

Hibernation

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Southern Light over Graceland © 2022 Rod E.S.Q.

About 14 years ago, George Ford set out to create a heartwarming film that he'd hope would become a holiday classic. It was the epically-named *Fireplace For Your Home*. It was a high-concept idea based on a very simple premise: a full hour of a fireplace burning wood, which anyone could watch from home.

Now, it may surprise you that making that film took him a much longer time than expected – and much greater effort than simply piling a bunch of wood, lighting a match, pressing *Record*, and rolling in those sweet Netflix royalties.

In fact, if you've ever built a fire, you'll know that even a modest fire takes at least some minimal amount of effort (that's assuming you already have the fuel around). If you're set with fuel, there are still some basic skills at play on how to place the logs, where and how much kindling to put down, and even on how to light the kindling safely and effectively. And, of course, having a live fire at home requires attentiveness for minimizing flammable hazards, as well the occasional maintenance of the logs, and of the fireplace.

And... if you don't already have fuel, that's an effort in itself. In the Boxing Day carol *Good King Wenceslas*, a major plot point includes a man in poverty who is gathering winter fuel, putting himself at great risk from the bitter weather. Such is the effort that goes in building a housewarming fire from scratch.

(And, as we explored last week, we could have a deeper discussion as to what really counts as doing *anything* from scratch! But gathering fuel or building a fire is enough effort to consider for today's purposes.)

In George Ford's case, the fire he built for his cinematic vision also required extensive planning, as well as literally hundreds of trials. After all, he wasn't just planning *a* fire – for single use by one family unit – but *the* fire that many households would repeatedly use in homes around the world. He had to position the logs *just* right, so that they would fall into themselves, without the need for additional intervention, during an entire hour.

Ford also had to hand-select the logs, that they may be the right shape, size, type, and dryness for that perfect crackling sound, and just the right amount of smoke (enough to appreciate it as part of the fire, but not so much as to drown out the picture). His wood of choice was Canadian fir, which is his personal favourite for his own household fires. And he included fire-building skills that he learned from his Canadian mother, living in the Pacific Northwest, where they really did need a lit fireplace to stay warm during the winter.

He wanted to bring at least a sense of that experience to others who couldn't have it, be it because of lack of a fireplace, or owing to issues with using one, due to accessibility or safety concerns.

And making it accessible was the next challenge he faced, as many networks refused to take him seriously. Until he reached Netflix, who took him up on the idea and released the first season in 2010.

That first season of *Fireplace For Your Home* consisted of three full episodes, each one an hour long. One features the fire with a Christmas soundtrack in the background, another one has the plain crackling fire (with no frills), and a third episode has music that fits other seasons. In 2015, Ford released an improved *Classic* version of the Crackling Fire, and in the same year, I was excited to see its long-awaited sequel: the *Birchwood Edition*.

Fireplace For Your Home now allows you to enjoy some of the soothing benefits of a lit fireplace, without the hazards of building one yourself, or to have access to this meditative heartwarming opportunity, if you don't happen to have a practical space in which to host your own fire. And it's presented in 4K Ultra HD.

Now, maybe having a fire at home was never your thing... perhaps the idea of having your clothes and living room smell like smoked salmon at the end of the night is not your idea of a good time. Or, maybe you *do* relish the leftover smoky aroma on your sweater, and the notion of a two-dimensional fire on a screen doesn't seem like it does justice to the experience... (after all, I know of people who purposely smoke their clothes at summer campfires or by the winter fireplace, for the express purpose of unpacking them later and bringing up that comforting memory).

But each of us has an idea of what would be a heartwarming moment on a season that might otherwise feel cold and dark. And the fact that George Ford made his *Fireplace* series, and that Netflix continues to play it 12 years later, shows that enough people find that particular setting soothing.

As George Ford notes in an interview with CBC, "I think it's this primal need for the safety of fire in a fireplace. For millions of years we've cooked on the fire. We used it for safety. We've used it for light at night. It's all about the fireplace."

I have not trouble sharing that I've fired up the *Birchwood Edition* from time to time, and I even found that the *Classic Crackling Fire* edition was a fitting background while writing this sermon. Like Ford, I find that it can offer one of those elements of safety and comfort that can make the necessity of staying at home in the winter not only endurable, but desirable. It helps me look forward to getting into a mindset that I can loosely call *hibernating*.

Strictly speaking, we humans don't hibernate in the way we picture bears doing so. And, as a sidenote, I'll acknowledge that there is a semantic debate among some biologists as to whether bears are "true" hibernators or not – as compared to ground squirrels or chipmunks, whose body temperature lowers significantly more – though there is no question that the life systems of bears certainly behave dramatically differently in the winter than during the rest of the year... their lifestyle is winterized.

But for those of us who live in this climate, taking an opportunity to slow down, hunker down with some comforting surroundings, and reducing the need to be as active as other times of the year, allows for different ways of connecting with ourselves, with others, with the places we call home, and to regenerate for a new year. Winterizing is a reality for us, it is a necessity for us – it is an opportunity for us.

For you, it might be a simple matter of making some tea and sitting with a warm cup on the couch, or perhaps your favourite easy chair, with that one blanket that is particularly cozy (or stuffed animal).

Maybe putting up the decorations, and seeing them up for a few weeks, maybe even months, is what brings in that cheer you need, and that extra bit of light, when the sunlight is at a premium.

Or maybe having that long-overdue call with a dear friend, or with family you haven't seen in a while – maybe even having them over – is what you're looking forward to in this dawning winter season.

It doesn't have to be complicated, or costly, but it will require at least the minimal effort of resolving to make it happen. Whatever it is that allows you to hibernate, it pays off to keep in sight, keep it in mind, and keep it in practice.

As we consider how we may hibernate in cold and dark days, we also remember that not everyone in our community can do so easily.

In the Boxing Day carol, the title character Wenceslas, and his page, are reminded that some folks have a harder time than others. Boxing Day itself has been a traditional day for alms-giving, in which some measure of wealth redistribution comes into practice. Many of us, who are able to do so, also stretch that practice throughout this season, or perhaps beyond, with general giving to those causes and communities that we consider important in sharing warmth with others beyond ourselves.

My friends, in this season of dark and cold, we intentionally set the time and space for light and warmth. Be it with five candles on a wreath throughout the month, eight candles on a candleholder throughout this week, a candle on a chalice on Sundays or other times of spiritual focus, or a fireplace, physical or virtual, that we may find a way to light our season.

My friends, in this season of dark and cold, we also keep in mind all who can use some help in warming up and finding glimmers of light. And we remember that it's perfectly appropriate to ask for this help.

My friends, as we kindle these flames, may our own selves be joined in one community of warmth and light.

So may it be,
In the spirit of rest and renewal,
Amen

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*Suggested Hymns:***Opening – Carol of the Bells****Hymn #225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

Words: Latin c. 9th cent., trans. Composite based on John Mason Neale, 1818-1866, recast

Music: Adapt. by Thomas Helmore, 1811-1890, harmony by John Weaver, 1937- , harm. © 1990 John Weaver.

VENI EMMANUEL

Closing #19 The Sun That Shines

Words: Attrib. to Dimitri S. Bortniansky, 1751-1825, v. 1

~)-| John Andrew Storey, 1935-1997

~)-| Music: David Dawson, 1939-

BARNFIELD