**Showcasing the DNR: Winter’s fading dance**

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The plaintive sound of simple chords played on a piano can open my heart and mind on these cold winter days. The sound fills the room and moves through the house, filling all the corners and cracks with warmth and hope.

The chords may sound sad and lonesome, but they’re good medicine. They are stirring to me, like churning over mulch in a black-peat soil garden, cultivating growth and new green shoots of life.

Outside, the snow is drifted high over everything. It’s nearly up to the woodshed roof and almost reaches the crossbar on the clothes pole. Like wet cement, the snow looks as though it has been poured and swirled around the trunks of all the trees.

Over the past few days, the Wintermaker unhinged the jaws of the blizzard monster, letting its mouth yawn wide open. Out came howling and slashing gales that shivered anything standing.

The reach of the storm was incredible, dumping snow over the deserts of the southwest, picking up speed, intensity and strength as she rumbled north, shaking the ground and swaying from side to side like an overloaded freight train.

Her sharp, icy air cut off my breath. She molded the snow on the rooftops, like a river shapes the sandbars and the cutaway banks of a river. She tore needles from the spruce and cedars from their branches and sprinkled them across the snow.

It was scary hearing the power and snarl of those winds. I imagine some older folks alone in their homes were terrified, perhaps wondering how they would clear all this snow away from their doors and rooftops.

The deer had to leap – in short, brief bursts – to make it through the deep drifts. The yearlings looked more like dog-paddling pups trying to keep their small heads bobbing above the cold, drifted sea of white.

Hungry birds braved the winds and cold to find seeds and suet at our feeders. The nuthatches and woodpeckers rested on the leeward side of the tree trunks. I worked my way through nearly chest-high snow to bring out more seed.

When it was all over, we all came outside, just like the Munchkins did after the Wicked Witch had gone. We all looked around in amazement at the broken tree limbs, the towering snow drifts, the power of nature.

Then we did what we always do – we picked up a shovel and started digging ourselves out. It strengthens us to know we outlasted another storm, and a particularly fierce one at that.

With sunlight shining across the wooden floor, I thought about how I wouldn’t really want it any other way. This was winter being winter. Without at least one big punch of a storm each season, winter wouldn’t be all we expect it should be.

For me, without winter’s stormy weather, it would be like springtime without rain showers, summer without the sun and thunderstorms and autumn without the colored leaves.

I think those who get outdoors in the wintertime, like any other time of the year, find new perspectives, simple peace and pleasures and a pace of life worth living. There really is far more than one whole wide world out there to explore.

Dress warmly to defy the cold and to maximize enjoyment.

Look up. Look down. Look all around. Everywhere there’s something different. There are dozens of things hiding in plain sight that may have never been noticed before.

Some of these things are small, some are large. Many might seem insignificant, at first, but turn out to be big, like the crisp, intricate patterns of snowflakes.

Once you start looking, you can’t stop. Then, weeks later on summer days, you will remember these things and look forward to seeing them again when the season is right.

In opposite fashion, I am now recalling the look and taste of plump summer raspberries, the turquoise neon of damselflies and the intricacies contained within a patch of fresh, green grass.

A couple of years ago, an Upper Peninsula newspaper poll asked readers how much the recent wintry weather had impacted their lifestyles.

With nearly 1,000 votes cast, nearly 60 percent of the respondents said they either hadn’t left their house in weeks or only venture outdoors for work, school or other important appointments.

I was shocked to see the figure was so high.

About 22 percent said they love cold, snowy winters, while the remaining 20 percent said their lifestyles were impacted a little bit, but they still enjoyed being outside.

I’ve heard people say to enjoy winter you have to find something you enjoy doing outside. I think that’s true to a large extent – but like everything else, it depends on the person.

I like the quieter winter season to try to catch up on reading and other things I would never be doing much of when the summertime trout are biting. I also like wintertime for soup, sweaters, hot chocolate and curling up under my beautiful, crimson-leafed patch-style quilt.

But I also like to get outside, winter or not. Even a walk to the mailbox or the store, or just a little way down the road and back, can bring uplifting opportunities I can’t experience indoors.

Feeling the bracing cold, smelling the clean air and seeing the crystal-clear skies – day or night – can boost my energy level, even if I’m only outside for a couple of minutes.

For me, a quick moment or so outside – to see what’s going on out there – usually prompts me to come back into the house to get boots and a jacket on so I can get back out for more.

Of course, this is true year-round.

I can’t count the number of times I’ve stepped out the back or front door and immediately sensed something very cool happening – like an owl hooting, migrating hawks or an incredible sunset or starry scene painted across the sky.

Sometimes, I just feel the warmth or the softness of the breeze. Other times, I hear the rain patting on the road or feel what it’s like to catch a big goose-feather snowflake on my tongue.

Being outside, for me, remains a tremendous source of strength, renewal and wonder. I never know exactly what I am going to see, but I know it will likely somehow show or teach me something I need or want to know.

Three days after the blizzard, about two-thirds of our shoveling is done. The winds have died, the snow falls only lightly now, and the temperatures are set to climb a few degrees.

The storm has passed.

Meanwhile, purple martins continue their migration north for springtime. Scouts have made it as far north as central Missouri and southern Kentucky.

Before the end of the month, robins will be back, perched within the cold, bare branches and at the crests of rooftops, singing their mating calls.

Spring will have arrived.

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