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Inhale ... Exhale: Exploring Breath in the Classroom

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Take a deep breath in ... and exhale.

This has been a recurring practice in my classrooms lately. Taking a moment to breathe – both physically and pedagogically. What started as an interesting idea to shape my classes in a rhythm of breath, has proven to be a welcomed experience for students throughout the landscape of a semester of communal learning – breathing together. Both the actual practice of slowing down at the start of class, centering, and taking a moment to breathe before or after diving into class content; as well as the movement through learning as a breath – an inhale of information, and an exhale of reflection – cultivate a unique rhythm of engagement, communal connection, and sustained learning.

This idea of intentionally infusing breath into the classroom has fascinated me for some time with its creative possibilities. In its development, I have found that this breath-centered pedagogy creates space for one's humanity and lived-experiences to be present and valued in the learning process. For example, in my most recent class, students expressed feelings of freedom in learning, being seen and heard, and recognizing a community that held space for

their theological processing. The classroom became a place of embodied learning that welcomed vulnerability, risk-taking, and difference. At the same time, it also required a willingness to be fully present in the process. Breathing was a primary part of ensuring this presence, with moments to breathe together at the start of class, after working with difficult content, and sometimes at the close of a class session.

The breath-centered pedagogy I have developed is informed by time spent in actual breathwork practice led by a certified coach. From the lessons learned working with this coach, my approach to teaching holds three priorities: (1) model the practice of breath in the classroom, (2) make room to breathe, and (3) be open to what breath can create. In modeling the practice of breath and making room to breathe, my classes are shaped in a circular rhythm that includes information intake, processing, and reflection through creative modes of learning. There are breath weeks introduced at weeks five and ten of the semester, which provide a chance to slow down and think deeply in community. These weeks make room for us to breathe in learning and in life. They are points along the way to assess the progress of the class as a collective, while also making room to allow life to show up in the room, which provides insight to the wellness of the students beyond the classroom persona they put on to navigate institutional expectations. Breathing allowed them to let down guards and be freely themselves – even if only for a few hours of the day.

The final priority is where I have witnessed the magic – being open to what breath can create. This past semester in my Womanist/Feminist Spirituality and Worship course, breath created community and connection, it empowered creativity and vulnerability, and it cultivated joy. Bodies in space learning together, who were allowed to breath, became a community that developed a connection across dialogue around ritual, sacramental theology, and women's ways of worship. This community affirmed and celebrated one another, they laughed and cried together, and they developed constructive theologies around liturgical practice born from theological creativity and freedom that many of them were afraid to embrace. This was the power of breath for this community.

So, what am I learning from this breath-centered pedagogy? While there is still room for fine-tuning the practice, there is so much potential in breathing together. I am learning that this practice of breathing must be mutual. I must breathe with the class, and not just facilitate the breath process. In breathing together, in shaping a class in a rhythm of breath, there must be room for flexibility because just like our natural rhythms of breath, depending on the activity or location, our rhythms of breathing change, and we must adjust in the moments to catch our breath, to find our breath, to pace our breath. So was the case in our learning. Finally, while not so much of a lesson but rather an observation, breath led to laughter, laughter led to joy, joy led to transformation (even in the smallest ways), and shared transformation led to deep learning. This is the impact of breath in the classroom. May we all be so inclined to breathe together.

So again, take a deep breath in ... and exhale.

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