

EMILY CLUFF

Breaths of Life

“Don’t forget your breathing.”

The chipper voice is what I would expect from someone who chose to teach a yoga class at 7:00 in the morning. In fact, everything about my instructor fits the stereotype down to a T. Long brown ponytail, inhuman flexibility, cute stretchy pants, and relentless positive energy at unholy hours of the morning. To top it all off, her name is even Brittany.

Her reminder is funny to me—I obviously haven’t been practicing long enough to develop the serious, meditative mindset that marks a true yogi. The strain of trying to contort my limbs without finding my face on the yoga mat still tends to make all of the serious talk of breath and self-compassion and discipline more humorous than instructive. Her command is so sincere, as though forgetting to breathe is a legitimate fear, as though she might at any second look up and find a student lying flat on his mat, cold and still, having been so focused on his downward dog that his lungs forgot to move, as though she would only sigh and mutter *not again*.

This isn’t what she means, of course. She doesn’t mean *don’t forget to breathe*; what she really means is, don’t forget your *correct* breath, your *yoga* breath, your *ujjayi* breath. Because

for the yogi, breath is everything. It coordinates the movements. It enables focus. It fuses the mind, the body, the spirit, into one united journey towards self-awareness, enlightenment, healing, and spiritual growth. Only if it is good breath, though, preferably *ujjayi* breath—the kind that comes in through the nose and down the carefully rounded and hollow throat and past the tongue that is clenched at the back, just enough to make every breath in through the nose and out through the nose as loud as possible. It should sound like an ocean. Waves crash in, waves roll out. A relentless rhythm of life.

“Your breath will warm you up.”

Admittedly, I find Brittany’s promise less than promising. After biking through the subfreezing wind to the unheated yoga studio, I find it difficult to believe that more cold air sucked into my lungs will warm anything, to believe that once air becomes breath, the frigidness will somehow disappear and transform into a source of heat. Yet I do have some vague sense that breath is more than just air. I remember winter afternoons waiting to be picked up after school, marveling at the cloud of heat pouring out of my mouth with each breath. In those moments, my breath was so much more than the air surrounding me at every turn—it had briefly become a part of me, and, for a moment, that journey had transformed it into a cloud apart from the rest of the air molecules floating around, not yet inhaled. It was visibly changed, and it was mine. I remember long minutes spent trying to capture it, not wanting to release my breath, my heat, my little piece of me into the world. I would cup my hands tight around my mouth and try to hold it there and gasp it back into my body where it could stay a part of me. I didn’t understand much about the science of breath then—how the body strips the small gulp of air of life-giving oxygen and spits out the waste. I didn’t know then that through my owning and transforming it, that breath had become useless to me.

“Yoga without breath is just circus tricks.”

I know it’s morbid, and I know it’s not helping my meditation and spiritual enlightenment, but at these words I can’t help but picture a giant puppeteer taking us to the circus and putting us all on strings: a room full of spandex-clad corpses who decided to do yoga without breath. The puppeteer inverts legs over heads and twists feet through arms, and we all look just as ridiculous in this macabre imagining as we do in class.

I don’t mean to make a mockery of the practice, but, try as I might—though admittedly I have not tried very hard—I cannot separate thoughts of breath from those of life, of death. I suppose I’m more aware of breath than most, although I wish I weren’t. In high school the tightness began, not all the time, just occasionally. My lungs would begin to strain against my rib cage, convincing me that there wasn’t enough air in them. I would inhale until my lungs ached from holding the breath, but still they didn’t feel full, and I worried that there wasn’t enough. I’d sit with my back pressed against a wall, one hand on my chest to feel the deep rise and fall of it, desperately trying to convince my brain to trust. Trust that the air going in and out was enough; trust that it was reaching the deepest parts of my lungs. Sometimes this lasted minutes, sometimes hours. After a while, I learned that the strange tightness wouldn’t kill me, that my body would keep working whether my mind believed it or not. The episodes became less stressful and merely uncomfortable. I talked to a doctor about it once. He didn’t have an explanation. I don’t either. Sometimes I wonder if it’s nothing more than a reminder of my own mortality.

I sometimes picture the first man being formed from the dust, God shaping him like clay, adding assorted arms and legs and deciding there’s too many. Smoothing out arms and legs and leaving just a couple of each. Deciding the head is too smooth and pushing the eyes in and pulling the nose and ears out, landscaping hills and valleys into the face before finally declaring

him perfect. Or almost perfect. Finally, after one deep inhale, God breathed air into man's nostrils, the breath of life, taking him from mere dust and earth and transforming him into a living soul.

Were Adam's lungs tight when that first breath forced its way in, stretching and expanding what had never been moved before? Did he know what a miracle that air was? Or was he maybe, just for a moment, scared at the foreign sensation of the world making its way inside him? Maybe along with the awe at the miracle of life and light and sound and sensation, there was a worry that the breath pushing its way in and out of his chest wouldn't be enough. All it took was one puff of holy air, one deep exhale to create life from dust. With each aching breath, did Adam feel how little it would take to return to such?

"Use inhales for energy . . ."

My inhales are bringing something other than energy at the moment. I'm not sure which ancient Hindu mind first conceived the practice of yoga, but I wonder if he thought through the implications of combining deep breathing with postures that relax muscles and encourage digestion—from the current smell of it, lots of digestion. I think he must have either been a bit dense or a bit mischievous. Maybe he's kicking around in the afterlife still giggling at all the fools who've fallen for his prank, gagging on their *ujjayi* breath.

Then again, maybe he was actually a little bit wise. Maybe he understood how our finite amount of air connects us, forcing us to share it as it cycles without boundary from garden to tomb, tree to lung, mouth to small intestine. Maybe he knew that long after his body had returned to dust, the very air he'd taken in would still be floating around, surrounding us all centuries and even millennia later. Maybe he noticed how each being that takes it in alters it just a bit, leaving it clean or dusty, purified or diseased, fresh or putrid. He must have known how desperately

we need the vitality of the world around us. This need drives us to take every piece of it deep inside of us, into the lungs, deep into the air sacs, over to the capillaries, so it can be carried to the heart. For a moment, we invite the world inside us, we own it, and in its journey to the deepest core of our being, we transform it. Everyone around me has left small pieces of themselves in the air floating around in invisible clouds surrounding them—surrounding me. I take it all in. My breath does not discriminate.

“ . . . exhales for balance.”

Hands planted on the ground, hip on elbow, legs swung out to the side, flailing a bit in the unsupportive air, I’m surprised to find that it really is easier to balance when I focus on exhaling loudly, fully. I sound like a bad Darth Vader impersonator, and it may be nothing more than a placebo effect, but I’m driving the air forcefully from my lungs, and my face hasn’t planted into the mat, at least not yet. I picture the air rushing in, filling my lungs, letting the world and all the little pieces of its ancient inhabitants be a part of it for just a moment. Red blood cells are rushing up to meet the new breath, to load all the oxygen onto their backs, fresh supplies for the weary venules, veins, and arteries doing the burdensome work of keeping me alive. Once the breath has been stripped of everything useful, I imagine the air sacs in the lungs constricting, leaving no more room for the waste, forcing it back out into the world, warm and changed and useless—to me at least. Some hungry tree may very well take my breath and make it its own and transform it and send it back. I can’t help but take in all the air around me, but I can’t hold it all. I have to expel, to release, and in these exhales, I find balance.

“Send breath to the points of tension.”

This is a nice idea, but with my pelvis up high in the air and my feet and head forming the base of an approximately three-degree triangle, I am struggling to send my breath anywhere

except in and out. How to get it to the screaming muscles in my shoulders clenched in a never-ending dolphin pose is beyond me. From the grimace on the face of the aspiring yogi next to me, I'm guessing she's not having much success either.

Perhaps I don't trust enough. Air molecules have somehow managed to animate my body into the distorted shape it's trying to maintain. Certainly they could ease some of the tension that comes with it, but they must feel my lack of faith in their power because no matter how hard I focus, I find no relief. Then again, maybe I don't fully understand Brittany's command. Maybe the breath isn't supposed to ease the tension. Maybe it's just supposed to keep me going until it's over.

Breath is mentioned forty-one times in the Old Testament. Only once in the New. I wonder what changed? Maybe after that first eternity-shattering breath of life Adam became fascinated by the slight rise and fall of his chest. Did this small rhythm of continuing existence astound him with its mighty power and frighten him with its fragility? I imagine that potent mix of wonder and angst being passed down from generation to generation until slowly, gradually, almost as imperceptibly as breath itself, his descendants began to forget. The rhythm stood the test of time and perhaps later generations began to simply expect that the steady stream of air would continue to come until it didn't. There was no need to dwell on it. Maybe they developed an abiding trust in God and His gifted breaths of life. Or maybe they simply forgot that every inhale was a reminder of their dependence on Him and every exhale was a testament to His power—a power that infused and animated their very being. I imagine they began to ignore the fragility of their numbered breaths. I wonder if they also began to forget the wonder of them?

“Make the breath louder than your thoughts.”

I have never been good at clearing my mind. I tried to meditate once and spent the whole time relentlessly, loudly

chanting *don't think, don't think, don't think*. This is better, just focusing on the in, out, in, out of my breath, but after a while, I become a little too aware of my own breathing. I hate the tightening in my chest that accompanies these moments. Over the years, the panic has dulled into a quiet complaint in the back of my head, insisting that the air is not enough, that I need more and more, and it won't come, that my lungs aren't big enough. I still hate that my brain won't believe the evidence right below my eyes—the steady expansion of stomach and chest.

Before Brittany and yoga and *ujjayi* breaths, I'd spent years trying not to think about breath, not to let my mind remember its own mortality, its acute reliance on molecules too small for me to see. Unlike my brain, my body knows that it is dust, it is comfortable with its dependence on breath for energy, for animation, for life. It pulls in lungful after lungful of air, taking what it needs, expelling what would just weigh it down. It understands warmth and energy, balance and tension, regulating without thought or effort. As long as my breath remains involuntary, I am safe—safe from the worry of my mind, the unyielding need for control, the lack of trust in the primal instinct that has served mankind for hundreds of thousands of years. My mind only rages against the inevitable. Despite the pain, despite the tightness, despite the anxiety, the world's air must come in and it must go out. And it will, without my efforts and without my permission.

At times my lungs strain against this ultimate reliance on something outside of myself. But at this moment, sitting in a child's pose, bowed down to the earth and all that is in it, breathing in all it has to offer, at this moment I marvel.