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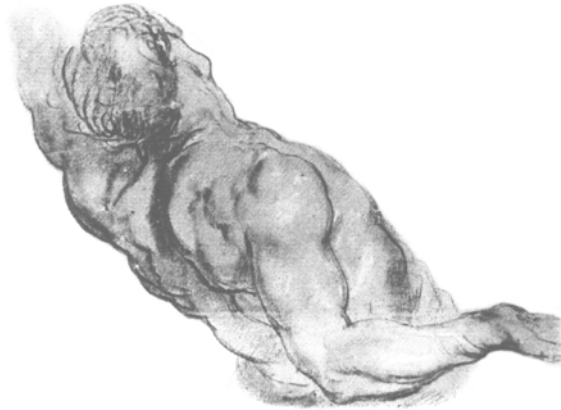


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USABP Mission Statement

The USABP believes that integration of the body and mind is essential to effective psychotherapy, and to that end, its mission is to develop and advance the art, science, and practice of body psychotherapy in a professional, ethical, and caring manner in order to promote the health and welfare of humanity. (revised October 1999)

Exploring Healing with the Experience of Breath: My Story

Margot S. Biestman

Abstract

The author explores how healing through breath is a dynamic process, a search for balance and flexibility. Through personal examples, she describes how pain from trauma can be transformed by breath into a life-giving force—toward healing. By shifting from thinking, to the physical sensation of our breath movement, we discover a vast intelligence within our body. Whereas trauma is experienced as broken connections, breath connects us on many different levels.

Keywords

Exploring healing with the experience of breath – Healing with breath – Middendorf

This story begins with a trauma. I fell, while trying to climb onto an upper berth of a train, while it was moving around a curve in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Being very agile at the age of 70, I grabbed onto the mattress above to hoist myself up. I later learned that it was the top mattress, which was loose. It had a slick under-surface, and I slid on it, 7 feet down to the floor of the train, landing on my coccyx. Like an airplane crash, the blow shot through my spine and compressed and fractured my thoracic vertebra, T-12, while on its way, delivering a severe sprain to my entire lumbar spine. *Excruciating pain, shocking!*

Traumas. We've all had them, in one way or another—whether by accident, war, even a perceived war with a parent, partner, friend. I'm interested in the choices I have in how I respond to any kind of trauma, which can become locked in my body. Within my physical body, I include my mind, psyche, and spirit. I do not experience them as separate.

I could choose to succumb to this traumatic circumstance, or become fortified from it. Though I wanted to be fortified, I must admit that part of me collapsed. My spine did not support me to stand or walk. My spirit felt broken. Part of me wanted to give up responsibility. I could not sense my Self. I can now, five months later, more fully understand my ambivalence about living and dying at the time of trauma.

Trauma is broken connections.¹

I began to ask anew, “When I am in so much pain, conflict, disorganization, how do I enter the world of my body to explore its intelligence, its wisdom? How do I tolerate so much unknown, when I’m scared, separated from my Self?” I tried to cling to what I knew already—familiar ways and patterns of being in the world. I needed a bridge to move from the familiar, to the unknown. Breath was my bridge that could link me between unconscious and conscious, known and unknown.

Quite early on, after my initial shock, I made a critical decision to shift from my thoughts and fears to simply sense my physical body and the natural movement of my breath under my hands, which I’d placed on the center of my torso. I recognize breath as the essence of life, so I brought full presence to its movement, and did nothing more than to sense and allow my breath to guide me, one breath cycle after another. Each cycle was different from the one preceding it—something new each time. I allowed breath movement to fluctuate from moment to moment, as it responds to whatever happens in my life. I could eventually sense my own breath rhythm develop. This led me to begin to trust that my breath that comes and goes on its own without disturbance or control, would support all the healing forces within. I knew my body held the trauma and it was through my body that I could heal. The key was within the God given gift of breath I received when I was born.

I sensed at a basic sensory level, that my innate resources would empower me to continue to grow, heal, and evolve, to become as fully human as possible. Somewhere, deep down within my core self—my

essential being—wanted to be Self-responsible—and live my life.

“We are living, breathing, pulsing, self-regulating, intelligent organisms, not merely complex chemistry sets. There is an innate resiliency of the human organism when it is supported and guided.” (Peter Levine)ⁱⁱ

I knew I could reach out to others I trusted immediately. It is through my physical sensation of body with breath moving through it that connects me to my soul and spirit, to my partners, and to the world beyond. My mind follows, but does not lead—that is, when I choose to be “breath aware”.

I’ve had a history of serious back pain, and had explored a variety of approaches toward healing before finding *The Experience of Breath*—a work developed by Professor Ilse Middendorf of Berlin, Germany over the past 65 years. I had taken workshops for several years before entering an intensive 3 and a half-year training program in this work with Juerg Roffler, Director of the U.S. Middendorf Breath Institute.ⁱⁱⁱ After setting up my practice for a few years and continuing as a post-graduate student in trainings, I became a member of the teaching and training staff. I had learned something about the nature of healing, but I was now being asked to learn so much more than I ever dreamed.

Perhaps my fall was no accident. It was a time to heal more deeply, from prior shocks to my system. I am, after all, not my story. I am my essence, when I am moved by the breath that moves me. It called me to listen to it, to follow it.

But I didn’t always do what my breath was asking for. When I didn’t listen or follow it, I found the way rocky, stormy sometimes. Trying to avoid or get rid of the pain only seemed to increase it. It wasn’t easy when pain and conflict were difficult to bear. There were times when it was easy to give my Self up. Fear and various ego states would take over.^{iv} Sometimes I could sense breath movement but “I” did not participate in the process. This collapse of Self, combined with my back injury, showed in my posture, and I became discouraged. I learned that even when—and especially when—my pain or conflict was especially challenging, I must be aware enough to not let the act of giving my Self up sneak up on me. Or if it does, then I must grab my Self back and tone myself up by taking the palms of my hands to physically tap the parts of my body that I can reach. This action helps me to sense my physical body and to become alive again with sensation, which stimulates me and my breath.

Often I wanted the process of healing to happen faster than was possible. In acknowledging this, I discovered that I could not move my structure or have it be moved ahead of my breath by anyone. Though wanting to heal fast is understandable as part of my human nature, it actually slowed my healing. When “I” returned to sensing the movement of breath, I sensed myself as whole, and accepted all of my humanness.

At one point, I explored meditating with breath for five minutes and then allowed myself to be moved by my breath into my daily life. I discovered that I needed to be alone and more with myself than out in the world with others, until my “doing” and “being” came more into balance. I realized I had a choice. Too much “doing” brought me to a point of collapse. “To be or not to be?” took on new meaning for me. The question became embodied. Basically my decision boiled down to really living my life or partially dying in it.

Healing took more *time* and *patience* than I had allowed. Yet patience, when I came to it, gave me the experience of not being discouraged. The rocky places did serve a purpose—to give me more humility and compassion for myself and others.

Along the way, I discovered more about what healing is for me. It’s about allowing and accepting what is, as it is—not knowing what will happen next. It’s about participating, being in the process of experiencing the movement of breath and its effect, rather than observing or imagining it, without expectations or pre-conceptions.^v It is about courage to go deeper to an even greater unknown—and sensing that is the place to be for healing and growth to take place. Breath is what leads me to the next step, which comes from recognizing and experiencing that breath actually moves me. The next step, however small, leads to the next and the next, until more substance of being is created.^{vi} If my breath is in its natural state I cannot push myself nor be pushed to do something. When I recognize something that is a truth for me and I understand it somatically, then I can heal. I become self-responsible.

Healing is the process of making sound or whole—restoring to integrity—an original or pure

state of being. It means to come into a balanced, flexible state between mind, spirit, and matter.^{vii viii}

I have had talented and wonderful accompaniment along my path from teachers, colleagues, students, friends, and family. “Humans support and empower each other in the process of transforming trauma”^{ix} to a life giving force. I sense this when I do not project onto others that they should “fix” me or feel sorry for me, and when colleagues, family members, and friends connect with me authentically, while maintaining a sense of their own Self as separate—not merging with me, not projecting nor transferring their experiences onto me.

For a long time I thought healing was to be pain-free—a view based on what I had interpreted from a Western medical model of illness—treating symptoms to alleviate pain.^x Although it is true that when my pain diminishes, I enjoy ease and a sense of well-being, but the absence of pain does not necessarily mean healing. Focusing or shining a light, on pain or conflict does not help me to heal. I have not imagined, nor used visualizations, though these are pleasant to think about and relaxing for a while, but for me, they engage more with my mind than my whole body.

The process of working with my breath helps to integrate my pain within the whole of me—so that I am not my pain. My pain is not my identity.^{xi} Pain is actually the result of postponing a decision for my Self to live my life.^{xii} Breath transforms the experience of pain into healing so that I am able to live my life.

I choose the path of breath, and follow it most of the time.^{xiii} It is simple and profound. I can experience its movement, and I can give over to its intelligence in knowing what my body needs. For example, if I feel anxious, I also sense that my diaphragm is tight, so if I allow myself to connect with my natural breath on its own, I can experience the rhythmic movement of my diaphragm and how it changes from moment to moment. Immediately, upon receiving my inhalation, I become aware of breath movement downwards. Simultaneously, I sense how my diaphragm—which is shaped like a half dome arching into the cavity of my chest—actually flattens, as it contracts down on my organs. Concurrently, my breath movement offers space within my chest and I sense ribs widening, shoulder blades opening like wings. My experience of breath movement illuminates my anatomy. On the transition to exhalation, I experience an opportunity for transformation, and on exhalation itself. I sense breath movement taking direction, making connections, and a flow develops, as the movement rises up along my spine, includes all my back and sides, and begins to spread out onto the horizon. I have a sense of breath clearing through me. Each exhale, each breath cycle shows me something different. While my exhale forms, my diaphragm moves back up, to its domed position, where it began, and my ribs and shoulders settle. I wait here, in the center of my torso, receiving the silence in the breath cycle, until the impulse for the next inhalation begins. My breath moves me in a way that I can sense an inner massage to my organs, my spine. I feel my tonus developing in just a few breath cycles. My anxiety has disappeared or become integrated within the whole of me, my posture is more flexible and upright, my stomach does not feel pinched, and I have an immediate sense of balance and well-being. At this point, if I go into my mind at all, I trust that this simple act of allowing my breath to be as it is—with my presence and sensation of breath moving my diaphragm—supports the healing of my entire being, including blood circulation, oxygen/carbon dioxide levels, lymph, immune, central nervous, and endocrine systems, joints, bones, etc.

Our culture has taught me about the connection between my mind and its intelligence, however, this is not enough for me. I come to understand that the connection between my breath and my body holds a far greater intelligence. Breath reflects every move in my life.

Having wondered for some time why my physical body is so slow to make changes, I come to realize that although our culture has provided ways to learn *about*, or *observe* my body through my mind or through sports or dance, it has not taught how I can *be in* my body—how I can live my life in it. Now I learn that with breath as my teacher, I can participate in experiencing my physical body and its matter, along with the non-physical aspects (psyche, soul, spirit, emotions, thoughts). It is through sensing my physical body with breath that I arrive to greet my soul and spirit. Emotions do not overwhelm me, as they find their home in my body. My thoughts are part of the whole, rather than rule my being. My world opens up to a vast body of knowledge that appears to have no end.

Healing is a constant search for balance. I experience healing as a dynamic process that continues—growing and evolving. I'm not sure that the process ever ends. Layers in my body, mind, and spirit are intricately linked together, each affecting the other.^{xiv} In healthy, balanced states, my physical body is in equilibrium with my emotional, mental and spiritual components. All aspects of my humanness are brought into connection when considering any of my parts.^{xv}

Different layers within myself are intertwined, woven together. Breath movement is the mediator, the integrating force. The depth to which breath can penetrate to unconscious states of being and bring them into consciousness depends on how willing I am to surrender to this powerful force, within my Self. I sense that I am never finished. Perhaps death is the ultimate healing.^{xvi} If so, then living means to me to connect with the Divine—through the breath that breathes me.^{xvii} Living life to the fullest is a preparation for another cycle—another unknown.

I was with my mother, sensing her last breath, when she died. Her life cycle had come to completion, just as the breath has a cycle of inhalation, exhalation, and silence before the next breath comes again on its own. The exhale dies within each cycle, into the silence. Each cycle is complete. Perhaps after death, there are more and more cycles in other forms. I still connect with my mother, on another plane—though we are in different worlds—and part of the whole, within the Divine, that holds us all.

Healing, for me, is connecting on many different levels.

Notes:

¹ Over the past 65 years Ilse Middendorf has developed a work called *The Experience of Breath*. She currently lives and works in Berlin, and maintains a full schedule—leading workshops and training practitioners throughout the world. In 1986, Advanced Seminars of Berkeley, California sponsored the introduction of Professor Middendorf's work to the United States with her close associate, Juerg Roffler.

² Peter Levine, Ph.D. writes that in trauma, connection is broken with the body/self, as well as with family, friends, community, nature and spirit. "Healing trauma is about restoring these connections." From "Nature's Lessons in Healing Trauma," Foundation for Human Enrichment, Lyons, CO ©2002 pg. 13.

³ Peter Levine, *ibid*, "Nature's Lessons", p. 3

⁴ Juerg Roffler became certified as a practitioner in the Berlin institute, and founded the first U.S. Middendorf Breath Institute in San Francisco, with a recent move to Berkeley, California.

⁵ Eckhart Tolle, writes, "To make the journey into the *Power of Now* we will need to leave our analytical mind and its false created self, the ego, behind," *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, New World Library, Novato, California, 1999, frontispiece. In *The Experience of Breath*, rather than leaving my mind and ego behind, I experience them within the whole of me, but they are no longer "take-over leaders." When I surrender to the movement of breath, and say, "Yes," to my higher Self, I connect with a Greater Power. As a result, I have a chance to live my life, to my own potential, and my mind and ego become servers of my Self.

⁶ Ilse Middendorf teaches that the discovery of the power of breath is through the *experience in the body*, not through feelings or mental observations, which place a veil on the actual sensing experience of breath with a person's full presence.

⁷ "If we are able to be fully present and take each step in the Now; if we are able to feel the reality of such things as the 'inner-body,' 'surrender,' . . . we will be opening ourselves to the transforming experience. . ." Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, *ibid*.

⁸ American Heritage Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin, 2000 and Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, Micra, Inc. 1996, 1998.

⁹ William Collinge, M.H.P. Ph.D. writes in *Mind/Body Medicine: The Dance of Soma and Psyche*, excerpted from The American Holistic Health Association's Complete Guide to Alternative Medicine, Warner Books, Inc., N.Y., "Breath. . . gives the body a greater supply of energy which it can use for healing. . . Since we take a thousand breaths every hour, each breath is an opportunity to contribute to a healing process."

¹⁰ Peter Levine, Ph.D. *ibid*, p.2

¹¹ Although some research has been done on the effect of Eastern forms of breath practices on oxygen consumption, heart rate, state of mind, etc., there has been very little research in Western medicine on the effect of Western breath practices in the human body. However, there are some studies in the West on breath in relationship to the human body, such as the Framingham study, (refer to the National Institute of Health Database), which "focused on the long-term predictive power of vital capacity and forced exhalation volume as the primary markers for life span. . . 29 years later the same conclusions. . . lung function may predict long life or early death." (Michael G. White, "Secrets of Optimal Breathing," manual, www.breathing.com/articles/clinical-studies.htm, 2001 pp. 1-3). These kinds of research studies remained primarily within

the model of treating illness, which has led to techniques in which patients were taught to direct or force the breath. “This can cause people to be trained to do forced inhalations that may actually be harmful in the long run.” (White, *ibid*, p. 6). Although some of the studies mentioned above, did focus on breath in the human body (rather than most studies which used primates and rats, whose breath is different from humans, none of them focused on the effect of the *movement of the natural breath in the body*.

In more recent years, W. Eberhard Mehling, MD studied Middendorf Breathwork and is currently engaged in a new research study, Proprioceptive Training with Breath Therapy for Back Pain, at The Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, University of California San Francisco (UCSF). Juerg Roffler

and I will participate with Faith Hornbacher and Gryta Coates, members of the Middendorf Institute training and teaching staff as breath practitioners

¹² Jon Kabat-Zin writes about pain and identity in his chapters, “Working with Physical Pain: Your Pain is Not You,” p. 283, and “Working with Emotional Pain: Your Suffering is Not You. . . But there is much you can do to heal it.” p. 300, in *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Delacorte Press, 1989.

¹³ Conversation with Juerg Roffler, April 2002.

¹⁴ Andrew Weil, MD says in “Breathing: The Master Key to Self-Healing,” audio cassettes, Sounds True, Inc., 1999, “If I had to limit my advice on healthier living to just one tip, it would be simply to learn how to breathe correctly.” Professor Middendorf does not speak of a “correct” way to breathe, but rather for us “to allow the breath to come and go on its own.”

¹⁵ “Breathwork is about reconnecting, embracing, and integrating all aspects of ourselves. . . Such a process. . . can be tremendously healing,” Andrew Weil, MD, *Spontaneous Healing: How To Discover and Enhance your Body’s Ability to Heal Itself*, Alfred Knopf, 1995.

¹⁶ Dennis Lewis writes in *The Tao of Natural Breathing: For Health, Well-Being and Inner Growth*, Mountain Wind Publishing, San Francisco, October, 1996, about discovering the transformative power of natural (whole body) breathing. He draws on his study in the work of Gurdjieff, Advaita Vedanta, Tao, as well as the more experiential Western methods, which includes his work with Ilse Middendorf.

¹⁷ Stephen Levine writes in *A Year To Live*, Random House, 1998, and Sounds True cassettes, April 1998, “Most of us go to extra lengths to ignore, laugh off, or deny the fact that we are going to die, but preparing for death is one of the most rational and rewarding acts of a lifetime. . . gives us an opportunity to enter a new and vibrant relationship with life.”

¹⁸ I sense, with *The Experience of Breath*, the moment when I connect with my natural breath and its rhythm, when I am guided by a greater power, I come to somatically understand some of what Jean Gebser (1905-1973) wrote how this is “the vital breath of reality . . . as actuality on all levels of experience - which is revealed in the gigantic movements of the universe as much as in the emotions of the human heart and the ecstasies of the spirit. It is revealed in the cosmic dance of heavenly bodies as well as in the dance of protons and electrons, in the ‘harmony of spheres’ as well as in the ‘inner sound’ of living things, in the breathing of our body as well as in the movements of our mind and the rhythm of our life.” From *The Ever Present Origin*, authorized translation by Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas, first published in German 1949-1953, later by Ohio University Press, Jan. 1985, reprint in paperback Feb. 1986. p. 4

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Biography

Margot Biestman is a certified practitioner of Middendorf Breathwork, *The Experience of Breath*, member of the teaching and training staff of the U.S. Middendorf Breath Institute, Berkeley, California, and founding member of The Breath Center of San Francisco, a non-profit organization for the advancement of Middendorf Breathwork. She also has a private practice in Sausalito and The Sea Ranch, California. She is an author and artist, and has had more than 35 years of experience in education with people from ages 3-93. Margot offers demonstrations, individual sessions, classes, retreats, and workshops in *The Experience of Breath*.

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How does material in this manuscript inform

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