

River House Respite With War Approaching

Behind cabin stands leafless old maple,
burned and scorched by recent fire:
Within its massive trunk life still moves
and from blackened hulk sprout
new grey limbs of strength and grace;
In places new wood curls over old,
encasing death and what is past.

The river at its foot flows on,
grey hills dim with winter's rain;
Golden jonquils lift nodding heads
and verdant leaves,
assuring Spring's return.

March 2003

I wrote this poem in early spring as our country was massing its armies poised to invade Iraq. It was a dark, depressing, and desolate time, both externally, and within my own life. My health was at low ebb, and I was about to begin a new medical treatment which I dreaded and felt ambiguous about. The outcome was uncertain. A friend offered a few days at their river cabin on the Siuslaw River.

Natural settings can often offer teaching if we are still and open. The scene I describe here reassured me that even though the world appeared very dark, life could not be destroyed, that True Life remained and would manifest again. Things would be different, yet nevertheless still not apart from the true reality of Buddha nature. The war would end, as it is now doing.

I find this teaching helpful again in our present circumstances as our nation and world enter unprecedented difficult economic times, and uncertainty hangs over our efforts to care for all and to simultaneously preserve a viable environment for future generations.

Keeping a bright mind is a choice. The temple can be a refuge for both stillness and brightness, a brief haven where we can remember that all is not lost, where we can renew our connection to what's most important. The Three Treasures is not a concept or belief. It is a reality that the temple (only) points to. We make it real through our meditation and faith/trust/confidence in the practice. Coming together to meditate is an act of faith, and simply that can be a transformative offering for hearts hungry for hope and sustenance.

It's vital that even as the nation takes various steps to restore our economy, we keep our anchor on our true refuge within and not place all our hopes for happiness on external conditions. Changes will come—some we'll welcome, some will sadden. Ending our lives in peace depends on doing the best we can in whatever circumstances come our way. Joy in life depends on our generous response to these conditions, regardless of how we may feel or their effects upon us. By taking refuge within, we can rise to these troubles from a place of strength and compassion, ensuring our response is one of greatest benefit to all beings.

Rev. Oswin
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