Breathe. It’s not just a verb: it’s a mantra. I tell it to myself over and over again during those hard spots in time, “Breathe. Breathe.”

And yet, when I’m going through my anxious, difficult moments, I often hold my breath. Not only am I not breathing, but this means I’m not getting into the flow, I’m not connecting to Spirit, and I’m not taking care of myself. Strangely, I do this when I get scared about how to survive a situation. But I need to breathe to survive!

Aside from the obvious – that we, as human beings, need oxygen to live – there’s something spiritually essential about the breath. There’s something about breathing calmly that helps us to connect to our Higher Self, rather than being stuck in the part of us that feels the stress and upsetting emotions, and creates chattering thoughts that worry us. Breathing helps us to center, and be someone more than just a stressed person operating on autopilot.

In addition to reminding myself to breathe, I often have to remind myself to do the creative things that really help me bridge the gap between feeling stressed and feeling closer to Spirit. Journaling. Art. Watercolor. Sketching. Playing guitar and singing. My writing projects.

Oftentimes I think, “There just isn’t enough time for this.” But what is life without it?

Years ago, when I worked over 50 hours a week, I made time to start reading books like, Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain and The Artist’s Way. I didn’t think of myself as creative at the time but I learned that I had the potential to be more creative than I ever knew myself to be. Through the process, I was amazed how opening up to more creativity could help me in a way that felt so spiritual and deep.

I was surprised. Before I thought, “Wasn’t this all just a way to pass time? Like a hobby?” No. It was a breath of air that I desperately needed, that helped open me to flow, and get out of my anxious thinking. It turns out that creative activities may also help to bridge different parts of the brain, combining our analytical thinking with our creative problem solving skills.

There’s a yogic practice called alternate breathing, where one takes turns slowly breathing inward, one nostril at a time. First breathe in through the left nostril. Then breathe in through the right nostril and so forth. It’s helpful. It forces me to slow down when I breathe, and bridge both hemispheres of the brain – just like being creative.

Breathing helps connect us to different parts of ourselves, and to Spirit, God, Goddess, or that ineffable force in life.

Breathing helps bridge us between the person we tend to be when we get stressed, scared, or upset, with the person we really want to be and are born to become.

Who is that person? That person is full of Spirit. That person is evolving every day and growing. Life is always bringing us new opportunities to grow and sometimes those opportunities are stressful. There can be a beauty in those moments, if we can meet the challenge to remind ourselves: Breathe.

Sofia Wren has just completed a 75-hour internship with the Well this fall. She is originally from Annapolis and enjoys helping others to be more creative, and make faster progress on their writing, creative, and business projects. She’s currently wrapping up her MA in Spiritual and Pastoral Care at Loyola University Maryland.

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God in a Box  BY GREG COCHRAN

When I was young, I was given a box. A box of ideas, norms, practices, and theology – words not used by a child – concepts felt, intuited, and internalized. I played with this box, stepped in and out of it and became comfortable with it. One day, why I do not know, I stepped in and did not leave. Maybe it was fear personified; inadequacies perceived, incompetencies feared, self-loathing lived. A provisional assurance held me. A conditional certainty seduced me. I longed to be safe as any child would.

Thus an unspoken deal was in the making; impervious, dualistic walls in exchange for vision, secure foundation if I bowed down to fear, invulnerable dogmatism for freedom, self-worth tethered to established compliance.

The cubed interior became my reality. The world outside was too threatening…to Fear, I surrendered. Truth encased in a box – wearing denial and self-righteousness like they were all the rage. In reality, I was living off of anxiety’s finite energy – finite being the pivotal word.

Unexpectedly, profound pain blew in like north winds. A deep, chaotic chill, tinged with icy, old wounds cracked and threatened my contained domain. Optic scales began to fall. Who would have thought pain would be my salvation?

Breathless, air seemed expended in my limited reality. Exposed to once bridled questions binary constructs crumbled; my small truth was deconstructed. A broken deal would surely be my demise. Surely now, without a safety box, I would become vapor and cease to exist.

Then the Deep Breath filled what was empty inside of me. Mystery invited me into limitless space constructed of Divine Truth; free of fear and anxiety’s paralyzing clutter, away from the idea of a contained god. An uncontainable God invited me into a spirit to Spirit conversation; into bridge-building conversation, into conversations across faiths, into a conversation between you and me. Like breathing, in and out, a conversation of listening and vulnerability.

How ironic that I thought that I could contain God in my box.

Editor’s Note  BY ROBBIN MARCUS

And here we are, still breathing! For our last issue on the idea of Breath, we return full circle to look at the words “just breathe.” Here are two more, completely different (and even opposite) takes on the impact of those words on our lives and the choices we make every day.

As editor and Alexander Technique teacher, I want to reiterate that we always have choices available to us – even in the moments when it most feels like we don’t. Instinctual reaction, fight or flight, if you will, moments of great adrenaline rush, we do not and cannot choose. But it is how we choose to respond to that reaction that makes the difference. One option is to dive full in to that void of confusion and let it carry us away. If the tiger is chasing you down the street, or the rock is coming through your windshield, you’d better run! But is it a real tiger, or a paper one? In situations that are mentally stressful rather than life threatening, we can recognize the instinctive reaction for what it is, pause for a split second and think “Do I have a choice here? What if I sit with these scary feelings for a minute and test them for validity?” These reactions come from the deepest part of our limbic brains. Far more often than we realize, we can discover that we don’t need to succumb.

When we make that choice, the words “just breathe” can be extremely helpful. As Sofia writes, breathing consciously can connect us to our deepest spiritual selves, and open the door for new ways of perceiving the world.

And in Missy’s words, what must we do to enable our own hearts, or that of another person to “just breathe” a little bit easier?

Happy reading!

ROBBIN
“JUST breathe,” they say!  By Missy Gugerty, SSND

It had been five years since I last rode the bus. Walking en route from my house to the bus stop, I internally acknowledged that much had changed and that I would need help with directions and transfers. Little did I know that this simple task would morph into my greatest challenge that day.

When the bus arrived, I confidently hopped on and asked the bus driver for the best route to my destination. Without hesitation the driver began to rattle off suggestions, each route involving multiple bus transfers. It was a lot to take in, so I asked, “Could you please repeat those options?” With that we jolted to a stop, the front door opened, and a crowd of people stepped onto the bus and I was impeding the flow! Without any effort on my part, I was carried by the new passengers to the back of the bus.

Feeling a little disoriented and having no idea where to get off to transfer to the next bus, I tried so hard to “just breathe” and reorient myself. It sounds so simple and instinctual, but just then, it seemed impossible. I felt trapped. The air was heavy and very hard to come by. A few stops later I recognized where I was and worked my way through the crowd to the side door to get off the bus. By the time I reached the door the off-light turned red. Instinctively (and to my surprise) I began banging on the door yelling “I need to get off the bus!” The bus started, hesitated, and then the doors opened. I jumped off onto a crowded street corner, bent in half, gasping for air.

“Just breathe,” they say. Since that bus ride I have spent hours pondering that experience and that phrase. And I have come to believe that the phrase “just breathe” involves so much more than a deliberate thought and action. It involves access to space. Space that is physical/environmental, and a sense of space in the heart and the soul. It’s so well known what can happen to a brain deprived of oxygen; less known is what happens to the soul when it is trying to “just breathe” and doesn’t have space to do so.

“Just breathe!” But that day on that bus it wasn’t simple at all. It wasn’t about my willpower or desire. It was about circumstance and surroundings beyond my control.

And I wonder, what must I do to enable my own heart, or that of another person to “just breathe” a little bit easier?

A School Sister of Notre Dame, Missy Gugerty has a master’s degree in pastoral counseling. She is the former director of the Center for Community Service and Justice at Loyola University Maryland. She is currently learning to live with chronic Lyme disease.
OUR MISSION
To encourage and support spiritual wellness in daily life through innovative programs and resources.

CORE VALUES
BRIDGING: Inviting people from different backgrounds and experiences into community while honoring each person’s uniqueness.

REFLECTING: Taking time amidst the busyness of life to explore faith, find meaning, and grow into wholeness.

DISCERNING: Helping one another listen for, become open to, and respond to the lived experience of God.

WELLBEING: Tending the spiritual life as an integral part of wholeness in people and communities.

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