

Couple Breathing/Life Breathing: A New Way of Being Together

Donald L. Paine, D.Min.Psy, LICSW

www.parakelein.org

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Abstract

This workshop presented at the North American Conference for Social Work and Spirituality had three parts. First an experiential part which invited the participants to “go inside” via a breathing exercise to experience their inner parts and offer them space to be cared for from within. The second didactic part presented the idea of the burning bush as a model for accepting and receiving all parts and inviting them to feel the transforming sense of Self-energy. The principles of Internal Family SystemsSM of “all parts are welcome” and need to be cared for from the inner Self were then presented as the rubric for this work. The third part was an experiential exercise that modeled the approach with participants.

Key Words: Spirituality, Marriage, Intimacy

Workshop

The workshop began with an experiential part, which invited the participants to “go inside” via a breathing exercise to experience their inner parts and offer them space to be cared for from within. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth exhaling any toxic elements and restoring the cleansing of fresh air to all the internal parts of the body system. Participants were then invited to explore triggered parts and invite those triggered parts into a caring presence that they could offer them. Participants were then invited to form couple/dyads in which they were instructed to just receive what the other person need to tell as “their inner truth”. The listener was encouraged to note any triggered parts that wanted to interrupt the listening process and ask them to trust that they would have a turn later and refocus on listening. Each spoke what they needed to speak and each listened to the other’s speaking. Participants reported inner experiences of curiosity, compassion and clarity. The model of Couple breathing or Life breathing was then presented. It is a way of being with one’s internal space and respecting the internal space of others that is mutually valuing and validating, respectful and resilient.

Biography

Rev. Dr. Donald L. Paine is a clinical social worker (LICSW), a clinical member of AAMFT, a fellow in AAPC, and pastor. He has been in private practice for 12 years. He has presented at conferences in Hong Kong, University of Kansas, Yeshiva University NYC and Prague.

Couple Breathing/Life Breathing: A New Way of Being Together

The concept of “Couple Breathing” was developed in clinical practice as a way of assisting the client system to make room for each other’s truth rather than resist or marginalize it. As we all know, when couple’s come into the therapist office, the presenting issue is actually the real issue cloaked. The work of traditional therapy is to remove the cloaking device and get to the work. Couple Breathing invites the client system to receive the truth of the other person. Only when “their truth” is clearly, compassionately and courageously heard is a healing connection formed. Likewise the therapist learns to start where the client is and respectfully listen to the part that is presenting a “cloaking device”. As a therapist, I listen with an awareness that this is the work, not with an agenda to “get to the work”. The work cannot begin until I relinquish my role as the expert therapist and invite the client to experience the internal safe space of natural breathing, free of fear of loss or gain. The client may secretly, without conscious awareness, be seeking to know or experience this to be a safe place. A place where all parts are welcomed, honored, and cared for. Creating a climate of safety and trust to invite and being present is the work of couple breathing.

As a principle of working with couples, Couple breathing blends together two constructs: the model of Parakalein (Paine, International Conference of Social Workers, 2006) and the model of Internal Family SystemsSM (Schwartz 2001). Parakalein is a Greek word meaning “called alongside” in a complementary rather than competing way. Parakalein creates a coalescing position and posture that has a couple “alongside each other” in a mutually supportive way. This is blended with the concepts of Internal Family

SystemsSM which welcome all parts of each person and invites Self energy into a healing and understanding role of compassion and clarity.

Authentic Presence:

Authentic presence is that which relinquishes the role of control and creates a safe space to speak and listen. Any and all agendas of right and wrong, good and bad, true or false are surrendered to genuine and authentic presence. To achieve authentic presence is to be at peace with oneself, to have love and care for all parts, and to allow for other means and methods of knowing and expressing love. In other words “there is no one way” but a multiplicity of ways to be with a multiplicity of parts within.

Couples often unintentionally create rituals and routines that destroy that authentic presence. The common retort “That is not true” is an unnoticed, often excused, statement of toxic quality in relationships. With that one statement the speaker takes the position of power and control over the other person. “I am the one who knows truth and your truth is of no value and has no truth in it.” With these four words dominance and control demands submission and subjugation. In four words much more is said. The unspoken message is to deify oneself and devalue or even demonize the other person. This is all about power and very little about relationship building. It serves the ego but not the spirit of relating.

There are four words that breathe life into relating: “I receive your truth”. They are very different words spoken in a very different way. To speak them a person has to be aware of all their internal exiled parts and how they might want to speak, blame, attack, or defend. The controlling part needs to be willing to surrender itself to hear and listen to the truth of the other person. Making room for the thoughts and feelings of the

other without any need or desire to control, correct, contend, compete, coerce, or condemn is a discipline of the ego and invites opens a safe space. Only when a person can “make room” for the other can a true intimacy begin to develop. To breathe in another’s truth a person has to exhale his thoughts and beliefs at least long enough to take in the other person’s truth. The words that give this life breathing edge are “I receive your truth”. At least “help me to understand your truth as I really want to receive your thoughts feelings and beliefs. The toxic truth is no longer resisted or refuted. It is take in as “truth” while keeping a clear sense of one’s own truth in place. This is not defiance or compliance. It is “couple breathing”.

An Internal Experience Opens Understanding of Presence

One metaphor for this kind of unassuming, non-controlling, equally and equitably validating part is the Burning Bush. It is a metaphor for couple therapy and couple relationships. In Judeo Christian literature there is the account of Moses encountering God at the Burning Bush. While this may be seen as some as toxic self-aggrandizement it is just a thought or belief about this metaphor. It is true. There however is another truth present in this metaphor and that is the metaphor I wan to present as a metaphor for couple or life breathing. The text itself is an apparent oxymoron. It states that the bush was “on fire, but it did not burn up.” If we set a bush on fire, there are only two possibilities in the natural arena. One is that the bush would burn up and the fire would continue to look for more bush, brush or trees to burn, much like a wildfire in the forest. Fire is thirsty for food: the bush! On the other hand if the bush is wet with the moisture of photosynthesis and natural healthiness the green bush might resist the fire and the fire

would go out. Either the bush would win or the fire would win. They could not both win. In the end, they would both lose. Eventually the fire would run out of bush to burn and go out, leaving a path of devastation in its path.

In this metaphor the idea of coalescence is presented. The fire realizes that the bush gives off the very oxygen that the fire needs to burn. If the fire can restrict its toxic behavior to consume the bush and rather discipline itself to not consume, both the bush and the fire can co-exist. If the bush can understand that the fire does not want to consume just exist then the bush can allow itself to feed the fire its oxygen realizing that the fire gives off what it needs to exist that is carbon dioxide. Both learn that what they fear and desire creates a toxicity that serves neither of them in the end. They can only learn this by letting go of their fear and desires and embracing each other. They must begin breathing out the idea of consuming or defeating the other and breathing in the value and validity of the other. In exhaling a false belief that only serves its own destruction, each of them find a new way of coalescing beyond merely co-existing.

By inhaling what appears to be toxic that “toxic belief” is transformed into a new experience of the union of all things, the community of opposites, the communion of breathing. The deeper the fire inhales the more allowance there is for the bush to grow, nurtured by the fire. The more the bush fearlessly allows the fire to be; the bigger the fire becomes. The toxic desire to subsume and subjugate and the toxic fear of surrendering and losing ground to others are relinquished and a new metaphor of the burning bush emerges.

In the religious accounts, Moses’ natural human inclination was to try to figure out or fix this anomaly of the bush burning but not being consumed. The voice of Spirit

God told him to stop and take off his shoes for the place he was standing was "holy ground". The ecosystem of the internal world and the world of relationships invites us to take off the shoes of our own ideas, thoughts and truths. We then can place our feet into the earth, the mother of all living things, and become aware that we are all of earth. Our awareness of self in us and in others is increased as is our compassion and care.

Competition surrenders to compassion, the need to be right surrenders to being right in our attitude and heart toward others, and the shame of being wrong surrenders to the autonomy of being true to oneself. Earth speaks loudly of the harmony of opposites. Opposites detract and attract in a design to become not a union of opposites but a community of opposite. Each person, idea, thought or feeling is embraced by each other in a synergy of opposites. This is coalescence. Relationships speak loudly for the inclusion of all in the harmony and balance of "The Burning Bush". The bush making room for the fire and trusting it to not overtake or undermine its existence meets the fire making room for the bush and trusting it to not resist or undermine its existence. They breathe in and out what each other needs discovering the mystery of the power of love to overcome the fear of loss and the desire to gain. All truths are welcome and received as having positive intention. The devaluation for fear of negative intention is embraced as part of what the system believes although it is only partially true. The truth is that all truth, no matter how frightening at first, is transformed into the power of being present without judgment or fear if it is embraced in love. This is the nature and nurture of love. It is the person at peace within therefore capable of living in peace with another.

The wisdom of the Ego and the message of this metaphor are similar. Two apparently opposite entities, ideas, thoughts or feelings can be mutually sustained in fact

they can feed and nurture each other. However this can only happen when both deeply and fundamentally trust each other. This trust lets go of the desire to gain through control and dominance. It also simultaneously surrenders its fear of loss which has it resist, contradict, defy, and deny the other person's truth.

This is not about tolerating each other's idiosyncrasies in an acceptance of the principle of coexistence. It is more than acceptance of difference. It is an embracing of difference in a coalescence of opposing forces through identifying and inviting the "soul force" (Ghandi) of both.

The "Burning Bush" metaphor has been used across the eons of time to speak of the holiness of God's presence. Different traditions have claimed that the burning bush was a statement of God's presence and power in the world and so wherever the experience of God is present is a burning bush.

However, the burning bush metaphor at its essence is a model of "being with" in a non-judgmental, non-correcting, non-agenda way that provides for peace making, community building, and the coalescing of conflicting ideas, ideologies, and idiosyncrasies in all groups. It is applicable to polarizations in ethnic, social, economic, religious, political, psychological, scientific and cultural spheres. In the internal world of timelessness and in the external world of time and space harmony and balance can be achieved only when opposites are seen from a matrix and paradigm that sees all parts of the universe as representative of this coalescence of opposites. Although it might appear to be the union of opposites, it is really the end of an opposing idea into a new idea. This would be the Hegelian theory of perpetual motion as one thesis gives way to an antithesis and a new synthesis emerges.

The process is never ending like a never ending story. While nice experiences emerge on the journey the journey goes on and on perpetuated by a belief that this is what we are to do. Look at opposites harmonize them only to have new thesis emerge from the synthesis. The problem is not the problem it is the belief that this is the only way to resolve opposites. Either we merge them into some collaborative and cooperative yet unsatisfying new part or community only for another conflict to emerge or we learn there is another way.

Internal Family SystemsSM

No particular model that I am aware of is as good and effective to enlist and invite this communion between polarized parts of couples, people groups and the internal family system itself that Internal Family SystemsSM. This model developed by Dr. Richard Swartz, (Internal Family Systems an Introduction, 2001) has four particular basic assumptions.

“All parts are welcome”. It is the nature of the mind to be subdivided into an indeterminate number of sub-personalities or parts. This inherently means that no part in the internal ecosystem of the inner world is a bad part. All parts need to be understood as having positive intention. They become fearful or are imbued with desire or fear due to false beliefs about their need to exist and their need to defend the system against all threats. Real or perceived real, the parts develop into an elaborate system of self - protection that does not protect as well or effectively at all. They often actually sabotage the system while intending to help. This is true externally in relationships and thus

provides a way for working with couples that invites each member of the couple system to go inside and settle down their internal fears and longings. Rather than projecting those fears and longings and the need for them being helped or held onto their partners, each partner's exiled and silenced parts are invited to speak and be heard, valued and validated. Their truth is empowered to be heard without being empowered to lead a take over in the internal system or in the external or couple system.

It is the truth, contained in a part, that fuels its fire to want to be heard. Parts can serve different functions, but they are protecting the belief system of the part while ignoring another deeper internal belief. This deeper internal belief is that in the presence of loving care and compassion all parts feel valued and validated as a part of the system. They see the self-energy as the soul force that allows them to feel unthreatened and become unthreatening. The enemy without is really the enemy within. The fire and the bush are one because neither one has to win. This is a win-win in the internal system. It parallels the win-win of couple breathing.

Existence of Self-Energy. Everyone has a Self and the Self is able to lead the system when released to do so. This is an internal source of help and hope that is oriented around having no agenda to control or resist control. The characteristics of this internal presence are calmness, confidence, courage, compassion, creativity, clarity, competency, and care. The Self has no fear of loss as it is self-sustaining and self-authenticating. The Self has no desire for gain as it is at inner peace with all it has is all it needs and all it needs it already has. "All I need to know I already know, I just do not know that I know it" is a truth that I have come to embrace. Needing to know has to do with the power of

knowing and the use of it as control. Not needing to know has to do with “making room” for new awareness that is at the heart of the ecosystems of life breathing things. This is the wisdom of the Ego and The Self!

The Parts Develop A System and are a system: As we develop as persons our parts develop a complex system of interactions among themselves – system theory can be applied to the internal system. When the system is re-organized around a new belief, the parts let go of their need to protect the Self or control others. The system can change rapidly when the system believes the Self to be present. They relinquish their fear and begin to trust the self while maintaining their existence and their positive intention. In this more peaceful state the Self can speak for the parts to other parts in the system finding a way to harmonize opposites for the sake of the system as a whole. In couple breathing the parts can be spoken for and heard without the parts of the others being triggered because they see that the intention is to care for the system not to take over or undermine the system.

The internal system when cared for from within is in a better place to receive and care for another person. Any exiled part that believes that it has to have someone outside from the external world care for them surrender that belief thus lessening the pressure on the external system of the partners parts.

The fourth assumption of Internal Family is Changes in the internal system will effect changes in the external system and vice versa. The implication of this assumption is that both the internal and external levels of system should be assessed.

Couple Breathing Using IFS Principles

In couple breathing one person invites the other person to bear witness to their internal parts and what they fear or believe allowing for a new presence of care to replace the former presence of contention, conflict, and competition. The authentic presence that replaces it is compassionate in its attitude toward, caring in its disposition toward, courageous in its belief in hope, creatively “making room for” more as an expansive breath of genuine unthreatened presence, clarity that it is not about who is right or wrong but about being together without the need to be right, calm in its posture towards the other of peace and openness to increase awareness, and curious toward the developing of a new and fuller sense of intimacy through embracing rather than imposing truth. The **confidence** is not in the self that wants to impose but in an inner Self that is all caring, resilient, redeeming, and all present. The bush and the fire coalesce into a communion of polarities and parallels. It is not a union that implies that one or both of the partners have exiled a part for the sake of the relationship. It is truly a communion where all parts of each are welcome accounted for, acknowledge and intentionally embraced. There is no effacement, exclusion or exiling. There is no imposing, controlling, or directing. There is harmony in the couple system because there is harmony in each person’s internal system.

In couple breathing each person learns how to speak for their parts rather than letting the parts speak. When parts speak with out a sense of the presence of Self they believe that they must prove their point or disprove the point of the partner. This results in point counter point - endless cycles of frustration and fragmentation. No one wins. Couple breathing invites each partner to breathe in the very truth that they want to

counter in a way that encounters that truth in a welcoming way. The toxic nature of win lose is replaced by a clam breathing that expands awareness and creates a safe listening space.

The Couple Breathing (Life Breathing) Principle of Presence

Both members of the dyad accept two characteristics of healing presence. The first is “Being with” without judgment. The need or desire to judge as good or bad any part of the internal system of each other is set-aside in the discipline of not judging. This makes room for and invites a safe space into the relationship. Condoning and condemning of the truth of the other person is surrendered to the discipline of truly hearing and listening to the internal world of the other person. The second is to be “authentic” without imposing or being imposed on. Mutual intention of acceptance of truths that may seem mutually exclusive are embraced in a inclusiveness of welcoming all truths a larger truth is experienced. A posture of Parakalein, alongside of presence, embraces the idea that “the truth I think is true is never as true as I think”. This is expansive idea of truth telling becoming truth inviting.

Like the universe that is ever expanding and yet held together, the couple learns how to be held together while having an expansive openness to each other’s internal worlds that are freely and fully being invited, expressed and mutually supported. The universe breathes life into and out of all members of the universe. Similarly a couple learns to breathe into and out of each other all the “parts” of their internal universe into the universe of the couple.

From this position (alongside of presence) and posture (of compassionate presence) a new entity emerges. The couple breathes freely. When a part is feeling angry, fearful, threatened, exiled, etc the partner speaks for that part assuring it that it will not be exiled into silence nor will it be allowed to dominate the other. The silence of exiling parts in the one internal system will not be allowed to impose the exiling of a part in the other internal system. All parts are welcomed, exiled parts are released of their burden of silence or their burden to have to dominate.

The Secret of Honest Open Care that gives and receives Care

When one partner says to another, “That is not true,” those four words are a toxic view of reality and create toxicity in the relationship. When a partner says, “I receive your truth,” those four words give life and breath to the relationship. This is the concept of couple breathing. It is “intentional” and “positive” toward the truth spoken. It therefore does not focus on evaluating or interpreting truth but rather on attending to that person’s truth in a positive way. It surrenders adjudicating of truth to advocating for truth. When one partner states, “That is not true,” it would not be true to assume that he intended to deify himself and devalue his partner. For one partner to defend himself by pleading that he did not intend to do so has no essential redeeming quality. At the same time, for one partner to choose to intentionally receive her partner’s truth regardless of his intention is to engage in “intentional acts of kindness.” The discipline of intentional kindness receiving the other person’s truth without the need to state yours is a big part of creating breathing room for the relationship. Couple breathing occurs when two persons make room for the truths of each other without feeling threatened or diminished but

rather enjoyed and expanded. Instead of arguing for their truth, they work together to value and validate each other's truth. If one partner needs to argue for his truth to be received, he is forcing intimacy. Forced intimacy does not invite intimacy at all. If one partner needs to ignore her truth and only value her partner's truth, she is feigning intimacy, not expressing it.

The statement "That is not true" is essentially the imposition of truth. It is a deification of self over the other while simultaneously demonizing, devaluing, and invalidating the other. In one sense it is only God who has the right to impose truth as the definer of truth.

In my work with one couple who were surviving an intrusion to their marriage each learned how to speak their hurt and each received the others hurt without countering or contradicting. Something new was experienced. Metaphorically speaking, the fiery truth of her hurt and anger was received by the bush of his loving heart. The fiery truth of his hurt and anger was received by the bush of her loving heart. The fire and the bush came together in a way that made room for the other without fear of loss or desire for gain. This is the metaphor of "two becoming one," not by takeover or consumption, but by surrender to the loving alongside of presence at **the heart of the Parakalein philosophy of care.**

Summary/Conclusion:

The blending of a positive position "alongside of" without a need to win or lose but with a heart of mutual support and surrender with a positive presence of compassionate and caring posture toward all parts in the internal family system produces

an intentionally positive awareness. This awareness invites an all assuming and non-consuming presence of Self into the relationship of the couple. Instead of vying for space they expand the space into a “safe space” that invites growth for each individual and for the couple equally sustained and equally maintained in a cacophony of voices that are all welcome. Instead of an imposed symphony there is a release of control. An invitation is given for all parts to be heard. More honesty is invited into the relationship.

Two people breathe life into and out of each other. This is holy ground and a holy experience of love and surrender. Into that holy space created by a shift in focus two people are invited to be together in a new Self informed way. Each one gives to the other. Neither one loses to the other. Both gain simultaneously. The enlarging sense of Self allows for a richer and fuller experience of each other. Everyone Wins.

Resources:

Schwartz, R.C. (2001) Internal Family Systems Model. Oak Park, IL: Trailheads Publications

Paine, Donald L. (2006) Paper presented at International Conference of Social Workers, Hong Kong