

"YOUR SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE"

Snow in Arizona! In early March some years ago, after almost 150 straight days without rain, Arizona finally got a large snowfall one weekend. All the television stations gleefully reported the falling snow with video coverage galore.

Snow. The White Stuff. Powder or packing Snow. What kind would it be? Excitedly, my husband and I set out for a drive along Highway 87, hoping to find out.

As we drove past the saguaro cactus and the desert landscape, I began thinking about the Easter Season. A time of renewal. Driving through the desert landscape, I suddenly became wistful for a sense of my own renewal, a deeper sense to know that I was changing and becoming closer to God, which, in that moment, I admit did not feel quite as much as I would have liked to...as I watched the landscape, mile after mile, continue on with the same colors and textures and seemingly endless desert monotony. I sat in the car, quiet, contemplating what might be wrong with my thoughts and desires and personal spirituality to prevent me from that spiritual renewal that I felt somewhat distant from in my reverie. My husband and I drove on in silence (his customary mode while driving), and as I continued to mope and stare at the landscape, I started to become conscious of how much we take nature, or possibly all of God's creation, for granted.

Here in Arizona where the physical landscape doesn't seem to change much over the course of a year, it's easy to think that your own spiritual landscape may not be changing as well. While growing up on the East Coast, and then living in downtown Chicago for 25 years, obviously, we had very distinct seasons, and therefore, noticing changes in nature, as well as within yourself, is much more easily detected. However, in the Arizona desert (at least to me), most days are sunny without a cloud in the sky, there is very little rain, and even less change in the physical landscape, and so you tend to get complacent about the seemingly quiet, unchanging sameness of the physical landscape, which then translates over into your own spiritual landscape.

"And be not conformed to this world; but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."
(Romans 12:2)

So, what does it mean to be renewed? If we take a look at most of the major world religions, each one of them has a time of reflection and fasting, which leads to a season of renewal in one's spiritual landscape. Even though these "faith seasons" may fall during different times of the year the concept is the same - renewal. Renewal of your physical landscape (fasting), and more importantly of your spiritual landscape (prayer, meditation). Might God possibly be helping all mankind, no matter what faith, to have a constant sense of renewal of our spiritual landscapes with these different, unique, *and* similar, renewal faith seasons throughout the year?

"By degrees, little by little, from time to time, a wise person should remove his own impurities as a blacksmith removes the dross from silver." (Buddhism ~ Dhammapada 239)

And so, as we traveled up Highway 87 that day years ago, as I contemplated my own spiritual

landscape and sense of spiritual renewal, we began to see the ‘white stuff’ here and there on the sides of the road, and patches of snow scattered among the landscape. Then as we rounded a bend just about 30 miles from our home, we came across a sight that most people will probably never see or experience in their lifetime.

The entire area on both sides of the expressway was covered in several feet of the most glorious, shining, snowman-building, snowball-packing, pure white snow!

Even more glorious ~ there were literally thousands of people pulled off to the side of the road, just to enjoy the snow. There were people of all ages playing, singing, sliding down the roadside slopes on plastic bags and snow coasters, and many of those in the snow were even eating the beautiful white powder “manna” from the Heavens.

The traffic was almost at a standstill, and as we crawled along that expressway, we saw cars and trucks of all makes, years, models; brand new Mercedes next to 30-year old pickups, compact cars next to huge SUVs. We saw people of all races and faiths, laughing together, sharing coffee from thermoses or Starbucks they had brought with them, sharing bags of popcorn and other snacks. We watched as they took turns with coasters and plastic bags sliding down the hills, and acting like children again.

Acting like children again!

In other words, none of the adults seemed to care what kind of car the person they were throwing a snowball at had. No one seemed to care who brought the coffee, or whether it was from Starbucks or not. All their children were playing *together* ~ regardless of the clothes they had on, the color of their skin, or of their background. Most of the adults, if they weren’t playing with their own children, were standing around chatting with whomever had parked in front or behind their respective car...enjoying the gloriousness of the snow, the moments in fellowship. Most importantly, the sense of renewal, a renewal that had been long awaited during the months without rain.

*“Then speak the truth to each other, for we belong to one another as parts of one body.”
(Ephesians 4:25)*

Watching everyone play and enjoy the event made me realize the symbolic beauty of it all. Let’s look at it this way: Snow is comprised of snowflakes, right? Millions and perhaps billions of tiny snowflakes. Each one, unique and beautiful in its own right. Each one unique and beautifully created in its own time. And what about mankind? Each one of us is unique and beautiful in our own right. Each one of us is unique and beautifully created in our own time. And, just as with the billions and probably immeasurable number of snowflakes, all are created by God in His design.

And what do the snowflakes gently falling to earth provide? Do they stay the same design throughout their life? Let’s think about this. Yes, the snowflakes are unique and individually created, as is mankind. And yet, after falling gently to the ground, snowflakes form a covering

blanket, each individual snowflake joining together to provide purpose, another part of God's design. As you look at each snowflake individually and see their unique beauty that is one part of the Divine design. However, when joined together, the blanket that covers the earth comprised of all those beautiful individual snowflakes, provides a source of insulation to the roots and branches of all nature, keeping those same roots insulated until spring, when the warmth of the sun shines strong again.

But, if we take this analogy a bit further, those roots and branches, although seemingly unchanging, are in reality changing their internal landscape, their unique energy...in essence their spiritual landscape...in preparation for Spring, what humankind may call the Easter Season, in other words the sense of renewal. And when the sun shines strong during springtime, those billions of snowflakes, again, change, change into water, which provides the life-sustaining foundation to all living things. So, it would be safe to say, that each snowflake, although unique in design, has a number of purposes during its life time, even though it may seem as if they are created and then don't change at all.

"So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth." (Baha'i Faith)

So if each one of us is created by God, uniquely and individually in His unique design, are we different than the snowflake? Look at it this way. The snowflakes represent each one of us. Each one of us is unique and individual, and yet, when we come together, like the thousands of people lining the expressway that particular day, we too can form an insulating blanket. A blanket of oneness and community providing an opportunity for each one of us to understand the larger Divine design. On that special day, everyone there sharing that moment was connected, and providing an opportunity for change, an opportunity for renewal within ourselves, our community, and our own spiritual landscapes.

As I stood there and breathed in those moments, I will share with you that the energy was electric. Not like a light bulb, but rather a feeling of oneness, of togetherness, of being at peace with each other...and more importantly, with myself. I also realized that I too, was changing. I too, was in a state of becoming all part of God's design. I may not see it on a moment-to-moment basis, but I was reminded again, that since I am created by God and therefore, I have been growing and changing, and spiritually renewed on a regular basis. And, it was up to me, just as it is up to you, to accept and recognize that is a constant in our spiritual landscapes.

"A spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center ~ where we are anchored in God." (Evelyn Underhill)

It was a feeling like no other, and one I will not forget. I realized the beauty of God's creation ~ snow, white, pure, renewing my spirituality, as well as the thousands of other people's spiritual landscapes in those shared moments in the snow...full of individual snowflakes, and yet together as a community creating and renewing in His grand design. A blanket for all of us to be reminded of our Oneness with God, and in His unending renewal of our own individual and unique spiritual landscapes.