



SIEBENQUELL

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# The warmth of the heart

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I recently had a conversation with a woman who was telling me about a seminar she had attended with her work colleagues. They had been experiencing some friction among themselves in the workplace. The seminar was intended to help them work their way through some of their tensions and to learn to communicate better with one another. The woman leading the seminar was highly qualified in her field of work and the content of the course was beyond reproach. But there was a dreadful disconnect between what the woman was saying to the group and what she was modelling in her behaviour. She was calling upon the woman and her colleagues to enter into more open encounter and forthright dialogue with one another, while herself being cold, distant and aloof. By the time the group had sat down eat lunch, they had given the leader of the seminar a nickname: the Ice Queen.

The name stuck and became a byword for the group. Now, whenever they detect too much cold-heartedness creeping back into their voices or their interactions among themselves, they say: The Ice Queen cometh.

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I heard the story several days ago, but it has stuck with me. Since then I have been thinking of how often the image of ice, snow, and cold are used in storytelling to symbolically express the rigidity, isolation and emotional aridity of broken and unhealthy relationships. There is the Snow Queen of Hans Christian Anderson, or his work »The Ice Maiden« C.S. Lewis gives us the White Witch of Narnia. In Russian fairy tells there is Snegurochka, a woman made of snow. In Dante's Inferno he describes how Vergil accompanies him to the ninth circle of hell. There he finds Satan embedded in ice up to his chest. With every furious beat of his wings he creates a wind that makes the ice harder and hell colder. Thus Dante portrays Satan as a victim of his self-generated coldness, bound in ice, voiceless and powerless. In his poem »Fire and Ice« the American poet Robert Frost recognises the destructive potential of cold for mercy.

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

Of course, the nature of the illness dictates the nature of the cure. Thus if coldness afflicts the heart, then warmth will ever be the cure. The people of Okinawa sing a song with the words: »The warmth of the heart prevents your body from rusting«. It so enchanted Marie de Hennezel, that she used the phrase as the title of her book on aging. In the Sequence to Pentecost we ask for the very grace of warmth from the Holy Spirit: »Melt the frozen, warm the chill.«

The problem will not be that there is no warmth in us, but that we show the ice because we are afraid of the fire within us. Vincent van Gogh wrote: »There may be a great fire in our hearts, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a wisp of smoke.« Being cold, distant and aloof is an easy way of protecting ourselves, shielding ourselves. Often we use cold to keep people at a distance, because we are afraid they will discover the truth about us if they got close enough to us to see what we are really like. Then we will elicit from the people around us the byword of the woman and her work colleagues: The Ice Queen cometh.

Yet, becoming an ice queen is not the answer. I leave the final, thoughtful word to one of my favourite spatial writers, Henri Nouwen. He was a man of extraordinary warmth, always willing to let people draw near. I never knew a man who could show his heart more openly. It was impossible not to be drawn to him when you encountered him. He knew the secret about the warmth of the heart. »When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.«

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