

BREATH, PUSH, TRANSITION
The United Church of Broomfield
June 13, 2021

BREATH
By Andi Fox

Sacred Word:

“And mention when your Lord said to the angels: Truly I am One who is Creator of the mortals out of earth, mud of soft wet earth. That is when I shaped him and breathed into him of My Spirit.” (Qur’an 15:28-29, Islam)

“Breath is life and life is breath. There is no difference between the two.” (Siri Singh Sahib Ji, Sikhism)

“The Spirit of God has made me, and the Breath of the Almighty gives me life.” (Job 33:4, Christianity)

In the beginning, the breath of God hovered over the waters. In each of our beginnings, the breath of our lungs was the first thing many noticed about us because we were screaming. As babies we weren’t able to talk and tell people what we needed, so we filled our lungs with breath and cried and yelled until someone figured out what we needed.

When you breathe air in through your nose and the air goes down a tube (the trachea) in your throat which branches into two tubes (the bronchi) which takes the air into your lungs. Your lungs are two marvelous organs in your chest, located behind your ribs, that process oxygen and send it to the rest of your body. If you put your hand on your chest you will feel your lungs working – getting larger and smaller as you breathe in and out.

We usually breathe without thinking about it. Sometimes when we have emotions that are too much for us, we may cry or breathe too fast. Sometimes you’re talking about breathing and are super aware of your own breathing. But most of the time, we don’t think about it. I think we think about it more up here in Colorado because the air is thinner than other places. If you have guests visiting, they may have a little bit of trouble breathing. Even if you live here, you may have a little trouble breathing. Some people need extra oxygen to help them. Sometimes they need extra oxygen occasionally like if they’re in the hospital, and sometimes they may need extra oxygen everyday. Pretty much everything that’s alive on our planet needs to breathe to live. Fish get oxygen through the water. A fire will go out if you put it into a vacuum without air. Plants take in carbon dioxide and expel oxygen while we take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide. People, dogs, cats, trout, squids, bluejays, eagles, elephants, iguanas, worms, werewolves, snails, foxes, llamas, flies, pandas, we all need to breathe.

Today we’re going to practice Breath Prayer. Breath Prayer is an ancient practice and different types of it are found around the world. It can be used by people small and tall, old and

young. There are lots of different ways to practice this type of prayer. We're going to practice a couple. The first involves counting and is a good way to calm yourself. The second involves repeating a phrase.

Counting breath prayer is just that--we are counting how long we breathe in and out. This is great to calm you down if your heart is racing or if you're feeling overwhelmed. It's a way to connect with the breath inside of your own body. When you breathe, be sure that you are breathing from your diaphragm--down here. If you're breathing from your chest, you could be breathing too shallowly. You want to breathe so that the air fills your body all the way down to your toes. When you exhale, you want to completely empty the air from your body. So let's just practice a deep inhale and exhale together. INHALE. EXHALE. Again. Ideally you're breathing in through your mouth and out through your nose. But if that's too complicated don't worry about it. When you do this counting prayer, you choose a number to count to when you inhale and a number to count to when you exhale. Choose a slightly bigger number to exhale. For example, we can choose 3 and 5. In-2-3 and out-2-3-4-5. In-2-3 and out-2-3-4-5. You keep breathing in and out, counting out loud or in your head. We are slowing down our breathing which will take tension out of your body.

Our second type of breath prayer, you're going to choose a word or a short phrase to think or say quietly when you breathe in and out. You still want to be breathing deep into your toes and exhaling to the top of your head. You could choose a name for God or something that means something to you. You can also choose something from scripture. For our example, I'm going to simplify something from Psalm 56. So when we inhale we're going to think "When I'm afraid," and when we exhale we're going to think "I trust You." And you repeat. Let's try. So what do you do after you count and after you repeat your words? You keep going. If you find your mind wandering, it's ok. Just come back and start again. The goal here is to focus and breathe. Some people will sit and do the same type of breath prayer over and over again for hours. We're not going to ask you to do that. It takes time to work up to that long praying. But we're going to sit for a couple of minutes for you to do some breath prayer. What is the role of breath in your own spiritual journey?

PUSH

Read by Jennie Belval

Sacred Word:

"Those who are low grade do not start any work, scared of the obstacles that they will face in accomplishing their task. The medium grade people start their tasks, but then stop before completing them when they encounter difficulties on the way. But the highest category of people never give up once they have start a task and do not stop before completing it despite numerous obstacles on their way." (Nitiśataka of Bhartṛihari, 7th Century Hindu philosopher and author)

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange things were happening to you; but to the degree that you

share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of God's glory you may rejoice with exultation." (1 Peter 4:12-13, Christianity)

"Of Birthing" by Majorie A. Burke from Women's Uncommon Prayers

Human birth,
pain, messy, sticky, sweaty,
push--breath, push--breathe,
no pain, no gain,
push--breathe, push--breathe,
finally, new life.

Spiritual birth,
what does this mean?
pain, struggle, water, sweat,
no pain, no gain.
Trust in God.

I push against my own will.
God breathes new life into me.
push--breathe, push--breathe.

Wind and water.
No, I don't want to go,
the wind blows,
God's breath surrounds me.
I resist
push--breathe, push--breathe.
The water of baptism engulfs me.
I am made new.

Human birth, spiritual birth.
I don't remember the first.
I don't remember the second, either.
It happened gradually--a long litany of
push--breathe, push--breathe,
not willing to fully give myself over to God.

"A Song of Christ's Goodness" by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1190 CE)

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you;
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
Often you weep over our sins and our pride,
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment.

You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,
in sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying, we are born to new life;
by your anguish and labor we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
through your gentleness, we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead,
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us;
in your love and tenderness, remake us.
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness,
for the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.

TRANSITION
By Michael Blackwood

Sacred Word:

“If you want to awaken all of humanity, then awaken all of yourself. If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world, then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself. Truly, the greatest gift you have to give is that of your own self-transformation.” (Lao Tzu, 6th Century BC Chinese philosopher & author of the Tao Te Ching).

“So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, Christianity)

“Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.” (Romans 12:2, Christianity)

Often, when we think of *transitions*, we think about things such as:

Every time you started a new school.

The first time you moved out of your parent’s home. The **SECOND** time you moved out of your parent’s home. (Maybe **DON’T** think about the third time you moved out of your parent’s home!)

When you graduated from high school or college.

When you got married.

When your first child was born.

When your first child got married.

The first day you were officially “retired.”

These are all moments in life that many people experience as “transitions.” These are all pinnacle moments in life, full of high emotions and major change. These transitional life moments are emphasized by the fear and excited that everything is possible AND everything could fall apart and fail.

I certainly don’t want to downplay these moments in life as trivial or unimportant, because they’re not ... but the transition of which we’re talking about today seems to take things a bit further – it’s more nuanced, shocking and impassioned.

Our sacred quote from the Tao Te Ching, guides us toward a broader prospect on transition and transformation that is a good focus, particular in response to Valerie Kaur’s book, See No Stranger, which is inspiring today’s worship service.

“If you want to awaken all of humanity, then awaken all of yourself. If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world, then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself. Truly, the greatest gift you have to give is that of your own self-transformation.”

Much of Valerie Kaur’s work comes from her experiences, both personal and observed, of racism, sexism, religious discrimination and many of “other-isms.” Seeing the racism in our world today, the xenophobia, religious persecution, etc. etc., many believe that we are indeed living in dark times. Fear, violence and hopelessness engulf social media and media sources.

May 31st marked the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, a long-buried act of stunning racial violence. Because a young black man *inadvertently* touched a white woman, he was accused of sexual assault and a white mob formed. That mob descended on the thriving black community of Greenwood, OK, killing about 300 residents, burning down over 1200 homes as well as burning down stores, churches and many other retail establishments. No one was ever charged criminally.¹ I’m ashamed that I had never heard of the Tulsa Race Massacre until only a few years ago because it was not taught as part of American history in school, despite Greenwood being so successful that it was called The Black Wall Street. What’s horrifically insulting though, is that last month Oklahoma’s governor signed into law HB1775 which bans K-12 school from teaching history or lessons that would cause feelings of guilt because of a person’s race or gender. The law also bans universities from requiring training on race and gender diversity. Besides IGNORING historical events of racism and discrimination, Oklahoma has now outlawed teaching about them and working toward ensuring they’ll never happen again.²

¹ Associated Press, Deepty hajela. The Week. June 11, 2021

² <https://www.businessinsider.com/oklahoma-law-bans-lessons-critical-race-theory-2021-5>

Oppressing and discriminating others is alive and happening today. It's rampant! It's not just in Oklahoma. We can claim that "such things don't happen in my community...in my city...in my state." They do. This chosen ignorance and advocacy of "othering" people is the darkness, harm and death that we need to fear, resist and actively work against.

One of the best quotes I've heard from Valerie Kaur as she's talked about the difficult times in which we're living is "what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?"

What rich imagery! It's full of ideas, possibilities, and inspiration for us to welcome, wonder and explore as we live our daily lives and *choose* to engage the world and one another. We see the womb as life and the tomb as death, but God and Jesus have taught us the tomb, death, is NOT and end. Darkness and all its metaphors shouldn't be feared, but entered. The TRANSITION of the tomb, is another beginning, change, transformation, opportunity for God's revolutionary love.

There is an overwhelming need for love and we have so many creative opportunities before us to take action to transition ourselves and others into a more loving world in which all embrace the belief of "seeing no stranger," so that we can transform the world personally and politically.

In the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak taught, "I see no stranger, I see no enemy." He taught that all of us could see the world in this way. "There is a voice inside each of us called haumai, the I that names itself as separate from You. It resides in the bowl that holds our individual consciousness. But separateness is an illusion. When we quiet the chatter in our heads through music or meditation or recitation or song, the boundaries begin to disappear. The bowl breaks. For a moment, we taste the truth, sweet as nectar—we are part of one another. Joy rushes in. Long after the moment passes, we can choose to remember the truth of our interconnectedness, that we belong to one another. We can choose to "see no stranger" (Kaur, pg. 9).

In Valerie Kaur's book, she describes transition through the metaphor of childbirth, saying, "I breathed. I took a breath. I pushed. The fire burned brighter and hotter, and I was screaming, flesh searing, until I pushed all the way through..." (pg. 277). That's a far different description and image of transition than one's first day at college.

~~The transition, transformation and change we're faced with today, the "Revolutionary Love" that Valerie Kaur speaks of in her book, the love expressed through the various faiths of this world, the love that Jesus taught, the love that God IS—is this kind of "transition Love,"—a love that takes training, nurturing, balance, sacrifice, sweat, pain~~

With childbirth, we can understand, appreciate and even desire the mystery, the patience, the work, the labor, and the pain, because it transitions to joyful beauty and love. The creation and emergence of new life and indescribable love. A difficult thing to remember is that in childbirth, sometimes the mother, the baby or both don't survive. Or there are complications and things do

turn out as expected. It's heartbreaking and soul-crushing. The challenge is to recognize that in this transition because transition still occurs, there is still love. God is still there in the midst of the anger, the pain and the journey. The same can be said for all transitions, transformations and labors of love.

We are in a monumental time of transition in church; both "our" church and "the church." COVID has changed "churching" forever. Because of the pandemic, over the last year we have had to do a lot of breathing and pushing and experienced a lot of discomfort and pain, as we birth a new form of worship...as we envision church anew. We're saying hello to hybrid worship and good-bye to conventional worship... well, not actually good-bye. When transitions occur, they can be complete transitions, but often times they're partial because sometimes transitions are slow. Sometimes we don't realize that a transition is complete until much time has transpired or changes in perspectives have happened.

Sometimes transition is voluntary, but other times it's reactionary. We can debate the pros or cons or both, but regardless - transition happens. We grow and the world improves when we approach transitions, transformation and change with a sense of wonder and understanding. That is the challenge before us. Are we willing and prepared to breath...to push...to endure the pain, sweat and work needed so that we can birth transitions within ourselves, for others and even our enemies?

"Guru Nanak called us to see no stranger, Buddha to practice unending compassion, Abraham to open our tent to all, Jesus to love our neighbors, Muhammad to take in the orphan, Mirabai to love without limit. They all expanded the circle of who counts as one of us, and therefore who is worthy of our care and concern. These teachings were rooted in the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual contexts of their time, but they spoke of a common vision of our interconnectedness and interdependence. It is the ancient Sanskrit truth that we can look upon anyone or anything and say: Tat tvam asi, "I am that." It is the African philosophy: Ubuntu, "I am because you are." It is the Mayan precept: In La'Kech, "You are my other me" (Kaur,. Pg 11).

I encourage you to read Valerie Kaur's book and visit her website, [The Revolutionary Love Project](#), so that you can learn how the labor of love, in whatever we choose to create, is worth it.

We declare our love for all who are in harm's way — refugees, immigrants, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, queer and trans people, Black people, Indigenous people, Asian Americans, Latinx people, the disabled, women and girls, working-class people and poor people. We vow to see one another as brothers, sisters, and siblings. Our humanity binds us together, and we vow to fight for a world where all of us can flourish.

We declare love even for our opponents. We oppose all policies that threaten the rights and dignity of any person. We vow to fight not with violence or vitriol, but by challenging the cultures and institutions that promote hate. In this way, we will challenge our opponents through the ethic of love.

We declare love for ourselves. We will protect our capacity for joy. We will rise and dance. We will honor our ancestors whose bodies, breath, and blood call us to a life of courage. In their name, we choose to see this darkness not as the darkness of the tomb – but of the womb. We will breathe and push through the pain of this era to birth a new future.³

AMEN

³ <https://valariekaur.com/revolutionary-love-project/>