

The Seasons of the Soul by Hermann Hesse, Ludwig Max Fischer

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Nature: Source of Strength and Solace (commentary from Ludwig Max Fischer, PhD)

Nature was Hesse's first and foremost teacher: the garden, the forest, animals. An appreciation of, a devotion to, a never-tiring observation and contemplation of natural life inspired Hesse's writing on every page. The young boy already fled the narrow streets of Calw to explore a less structured, less regimented, much freer playground for his limitless curiosity and imagination. Even during his apprentice years and work in bookshops in Tübingen and Basel, Hesse used every opportunity to escape city life and went on long hiking trips in the mountains of Germany and Switzerland. Between 1904 and 1912 he lived in a rural setting in Gaienhofen on Lake Constance, where he built his own house. Reading good books and a walk in the woods alternated and filled Hesse's daily schedule throughout his years. An avid gardener with much knowledge about the art and science of taking care of plants, he nourished his creativity by direct experience, by the cultivation of contemplative interaction with nature. The harvest of this dedication was rich, full of insightful analogies and an abundance of perceptive metaphors.

With a growing awareness he understood the meaning of the great Hermes Trismegistos's adage—As above, so below; as outside, so inside—and perceived the eternal rhythms underlying the seasonal changes. The progressions in nature are the same in the life of every plant and animal as they are in a human being. The natural and spiritual build a dynamic polarity of change upon a common base of unity. The decline of the West was not obvious only to Oswald Spengler. Hesse saw clearly the problems and the destructive forces in society that led to the catastrophes of the early twentieth century.

In Hesse's young years finding strength and solace in nature became a popular movement. Naturist communities like the one at Monte Verità near Ascona in Switzerland served as islands of sanity and a counterweight to the hectic and stress-filled city existence during an age of rapid industrialization when unhealthy working and living conditions caused much suffering, especially in the factory workers.

Young Hesse met Gusto Gräser, the founder of the naturist community at Monte Verità, and spent months with people like Arnold Ehret, who advocated vegetarianism, raw food, growing one's own food, fasting, and other ways to "return to nature" that became

popular again at the turn of the twenty-first century as the signs of our devastation of nature are becoming inescapably, chillingly clear. In 1914 Hesse wrote to a friend: "Give my regards to the people at Monte Verità ... I have always carried the seeking of these people in my heart." Hesse remained close to the nature seekers but also continued on his own unique path, as he did throughout his life. For him a naive and sentimental journey back to the reclaimed Garden of Eden is neither possible nor desirable. Nature provides sustenance, nature is to be honored, nature is sacred, but not a sort of tropical paradise fantasy where a cornucopia of fruit drops into our mouths: "Nothing feels better during hard times than blending with nature, but not as a passive hedonism, but as a source for creative work."

To a man attuned to nature as Hesse was to the unsentimental rigors of natural change, a gray sky became an opportunity to understand his own life:

I am lying down and look at the evening sky, which has been for hours increasingly covered with little, silent, irregular clouds. There must be winds above which we do not feel down here. The winds spin the cloud-strings like yarn. Just like the evaporation and condensation as rain of water above the earth follows a certain rhythm, just like the seasons of the year and ebb and high tide follow firm laws and carry certain consequences, so everything happens within us according to certain laws and rhythms ... It would be impossible for me to declare whether this cloudy sky, quietly moving by itself in these manifold forms is producing a mirror in my soul or whether it is the other way around. I see this sky as an image of my inner movements.

Hesse's love of nature received much criticism even from his friends in a time when the speed of trains and cars and then airplanes brought a fascination and even an obsession with the machine, with the rapidly progressing technologies promising to deliver a tangible utopia and final liberation from the unwelcome constraints nature places upon us:

My friends and foes know this about me and scold me for not sharing their pride and joy and their faith in technology so dominant in our times. I do not believe in the idea of progress, I do not believe in the glory and greatness of our world today or any of the leading ideologies, but I have an infinite reverence for what we call nature.

The alienation from nature was one of the main characteristics of the twentieth century and cost us a heavy price, which we may or may not be able to reverse through the increasing ecological awareness that emerged toward the end of that century. Hesse saw the dangers in this separation and not only warned us in his writing but actively practiced a lifestyle of respect for and intense interaction with, of practical cultivation as well as symbolic contemplation of, the natural world. For Hesse, the harmony ruling nature is not a sweet, idyllic bed of blooming roses offering perpetual bliss, not a home of complete comfort in which we can move, guided by infallible instinct, as plants and animals experience nature. But as Hesse patiently shows us, we can certainly reduce our alienation from nature, and move from control and domination fantasies, from insulation and protection from natural processes in us, toward an appreciation, toward a more intimate relationship, toward a reconciliation, and toward an attitude of grateful awe.

Hesse's poetic path renders words magical. He speaks about nature with a language full of symbols, metaphors, associations, rhythms, and rhymes that can lead us from an attitude and an ideology of "efficient" use and seemingly legitimate abuse of nature

toward a less aggressive, less violent, more caring, and more participatory way of being with and being in nature. The more we value nature the more it can bestow on us. Hesse's nature poems are invitations to reenter the garden of nature with a softer touch, a gentler footprint, a deeper interest in seeing the garden growing. The patient tending of this outer growth will in its time yield a much greater inner growth and richer harvest than we may have imagined and will fashion for us a lamp to guide us through the darkness of our era, when all the karmic bills of our continuing ignorant exploration of the outer world are coming back in a tsunami threatening to devastate and destroy us.

Like a Wave

Like a wave crowned with foam
flinging upward its frothing brilliance
before sinking seaward again.

Like a cloud floating on a breeze
stirring the souls of so many seekers
fading soon as a silver sliver in the sky.

And like a song rising from the edge of a hot street,
with mysterious sounds and magical rhymes
seizing the heart and kneading it over the land.

So my life drifts slowly through time
and will wane before long and still reach the placeless space
where the tides of desire rejoin the timeless ocean.

A Rainy Night

A steady stream of almost silent rain
drops on every roof and windowsill
and stretches like a veil
deep over the darkness of the land.

It trickles and tumbles in the wind
with no movement of its own and yet alive.

The fields draw near the clouds.

Even heaven bows to the solid ground.

A rhythmic, subtle song sates the space,

swells, sways, and soaks the night in sorrow
as if a lone violin were delving deep
into dark, secret yearnings
transforming fiery torment into tone
while touching here and there a homeless heart,
which found no words
for its deep longings.

What neither words nor music could express
the wind and rain intone with quiet strength.

They fill the rainy night with a tender lullaby
and the steady rhythms of this song
sustain and cradle and appease
all unheard struggles, all unhealed pain.

Bursting with Blossoms

The peachtree is bursting with blossoms.

Some will ripen as fruit.

The peach blossoms shine bright in rose colors
through the blue sky and the passing clouds.

Idea too break open like buds of blossoms,
at least a hundred every day—

Let them unfold and roam as they wish!

Don't ask for rewards!

There must be time for play and innocence in life
and room for boundless blossoms.

The world would otherwise be too small
and our life not a delight.

Autumn Takes Hold of My Life

Autumn rain has drenched the gray forest.
A brisk morning breeze blows through the valley.
The chestnuts crack hard, tumbling from the trees.
They burst open, moist, brown as if full of joy.

Autumn takes hold of my life.
Gales split and tore my leaves.
My branches are shaking—did I bear fruit?

My flowers of love bore the fruit of suffering.
My flowers of faith bore the fruit of hate.
The wind rattles my brittle branches, but I laugh.
I still stand strong in the storm.

What do I care about bearing fruit, about achieving goals?

I blossomed and flowers were my purpose.
Now I am wilting and nothing but wilting is my aim.

Hearts don't beat for distant goals.

God lives in me, God dies in me,
God suffers in my soul: that is enough purpose.

Right or wrong, flower or fruit,
nothing but names, it is all the same.

A brisk morning breeze blows through the valley.
The chestnuts crack hard, tumbling from the trees.
They burst open, I too break open, burnished with joy.

Pruned Oak

Oh oak tree, how they have pruned you.
Now you stand odd and strangely shaped!
You were hacked a hundred times
until you had nothing left but spite and will!

I am like you, so many insults and humiliations
could not shatter my link with life.

And every day I raise my head
beyond countless insults toward new light.

What in me was once gentle, sweet, and tender
this world has ridiculed to death.

But my true self cannot be murdered.

I am at peace and reconciled.

I grow new leaves with patience
from branches hacked a hundred times.

In spite of all the pain and sorrow

I'm still in love with this mad, mad world.

Rain at Night

The sound of rain slipped into my sleep
and touched me until I woke.

Now I hear the rain and feel it.

Its thousand voices fill the night,
each drop a message moist and cool.

It whispers, laughs, and groans.

Enchanted, I begin to listen
to its symphony of flowing tones.

After the dry, hard notes
of unrelenting sunny days
the rain's sad, mellow sorrow
calls me like a sobbing soul.

I keep a child buried in my heart
deep beneath lots of pride and hard scales of conceit.

But someday the child will shatter the armor

and burst out in a torrent of tears.
Long-held walls of separation will crumble
and what was silenced will reclaim its voice.

New joy, new grief will gush freely
and this is how my soul grows wide.