

WOMEN'S BODIES/
WOMEN'S LIVES

HEALTH, WELL-BEING
AND BODY IMAGE

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CHAPTER THREE

BREATH AND BODY WISDOM
EXPERIENCING THE PERSONAL POWER OF SELF

Barbara Lynn Cull-Wilby



WE WILL ENGAGE SIX TO SEVEN hundred .million breaths in a lifetime.¹ Breathing is one of the few automatic processes of bur bodies that we can bring under conscious control. Awareness of breath brings us to recognize its significance: breath both influences and is influenced by *every* experience in our moment-to-moment functioning.² It is used in every single word and movement; it is necessary for "all energy-producing chemical reactions in the body."³ Breathing connects us to life, to spirit, to Self. It connects us with our environment. Breath is incredibly significant. It is remarkable that we breathe so much and ate so dependent on breath yet often are not even aware that we are breathing.

Breath is simultaneously both a *literal* and a *metaphorical* function.⁴ As a *literal* function, breath is focused primarily on the physical understanding: the pulmpnary exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, for example. If breathing becomes difficult, the emphasis is on re-establishing the optimum functioning of the respiratory tract. Pharmaceuticals have been the main choice of treatment for breathing difficulties. Breath as a *metaphorical* function reveals one's life as it is experienced physically, but also spiritually, emotionally, mentally and culturally. If the breathing becomes difficult, the emphasis is on understanding the life experiences that are contributing to the breathlessness. Practising an awareness of breath, which could perhaps include the use of pharmaceuticals, might be used to help the condition.

Breath is both inhalation and exhalation. Inhalation means to inspire, literally breathing in oxygen and divine inspiration with each breath. Receiving,

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opening, accepting, allowing — these are all literal descriptions of the physical act of breathing in. They are also, at the same time and as equally important, descriptions of the metaphorical, the symbolic nuances of breathing in. How open are you to receive in your life? Are you open to accept loving gestures? Money? Friendship? Criticism? These questions may reveal obvious responses. Yet it is interesting to pay attention to the subtle ways we accept the experiences of our day. This receptiveness can be "tested" in any situation. Try it now. How open are you at this moment — can you stop reading and deeply notice the environment that you are in? Are you comfortable? Did you consciously choose your environment? Why? Why not? Is your breathing long or short? Are you open to thinking of your breath as divine inspiration? Do you resist that idea? Are you open to exploring the awareness that breath facilitates — the awareness that you can be who you desire to be now and always?

Exhalation means to exhale, literally and metaphorically expiring with each breath — dying, letting go, giving, releasing. How open are you to letting things go? What are you holding on to that no longer fits with your life? Whom are you holding on to? By breathing deeply in various situations, by consciously breathing in as well as out, you can direct and redirect the possibilities, as if to open the possibilities. Simply bringing your awareness to your breath — when breathing in know that you are breathing in, when breathing out know that you are breathing out — brings you to a point of focus that can facilitate a calming of your thoughts, your emotions and your body.

By doing so, we are more sharply aware of ourselves and our environment, which includes others. Being mindful of our breath can allow us to acknowledge that we might be resisting someone or something. Resistance is often accompanied by a shallow breath or a holding of breath. Therefore, there is reduced amount of oxygen and life energy being used to facilitate the vigour of bodily functions, to formulate thoughts and to recognize and understand emotions.

I have a dear friend who is quick to anger. Choosing to breathe deeply and consciously when she feels her anger rising offers her different possibilities to her predictable behaviour of blind rage. Each cell of her body benefits physically from an influx of oxygen, so does the clarity of her mind, emotions and spirit. She takes in more life (more air, more awareness of her environment, her feelings and mental formations) when she breathes deeply. Fear and anger constrict her respiratory and circulatory systems; she is not able to think or

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function with clarity. Through the calm, clearly felt field of energy that comes as a result of her focused breathing, she is better able to see the fear behind the anger and thus better able to understand and let go. It takes practice and a willingness to be open to try something new. Learning to respond to fear with blind rage is a familiar, inherited and well-practised pattern that has been subtly nurtured and reinforced in her life experiences, even with as innocent a comment as "Oh, she's always had a temper." Seeing herself holding her breath in anger allows my friend the possibility of reflecting rather than blindly ranting: perhaps she might ask, What is this anger about? What is it that causes me to hold my breath? Am I afraid to breathe fully, to speak fully, to act fully in this situation, with this person? Breathing with awareness not only nurtures the healthy functioning of her physical body but facilitates an understanding of her life and her choice of response. Her breath is significant, both metaphorically and literally, for a more centred life.

Using the breath to focus on our life energy and bring awareness to our actions and emotions is, on the surface, a foreign idea to our western way of thinking. Yet the origins of the diverse cultures that make up our western civilization, indeed even our language, are grounded in ancient roots and traditions based on an appreciation of breath. Cultural meanings of breath offer the individual possibilities to explore and experience breath as a life-giving force. For example, Chinese teachings depict the understanding of breath beyond a mere exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. The Chi (breath) is energy connected to all that is. This energy not only encompasses the body, it flows through it; it is it. The inhalation and exhalation of breath forms a part of this energy flow yet breath is also the metaphor for the vitalizing energy of life. It is, in the Chinese philosophy, the very essence of life:

Therefore, the able, the wise and the scholars treasure life when it is not yet endangered . . . The way (TAO) is breath. The ruler of the body is this essence. This essence is the root of life. By loving the essence and treasuring the breath, you are likely to prolong life.⁵

Prana is the Hindu word for life principle. "Prana is not oxygen, but rather is that which gives *life* to the oxygen, the actual life force within the oxygen."⁶ "To breathe deeply is to live fully,"⁷ for breath contains prana according to Hindu belief

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The breath-of-life is a concept central to North American First Nations culture. It is understanding beyond what can be described in words:

This concept of the breath-of-life is discovered everywhere in the unique spiritual world of Indians: in the ceremonial stem of the sacred pipe, in the heart line of animals imprinted on pottery, in the rite of inhaling the first light of day and the conferring of blessings by exhaling. All these symbolic images and gestures are associated with the wind and with the breathing of the universe — the invisible motion of the power that invests everything in existence.⁸

In Hawaiian culture, breath is a basic integral aspect of the language. For example, *ha* means breath, the breath of life, inspiration. *Moha* is the greeting for hello, goodbye. It means to go with, or to be with, the breath of life.⁹ "*Ruh* in Hebrew and Arabic means both 'breath' and 'spirit.' The Dakota and the Sioux called it *niya*, the Aztec *ehcatl*.¹⁰ Psychology is the study of *psyche*, a word commonly referred to in our language. The original meaning of *psyche* "is breath, life, spirit, soul, mind" derived from the Greek work *psukhe*. Spirit is derived from the Latin word *spimre*, to breathe. Similarly, in Hebrew, "soul, life, person" literally refers to "that which breathes."¹¹ Christian teachings record the connection between breath and spirit. God, having formed humans from dust, breathed into the nostrils the breath of life, and a living soul was created.¹²

Reminders that make us aware of breathing fully *can* be found everywhere, certainly in nature, with wind, for example. Reminders also exist in common breath-related expressions, such as "So hot you can't breathe." "Catch my breath." "You took my breath away." "Breathe new life into something old." Stop now. Close your eyes .and in a symbolic way let go. Concentrate and with gentleness bring your awareness to your breath. Pause a moment and listen. Just listen. No judgment. Simply allow yourself your thoughts, your emotions and your body to be still.

REFLECTING ON MY PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

I do not remember the first time I became aware of *my* breath and its significance for *my* life; perhaps with *my* birth. Many of my past experiences offered me the opportunity to see, feel and learn to value the breath – tobogganing, falling,

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scuba diving, wheezing, pneumonia, asthma, loving, arguing, labouring, birthing, nursing, mothering. At the age of twenty-three (I am now forty-four), approximately one year after I was married, I was diagnosed with asthma. I was shocked with this verdict. Even though I had grown up with a wheeze, I had always seen it as a friendly wheeze. I had been taught in my nursing education to view asthma as an aberration. I was prescribed several pharmaceutical prescriptions. The dizziness, heart palpitations and bad taste of the medicine were difficult to accept, yet I dutifully took them as directed. I also began experimenting with my breathing as I walked up the hill to the university, monitoring my daily functioning and noting gradual improvement. I eventually stopped the medication and continued to experiment with other means to alleviate the breathlessness.

Although my primary focus at that time was on the physical act of breathing, I was, to a degree, aware that my new marital status had an influence on my breathing space. I relate this story because the meaning that I associated with asthma changed as I lived a life that was in contrast to what the physician and the textbooks told me asthma was, and what I felt and experienced as asthma. Essentially there was a blending of knowledge. I knew medically what asthma was. I knew the air became trapped in the alveoli, my air sacs. I knew in order to get a full breath in, I needed to exhale fully. I knew my body and mind functioned better when I concentrated on my breathing. It was this blending of knowledge that allowed me to experiment with the breathlessness as I walked to and from school. This blending essentially was an internal knowing, an awareness, perhaps even an empowerment that suggested I did not have to rely on the official view of treating asthma with medication if it did not feel right with me or feel good and easy with my body.

Years later, I discovered that my efforts to take control of this condition were not unlike those of others in similar situations. In the spring and autumn of 1986, I conducted preliminary interviews with four individuals with asthma as part of the course work for my doctorate. Analysis of the data generated from the interviews revealed that although individuals were using standard treatments, that is, medication, they were also alleviating breathlessness by using strategies based on personal knowledge. For example, a forty-year-old woman described how she achieved drastic improvement by listening daily, for one year, to an audio-tape that she had designed and taped to assist her in imagining a healthy respiratory tract.

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Through my research I began to ask many questions of what I knew, and how I came to know. Again and again I recognized that as a society and as individuals we value and perpetuate dependence on external knowledge and regulation. I saw how we subtly encouraged the concealment and the disregarding of personal knowledge and subjective knowing. We all have personal knowledge as well as knowledge derived from objective and subjective points of view; they are different but not separate, Personal knowledge is often silent and invisible.¹³ "We bring personal knowledge, whether consciously or unconsciously, to every situation. It serves as a bridge for interpretation between objective and subjective knowing."¹⁴ It became more and more obvious to me that we unconsciously encouraged, taught and even financially reimbursed illness and disease. In my pursuit to understand the personal meaning-individuals brought to their illness experiences, I interviewed nine people for my PhD research on the experience of living with asthma. Five of the nine were women: Sophia, Joy, Olivia, Leah and Jane (pseudonyms). Deep contemplation on the breathlessness of asthma in their lives brought me back to an exploration of breath. I struggled with and resisted what I saw emerging from my data analysis because it did not fit with the way I had come to know illness, disease, breath, even life. My foundations were shaken. Others also resisted what I was saying and how I was saying it. It didn't fit with the expected way of being yet there was also growing recognition that as a global society our views of the world were changing.

My research revealed that there was an alternative movement towards understanding the journey of knowing breath as life, breath as soul, breath as Self. Funded by the Canadian Nurses Respiratory Society of the Lung Association, I portrayed this movement in a video featuring the stories of five women: *Living Each Breath; Asthma: A Dis-Coverly of Self?*⁵ Over the past decade I have come to understand this movement as a healing process. It has not only influenced by research but also my work, my life. As a consequence, I made a change to my nursing practice. Honouring my body wisdom, I resigned from a tenured university position in the Faculty of Nursing. The energy demands of mothering three children spoke to a home-based business. My nursing practice now is defined by writing, public speaking and counselling, all focusing on breathing awareness in the experience of discovering Self.

Through the way I live and through my research, I intend to evolve and transform our understanding of life from the current disease-orientated health and illness to an understanding of life as integrated with equanimity, spiritual

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and personal meanings. I want to increase our awareness of what we take for granted and of the language we choose to describe how we live. I would like to see us increase our personal possibilities, acknowledge the inseparability of our lifeworlds, acknowledge the interrelatedness of our worlds and pursue an enjoyment of Self. This means there must be a desire to see the whole, not just symptoms of struggle or disease, for example, but also the *life* of the woman¹⁶ as it is lived and all the elements that make up the totality of her Being: from the spiritual to the physical to the emotional to the environmental. *Everything* contributes to who and what we are and how we know what we know and how and what we pass on to future generations. *Self*, capitalized, is defined as "trusting, open, centered in a calm, clearly felt field of energy. The Self stands for *an ever-deepening experience* of Being and for a *wholeness* in relation to that experience that is open and expansive."¹⁷ It is in the Self that there is an allowing, a recognition of our Essence, our essential nature. When we live with an awareness of this calm and clearly felt energy, we are living in an awareness of a personal experience of one's God, however God is or is not understood. My work is about honouring who we are as individuals. And so, it is about honouring Self and Other equally.

We gain insight into ourselves through allowing ourselves to listen and reflect on the experiences of others. My experience may relate to your experience and vice versa. We truly are not separate from one another. Even if we disagree, each perspective helps to create and picture the whole of reality that we, as individuals, understand. Whether we like to admit it or not, we have created the world in which we live, perhaps with voice or action or silence. Every perspective has value and contributes to understanding the experience of what it means to be a woman. As we allow ourselves the gift of paying attention our breath, we are more able to tap our inner and outer landscapes, our resources and our body wisdom.

LEARNING OUR BODY WISDOM

If statistics are anything to live by (and surely they're as reliable as game shows), Leslie will be dead in five to ten years. *How* is still being decided by her cells. Will it be her stomach, where the ulcer has already made its presence known? Her heart or lungs, whose

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complaints she hears but manages to ignore? Right now, her cells are deciding her future.¹⁸

Because the body is our means of experiencing the world,¹⁹ the search for meaning is inextricably connected to and is one with embodiment. Conscious embodiment is a "complex event and a task accomplished at every moment."²⁰ How aware of your moments are you? How aware of your embodiment are you?

Sally Gadow presents four progressive dialectic levels of relation between the body and the self,²¹ I outline Gadow's body and self dialectic to help you engage in a dialectic with the experiences of your own body. Her writings inspired me to further explore the value of learning and trusting body wisdom. I perceive that it is through the process of mutual learning, of each learning the language of the other (whether the other is her body, a husband, a partner, a mother, an environment, an audience, a family, a religion, or a piece of art) that personal power is uncovered and consciously experienced. The dialectic is an honest exchange grounded in an open curiosity, a willingness to deeply listen, and a mutual respect allowing the others validity.

In Gadow's first level, Primary immediacy: the lived body, the body and self form a unity of lived body separate and distinguishable from the world. In Disrupted immediacy: the object body, the second level, the body is opposed to self and is considered to be a source of impediment. The immediacy of being in the world, of breathing thoughtlessly is shattered as the self experiences the restrictions imposed by the body:

The self either controls the body, through discipline, habituation and training, or is controlled by it through illness, awkwardness, disability. In either case, the relation is one of implicit struggle: I *will master* this musical instrument; I *will not* give in to this pain. Body and self are inevitably at odds with one another.²²

Two directions are possible in an attempt to restore unity between self and object body. In one, *Renewed dichotomy*, the body and self continue to play out the master and slave scenario. "The self attempts to master the body conclusively by scientifically comprehending it, that is, relegating it to the abstract world of pure objectiveness and categories."²³ The second possible direction is a new unity, which Gadow identifies as the third level of the dialectical progression: *Cultivated immediacy: Harmony of lived body and object*

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body. Here the body and self are not opposed. The body becomes the means to fulfill the aims of the Self. Still missing, however, is the full recognition of the body as a respected and trusted member of the dialectic. Hence, the Self relies on learned ways to master, often masking the messages from the body. "Determination from the body is experienced as negative (limit, constraint) and, furthermore, as secondary to the determination imposed by the self."²⁴ The final possible level of the dialectic is *Aesthetic immediacy: completion of the dialectic in aging and illness*. It is in this final level that the idea of honouring Self and Other equally was triggered and hence the idea of honoring and understanding the messages from our bodies.

Coupled with what I saw emerging from my research data, Gadow's dialectic levels of relation between the body and the self revealed to me a possibility of teaching ourselves to listen to our bodies so that we may discover how we are responding to, and in a sense receiving, the experiences of our lives. Gadow posits that it is through aging and illness that we can choose to recognize the body as an equal in the dialectic of experience. This aesthetic immediacy, as she calls it, reflects the awareness of beautiful presence, replaces both the body and the Self in a continual dance of each learning the language of the other. Gadow describes this "new relation between self and subject body" as intrasubjectivity. The self recognizes the body as another manifestation of selfness. She uses the analogy of a child within a family and recognizes that ideally "the child's reality *as a subject*, is of equal value with every other person in the family."²⁵

I like this example of a child's reality being of equal value in a family because it is a concrete metaphor for symbolizing the potentially infinite expressions of the body. I have three children. Esther is seven, my youngest. Simon and Sarah, both in their teens, have evolved their art of being present in their reality through being heard — sometimes through vocal expression, sometimes through bodily gestures and sometimes through their chosen absence or presence. Esther's voice is not always heard, not always equally valued. To announce her desires, she may choose tears or change the tone of her voice to a pitch that gets attention. The body, through respiration, executes its "contact with the world," announcing its "mood and desires."²⁶ The personal meanings of our experiences are coloured with the interpretations we have learned from our own particular lives, each one filled with infinite, unique, individualized experiences. There are always many levels of interpretation

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possible in any given situation. We are all acting on personal meaning; acting on our level of awareness of embodiment. Esther has not yet learned to mask the messages from her body to suit the expectations of others. For example, she readily feels her own beautiful presence and is able to release easily her frustration with tears. Although not yet conscious, she trusts and therefore effortlessly acts with the messages her body gives.

We need to be aware of the messages our bodies give to us. It is an "out and in experience." We can "both move the body proper and are moved by it."²⁷ Touching something or someone and being touched by something or someone dramatically increases awareness if we can allow both, to happen simultaneously; touching makes embodiment keenly and acutely felt.²⁸ Breath is both out and in. When I consciously embody my wheeze, I feel the restricted bronchi and am aware that I restrict the bronchi. As I fully embody the restriction, it releases. This process of allowing myself to join with the restriction is calming for it requires quiet poignant focusing. Often I gain insight into my own personal meaning of what the restriction is about. To live with an awareness of a possible dialectic is to uncover personal meaning in the search, the quest of finding what works and what doesn't work to release the restrictions I experience. Discovering embodiment is a quest; embodiment is a unique relation to the world; a unique way of being-in-the-world.

Without this embodiment, this body wisdom, I would not always *act* on messages my body gives. Indeed, it may seem and is often considered naive or trivial to heed our bodies as if they were communicating honestly and with authority. The women in my research project talked about how they learned to listen to their bodies — to embody their experience in breathlessness. They imagined themselves on a desert island where they could create their own space. On a desert island, the function of breathing switches its focus from the breathlessness of the restriction ("something happening to me") to the breath that is associated with the method to remain calm ("something I am doing"). It is not necessary to meet anyone else's expectations — only their own. On a desert island there is time to focus and centre. For these women, it is a way of coming into their being, to reorient themselves to the world, to Self. They can slow down, relax and focus inward. This image helped the women alleviate breathlessness, a technique used after all else had failed. This imagery and practice helped them learn to regulate their breathing in other situations. Joy,

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sitting at the legislators table, consciously but discretely took "deep breaths in and out with pursed lips." Olivia has learned: "Sometimes you can wheeze yourself off by being quiet and just slowing your breathing down. It's like going into a meditation."

LISTENING TO THE LANGUAGE OF THE BODY

Illness has always been of enormous benefit to me. It might even be said that I have learned little from anything that did not in some way make me sick.²⁹

I compare the process of learning to value and respect communication with my body to learning to communicate in French with my friend, Jacinthe. It is a slow process and I improve with practice. If I do not practise, I do not improve, which is fine. Yet, as I learn to communicate in this new language, new possibilities and new experiences unfold; and so it is with the experience of listening to ones body. Emma, a young single mother who came to visit me, learned how to listen and trust her body's language. She told me that in the past during an asthma attack she never knew what her body was going to do. "I was afraid of it. I didn't feel I had any power over it but now I do. I always thought of my body as my enemy and now we're friends." Through listening and experimenting with understanding what relieved her breathlessness and what did not, Emma was able to value, listen and work with the communication from her body. She moved from seeing her body as an enemy to seeing it as a trusted, beautiful presence. This movement is what I define as the healing process. It is a process that allows oneself to embrace the fear and to practise living from a place of trust: trusting one's breath, one's way of knowing, one's values, even one's mistakes, sounds so simple. And it is. *Yet* when we are in a state of being blinded with pain and fear, it can be very difficult to allow ourselves to be open to and nurture this healing movement.

Our bodies talk, not only through voice and thoughts and language but also through an infinite array of expressions: mobility, posture, breathing depth, sight, smell, touch, to name a few. Attending to these bodily messages acknowledges the inseparability of body, mind emotions and spirit. At what level do we choose to heed the body wisdom? Interpreting "asthma attack," for example, based on the word origins might imply that an asthma attack is battle with air, with breath, or a battle with a person's soul or spirit.³⁰ Often we

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do not take the time to explore the deeper meaning of the messages our bodies give. How do we experience these personal meanings? Jane was diagnosed with asthma and allergies at three years of age, shortly after her parents divorced. The synchronicity of these experiences is obvious. Jane, almost twenty at the time of the research interviews, had learned to maintain the asthma in her life through exercise and techniques she had learned from her mother, a nurse. She has learned to live the asthma experience. She learns to balance external control (for example: prescriptions, her mother's attention, the do's and don'ts of others) with her own internal sense of what feels right for her. Asthma is her "birth mark" as she says. It is part of her. To maintain it, she listens to her breath, she pays attention to the experiences of her life and when the asthma bothers her, she deals with it. The meaning Jane gives the asthma is wedded to the experiences of her life and to the depth of her openness and desire to understand it.

As we fully respect and attend to whatever sensations or messages our bodies reveal, we tap wisdom beyond rational knowing. We cross boundaries that have limited our understanding of ourselves and our lives. A salient example would be when I experience the beginnings of nasal congestion. I find this is an opportunity for me to recognize that my life has become overly congested. I have too many things on the go. If I slow my pace and allow myself to connect with that inner calm of *Self*, often the congestion will ease and not develop into a cold. A more subtle example is the feeling, that tug of sensation to contact someone. Often when I consciously value this message and act on it, my phone call comes at a most appropriate time; both for the person I call and for myself. "The body is a metaphor. Listen to it," Sheila Pennington, a Toronto psychotherapist advises.³¹ What do arthritic fingers say about our ability to handle finely the experiences of our lives? Or an irritated digestive tract say about digesting life or about the relationships in our life? The messages of our bodies are wedded to context, to our experiences, our lifeworlds, and although there are common elements they are always unique to the individual. Joy, a forty-one-year old woman, experienced difficulties breathing when she was working in a factory with a specific glue. She took direct actions based on her awareness: "So I made a little stink at work and they did move us, move the area we were working in and put in some floor fans around us. I did continue to work with the glue. I started at that time using a prescription inhaler ... I think it was theroderm. I continued to be a smoker also." Joy experienced difficulties breathing when she smoked. She was aware of this

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but continued to smoke until, as she says, "I just reached a point where I couldn't inhale a cigarette."

There is a personal responsibility and with that a sense of freedom that comes when choosing to respect body's language and wisdom. And yet, the idea of being responsible for my being-in-the-world often has negative connotations. This responsibility with roots in a wholistic paradigm is different from blaming, which has roots in a separation paradigm. For example Leah, thirty-eight, says, "I would like to think that asthma is straight physiologic." This physical cause-and-effect statement of reassurance stems from our ingrained dualism that allows blaming. Joy's statement, too, reflects the ingrained separation of body, mind, emotions and spirit: "I get the feeling sometimes that others feel that you bring on the asthma yourself. Though I find it hard to think of myself as having a disease, I want to know that I don't bring it on myself." Although we want control, we do not want and have not reinforced, taking responsibility for our own lives, our own experiences. Choosing to listen to and act with the body's language reflects taking responsibility and allows for the opportunity of learning and personal growth. Valuing the body wisdom means respecting where you are at this time in your life. Sophia, who is sixty-two, has learned from her many breathless struggles: "I've learned," she says. "A day at a time, I guess."

RITUALS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

Whatever I have encountered in my past now sticks to me as memories or as (near) forgotten experiences that somehow leave their traces on my being - the way I carry myself (hopeful or confident, defeated or worn-out), the gestures I have adopted and made my own (from my mother, father, teacher, friend), the words I speak and the language that ties me to my past (family, school, ethnicity), and so forth.³²

All consciousness is consciousness of something. Each thought is a thought about something. Each thought is felt and experienced in our bodies. Our inherited knowledge is embedded in our way of knowing and in our way of being; it shapes our consciousness and our lives. We embody it. How has my consciousness been shaped? How has your consciousness been shaped? How do you know what you know? Listening to your body, paying attention to the experiences of your life enhances your personal power. How do you respond in

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situations, in relationships? How does your body respond? How aware of your bodily messages are you? Do you allow yourSelf to experience fully? When experiencing fatigue, do you rest, exercise more or have a cup of coffee? When you experience a full bladder, do you go to the bathroom or feel compelled to wait? We have learned and cultivated many ways to mask and cover up our true Selves by using business deadlines, caffeine, sugar, alcohol, fear, anger, medication and silence.

"I am what I say." Language (including all the "phenomena of expression") directs us towards possibilities. What language do we choose to describe our lives, our bodies, our possibilities? "*I am language*/" Sartre wrote.³³ Language serves to create our rituals: the daily patterns of existence that we consciously or unconsciously live, day in, day out. *I am asthmatic. Asthma attacks.* This illness-specific vocabulary becomes internalized and directs, and perhaps limits, a woman's possibilities. *I can't breathe. I can't sleep. I have headaches. I take my medicine.* This language of disease is recited by rote in society, in the family, at work and in social gatherings. And so disease becomes a way of life. "It is a part of life," says Leah, referring to her asthma.

In his work with jazz players' unconventionality of language, Leonard recognized how their language stemmed in part from their "inarticulateness or the incapacity of ordinary language to express extraordinary feelings."³⁴ I wonder, does this reflect a gulf between what we experience internally and what is experienced externally? Are the internal feelings, intuitions, desires, wishes of women not expressed adequately in our ordinary language, in our external expected way of functioning? Jazz players come to grips with emotions so strong "that they are unable to cope with them in ordinary adjectives." Joy experiences emotions so strong she becomes breathless, has to leave the school board meeting and arrives home speechless. Verbalizing feelings led the jazz player to "the edges of language."³⁵ Keeping her feelings to herself leads Joy to prescribed valium. Somehow Joy has learned in her life not to breathe fully, and not to express herself fully. Allowing the time to reflect on the whole of life helps us to see patterns in our struggling.

Can I allow myself to become aware of my past — a past that "sticks to me as memories or as (near) forgotten experiences that somehow leave their traces on my being"? Can I consciously become aware of the inherited knowledge that influences and directs the rituals of my life? Can I then choose whether or not to maintain them? Attention, awareness of rituals facilitates the uncovering of

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personal knowledge and by renewing rituals (perhaps changing them, perhaps not) a personal way of Being is created and practised. It takes *courage* to look at the rituals of our lives and to allow ourselves to reflect on the experiences of the rituals and determine if they fit with our *desire* how we want to be-in-the-world. Does our being-in-the-world reflect our *wishes* or are we living our *lives* with the expectations of others?

To reconnect with breathing as a ritual is to experience the miracle of each breath. It is to reconnect breath with life, with Self. Again, "Self is trusting, open, centered in a calm, clearly felt field of energy. The Self stands for an ever-deepening experience of Being and for wholeness a in relation to that experience that is open and expansive."³⁶

TRUSTING OUR BODY WISDOM

Are we more aware of ourSelves when we breathe consciously? Do we take in more life when we breathe deeply? Are we restricting life when our breathing is shallow? Helen Luke in her book *The Way of Woman* reacquaints us with this miracle of breath:?

I am reminded of a beautiful sentence from an Indian Tantra which is thought to be as much as five thousand years old. It says, 'When in worldly activity, keep attentive between the: two breaths (the in breath and the out breath), and so practicing, in a few days be born anew.'

To the extent, then that we achieve this discrimination, this attention, our lives are freed from a sense of rush and begin to resemble the pattern of a dance instead of a wild plunging about, each movement dear and whole in itself yet related to all the others in the totality of the great pattern. This is the symbolic life. As Irene de Castillejo has said, in her book *Knowing Woman*, this end may seem very remote but all that matters is that we move toward it. Somehow in each tiny effort the whole is already there if we could but recognize it.³⁷

Simply attending to the breath facilitates a learning and a trusting of the body wisdom. To experience personal power is to own our unique life journeys.

BREATH AND BODY WISDOM

To be a Woman of Power is simply to allow mySelf to be who I am. This means to speak what I know in a sharing, trusting, humble way. This, of course, takes courage because it is so simple, honest and authentic. Without masks to protect oneself there is vulnerability and we have not allowed ourselves to learn how to be vulnerable courageously. We have not taught ourselves to be 'honest without judgement.

My perspective of experiencing personal power through trusting body wisdom and breathing is based on the following assumptions. The "heart symbol" at the beginning of each assumption is a reminder to pause and breathe from a place of inner stillness. Although the heart symbol reflects, perhaps, more of a woman's craft than her science, I consciously chose it to provoke awareness of the often fast-paced, taken-for-granted lives we live and to invite awareness of the value of reading and living from a heart felt place of trust, openness, calm and clarity—something that breath can bring into focus.

- ♥ We, as women, are interested in taking responsibility for our lives. This means that we increasingly are letting go of blaming others or of blaming situations. Instead we are choosing to see deeply each experience of our lives with a sense of recognizing that every situation and relationship somehow contributes to the overall richness of Being who we are.
- ♥ We, as women, are interested in growing and "maturing" not only physically but also spiritually, mentally, emotionally and intuitively.
- ♥ We are interested in the power of understanding, the power of compassion, the power of peace; this contrasts, balances and transforms the power of dominance or control over someone or something.
- ♥ The values on which we have structured the various systems of our society (legal, economic, health, environmental) are out of balance. We have overemphasized the values associated with a more masculine perspective — production, manipulation, control, rationalization, analysis and competition. We need to emphasize with equanimity the values associated with _a more

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feminine perspective — creativity, nurturance, intuition, synthesis, co-operation and mutual support.

- ♥ As women, either consciously or unconsciously in response to the multiple and varied experiences of our lives, we have taught ourselves not to breathe fully. Yet to breathe fully is to live fully.
- ♥ “Crisis” is always an opportunity to clarify, to renew and to recreate in such a way that more truly reflects the values on which we mindfully choose to live our lives.
- ♥ We, as women, are the experts in our unique, individual, and yet collective, lives. “We already have everything we need to succeed. Our greatest contribution to this world and to our children, grandchildren, grand-nieces and nephews is to Be fully who we are, now.
- ♥ We, as women, have a desire to be authentic. This means, we have a desire to develop consistency in our lives among our thoughts, words, actions and felt energy (how we feel, what we feel). We recognize that this takes daily awareness, commitment, practice, compassion, gentleness and more practice. And practice means effortless effort.
- ♥ We have a desire to be the Self we want to be.

I perceive healing to be an ever-evolving process of clarifying Self. As we clarify our Selves we move to a deepening acceptance and an awareness of our Essence. Healing comes from this Essence, from within a person. It focuses on balance and harmony. The healing process is a journey, a life-long dance of experiencing and discovering Self. Essentially it is a journey of awareness; a journey of empowerment; coming to a place of trusting “I am who I am.” Healing focuses on taking responsibility for our own health, our own lives. This involves becoming aware increasingly of the multiple influences on our lives and making conscious choices of which thoughts, words, emotions, actions and felt energy we desire to nurture. As we practise honouring ourSelves, this naturally embraces a deepening respect and trust of each other. In turn, our local, national and global communities will benefit. Imagine such a possibility.

BREATH AND BODY WISDOM

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- research. I have worked with the Breast Cancer Support Network, Osteoporosis Support Group, Palliative Care Practitioners, Mental Health Staff, Department of Social Work as well as women's church groups and elementary school teachers.
16. I use the feminine gender here and throughout the chapter because of the focus of this book and also because of my desire to contribute consciously to balancing our predominantly masculine view of the world. Albeit, the work is intended for all people, all ages, without prejudice.
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