

Breathing in the Time of Covid-19 by Tonya Stoddard, LCSW

When I first heard the term “social distancing” I thought it was a joke. I was getting ready to take my 11-year-old son, a ballet dancer, to his very first “real” ballet in the city. Though our seats would be jammed together in a very small space with little ventilation, our excitement was mounting by the minute. Then I received the email.

The city was shutting down all group activities and was now doing “social distancing”.

“How does one social distance?”, I laughed with my friends. Isn't that an oxymoron?

People need to be together to be social, and apart to be distant. As a psychotherapist, and a citizen suspicious of social control by the government, I was distraught to learn of the quite serious nature of this new politically correct term “social distancing”.

For years I have been watching the very steady rise in the number of human beings, ranging in age from 4 years old to well into the eleventh septennial, experiencing debilitating anxiety, come through my door. I've met with anxious parents worried about their child's unsavory behavior because they can't “be good” in school, adolescents worried about being judged about any and every conceivable difference they might exhibit or what they are “supposed to be when they grow up”, young adults worried about their inability to find a job or a relationship that doesn't feel abusive or one with meaning, and older adults worried about how terrible they've been as a parent, partner or just a plain failure as a human being.

This distress is reflected in the unprecedented number of websites, books, podcasts, TED talks, webinars, seminars, blogs, Facebook groups, gurus, channelers, hugging healers, and yes, therapists, that are available to fix your “wrong self”. This list of helpers is by no means exhaustive. The different forms of body healers (allopathic, naturopathic, Chinese medicine, integrative, functional, chiropractic, somatic, eastern, western, and, yes, anthroposophic, etc.) available to help with any type of ailment is so overwhelming that it's almost disorienting to understand any professional orientation at all. It's become an art for the healing professional to identify their orientation accurately.

And yet, underlying all of these acrobatics in figuring out who is the best health professional one should see, there is really only one factor that seems to consistently effect change. Only one: the patient/provider relationship. In fact, it is well known that any healthy relationship has healing properties, which is probably why we are oriented from the moment of consciousness to try to develop relationships with the humans that surround us. As we grow, we work to surround ourselves with friends, lovers, families, etc. We all know that isolation leads to sadness, depression and sometimes even paranoia.

So when the mandate to “social distance” came about, it was surprising to see how quickly we all ran away from each other. We began eyeing each other as potential carriers of disease and death. We became suspicious of each other and accused each other of trying to kill others if they didn't wear a mask. Massive online shaming on each side of the mask debate virtually socially distanced us as effectively as we have physically distanced ourselves.

And then the United States exploded in a combustive state of rage when George Floyd (and many others before and after!!) was brutally murdered while gasping the words, “I can’t breathe”. I c a n ‘ t b r e a t h e.

The protests and riots filled the United States’ lungs with all the emotional pain and suffering and anxiety and trauma of hundreds of years and screamed out loud. We breathed out into the nation, the world, the cosmos, the air of courage, of change, of love and shouted, “Stop!!”

How did people manage this? Through social distancing? No! People joined each other collectively, communally, coming together in the streets, in the community and virtually. People gathered together with or without masks, but always in groups with other human beings. Coming together to find solace for their pain, and anguish and action to change it.

Yes there is a virus and we need to care for ourselves and those around us in private spaces and public ones, but when have we gone too far? There is a social isolation pandemic in our midst that is threatening our children and adults alike. Unprecedented fear and anxiety pervade our culture as people lose their jobs, access to healthcare becomes difficult or impossible, schools remain closed and people who do contract the virus are often quarantined even from loved ones. What kind of a virus attacks us internally, but destroys our external social fabric? One that is everything to do with the lung.

Our organs are the workshop of the cosmic forces working within us, the life sustaining forces of our inner world. The lungs are a bridge between our inner and outer world. In every moment we breathe the external environment into our internal being. It is the only organ in which the outer world enters directly and unchanged into the inside of our insides. Our lungs, our breathing is how our physical body expresses its livingness. It’s how our brain can function, and it rhythmically works with our heartbeat; we can reduce stress and fear through willfully using our lungs to breathe mindfully, meditatively. One can arguably live without brain function. This is not true of our lungs. When we are no longer breathing, we are no longer living.

We are now experiencing a worldwide lack of breathing. Our lungs filling with fear of the “other”. A suggestion, or rather an implication, that your air is a threat to me, and we must hold our breath, our experience of the outer living world, deep inside until the threat has passed. We must suffocate ourselves in the name of staying healthy.

I often wonder about the meaning of this restricted breathing that humanity is experiencing through either contracting the virus, wearing masks, or quarantine. There is something profoundly unnerving in the gesture of suffocation in relation to the development of humanity. As if we are purposely or willfully preventing our inner and outer world to enliven each other. Without the cosmic forces, our lungs harden and we gasp for air. Without the human forces, our lungs become inflamed and fill with fluid. We need each other to breathe, to allow our inner selves to be seen by each other, to allow the other to enter into our inner being and to keep the streaming between our physical selves and our cosmic selves.

The images of George Floyd's final moments continue to live within me and remind me that I love human beings, that I don't want to suffocate and I don't want you to suffocate. I want to fill my lungs with you and you with me.

Let us collectively find ways to eradicate our judgements of each other and our personal choices, design and implement systems that facilitate healing for all without barriers, and find ways to safely meet with one another regularly so that no one feels alone. Let us remember how our first breath in this earthly world was filled not only with air, but with warmth and wonder for this great journey we have chosen and our fellow human beings who are on this same pilgrimage.

Let us breathe deeply.