

Thankfully, no matter what's going on in the world – no matter how much mischief we humans manage to make, how much pain we inflict on ourselves and each other – fall still comes 'round each year, like a stubborn suitor determined to woo us right out of our nasty mood.



And so it has, and just in time. As I write this, the air is sparkling, the heat is waning, the marsh is golding, and my inbox overflows. The press releases keep coming, touting art exhibits... concerts... festivals... bazaars. There's new energy afoot, and it's good. You know that strange, vaguely-familiar sensation that hits you when you turn off the election coverage, put down the financial page, shut off the cursed computer and step out into the sunlight? Call me crazy, but I think it's *joy*.

You might be a spring person – and don't get me wrong, I *like* spring – but I've always found the richest, chewiest, most delicious joy in fall. Maybe for the same reason I prefer dark chocolate to milk: I'm mad about the bittersweet. And is it just me, or does this fall seem especially bittersweet? Ever the season of wistfulness and longing – daylight slipping away, the *year*

slipping away, a feverish flush of beauty before nature's big sleep – this fall feels even more poignant than usual.

I assume it has something to do with The Late, Great Unsettling. Take the most contentious presidential election in recent memory, the largest financial crisis in almost a century, a federal government that's frittered away our trust, and a media who've lost credibility and seem intent on stoking our divisions. Put them all together and what do you get? An American populace nursing a low-grade, simmering anxiety that never seems to let up.

Against the backdrop of this national – nay, *international* – nightmare, the familiar sights and sounds of our Lowcountry autumn seem especially precious, don't they? We welcome them back with grateful relief, clinging to them for their blessed, blessed... normalness. All hail the Beaufort Shrimp Festival and St. Peter's Fall Bazaar, OctoberFest and Heritage Days! Rejoice, for the pumpkins will soon appear outside Carteret Methodist, the children will trick or treat down Bay Street again, the great downtown houses, once more, will fling wide their doors to tourists. Give thanks for the gallery openings and the high school football games, the organ concerts at St. Helena's and the chamber music at USCB. These are our rituals, and this year, they feel sacred. This is autumn in Beaufort, South Carolina.... as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. World without end. Amen.

Or so we tell ourselves. We hold fast to these rites and ceremonies, I think, because deep down, we know that things outside our little sphere are changing. Changing fast, and maybe forever. And I'm not talking about the warm, fuzzy change we've all been hearing about from the presidential candidates. I'm talking about huge, scary, impossible-to-fathom change. The kind of change that's inevitable when the entire financial structure of the most powerful country on earth goes kerflooey and nobody can agree on what happened or how to fix it. As of press time, our leaders were still debating what to do. One suspects that, no matter what they decide, much suffering and sacrifice will ensue on the part of the American people.

But maybe that's not such a bad thing. I am of a generation – as are most of us – that has never had to sacrifice. Not in any meaningful way. We are a nation grown selfish and lazy and entitled, and I think a little sacrifice might be just what the doctor ordered. The thought of it actually cheers me. I fantasize about transforming into a steely, Depression era wife... about rationing my lipstick and going without stockings (not that I wear stockings)... learning to can vegetables and make soap. I daydream of baking bread from scratch, of sewing my own clothes, of raising a couple of chickens in the back yard.

Okay, maybe I'm romanticizing a bit. The sacrifice, when we are asked to make it, will not be fun. For some, it will be harrowing – a lost job or even a lost home. For most of us, it will probably be less epic, and definitely less poetic. It won't be about churning butter or dipping candles or raising cute little chicks. In reality, it'll be about fewer presents for the kids at Christmas... about canceling the family vacation... about trimming our own bangs and carpooling and wearing cheap shoes. Far from romantic, our sacrifice is likely to be mundane, and certain to be humbling.

And still, I have high hopes for our sacrifice. I believe it will make us stronger, more grateful, more loving. So let's bring it on.

And while we're waiting for the Official Sacrifice to begin – as we prepare to hunker down for the winter, so to speak – there are things we can do right now, in the glorious fall, to buoy our spirits even as we practice our new frugality. The weather's perfect, so let's leave the car at home when we can; it's delightful to travel by foot or bike. We have beautiful parks; instead of hiring a sitter and doing "dinner and a movie," let's make some sandwiches, grab the Frisbee, and take the whole family on a picnic. Or haul out that old kayak, or that moldering canoe, and hit the water, gas-free. There's nothing like a big, whopping dose of Lowcountry nature to remind us how rich we are, dwindling stock portfolios notwithstanding.

None of this, of course, is actually *sacrifice*. These are all pleasures. But they are *simple* pleasures, and that's a start. Each small exercise in simplicity, discipline and gratitude will prepare us for the greater tests to come.

There are so many easy ways to shore up our creaky souls for the coming Age of Austerity. Reread a classic novel you love; play your instrument, if you play one; sing as often as possible. Listen – really listen – to your children; they say amazing things. Wrap up in your favorite blanket on a chilly morning. Take your sweaters out of storage. Write a letter – on actual stationery! – to a friend with whom you've lost touch. Rent some old movies – Jimmy Stewart and Gary Cooper are good. Read some poetry. Heck, write some poetry. Help someone in need. Pray.

And now for the heavy lifting: Apologize to someone you've hurt, even if you didn't mean to; forgive someone who's hurt you, even if that someone isn't sorry. Empathize with someone who might not empathize back. If you're like me, cautious and nostalgic by nature, inclined to mourn and eulogize the passing age (maybe that's a "fall person" thing?), try understanding those who are more inclined to spring forward, who have little patience with the past and are anxious to bring about a *new* age. Even if you don't share their hopes for the future, respect that their hopes, like *your* hopes, are sincere and worthy of consideration. Recognize that it takes both kinds in this world – those who rush forward and those who look back. Believe that we check and balance each other. Do this even if no one returns the favor.

And if you're up for some *serious* sacrifice, try swallowing your pride.

That, as I see it, is the hardest – and most crucial – sacrifice we must make if we are to survive as a nation. A sacrifice of our collective pride... our arrogance... our orneriness... our

cussed certainty of our own superiority. And if you think this excessive pride – *hubris*, the Greeks called it, and they knew it could be fatal – is an affliction from which only the “other side” suffers, then you’re paying very selective attention.

It we could make this one great sacrifice, then maybe, just maybe, we could stop seeing each other as red or blue, this side or that, and start seeing each other as Americans again. Fellow citizens. People who can kindly agree to disagree. Friends.

Maybe I’m dreaming. Maybe this is just too much to ask. But fall came again this year. I think anything can happen.