

An interview with Eileen Lawlor, published in "Connections"
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Who turned on the trees? Fall assaults our senses with a frenzy of color, sharp, woody smells, and a host of memories of the year that's passing and spiritual enrichment for the seasons ahead.

Drive out and drink in the color. In New England, you can stride through the woods kicking leaves into damp, pungent heaps and revel in a carnival of color. In leaf-challenged parts of the country, like Arizona, fall color is harder to find, but canyons and high ground harbor gorgeous pockets of tawny and yellow that are more precious for their comparative rarity.

The words that cluster around the word "autumn" are as extravagant as the season itself: magnificent, glorious, blazing, russet, reds, glowing Like the leaves themselves, they almost constitute an overdose. You want to step back, blink, catch your breath.

Fall generates emotional change

How do you feel in the fall? Invigorated? Melancholy? The feelings evoked by the dying leaves are as varied as the colors that coat the trees like short-lived butterflies.

"We all respond to color, because color is vibration," says Canyon Ranch in Lenox Behavioral Health Therapist Eileen Lawlor, M.S.W. "Red and orange are warmer colors. They tend to enliven us – or, in a negative way, agitate us. Like a fire, they heat us up." When brilliant colors take over from soft greens, some people see them as "unsettling," she says, yet "others find them playful and whimsical."

Why do leaves behave so spectacularly? The color you see depends on which part of the spectrum is being absorbed and what's reflected away. Leaves have lots of chlorophyll in spring and summer, making them reflect green. In the fall, chlorophyll recedes and summer green turns to golden-yellow or blazing red as carotenoids and antioxidants have their moment on stage. It's all part of a process that reminds us of the power and mystery in nature – and in ourselves.

A time to turn inward.

Nature's yearly show puts the "awe" into autumn. "Fall is like looking at the night sky," says Lawlor. "We look at the grandeur and become more conscious of our own humanity and the 'I' in relation to our planet Earth."

And what if you live in the desert Southwest, where hostile stickers are more common than frantic foliage? Even in places where the landscape stays much the same year-round, fall is a time of change and introspection, she says. It's a time of endings – and new beginnings. School starts again, bringing all the excitement of new notebooks and pencils, new clothes and new teachers, along with the chance to turn over a new leaf and be a better student. The air cools, turning thoughts to lighting fires, picking apples, creating cinnamon smells in the kitchen and preparing for the holidays.

No matter where you live, the spiritual landscape of autumn can stir your psyche, says Lawlor. Tribal peoples have always observed the four seasons with reverence: spring and fall equinox and summer and winter solstice were honored with rituals and ceremonies. After the new life of spring comes the fullness of summer, symbolizing abundance, laughter and outdoor life. "Fall is harvest, maturity, ripening," as we prepare to draw inward for the winter, she says. "In the dark of winter, we can see the spiritual light most clearly ... the subconscious is more available to you – whereas summer is an extroverted season so we tend to focus outward."

Look back, learn and move on.

Metaphorically, says Lawlor, "Fall is time to batten down hatches. We're closing down the garden; taking stock, getting prepared for the inner journey to follow. In autumn, we let people, places and things go, just as the trees let the leaves go. We shed things: ideas, attitudes,

beliefs." You may not be ready to let go, but "the season will demand that we let go, as does our psyche.

"We go through our regrets and celebrate our positive experiences, taking their lessons into our spirit. Sometimes the lessons are painful – maybe there have been losses in the course of the year. We distill our experiences, select what's most meaningful and let the rest fall away. Summer is like a three-ring circus; there's always a lot going on. Fall is the grand finale before we leave the big top."

It's common to experience sadness when you watch the red and gold of autumn turn to brown as the leaves die and fall, says Lawlor. "As a therapist, I encourage people to attend to their melancholy, yet acknowledge the richness of experience. All feelings are aspects of ourselves. Wistfulness, sorrow, sadness, as well as joy, are all part of the package of being human." Try to honor those feelings and go with them, Lawlor suggests. "Live into whatever you are experiencing – it will strengthen you, and you will move into acceptance and understanding. ... You're being called inward for another round of rebirth."

Whether fall represents for you a time of spiritual house-cleaning, a relief from summer sun set permanently on "high," or simply the greatest show on Earth, it's time to get out there and soak it up. Poised between the yin and yang of sunglasses and snow blowers, it's a magical time to pause, look back over the year and glory in the enchantment that is autumn.