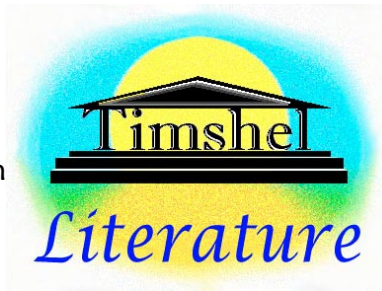


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Just Thinking, 09/15/03:

Through Changes, I Remember

by Justin Katz

A bit of a cultural jest has evolved around the belief of Americans in the Northeast of the country that the seasons represent a marketable aspect for the region. I don't mean Vermont's advertising its fall foliage and skiing or Massachusetts's promoting summers on the cape. Rather, the joke that pops up from time to time involves Northeasterners' bragging about the *fact of the seasons*. Despite being a lifelong Northeasterner, I've found this regional trait to be significant only recently.

In part, my delayed affection for seasons had to do with focus. The young are too concerned with the ebb and flow of their own lives to ponder the regular shifts of their surroundings. For them, the question of the seasons is, "What do I/must I/can I do during that time of year?" As it falls out, they'll tend to prefer the extremes. Skiing and other snowplay in the winter. Beaches, camp, and vacations in the summer. Fall is back to school. Spring threatens exams and brings impatience for summer.

Seen in this way, the shift in perspective may come not so much from maturity as from passage into a monotonous schedule. When the differences of seasonal activity are negligible, the focus will naturally shift to variations in the scenery, the yard work, and the wardrobe. Monotony

also requires examples of time's passage to be more explicit in order to be noticed. The numbers of human time are easy to slide through; shifts in an area's entire environment cannot be ignored.

The obviousness of the change represents another benefit to those trapped in grownups' schedules. It's like nature's own alarm clock. It provides a unit of measure between the months, which click past like the year's minute hand. The full year, by contrast, is a sufficiently large and distinct measure to allow one to feel simultaneously that it is too late to finish a project within its time frame and that there is plenty of time to postpone action into the next.

In contrast, as one trades the lawnmower for a rake, the quieter chore lends itself to consideration of unfinished work, unachieved long-term goals. So much to get done before interest and skill fade. So much to prepare before the children reach the age at which traditions must be in place. Another season has reached its end without anything *happening*. The cool breeze dispels the dust of days that had hidden this fact.

More than being impossible to ignore, however, seasons are associative. Students may discover the strategy of chewing the same flavor of gum while studying for and taking a test. The taste and smell help to open up the memory's conduit to the experience of reading and, in turn, that which was read. Seasons, for their part, stimulate every sense, and so they link to each other across the decades, as they come around, in a lifelong chain of experience.

Approached in this context, autumn still feels like the beginning of the year. Who could say, back when one's sense of the seasons was formed, what would transpire during a new school year? Summer had been a vacation, and possibilities abounded with the return to everyday life. Opportunities and achievements are part of society's itinerary for youth, and consequently the autumn retains the feeling of beginning. Fresh air and optimism. So the autumn brings not only the realization that time is passing while much remains undone, but also the sense that there is still hope for its accomplishment.

Age, I've found, adds another attribute: each season ends in such a way as to give the next the timbre of a promise. Summer heat becomes oppressive, parched yet muggy, with insects nibbling away at one's patience until the crisp air of autumn cannot come soon enough. When autumn has run its course and the leaves have all fallen and cool blue skies become cold and gray, one longs for the garland of winter snow and the comforting contrast of interior warmth and frosted glass. But winter goes on too long, until it feels as if the world has no intention of coming back to life, and the first buds and the first greens remind folks of their senses, their lifeblood, and their souls. Then, as the air warms and the clothes lighten, the water seems to beckon, but still wants the heat of summer.

Now that the seasons are more prominent in the background that they provide for my life, I am glad for the reminder that there is much left to do in this life, the promise that there is a season for all to be done, and the excuse to pause and smile into the wind at the shifting smells and think, "Yes, I remember. Through changes, I remember."