



March 2019 Monthly Theme

SPIRIT

the practice of breathing

The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: wbuuc.org/themes or sign up for a circle at wbuuc.org/classes.

QUESTIONS

Do you think that spirit and soul are the same thing? Do you think that the spirit/soul survives after death?

Sometimes there is a long final breath at the end of life; some people believe this is when the spirit leaves the body. What do you think?

How do you react when your frustration, confusion, or anger shortens your breathing? How do you remember to breathe?

What benefit for our spirit is there in paying attention to our breath, a thing we do involuntarily anyway?

How often do you pause in your day, calm your breathing, and give your spirit a rest?

QUOTATIONS

Every breath offers a new possibility to be aware of Spirit.
—Kabir Helminski, Turkish Sufi poet, author, spiritual educator

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.
—Arundhati Roy

When the time comes, I will know that death is a homecoming, not a wrench that leaves a bruise on my spirit. Death is not the shadow but the light beyond the shadow. My spirit will return to its resting place in a long, slow glide toward peace.
—Meditation from Orkney, Scotland

I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are of one religion, and it is the spirit. —Khalil Gibran

Breathing in, I calm body and mind. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment I know this is the only moment. —Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*

the Lord God formed the Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the Adam became a living being. —Genesis 2:7

POETRY

Keep Breathing

The storm is coming but I don't mind
People are dying, I close my blinds
All that I know is I'm breathing now
I want to change the world—instead I sleep
I want to believe in more than you and me
But all that I know is I'm breathing
Now I, Now, Now...
All that I know is I'm breathing
All I can do is keep breathing
All we can do is keep breathing
All we can do is keep breathing
Now.

—Ingrid Michelson

The Span of A Life Retold By Sarah Conover in *Kindess: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom*

The Buddha once asked a student, "How long is a human life?" The student replied, "It is so brief it seems but a day long." He then asked another the same question, "What is the true length of a person's life?" She answered thoughtfully, "It is the time taken to eat a single meal." And so the Buddha asked a third student, "How long is life?" The time in a single breath," was the student's reply. "Exactly so." said the Buddha, "You understand."



Imperfection

Imperfection is the place where the spirit enters, the small hole in your shirt, the loosening threads of carpet, the ache in your soul for forgiveness. Where the camel waits, where the eye strays, where the hand reaches up, empty of all but breath, is the place where the soul begins, its gravity mightier than we may ever know. There, where the rug unravels like a rope of time, where pockets bleed their secrets between the seams. In a widow's eyes words appear lit up like stars in a deep sky: If God is all we believe, soul and sorrow and bliss, the soul is stone and lattice, ligature and air, and it lives in the body's secret lapses. How grateful then to know imperfection's door swinging open and closed, how good to be humbled. — Rachel Guido deVries

Hymn #1009 Meditation on Breathing Sarah Dan Jones

"When I breathe in, I breathe in peace
When I breathe out, I breathe out love."

READINGS & EXCERPTS

Learning How to Breathe Again by Omid Safi: <https://onbeing.org/blog/learning-how-to-breathe-again/>

I think I have forgotten how to breathe. Or, at least, I have forgotten how to breathe properly. Perhaps it is a sign of how out of sync our lives are that so many of us have forgotten how to breathe. When I pay attention to my own breathing, I notice that my breaths are often shallow breaths. The breath goes down to my throat, or somewhere in my upper chest, and comes out quickly, immediately followed by another breath.

It is not that I am short of breath. This is how I have learned to breathe now. It is as if a constant stress and pressure is with me, perhaps the curse of what, some time ago, I called the “disease of being busy.”

We have to learn to breathe again.

I am occasionally reminded of a beautiful line in the Bible, the Gospel according to St. Luke, 11:1, where Jesus prays to God, asking to be taught how to pray. Jesus asks not what to pray for; he does not pray for this or that. He asks how to pray.

I think we need similar instruction about breathing.

Dear God: teach us how to breathe.

Teach us how to breathe
beautifully.

Teach us how to breathe
truly.

Teach us how to breathe
deeply.

Teach us how to breathe
in spirit.

Teach us to take in a breath
that is connected to a healing spirit.

Oh, Lord, teach us how to breathe again. Teach us how to breathe well.

The Spirit in Hebrew Teachings

The Ruach or Kabbalah posits that the human soul has three elements, the nefesh, ru'ach, and neshamah. The nefesh is found in all humans, and enters the physical body at birth. It is the source of one's physical and psychological nature. The next two parts of the soul are not implanted at birth, but can be developed over time; their development depends on the actions and beliefs of the individual. They are said to only fully exist in people awakened spiritually. A common way of explaining the three parts of the soul is as follows:

- Nefesh (נפש): the lower part, or “animal part”, of the soul. It is linked to instincts and bodily cravings. This part of the soul is provided at birth.
- Ruach (רוח): the middle soul, the “spirit” It contains the moral virtues and the ability to distinguish between good and evil.
- Neshamah (נשמה): the higher soul, or “super-soul” This separates man from all other life-forms. It is related to the intellect and allows man to enjoy and benefit from the afterlife. It allows one to have some awareness of the existence and presence of God.

MUSIC

Spiritus - Latin for Breathing (A Gregorian Chant)
Veni Creator Spiritus, Come, O Creator Spirit, come,
mentes tuorum visita, and make within our heart thy home;
imple superna gratia, to us thy grace celestial give,
quae tu creasti, pectora. who of thy breathing move and live.

Hymn #8, Mother Spirit, Father Spirit (words & music: Norbert F Capek)

Norbert Fabian Capek (June 3, 1870-October 12, 1942), a Czechoslovak minister of extraordinary ability, after spending a few years in the United States, returned in 1921 to his native country to found and build in Prague what soon became the largest Unitarian church in the world as well as a vigorous new Unitarian movement across the land. His tragic death, in a Nazi prison camp, was a terrible loss for his church and his country.

Mother Spirit, father spirit, where are you?
In the sky song, in the forest, sounds your cry.
What to give you, what to call you, what am I?

Many drops are in the ocean, deep and wide.
Sunlight bounces off the ripples to the sky.
What to give you, what to call you, who am I?

I am empty, time flies from me, what is time?
Dreams eternal, fears infernal haunt my heart.
What to give you, what to call you, O, My God?

Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, take our hearts.
Take our breath and let our voices sing our parts.
Take our hands and let us work to shape our art.



OTHER RESOURCES

Meditation

Spend a few minutes in your chosen practice, paying attention to how you are breathing. Then call to mind a time when a mistake in your life ended up with rich learning and growth. Hold this memory as you work through your favorite practices, readings, or reflections.

The Association of the Embodied Soul with Breath, The Seven Gates of Soul, Joe Landwehr

Curriculum: Spirit in Practice: An Adult Program for Developing a Regular Practice of the Spirit by The Rev Erik Walker Wikstrom

Resources for children and families:

- *Mindful Kids: 50 Mindfulness Activities for Kindness, Focus and Calm*
- *Just Breathe: Meditation, Mindfulness, Movement, and More* By Mallika Chopra