



I NEED YOU TO BREATHE

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I am deeply humbled and grateful for the opportunity to share this time with all of you. Many of the folks in this room are friends, teachers and even some heroes of mine. I am especially grateful to my friend Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews who has the soul of a prophet and the voice of an angel, and to Scott Reed and the whole PICO and Prophetic Resistance team, as well as our LA Voice partners and friends, AMOS, LiveFree and IndyCan. Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts in this perilous time.

Be honest with me... am I the only one here who has suffered from Executive Order Disorder this year? Our heads are spinning and hearts racing, we're stuck in permanent reactive mode, suffering from a kind of whiplash brought on by the daily assault on what we know to be just and right. This has left us with an overwhelming sense not only of incredulity, but also of fragility. We worry for our loved ones, our communities, our nation.

The Children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt for more than 200 years when Moses signaled that liberation was near. "It's our time!" he said to the people. "God will free us from bondage and bring us home." But the people couldn't hear him, *וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקְאָר רُוח וּמִעֲבֵדָה קָשָׁה* -- because of shortness of breath and hard work (Ex 6:9). Know this: what Moses was promising was exactly what they had been praying for—for hundreds of years. But when it finally came, their situation is so bad that they couldn't even hear it.

Whether our foundation is shaken by a political reality or a personal one, we, like the Children of Israel, suffer from shortness of breath that makes it hard to hear, let alone think or process effectively.

That's where many of us are today: breathless.

We in this room know how much our country aches today.

We see the hurricanes, floods and fires of the past few months signaling a treacherous future that is inevitable as long as national climate policy is shaped on denialism and a resistance to empirical fact.

We see that black and brown folks across the country are criminalized, monsterized, invisibilized. We know that what was bad—mass incarceration, police violence, voter suppression—has become worse, now that White Nationalists feel they have direct support from the White House.

We know that hardworking immigrants who came here to build a future for their families are treated like parasites, and minority communities who have been in this country from its founding are treated as outside agitators, threats to America.

We witness the obsessive repeated attempts to scapegoat and marginalize Muslim Americans, and the spike in antisemitism and hate crimes against vulnerable minority communities.

We see the toxins of white supremacy, misogyny and a deep disdain for truth seeping into all corners of our society.

We have witnessed relentless efforts to undermine healthcare for the most vulnerable in our nation.

We are kept up at night by senseless mass shootings, by the criminal negligence of craven lawmakers who stubbornly fail to protect us from weapons of war wreaking havoc on our streets, schools, churches, concerts, work places.

We are sickened by predatory harassment and violence against women and girls that has become so normative in our culture that it transcends right and left, red and blue, rendering us all—women, men, LGBT and non-binary folks alike—unsafe.

Today a polarized political culture has dragged our country into a blackhole of lies, hostility and profound indecency.

There's a lot of work to do. But know this: we cannot fight without our breath.

So the question I want to ask at the start of this sacred convening is one that stands at the heart of our spiritual and political lives: how do we get our breath back?

I have spent a lot of time lately arguing against the dumbing and numbing of [American religious life](#). We have come to see the banner of God and religion waved in ways ranging from absurd to obscene, justifying cruel and regressive politics and policies, making a mockery of the very religious traditions they claim to celebrate. My focus has been twofold: on one hand, there's religious extremism, the exploitation of sacred texts to justify hatred and violence in God's name. And on the other, there's what I call religious routine-ism: rote, soulless, empty religiosity. These countervailing trends are profoundly alienating to a generation that considers itself spiritual but not religious, and can't flee the religious establishment quickly enough. Religion today has failed to capture the imagination of millions who are repelled by the viciousness of extremism and disenchanted by the dullness of routine-ism. *They refuse to choose between religion that's deadly and religion that is dead.*

But this past year, another trend has emerged in the bleak landscape of American religious life: religious escapism. This is the now dominant trend of religion as a pacifier. A diversion. This is thoughts-and-prayers religion. As in “our thoughts and prayers are with the victims of the hurricane,” while we sit on our hands, lock our doors and shame anyone who dares to bring up the increased ocean temperatures that so clearly contributed to the relentlessness of the storms. We’re deeply saddened by the latest shooting/ hate crime/ Nazi march/ natural disaster, but let’s not politicize a tragedy now!

Religious escapists worship at the altar of the status quo, and they’ve had quite a revival in America over the past year. When Marx called religion the opium of the people, he was criticizing religion that quiets the oppressed masses. I wonder what he would think of religion that quiets the privileged masses?

It turns out there's more than one opioid addiction in this country; this one requires no needle or prescription, just a church or synagogue membership and a willingness to use religion as a drug to escape reality.

But religion is not meant to be an opiate—to dull our senses—but rather to be our *oxygen*, the fuel we need to breathe in a breathless time.

How does faith give us the strength not to escape the real challenges of the day, but to confront and move through them?

I want to share with you one of my favorite stories from my tradition, a Rabbinic story, a midrash, of an early encounter between Abraham and God. The Rabbis are trying to understand why Abraham—in the Torah portion read this week by Jews around the world—is chosen by God to leave his homeland, his family, everything he knows and go to a strange and foreign land? What’s so special about him? Well, every superhero has an origin story. This is Abraham’s:

A parable is told of a traveler, en-route from one place to another when he sees a *birah doleket*—a palace consumed in flames. He stops and asks: How can it be that the palace burns with nobody taking care of it? Who is the caretaker responsible for this place? At that moment, the owner of the palace pokes his head out and responds: I am the owner of this place! So too, the Midrash says, Abraham looked out and saw that the world was on fire, and he wondered: How can it be that the world burns without someone trying to save it? Who is the caretaker responsible for the world? At that moment, God responded: I am the owner of this place!¹

I love everything about this story. I love that, despite his busy life, this person looks up and sees that something is on fire. I love that he’s a traveler—someone who is out of place, on the move, who has somewhere to go. Someone with plausible deniability: he could easily argue that this burning palace is not his problem. But he doesn’t: he stops and asks. I love that he works on the moral assumption that *someone* must be responsible, demanding to know who it is. His question is what forces the owner to take responsibility, wills him out of disregard for his creation. And I love that the question is: “who is the caretaker,” and the answer is: “I am the owner...” meaning *you, you who noticed that my house is on fire, you are now the caretaker.*

This story, of course, is not only about Abraham. It’s about anyone who sees herself as a spiritual descendant of Abraham. Those whose *spiritual inheritance* is to be awake. To see.

The first thing for us to know, in these breathless times, is that we must not be fazed or disheartened by these fires. There have always been palace fires; our most ancient spiritual calling is to see them. As people of faith, it’s in our shared spiritual DNA. Wakefulness. Willful opposition. Restless agitation... this isn’t knee-jerk liberalism. The demand that we show up as pursuers of justice and righteousness, is as ancient as our most sacred texts.

My Jewish tradition is centered around obedience to God and observance of *mitzvot*, commandments, and yet the central charge of our tradition is to stand in defiance of unjust power structures. Our heroes are those who stood up for the vulnerable, who risked everything, challenging both God and man to fight for what is just and right.

For many of us here tonight, the battles for racial, economic and environmental justice, for not only equality but equity, for human dignity for all, these fights are precisely what give our lives purpose. But these battles can also, as we know, take our breath away.

So let’s go back to that burning palace. *Birah doleket*, the midrash tells us. There’s a powerful ambiguity built into the Hebrew text that allows us to read it not as a palace burning down, but as a palace radiant

¹ Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

with light. In that case, what does the story teach us? The traveler is on his way when he notices a magnificent palace—a work of art!—radiating beauty. It stops him in his tracks. “How can it be that such beauty exists in the world?” he asks. “Who’s responsible for this place?” And just then, the owner appeared and says, “Thank you for noticing My creation. Come, let’s work together to take care of it.”

Who then is Abraham? The one who stops in awe and wonder, who sees beauty, when others are too busy, too distracted to notice.

This is not the beauty of glamour or luxury. I mean beauty in the way the Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue spoke of it. Beauty that: “...ennobles the heart and reminds us of the infinity that is within us... that reminds you that there is a huge interiority within you.”²

When's the last time any of us remembered that there's a huge interiority within us?

Most of us access awe in nature—gazing at an expanse. Flying from DC back to LA in July, I caught the famed four-hour sunset, when the plane was miraculously paced with the setting sun, and I was lucky enough to get a window seat... (It was clearly God's way of thanking me for sitting handcuffed for five hours in the Capitol police station with a multi-faith group of clergy leaders, arrested for protesting the Senate's vulgar attempt to strip health care from our most vulnerable citizens.) I wept the whole way home: swept up in the magnificence of God's creation.

When we see something that beautiful, we call it breathtaking, but we really should call it *breathgiving*. When life's struggles constrict the heart, awe stretches it back out, making us more compassionate, more loving, more present.

Here's how it works: when we think we're alone in our pain, we despair. We suffer from קַצְרָ רִוחַ—shortness of breath that's really shortness of spirit, anguish, like the Children of Israel when Moses first appeared to them.³ We can't hold it all on our own. But when we experience awe—whether it's the shared astonishment at the sight of the eclipse, the ecstasy of a perfect harmony, or the sense of shared purpose in a mass protest, we get our breath back.

Awe and wonder. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that the profound and perpetual awareness of the wonder of being is one of the goals of a life of faith, “to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.”⁴

So, is the palace burning down, or is it radiant with light? It's clearly both. There's a lot of fire out there today (and some here, from the Northwest, have been battling literal fires this past month). But if all we see when we look at the world is heartache, we need to rediscover the beauty. And if all we see is endless beauty, we need to be reminded that there's a lot of brokenness out there that needs fixing.

THIS is the reason the work of the faith activists and the leadership of clergy matters so much today, the reason the hour calls not only for resistance, but for *prophetic* resistance. Because to fight this fire, we must remember to hold BOTH wonder and indignation. Appreciation and agitation.

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/>

³ See Rashi and Degel Mahane Ephraim, among others.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 48-49.

This brings me back to the religious quackery of escapism. The goal of the religious life is not to escape the world as it is, but to be awake to it: its bruises, its fires, its brokenness. And it's also to breathe hope, life, love and possibility back into that broken world once we've gotten a glimpse of the wondrous, the beautiful, the magnificent.

There is loss and there is love. Grief and grandeur. There is pain and there is possibility.

I want to tell you two short stories about two of my three children: When Eva was little, because she was our first child and I was a guilt-ridden working mother, I kept a careful log tracking every sweet, funny, goofy or moving thing she said.

Once, when she was three years old, I got some sad news about someone in the community who had a terrible loss. It was all I could do to hold back my tears as Eva and I walked outside to get into the car. My heart was so heavy. It was gloomy outside from a thick layer of ominous cloud, which felt entirely appropriate. But then Eva proclaimed, "Ima, look- the sky is so pretty and blue." "E," I said, with a giant knot in my throat, "the sky is dark grey." "No, Ima, it's blue! It's blue!" I was slightly annoyed, and a little concerned that she might be color blind. But she pointed up to the corner of the sky where there was, in fact, a tiny patch of bright, beautiful blue peeking out of the dark clouds. She was right, the sky was blue. I was so caught up in the grey that I didn't even notice.

Ten years later, just a couple of weeks ago, I'm on my way to Shabbat morning services with Levi, who is eight. He's says he has a question, but doesn't want to hurt my feelings. Finally, he bursts out: "Ima—every single day we're talking about all the bad news. When do we get to talk about the good news?"

I know a lot of us in this room spend a lot of time thinking about the good news. We're kind of in the good news business. But if you're at all like me, you've spent a lot more time these past couple of years worried about the burning house than appreciating the beautiful light. It's not our fault, really. Every hour, every alert on our phones brings another devastating surprise.

So let me close tonight by asking all of you to think for a moment: what's the good news? We know all about the ominous clouds. Where's the small patch of blue?

There's also a whole lot of good news out there. There's a lot of beauty and a lot of wonder. There's a lot of love. Here's what I hope we'll remember, in the stormy days ahead:

Despite the intoxicating pull of escapist religion, faith is not about being comfortable in the world as it is. Faith is a rebellion against that world. The goal is not to be quieted, to feel good, to get comfortable and settled while the palace burns. It is to be awake and to fight—with love—for the courage we need, for the family we yearn for, for the beloved community we're called to be, for the world we want our children to inherit. Faith is the belief that the impossible is possible, because, as a friend from Homeboy Industry, who spent 20 years in prison for a non-violent crime he committed as a teenager, says: *our God specializes in the impossible*.

There is reason for our breathlessness. We're holding a lot. But know this: we can't sustain the battles of our lives with *kotzer ruah*, with shrunken spirits.

Last month, on Rosh Hashanah, one of our holiest days of the year, I issued a charge for the Jewish community to support and amplify the black community's call for a national moral reckoning, including *reparations* for slavery and Jim Crow. We know that racial injustice stands at the heart of so much that's

broken in America, that racialized hatred is the raison-d'etre of the far right, now emboldened by neo-Nazis and White Nationalists determined to build a white-only nation, hell-bent on perpetuating the idolatry of the Confederacy, all while denying the terror, degradation, theft, rape and murder that are its unresolved legacy.

I argued that we—Jews, people of faith, survivors and descendants of survivors of generational trauma—must join this conversation because it's decent and it's right, and because it's simply immoral to leave the call for reparations to the black community alone. Our destiny, as Americans, is tied inextricably to one another's wellbeing, and right now we are profoundly unwell. I believe that we are obligated to fight to extend the blessings of freedom, safety and boundless opportunity to *all*, including and especially those who built this country with their own blood, sweat and too many tears.

I love America. But our GDP was built on a rotten foundation: stolen land and stolen labor. And all of us are responsible for righting that wrong. As a rabbi, I'm committed to magnifying and amplifying this conversation wherever I go, wherever my voice might be useful in advancing justice. But to be effective, I know that I, too, need to breathe.

When we make space for wakefulness and wonder, when we lead with love, when we lift one another's spirits and join one another's struggles as allies and partners, when we raise holy hell together, we make room for breath even in the most breathless moments.

I close with the words some of you know, from Rev. Lynn Ungar:

Breathe, said the wind.

How can I breathe at a time like this,
when the air is full of the smoke
of burning tires, burning lives?

Just breathe, the wind insisted.

Easy for you to say, if the weight of
injustice is not wrapped around your throat,
cutting off all air.

I need you to breathe.

I need you to breathe.

Don't tell me to be calm
when there are so many reasons
to be angry, so much cause for despair!

I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,
I said to breathe.
We're going to need a lot of air
to make this hurricane together.

There are hurricanes that bring death and destruction, and there are hurricanes that herald a new day. A day free of the pain that plagues us, free of the cruelties and system failures that bind us. Hurricanes that are driven by love and breath, that usher in the winds of change and possibility. That remind us that each and every one of us was put here to bring light and love to the world.

We don't need to escape. We need to remember how to breathe.

As Mother Teresa taught us: "we have been created for greater things, not just to be a number in the world, not just to go for diplomas and degrees, this work and that work. We have been created in order to love and be loved."⁵ And that, friends, is the good news.

⁵ Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love*, p. 30.