



## **A Collective Breath Exercise for Building Empathy and Honoring Humanity**

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*This breathing exercise and  
reflection was written and read*

*aloud by Devin Duprey '10, Dean of Diversity Education, at faculty meeting on Wednesday, June 3.*

Breathing can be a learning tool to help us identify our needs and become more aware internally and of our external environment. The purpose of this breathing exercise is to increase our awareness and empathy, bringing to our center an often marginalized narrative. Thank you for participating and breathing with me.

*\*Begin with 4 rounds of breath, inhaling for 4 seconds, holding for a half second and exhaling for 5 seconds. Notice your breath, take a moment to appreciate what the breath can symbolize: we are alive, we are in this present moment, we can be unified through our breath.\**

Since January, there has been a virus in this country that has constricted the breath of over 1.87 million Americans and 6.7 million people around the globe. It has stolen the breath of hundreds of thousands worldwide. As the virus spread, even those who were not infected felt a shortness of breath. Our breathing was restricted as we watched, and continue to watch, numbers rise, as we experienced the loneliness of quarantine, faced economic hardship, and even grieved for loved ones who have died.

Our breathing has been swallowed by the disproportion in cases of the virus amongst Black and Brown Americans. Researchers and scientists point to factors such as living conditions, work circumstances (serving as essential workers, not having paid sick leave) and underlying health conditions to explain these high rates of transmission and mortality.

But perhaps it is a different contagion that has restricted our breath as well. A plague that is endemic in our country, that has taken the lives of millions. Another virus that desperately needs a cure.

We all breathe together, but not the same. For 400 years, Black people in this country have only had access to a constricted breath.

The last deep breath sucked in by West Africans before boarding ships was soon choked by poor air circulation, fear, the smell of human excrement and death all around them.

The labored breath of slaves tilling the field, their lives, voices, love, and humanity all reduced to a whisper. (It is impossible to truly breath deeply if you can only whisper.)

The spent breath of the Union and Confederate soldiers in the fighting for freedom that would never be theirs.

The strained breath of the sharecroppers, yet again harvesting a bounty, but still unable to feed their families. (It is impossible to truly breath deeply if you are famished, still awaiting your next meal.)

The controlled breath of the young men who quickly crossed the street, avoiding eye contact with the white woman walking toward him, making sure his respirations don't mimic a whistle.

The disoriented breath of the Black recent Americans. They may not come from this exact history, but they inherit the consequence due to their skin tone.

The heavy breathing of the drivers, blue flashing lights in their rear view, unsure if they will make it home, if he will become '1' in the "1 in 3" Black men who will face imprisonment in their lifetime, or if she will become the next Sandra Bland.

The stale breath of the 40% of the inmates in prison, yearning for from a sip of fresh, uncaged air.

The tired breath of the pregnant mothers carrying babies who, not even from the point of conception, had access to the deep breaths a mother is supposed to provide. Despite her laboring breaths, it is 2.5 times more likely that she and her babies will die in the process of her trying welcoming them into the world.

The exasperated breath of young people, trying to make sense of this world they were born into.

All of our breath constricts when we watch the video footage, and as we struggle to avoid those horrific images.

Our collective breath is restricted as we watch protest and revolts in the street. As we hear the words that seem to indicate that property is still worth more than the lives of some in this country.

It takes a lot of deep breath to push hard. It takes full deep breaths to shout. It takes sustaining deep breaths to make change.

Let our breath honor those who have had their breath stolen by this nation's own insidious endemic virus.

A breath for Amaud Arbery

A breath for Breonna Taylor

A breath for Nina Pop

A breath for George Floyd

A breath for Tony McDade

It is only in recognizing the equities of breath, the unfair and unjust constrictions and asphyxiations, that we can create a world where all have access to breathe freely. By listening to and believing our neighbor when they say they can't breathe. By being aware of the ways we benefit from a system that denies basic human rights.

For those who hear this and are breathing the most shallow of us all, you are phenomenal. You get up everyday and show up for class and for work. You create content, you analyze with sharpness. You care for others, stand up for others. You love, and find joy, and dance. Your spirit, although it may be weak, can never be smothered.

For those who have the full lungs and access to the deepest of breaths, use that capacity everyday you can to create a world where all breath like you.

*\*Close with 4 rounds of breath, inhaling for 4 seconds, holding for a half second and exhaling for 5 seconds. Notice your breath. Notice your feelings. Take a moment to appreciate what the*

*breath can symbolize. Take a moment to consider what action you will take to contribute to the building of a more equitable world.\**

Excerpted from a reflection/breathing exercise written and read aloud by Dean of Diversity Education Devin Duprey '10 at faculty meeting earlier this week. Read the full piece at the link in our bio.