

God's Breath by Donne Hayden

The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen wrote, "When we speak about the Holy Spirit, we speak about the breath of God, breathing in us." Spirit and breath. In both Hebrew and Greek, the words for "breath"--*ruach* and *pneuma*, respectively--are also translated as "spirit" and used throughout the Old and New Testaments. The ancient Hawaiians called the wind "the breath of God." (The one word we all know in Hawaiian, *aloha* comes from two root words that mean "in the presence of wind, breath, or spirit." The word *haole* (how-lee) refers to light-skinned foreigners and means "without breath, wind or spirit.") In the Eastern traditions, Buddha taught his followers a meditation that focused on breathing. Buddhist monk and writer Thich Nhat Hanh claims that the *only* thing we can absolutely know for certain is that we are breathing.

"Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out." This is a very important practice. When you breathe in, you know that this is your in-breath, and not your out-breath. You identify your in-breath as in-breath. When you breathe out, you know that this is your out-breath. Only that. But it is a very important practice.

This is the first exercise of breathing that the Buddha leaves to us. When we practice like that, something wonderful happens. Since we pay attention only to our in-breath and out-breath and identify them as in-breath or out-breath, we stop the thinking. This is a miracle already, because in our daily life we think too much and because we think too much we are not truly ourselves. . . .Our body may be here, but our mind may be elsewhere—in the past, in the future, in China. Our body and our mind are very often separated from each other, and in between we have our breath.

“Breath” and “spirit” came up in a book I was reading this past week, in rather strange context. The book was *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* by Barbara Bradley Hagerty who explores current scientific research on spiritual experiences. (You may have heard it discussed or reviewed on NPR.) In one section near the end, Hagerty interviews Pam Reynolds who underwent complicated surgery for a brain aneurysm. During the surgery, her body temperature was lowered, her heart stopped, and all the blood removed from her brain so the aneurysm could be removed. She was given anesthesia to put her to sleep and then barbiturates to “knock out her deepest brain functions.” In describing her state, Dr. Robert Spetzler, the neurosurgeon who performed the surgery, told Hagerty, “Her brain [was] as comatose, as unresponsive, as it can

possibly be. . . . If she were awake, and she had no pulse, no blood pressure, no respiration, we would call her dead. But if you are in this suspended state, because we know you can come back, I would not define it as dead.” When asked if Pam could see or hear anything during her surgery, Dr. Spetzler replied, “Absolutely not.”¹

During the surgery, Pam Reynolds left her body and watched the entire process. Because of the detail with which she described events when her brain could not possibly have been functioning, her own doctor “conducted an exhaustive investigation of Pam’s story. He obtained her records, including a timeline of the surgery and transcripts. He confirmed the conversation about her small veins, the description of the Midas Rex bone saw and its case. He confirmed the defibrillation, the number of doctors, and nurses, even their position around the operating table.”

During the interview, Hagerty asked Dr. Spetzler how he explains Pam’s knowledge of what occurred while her brain was essentially dead.

“From a scientific perspective, I have absolutely no explanation about how it could have happened. . . . It comes down to the metaphysical . . . It comes down to the soul. It comes down to whether you’re religious and believe in these things. I think it is the ultimate arrogance for anyone, whether they’re a scientist, or anyone

¹ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), pages 202-206.

*else, to say that something can't be. I accept Pamela's account, although I have no explanation of how it could have happened."*²

For me, the most moving part of Pam Reynold's story was when she noticed the light and went toward it. She heard a voice from the light, and there saw her grandmother and her uncle, both of whom had died. "They looked young," Pam said, and they "shimmered as if they were wearing coats of light." She then noticed "a sea of people" who "were all wearing the light."

"I remember asking, 'Is God the light?' And the communication was, 'No, it's not the light. The light is what happens when God breathes.'

*"And I thought, I am standing in the breath of God."*³

The Light that Friends seek each week in Meeting for Worship is "what happens when God breathes." As we focus on the Light, we are essentially hoping God will *breathe* on us. Is there anything more intimate than breath? "Closer is He than breathing"

The breath of God. When my daughter was five years old, we lived in Fort Collins, Colorado, and one morning, we opened our apartment door to find a thick, white ground fog covering everything. We could see only a few feet in any direction. As we walked through the moist whiteness, my

² Ibid, p. 206.

³ Ibid.,p. 203.

daughter took my hand and asked with a trace of concern, “Is this God’s breath?”

I don’t remember how I answered her—being a conscientious mother, I probably said something like, “Well, in a way, but it’s just fog—sort of like a cloud on the ground.” Explaining away the mystical, as some of us good parents are wont to do.

I was moved by her question, however, particularly since we didn’t really talk about God that much. This was during my unchurched period, and thus, her unchurched period. In fact, I don’t think I had ever taken my daughter to church, so I was surprised that she had a concept of God as something that might surround us with its breath. “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings,” Jesus said, “thou hast brought perfect praise,” and in the Old Testament, the young Elihu tells Job it is not necessarily age and experience, but “truly it is the *spirit* in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.” In the words of my child that foggy morning, I glimpsed “the breath of the Almighty,” i.e., knowledge and understanding she had neither time nor opportunity to acquire in her short span of years on earth. I suspect that she brought it with her.

I suspect also that Lyla Nadda is young and wise beyond her years. I don’t know who she is—her last name means “generous” in Arabic—but

though I tried to find out more about her, I found nothing but the poem she wrote that I stumbled across on an Internet writer's site, a poem that moved me deeply.

"The Breath of God" by Lyla Nadda

I caught God staring at me
 while I was not performing
 or shining
 or even praying
 and the gaze was that of one deeply in love
 So much so
 that the brilliance was pouring out of God's eyes
 and for a moment
 I had no breath
 and saw and felt and knew
 that I was caught in the very breath of God
 and that my very own breathing was
 simply
 an illusion
 a dream
 and that I was the breath
 of God
 moving in and out of the body
 of infinite Love.⁴

I invite you to think about *breath* today during the silence. Think of the Light as "what happens when God breathes." Think of the breath of God, breathing through you.

Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet —

⁴ Lyla Nadda, "The Breath of God," Creative Writing channel, *Helium* website, <http://www.helium.com/users/154120>

*Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.*⁵

⁵ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Higher Pantheism," 1869.