

THE RIGHT TO BREATHE

Update to my March article on the Amazon, Covid-19, and the Symbolism of Breath

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It seems we can't escape the symbolism of breathing this year, as circumstances force us face to face with our collective shadow. It began with the burning of "the world's lungs," the Amazonian jungle, in August, 2019, and continued with the outbreak of Covid-19, a respiratory virus and possibly a human-altered pathogen escaped from a research lab. Ventilators and the fear of suffocation fueled our nightmares. Face masks, likely to be with us for a long time to come, now make it difficult to breathe even when we're healthy. It's been more than two months since the symbolism of the Amazon fire and Covid-19 struck me as defined by breath, and today the air reverberates with chants of "I can't breathe," echoing the last tragic words spoken by a dying George Floyd as he was murdered by police. His death would be devastating if it were the only case of an unarmed Black man or woman dying of brutal treatment at the hands of police. It is far worse because it is just the latest in a litany of excessive, aggressive attacks on citizens of color, reflecting the systemic racism of some police forces and of our society as a whole.

Floyd's death is not a new phenomenon but rather the latest chapter, not only in the relatively recent Black Lives Matter movement but in the long history of racism in our country. We have had an African-American President, and yet Black people continue to live in fear for their lives when they see a police car



on the highway or a policeman on their street. I just read an essay by a Black woman who wrote about going on a cross-country drive with her Black boyfriend to visit a potential graduate school in Texas. They were stopped by police *three times in one hour* and interrogated like criminals. Tragically, she pointed out that every African-American has not just one but many such stories to tell, whether their own or that of a loved one.

I am remembering a Black man I was close to many years ago sharing his pain and anger with me after a distressing experience of intimidation. Police stopped him for a minor jay-walking offense he barely knew he'd committed. There was no one on the road when he crossed against

the light, but police had seen him. They could have just given him a ticket. Instead, they told him he could pay the fine immediately or go to jail. They put him in their cruiser and gave him the choice of being driven to jail or to an ATM. Fortunately, he had the money to withdraw in order to pay the fine. Both of us knew that if it had happened to me, as a white woman, the situation would have played out differently. I haven't thought about that incident for a long time. Now, sadly, I have witnessed far worse time and time again on the evening news—Black people being shot, beaten, or choked regularly with little or no cause. Too many Americans are being suffocated by injustice.

Breath is sacred. Jews, Christians, and Muslims share the origin story that God created Adam's body from the soil of the earth and then breathed life into it with His own breath. Everyone has the right to breathe. We all breathe the same air—that's part of what has made Covid-19 so dangerous! Not long into quarantine, far too many ads began to proclaim in ponderous tones, "We're all in this together." It's become such a cliché slogan that I cringe now when I hear it. So I truly hesitate to point out the truth it conveys—we *are* all in this together, quite literally, breathing the same air. The flapping of a butterfly's wings is said to influence the formation of a storm thousands of miles away. My exhale becomes your inhale, and the molecules of air we breathe eventually make their way around the globe. There is only one air we all share.

In the face of suffering, there have been signs of hope. People sharing food, masks, disinfectant wipes. People donating money to help feed the hungry. People hanging hearts on doors and windows to symbolize gratitude and clapping from their front steps to show their appreciation of nurses and doctors. Now there are healthcare workers kneeling to show their respect for protestors. Some protestors have protected police from the anger of the mob at times, and some police, touchingly, go down on one knee before the crowds to demonstrate their solidarity with those fighting for justice.

The symbolism of the half-kneel evokes many associations. In 2016, it came to the nation's attention when NFL player Colin Kaepernick went down on one knee as a form of protest while others stood as the National Anthem played at the start of each football game. We have so many customs that arouse strong emotion even when we have little or no idea why we follow them. We stand and salute the American flag with a hand over our hearts when we hear the National Anthem or recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I was indoctrinated into that habit in grade school. Standing is a sign of respect. My parents drilled into my sisters and me the requirement of good manners to stand when greeting an elder or respected person. They would bring their friends into the family den to say hello to us kids, and they expected us to stand and shake hands. I remember having dinner out with my father in the latter years of his life, just the two of us, and having to jump up with him time and time again as one of his many friends stopped by our table to say hello. But it goes beyond good manners. I've been thinking about how we behave with kings and queens, or the things we respect in place of kings and queens in America.

The first time I heard Handel’s “Messiah” performed live, the audience unexpectedly rose to its feet during the famous, glorious “Hallelujah Chorus.” Not wanting to be left out, I stood too, even though I had no idea why. Maybe it was the sheer majesty of the music that brought the audience to its feet, I thought. It certainly affected me deeply, and the “Messiah” as a whole remains one of my favorite pieces of music. Afterward my companion explained that the custom began during Handel’s time when King George attended a performance in London. For some reason, the King stood during the Chorus, and protocol dictated that the entire audience stand with him. That was a few hundred years ago, yet the behavior persists. We stand when a king or queen stands, we stand for the “Hallelujah Chorus,” we stand for the flag or the anthem or our parents’ friends, we stand to show respect and attention. But we also kneel. We stand *with*, but we kneel *before* the King or Queen.

Kneeling harkens back to the time of knights. We imagine a knight going down on one knee before his King or Queen. Is this why men so often take a knee when they propose to the woman they hope will be their future queen? Now when I see photos of Colin Kaepernick or other football players on one knee while others stand for the National Anthem, protesting that the America of Black Americans is not the same as that of white Americans, this is what I think of: knights showing their profound respect, not for a flag or an anthem or a country but for a higher ideal of justice and equality than has yet been manifested. Significantly, when Kaepernick first wanted to protest, he sat on the bench during the anthem. Another NFL player and former Army Green Beret, Nate Boyer, felt that behavior signaled not protest but disrespect and wrote an open letter to Kaepernick, who then asked for Boyer’s advice. Boyer suggested that it would be more respectful to kneel. Kaepernick agreed, and the iconic gesture that has become symbolic of a movement was born.

That inspired gesture carries a powerful message besides one of protest. As people kneel today before protestors, whether it is healthcare workers respecting those who seek justice or individual police displaying their compassion and commitment to serve and protect *all* people, I see them saying, “I recognize what is regal in you; I bow before the divine in you.” They are kneeling before our shared humanity, and that gives me hope. As long as we are still breathing, there is reason to hope, and reason to give thanks. Hope that together we can create a better, kinder, more just world. Thanks that we are still breathing together to keep fighting the good fight.

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