

## REMEMBERING TO BREATHE

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Please try this experiment with me:  
Breathe in. Breathe out.  
Breathe in. Breathe out.  
I hope none of you had any problems with that.

Now please try another experiment with me:  
Breathe in. Breathe out.  
Breathe in. Breathe out.  
Now breathe out more.  
Now breathe out more.  
Now breathe out just a little more.  
OK, now breathe in!

The way you were feeling a moment ago, when you were breathing out and breathing out and breathing out but not breathing in, matches the way I was feeling at the end of December with regard to my work here at First Unitarian Church. I was pretty much exhausted, breathing out and out and out but not breathing in. Yes, our church had a very fine and successful holiday season in December. All five of our music groups offered wonderful performances for our Christmas Music Sunday on December 18. Our Solstice Celebration on December 21 was exquisite, with performances by our Dance Choir and by a medieval and renaissance music group called the Urban Sky Consort. On Christmas Eve, we expanded from two to three services, at 4:30, 7:30, and 10:00 PM. I am pleased to say that our total attendance for all three services on Christmas Eve was 577, much higher than the attendance on Christmas Eve in previous years, and in fact much higher than the attendance on any single day I can recall during my fifteen years of ministry with this congregation. Members of the Sunday Celebrations Committee led our Christmas and Hannukah service on December 25, but I was back again for our Kwanzaa service on January 1. Our busy holiday season followed a busy fall season, including the memorable Revival Weekend that First Unitarian Church hosted in early November, and thus by the first of January I was gasping for breath, ready to breathe in after breathing out and out and out, ready for a mini-sabbatical.

During my sabbatical month, I did some reflecting about why I had become so exhausted and what I could do to avoid becoming so exhausted again. More generally, however, I did some reflecting about the importance of renewal and breathing in for all of us, for I know that all of us are at risk for becoming exhausted and depleted and drained.

During the final week of my sabbatical, I traveled to New York City for some fresh air. I stayed with my cousin Hilary who lives with her husband Joe in an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan not far from the All Souls Unitarian Church. On the first day of my sojourn there, I visited the Frick Collection, a museum across the street from Central Park that houses the art collection of the well-known Pittsburgh industrialist Henry Clay Frick. Promotional material about the Frick Collection reports on an interview one of the curators of the museum had with one of Mr. Frick's children. The curator asked this daughter what she believed was the common theme uniting the outstanding paintings in the Frick Collection. She replied that her father had collected art that was "pleasant to live with." And indeed, the Frick Collection has a wholesome, restorative, uplifting quality. There are no paintings of war, or suffering, or social calamities. The building that now contains the Frick Collection was the private residence of the Frick family while they lived in New York City. This private residence was converted into a museum in the 1930s, but many of the rooms were clearly used once upon a time for domestic purposes. The following day I visited the Museum of Modern Art and I saw plenty of art that challenges the conventions of society, but the Frick Collection is not revolutionary. It does not challenge one's conscience or one's customs. Instead, it is just beautiful—magnificently and refreshingly beautiful.

Late at night, after a draining and frustrating day at the office managing his business interests, Mr. Frick would come downstairs and sit in one room or another and just enjoy the beauty of his paintings. He had collected art that was "pleasant to live with," but that should not be taken as an indication that his paintings were simple-minded or trivial. Sometimes Mr. Frick would sit silently for an hour or more, just letting the extraordinary beauty of his paintings move him inwardly, just letting the extraordinary beauty of his paintings restore his spirit.

All of us deserve this. All of us deserve beauty. All of us deserve the opportunity to have our spirits restored by beauty. That is the conclusion that I drew from my visit to the Frick Collection. We may not have the financial means to assemble a great art collection in a monumental private residence across from Central Park in New York City, but we can nevertheless find some way to bring beauty into our lives and take the time to let that beauty work its restorative magic on our souls.

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," advises a well-known passage of Scripture. Does this mean that we are to breathe out for six days and breathe in for one day? Does this mean that we are to wait for six days before we can finally experience the restorative magic of beauty? I'd like to think that "Sabbath" can refer to a quality of being that we can carry with us and lift up or connect with as needed. We might say, "Remember your inward capacity for Sabbath experience that can make every day holy."

This morning we sang "Lift Every Voice" to help us celebrate African-American History Month. "Lift Every Voice" is a song with a conscience. It is not a song that is "pleasant to live with," and if this song were a painting, Mr. Frick would probably not have included it in his art collection. However, we Unitarian Universalists have included it in our hymnbook, in our collection of songs. Another song with a conscience that

appears in our hymnbook draws its text from the constitution of the United Mine Workers Union. If this song were a painting, Mr. Frick probably would not have included it in his art collection either, if his general attitude toward labor unions was evident in his response to the Homestead Strike of 1892. Nevertheless, many of the songs in our Unitarian Universalist hymnbook are songs with a conscience, songs which challenge unjust customs, songs which one might even call revolutionary.

When I put together our Sunday morning worship services, I include songs and spoken words which illustrate our Unitarian Universalist conscience, songs and spoken words which challenge social customs contrary to our Unitarian Universalist values and principles. I do this because I believe that religion should give us a deeper thirst for social justice and a sharper understanding of social ethics.

But I am coming back from my mini-sabbatical with a new appreciation for having our time together on Sunday mornings be a time of renewal, a time of breathing in, a time of becoming reacquainted with our soul or our center or our depths, a time for letting beauty work its restorative magic, a time for rediscovering that God speaks not only words of conscience but also words of healing. I am coming back from my mini-sabbatical saying: Double the music budget! Triple the music budget! I am coming back from my mini-sabbatical saying: Let us have more beauty to enjoy together on Sunday mornings. Let us appreciate not only the peace that has its roots in justice, but also the peace of mind that has its roots in beauty.

In addition to visiting two art galleries in New York City, I was also able to attend three concerts. Given that all three of these concerts took place in the middle of the week, I was impressed by number of people who attended: fifteen hundred people coming out to hear the symphony on a Wednesday evening, four hundred people coming out to a piano recital on a Thursday evening, two hundred people taking time to attend a program of chamber music over the lunch hour on a Wednesday. This triggered more reflection about breathing. I spoke with my cousin Hilary and her husband Joe about the kinds of people who choose to inhabit Manhattan. Many of us are familiar with long-standing stereotypes of New Yorkers as people who are pushy, impatient, arrogant, demanding, loud, and rude. Personally, I have rarely encountered such people, but to the extent that New Yorkers fit this description, my cousin Hilary has offered an alternative way of understanding these characteristics. She said: "Many New Yorkers have high expectations and high standards. They appreciate quality and they are good at asking for it." When reframed in this way, the portrait that emerges is much more attractive.

I thought about all those people going to those concerts in the middle of the week. It is not always easy to get around in New York City. It is not always easy to deal with the large number of people in New York City. But these people managed to get to these concerts anyway. The descriptive phrase I want to use is not "quality of life" but rather "quality in life." You may or may not think that living in Manhattan exemplifies "quality of life," but you do have to admire those folks for their pursuit of "quality in life," for their willingness to negotiate one inconvenience after another to attend those concerts. Of course, I fully understand that individuals pursue "quality in life" in cities and town everywhere, certainly including Pittsburgh.

What does "quality in life" have to do with breathing? A few moments ago I said that by the end of December I felt that I had been breathing out and out and out but not

breathing in. A change in routine over the last few weeks has helped me regain the rhythm of breathing out and also breathing in. Breathing out and breathing in is of course essential. But being in New York City for a few days reminded me that one can go beyond just simply breathing in and breathing out. Sometimes one can quicken one's pace. Sometimes one can intentionally pursue "quality in life" even if one has to breathe hard, even if one has to inhale and exhale more quickly and more deeply. Sure, one can sit on the couch and do very little and breathe shallowly. But why not make the extra effort to pursue "quality in life," to go to that concert even if it means extra hassles, even if it means breathing hard? What's the matter with a little aerobic breathing? It might even be good for you.

Yesterday I had the pleasure of attending the afternoon session of the "Searching for Our Future" workshop that was led by our Capital Campaign Consultant, Rev. Tricia Hart. I enjoyed hearing members and friends of First Unitarian Church envision ways that we could have greater "quality in church life" together. I thoroughly endorse many of the ideas that people brought forward: strengthening and expanding our efforts on behalf of peace and justice, sharing our values and our vision with the larger community, strengthening and expanding our music program and our lifespan religious education program, and weaving a deeper sense of community among the members and friends of this congregation.

Based on the reflecting I have done during my mini-sabbatical, however, I would offer two comments. First, I really do not want to return to a situation where I am breathing out and out and out but not breathing in. Yes, let's do the wonderful things that people identified in our workshop yesterday, but rather than stretching the resources we have now, let's gather additional resources. Without those additional resources, I expect that I will probably find myself breathing out and out and out. What additional resources might we gather? We will need financial resources, staff resources, leadership resources, policy resources, relational resources, planning resources, support resources, space resources, and perhaps other resources as well.

My second comment is that I would encourage us, if we do indeed want to have significantly better "quality in church life" together, not to be afraid to breathe hard, to breathe aerobically, to breathe in the way that people breathe when they are putting forth great effort. Yes, it is important to breathe in as well as breathe out. And yes, sometimes it is important to breathe hard. Sometimes our purposes and our values call us to breathe hard. Over the next few years, we can accomplish some truly remarkable and worthwhile things together as a religious community. Paying attention to our breathing will be essential. Therefore, let us remember to breathe in and breathe out. And let us remember that breathing hard can bring joy, and accomplishment, and greater "quality in life."

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