

“*Breathe!*”

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Today is my 61st birthday and I’ve been thinking a lot lately about *breathing*. Actually, I am thinking about *first breaths* and *last breaths*. This coming July my daughter Jessica is going to give birth to her first child, a girl, and I am thinking mightily of that child’s first breath.

Breathing is a part of the birth process. It is only when the baby begins to breathe the air outside of the womb that it is declared that she is living. That first cry is the sound of life as air is drawn into the baby’s lungs.

When Jessica was born—her mother and I were involved in a relatively new birthing procedure called the Lamaze method, a kind of “natural childbirth” practice popular in those days so many years ago. (32 years ago in fact.) Even today, the estimate is that a quarter of all American women who give birth use the Lamaze method. □

The Lamaze Method is based on the belief that pregnancy and birth are natural processes for which the female body is uniquely designed. Much like transcendental meditation, it is based on physiological principles. In other words, *you don’t have to believe in it for it to work!*

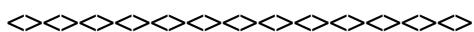
Developed by French obstetrician Fernand Lamaze after he visited Russia in 1951, where he was impressed with the trailblazing work being done in “conditioning” by the psychologist Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov did research on “the conditioned response,” which demonstrated that living things responded “automatically” to stimuli and events to which they became accustomed. In other words, they became “conditioned” to respond to familiar things in a reflexive and essentially non-thinking way. Lamaze reasoned that women, too, could be taught to respond to the contractions of labor in a similar way. During this time many women in the U.S. were being “knocked out” during childbirth.

With the goal of having women respond to contractions in a conditioned way – in other words, automatically – he devised a number of exercises that were designed to minimize anxiety and reduce pain.

At the heart of the course are three techniques which are used throughout the course of labor and delivery: relaxation methods, breathing exercises, and pushing during contractions.

I was impressed at the effectiveness of the Lamaze method. It is a form of so-called natural childbirth, because it prepares the mother to respond naturally to the events she and her body were evolutionarily designed to do. And the most natural thing of all is to *breathe*.

To this day when I encounter pain, like when being given an injection, a flu shot or whatever, I use the breathing techniques I learned in Lamaze. And you know what? It works. It really does.



This morning I would like to extend the idea of the body’s natural responses to all of us, not just the pregnant ones. We are all evolutionarily designed—naturally designed—to breathe as a necessity of life. I also think that breathing enhances the quality of life.

After all, of all the necessities of life—food, water, shelter—breathing is by far the most important and the most urgent. A human being can go quite a while without a house or without water or food. But there are only a matter of seconds to go without air before the body dies.

We ought to be teaching everyone breathing techniques. And yet I’ve rarely encountered anyone who teaches folks how to breathe most effectively and enjoyably.

There are so many aspects to the subject of breathing that I had trouble narrowing down this sermon to its required length of 45 minutes.

As always and with all things, I first think about spirituality. In fact, the concept of breath is

fundamentally embedded in all the great religious traditions. Interestingly, the word and concept for *breath* is the same word for *spirit* in Hebrew (*ruah*), Latin (*espiritu*) and Greek (*pneuma*).

Among these spiritualities, *breath* is the primary synonym for *life*. The Spirit of Life we sing about is, in reality, the Breath of Life. In the desert cultures out of which our Western religious traditions come, a mirror is held in front of a dying person's mouth to see if she is still breathing, thereby still living.

The *Breath of God* is a fundamental symbol of our deepest spirituality at the center of many prayers in these traditions. Even the mantras of certain Eastern religions are essentially *breath prayers*.

Breathwork is spiritual practice. Well of course it is. How could it be otherwise when trances take us into states of Oneness and contact with the Divine. The Buddha (around 400 B.C.E. and the Jains (perhaps 500 B.C.E. or earlier) used the breath as spiritual practice. Yoga does the same. The martial arts use it to get energy flowing before ever starting the body movements. Chanting in church, synagogue and mosque is a form of breathwork. ...

Breathing wisely is the vital element in Buddhist meditations, such as those proposed by the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, one form of which is printed in your order of worship.

The ancient Eastern spiritual tradition of The Tao also teaches this. Hear this from the mediation manual called "*The Daily Tao*": "A central concept for Tao is breath. Without breath, there is no life. The complexity of this idea is great indeed. You breathe; that brings you oxygen. You breathe; that sustains you. You breathe; that regulates your heartbeat, feeds your brain, makes your blood red. Deeper still: you breathe, and the entire energy field of your body is sustained and set into motion. When that field, so intimately tied to breathing, is integrated with your mind, you have the power of spirituality. *Breath*. Just as we breathe, *so too does the universe breathe*. When the world breathes, all things are sustained. Weather moves as it should. Plants grow as they should. Animals are made strong. The very forces of geology are set into motion. And together, a mighty field of energy is generated, a much larger version of what happens in your own body. Connected to that field is a universal mind. Do you want to know how spirituality works? *Breathe!*"

Breath is also central to understanding Christian spirituality. The third chapter of the Gospel Book of John tells the story of Nicodemus meeting with Jesus in the night (so as not to be seen with him). The two talked about true spirituality.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, "*Unless a person is born from above, it is not possible to hear what I'm talking about, which is the realm of God.*" Nicodemus counters, "I don't know what you mean."

"*Unless a person submits to the energy of original creation, the wind hovering over the water, the invisible moving the visible, it is not possible to enter the kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch, which is the Breath. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear its rustling through the trees, but you have idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the breath of God.*"

And now, to lighten up our conversation alittle, here's the "*Peaceful Piggy Meditation*" from Kerry MacLean:

Sometimes the world can be such a busy, noisy place. □
Sometimes it feels like you always to hurry, hurry, hurry, □
and you feel like you can't slow down even when you're sitting down, □
it can be hard not to lose your temper when you're angry, □
and you can get really frustrated when things don't go your way. □
So, it's good to have a peaceful place inside...it's good to meditate. □
Peaceful piggies know when to take a break, □

*find a quiet spot and just breathe, breathe, breathe. □
Mom or Dad might help them set up a special place with a few things..... □
maybe a crystal for clear thinking, a stone for stillness, or even a flower for kindness. □
Peaceful piggies sit like a king or queen on their throne,
feeling the solid earth beneath them and the big sky all around them. □
Everyday they sit feeling their breath going in and out until their minds calm down. □
So peaceful piggies feel free like a bird in the sky,
and as calm as a pond on a cool, clear night. □
This makes it easier to accept things that happen and stop wishing for things to be different. □
When you're peaceful, you can be truly fearless! □
Best of all, when you're feeling peaceful, you like who you are, just as you are. □
So, it's easier to face the truth about yourself... □ and it's easier to stand up to others. □
Peaceful piggies take good care of their friends...and their enemies too. □
They try to be loving and kind to all beings...even worms. □
By slowing down, peaceful piggies notice all the magical little things in life,
like the way raindrops race each other down the window... □
The way the clouds tell silent stories...and the way the birds sing songs just for you. □
Having a peaceful place inside helps keep a happy heart happy, so that even on a horrible painful,
disgustingly rotten day,
a peaceful piggy can smile.*

With that we say, Amen!