



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

The only spiritual practice we ever need?

My mother used to say “mind your P’s and Q’s.” According to Wikipedia, the expression means “mind your manners,” “mind your language,” “be on your best behavior” or “watch what you’re doing.” (It’s worth reading the whole Wikipedia article, suggesting the origin of the phrase could be traced to confusion over lowercase p’s and q’s, proper pours of pints and quarts in English pubs, and other explanations). Anyway, I’m fairly sure my mother wanted us to mind our manners, language and behavior. This has virtually nothing to do with the theme of this column, but it could be a helpful way to find a spiritual practice that works for most everyone, whether you’re a person of faith or not.

For our purposes, minding our P’s and Q’s could mean practicing mindfulness. Buddhists teach this basic, though apparently contradictory, message. Rather than suggesting a “mind full” of thoughts, it refers to a conscious decision to be still, calmly letting go of distracting thoughts. It’s an invitation to an awakened awareness of Life. This sounds a bit esoteric until we pay attention to “centering” or “grounding” ourselves in the here and now. Being awake to life begins with a sense of doing essentially one thing, which isn’t actually “doing” anything! What I take it to mean, is simply: breathe. That’s right. “Keep coming back to the breath” is one of the first lessons I learned when enjoying quiet retreats at a local Zen Center near San Francisco. A Zen priest directed us to sit in a relaxed and alert position, staring at nothing in particular, breathing in and out, in and out. You forget about time, begin to release thoughts and worries, and...breathe.

Try it. Pause your reading now, and breathe. There, you did it. From my perspective, this is the origin of all “spiritual” practices and traditions. Add the element of silence, and you have the foundation of religion, or any mindful, ethical way of living. Sound too simple and easy? Perhaps. And perhaps that’s the whole point. We complicate the essentials of life, those things that really matter, and allow other stuff (the possession of things, including material and mental “things”) to cloud our minds and consume our lives.

Am I suggesting everyone become a Buddhist? No. I’m not a Buddhist. Yet I’ve been influenced by Buddhist ideas and practices, the most basic being a natural awareness of breath. In church we used to sing the hymn “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” and there were many sermons and prayers about the Holy Spirit (Sacred Breath). Though supernatural views of spirituality have been proclaimed for centuries, the biblical story simply presents the Hebrew word “ruah” and the Greek word “pneuma,” both meaning breath or wind. Nothing simple about that, but maybe the history of religion has so many “add-ons” and “apps” (updates and applications), orthodox creeds and doctrines, scriptures and rituals, that the most important element has been essentially lost: to breathe. Believing you “breathe God’s breath” is one concept, and so is the practical knowledge that “to breathe is to live.”

In the Christian tradition, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Breath, with a great wind blowing over the early followers of Jesus. Originally, to be “spiritual” meant to be filled with that sacred breeze (when I was in the Pentecostal church, we believed we were inhabited by the Spirit/Breath that energized our faith). This is one chapter of the history of religion, however, there are various perspectives on what it all means.

Go ahead. Take another deep, long breath. Do you imagine you are filled with God, or Life, or simply air? Our bodies need the oxygen, of course, but so do our minds. How we think of breath — and how we breathe — makes a difference in our health, and also what we believe. I was always delighted to hear the story of the dove that landed on Jesus when he was baptized. It doesn’t say a dove landed on him, but the Spirit/Breath/Breeze descended on the young man to fill him with energy for his ministry. Something like that. I wonder if the free flight of birds might remind us of the wind blowing over, around and through our mouths, noses and lungs — a soaring bird brings us back down to earth, to our natural breath.

Do you pray? Doesn’t prayer begin and end with breath? Do you work with others, assisting them when able? Doesn’t any meaningful work begin and end with breathing, and choosing to breathe with others? The fact we “share the air,” the common breath of life, with all creatures, should cause us to pause now and then, to simply breathe.

Breathing may be the only practice we truly need.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).