

The Medicine Wheel and the Seasons in Relationships

By Kukwitene Nale

In traditional indigenous knowledge, the medicine wheel is used to show how our lives are governed by cycles and directions in nature. The cycle shown below illustrates how every relationship goes through four seasonal phases, cycling from life to death and rebirth, much as nature itself.

Understanding this natural cycle and properly anticipating each phase does much to bring balance and harmony to relationships. From not understanding nature's personal winter of withdrawal, for example, many relationships have been prematurely terminated without full opportunity for renewal.

Spring

A relationship starts with a planting phase. You invest your energies into this person with whom you have discovered love. There is new life coming up from the ground of your isolation. A new vision and hope is shared with your partner.

Old ways of doing things are freely challenged, cultivated into new ways with fresh seeds of hope. Compromises are worked out, trust is developed. The increasing warmth you feel has you looking forward to enjoying the future with your partner. Your love even feels invincible, like it could last forever.

You begin this relationship with a sense of your own independence seeking someone who could appreciate your individuality. Now your *independence* has given way to *interdependence*, where souls mold into a oneness of mutual cooperation benefiting both.

Summer

The relationship appears to be worth all those invested energies as you enter the growing phase. You feel the warmth of the sun enriching your life. The roots of your love deepen with your partner. A mutual understanding blossoms.

You both have found new ways of doing things, and they are generally understood and accepted, branching out into new possibilities. Compromises made earlier are maintained to keep the relationship growing. There is warmth between you as you see this relationship maturing. It is obvious to you that the love you share with your partner is a solid love.

Interdependence increasingly slides into a state of *dependence* upon one another, where each starts to take the other's role in the relationship for granted.

Autumn

The relationship moves towards a time of harvest. You feel you have given plenty to this relationship and now it is time to reap even more of the benefits. But you increasingly find that this relationship has given up all of its fruit, and you realize the vine may soon die. The relationship appears to have peaked, and the future seems in doubt.

Your special ways of doing things together no longer seem worthwhile. The fun times have dried up, and life succumbs to a dull routine. Any new compromise is resisted, those old ones are only followed ritually. You feel a chilly breeze blow in as you watch the leaves of your passion fade and hit the ground. Yes, your love is less passionate, but typically more dependable. The roots of your relationship are deep, but the branches are bare.

Dependence upon one another breaks down and gives way to the opposite force of *counterdependence*, as each start to think about going your own separate way. You wonder if the relationship has failed you, or if you have failed the relationship. You only know for sure that the warmth is gone and it is time to seek shelter.

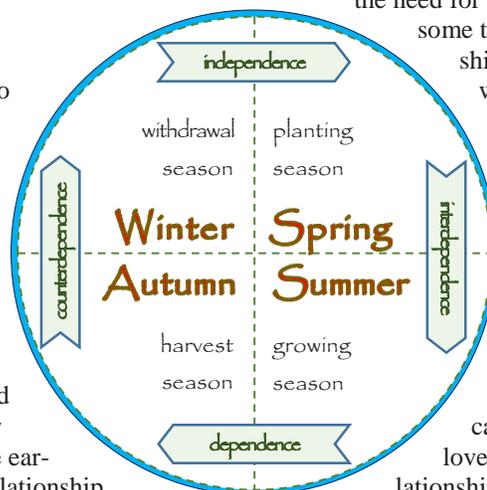
Winter

Each moves into a withdrawal phase, putting the relationship on ice. Welling up inside your soul is a gnawing call for change. Your partner probably feels it too. But it is difficult to talk about.

You know things cannot go on as they were. You feel the need for solitude, for space to reflect, space to find some things you feel have been lost in the relationship. You know you need time to think about where you stand in this partnership. You may even feel it might soon be over. And this will raise some questions about who you are and your direction in life.

Now those shared ways of doing things seem far too inadequate. They impede your personal needs. Your neglected needs seem so great that you are now willing to renege on your compromises. A coldness envelopes you. You find shelter in the rediscovery of your individual self. Because of the changes you needed to make your love as it was will inevitably die. Therefore, the relationship dies—or undergoes renewal into the next phase of Spring.

You have come full circle in your relationship and once again feel your *independence*. The freedom to be yourself has been revived. But you naturally wonder what good is this freedom if you are all by yourself with no one to share it. →



Spring Again

You now feel ready to reinvest yourself in a loving relationship. If you have done well during your Winter phase you will be ready to put yourself fully into a meaningful relationship. Often it will be the same relationship that recently proved to be such a burdensome struggle. When all the fruit of the relationship isn't consumed there remains some seeds of hope stored through Winter to be replanted in Spring.

Your partner may have come through Winter with some common conclusions: You were meant for each other, and with much renewal you can go on, rebuild, rethink your place in this growing relationship, and stay committed to one another. You *can* because the icy coldness between you has melted, the replanting season has begun, and the growing season is straight ahead. If your relationship survived this Winter surely it will survive another.

Of course, you may have discovered during your Winter phase that you simply cannot go on with your life while still attached to your partner. You may have decided to start anew with another soul-mate.

No matter who you decide to be with, you will inevitably feel the need to invest your independent spirit in a relationship with whom you can develop a sense of interdependence. And the cycle continues.

Cycle Through Life

Each season lasts about a year. Each 4-part cycle will typically last about 4 to 5 years in your life. And these cycles keep repeating, beginning at the start of your life.

You begin your first relationship before you are born—a symbiotic bond with your mother. You hit your first Autumn to Winter about 2 or 3 years old, when you first insist on being free to do things for yourself. This is your first step towards finding and asserting your individuality.

After much trial and error you find where you are and aren't capable. As all goes well, childhood continues into Spring with the needed protection and nourishment from family and friends. You are an individual who fits in a family unit.

But you hit another cold spell about 8 or 9, and again at about 13 or 14 years of age. Each Winter you are finding who you are apart from your family ties. You are gradually learning how to live on your own. By your next Winter, about age 18 or 19, you are ready to break free from the family unit and start a new bond in your first Spring of adulthood. You find your first lasting love.

After about 2 years, going into your first Winter with your new love, you feel the fire going out of your romance. An inexplicable urge will compel you to find your identity apart from the confinement you curiously feel in this stage of the relationship. It feels strangely familiar, like when you

felt smothered by your parents in your youth. But Spring finally comes and you are likely to continue to build the relationship.

In the next Winter you will no doubt experience what some have called the seven year itch. Sadly, many couples do not make it past this chilly season. Of those who do, plenty will separate after about 11 to 13 years into the relationship, in their next Winter of life. Some will endure the cold and struggle to stay together, envisioning better days ahead. It is a struggle revisited in one's mid-life crisis. It will be felt again when entering retirement. It is this relationship cycle coming full circle again.

Cycling For Balance

This cycle illustrates a primary dilemma we all face in life: How do I maintain my own sense of personhood while trying to get along with others, especially those closest to me? The dilemma pits one's individual freedom against the social code of togetherness.

As you head south, through Spring and onto Summer, you gravitate towards togetherness, accepting the social agreements for living together in close proximity. You feel positive about the relationship. When you head north, through Autumn and onto Winter, you switch your emphasis from togetherness to solitude, reclaiming the freedom of your individuality. You think things through apart from the relationship. You try to do your "own" thing.

The turn is inevitable and often painful. Everyone goes through it, each in his or her own way. It is frequently resisted, but can only be delayed. The growth your relationship has enjoyed during your Summer season will be necessary to endure the distancing you will endure during Winter. If you pass through Winter without much personal development, you will find it difficult to give of yourself come Spring.

As you go through these changes it may feel like you have failed your commitments and even failed yourself. You wonder what you did wrong that now puts you through so much grief. But these changes are necessary for bringing balance into your life. And because we are in complex relationships as intricate individuals who are always changing, it is a lifelong process. It is a natural process.

Much of the misery we put ourselves through in our relationships is because we are resisting this balancing process. There is much happiness and peace to be found when discovering the balance between your individual needs and the needs of the group, especially the needs of your loved one. It doesn't happen overnight, but it does happen when you work with nature. It is when we follow nature's path through these seasonal cycles that we find that balance and peace for ourselves. ⊗

