

5 days with Mike White and his Optimal Breathing

Hi, I am Dan S. I am from Philadelphia and work as a speech pathologist in a hospital as well as voice therapist in an ENT clinic.

This whole process has been an eye opener as well as a breath opener for me.

It has certainly reminded me of some things I already knew about myself and also given me more clarity of vision vis a vis my personal and professional goals.

We breathe to stay alive, but we also breathe to "be" alive, to live.

The breath of life might perhaps be best expressed as the breath of living.

That has been a big take home message for me from this experience. It is surprising how much we can be held back by sub-optimal breathing patterns.

Another message I've been able to begin accepting is that it is okay for me to be myself, to be human

a fallible human being who doesn't have to get things right all the time or carry himself in a rigid "professional" manner all the time.

This is Mike's home, not military school;

and he is sharing himself.

It's okay for me to do the same.

Breathing and "being" is not a simple right or wrong process.

There is no right or wrong; there is my own internal experience and sensation, and how it guides me.

We all want to be the best we can be, and we need to be able to give ourselves permission to do just that.

I find that I often hold my "self" back. This can't do any favors for my own healthful breathing.

Does less than optimal breathing play a role in less than optimal living? I can see a strong correlation. I am now more aware of my own holdings and bracing that most likely contribute to my various chronic injuries, aches and pains. This work helps me open that up and experience (and feel) more of what I think my true self is or should be. I know I will not wind up a statistic-- someone with a bunch of medical diagnoses that show correlation to dysfunctional breathing.

I think we are all in a process of becoming. I feel myself in that no-man's land between psyche and soma as I discover my full breath and full self (slowly but surely).

To fully breathe helps me access more of myself. It isn't necessarily something I have to let out for the world to see, at least not at this particular juncture; but it helps me realize what is possible.

This is a personal experience of letting go and letting natural things happen-naturally.

I didn't start this training as a sympathetically dominant person, but that doesn't mean I didn't come with my own set of issues that held me back and that I have now gotten a better glimpse of through the various physical releases and just through conversations with a teacher whose insight and genuine caring are an inspiration .

I was already fairly well read as a student of "the breath" as far as physiologic principles and some ideas of various ways to facilitate more healthful breathing, but now it was time for direct experiential learning.

I feel that I can be a much more well rounded clinician in my own field because I have now "been there and done that" rather than just having a collegial relationship with breathing work.

What I have experienced with Mike is an accessible method of opening up not only my own breathing mechanism but also more of my personal authenticity. How can the two be separate?

A lot of psychology comes into play when you start working with breathing. I am as guilty as anyone else in being constantly wrapped up in my head and in all the machinations of daily professional goings-on.

What goes on in the body, however, is equally if not more important (especially in terms of my awareness of it) than the thoughts, plans, ideas, etc. that race through my head.

I have been so accustomed to acquiring continuing education for the benefit of others that I have sometimes forgotten the breathing pause and considered my self. Then again, as a fan of Nietzschean philosophy, I believe in being an example of the things I espouse, to practice what I preach.

This training has allowed me to put myself at the front of the proverbial line and experience what is necessary.

I cannot pass onto others what has not made a significant difference in my own soma not if I want to pass myself off as an authentic, genuine clinician or human being.

We all have a various collection of selves we present to the world in terms of the roles we play in our lives: friend, sibling, co-worker, student, teacher, parent, etc. Each role demands adjustments in how we present ourselves tone of voice, use of language, display of humility or authority, ad infinitum.

But I have been guided to think about how I present myself to my self.

This has occurred naturally, not as a dictate of the training.

My breathing pattern and habits have always been fairly healthful, but of course with plenty of room for improvement and development, especially if I want to claim to be a therapist who can guide others.

However, my personal experience with this work tells me very strongly that breathing and our own personal psychology cannot be easily separated.

And why should they?

I have discovered more and more of own ability to let go, to allow, to not focus so much on doing something right, but to explore, sense, appreciate.

As a student of somatic work, I have learned to appreciate how one's life experiences influence his or her practice of whatever helping discipline they might practice.

Mike's own life experiences are clearly brought to bear in his teaching and coaching.

And since Mike's path has not been the "common," circumscribed American life, he offers more than I could have expected; and the benefits are mine!

For me in some ways, the breathing mechanics work is the easy part.

It is what a full, free breathing pattern can do for your real, whole self that inspires me.

How I feel internally is expressed externally whether I mean to do so or not.

I've always been one of those people who wears his heart on his sleeve.

I now realize that I also wear it in my spine, shoulders and neck!! I feel like I've been lucky as a bodily arts practitioner that my own patients/clients have not bothered to recognize it.

But now I have a new arsenal of self-help ideas and techniques to get myself out of some of the habitual patterns that hold me back physically and perhaps psychologically and socially. It's a challenge, a process

But sometimes we need that objective set of eyes and intuition that helps us see ourselves honestly.

I have had that experience working with Mike.

That is what his own life experience, training and background have given him the ability to do.

If I had not come here and done this training,

I may not have been able to find the ability to break further away from my self-imposed limitations and become the best me I can be.

One of the biggest challenges is to let go and allow the breathing process to unfold during the various exercises and explorations.

I have learned to be a bit more honest with myself throughout this training, to not focus on gaining someone else's approval as much as enjoying my own experience and learning from it.

The work at the gym was especially helpful on at least 2 levels.

It reminded me that there is more than one definition of the word exercise.

Also, it was a great rib opening experience to use weights and weight machines in new ways to open the costal spaces and allow more room for breathing that isn't utilized as much as it probably should be.

It is surprising sometimes at how stiffly or tightly we hold ourselves without knowing itô for me, especially, when lifting weights. The way we breathe while doing resistance training can either support what we're doing or impede it.

I am just as prone to Thomas Hanna's "sensory-motor amnesia" as anyone. There are muscular holdings and tightnesses that I have difficulty sensing but are quite apparent visually. They can creep up on you.

The work with Mike brings me to a new level of understanding of myself, first and foremost,

but it also is a great reminder of how many, many people are likely going through their lives with unnecessary, unsensed limitations of breath and movement, and range of motion in muscles and joints, and a general decrease in the fullness of life because of lack of somatic awareness.

Some of the breathing skills and movements to elicit and enhance reflexive inspiration gave me what I might describe as a true Zen experience, especially with regard to stress relief.

Some of the movements involve such a mental focus that I found it to be nearly impossible to have my thoughts invaded by the usual mundane intrusions or everyday worries.

I encourage anyone to not underestimate the value of these simple movements. This work puts you into yourself more than you might be expecting.

But Mike reads you well and knows what you need.

I didn't know exactly what to expect when I got here, and I'm sure others' experience will be different from mine. But I do know that Mike's Optimal Breathing work is a doorway to whole-body, whole-person wellness and healthy self-exploration.

I am a more complete person for having had this experience.

Dan Sherwood, SLP

One week later.

I'm sitting here in my little suburban Starbucks after a 9-hour Saturday in that hospital. Whew! It's amazing how so much of what goes on in that place is about saving people from themselves. So many of the things that put people in the hospital seem so preventable. Unhealthy lifestyles and bad habits can really catch up to us. I apologize in advance if this email gets a bit lengthy. I just may have a lot to say. First of all, let me thank you for that CD with the Tibetan bells/bowls.

It's wonderfully relaxing and peaceful, which is a very good thing for me to access. I've been playing it every night while I read-- on the sofa now, not in bed. I slept the BVS on for 2 nights, even wore it to the gym one day to see what would happen. Sleeping with it was a challenge at first, just getting used to the feeling of something on me that normally isn't there. Upon waking each morning and removing it, it felt as if I had just done the OBRs. Nice, full, energizing, complete breaths that lasted until I was on the train ride into town an hour later.

Wearing the strap at the gym was okay while working biceps, but I had to remove it for my quad workout. I just needed all the unconstricted room I could get, because I get more winded on leg days. Meanwhile, I enjoy many of the various movement explorations to connect with my breathing. The core development puts me in a good spot, and I've been sharing it with others. Coincidentally (?), on my first day back at work on Thursday, my first 2 patients in the voice center desperately needed work with their breathing, and there I was with a new arsenal of techniques and principles to help them. It was a good morning. That same day, one of my colleagues referred one of her patients to me to work on her breathing. Then Thursday night I got an email from ECH. My article on Corollary Discharge was accepted for publication in the next journal. So that was a good feeling. A good week all around, for the most part. But...

You know, I've often lamented that one of the worst things for me to have is time to sit and think. I usually try to keep myself busily involved in some project to complete. If I have time to ruminate over things I can quickly depress or perhaps anger myself. Since I had Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday off from work I had that time. I did get some important things done. Found a place that sells those Cell-drinks and got several bottles. I also ordered and received 2 cases of those Raw Crunch bars. Excellent. I read both the Grain Damage and Green For Life books. Very eye opening. But alas, still a lot of time to just think. In my little essay that we recorded last Saturday I mentioned the many psychological attachments to breathing work. I meant it and continue to experience it. But for me it may a bit askew compared to others' experiences. I have had various summer excursions over the years that have turned me seriously inward and sort of "asked" me to be a different person upon returning to my usual life. Sometimes you just return from a place where you experienced something special and you feel like you're just not the same person you were before you did it. This was definitely one of those experiences for me. I know I mentioned to you that I have a book I wrote about...well...about what it is and has been like to be me, given the environment I was raised in. The title is "Other Than Normal: Examining the Dysfunctional Life." Right now it's just a Word file on my computer, and I don't know if it could ever be publishable; it was just one of those things I just had to get out of me. Anyway, the

various chapters discuss the long term results of growing up in a, shall we say, less than nurturing environment. After working with you, I now need to add another chapter and talk about posture and breathing.

I need to discuss how growing up where and how I did affected the way I physically carry myself and how I present myself to the world without even knowing it. I know there are probably a lot of folks like me out there who also were raised in painful or insane circumstances, and there are a lot of unconscious ways they/we/I maintain dysfunctional behavior by way of postural and breathing impairments. So I guess writing that chapter will be my next project to keep me occupied and prevent me from "thinking." **(from mike) It is a great idea. That kind of thinking as long as you keep breathing a little deeper can be VERY healing. Come back for a few days work in six months time. There is much more to experience but you will need time to integrate what we did.**

Otherwise, I am really thinking a lot about altering my diet for the better. I am so glad to have had this exposure with you and to have begun to learn about raw foods, green foods, alkalinity. I only had the most rudimentary knowledge of it all beforehand. Now I have a nice new blender, and tomorrow I'll be at Whole Foods grabbing fruits and veggies galore, as well as chia seeds, flax seed, www.bulkfoods.com maybe some of that aloe Vera. We'll see how I do. What will be important for me is finding an information source to guide me in daily menu planning so what and how I eat supports not only my health but also my exercise routine/goals. It will be a good adventure for me. I want to lead by example-- not shouting it out loud, so to speak, just to form and practice good habits that people may subtly notice. There's no reason for me to automatically look my age.

So that's it for now. I'm at a point of ongoing personal reflection and change. I have spent the last several years acquiring a rather unique skill set, unbelievably unique for a SLP, at least.

for sure. Start using paragraphs. The run-on paragraph above is a sign of not breathing.

I am now the Hospital's best kept secret. Hopefully not for long.

Dan S.