

## Spiritual Winter

*Pat Hendricks, Executive Director*

I think of winter as a time of waiting---a time to endure, a time to yearn for spring to arrive and bring a veil of color to the trees. It doesn't help that I suffer from seasonal disorder, so the lack of light and the cold cause me to struggle with depression. (And in Minnesota it is very dark and very cold.) I used to believe that the hibernating animals had the right idea. Eat a lot in the fall, then cuddle up in a warm cave and yield to the delicious peace of dreamless slumber.

I believe there are winters of the spiritual life, times when God is absent. Almost three years ago I had a long stretch of spiritual winter. I was led into the tomb with Jesus on Good Friday and did not emerge until late the next fall. I was alone there. Jesus had left without saying a word. It felt like my mind and heart were dulled to God's presence. I could not pray. When I tried, I could only stare out the window, or look at my bible with an inability to comprehend the words. Nor could I read anything with substance. I would try, and the words just slipped through my mind into some unreachable void.

I could, however, go on with my life. Except for those closest to me, (my husband, a few friends, and my spiritual director), no one knew of the darkness I was living. Several relationships sustained me, however. My spiritual director who listened month after month to my questions and my impatience. She held the darkness with me. And Sunday liturgy sustained me. Sunday after Sunday I would experience a sense of hope as I listened to the gospel readings, received communion, and pondered the sermons that were often about not giving up and the courage to face life's challenges. As much as I tried, there was little I could do to get through this time. *I just needed to wait.*

Sue Monk Kidd, in her book, *When the Heart Waits*, says, "When you're waiting, you're **not** doing nothing. You're doing the most important something there is. You're allowing your soul to grow up." My time spent in the tomb matured me. It taught me to search for my core being---for the self I wanted to be. It gave me the courage to be real before God and others. It prompted me to look at my life and to embrace all of its struggles and joys. And it gave me a different perspective on the seasons of the spiritual life.

I've since learned that winter has its own magic. The barren trees help me to see farther. There are fewer distractions, less noise, and more time to spend with God---now that God is present to me again. I have also admitted that I no longer desire to cuddle up in a warm cave. For one thing, caves are not warm, and for another I would miss the many lessons the darkness taught me. I can't say, however, that winter is my favorite season. I do yearn for the days to get longer and for that veil of green to appear on the willow trees.