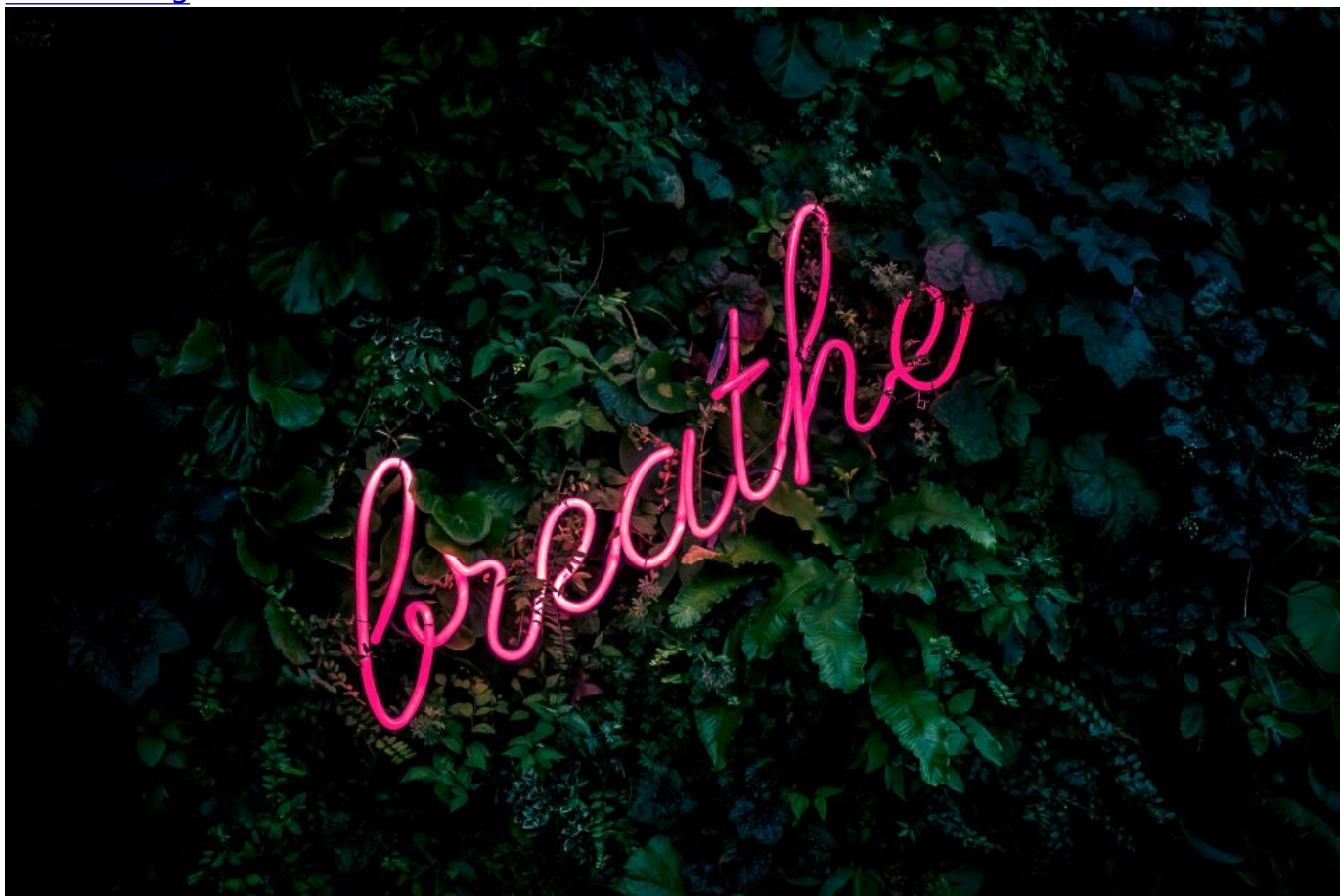


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(Unsplash/Fabian Moller)

by Renée Lareau

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The Calm app on my phone sends a cheery little message that I've completed more than 100 meditation sessions: "You star!" it says. "Keep up the great work!" I

appreciate the encouragement, but I'm not a stellar contemplative — I'm a meditation novice. I downloaded the app in desperation last winter during its darkest, coldest days, seeking respite from the season's grip and a balm for my anxiety.

I have long specialized in catastrophic thinking, often juggling six impossible scenarios before breakfast. Over the years, too many hours spent online further distorted my perception of reality. I watched acquaintances' personal struggles unfold in real time on Facebook, witnessed too many Twitter fights, and digested an unhealthy number of tragic news headlines — many of them focusing on the faith tradition that has sustained me for my entire adult life.

In this digitally mediated world, potential misfortune lurked around every corner. I was on alert, all the time.

I needed a new tactic to combat my anxiety. A well-timed opinion piece on meditation by New York Times columnist Farhad Manjoo seemed meant for me: "I'm not promising meditation will fix everything about how the Internet has ruined you," he wrote. "But what if it does?"

I was intrigued. Of course, meditation is having a moment, and the trend is backed by loads of scientific research showing the benefits of mindfulness for your physical and mental health. Even short-term practices bring these benefits.

So short-term is where I started. "Daily Calm," the heart of Apple's Calm app, is a 10-minute meditation delivered to your phone each day. Perfect for the novice, each session focuses on a different topic — worry, personal relationships, self-doubt, compassion — and you can save your favorites for later. Meditations are accompanied by the soothing ambient sounds of your choice, whether that's soft rainfall, ocean waves or nighttime crickets.

The linchpin of each meditation is several minutes of deep, focused breathing. For me, that breathing has become an anchor — one that is available to me in the middle of the night, in between work meetings, at Mass, in the checkout line, during moments of boredom or moments of panic.

In recent months, meditative breathing has become the best way I know how to pray.

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I remember learning long ago that in Hebrew, the word for breath and spirit is the same — *ruah*. The very act of breathing is an expression of the presence of God. In recent months, meditative breathing has become the best way I know how to pray.

Even in this seemingly solitary act, there is community. Meditation has become my Liturgy of the Hours. Opening the Calm app early in the morning, I can see that tens of thousands of people have already completed their Daily Calm session. On the days when I meditate at lunchtime, I use a designated interfaith prayer room in the building where I work.

Beforehand, I check local Muslim prayer times online so I don't interrupt the daily prayers of our Muslim faculty and students. But I like seeing traces of their presence — their prayer rugs rolled and tucked into cabinets, the foot-washing station nearby.

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Some nights, I do the Calm kids' meditations with my children in their rooms before bed. (Their personal favorites include "Flashlight Body Scan," "Follow the Leader" and "Warm Heart.") My boys love it so much they often request more than one. "One more please, Mom — that felt sooooo good," pleads my 8-year-old from his top bunk. (This is how kids prolong bedtimes in 2019 — asking for another glass of water is so last year.)

As with any prayer practice, there are struggles. During some sessions, my mind is so cluttered I wonder why I even bother. Other days, my mind wanders when I hear my kids fighting downstairs or I hear the neighbors outside. But even when my thoughts wander, which is most of the time, I always go back to my breath.

I wish I could say I've left my anxiety behind for good. Alas, that's not the case. But I feel significantly better thanks to this new-to-me daily practice, coupled with a dramatic scaling back on social media. I no longer feel like a helpless victim of the internet and its fear-mongering and rabbit holes. Instead, I use it on my own terms.

I thought the internet had ruined my psyche and me, too. Who knew that a little app on my phone would remind me that I always have access to my breath, my spirit, my *ruah*, proof positive of the presence of God?

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