

# *On the Path*

## *Soulful Solstice*

By Keith Hammer

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It's again that time of year when we in the northern hemisphere experience the shortest daylight of the year, as Winter Solstice ushers in the first day of winter on December 21. We are comforted knowing the days will soon grow longer, yet we also know our coldest weather is yet to come in January in spite of the lengthening days and the slow climb of the sun upwards from our southern horizon.

Winter Solstice is at once a meaningful mark in the year and also just one day in the flux of the ever-changing universe and life here on Earth. Because the Earth still holds warmth left over from summer, it will take another few weeks of short days with low-angle sun to cool the northern hemisphere and bring us the colder weather promised by winter. Similarly, come spring, much of our plant and tree growth will only respond when the ground finally warms enough, not just when the fickle air temperature gets pleasant.

Perhaps therein lies a metaphor and lesson to learn patience in our lives and to forgive ourselves when things don't change quickly enough. In a world of commercial enterprise and electronic gadgets, we are indoctrinated to expect instant gratification. From the natural world we learn that things like the seasonal warming and cooling of our planet's hemispheres take a little time – and that we need to think in longer terms to be prepared to meet our needs for food, warmth and shelter.

I enjoy life in Montana precisely because of the change in seasons and I'm hard-pressed to pick any one of them as my favorite. I enjoy laying up firewood in the summer and fall, not to mention soaking up the warmth it brings during winter! I also enjoy shoveling and plowing snow around the place - up to the point where it requires too much time and begins interfering with skiing and snowshoeing that is!

Winter is brightened when we pull a bottle of summer pickles off the shelf, bring some fresh carrots up from the root cellar, or thaw out a tub of frozen homemade salsa. These gastronomic meditations on the changing of the seasons fit right in with the longer hours of winter darkness that provide us with more "down time" to reflect on our lives and appreciate the world around us.

I must admit, however, to a subtle longing for greenness that sets in after only a few weeks of snow on the ground. It surfaces abruptly when watching a movie with scenes of summer green, which appear quite shocking in the midst of our winter grays and white. This longing for greenness otherwise lies dormant most of the winter, as though buried under the snow itself.

I suppose it's a bit like the buds that form at the tips of mountain maple, cottonwood and aspen in the late fall, then just hang there in suspended animation until the right conditions in spring make them swell and burst forth with new, green leaves. It's as though, somewhere in the pool of life we share with all plants, animals and minerals, there always lies ready the seed or bud waiting to spring forth when new circumstances require or allow it.

And therein lies the challenge of winter for most of us, I suspect: to not get ahead of ourselves and to find ways to enjoy winter, not just wait it out. Indeed, the cover of winter snow provides a season when we can ski or snowshoe right over the top of dense underbrush that makes off-trail hiking miserable in summer, opening up new opportunities for exploration and the enjoyment of the tracks wildlife leave behind. I so look forward to these winter outings but, on days when work does not allow enough time for a trip into the woods, I content myself to get outside for a bit of fresh air shoveling walkways and roofs around our place and elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Winter Solstice and the remaining Holiday Season also bring us opportunities to get out of our homes to spend time with others in celebrations of life, spirit, community, and companionship. There's music to be made and heard, perhaps a Christmas tree to be sought out in the woods, family and friends to visit, a New Year to ring in, and the wonderful, white hush of winter upon the land for us to enjoy.

I hope Winter Solstice and the remaining Holiday Season mark the beginning of a wonderful winter for everyone!

*Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at [www.swanrange.org](http://www.swanrange.org). Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or [keith@swanview.org](mailto:keith@swanview.org).*



A winter sun lights the way up Infinity Ridge in the Swan Range. Keith Hammer photo.