

Upfront

Yesterday, I was sitting in my chair when a feeling that became a thought washed over me: Winter is depressing.

Admittedly, it's late autumn. The winter solstice is nearly three weeks from its beginning. But it feels like winter – barren and gray – even though I clearly see green leaves through my front window as I sit here and type.

This feeling is unfamiliar. I don't remember it as a yearly thing. As a kid in a place that experiences both blinding snow and bone-chilling cold on bright, sunny days, winter is exciting, exotic, an adventure. Bulky snowsuits...the kind with extra-long zippers in front. Sleds. Runny noses treated with hot chocolate and marshmallows. A stretch of days without school. And presents; you get gifts. For a child, winter is a time of abundance rather than blight.

Over the years, I've become less enthusiastic about winter, more ambivalent than maudlin, though. Yesterday, something seemed to shift. A sense of melancholy invaded my psyche. For the first time, I consciously recognized winter – at least its early stages – as a season of deterioration and decline.

The triggers? The light is suddenly drab and bleak. It's raining intermittently, and it's predicted to continue through the week. Afternoon surrenders too easily and quickly to evening and breaks my day's momentum just as it begins to build. Last weekend – Thanksgiving weekend, a time to gather in grateful celebration – the town was bursting with life. Suddenly, the streets are empty, the coffee shop on the corner is quiet, the swarm has receded, the people are gone.

Yesterday, at my request, Jenna piped Christmas music through the speakers throughout the house. Spotify chose the songs. The algorithm favored jazzy melodies rather than traditional carols or religious hymns. As the playlist progressed, it conveyed a consistent sentiment to me: The songs were sad. Was I superimposing my own darkness and dread on otherwise cheery or innocuous melodious art? Let's look it up.

Dear A.I.: "Is Christmas music sad?"

Christmas music isn't inherently sad, but it can evoke feelings of sadness due to nostalgia, memories of lost loved ones, or the contrast between reality and the idealized notion of the season. Holiday music evokes memories of childhood, which can be both happy and sad. As you grow up, Christmas music can remind you of a time when the magic was different, leading to feelings both wistful and bittersweet.

It makes sense, but my current life is terrific, so I'm not pining for something I no longer have. Let's try another one...

Dear A.I.: "Is Charlie Brown Christmas music sad?" (I asked this because it's representative of the type of contemporary songs that were coming at me, including Dolly Parton's "Hard Candy Christmas," which is – literally – a metaphor filled with bitter and sweet.)

Yes, particularly the iconic "Christmas Time Is Here," because it captures the bittersweet and melancholy feelings that many people experience during the holidays, despite its beautiful, nostalgic, and sometimes joyful melodies. The music's melancholy stems from the contrast between its lovely, wistful tones and the underlying disappointment Charlie Brown feels, creating a mix of emotions that many find relatable.

If I had to explain it myself, it's the piano stuff. The keys are often struck with staccato precision rather than a soft, whole-handed blend of notes. Each sound is distinct from the next, lonely rather than comforted by what comes thence or hence. The featured piano in these songs has no room for instrumental friends.

What about the aforementioned "Christmas Time is Here?" It's singularly soul-wrenching and, to me, the finest contemporary Christmas song.

Dear A.I.: "Christmas Time Is Here' composer's thoughts."

Vince Guaraldi composed the instrumental music. His goal was to write a song that captured the specific emotional and melancholic atmosphere of the season. It was created to communicate directly through its emotional language, transcending words.

Mission accomplished, I'd say.

Our priest offered a great reminder about the season last Sunday. Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas in the Christian faiths, is a time of anticipation and waiting. The Savior has yet to be born, but He's coming. Eventually, His arrival is marked by a bright star in the night sky. In other words, where there is darkness, there is hope. There is divine genius in the timing of Jesus' birthday. It coincides with the slow, incremental lengthening of days after a period of steady deterioration and relentless decay.

So, it makes sense to be sad for a minute, so we can contrast the feelings with imminent joy. When I wrote this essay's first word, a drizzle had accelerated to a downpour. I turned all the lights on; there wasn't adequate natural illumination for work. Surveying the room now I marvel at the amazing decorations Jenna filled our home with while I was in bed. A smile forms, involuntarily. I'm sitting in the same sad chair as yesterday, but something has changed. With this final sentence, I turn my head to the window, and I notice the rain has completely stopped.

Scott A. Lawrence

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