

# Breath and Breathlessness

(Reflections from the Long Road of My Healing)

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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, April 11<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is Breath and Breathlessness—Reflections from the Long Road of My Healing. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

Maya Angelou proclaimed, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away." The sacredness of life is measured not by time but by timelessness...by the experiences in life that leave us breathless. Maya Angelou was an artist. She was a poet. She was careful with her words, careful with her meaning...with her healing messages.

Poems are like remedies. They are like a little games of words—combed and measured, braided in near-perfect rows. Corn, collard, ochre-green. Lean words, wise and healthy. Fresh and tender to the touch. Maya was a poet. She captured the sun-hot intimacy of living and reflected it back to us, as sunrise...as nebula, comet and constellation, as black hole and as supernova. She reminded us that there are many great struggles in life—between enslavement and real freedom, between greed and true ambition. She'd say, "The desire to reach for the stars is ambitious. The desire to reach hearts is wise and most possible." She grounded us in the real and not-so-distant heaven of here and now through poetry, through little games of words.

I love poetry. I'm drawn to it. I write my own. I like when others do. A beautiful soul I once knew once showed me a little word-game on a sunny afternoon. She showed me this little language trick that I love and I will never forget it. She said, "To achieve the healthy self, heal thyself." She wrote it out. "Healthy Self" [show sign] "Heal Thyself" [show sign] She used the same letters and made a different meaning. It was a total sucker punch for me. I really loved it. I really love word-games like this.

Jim Hightower, the author and liberal activist out of Texas...he had the best word-games of all. He really got me. His word game taught me an important lesson.

Jim Hightower was one of the major speakers at the General Assembly in 2006. Of course, the General Assembly is the annual, national gathering for Unitarian Universalists in the U.S. It takes place every June and in 2006, it was in Texas, in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Thousands came. It was a great event. I drove out from North Carolina. I stopped in on my way to California. I found out when Jim was speaking. I got myself a ticket and I watched the show.

The performance hall was full and Jim seemed to be a little nervous. There were tons of us there...tons of UUs from all over the country and parts of Canada.

Now, Jim Hightower is pretty funny but regional humor was out of bounds. You couldn't make fun of a far away place because its people were right there in the room...which was bad because making fun of far away places was a real strength of his.

He met the challenge well. He started us off with a little joke. He was warming up the room...or, at least, he was trying to. He said, "In my good life, I've noticed something about good-ole, country wisdom. Some of the old adages are true and some of them are false. For instance, the early bird always does get the worm—that much is true—but it's always the second mouse," he said with a hopeful and mischievous smile, "that gets the cheese." We were slow to get the joke because it required of the mind the creation of a morbid image—the first mouse that had triggered the mouse-trap and the second that didn't want the bait to go to waste. We were slow to get the joke but we got it and we groaned in kind of a joyous disapproval. I think that's what he was going for.

After this, Jim tried again. He went for a second joke. He started down a road that seemed unwise. He started to make fun of Presbyterians. He said, "Do you know what I don't like about Presbyterians?" and I thought to myself, "This is not going to end well for Jim Hightower.' Yes, it was safe to assume that the performance hall was nearly void of practicing Presbyterians but that really wasn't the issue. There was a different kind of problem.

Unitarian Universalists make their ways to this faith from all walks of life. Very few of us are life-long UUs. Most of us have complex histories. Most of us used to be something else. Some of us used to be Catholic and some of us used to be Episcopalian and some of us used to be Jewish and still are and some of us used to be Muslim and still are and some of us used to be Anglicans or used to be Methodists or used to be Buddhists or Shakers or Quakers...and some of us used to be Presbyterian, unbeknownst (it seemed) to Jim Hightower. In fact, before she became a Unitarian Universalist in the early '70s, my own mother was Presbyterian...and I could feel her, in my imagination, balling up her used-to-be Presbyterian fists and clenching her used-to-be Presbyterian teeth. In fact, I was doing these things on her behalf, anxiously and nervously anticipating what awful things Jim Hightower was about to say. 'This is our national gathering,' I said to myself. 'This will not end well for Jim Hightower.'

But here's what he said—Jim Hightower, that snarky, little magic man. He said, "The thing that I don't like about 'Presbyterians' is that when you rearrange the letters, you basically come up with 'Britney Spears'!" and he was right. It's basically true. It isn't perfect. There's an extra 's' but you do come up with 'P-r-e-s-b-y-t-e-r-i-a-n-s-s!' It was a harmless word-game and we loved it. And we loved him for not making a national scandal in Protestant faith. We were all so relieved not to be going to the hell that we don't believe in, we just laughed and sighed and looked at one another in peace, lovingly.

That was 2006. That was fifteen years ago. Jim Hightower's joke would not be nearly as funny today. We're all so on edge—we, the QAnon conspirators and we, the liberal intelligentsia; we, the anxious conservatives and we, the radical progressives; we, the maskless anti-vaxers and we, the Fauci fanatics; we, the pink

and blue men and women and we, the rainbow revolutionaries... When, as citizens of this country, we say, "We, the people..." this is who and what we mean.

We're all so on edge. We're throwing far too much fire over our fences. We're losing touch with our common sense of humanity, the worst of us are. The worst in us is crying out for help so desperately. And help is on the way but it is not here just yet. We are trying to prepare the way but there's just too much warring in the streets—in the name of white supremacy and in the name of Black Lives Matter, in the name of chauvinist privilege and in the name of liberation, in the name of one political expression that differs from another...with rancid bitterness that has become toxic for us all.

In Minnesota, for the last two weeks, the trail of Derek Chauvin has been front-page news. Of course, Derek Chauvin is the former police officer who is currently charged with manslaughter and murder in the second and third degrees. Last year, two days after my birthday, Officer Chauvin took the life of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis.

Maya Angelou wrote, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away." But that's what he did so I'm confounded. Derek Chauvin took George Floyd's breath away. Derek Chauvin literally left him breathless.

Now, Maya Angelou says that the sacredness of life is measured by the moments that leave us breathless. Clearly, this is not what she meant. Nothing about the killing of George Floyd was sacred. The poetry of Maya Angelou does not apply here...not as it had before. Her poetry was linked to stars that shine down on us from the heavens. Her words in this context reduce to utter vulgarity. They sit heavy, like a chain upon my heart...upon my soul.

Earlier this week, I made a mistake in my planning. I made a mental mistake that led me to make an interpersonal mistake in life and I disappointed someone and deeply regretted it. It wasn't a terribly big deal but it landed on my heart in a terribly big way...and I spent some time reflecting on why that was...and I learned of an accidental death in my extended family...and Melinda's dog, Gracie, died. Melinda is a dear friend of mine and a colleague (a good colleague) from the Silver Spring church in Maryland...which is where I was before I was lucky enough to move to northern New England. Overall, I was feeling pretty blue.

I learned of all of this while paying close attention to the daily news...which has been a bit heartbreaking. It was all a bit too much and I crashed down a little bit. I felt a level of sorrow with which I could find my balance. It was all too heavy and I was too heavy. I put it down and stepped away.

Sometimes, I try to live out the gift, live out the value and prayer of the mountaintop. Sometimes, I try to take the broad view in life, hold all things in balance and find my peace...but I could not find my peace. I had to create a different prayer. Sometimes, I try to carry what is too heavy for me. I forget my limits. Sometimes, I choose to forget my limits because I mistakenly believe that if I try harder/work faster/study better/eat slower/sleep longer and more deeply, I believe that if I do all of that, I will become a better person somehow and that's not true. It's not a healthy thought and I know that but I still secretly believe it and I want to put it

down and step away but I just don't. I need to step away from the heavy chain around my heart, around my soul but I just don't know how to do it. I want to break free from whatever holds me back or holds me down but I can't remember how. I need to be reminded how to do it.

I had a friend say, years ago, a fellow minister, he was preaching and he said in one of his sermons, "I don't want to be part of a good family." That was how he started an idea that he was developing. That really resonated with me for some reason. I had never thought of such a thing, never heard of it. I'd assumed that everyone would want to be part of a good family. Having been raised in the way that I have, I value that highly. I believe in good family...no matter what. I never questioned that.

Now, I love my family and I have been very fortunate and very lucky...even blessed. And yet, I was deeply struck by what my friend was saying. For the first time in my life, I was questioning something that I never had before, so deeply has the value of good family been ingrained in me.

Carlton Pearson was the preacher. He can be fearless at times. Rev. Carlton D'metrius Pearson. He used to serve a conservative church in Tulsa. African American. Edgy. Funny. Highly charismatic. He trained in the Bible Belt, under Oral Roberts. Carlton Pearson is a fascinating man. He made the impossible possible for me with that one powerful idea. He pushed me a few miles further on the long road of my healing.

You can look him up online. The world has tons to say about him. He's brilliant. He's rather good-looking and he has his own Wikipedia page...which is a real achievement, especially for non-celebrity African Americans...particularly for men who have NOT been shot and who have NOT been beaten and who have NOT been killed at the hands of police.

My uncle was an officer. I was NYPD blue. I wonder what he would think about what we've been experiencing in our world...because Trayvon Martin has a page and he's gone...and Tamir Rice has a page and he's gone...and Michael Brown had a page...and Eric Garner...and Oscar Grant...and they're not with us. Women and trans-folk suffer too—Sandra Bland and Rekia Boyd and Breonna Taylor and Nina Pop and Toni McDade and the list goes on and they all have pages and they're all gone from us now, dead and gone from us...and George Floyd, of course...at the hands of ex-police officer, Derek Chauvin.

There are better ways of being famous, healthier ways. Can you imagine what the world would be like if we valued ourselves differently? ...if what we treasured about Trayvon Martin was his love of poetry? ...if what we valued about George Floyd and beautiful Breonna Taylor was the depth of their commitment to family? Death is a bad way of becoming known. We must learn to choose otherwise.

We need that learning or some great turning. Something has to change right now. When we sing, we bring change into being...and so we sing,

We shall be known by the company we keep  
By the ones who circle round to tend these fires  
We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap

the seeds of change alive from deep within the Earth  
It is time now...and what a time to be alive  
In this great turning we shall learn to lead in love

Can you imagine what the new world would be...like if we valued ourselves differently? ...if we learned to lead in love?

You have to be alive in order to do that. That's why I like Carlton's Wikipedia page. Like him, it's so alive and it is so fascinating. It reads:

Carlton D'metrius Pearson (born March 19 of '53) is an American Christian minister. At one time, he was the pastor of the Higher Dimensions Evangelistic [] Family Church... During the 1990s, [this church] grew to an average attendance of over 6,000. Due to his stated belief in universal reconciliation [which is, broadly speaking, universalism], Pearson rapidly began to lose his influence...

He flew so high but he fell like Icarus...because he spoke honestly about his faith. By the end of 2004, he'd lost almost 90% of his congregation. They turned powerfully away from him. He was devastated but he was held whole by love...and he knew he had been honest

I met Rev. Carlton seven years ago in Tulsa, OK...at All Souls Unitarian Church. That was where I heard him preach. That was where he moved me down the healing road and helped me grow. There is very little growth without healing. I met him in March or April of 2014. I was learning how to walk again back then.

The August before, I had broken my femur in a light-hearted, softball game. I needed heavy surgery and for the next seven months or so, I was in a bed, was in a wheelchair, was in progressive physical therapy and on crutches. This was the long road of my healing...the long road of my physical healing, that is. I had fractured my leg—that was obvious—but something within me had fractured as well and my love of life had dimmed quite a bit.

The medical twists and turns on my healing road were very clear. I needed surgery. So, I was opened. My upper thigh was placed in traction. Its bone (the largest in the body) was drilled and fitted with a metal rod. Now, there is a titanium rod where bone marrow used to be. That was the medical road.

The spiritual twists and turns on my healing road were mysterious. At first, I didn't take them seriously but more than a bone within me had been broken. My heart, my soul, my faith were just as fractured as my leg. Without knowing it, I was travelling on two healing roads at once. Better said, the two roads of my healing were one and the same.

Robert Frost had been perplexed. I was not but Robert was. In his famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*, he wrote,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth



I was not so troubled in my healing. My attention was complex but undivided. When my two roads diverged in a yellow wood, I took both of them at once. Everyone does, even Robert...when we are on the long road of our healing.

I was lucky. I realized that I was traveling both roads at once. I realized this on a Sunday morning in the Tulsa sanctuary. I took my first steps without crutches in front of the congregation of that church...with the help of a dear friend named Deborah Thorton.

We were all seated. The service had begun and the music was lovely. It was filled all up with joy. One or the other of us (or maybe both of us) thought that it would be fun to dance in the aisles of church on Sunday morning, right in front of everybody. The idea filled my heart. It lifted up my soul. It brightened up my love of life a bit. It was beautiful. Someone snapped a picture and sent it to me.

This is what the two, long roads of our healing can look like if we allow it. Dancing in the aisle was painful...and scary...but it was also so joyful. It was also wonderful and sweet. I couldn't have done it without her. Thank you, Deborah Thorton, for walking both the healing roads with me...and for remaining true to our connection.



I will never forget that moment. It just took my breath away...and it gave me strength enough to engage with Carlton Pearson...when he said, "I don't want to be part of a good family. Being part of a family is hard enough." I promise you, I laughed out loud...I was so deeply touched.

Maya Angelou said, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away." We glimpse the sacredness of life along its many healing roads...and it is this and only that can truly leave us breathless.

George's brother, Terrence Floyd put it best for me, captured the gesture and the meaning and the value of prayer most powerfully. At a vigil last month in Minneapolis, he said,

We're asking the system for the justice. But this gathering we're doing right now is what's needed. We're going to take not one knee, but both knees. Get down. And we're going to ask God for the justice, because our justice can't compare to His.

Regardless of our religious backgrounds—whether we are or have been Catholic or Jewish or Buddhists or Muslim or Quaker or Presbyterian—and not matter our political persuasions, we all journey on the long roads of our healing. Some healing happens in a heartbeat. Some healing roads take more time.

This last year has been an astounding one. Let's ask ourselves what we've learned from it. I pray that what we've learned has been guided by honesty...by love

and gently, by grace. With these, we'll surely strengthen up our common sense humanity. In this year to come, I pray that we move further on the healing road...until we're strong enough, bold enough, brave enough in sanctuary to find ourselves dancing in the aisles.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.