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Spirituality is as necessary as breath

by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

My Table Is Spread

Both died the same week. One of the dead was a neighbor, near my age, his heart broken after the suicide of his son, a soldier who had returned from Iraq changed in some terrible way.

Very near the anniversary of his son's suicide, my neighbor took his own life.

One of the dead was a 14-month-old boy, the younger son of a young woman I have known since she was a child. He woke up well, or seemingly so, on Tuesday morning. By Wednesday morning his brain had ceased to function. By Thursday, the baby's extended family had gathered and the nurses unhooked him from the machines that caused his chest to rise and fall in a terrible imitation of breathing.

His parents were at last able to cradle their son. Untethered from the tubes in which we had all placed our hope, this baby was back in his parents' arms.

They had to find another way to hope, another place to anchor. So have we, or will we, all. For that which looks so stable and so strong -- the medical machinery, the wise counseling -- turns out, at times, to be weaker than the disease. And we have to find a rock on which to stand, lest the dark waters overtake us.

Ruah is a Hebrew word for breath. In the beginning, God breathed upon the waters. God created Adam and breathed into him the breath of life. When the risen Jesus met with the disciples in a locked room on that evening of the first day of the week, he said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

And the world began anew, re-created and reborn.

What departed the bodies of the dead that week was breath, the animating spirit. Like people hit with a sucker punch, the mourners, too, felt the wind, the breath, the life, go out of them.

Grief and despair, loss and longing threaten to smother us, to steal the animating breath. The practices of spirituality are nothing less than the practice of life.

To practice spirituality is to begin to breathe, or to learn to breathe, again. By learning to breathe, I do not mean traveling to Italy, India and Indonesia, eating lots of pizza and seeking out spiritual leaders who are ABWIWR (Anything But What I Was Raised). Just imagine the cinematic possibilities of Julia Roberts and a balding man in pleated Dockers reading the psalms.

That's the trouble with any talk about spirituality. Pop spirituality can be as light, as sweet, and as quickly spent as cotton candy. Pick off a strand anywhere on the cone and let it melt in your mouth, no chewing -- no effort at all -- required.

But if spirituality is understood as one with the body, as breath is one with flesh, then what seemed weightless takes on heft and shape. Spirituality is not "something I tried on for a year and sold to a publisher." Spirituality is the steady inhalation and exhalation of life. It is as daily, and as necessary, as daily bread, and daily breath.

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Let's agree on one thing: Breathing is an act we must do moment by moment, day after day, or we die. Spirituality, then, is not a phase or an experiment, but the in and out, the rise and fall of the human heart.

How do we learn to breathe, to take in and be filled by the Holy Spirit? How do we learn to breathe out the Holy Spirit in a world gasping for breath? I was reminded during that long week of the centrality of singing in spiritual practice.

It's often been observed that stutterers, who cannot speak without hesitation, are able to sing smoothly, and with ease.

So, too, can songs give voice when our words and thoughts falter. When we gathered for the funeral of my neighbor, people searched for wise and kind words. A suicide is an act of violence, not only toward the dead, but toward all those he leaves behind to mourn. There are no obvious words, and certainly no easy ones. But there is song, and a rich tradition of songs sung at sickbeds and deathbeds and gravesides.

We stood to sing the opening hymn, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy."

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice,
Which is more than liberty.

The wideness of God's mercy: Yes, that is what we sought, and seek. Nothing in that hymn denies death, or the destruction in death's wake. Rather, it praises a mercy that is, even in the face of every unjust death, greater still. God's mercy is like the sea, deeper than we have ever yet gone, its farthest shores beyond our sight.

We have to breathe to sing, and singing that song, all of us together, restored some measure of *ruah*, of spirit, of life.

When my young friend and her husband knew that their son would never again open his eyes, they had to make decisions. They had to decide to donate his organs. They had to decide that the many tubes could, and would be, disconnected.

And then they were left with the baby they had birthed, and would, too soon, bury. They held him, and rocked him. They sang to him as he died.

They sang, "This Little Light of Mine," and "You are My Sunshine," and "All Through the Night," songs they had sang every night of his 420 days of life.

They sang the songs from before, from the time when they bent over his sleeping face to inhale his sweet breath. They sang the songs from before, when they watched his chest rise and fall in a rhythm of health and strength. They sang songs from before, when the peace for which they prayed was a quiet slumber, rather than the rest of death. They sang songs from before, when the guardian angels on which they called were bidden to shepherd him in this life, and not the next. They sang songs which remembered them to joy and peace.

I was not at the bedside. I pray never to be witness to such grief. But I believe that, in the singing, in the lullabies, they remembered, if only for those moments, what it is to breathe in and be filled, to breathe out and be emptied, to be alive and whole.

Sleep, my child, and peace attend
thee
All through the night.
Guardian angels God will send
thee,
All through the night.
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,
Hill and dale in slumber sleeping,
I my loving vigil keeping,
All through the night.

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