

## Breathe

### *Pathways to Healing Where “Peace Is Every Step”*

In February 2020 I was transitioning out of a ten-year relationship. The best part of that relationship was and remains our three beautiful, awesome children. Like many relationships, our separation happened long before our relocation. By the time I moved out, it was a relief (for both of us), not a loss. We had months to process the separation, and we agreed to maintain a consistent space for the children. I had just said goodbye to my oldest (age nine) and his brother (age six), and I was descending the stairs from their attic playroom when from behind me I heard my oldest say to his brother: “Why are you crying?” I stopped halfway down. Tears welled up in my eyes. I climbed back up the stairs and hugged them tightly.

Four weeks into the physical separation I was buried in debt and in uncharted emotional territory. But I was employed, more in love with classroom teaching than ever, and I was hitting a publication stride. I was one year into my abstinence from alcohol and eyeing the year-and-a-half mark. I was fully supporting my children’s household and providing additional financial support for their move later that summer. Until then, my new, 600-square foot home was only four miles across town. My OCD and ADD had free reign of the place, which really just meant there was no one around to get annoyed by that infuriating combination. By August of 2020, my debt was cleared, my teaching contract was renewed, and I had sold the family home. The children moved to another city with their mother, and I secured my visitation rights. When they moved, I lost my midweek time with them, which made the separation from their hugs and presence all the more painful.

The first Monday after a weekend with my children became a monumental effort to not cancel the day’s four virtual classes. Their sudden absence left an unmovable void, and this void was my sole companion during Ohio’s “shelter in place” directive. I got myself into the day’s rhythm with coffee and email, course announcements, and a short walk around the corner to the wooded park where I looked out upon a field, past the field to the tree line, then up to the sky with the rising sun at my back. I returned through my

backdoor into the furnace room, where I hosted virtual classes. This got me into the first meeting and the day was rolling. By late afternoon I fulfilled my contractual duties and went for another walk. Upon my return, the pain of their absence floods my heart. I sit in quiet, where not even my love of music is welcome. I sleep on the couch, where my oldest slept the night before next to his brother and sister on the camping cots I bought for them. It is a grieving process every time they leave, a hellish re-separation.

In lieu of more traditionally styled self-destructive activities, I took to wailing. You read that correctly: wailing. I surrendered to the ineffability of my pain and let it play out physically, but in the privacy of my 600-square foot “Covid Cave.” This was a daily occurrence at first, then weekly, then every three to five weeks. I am forty-seven years old, and it took this much effort to come out the other side of the most profound pain I have ever felt—how do a nine-year-old, a six-year-old, and a four-year-old process a separation? That rhetorical question is when everything changed. My self-care was now invested in their well-being. I am on the other side of that wailing now, and for the first time in my life I understand genuine empathy. The next “EQ test” is translating this into an even broader and more meaningful perspective that encompasses the entire family, from their mother and her new life, to “seeing the whole field” and appreciating my role as a mere blade in that grass.

The pandemic-driven job insecurity was a traumatic piling on of troubles, and at the worst possible time. In all of this I knew that I needed to go in the opposite direction of despair. I needed to live from gratitude. What I found, with help from a book my cousin sent, was peace in every step.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* became my saving grace.<sup>1</sup> This book guided me through learning how to breathe, quite literally but also with the added benefit of ideas for how to perceive routine activities differently. We learn in our introduction to communication courses the shortened definition of intrapersonal communication as self-talk, but this linguistically grounded act is really about perception. Perceptions are socially constructed. As Berger and Luckmann explain in their treatise on the social construction of reality, these constructions are embedded in our norms of behavior, institutions, and permeate our most personally held attitudes and beliefs.<sup>2</sup> I started posting to Facebook my reflections from *Peace is Every Step*. These posts were a constructive pathway to process emotional trauma. Rather than fighting against the emotions, I engaged in acts of personal reconstruction by changing how I processed (perceived) the emotions.

Most of the Facebook posts from others populating my feed were embroiled in anger directed at politics, the pandemic, or virtual platforms. My own posts took a different turn. From March through April, I posted reflections featuring the same lead about “sheltering in place” that included the same disclaimer:

*I don't watch TV anymore—it's been three months. When I glance at headlines from Facebook posts or the local newspaper, I can only imagine the virtual world of fear, anger, and anxiety that wrecks folks' spirit. Keep reading those posts and watching that TV, but maybe add something else to the mix to balance it out, like these meditations. Some folks*

*might call these meditations “naive.” If, however, like me, you have been through living hell at some point in your life, or a few times, then you know these meditations are not naive. Quite the opposite! If you know, for instance, what it is to be or have been so laid low that you actually wailed (regularly), then you’ll recognize these as attainable acts of mindfulness that help us enter into peace, if only for a minute.<sup>3</sup>*

I am grateful for every peaceful minute each of those meditations brought, and for the virtual space to translate those personal meditations into something I could share with others—I needed to do that, much more than anyone needed to read it.

#### REFLECTIONS FROM MY COVID CAVE

A person in pain wrote, “I have lost my smile, but don’t worry, the dandelion has it.”<sup>4</sup> Just being able to make that statement can be a monumental achievement of will and spirit. This note changed my life, though it seemed really lame the first time I read it. The person in pain speaks from the tiniest seed of hope to utter those words, without the comfort of belief and instead willing it into being that the smile is being kept for her when she is able to return to herself: “In fact, everything around you is keeping your smile for you. You don’t need to feel isolated. You only have to open yourself to the support that is all around you, and in you.”<sup>5</sup>

Meditation and yoga were two activities I always wanted to start but never did. I thought I had to attain some special insight or stability in my life before starting a regular meditation routine, but this book helped me understand that meditation is a practice we can integrate easily: “As you breathe in, you say to yourself, ‘Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.’ And as you breathe out, say, ‘Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.’”<sup>6</sup>

I’m such a newcomer to my own breathing that I’m still working on stopping my thoughts, breathing, and using the words “I know that I am breathing in” and “I know that I am breathing out” as meditation. This section adds a few more lines that include the words “calming,” “smiling,” and “dwelling” and the declaration, “I know that this is a wonderful moment.”<sup>7</sup> This morning my mind flooded with negative thoughts, mostly worrying about things beyond my control. I lost the moment to those thoughts. This meditation—calming, smiling, dwelling—helped me get it back. It’s only for a moment, but simply breathing is much better for a start: “Our appointment with life is in the present moment. If we do not have peace and joy right now, when will we have peace and joy—tomorrow, or after tomorrow?”<sup>8</sup> An annoyance can turn into a grudge or anger, and then we carry it into our day, thinking we moved past it but it’s still there and it grafts itself onto something else that happens later in the day. By the end of the day, who knows how intense or sharp it has become? “If we are angry, we are the anger. If we are in love, we are love. If we look at a snow-covered mountain peak, we are the mountain.”<sup>9</sup>

“Be aware of the contact between your feet and the Earth,” says the monk: “Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.”<sup>10</sup> I love walking. However, in all my years of walking or hiking and for so many different purposes and in so many places it never occurred to me that how I walk, or how I am (or am not) present to the walking, the

earth, the stone, matters. It matters a great deal: “Although we walk all the time, our walking is usually more like running. When we walk like that we print anxiety and sorrow on the Earth. We have to walk in a way that we only print peace and serenity on the Earth.”<sup>11</sup> He adds, and this is my favorite part, “We can all do this, provided that we want it very much.”

#### LIVING THE INNER WORK OUTWARD

These were life-changing reflections for me—new seeds planted in my psyche that sprouted pathways to healing. The walking, the meditation, the new breathing all contributed to minutes or an hour of relocating my emotional well-being from self-destructive, negative thinking into the bliss of nothingness, or the call of birds, or how the wind danced through the tall grasses.

When the “shelter in place” directive was lifted, I continued my walking and breathing, kept pace with my beginner’s level yoga, but also picked up a new activity. Carpentry is something I have long desired to do and it runs in my family. I still have the small stool that my grandfather made for me, and a small arts craft that I made with my father. I made and installed some shelves. I built a small kitchen table, and a bench from that table’s leftover wood, and a six-foot-long entertainment center with shelves for my hard-copy DVDs. I graduated from breathing to doing, and I loved the person I was becoming. The personal reconstruction, or what Jungian depth psychologist Robert Johnson calls



“inner work,”<sup>12</sup> materialized into these carpentry projects. When I ran out of space on the inside of my “Covid Cave,” I moved outside to break ground on a more ambitious project.

Every step of the shed-building process brings a renewed appreciation for something learned before. First, no matter how much I measure and plan, and no matter how confident I am about each of those parts of the process, nothing ever fits together perfectly. There’s always a slight flaw, and maybe only the builder can see it. But these flaws are only aesthetic and usually it’s the materials you have to work with that are themselves coming to you bowed. Second, where the hammer meets the nail is a kind of meditation. I love hammering, and I’m good at it. Every completed job along the way is joyful, from preparing the ground to constructing the frame; to measuring out the floor joists and adjusting the spacing to make up for my shed’s imperfect dimensions. Every completed step is a source of pride.

I take my time. I understand that if the foundation is flawed then everything else, no matter how right within itself, will be off-kilter. Other things, also, need priority: teaching my virtual classes, grading, and resting along the way so that when it’s my weekend with the children I’ll be focused on them. Working on the foundation is similar. I have to clear my mind from other tasks and responsibilities. I cannot drive a single nail with troubles in mind. Every step needs peaceful consideration. I have to clear the attic space of my mind and open my heart to wherever it needs to go: maybe it’s joy, maybe it’s hurt, maybe it’s a blade of grass.

Gratitude creates more to be thankful for. Self-care is a balanced mind where you feel love. Nothing worthwhile can be built upon pain alone. Thich didn’t have children, but neither have I lost mine.

In his Jack Frost–produced song, “Mississippi,” Bob Dylan articulates the bind of desiring a “return” and the impossibility of ever doing so completely.<sup>13</sup> Much of our despair comes not from personal “failures” but how we respond to them—trying to “come back all the way” is impossible. “Home” has changed, because we have changed.<sup>14</sup> Instead of refabricating what once was there, we need to get excited about what is here, and who we are becoming, and how beautiful (and healing) that is for others in our lives.

#### A NEW REFLECTION

The pain is sharp, but my heart is full. I look at my daughter on her camping cot, the covers pulled up to her chin and her arm resting around an untouched snack bowl. It’s our mid-afternoon movie time before I pack them into the car to drive them back to their mom. The wind outside is violent, over thirty mph, but it’s sunny and the warmth fills the small living room. My oldest is outside playing on the rock pile next to the shed foundation, and his brother moves closer to me on the couch—“I love you daddy,” he says. My daughter leaves her cot and squeezes in on the other side of me, resting her head upon my chest while watching Robin Williams’s character in *Flubber*.<sup>15</sup> This is perfection. I cry a few tears they don’t see. When I return, I’m alone in the quiet of my 600 square feet. I sit on the couch—same spot as before, but they’re missing. I catch a scent of them (the good kind). I “hear” a laugh. I “see” my daughter hiding behind the recliner.

These are all traces of them—ghosts. But something good has changed. No wailing. No despair. I know that in two weeks I will have them again. Instead of a debilitating crash in the time between visits, “peace is every step.” ■

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#### NOTES

I extend my grateful acknowledgment to Ted Smith, Lynne M. Webb, and the Christ Episcopal Church in Springfield, Ohio.

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