

Trees, from Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times, by Katherine May (2020)

We are in the habit of imagining our lives to be linear, a long march from birth to death, in which we mass our powers only to surrender them again, all the while slowly losing our youthful beauty. This is a brutal untruth. Life meanders like a path through the woods. We have seasons when we flourish, and seasons when the leaves fall from us, revealing our bare bones. Given time, they grow again.

The dropping of leaves by deciduous trees is called abscission. It occurs on the cusp of autumn and winter, as part of a long cycle of growth, maturity and renewal. In spring and summer, leaf cells are full of chlorophyll, a bright green substance that absorbs sunlight to fuel the process that converts carbon dioxide and water into the starch and sugar that allow the tree to grow. But at the end of the summer, as the days grow shorter and the temperature falls, deciduous trees stop making food. In the absence of sunlight, it would be too costly to maintain the machinery of growth. The chlorophyll begins to breakdown, revealing other colours that were always present, but which were masked by the abundance of green. The exact mix is different for each tree, sometimes producing bright yellows, oranges and browns, and sometimes displaying as reds or purples.

The trees put on their autumn display.

But while this is happening, a layer of cells is weakening between the stem and the branch. This is called the abscission zone. Gradually, it severs the leaf from access to water, and the leaf dries and browns, and then, in most cases, falls off, either under its own weight or encouraged by wintry rains and winds. Within a few hours, the tree will have released substances that heal the scar that the leaf has left, protecting itself from the evaporation of water, infection or the invasion of parasites.

But even as the leaves are falling, the buds of next year's crop are already in place, waiting to erupt again in spring.

Most trees produce their buds in high summer, and the autumn leaf fall reveals them, neat and expectant, protected from the cold by thick scales. We rarely notice them because we think we're seeing the skeleton of the tree, a dead thing, until the sun returns.

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... But look closely, and every single tree is in bud, from the sharp talons of the beech to the hoof-like black buds of the ash.

The tree is waiting. It has everything ready. Its fallen leaves are mulching the forest floor. And its roots are drawing up extra winter moisture, providing a firm anchor against seasonal storms. Its ripe cones and nuts are providing essential food in this scarce time for mice and squirrels, and its bark is hosting hibernating insects and providing a source of nourishment for hungry deer. It is far from dead. It is, in fact, the life and soul of the wood.

Questions for reflection:

“A layer of cells is weakening between the stem and the branch. This is called the abscission zone. Gradually, it severs the leaf from access to water, and the leaf dries and browns, and then, in most cases, falls off...”

- What is drying, browning, or moving away?

“Within a few hours, the tree will have released substances that heal the scar that the leaf has left, protecting itself from the evaporation of water, infection or the invasion of parasites.

- What is asking for attention, attending, or protection?

“But even as the leaves are falling, the buds of next year's crop are already in place.... We rarely notice them... But look closely, and every single tree is in bud.”

- What is already budding in readiness for what comes next?