

Life, Pain, Fear, and the Whole Wide World: Breathe In, Breathe Out

written by Holly
July 10, 2015
By Holly Lisle



Breathe in. Breathe out.

A close friend of mine observed recently that he felt guilty about bringing kids into this world—this world being full of nightmares, and pain, and threats, and disasters.

I told him the gift he gave them was the choice to be who they wanted to be, and to make the time they had matter to themselves. I told him that was a precious thing.

But I kept thinking about the basic premise of his worry—that the world is a terrible place, and that bringing new life into it is cruel, or bad, or terrible.

And I came to a life-changing realization.

Where any individual is concerned,

there is no world.

(I acknowledge that from someone who writes science fiction, this is not a reassuring statement, but please bear with me.)

Pain is real—and I have experienced all kinds. Long-term, constant pain from scoliosis undiagnosed until I was 53, fixed by a half-inch lift in my left shoe last year.

Recurring short-term pain, from icepick migraines and regular migraines.

Childbirth three times, and the last time without so much as a Tylenol to take the edge off. That was my go-to example of BIG pain until the several days following surgery on my tongue last month.

New winner: Tongue surgery. Worst pain I've ever experienced.

Gonna do it again next Monday. Yippee.

So, okay. Pain is real.

Tragedy is real—I've lost people I've loved, and I know I'll lose more. No one gets out of this alive (yet), and the anguish of thinking *I'll just call...* followed by the shock of *No. I won't ever hear that voice again*, is terrible.

And fear is real. The whole wide world is a scary place, full of earthquakes, wars, riots, madness, anger, hate, destruction, and death.

But stop.

You don't live in the whole wide world, and neither do I.

Each adult human being takes up an area of somewhere between 1.5 and 5 cubic feet. If we hold our arms out, we can span an

average five-ish to seven-ish feet from side to side.

Our bare feet on the floor or the grass or the rocky surface beneath us touch—on average—less than one square foot of surface at any time.

Our fingers touch and sense areas measured in millimeters.

Our eyes can see maybe a couple of miles in any direction outdoors from a good vantage point on a clear day. Usually, we see only the few feet around us enclosed by walls, or the slightly larger area blocked by buildings, streets, hills, forests—whatever your view is when you're outdoors.

We are small. We have fairly limited senses. And most of us live in small areas and range only short distances from our home base most of the time.

**Your world is the space you fill
and the area you move through.
That's it.**

Which is not to say the world inhabited by any one individual is pure sunshine and roses.

I have been through moments of sheer horror.

The big Guatemala earthquake when I was fifteen.

One moment on a road between Fayetteville and Laurinburg where, for just an instant, I gave the wrong answer to Hamlet's soliloquy, and chose "not to be."

Discovering what my first ex had been doing to our children.

All added together, those moments when my mind damn near shut down and I couldn't breathe comprised maybe sixty to eighty seconds **total** in my life—now standing at 54 years.

Because after the brief disorientation when I woke up, heard the screaming of every human being and every animal in the area around me, and tried to comprehend the sound of a train rushing down on me, and realized that my bed was sliding from one side of the room to the other, slamming first into a wall, then into my sister's bed, then into the wall again, I started thinking.

I managed to get to my sister's bed across the bucking, rippling floor, wake her up, drag her to the screen door that the earthquake locked—external spin-the-block windlocks in a breezeway turn out do be a dangerous thing—and I screamed to my parents for help. My mother unlocked the door and Julie and I got out, and ran from beneath the heavy hand-made tiles that roofed our quarters in the mission to the slightly safer walled courtyard beneath an open sky. (Tall walls, adobe construction—not safe, but safer than those huge, deadly tiles.)

Because in the instant after I decided that the only way I could solve the long misery of my first marriage without shaming my parents with a divorce was to end myself, a little voice in the back of my mind whispered, “Maybe divorce wouldn't be so bad,” and I swerved and avoided the tree I'd been aiming at.

Because after the minute in which I understood what my son was telling me about what his father had been doing to him and his sister, and in the instants after I choked back my gag reflex and my urge to go kill the bastard right that minute, my brain kicked in, and I was able to think about how I could fix what had happened. Call a lawyer. Call my friend in Social Services. Call the police. Keep the kids away from the monster.

The worst horrors we imagine sometimes come true, but in the scale of a lifetime, they end quickly.

And most of the worst horrors we imagine come not from what we experience, but from what others want us to experience, and will never touch us or those we love or any part of our existence.

Most horror is borrowed, experienced third hand, and can be put down as quickly as it was picked up.

Meanwhile, joy is real, too.

Your life is tiny, and within the scope of the space and time you inhabit, it is livable and can be meaningful, and wonderful, and joyful. No matter who you are, no matter where you are, no matter what your life was like yesterday or what it will be like tomorrow.

Horrible things happen all around the world every minute. They always have. They always will.

But your life is not bound to all the horrors in the whole wide world.

Your world is not bound to the strife and conflict thrown at you by the guilt-mongers who want you to feel shame for not being in the middle of a war, not being starving, not being some other race or some other nationality or some other thing that someone else thinks you should be, or wishes you were.

You are not living in yesterday. You are not living in tomorrow.

Your life will have its share of pain, of grief, of fear, of loss, and someday it will end.

But you are here now.

You are in your tiny body, in your tiny space, where you can

see what is real in this moment. Where you can hear and taste and touch the things that actually affect you. Where you can do what matters to you, and where you can choose to make the space that is your world better.

You are, right this instant, where you can bring goodness and joy into the places you can touch.

Or where you can choose to adopt the guilt and weight of the whole wide world until your time runs out, leaving nothing of you that matters behind.

Tomorrow or the next day, you may face terrible pain. I know I will on Monday. This is my reality, and with it comes the reality that this pain will last for days, and will be at times almost unbearable.

But I bore it once. I will bear it again. And it will pass.

I know that in a week, I may not get the news I want regarding the lesion that will be removed. If that happens, I will experience a sense of grief and loss. I will go through another kind of pain.

But I faced up to that pain while waiting for my last results, and managed to let go of the fear. To find joy in those moments I had while waiting.

If I don't get good news, though, I will breathe in. Breathe out. Everyone gets one last good moment. If I can, I want my last good moment to be my last moment.

I have the same instant you have. The same single inhalation, the same single exhalation. The same microscopic now.

And from where I am standing right now, I can honestly say this—joy can grow in the strangest of situations, in the thinnest of soil, simply because you choose to plant the seed. Joy is a tough, beautiful thing.

And it grows in the space of a breath.

It grows when you realize that your life matters, and if right in this instant your life only matters to you, that's okay. You get to find joy in that—that you care about yourself, that you love the way it feels to inhale. To exhale.

That being able to touch a keyboard or a flower or a friend's hand is wonderful.

That smiling at a stranger, and having that stranger smile back makes you happy.

That standing in the hot sun feels good against your skin, and drinking a glass of cold water feels good, too.

That thinking your thoughts—knowing no one else can touch them or take them—is perfect freedom, no matter your circumstances.

That this instant, however imperfect, is yours for this breath, and it will be what you choose to make of it in this breath.

You are not the whole world, and you do not carry the guilt for the whole world, or even a tiny subset of it.

You are small. Light. You have ideas that are beautiful. Your thoughts are unchained, no matter where you are.

All you have to do is figure out how to make your life and the tiny portion of the world that you touch better for you and whoever matters to you, in just this moment.

To be joyful, you only have to create the life you love.

And you only have to do it one breath at a time.

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved