



SIEBENQUELL

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## Lessons against Cold-heartedness from the Canadian Prairie

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I recently read a lengthy article on people who are referred to as toxic personalities. These are people who exhaust others emotionally and mentally because they constantly crave attention, perpetually need validation, always present themselves as the victim in every conflict and who exude a bottomless negativity.

In storytelling such people were referred to as cold-hearted. The term is analytically less precise, but it has captured the imagination far more effectively over the generations. In C.S. Lewis' book **The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe**, Lucy Pevensie says of the white witch: »And she has made a magic so that it is always winter in Narnia - always winter, but it never gets to Christmas.« Hans Christian Anderson created the snow queen. Dante presents us Satan buried to his hips in ice in the deepest level of hell, flapping his great wings in rage and thus generating ever great coldness.

In his tale, *The Selfish Giant*, Oscar Wilde lets winter remain year-round in the garden of the selfish giant once he has banished the children from it. »The Snow covered up the grass with her great white cloak, and the Frost painted all the trees silver. Then they invited the North Wind to stay with them, and he came. He was wrapped in furs, and he roared all day about the garden, and blew the chimney-pots down. "This is a delightful spot," he said, "we must ask the Hail on a visit." So the

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Hail came. Every day for three hours he rattled on the roof of the castle till he broke most of the slates, and then he ran round and round the garden as fast as he could go. He was dressed in grey, and his breath was like ice.«

I grew up on the Canadian Prairie, renowned even among other Canadians for its cold, hard, long winters. I believe that the children of the Canadian Prairie can offer us four lessons on how to deal with cold-hearted persons who plague our lives.

### **1. Do not fight the cold; preserve the warmth.**

Very often we speak about dressing against the cold. However, when I was a child the common advice of parents and teachers was »Stay warm«. The point of donning winter clothing, and many layers of them, was not to fight the cold, but to prevent the loss of the body warmth you already had.

The same is true of dealing with the cold-hearted. If we spend our time fighting them, resisting them, we run the danger of losing the warmth we already possess. It is one of the great lessons of biblical spirituality: You must be careful not to become what you hate the most. How easily we can become just as nasty and critical as the cold-hearted are. We allow ourselves to be dragged down to their vitriolic level. If we do not hold onto our deep warmth, we will permit their negativity to determine our outlook on life, the way we feel, and even where we go and what we do, simply to avoid more of the bitter edge of their icy demeanor.

This lesson of the Prairies is simple enough. Make sure you don't lose your own warmth, the joy within you, the delight that is housed within your heart. Do not fight the coldness in the other but preserve all that is warm and beautiful in yourself. It belongs to the great tragedies of life, when others remake us into something we are not.

### **2. Avoid unnecessary exposure.**

During the long cold winters of the Canadian Prairie you learn very quickly that you cannot stay indoors for the 5 to 6 months our winters can last. At the same time, we also know that we must exercise great caution. Overexposure can create frostbite and even death. You have to be careful about how long you stay outside when it is -40°C. You learn to limit your exposure to the elements and to judge very carefully and with great precision length of time you spend in the cold.

The same is true when we are dealing with the cold-hearted. We need to limit our exposure to them. We need to make sure we do not spend too great a time in their presence. Much like the cold of the winter, the human chilliness of the cold-hearted starts to creep into our bones, sap our strength, and weave a deep, heavy tiredness into us. Contact with them should be limited so that we do not end up, chilled to the bone by the constant exposure to their negativity and vindictiveness.

### **3. Breathe through a scarf.**

When the temperatures drop drastically in the winter, it is imperative to wear a scarf over your nose and mouth. Breathing air that cold straight down into your lungs is not only painful, but harmful. Breathing through a scarf, you pull the cold air through a filter that warms the air, so that it does not hurt the lungs. That is why in our winters, you will often see patches of ice crystals forming on the outside of the scarf. That is the idea, to make sure the ice stays on the outside and does not enter into your body.

The same is true for the cold-hearted. We need to make sure that we do not take whatever they say and do deeply into ourselves without filtering it first. To make sure that the scarf of our deepest personal convictions filters out the poison of their bitterness. We need to breathe through the scarf of our critical evaluation, to ensure that the harmful remains outside and does not enter into our hearts. We cannot control who knocks at the door of our hearts, but we can most assuredly determine whom we will allow to enter. The nasty language, the vicious diatribes and the cutting words frequently employed by

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the cold-hearted do not have to have an invitation extended to them to come in and make themselves comfortable within our souls.

**4. Seek out the places of warmth.**

As sons and daughters of the prairie, we already learned as school children that it is always necessary to know where the nearest place of warm shelter is. We were continuously aware of where the nearest school was, the nearest heated bus shelter, the nearest store, the nearest shopping center. It is critical to know where the shelters of warmth are and spend time there. Sometimes we just went in warm ourselves for a short time before going back out into the cold. Many people spend time skating on our frozen lakes and ponds, even at  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but they will periodically go inside a cabin to warm themselves for a time before returning to their favorite sport.

The same is true for the cold-hearted. We need to know where the places and shelters of warmth are in our lives. When the cold-hearted arrive, we tend to be so preoccupied with them that we forget the great shelters of warmth. The enclaves of warmth are the people who deal with us kindly, who are always generous with their time. The shelter from the cold-hearted are the people of the warm and encouraging word, who build us up and are delighted by our presence. The place of warmth are the people who are glad to share the journey with us, who are our companions, even on the roughest roads.

However, it is very easy to forget these many shelters of warmth for the human heart when assailed by the cold-hearted. Then, we spend all our time in furious engagement with the cold-hearted and forget to spend time in the places that warm our hearts. A devious delight of my childhood was entering the warmth of home or school and knowing the winter could not follow me there. The cold-hearted will never join us in the places where the warmth of the human heart prevails.

These are simple, straightforward truths from a simple and forthright people. On the other hand, we have weathered generations of the coldest winters on the planet. We have learned to take winter seriously, but not to allow it to fetter us as prisoners of the dark and the cold. So, too, with the cold-hearted. We need to take them seriously, because they are dangerous to our health and life. Yet, we must never allow ourselves to become prisoners of the cold and darkness they exude.

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