

In a dusky cityscape are found serenity and a sense of peace.

Inner warmth on winter days

By Myra Bellin

Many people dislike the gray winters in Philadelphia. They find the season bleak and depressing. But I like the winter light; the slanting rays of sunshine that penetrate the ashen skies of December and January are soft and gentle. It is the light in my memories of the cold winters when I was a kid, winters that elicited no thoughts of global warming, winters when we could count on at least a few snowy days to drag our sleds up from the basement and tromp around the neighborhood searching for hills.

The oblique light only disturbs me when a December day is unseasonably warm, for the association forged in my mind long ago pairs the freezing temperature with a sun that is smeared behind a heavy sky, one that sets early rather than continuing its struggle to burn too brightly.

I like the frosty weather, too. Smog doesn't hover in the cold winds, and the air seems clearer. The clothes of the season are bright — red mittens, purple scarves, green hats — the colors pop without a blazing sun high in the sky to compete with them. There is a storybook feel to the streets, particularly when the wrought-iron lamps are glowing in the late afternoon against a gray winter sky and people are scurrying around, bundled against the wind.

But I think that the real reason I like

the winter in the city is that the conspiracy of angled sunlight, shorter days, and freezing temperatures makes this a time when it seems natural to be indoors, to seek the comfort of a room with a blazing fire. Like peanut butter and jelly, the dark and cold go together: Both signal that it's time to move to a sheltered space. And what

against the cold. And the relaxation reaches way back to an earlier sense of shelter and safety, of being a little kid, with no adult responsibilities, cheeks red from the winter, finding a single spot in the cold universe that feels familiar and warm and safe.

Bears have evolved to hibernate all winter. They find the shelter of a cave and sleep through the

harsh weather. I think they're onto something. A late afternoon nap in the early twilights of winter is so delicious, snuggling under the covers at 4:30 on a gray bone-chilling Saturday afternoon. It's a reparative sleep, a childhood nap for adults.

"You want to sleep with the window open?" My husband is incredulous. He seems impervious to the joys of piling on blankets to stay warm. "Besides, the heat is on. If you open the window, all the heat will escape," he says.

I reason that the thermostat is turned way down and, bounded by houses on either side, ours retains the heat. "I just want to open the window a crack. For some fresh air," I say.

He rolls over and murmurs something that is fortunately unintelligible as I open one of the bedroom windows just a sliver. Cold air seeps into the room, and I arrange myself under the blankets in the dark January night. I like being surrounded by the chilly air. As long as I can stay warm.

And when I tire of leaden skies, as I invariably do by the end of February, I remember that the days are already growing longer, that the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, is well behind us for this season, and that the northern hemisphere of our planet is slowly tilting once again toward bright sunshine.

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is a city but a densely packed conglomerate of sheltered spaces? In the spring and summer, I long to see bright blue skies that are wide, uninterrupted by buildings; but in the winter, a skyline glimpsed through the narrow funnel of city streets offers me a sense of protection from bitter chills and cold sleet.

There's nothing better than walking indoors on a frigid day to be greeted by the smells of a simmering stew — parsley and dill, fresh vegetables, meat, potatoes. Even though I'm the one who shopped and chopped and cooked, it still feels as if a doting grandmother spent the time preparing something nourishing to take care of me.

When I enter the front door and settle into the comfortable warmth of my house, there is a sense of relief as I peel off my coat, hat, gloves and scarf. My body no longer has to brace