

Breathe In. Breathe Out.

Rev. Dawn Fortune

November 15, 2020

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

Breathing is a function of our body that is semi-voluntary.

I say breathing is semi-voluntary because we can choose to stop breathing, and hold our breath, but when we become unconscious from lack of air, our body will generally resume breathing again once we stop being stubborn.

And while breathing happens mostly whether we want it to or not, it is a thing we can concentrate our attention on to our own benefit. Paying attention to our own breathing can ground us, as Miss Jessica mentioned in this morning's Time For All Ages.

Our bodies carry stress in a variety of ways.

For some, our shoulders get tense and stiff. For others, our stomach acids work overtime and cause us problems with ulcers and such. Sometimes people get headaches from stress.

I compare stress to electricity. It is like a live wire that sparks and causes damage unless it can be grounded. I've been spending a lot of time lately learning about electricity as I have installed electrical outlets in my workshop. Electricity needs to have a complete circuit. There needs to be an in line, and out line, and a line to ground everything and prevent sparks and dangerous weirdness. This is the extent of my knowledge of things electrical, and thus the reason why I hired an electrician to do the really fussy stuff.

In our bodies, we need to be grounded, just like the wires in my garage.

When I was in seminary, I took a class in Buddhism that focused a lot of attention on learning to meditate.

The way we learned to meditate was to close our eyes and allow all our thoughts and worries to drift away. When a thought appeared in our heads, we were to acknowledge it and let it drift away.

I was not good at this.

I was, in fact, spectacularly bad at this.

In the same term when I was trying to learn to meditate, I had also begun some very difficult work in therapy, and all of the buried stuff I was exploring in therapy were the things that emerged in my brain every time I tried to meditate.

For some folks, being alone in the quiet of our brains is not necessarily a safe or peaceful place to be.

It took a while, but I did learn to meditate, but in my own way. Part of that was through mindful breathing.

Breathe in

Breathe out

Breathe in

Breathe out

I could concentrate on my body breathing in and breathing out, grounding myself in the present, becoming aware of my surroundings and aware of what kind of control I have over my own situation.

I breathe in and am aware of my fear

I breathe out and know that I am not my fear

I breathe in and feel my heart beating in my chest

I breathe out and feel my heart rate begin to slow.

Mindful breathing is a way to reclaim control in situations that feel beyond our control.

Yes, things are frightening right now, but I am breathing and taking care of myself.

I breathe in and am aware of my sadness

I breathe out and know that I am not my sadness.

My friend CB Beal wrote something this week that clarified some of what I have been feeling of late. CB Beal is a fantastic religious educator and winner of the 2019 Unitarian Universalist Association's Angus McLean award for educators. They've preached here at least once and maintain a fantastic social media ministry with a regularity and consistency that I envy. I'll share with you one of this week's particularly astute posts.

From November 11, 2020:

Dear My People,

I have noticed that many of my friends are having a Stabby Day, or Depressed Day, or Missing Everything Day yesterday, today, and I suspect tomorrow.

I was about to join someone online in a I AM SO STABBY WTF IS WRONG WITH PEOPLE moment that felt out of proportion even for 2020. Then I realized, "Oh. Hi again Con Crash."

There's always an emotional crash that follows an emotional high. That's biology.

The good news is that this means that today's hard feeling won't last. We have experienced that before. It might be called

Con Crash,

Post-Event Blues,

Post-Adrenaline Crash, or

The Stay In Bed All Day After Returning Home From Summer Camp Effect.

The next two months will be hard, but don't let yourself be tricked to think that this Con Crash post-election-win Blues are what you will feel for the next two months.

What we are feeling might just be the emotional fallout of the crescendo of feelings over the weekend. There was an intense, high energy, highly emotional experience that ended suddenly. We free fell in an elevator and then rolled the hell out.

The work and chaos of the next two months will be hard, but it won't be This. Feeling.

This feeling is body chemistry.

I talked about self-care all weekend. This is why.

We can participate in our own healing.

~Eat well and healthy and regularly. Many small meals.

~Hydrate with water. Cortisol only leaves the body via urine.

~Rest/de-stress wherever you can.

~Do some bilateral movement and/or art. Left side and right side cooperating.

Walk or knit. Build something out of that Jenga game you hid away so the kids would stop throwing the blocks. Play catch with both hands. Color and only use the blue with your non-dominant hand.

~Identify healthy routines that you may have set aside and meet them again for the first time.

~If you are an on-the-ground organizer, you will need longer to recover, even though you are also looking at What's Next. You have healing to do, not just recuperation.

~Connect with family and friends who buoy you. Touch base with everyone and catch up on other-than-politics-and-organizing work. Write thank you notes that feel joyful and specific.

Be kind to yourself and remind yourself that feelings don't last.

love, me¹

CB Beal is a wise person.

As much as I am aware of the post-adrenaline crash that comes after a big conclusion of a big event, I somehow had forgotten about it with regards to the US presidential

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/cindy.beal> November 11, 2020

election. I just figured somehow that I was a lazy slug who couldn't get organized to accomplish the things I need to do.

No, I realized with some resentment. I am human. And as a human, my body is susceptible to all the normal body things that happen, including responses to chemicals like adrenaline, dopamine, and cortisol.

Inconvenient as it may be to my list of things to do, I am not superhuman.

I, like so many others, need to get grounded and recover after the stress of the election season.

And after 10 and a half months of 2020, if we're going to be honest about it. 2020 has really been unreasonable, I think.

And so this week, I had to do some of the things CB talks about: I had to allow myself to rest. I had to cut back on my daily to-do lists. I had to allow some things to fail. I had to get back to some pretty basic stuff.

Breathe in

Breathe out

Breathe in

Breathe out

Feel my lungs expand with oxygen

Feel my lungs contract and expel carbon dioxide

Oxygen in, CO2 out

O2 in, CO2 out

O2 in, CO2 out

breathing in

i am aware of my pain.

breathing out

i am aware that i am not my pain.²

Breathing in

I am aware of my stress

Breathing out

I am aware that I am not my stress

Breathing in, I am aware of my anxiety

Breathing out, I am aware that I am not my anxiety.

And this healing and restoration is not complete. By focusing on my body's responses to daily life, I can be aware of what it needs and address those needs, instead of simply judging myself as inadequate to the task of life in 2020.

Breathing in and breathing out are among the body's most basic functions. An EMT I once knew used to say the first things to check for in any situation were: does air go in and out? Does blood go 'round and 'round?

That's where to start.

Air goes in and out.

Blood goes 'round and 'round.

Science is real.

Despite our oversized brains, we humans are, after all, mammals. Animals like any other, and subject to the laws of nature as all things that exist in this interconnected world.

² Walker, Nathan C., excerpt from A Survival Meditation <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/survival-meditation>

I once more offer the words of Rev. Nate Walker:

breathing in
i am aware of my pain.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my pain.

breathing in
i am aware of my past.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my past.

breathing in
i am aware of my anger.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my anger.

breathing in
i am aware of my despair.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my despair.

breathing in
i am aware of peace.
breathing out
i am aware that i am worthy of peace.

breathing in
i am aware of love.
breathing out
i am aware that i am worthy of love.

breathing in
i am aware of joy.
breathing out
i am aware that i am an agent of joy.

breathing in
i am aware of hope.
breathing out
i am aware that i am an agent of hope.

breathing in
i am aware.³

[SOUND BELL]

Amen.

³ Walker, *ibid.*