

In praise of snow

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue



Attribution [Some rights reserved](#) by [Jo Naylor](#)

Call it a Chicago winter survival skill. Usually by this time you've shoveled enough snow to begin to hate the stuff. So it's time to concentrate on snow's beauty.

And it is beautiful. Sometimes it falls like dust, accumulating like soil. Other times it falls in clumpy, heavy flakes, splattering as it hits the ground. Either way, it leaves that ground white and smooth, trackless and bright with hope of new beginnings. It limns the tree limbs with frosting and makes the power wires glisten with ice.

Snow brings a hush, a muffling quiet to busy neighborhoods. It really does change the world, beveling its rough edges of sight and sound.

Farmers love snow. It is, as my farming grandmother used to say, good moisture. It covers evenly and melts gently, doing little to erode the topsoil.

Dogs delight in snow. Our labradoodle runs and jumps through it, digs into it with his whitening mustache. He eats it like a delicacy, like manna fallen from heaven.

Piled up and slick, snow makes things happen. Stories grow around it. Take these four, chosen almost at random.

My wife was born in late February. She was a tiny baby, carried home in one of her daddy's shoe boxes. She wasn't long home before blizzards hit. Her mother produced insufficient breast milk and the family was running low on store-bought

cow's milk. Not to worry—the grocer hiked over snowdrifts and delivered three gallons.

My father had a 1961 crimson-colored pickup truck that he anointed Big Red. He mock-boasted about Big Red's considerable powers for hauling, towing and otherwise performing pickup truck tasks magnificently. At age six or seven I was sometimes allowed to turn the wheel while Dad operated the clutch, brake and accelerator. On one of my driving occasions, Dad crowed, "Big Red can't get stuck! No, you can't stick Big Red." I begged to differ, cruising along between snow-filled ditches. But Dad kept it up: "No, can't stick Big Red." Without warning, I twisted the steering wheel, and Big Red careened into the ditch, where it was soundly and surely stuck. Dad made me walk the quarter mile to Granddad's house for help.

Another story from the early 1960s: a considerable snowstorm hit the countryside, knocking out electricity. When Mom and Dad had gone through the night without power and had no word of power being restored for another day or two, they decided something had to be done with the refrigerator's contents. Why not use the snow? Outside the front door, Dad dug a good-sized hole in the snow. Then they transferred meat and other perishables to the outdoor makeshift refrigerator. All this worked swimmingly until a neighbor dropped by, pulled his truck into the front yard and buried his front tire in the snowbox.

Finally, a more recent tale: My writing office faces out a front window of our home. One day a couple of years ago I was working away, occasionally glancing up to see how much more snow was accumulating outside. Car behavior suggested that the roads were slick and treacherous. Sure enough, I soon looked up to see a neighbor's car slowly but irrevocably skimming off the street and straight into our front yard. I went outside and pushed, but to no avail. Another neighbor added his heft, but still to no avail. Then a third neighbor stopped by in his truck. I crawled under his truck and the car and tied a line between them. The truck's assistance did the trick and the car was freed. The best part: the next day, the neighbor with the errant car brought over a plate of freshly baked cookies.

So snow brings life. It brings it literally, with the moisture it brings. And it brings it figuratively, with story-making occasions that call neighbors together in laughter and common endeavor. Not for nothing does the Psalmist exhort "fire and hail, snow and frost" to praise God through its creaturely occurrence (148:8). The Bible's writers are struck most by snow's whiteness, and in it they see reflected holiness—not a self-

righteous sort of holiness, but the holiness that brings cleansing and new, capacious life. "Wash me," the Psalmist cries, "and I shall be whiter than snow" (51:7). Similarly, and most famously, God promises Isaiah, "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow" (1:18).

Snow can be tiresome and even deadly—it sometimes freezes and smothers people and other creatures. But snow can be a cipher of holiness, a sign of renewal and hope. In the lengthening calendar of winter, when the white stuff comes yet again and the shovel grows heavy, let there be a prayer of thanksgiving for snow.