

Air--Empty Space or Animating Force?

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We see fish in a pond and say that fish live in water. Yet, we humans often fail to recognize the medium in which we are immersed--air. We imbibe air continually, all the while failing to notice that we live in a "pond" of air. Indeed, we refer to the unseen volumes between objects, such as people or trees, as "empty space."

Take a fish from the water and it flops and dies; remove us from our medium, the air, and we collapse. If you need reminding, hold your breath and watch what happens. In a short time the blood vessels in your head begin to bulge and your heart pounds as your body aches for air.

Although the atmosphere is largely invisible, it is pulsating with gases, spores, dust, fungi, and microscopic animals--all stirred by air currents. In a mere ounce of air, there are trillions of pulsating atoms.

Think of the air rushing into your nasal chamber--chock full of molecules that brings you detailed information about your surroundings--stimulating appetite, arousing you, warning you, and, perhaps at times, even triggering deep emotions and distant memories.

We are intimately embraced by air. Our bodies--our lungs and circulatory system--are designed to absorb air and draw it into the core of our being. The air exchange surfaces inside our lungs are immense; if spread out, they would equal the playing surface of a racketball court.

With each inhalation we literally take the world into our bodies; we take in atoms of oxygen that were once part of leaves, lakes and rocks. And with each exhalation we give back part of ourselves to the earth system; we literally breathe out carbon atoms that were for a time part of our cells--part of our heart, liver, kidneys, and muscles. Once free in the air, these atoms will eventually find their way into some other life form. The acclaimed geneticist, David Suzuki, sums it up this way:

"The longer each of us lives, the greater the likelihood that we will absorb atoms that were once part of Joan of Arc and Jesus Christ, of Neanderthal people and woolly mammoths. As we have breathed in our forebearers, so our grandchildren and their grandchildren will take us in with their breath. We are bound up inseparably with the past and the future . . ."

Suzuki observes that it is no accident that a web of words has been created which recognize the sacred status of air. The word "spirit" is derived from the Latin "spiritus" meaning "breath" with connections to soul, intelligence, and essence. It is by breathing mindfully that we may begin to reconnect to our essence; and with this extended awareness, the importance of clean air to our quality of life becomes apparent. Nonetheless, in our quest for material well

being, all too often, we seem inclined to forget our essential dependence on clean air. In a recent dinner conversation a local highschool teacher was expressing concern about the effects new roads, increased traffic, and incessant growth on air quality here in our Ridge and Valley community. She had barely finished her thought when a colleague interjected, "Do you really advocate slowing down our growth and denying ourselves the "necessities of life" for the sake of clean air?" There was a silence and then the teacher responded: "I don't know about you, but I personally would consider clean air to be one our very most fundamental "necessities of life. . ."

Ecologist and Philosopher, David Abram, sums up both our dilemma and our challenge: "As long as we experience the invisible depths that surround us as empty space, we will be able to deny, or repress, our thorough interdependence with the other animals, the plants, and the living land that sustains us. . . Only as we begin to notice and to experience, once again, our immersion in the invisible air do we start to recall what it is to be fully a part of this world."

These days I try to breathe with full consciousness that the "environment" is not something "out there." We all breathe in the environment; we are part of the environment and it is part of us. We cannot taint and compromise the air, without tainting and compromising ourselves.