



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Air My Breath, Wind My Spirit”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

For breath is life, and if you breathe well you will live long on earth. Sanskrit Proverb

There is one way of breathing that is shameful and constricted.

Then, there's another way: a breath of love that takes you all the way to infinity. Rumi

All things share the same breath – the beast, the tree, the man ... the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. Chief Seattle

Sermon

Everybody take a deep breath in, then out. Are you feeling good? That breath you just took indicates you're alive, so you ought to be feeling pretty good and happy. Am I right?

Doctors tell us we can survive at least a month without food, as long as we have water to drink. Depending on the climate and other conditions, doctors tell us we can survive up to a week without water, as long as we have air to breathe. They tell us we can survive only a few minutes without air. Take another deep breath. It is good to have air to breathe.

You've just breathed into your lungs a mixture of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, carbon dioxide, and minor concentrations of a few other gases—maybe even some undesirable, ah-hem, human-made gases. We know the gaseous mix we call air fills this room, yet we can't really see it. Although you can hold your finger up and know you are touching it, we don't sense it like we do earth's soil or water. We can only feel it when it breezes over exposed skin. Go ahead. Blow on your hand to feel it. We can't taste or smell pure air, though we detect odors that air can carry, such as salt water from a nearby ocean, earthy fragrances from a forest, and even delicious cinnamon from just-baked muffins.

Unitarian minister and scientist Joseph Priestley discovered oxygen's properties before he was chased out of England for his dissenting religious views in 1794. Among Priestley's many experiments, he showed that when air is removed from a sealed container, plants will replenish the

air. No air for our breath would exist if not for plants taking in our exhaled carbon dioxide and giving out oxygen for our inhalation. How appropriate that our Seventh Principle (which affirms we are interdependent with all that exists) should receive an early proof from one of our own.

Air is the breath and spirit of life, precious and sacred, and acknowledged in many religious traditions as a divine gift from a god or a god's creation.

In Hindu tradition, the sound of divine creation is chanted and invoked regularly. We exhale breath to recreate this sound when we chant 'A-U-M'. We merge our self with all that exists as we exhale our spirit into the air. Creation, sound, speech, and breath are bound together in Hindu thought. A Hindu text in the Upanishad says, "Each and every particular to the totality of the Universe is the home of the holy spirit." All that exists is imbued by the sacred, everything is divine.

For some Native American tribes, such as the Lakota, the supreme entity *Wakan Tanka* translates as Great Spirit or Great Mystery. This mystery exists in all as the very fabric of the material world and as that unknowable source which sustains all life. Echoing this thought, an Eastern Algonkian Indian, Big Thunder, said the Great Spirit is in all things, including the air we breathe. (*Temple Wilderness*, page 31). Many native ceremonies use smoking sage to sanctify and tobacco to lift hopes and prayers into the air and up to the spirits.

In the opening lines of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, we're told the Spirit of the Creator is a rushing, dynamic wind hovering over the waters. The Hebrew word used is *ruach*, which can mean spirit, air, wind, and breath. The text continues with God creating light by divine word, uttered breath, "God said...". In the next chapter, God forms a human and breathes into this human's nostrils the breath of life, thus sharing some of God's spirit with humans, real and metaphorical inspiration by the Spirit. The existence of air everywhere, from the ocean depths to mountain heights, serves as a parable for God's omnipresence in Jewish tradition. For Hindu, Jew, Native American or Christian, God or the divine spirit exists in all things.

The Christian Bible's authors substituted the Hebrew *ruach* with the Greek *pneuma*, again meaning both spirit (lower case s), Spirit (upper case S), and breath. Doctors today use *pneuma* to describe medical conditions pertaining to the lungs and breathing, such as pneumonia. And pneumatology is the study of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology. The Latin word *spiritus*, such as *spiritus sanctus*, or Holy Spirit, forms the root of respiration, expiration, inspiration, and more obviously, spirit and spiritual. In Christian texts, when Jesus took his last breath he gave his spirit back to God—spirit and breath as one.

When Unitarian Universalists use the term 'Spirit of Life' or 'Spirit of Love' we may be, but are not necessarily referring to the divine Holy Spirit of Christianity or any other supernatural concept of spirit. Each of us is free to interpret these terms in personally meaningful ways, natural or supernatural. Although UUs have historically rejected most supernaturalism in religion, we have not totally discarded all spiritual meaning.

Some early American Unitarians and Universalists described the Spirit as God's active force in the world. In 1841, Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his

essay “The Over-Soul,” described a spiritual connection to something larger than humankind, an ever-present God who contributes to “that shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul.” [Quote taken from Emerson’s 1841 essay, “The Over-Soul,” #VIII, Paragraph 16] The feeling of awe and wonder we get when viewing a newborn baby or a magnificent rainbow is our Spirit mingling with that which is beyond us, that which is larger than ourselves and therefore universal. Emerson further adds in another essay titled “Worship,” that God’s spirit is a “simple, quiet, undescribed, undescrivable presence, dwelling very peacefully in us.” [Quote taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1860 essay, “Worship,” #XVII, Paragraph 13]

Like Emerson, historically we eliminated most ideas of God the Father, God the King, and God the old man in the sky with a long-flowing beard, but not that transcendent spirit of the divine located both within our hearts and souls and evident in the natural world. Emerson’s natural concept of the divine continues to resonate with many of us. I believe this feeling is one source of our call to environmental justice.

Whether or not we believe in a God, a Goddess, or another divine being, the Spirit, such as the Spirit of Life or the Spirit of Love, is a very real feeling contributing to our sense of spirituality, of our connectedness to something larger than ourselves which cannot adequately be described with human language. Spirit is as ephemeral as the air with which it shares its etymological origin.

For me, the Spirit of Life is not only the air I breathe, but the intangible forces that give me life, spirit, and inspiration—including joy, enthusiasm, and exuberance. The Spirit of Life is that unnamable, unquantifiable, untouchable internal and external source I draw on to keep me going when times are tough. I access this spiritual feeling by connecting to people, animals, the earth, the universe, other tangible things and even intangible energies.

When I look out at the stars at night, I feel Emerson’s shudder of awe and wonder. It is amazing how vast the universe is. It makes me feel small and humble. But it also makes me feel incredible, even miraculous, because I’m aware I am this tiny little speck of dust, stardust to be exact, and I can look out at all these other stars knowing I am one with all those stars. I want to reach out to the twinkling lights above to touch them.

Sometimes, when I look up at the stars, I feel I am looking into a mirror. If some life form exists out there on one of those stars and is looking out from their night sky, it may only see what I see, just the twinkling light of a solar star. If I could know that creature truly exists, it would be a miracle like our own miraculous life on Earth. And I would know I am connected to that alien life form, too. Existence is so amazing!

Many things make me experience awe and wonder. The choir singing sometimes takes my breath away. Many people have said, “Life is not determined by how many breaths we take, but by how many moments take our breath away.” The original source of this thought is unknown, though it may be adapted from mid-19th century poet, Philip James Bailey. Having my breath taken away in moments of wonder reminds me I am fully alive and responding to life around me.

But our Spirits and spirituality are informed by more than just these amazing peak moments. During our ‘New UU’ orientations we ask you to describe your spiritual journeys. You share your moments of wonder, but also your moments of doubt, your life’s high and low points, your desire to connect with others, and your desire to make a difference. Your spiritual journeys also include the times you reject or adopt a new religious idea or community. All these times in life add up to make you and me who we are, and determine our commitments and beliefs.

Each time you come to the fellowship is another moment in your life to connect, to make meaning, and to feel your spirit moved. Now, I don’t expect you to have peak spiritual experiences of awe and wonder here each week. It may happen, but I know it will happen wherever and whenever you feel most connected to something larger than yourself and when you feel most alive. By being in community we have a chance to share these moments and make meaning out of them, as well as test our ideas, celebrate the losses which affect our spirits most deeply, and celebrate the joys which lift up our spirits and enable us to carry on.

I believe with every fiber of my being, with every molecule of air I breathe, that living connected to a religious community is an essential aspect of our being spiritual. We may not agree to what has en-spirited or inspired us, but I believe we are filled with something I’ll call Spirit—that something that connects us and takes us out of isolated ourselves.

Let’s fill our lungs with spirit one more time. Breathe deep. Thank God, thank the spirits, thank whatever is your source of inspiration, that we breathe today. May it be so for a very long time.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When do you feel most inspired, alive, or filled with spirit (as you define it) within yourself?
2. Share a time you felt ‘wow’ – at one with earth or the universe, most connected to life, mystery, wonder, or the divine beyond yourself.
3. What tends to stifle your enthusiasm for life or dampen your spirit? What do you do to lift your spirits?