

Blessing Our Chaff

ew metaphors are more worn than “the wheat and the chaff.”

It usually arrives already moralized. Wheat is what matters. Chaff is what doesn’t. Keep the good, discard the rest.

But this tidy image misses the depth of the metaphor.

To begin with, there would be no wheat at all without what we later call chaff. The stalk lifts the seed toward light and nourishes it as it grows. The husk encloses the wheat like a nutshell, protecting it from birds, weather, and disease. These structures are not incidental. Without them, there is no grain.

How many things are we quick to label “chaff” in our own lives? Outgrown identities. Provisional beliefs. Coping strategies that served us for a season and are no longer needed. We speak of them as mistakes, as though they were always dead weight slowing us down on the way to our “true self.”

But how many of them were essential stalk and husk all along?
Stalks that supported and fed us when we could not yet stand?
Husks that protected something fragile while it was still forming?

Think about the parts of yourself that you like and respect. How many of those qualities exist because of so-called chaff in your earlier life — experiences that make you uneasy when you look back on them now, but helped you grow into your current stage of fruition?

Then comes the harvest. And the threshing. These are not for the faint of heart.

Scythes cut the wheat in the field. It is carried to the threshing floor, where great oxen crush the husks beneath their heavy hooves and stone-weighted sledges scrape across the wheat. The plant that grew whole must be broken open for the grain to be released.

Anyone who has lived long enough recognizes this stage: the dark night of the soul, the hero’s descent into the underworld. A painful process in which what is truly essential is broken open, and what can no longer serve us is broken apart.

After threshing, the result is not clarity but confusion: grain, straw, husk, and dust mixed together. A heap of chaos.

And then comes winnowing.

How does one separate the wheat from the chaff? How does one sort out the chaos?

With wind.

The Greek word for wind is *pneuma*. It also means breath. And spirit. These meanings still hang together. Breath is wind made personal. Spirit is breath made meaningful.

Ancient farmers winnowed their grain where there was wind — often outside the village, sometimes high ground was better. And because the wind rose most reliably at dusk, win-

nowing frequently took place at that liminal hour, between day and night, in a liminal place — not in town, but not in the wilderness either.

The farmer took the chaotic mixture and threw it upward. Not around. Up. And let the wind do its work.

The heavier kernels fall back to the floor. The lighter material drifts aside. Nothing is accused. Nothing is condemned. Things go where they belong.

The wind does not destroy the chaff.
It removes it from this stage of the work.

Straw becomes bedding. Husks become fuel, then ash, then soil again. Nothing is wasted.
Nothing was a mistake.

Breath — wind — spirit does not ask us to decide what is unnecessary.
It asks us to lift everything up and see what can remain.

So perhaps our task is not to despise our chaff, but to bless it — and the entire process that turns our seeds into fruit.

To honor the stalks that lifted us toward light.
To thank the husks that once protected us.
To trust that what can no longer remain is not being destroyed, but renewed.

Breath — wind — spirit moves through us. And the grain discovers where it belongs.

— *William Zeitler*
2025 December 16

© 2025 William Zeitler. Originally published at GrailHeart.com

