

Can We Breathe?

Exploring a Pedagogy of Breath for Theological Education

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It was the fifth week of the fall semester, and I was teaching my Womanist/Feminist Spirituality and Worship course. A student walked into our Wednesday afternoon class a few minutes early, plopped down into her chair, and let out a deep sigh – “Hhhaaa!” She then said, “Now I can feel human” to the classmate seated beside her. This stopped me! And for the next ten minutes before class began, I listened to the conversations in the room hoping to glean a bit more information on this student’s experience. While she did not provide much more for me after that initial declaration, I sat with the occurrence for many weeks following; it was less the statement of “being human” that arrested my attention, and more the act of the sigh – her deep release of breath – that captured my thoughts. This was the viscerally embodied expression of how she felt in that moment – like she had finally reached a place to breathe and be. Had she been holding her breath in other classes (literally and metaphorically)? Had she been pieces of herself in other spaces of learning, and now met a place to re-member her very being in the process of learning?

During the remainder of the semester I paid attention to the experiences of the students in a different way. I watched as their bodies and their minds engaged the course material. I asked pointed questions about how they felt when they read something that was jarring or new as it related to liturgy and sacred ritual. I took time to slow down and revisit spaces of tension with the students more carefully, with attention to embodied reactions. This was the start of a journey to imagine a different way and pace of teaching, particularly when teaching a worship course that engages content that is close to the heart and very personal for students to approach with a deepened level of openness. More questions arose. What is happening in classrooms that makes students feel less than human? What is the aim of theological education if students struggle to be their full selves in the classrooms? Exactly what was different in my class (and classes like it) that allowed the student to exhale? This was the core of what needed to be explored.



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Since that late fall afternoon class, I have been on a journey of imagining a learning environment that is breath, and that allows room for breathing to happen. This goes slightly beyond the practice of intentional breathing, although that does happen often as a means for centering and connecting with the self in the learning process. However, my focus has been on how to shape the learning experience in a rhythm of breath. How can I imagine a rhythm of breath in my teaching? What is the impact on the community and the academic exercise when you move through a breath-shaped course? How do we let this experience of learning breathe? These were the questions that rested at the heart of my intentions as I started to reimagine this Womanist/ Feminist Worship and Spirituality course more intentionally as a humanizing engagement of learning.

In my search for answers I went on a yearlong journey with a breath coach (who happened to also have theological education experience) to learn more about the practice and the theory behind the practice. We engaged in monthly two-hour-long breathwork sessions, practicing a circular breath pattern and discussing the meaning behind the method and theory of breathwork. I sat with literature on breath, breathwork, and principles of breathing and pedagogy in music studies. I reflected critically on my experiences as a classically trained dancer and the role of breath and breathing in dance practice and performance. I emerged from this year of experimentation and investigation with insight that reshaped my rhythm of teaching – from course design to implementation – having rediscovered my own connection to breath in new and interesting ways. As we journey through my reflection on breath and learning, we will breathe together to allow us a moment to sit with what we have read, to allow thoughts and feelings to settle before we move forward, and to experiment with a new pace in information exchange. To begin, let us pause and center ourselves...

*and I invite you take a deep breath in...
and exhale.*

THE PROCESS OF BREATHING: DEVELOPING A RHYTHM OF BREATH IN TEACHING

Why breath?

As I launched into this exploration of breath, I realized that my interest in it stemmed from the fact that some of the most formative parts of my life and how I know myself are centered around breath – dance and giving birth. I am a classically trained ballet and modern dancer, and my dance training is grounded in an understanding of how to use breath to sustain activity. However, I only applied this knowledge in the action of dance or exercising; I cannot say it was an active thought in my everyday life. In fact, in this context, I had a more utilitarian relationship with my breath, using it to get me through a performance or to the end of a workout.

While the connections between breath and dance were about use and function, I became more closely aware of my breath when I practiced prenatal yoga. During this season of my life, not only was my body going through physical change, but my identity was changing as well – I was becoming a mom. The lessons on breathing provided in these particular classes were shaped to be much more somatic, and taught me how to use breath not only to aid in the birthing process (the utilitarian function), but also how to use breath to connect with myself and the child growing inside of me. This concept and practice deepened my curiosity about the power of the intentional awareness of our breath. This is where my interest to learn more about breath was formed, and where I developed a new relationship with breathing.

In thinking about breath, it is interesting to recognize how much we don't think about it. Our relationship with our breath is often unconscious and underappreciated, despite it being the most fundamental aspect of our existence. Breathing is an automatic process that sustains life, yet many of us only engage in shallow, surface-level breathing, especially during stress or when we are preoccupied. This shallow breathing limits the oxygen that reaches our cells and affects our overall vitality, leading to

increased tension, reduced energy, and even compromised mental clarity. By not fully engaging our breath – by not breathing deeply and fully into our lungs – we miss out on the profound benefits of this simple act. Deep, mindful breathing can help us connect more deeply with our bodies, calm our nervous systems, and enhance our well-being. In essence, reclaiming control and intention in our breathing allows us to harness its full potential, turning it into a powerful tool for physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

If there is this much power in the actual practice of breath for our physical bodies, I wondered how the idea of breath, a theoretical and pedagogical approach to breath, might enliven and empower my work in the classroom. You see, the student’s deep breath that day was a different kind of breathing. It was a connectional breath; one that connected her to herself in a meaningful way. She used her breath in the most intentional way to proclaim and even reclaim her humanity. This made me wonder how we can teach theological

education in a way that connects us to ourselves and to one another during the learning process. After all, my own spirituality of teaching is centered on values of wholeness that seek to integrate mind, body, and spirit in the learning process. So this student’s breath and the connection to her humanity was intriguing and inspired me to investigate my relationship with my own breath and the way I was approaching the class, for the remainder of the semester.



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Breath lessons

In my yearlong work with the breath coach there were several lessons that informed my pedagogical shifts. The science behind breathwork, which is rooted in its effects on the autonomic nervous system, brain function, and overall physiological health, became a conversation partner for my process. Breathwork, especially practices like diaphragmatic breathing, slow breathing, and rhythmic breathing, had direct influence on my body’s rest and digestive functions, and guided me to practices used to lower my heart rate and promote relaxation and emotional regulation. Through the work, I became more acutely aware of the interconnection of breath and the nervous system and its relation to better emotional resilience, improved stress response, and overall well-being. I even found that deep, controlled breathing helped improve my focus, which aligned with scientific research showing that deep breathing can enhance cognitive performance.

All of this was happening during the COVID-19 global pandemic. While I was focusing on breath, I was surrounded by the reality that breathing in public could literally end someone’s life, could at the very least infect you with a virus so detrimental that you’d be isolated for weeks and possibly suffer long-term health consequences. This stark contrast between the healing potential of breathwork and the deadly implications of a virus that attacks the respiratory system profoundly shaped my understanding of breath as both fragile and sacred. The pandemic heightened the urgency of mindfulness in teaching and learning, as anxiety and isolation grew widespread. Breathwork, in this context, became not only a tool for personal well-being but also a collective pedagogical framework that could help students navigate uncertainty, fear, and the emotional toll of global crisis. It underscored the interconnectedness of our physical and spiritual health, reminding us that breath – something as simple and fundamental as breathing – could be a powerful anchor in a world turned upside down. This duality, where breath is both a symbol of life and a vector of danger, deepened my commitment to integrating a rhythm of breath and actual

breath practices into the classroom, offering a space for healing, reflection, and resilience in the learning journey.

The process and the practice of my journey in this work was filled with the rich potential of breath as a pedagogical framework. As I delved deeper into the significance of breath, I realized that just as breathing has its own rhythm and flow, so too does effective



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teaching. Breathwork grounded me in ways that reminded me that teaching is not just about delivering content but about facilitating a dynamic, living process. Teaching invites flexibility – much like breath – which adapts moment by moment to the body's needs; this approach to teaching also requires the ability to adapt to the rhythms of the classroom and the unique energies and needs of the students. This fosters a space where both facilitator and learner can “teach in the spirit,” moving intuitively with the flow of the learning process. It emphasizes the importance of being attuned

to the present moment, allowing for adjustments and openness, much like a deep, mindful breath. In this way, the rhythm of breath can guide not just what we teach, but how we engage, offering a grounded yet flexible foundation that is responsive and alive.

Breathwork also taught me the value of using breath as a point of transition. My breath coach and I spent a lot of time exploring how breath can help facilitate creativity, clarity, and inspiration at pivotal transitions points in one's life. Applying this concept to teaching allowed for a more intentional use of breath as points of transition throughout the course, offering natural pauses that created space for reflection and emotional processing. By integrating breath into the flow of teaching, I was able to consciously use moments of breathing to signal the end of one topic and the beginning of another, encouraging students to pause, gather their thoughts, and center themselves before moving forward. Incorporating dedicated “breath weeks” – which are not a week off from class but rather class sessions shaped in a very slow and reflective rhythm – at significant points in the course further enriched this practice, giving students a structured opportunity to step back, reflect on the material covered, and process their own emotional and intellectual responses. This practice has become particularly valuable when addressing highly sensitive or emotionally charged topics in the classroom, where students may need time to digest difficult content. It has also become a welcomed rhythm for students who are burning out earlier and faster in the semester than I have ever seen before. A breath week not only allows for deeper contemplation but also cultivates a sense of care, giving students permission to take a breath – both literally and figuratively – before re-engaging with the complexities of new content. It provides an opportunity to ask questions in community, and to work through theological histories that come into conversation with new concepts and ideas. This reflective rhythm enhances students' capacity to engage meaningfully with the material while maintaining emotional well-being.

Another impactful discovery in this process was the use of breath

as a liberating practice. While a more implicit, or personally experiential lesson, this idea of breath as liberation took on a profound meaning in the context of systemic oppression and violence against Black bodies in America. As a Black woman, the haunting cry of Eric Garner – “I can’t breathe” – resonates deeply and is embedded in my subconscious, so naturally when I started to really explore breath and breathing, I couldn’t help but carry Garner’s cry with me in the process, reflecting the literal and metaphorical suffocation of Black lives in a country shaped by racial injustice. Breath, something so essential yet so often denied to marginalized communities, became a lens through which I viewed the classroom. The act of teaching in the rhythm of breath, then, becomes subversive – an act of resistance against the forces that seek to silence and oppress. For me, it affirms the right to breathe, to be present, to exist fully, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds whose voices and lives are often stifled.

Breath also connects to broader environmental realities that further complicate this conversation. During this process I read headlines about wildfires, pollution, and COVID-19 (as expressed earlier), all of which threaten our ability to breathe freely. The air we depend on is becoming increasingly toxic, yet in the classroom, we speak of breath as a tool for healing and learning. This contradiction brings the intentional act of breathing as a liberating practice to the forefront for those whose breath is constrained, figuratively and literally. By incorporating breath into pedagogy, we not only acknowledge the deep systemic inequalities tied to air and life itself but also offer students a practice that restores autonomy and presence. Teaching through breath challenges us to reclaim the sacredness of breath in the midst of oppression and environmental crises, reminding students that the simple act of breathing can be an act of resistance, resilience, and liberation.

I have shared a lot from my breath lessons; this is a good point to pause as we transition. I invite you to take a moment, maybe even put this article down for a few minutes and sit with what has

resonated with you thus far. What questions do you have? As you take this brief time to reflect, I invite you take a deep breath in... and *exhale*.



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THE POWER OF BREATH: A CLASSROOM ECOLOGY

*Breathe out everything you have...
so the next breath is the biggest you’ve taken in a while.*

At the start of each class students lead a centering moment. During three years of teaching in the rhythm of breath, I have noticed these centering moments moving from reading scripture and prayer to more creative engagement with poetry, music, and breathing. Students have stepped out on a limb and invited their classmates into some of their most personal practices of meditation. At the

end of her assigned centering moment one student commented, “I was so nervous, because I don’t share this with anyone.” While the practice she used to open the class seemed to me to be a familiar practice of breath and centering around specific affirmations, for her it was a very vulnerable act – sharing her personal practice in public. Her confession was followed by immediate affirmation from her peers and specific insight on what was most meaningful to everyone. The classroom, in that moment, became a safe space for vulnerability that allowed this student to be her full self in her leadership and her learning.

Breath as a pedagogical framework creates a classroom ecology that invites all participants to bring their full selves into the experience, and this invitation is a fundamental force for fostering holistic learning environments. This ecology recognizes that breath is not merely a biological necessity but a symbol of life, presence, and spiritual vitality. This recognition honors the vital connection between breath and the learning process – in practice and in pedagogy – and fosters an environment where students can fully embody their humanity, both their physicality and their spirituality. This embodiment affirms the students’ wholeness, grounding them in the present and encouraging a sense of self-awareness. Integrating breathing exercises, pauses, and mindfulness practices into the classroom creates a space where students feel grounded and connected to themselves, which opens the door to deeper engagement with theological concepts. This allows all participants in the classroom to become attuned to their physical and emotional states, which establishes a basis for transparency and honest exchange. I found this most noticeable during weekly check-ins at the start of each class session; students became acutely aware of and honest about their personal well-being. They quickly grew comfortable asking questions of themselves and one another, admitting what they didn’t know, and resting in the experience of not having to have all the answers. They were given the opportunity to slow down, reflect, and engage with the class material on a deeper level that invited an awareness of the personal impact of the process. This created a shift from the fast-

paced, often stressful nature of traditional learning environments to one where students could process information in conversation with their inherited assumptions and experiences with clarity and calmness.

This enhanced self-awareness allows joy to enter the learning process. While the classroom experience often centers on heavy discussions around complex topics of faith and reimagining God through a new lens, integrating a process of mindfulness and a rhythm that brings us back to the core foundation of the class can introduce moments of joy and release. These moments remind students of the lightness that can coexist with rigorous learning, encouraging them to approach the content and coursework with a sense of balance. Joy, in this context, becomes an integral part of the classroom ecology, a practice that opens space for gratitude and wonder amidst academic challenges.

Moreover, a pedagogy of breath helps create spaces of vulnerability within the classroom. Including the act of intentional breathing at various points and introducing breath weeks during which students engage an intentional process of reflection on course material in a more contemplative rhythm requires them to slow down and become more attuned to their inner lives. When students breathe deeply and intentionally, they may find themselves more willing to share personal experiences, theological struggles, or uncertainties about the subject matter. Breath, in this instance, becomes a grounding force that invites vulnerability amid cultural, social, and personal differences. It has the potential to cultivate a sense of community and belonging, reducing feelings of isolation or alienation, and when held within a supportive environment, invites authentic dialogue and richer reflection. This collective practice can help to dismantle hierarchies within the classroom, as everyone, regardless of their background, participates in the same embodied practice. Students feel comfortable expressing themselves and engaging in difficult conversations, knowing they are supported in a compassionate environment. Breath, therefore, is a practice that centers the individual and fosters collective openness.

Risk-taking and mutual exchange are also facilitated through the mindful integration of a rhythm of breath. At the heart of the breath pedagogy is the value for learning that encourages students to take risks – both in terms of intellectual exploration and personal growth. This sometimes requires a slower pace in the dissemination of information and space to reflect in order to venture into the



Photo by Susan Wilkinson

risk taking. This approach challenges the dominant paradigms of control and productivity that often shape educational systems and shifts the focus from rigid structures of learning and outcomes to a more fluid and responsive learning experience. This takes place when students are allowed to center themselves in meditative and reflective ways as they bring their full selves into the room. In doing this, students may feel more equipped to challenge preconceived notions or explore uncomfortable theological ideas. Moreover, when this practice is viewed as a shared experience, it cultivates mutual exchange between students, creating a rhythm of give-and-take in conversations and interactions. This openness leads to a more dynamic and fluid learning environment.

In this atmosphere of mutual

exchange, imagination and creativity are also empowered. Breath has long been associated with the divine act of creation, and in the classroom, it can serve as a reminder of the boundless possibilities inherent in theological study. When students are encouraged to think creatively and bring questions, they are freed. This dispels competitive assumptions and performances in the class, and invites them to dream, imagine, and cocreate new theological insights. This act of creation, inspired by the sacred nature of breath, can unlock new ways of understanding the divine, human relationships, and the world around them, thus fostering a deep sense of community in which they are drawn into a collective experience of learning. This shared breath of learning becomes a metaphor for the shared life of the classroom, where each participant contributes to the whole, and they build a sense of solidarity and mutual care, understanding that their individual contributions are part of a larger, interconnected ecosystem.

Moreover, a pedagogy of breath emphasizes the holistic nature of learning, acknowledging that students are not just intellectual beings but emotional and spiritual ones as well. Traditional classroom settings often prioritize cognitive development, leaving little room for the emotional or spiritual aspects of a student's experience. However, by incorporating breathing practices and shaping a course in the rhythm of breath with intentional concern for the whole being in the learning process, we can validate the full spectrum of human experience. This approach recognizes that students' well-being is integral to their success and that fostering an environment where they feel fully human is just as important as the academic content being delivered. This validation allows students to bring their whole selves into the classroom, encouraging a deeper connection to the material and to each other. When students are given the space to breathe they are also given the space to feel, which enhances their ability to engage in critical thinking and creative expression. In this work, breath serves as both a spiritual and pedagogical tool, making room for divine presence to move through the classroom in ways that are life-giving, transformative, and deeply connective.

CONCLUSION: LIVING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF EXHALE

I want to revisit my student's experience from fall 2019. She entered the classroom, took a seat, and exhaled; and for at least the next 180 minutes, she experienced the other side of that exhale – the side that connected her to her humanity and enabled her to embrace it as the place of pursuit. In that moment, the exhale became more than just a release of breath; it became a grounding



Figure 2. Ekene Ijeoma, *Black Forest: Melvindale*, 2022. (Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.)

force that opened space for vulnerability, authenticity, and deep learning. What happens when our learning and our living privilege our humanity and all that it brings – messiness, chaos, confusion, joy, laughter, flaws, and brilliance found in the cracks of the veneer? Learning becomes transformative. The classroom shifts from being a space of rigid performance to one of genuine connection,

where students can bring their whole selves, unpolished and raw, into the process.

When we privilege our humanity, we create room for the imperfections and complexities that make us who we are. Instead of demanding polished answers or perfect comprehension, we allow space for questions, doubts, and explorations that are often more meaningful than any tidy conclusion. The joy and laughter that arise from shared experiences, the confusion that leads to deeper understanding, the flaws that reveal untapped brilliance – all of these become integral to the learning journey. In this environment learning is no longer a performance but a process of becoming, where students are invited to explore not just the content at hand, but their own evolving identities. By embracing humanity in its fullness, we affirm that learning is not just about the acquisition of knowledge, but about the cultivation of wisdom, empathy, and personal growth. In doing so, we acknowledge that the journey of learning, like the breath itself, is cyclical, messy, and deeply connected to the essence of being human.

What does it look like to live on the other side of exhale? In the realm of theological education, I believe it encapsulates a pedagogical approach that embraces the fluidity and resilience of both professor and students. It recognizes the classroom as a dynamic space where the breath, often a metaphor for life's cyclical challenges and reprieves, plays a crucial role in shaping the learning experience. This pedagogy acknowledges that education is not a linear journey but a series of inhalations – moments of intense focus and effort – and exhalations – moments of reflection, rest, and integration. By living on the other side of exhale, facilitators commit to fostering an environment where the pressures of learning are balanced with the necessity of pause, encouraging students to not only acquire knowledge but also to internalize and personalize their growth. This approach underscores the importance of patience, mindfulness, and the understanding that true learning often occurs in the spaces between action and reflection.


By embracing breath as a pedagogical tool, we not only enhance student learning but also contribute to the creation of more humane and just educational spaces, where every student can thrive. Breath, in the context of education, has the power to connect us to our inner selves and to one another in ways that conventional methods often neglect. The simple act of mindful breathing can foster a deeper sense of presence, helping students center themselves amidst the complexities of academic life. Shaping our teaching in a rhythm of breath encourages reflective practices that honor the whole self – body, mind, and spirit – allowing for a learning experience that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge to one that nurtures personal and communal transformation. A pedagogy of breath is not merely about adding breathing exercises to the curriculum, but about fundamentally reshaping how we approach teaching and learning. It challenges the relentless pace and pressure of traditional education, offering an alternative rhythm that values pause, reflection, and the nurturing of the whole person. Can we breathe? With intentionality, care, and a commitment to justice in education, the answer can be yes; yes, we can breathe, and in doing so, we can build spaces where every student can thrive and flourish.

In the pursuit of a pedagogy of breath, we are invited to reimagine the classroom as a space not merely for intellectual growth but for holistic flourishing. Breath, in its simplicity, holds the potential to connect us to ourselves, each other, and the larger world, creating opportunities for empathy, creativity, and justice to emerge in the learning process. As we become more attuned to the rhythms of our own breath, we can better understand the varied and complex lives of our students, meeting them where they are with compassion and care. The question, “Can we breathe?” becomes not only a call to acknowledge our humanity, but also a challenge to cultivate spaces where all can breathe freely – where education is a liberating force that honors the dignity of every

student. In this vision, breathing is not just a personal act but a radical gesture toward equity and shared learning. In the spirit of this pedagogy, let us conclude with a deep, cleansing breath...

take a deep breath in through your nose...
and exhale through your mouth.

Amen.



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