

Listen! Hearing That Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own
Part 2: Finding Our Breath
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Scripture: Genesis 2:7; John 20:21-22; Romans 8:26-27
"Love Dogs," by Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi

I. Of Breath and Spirit

Last week I received a call from my friend, Jack Levison, professor of Old Testament Interpretation and Biblical Hebrew at Southern Methodist University. Jack has a new book being released shortly called, *The Holy Spirit Before Christianity*. Jack is one of many Christian scholars and religious leaders I know who have found it increasingly important in recent years to remind fellow Christians that we are not the only ones God has chosen to connect with. If we engage with people of other faiths who encounter the same God, then we all stand to learn something new about God and the ways that we may experience the divine in our everyday lives.

Many people assume that "God experiences" are fairly uncommon; that they're limited to people of their own particular faith tradition and rarely occur. I remember Jack telling me about a time when he asked his students to tell him stories of times when they had experienced the Holy Spirit. One talked about experiencing the Holy Spirit at a campfire at the end of the week. Another described a special worship service. One by one, his students associated the Spirit with *exceptional* things in their lives—things that don't normally happen. Our basic problem with the Holy Spirit, he argues, is that we need to take it "from the mountaintop into our daily lives."

The great contemplative mystic Thomas Merton was asked—one too many times—about his life and practices at his hermitage at The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Tersely Merton responded, "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe." Merton's observation may betray a note of exasperation, but it also reveals wisdom. For Merton, experiencing the Holy Spirit is not confined to the mountaintop. It is a daily experience, even a moment-by-moment experience, in which the Holy Spirit is as present—and constant—as breathing.

When is the last time you noticed that you are breathing? We breathe approximately 26,000 times per day! Perhaps if we became more aware of our breath, we would become more aware of God's actual presence in our lives and ability to guide us. Judging by how many of the great religions of the world have developed spiritual

practices relating to breathing – including the Abrahamic faiths as well as faiths of many Eastern traditions – the answer is decidedly, “Yes!”

In the Old Testament, the words for spirit, soul, and breath are related. One Hebrew word for “breath,” *ruach*, is the same as the word for “spirit.” The Hebrew word for “soul” or “being,” *nephesh*, can also be translated as “breath.” Thus, in Genesis 2, God is said to have breathed the breath (*nephesh*) of life into Adam's nostrils, and Adam became a living soul/being (*nephesh*).

This relationship carries forward into the New Testament as well, with the Greek word *pneuma*. You can only tell by the context whether *pneuma* means spirit or breath. Even then, it may be unclear. In the Gospel of John, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples and then breathes on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*].” (John 20:21-22) But did Jesus say “Receive the Holy Spirit” or “Receive the holy breath”? If we take the biblical relationship between breath and spirit seriously, here again the answer to both questions just might be “Yes.”

It has been estimated that all of us regularly breathe in at least a molecule of air that Jesus himself once breathed. While that molecule is no different from any other air molecule, I love how the awareness of that molecule reengages us with the ancient imagination of the scriptures. Perhaps our awareness turns receiving Jesus's holy breath into an openness to receiving the Holy Spirit, which in turn allows the Spirit to be more present in our everyday lives.

Imam Jamal, leader of our neighbors at the American Muslim Institute, tells me that in the Naqshbandi order of Islamic Sufism, one of their eleven principle teachings is “awareness while breathing.” Through a practice they call “Muraqaba,” one tries to unveil the mystery of life by losing oneself in it. To do this, they hold in their breath and recite the name Allah (“God”) with each and every heartbeat. They believe that our hearts do, in fact, call out for Allah with every beat, but because the heart is draped by layers of sin, what we hear when we listen to our heartbeat is “dhak dhak dhak,” not “Allah, Allah, Allah.” Muraqaba is done by sitting in a quiet place with eyes closed, imagining your interior eyes to be open even as your outer eyes are closed, reciting God’s name with every heartbeat.

One of the reasons why the Sufis hold in their breath while they engage in Muraqaba is so that they can narrow the gap between how many times they breathe during the day and how many times they utter the name, Allah. The practice isn’t a numbers game, but a method of prayerful meditation that they believe offers a direct experience of God.

How many breaths will you take today compared to how many times you mindfully seek connection with God?

II. Too Deep for Words

Many people have a hard time praying to God for longer than a few moments, or at least, they think they do. They wonder what to say. They struggle to discern between God's voice and all the other voices in their heads. Yet what if prayer was as easy and natural as breathing?

The apostle Paul says that we don't actually know how to pray as we should, but that *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness ... and intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."* (Romans 8:26-27).

Yet, because the Greek word, *pneuma*, in this passage can be translated as "spirit" or "breath," it is possible that what Paul is actually saying is this:

The breath helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very breath intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the breath, because the breath intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

(Romans 8:26-27)

Whether or not we translate what Paul says as "breath" or "spirit," it is clear that in Paul's understanding, breath and spirit are fundamentally related. Paul might say that when you pray, it's okay just to let your breath do the talking. In fact, it's a very good thing to do just this.

But how? How do we allow our breath to utter deeper, more effective prayers than we can utter on our own?

I invite you to try one form of breath prayer that I've been using lately. It combines the Jewish understanding of breath and spirit being related, with the Sufi practice of holding in one's breath while concentrating on one's connection with God, and a practice we use at the Day One evening services called "Four Bows Meditation," in which one becomes increasingly surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

In what follows read the descriptive paragraph, try the practice indicated in that paragraph for a few minutes, then move to the next one. Ideally, you'll take five or more minutes per internal "bow." My favorite way of meditating, actually, is to move in and out of this breath-and-bow practice over the course of 1-2 hours! This may seem like a long time in which you'd die of boredom. Yet, if you do it right, it will sometimes blow

open such huge vistas of awareness, with such a deep and direct awareness of God's presence, that two hours may seem like too little time, not too much.

Four Bow Meditation with Breath Prayers

In each of the following four segments, you will spend part of the time holding a particular thought or experience to mind while you take in a deep breath and hold your breath briefly. As your breath is held, you'll imagine that it is combining with the experience or thought you are holding onto in such a way that, when you exhale, your breath releases prayers that are too deep for you to be consciously aware of. In other words, you will be offering prayers that connect with you on such a deep level that they cannot be articulated with words and concepts, or even be known to your conscious mind. Through your breath, the Spirit will "intercede with signs too deep for human words."

First Bow: Giving Thanks

Sit straight up and comfortably, with eyes closed. Imagine yourself physically bowing your head to acknowledge God's presence all around you, and God's authority. You may want to imagine passing through a doorway into God's Presence so as to leave a little distance between where you just were and where you now are. Leave all anxiety, all fear, and all other distractions outside the door. Then, take a deep "cleansing" breath in, hold it briefly, and let go – clearing away any obstacles that remain within you to experiencing God's Presence.

Now, do as we do every Sunday morning, looking over the last 24 hours of your life and offering thanks for each and every blessing you can name – breathing slow and easy. When you hit upon a blessing that is particularly meaningful to you, hold this thought as you take a very deep, slow breath in and hold it as long as you can comfortably. While the breath is inhaled, imagine it combining with the experience you are thankful for. Then, let it out slowly and deliberately through your nose, releasing before God prayers "too deep for human words." You may want to try this a few times until it feels more natural. Then, continue to review your day, pausing when you feel fit to repeat the breath prayer.

Second Bow: Praying for Another

When ready, take in a cleansing breath and let it out slowly. As you do so, imagine yourself bowing deeply at the waist, as if before a very dear and trusted friend. Then call to mind someone you care about who is struggling currently – physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Try to *feel* their struggle.

For instance, if they are experiencing heart trouble, breathe in deeply and hold your breath as you imagine the breath surrounding your own heart. When it starts to become uncomfortable, release your breath slowly from your nose, allowing your breath to release your deepest prayers for your own heart's health. Now, repeat the same practice, this time envisioning your loved one's heart. Continue to repeat this practice as many times as you like, while focusing on your breath and the person's struggle.

Third Bow: Praying for Yourself

When it seems appropriate, take in a cleansing breath and let it out slowly while bringing yourself into focus. As you do so, imagine yourself bowing so deeply that you are on hands and knees. You are *not* groveling, nor are you abasing yourself before some God with "anger management issues." You are simply surrendering yourself more deeply to a divine Presence whose love for you is far deeper than you can possibly imagine. Perhaps you are also inwardly on hands and knees because you have begun to sense this Presence and are moved to your knees in wonder over the fact that you are so deeply loved by your Creator.

Now, consider what remains of the day ahead. (This practice is best done first thing in the morning, but can be used fruitfully at any time.) What meetings or projects lie ahead, what meals, what interactions with others? Now, imagine ending the day looking back and thinking, "Wow, God was really with me today!" As you do so, take a deep breath in and hold it, allowing your breath to intertwine with the day ahead. Let it out through your nose slowly. You may want to do this once or twice more. You may also want to isolate something ahead of you that you are particularly concerned about and focus multiple breath prayers around that.

By now, you will often (though not always) be experiencing a sense of very deep peace, as if a number of inner concerns – known and unknown – have been released. You will experience this peace often if you make this a regular practice.

Fourth Bow: God's Pure Presence

This last bow works a bit differently than it does in our Day One evening service, where we envision ourselves fully prostrate before God. Call to mind your body as it is now, sitting up straight and relaxed. Take in, and let out, a cleansing breath.

Now, call to mind a time – a recent time or one from long ago – when you really knew God was real, and that God loved you beyond all imagining. If nothing comes to mind, then concentrate on your yearning to experience such a Presence in your life. Once you can palpably feel either the memory of God's loving Presence, or your yearning for it, breathe in deeply, as if breathing God (or your yearning for God) into your deepest self. Allow your breath to penetrate into those nooks and crannies within you that rarely are open to God, such that you consciously

allow God to fill all of you, not just parts. Hold in your breath as long as you can without feeling pain, all the while clearing your mind of all thoughts, then let it out slowly, concentrating on your breath releasing prayers you cannot fathom.

Repeat this same breath prayer, trying not to focus on anything but your breath. As you do so, you may feel a thought or awareness suddenly come upon you that holds your attention. While focused on this thought, allow your breath to help you interact with the thought by taking another deep breath in, holding it in, then releasing your innermost prayers with your breath.

While it doesn't happen every time, I find that this section of my prayer time regularly brings forth thoughts and ideas that click something into place for me. I see a bigger picture; a greater context in which my life sits; or I may have a "bizarre" thought that intrigues me without knowing why.

When it seems appropriate, I slowly release all my prayers and "come back" to myself, allowing my prayer time to come to a conclusion. Whether or not I have felt anything, or had any "significant" thought, I give thanks that God has allowed my breath to pray for me. I also trust that, having heard these deep prayers, God will respond in whatever way God sees fit.

That's it. This prayer exercise may not seem like much when reading about it on a page, but if you will allow yourself the time to move through these four bows slowly, paying careful attention to your breath, allowing it to "intercede with sighs too deep for human words," you will regularly experience a joy too deep for human words to describe – and a clear and confident sense that God really is present in your life and aware of you. More aware of you than you're aware of you, in fact. A God who is both willing and able to help you meet challenges you have little or no ability to meet on your own.