



EUDAEMONIA **Retreat, with Katherine May**

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Kim Forrester 0:00

For many thousands of years, humans understood the importance of winter and welcomed the opportunity to rest, retreat and repair. But how many of us now in our busy modern lives appreciate the inherent beauty of life's darker and more uncomfortable phases? You're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. I'm Kim Forrester, and today it's time to explore why a truly flourishing life requires periods of rest and retreat.

Intro 0:30

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:50

Katherine May is a British author who is compelled by how wild and extreme landscapes can benefit our mental and emotional well being. Her journalism and essays have appeared in a range of publications including The Times, The Observer, and Good Housekeeping, and she is the author of several books, including her most recent title, *Wintering: How I learned to flourish when life became frozen*. It's my absolute delight to be chatting with Katherine today to explore the importance of rest, retreat and repair, and to learn how our well being is enhanced when we fully accept and fall into the fallow seasons of our lives. Katherine May, it is such a pleasure to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. How are things with you today?

Katherine May 1:35

They're great, actually. It's a very beautiful day here in the UK. It's not too hot, because I'm not very keen on the heat, which is probably very on brand for me as the author of a book called *Wintering*. So it's cooled down a little bit, but it's still sunny and very beautiful.

Kim Forrester 1:49

Well, I'm delighted to hear that and I'm just truly delighted to be exploring this really important topic with you here today; this topic of retreat, and rest, and reflection. Let's start with what that means and how that looks in our modern lives. Because our modern lives overwhelmingly seem to be determined by this sense of productivity, right, and this obsession with doing? And I feel that this obsession can actually distract us from what's really going on within ourselves. How did you distract yourself from the onset of your personal winter? Did you distract yourself, Katherine? And do you feel that these life phases can be mitigated somehow, if we actually learn to acknowledge the signs, early on, that we are in greater need of rest and retreat?

Katherine May 2:37

Hmm, that's a really interesting question because I would say that I tried not to distract myself from it. I think one of the things that we do an awful lot in contemporary society, is that we don't allow ourselves to exist alongside the most difficult moments of our lives. We don't let ourselves feel them. We don't let ourselves even really notice them. We just carry on charging through life and trying to be busy because busy makes us feel important. And if we don't feel important, this sense of shame comes in very quickly. So when I began to approach the winter that I wrote about in my book, I took a very different angle on it to everything I'd ever done before. And I tried to live through it in a very mindful, conscious way, and to notice what was happening and to notice those feelings. And I think it's interesting you using the word 'mitigate'. I'm not sure it does mitigate it, funnily enough, because - I say in the book - you can't rush a wintering, you can't skip it. They're completely unavoidable and irresistible is the word I use. But actually, I delved into it, and I asked what it could teach me instead.

Kim Forrester 3:53

There is truly a sense of vulnerability, and openness to pain and discomfort throughout your book, and several times, you actually describe the power that can be derived from profound discomfort, right? You tell stories of swimming in a midwinter ocean or rolling in the snow after a sauna. Do you feel that we benefit as individuals when we allow ourselves these moments of intensity, and pain even? Is there something to be gained from becoming more mindful of these moments in our lives and leaping into physical, emotional and spiritual discomfort?

Katherine May 4:31

Yeah, it's really interesting, actually, because I would say that swimming in the winter ocean is not at all uncomfortable. I think it's massively pleasurable. I don't think I'm very good at physical discomfort to be honest. I love all these kind of hardy, outdoors-y people that love kind of camping and all that kind of thing. I can't do any of that. I like my home comforts. So actually, I think a lot of the things that we think are physically uncomfortable and maybe not as uncomfortable as they actually turned out to be. And cold water swimming is one of those things. It's actually an intense high that you get from it. It's hugely pleasurable. And I certainly don't go back to it because it's unpleasant. But interestingly, emotionally, yeah, I am very interested in that experience of being with those hardest moments inside our own minds. I suppose I've begun to notice over the years, the number of times I'm flinching away from certain thoughts or ideas or feelings; the way that there's a kind of bounce, I suppose, that happens when those darkest things enter your consciousness. You know, that you automatically distract yourself or do something else. So I think that there's a huge value to delving into those really tricky emotions, feelings, memories, sensations, and experiencing them for what they actually are because I don't think we process them otherwise.

Kim Forrester 6:01

I think there is a modern idea or ideal as well, that we are supposed to be able to cope all the time, right, with whatever life throws our way. And the sense of being vulnerable is not only sort of quite shameful for many of us, I think it does open us up for judgement from others around us. What have you learned through your personal wintering about the power of vulnerability and of allowing yourself to not be okay, sometimes?

Katherine May 6:32

Yeah, not being okay is a surprisingly helpful state of being, funnily enough. And I think that all of our culture points us away to that. You know, even when we're trying to say helpful things on social media, we're quite often just spitting cliches out to each other. You know, like, hang on in there, we say. What does that mean? Like that doesn't tell me anything that I ... you know, it doesn't give me any guide for what I could possibly do to hang on in there. And I think often we express a lack of care for each other when we talk about, you know, people going through painful moments. We don't actually say, What can I do to help? We say, oh, jolly up then. You know, off you go. But I do think that we need to learn a whole new vocabulary for how we deal with people going through tough times. I think we need that personally; we need to be able to name it, we need to be able to acknowledge it, we need to be able to see the phases that that kind of constitutes. The fact that you might be in deep midwinter is a very, very specific moment in your life; those moments of despair, those moments when you can't see the sunlight for a while. They're so common to all human beings - most people get there at some point - and yet, we don't name them, we don't talk about them. And if we did, we'd start to see what a universal experience it is, and therefore we'd allow ourselves a little bit more hope. But I think we're all ... and actually the pandemic is teaching us a load about this. But we're all in need of learning how to talk to other people who are wintering, and how to kind of reach out from our wintering to theirs, and from our experience to theirs. And that involves boosting our compassion, refusing to shut down and get bored when we see people suffering, and really - not necessarily doing anything that breaks down our own boundaries, because I still think our boundaries are important so that we can cope, too - but when we see someone else wintering, offering actual help like a cup of tea together, or just an email to say that you care, or sending a card or, you know, very simple things that we can do for each other, as well as for ourselves. And when we do help someone else who's wintering, we learn more about our own winters too. And it's another thing that can combat our shame when it comes around to our time again. Because it always will.

Kim Forrester 8:55

I can see that immediately in your answer there, it's almost like we avoid being there for others - truly deeply, authentically being there for others - because we will have to confront the shame of our own winter moments, right? Our own moments of this need for rest, and retreat, and repair as you wrote in your book. So, there are so many forces, I think, in society that call us away from our winter moments; that call us out of our retreat and out of our hibernation and rest moments. And one of them, particularly in the age of social media, I feel is this desire - no, this emphatic decision - that we must all be relevant. And we must all be validated, and we must all be seen to have worth. In your opinion, Katherine, if we are to find greater well being through rest and repair, do we have to work through a fear of insignificance and unworthiness? And if so, how do we do that?

Katherine May 10:04

Well, that's a very good question and I wish I could say I had it all figured out. But I think that we need to begin to accept that there are some points in our life when we haven't actually got that much to offer to the world. And they may be really extended periods. You know, like, not in the conventional sense of an offer, anyway. So, we may not be able to work, we may not be very economically productive, whatever the hell that means. We may not be feeling very sociable. You know, we might not be going out very much. We might not be very cheerful. We might not be, you know, in a position to help others. We might require help ourselves. And I think we all have to reflect honestly on the times when that's been true for us - because I think it's been true for all of us at certain points in time - and need to kind of come to an acceptance that that is part of our humanity.

And that needing help is a real privilege to the people who can then offer us help. You know, we are still part of that amazing ecosystem of humanity in our weakest moments. Because actually, we give other people the opportunity to step in and lead for a while and take over from us. And it's a cycle. I think the more we observe that cycle, the more we can come to trust it, and actually to use those difficult periods to restore ourselves and to face the changes that have come to us because the changes come either way, and the change will happen. But wintering gives us a period in which to process that change and to think about how we're going to address it, I think.

Kim Forrester 11:44

Even through your wintering - the winter that you wrote about - you were engaging with others, Katherine. Like, you were creating meaningful connections you were spending time with trusted friends. Human connection is vital for our well being. You know, research shows that. So how can we know that we've struck the right balance between retreat and social connection? Or in your experience, is complete isolation also beneficial for us at times?

Katherine May 12:12

Hmm. Well, you're asking the wrong person because I am a lover of solitude. And I think I probably want more solitude than most people do. But I've been learning this myself over the last few years because I used to see myself as an extremely sociable person. I'd have told you was an extrovert, if you'd have asked me like, even five years ago. And I've had this big realisation that I'm actually not, but that I've been enacting that all my life because I thought it was the right thing to do. And I've really been rebalancing the amount of social contact I need. And it's not very easy to do because there are lots of demands on all of us. And, I mean, again, a busy social life is one of those things that might make us all feel quite important, you know. And there's shame associated with not being in social demand enough, I think. But if we can take the time - and again, as with everything I talk about, this is a slow process, this is not something you're going to do over a weekend - but to really observe how social life affects us. You know, which pieces of contact leave us feeling refreshed, excited, zingy, restored. Like we've had, you know, really meaningful contact and maybe even inspired for the next, you know, whatever we're going to do next. And which pieces of social contact leave us actually quite spent, anxious, exhausted, and distracted. You know, I learned by observation that actually quite often at parties, I was ending up hiding in the toilets, just for a bit of relief. And I hadn't noticed that about myself until I checked in with it. And I do think that we're often not meeting our own needs as far as social life goes. So that led me to being, you know ... to kind of delving further into solitude. I mean, you know, it's never truly solitude when you've got a young family, so I don't get time on my own very much. And I would love some more time actually alone. But it did lead me to a period of kind of avoiding loads of social contact. And I found that that wasn't the right balance, either. I missed people and I missed the inspiration they bring, and I certainly learned that all over again in lockdown. So, I know now my particular balance, you know, there are certain kind of very noisy, frantic events that I avoid, but I love one on one contact with really cherished friends. And I, you know, I do walk away from certain friendships and associations that I find tiring and harmful. And I think that's something that we all need permission to do sometimes. You know, you would dump a bad boyfriend, but we all need to learn to dump bad friends as well.

Kim Forrester 14:50

I've been there and it's a very painful and uncomfortable thing to do, particularly if you want to be seen as being a good, kind, compassionate person. Right? Which kind of leads me to my next

question, because intertwined with this idea of withdrawing from the world and withdrawing from the obligations and expectations that society places upon us, there is this sense that we are being asked to be fully engaged in the process of self healing and self care. This concept of selffulness, as I call it. And this can be deeply uncomfortable for many people, myself included. Why do you feel, Katherine, that we shy away from fully engaging unapologetically in self care and self nurturing?

Katherine May 15:40

Oh, my goodness, I think that that comes for loads of reasons. I think it's particularly true for women who are taught, you know, not to kind of ask for that time and also to always have other people's needs at the forefront of their mind. I think we see it as a sign of weakness, quite often; that, you know, I'm not in need of care, because I'm dynamic and thrusting. And I'm out in the world and I'm capable. I think also, we don't necessarily know what self care is, to be honest. I think we talk a good game but if your self care routine is limited to, you know, the odd face pack and gin and tonic, you probably aren't truly, truly nurturing yourself. And real self care involves the difficult bits of dealing with being human, too. It involves you know, spending time processing difficult emotions. It involves solitude. It involves those painful moments, you know, that we need to go through in order to move on to the next phases. And it's not performative. Like when we're taking care of ourself, that is a quiet, private moment. It's not something that you can post on Instagram with a pretty picture and a kind of neat caption. It doesn't work that way. And I think that we need to learn to take ourselves backstage sometimes, in this incredibly busy, pressured world. And, you know, please don't ever read what I'm saying as, like, I'm disapproving of people out on social media and stuff. I mean, I'm on Instagram every single day talking about every single thing I do. I've been posting pictures of my homemade raisins today, if that's an indication of the level to which I'm going into on there. But I have a very strong sense of what happens backstage from that place, too. And I regularly take weeks off and stop outputting for a while, you know. Like, sometimes you need to input. And I do think that there needs to be some kind of spiritual sense of the world that comes with that. I don't necessarily mean religious, I don't necessarily mean it has to be particularly woo, if you're uncomfortable with that. And I often get uncomfortable with that. But a sense of that thing that is bigger than us; of those processes that are grinding on regardless of us, and how small we are against them. And an appreciation of how enormous the world is, I think, is enough to give you that spiritual sense of where we stand and what we are. I think we all need that.

Kim Forrester 18:12

So many ideas to unpack there, from that answer. First of all, I can see - if we can just hark back quickly to why it's imperative that we sort of choose who we allow into our life - and that is because the process you're talking about there, it feels to me like literally unzipping ourselves, right? Zipping ourselves open and going in and being completely raw, and real, and honest with ourselves about the pain that we're carrying and the pain we need to process. And that is not the kind of process that you do on Instagram. And it's certainly not the kind of process that you invite the world in, or your community, or even your wider social circle, to come in and to witness. So I think for the listeners, just another beautiful reason why rest and retreat - literally retreating and doing what humans have done for tens of thousands of years in the winter, right? Going inside with the closest and the dearest and the ones that that will nourish and nurture them the most through those darker, colder months.

Katherine May 19:19

And you're allowed to choose those people, you know. You're allowed to trust the people who you are closest to. Like, I don't think everybody feels entitled to that. But I think that's something that we all have to assert for ourselves. The people that we are closest to should be people that we trust. And if they're not, and if you have those kind of competitive, oppositional relationships with them, or if they're cruel or unkind to you, and certainly if they're abusive to you, they are people that we need to learn to walk away from.

Kim Forrester 19:51

Well, let's expand beyond friendships. If we are to truly benefit from times of rest and retreat, what is it wise to say 'no' to, Katherine? And was it best to say 'yes' to?

Katherine May 20:05

I think what we say no to is different to everybody. But I do think in periods of rest and retreat, it can be a great idea to, even for a couple of weeks, just avoid big events where there's loads and loads of people, and where you might be putting on a sort of performance face. You know, those kind of places that you feel like you have to dress up for, and you're worried about what people think of you. I think avoiding those for a little while can be really healthy and positive. Even if you want to throw yourself straight back into them afterwards. I would avoid any situation in which you have to be positive - uniformly positive, you know - and you're not allowed to express vulnerability. Any situation where you're kind of vulnerable to trends or to looking up to date. You know, I think if you can give yourself a couple of weeks when you're allowed to be nothing; when you're allowed to be homely; when you're allowed to be dowdy. All of those things we try very hard not to be in everyday. I think they are great things to say no to, personally. And also, you know, checking in and working out those things that are making you feel exhausted because they will be different for everybody. But what should you say yes to? Hmm, I think you should say yes to any offers that come from people that are about healing. So, I'm going with a good friend of mine, next week, to a sound bath. I'd given myself a few weeks of quiet because I was in need of another retreat. But this opportunity came up to go to a beautiful sound bath and I thought, well, what a lovely thing to do together. It doesn't involve that kind of social pressure of going to a pub and having wine, or anything like that, which is gonna make me feel worse in the morning. But it's actually a really nice, quiet healing thing that you can do alongside another soul who's also in need of some solace. You know, it's certainly not a case of saying no to absolutely everything. But it is about learning to say no to the stuff where we can't be fully ourselves and where we have to perform.

Kim Forrester 22:13

Let's go back to this Instagram post, because you do write about it in your book. And I know you're saying that Instagram is wonderful and lovely. However, there has to be an acknowledgement that these quotes and lovely images that get shared, they don't necessarily get to the depths of someone's personal experience, right? A lot of these posts, they're out there to be inspiring and probably to share a bit of optimism. But do you think that, in a sense of misplaced optimism, we tend to rush through our wintering phases? Do you feel that we kind of try to scream through all the pain, and the unpleasantness, and the discomfort to get to the spring? Or at least sit in the darkness going, you know what, it's fine because spring will eventually come? Is there value in there power in allowing our personal winters and our need for retreat to take as long as it needs to take.

Katherine May 23:08

Yes, definitely. Let it take its course. You can't rush these things. And as you say, I think if we put ourselves under pressure to be performing, then actually, we're not engaging with the process, you know. I mean, I curate the media I get really carefully so that I avoid those people because I find them absolutely exhausting. You know, they're not what I want to consume. Like, I rarely see that in my feed. And I think we all need to realise the control we have over what we're consuming, and whether we're consuming realness. Because there are loads of people out there being really real and really, really giving. There's a big mindset shift that has to come when we truly embrace wintering, not just as a sort of moment, but as a lifestyle for the rest of our life, as well. And that means taking a very long term view. It means acknowledging the cyclical nature of life. And it means opening ourselves up to stuff going wrong, and to the notion that we can heal, and that we are capable of integrating the difficult stuff that happens.

Kim Forrester 24:21

Importantly, in that, I can sense the concept that we mustn't approach our personal winters as just another project to complete. Right? Or just another thing to accomplish. Right? I am now in a space of pain and discomfort and healing but that's fine, because I'm going to crack on and I'm going to, you know, I'm going to kick this. I can't imagine that, that you would regard that as a particularly healthy way to approach our personal winters.

Katherine May 24:48

No, you know, you can't ace them. They're not a competitive process. But you're right. You know, like, we don't know how to talk about that, do we? And actually, I could probably sell lots more copies of my book if I said, here's your 10 step plan for making your wintering last a lot less time. You know, we're grownups here. And I consumed a lot of self help books in my twenties and I got to a point when I realised that they never, ever were working for me, and I needed something deeper, and more honest, and more sustainable and a different way of thinking about it. Actually, another thing that this pandemic has taught us is that we're learning about convalescence again, for the first time in a very, very long time. You know, we're learning about the idea that here is an illness that, if you get it - and I had it early on in the process of you know, in the pandemic - if you get it, it stays with you for a long time. And for many of us, you have to rest out the symptoms. You can't short circuit them, there's no drug you can take. There is no therapy that we know about yet, that speeds it up. You will feel tired for weeks and you will be overtaken by moments of breathlessness for weeks. And you are forced to genuinely convalesce in a way that I think we've forgotten that we need to do. And we need to do it with more than just covid. We need to learn to convalesce from childbirth again; we need to learn to convalesce from depression again, you know. I think that word is going to come into our vocabulary much more in the next few years because I think it's a human skill that we have forgotten about and that we urgently need all over again.

Kim Forrester 26:34

Beautiful. Grief too. The loss of a loved one - something that we tend to feel that we have to rush our way out of.

Katherine May 26:41

Oh, wow, yes. And I mean grief. I think again, you know, we are in a situation of mass grief here, now. We have, you know, gone back to a time perhaps that we were last in during wartime when loads and loads of people have lost a loved one, all in one go. And that is unfamiliar territory for us. We have forgotten - we have very carefully forgotten - about death over the last few decades. And we've got to remember it again. Because actually, this is going to go on for a long time. You know, there are people who have not had the opportunity to really process their grief yet, because they were denied a funeral, for example. Or because, you know, they were busy taking care of other things, and it's not really hit them yet. So I think we're all going to have to get used to having conversations about grief with other people again, and acknowledging people as grieving over long periods of time. And that's not going to be easy, but I think it's going to do us a lot of good and I think it's very, very necessary.

Kim Forrester 27:40

My final question, Katherine is one that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. And I do hate to take your incredible message and your incredible book and ask you to put it into one, sort of, mantra or affirmation or ritual or practice. But can you offer something simple that can help my listeners at least start tapping into that power of wintering; start tapping into the importance of rest and retreat and repair?

Katherine May 28:06

I have a very tiny thing that I do every single morning that I think could help everybody. And that is that, the first thing I do when I get up is I open my back door of my house and I just sniff the air. And that sounds like absolutely nothing but it's everything because the air is full of information every morning about how the day is going to go. That breath will tell you an awful lot about how you're feeling. It will tell you where the seasons are. It helps you to detect the shifts in the seasons. I sniffed a little bit of autumn in the air this morning for the first time and it was really exciting. And it primes you for your day. It's a moment of pause before everything starts. So if that isn't too small a thing, that is the practice that I would definitely recommend to your listeners.

Kim Forrester 28:57

It sounds beautiful. It brings us to where we are, doesn't it?

Katherine May 29:02

Exactly. It lands us exactly in the present moment. Yeah.

Kim Forrester 29:05

Katherine your book, *Wintering*, I wept and sighed my way through its beautiful pages. If people would like to learn more about the book and the other amazing books that you've written, and more about the work that you do, where can people go to find out more?

Katherine May 29:21

You can find me at www.katherinemay.co.uk. And I mean, I'm very Googable. So if you go to my website, you can find links to me on Instagram, Twitter, to the courses I run. I've just started running some courses for people who want to write creative nonfiction like I do, but also for writers who are wintering at the moment. Because I realised that actually, there are so many writers who go through these very dark phases in their career and that I have some stuff that could help them. So I've been really enjoying helping some people out in the last few weeks. That's been a real privilege for me.

Kim Forrester 29:54

Katherine, thank you so much - first of all for sharing the experience that you went through, your wintering experience, and for allowing us to live that with you. And thank you for choosing to come on Eudaemonia podcast. It's just been wonderful having you here.

Katherine May 30:09

Thank you so much for having me. It's been lovely to chat.

Kim Forrester 30:12

It was the French philosopher, Albert Camus, who wisely said, "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer." You've been listening to the final episode of the Eudaemonia podcast, season seven. I'll be back in late October for season eight. In the meantime, if you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe, check out www.eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes, or catch me on Instagram @iamkimforrester. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself, and gift yourself phases of rest and retreat.