

The Life in Front of You

When I left the care of you good folks to Julia for the summer, I was on the edge of feeling overwhelmed. I imagine I was not alone in that. It has been a rough year. By the end of May, life seemed to have exploded into chaos—the pandemic was raging, political tensions were high, and we were hearing reports of mass shootings almost every week. I had idealized my Sabbatical as a safe haven from the burdens of modern existence—a place to curl up as the world surely would calm down, just a little, between spring and early Fall and we all might at least inch back toward a more standard way of daily living.

But now, upon my return, it seems that we have more national concerns than ever. Fortunately, in my time away, I did find a practice which helps me live life which is less chaotic than the one we see depicted in the news alerts which interrupt us regularly. And this practice does not require you to become a hermit or to gain super-powers. There is one thing which you need to know how to do, and you all know it already. The secret to living a calmer life is breathing.

Not the rapid breathing we tend to do when we are stressed out and spiraling through the woes of the day. Not the everyday breathing we do to just live—but, intentional breathing. That is the kind of breathing we do when we are meditating, praying or both. You can also find it in the depth of challenging exertion when all you can focus on are the acts of breath and motion—a rigorous hike, running for miles, or any sport where you break a sweat as you focus hard on your intentions.

One of the earliest words in the entire Bible is breath, which can also be written as spirit or wind—they are all different ways to translate the Hebrew word Ruah (רוּחַ). “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1 NRSV). That’s the very first sentence of the whole Bible. The wind from God is breath from God which is the Spirit of God in Hebrew. It is all Ruah.

And we all have Ruah, which we share with God—our spirits and breath come from God to bring us to life and return to God when we perish. I believe more strongly than ever that the more we make time to intentionally breathe, the more often we abide in the presence of God. When we focus on our breath, we enable ourselves to focus on the life in front of us. The very moment we are in—no screaming headlines, or endless lists of all those little things we keep meaning to get to but never do, or even the pain we may bear day to day. Just breath—in and out, slowly and deeply. Which may sound a bit daft to some of you. Too simple, right?

Surely all the complex demands of the world must require complicated responses? No. Just breath, in and out, slowly and deeply. The more we practice breathing intentionally, the calmer and more centered we feel and the more able we are to remain calm as the world catches fire in new and terrifying ways. And even better, we kindle a sense of God not only in specific places dedicated to that purpose, like our beloved church—but wherever it is we happen to be. Anxiously waiting in line for what seems like eternity? Focus on your breath, slow and deep. The resulting calm may just center you in that very moment, so that you feel less anxious about everything.

Tensely caught in traffic and not moving anyway? Focus on your breath and the tension may just drain away unbidden. There are limitless applications for these tension rich times in which we live. Scripture assures us that the peace of God surpasses all understanding, and Jesus tells us that when we abide in him, Jesus will abide in us, too. We are as connected with Jesus as a leaf is to a vine. One organism with different parts.

Now, I will be totally honest with you. It is not all immediate, perpetual bliss and Angels singing around every corner, and God does not descend with a congratulatory diploma when you take your first deep breath. Breathing with intention takes real work. It can be unpredictable—a blissful session one day can be followed by a week of utter distraction and folly. But if you keep with it, it also offers real, life changing rewards. Both tangible things like lower blood pressure and better overall immune health, as well as more mystical things like a sense of the presence of God in ever leaf and blade of grass around you.

You do not have to commit to being a monk the first time you try it, you can learn to breath intentionally at the pace which suits you. I find I do it best with company—when I am walking my dog Deja, or sitting with my wife, Carol. The value of company for doing spiritual work is demonstrated in the monasteries around the world. It can help.

I hope that I will have the pleasure of your company in testing the waters of intentional breathing whenever we can meet in person again whether socially distanced, or by zoom in the meantime if you'd like. I find increasingly that experiencing the presence of God is more important to me than talking or preaching about God. If you are looking for something which can help you feel connected to Jesus like a leaf is to a vine, I encourage you to keep in touch with me about it. In the meantime, it is simple to begin—find a place you feel at peace. Bring a friend if you feel it will be helpful. Sit comfortably with a straight spine. Rest your hands on your knees or in your lap so they will not distract you. Just breathe—in and out, slowly and deeply. When your mind wanders, which it inevitably will, smile and breathe a little deeper, gently releasing the distractions. No judgment, just breathing.

Eventually you will be able to bring the practice into more of your life, and that peace will grow. Keep at it and you will eventually abide in Jesus and feel as close to God as a leaf to its vine.

Amen.

John 15:4-5

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.