

## Winter Lessons:

It's more than a little annoying for the cardinals to have to eat at the seed troughs. They are scratchers, ground feeders by nature and this business of having to perch, wait and eat in turn with the finches and woodpeckers and jays and chickadees is beneath them. But there is no ground now, just snow. So the redbirds swallow their pride and cue up with all the others. Winter is the great equalizer isn't it? There are so many situations, be you avian or sapiens that beset us during the cold months. Situations that respect neither status nor wealth, position nor fame. The winter makes citizens of all of us. It is the enemy of pretense and the close ally of steady, rational thought.

Every winter the Northland has more than a few stories about folks who forgot or ignored the power of a winter storm. Sometimes it's folks who really didn't know what they were getting into, people from somewhere else who hadn't experienced its frigid grip before. And on other occasions it's a poor soul who gets careless, someone who knew better but forgot. Most often our carelessness leads to nothing more serious than a dead battery and the inconvenience that follows. I like to think of these minor troubles as useful lessons, reminders to the wise.

I remember the first business meeting I attended shortly after my arrival in the Twin Cities back in the early seventies. I was fresh out of New York, via Chicago, full of myself and the promise of my newly hatched career. It was January. It was cold. But being a slave to fashion I wore my best suit (my only suit), my loafers a topcoat and no hat. I figured business must be about looking good and I was determined to look as successful as I wanted to be. I was meeting with representatives of a suburban Minneapolis outfit of some repute around here. Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing. 3M. You may have heard of them.

I was first in the conference room which gave me a chance to thaw my frozen ears and fingers. Then I turned my attention to what used to be cordovan colored Weejuns. My shoes now sported a jagged slush line all around their perimeters. The color appeared more grayish white than cordovan. Waiting for the bus on Hennepin Avenue had not been kind to my footwear. I was bent over in a chair trying to rub the salt stains off with crumbling tissues and spit when the rest of the meeting walked in.

Do you remember Larry, Darryl and Darryl from the old Bob Newhart show? Well, these three guys looked every bit as stylistically challenged as those characters did. Hooded parkas, zip up boots and ear muffs were the uniform of choice. "Great", I thought, "I'm meeting with the guy who plows the parking lot and his two cousins." Then I noticed that these gentlemen were in good spirits and ready for the meeting while I was still trying to polish my appearance. They were in command of the agenda while I was preening. Hmm. It was only after the formal introductions that I realized I was meeting with a Division Head and two of his Vice Presidents. These abominably dressed snowmen were responsible for about 100 million dollars of 3M's business.

A winter lesson to be sure. A Minnesota lesson if you will. Dress for the weather not for the show. Killer cold requires fashion concessions. Your reputation is not built solely on the quality of your looks. Somebody should have told Mitt. He could have saved himself a lot of money.

Where was I? Ah, yes, the cardinals. The cardinals are making winter concessions. They could have remained on the snow waiting for the stray seed to fall or they could get on the chow line with the rest of the birds and swallow enough food energy to get through another below zero night.

Well the feeders are packed with all manner of feathered friends, every one of them trying to stay one step ahead of the final freeze. I see a hint of yellow on some of the male finches, just the beginning of the show that will announce the next season. But it's early, way too early to be thinking about what comes next. That sort of thing can get you in trouble, attitude wise. So the trick is to be content with what the season gives you. Hopefully not just content but excited at the beauty of it. I'm looking past the birds now out onto a landscape that runs in bands from bleached white to stony brown. The oak leaves that stay curled but attached all winter are gyrating in the wind. I wonder why they don't fall. I wonder what advantage they gain from remaining while all the others are long gone. Maybe it's just to show tenacity, toughness in the middle of the big chill.

Or maybe any leaf, brown or green, is a reminder of the stages of things, the progression from one state to the next, the logic of sleep following growth. A winter lesson.

