

# Perhaps All Our Dragons

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*Abstract: This article contains testimonials from breathwork participants in Rebecoming workshops, a description of breathwork's emergence from the field of Humanistic Psychology and demonstrates its unique value and utility as a stand-alone modality within the larger framework of Transpersonal Psychology. 2009.*

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The shades are drawn for the afternoon session and percussive music from Babatunde Olatungi's album "Drums of Passion" fills the half-dark room through substantial speakers. Twelve self-paired participants, men and women between 23 and 69 years old, have found a comfortable place for themselves across the beige carpeted floor of the retreat center meditation room, one sitting as their partner lies on a mat beside them. A middle-aged man on his back holds his ankles as he lifts his hips off the ground and whoops triumphantly, his cries subsumed by the music, repeating this action over and over until falling back exhausted. A young woman is curled up in a fetal position weeping quietly as her sitter leans in just enough to be ready to offer an ear, tissues, and always his presence. An older woman is rocking vigorously from side to side crying "No! Listen! No! NO!"; another individual is crouched as still as a rock, head between their knees, a blanket covering them from head to toe. A young man expresses his anger by beating his fists on the mat and trash-talking, whilst in the opposite corner of the room, her arms outstretched in a gesture of ecstatic embrace, a woman lies quietly with a beatific smile on her face.

Welcome to a session of breathwork, a work that grew out of the human potential movement of the 1960's, where, in gestalt, bio energetic, primal and other forms, the emphasis was less on talking *about* ones problems from the past than talking *to* them in the present. "My father did not love me" became "Daddy, you don't love me!", and this simple but astonishingly effective shift of emphasis, originated by Jacob Moreno and

Fritz Perls, was a significant modus operandi of participants in workshops, marathons and events at various “new age” centers where individuals could directly and vigorously express their inner condition in a way that would have been unwelcome as inappropriate in a therapist’s office.

The results were noteworthy, and the post-session feelings of resolution that typically followed these meditative, ecstatic and tumultuous encounters with the individual’s deep psyche particularly interested psychiatrist Stanislav Grof. He had been invited to Esalen, where Perls lived and worked, as a scholar-in residence to write about the clinical research he and his colleagues had conducted with psychoactive medicines in both his native Prague, Czechoslovakia as well as at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Maryland, which research sought to evaluate the healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. Finding that the experiences of individuals he encountered at Esalen uncannily matched the experiences of individuals from his work in Prague and Baltimore, Grof was impressed by how these healing states could be achieved without medication. He identified conscious breathing, music and complete freedom of expression within a supportive environment as the basic elements, and with his wife Christina developed breathwork during the 1970’s -1980’s. During the subsequent thirty-something years of rigorous self-proving, trained facilitators have conducted well over one million three-hour sessions in all fifty states and in many countries of the world including Canada, Mexico, Europe, Africa, South America, India, Russia, China, Australia and New Zealand.

If this all activates your skeptical button, you are not alone; the healing potential of What? Non-ordinary states of consciousness are of scant interest to therapists in the field, despite the fact that Sigmund Freud famously called dreams, the non-ordinary states with which we are nightly familiar, the ‘Royal Road’ to the subconscious. With dreams, sleep is the agent that nudges the ego-self aside, allowing the subconscious to rise within non-ordinary consciousness and reveal its hidden contents. With breathwork the non-ordinary state is an artifact of the breathing, the music and the supportive milieu, and, importantly, one is *awake* to receive the subconscious material at the very moment it emerges. It is

both this revelation of the astonishingly rich source of information, and the participant's immediate engagement with it, that defines breathwork.

None of this is mainstream, however, and some robust skepticism is in order. The healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness largely unacknowledged and inadequately understood and the action of this work runs counter to many tenets of the psychotherapeutic professions; and, in certain of its expressions, of civil propriety and everyday common sense. Context is the thing. Raging on the highway can be fatal; raging in a safe and controlled environment can lead to understanding of its source and, potentially, resolution. Mythologist Joseph Campbell, one of Dr. Grof's mentors, speaks to the importance of just such a location, writing; "You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don't know what was in the papers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be." Offering such a safe place, ample time and every support by skillful means to individuals seeking self-discovery is the essential role played by breathwork facilitators.

We have developed strategies in every area of our lives to manage feelings as they may arise; therapeutically with pharmaceutical drugs and talk therapy of various stripes, socially with civility and self-restraint and societally with simple prohibition. All these make perfect sense on their face but have collectively demonstrated a regrettable lack of success in ameliorating fear, depression, anxiety, lack of self-worth as well as other challenges, like trauma, alcoholism and addiction that are attendant upon these conditions. I have experienced this healing potential myself and, as a facilitator for the past thirteen years, have seen lasting changes in others. The 2007 article in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* entitled "Holotropic Breathwork: The Potential Role of a Prolonged, Voluntary Hyperventilation Procedure as an Adjunct to Psychotherapy", principally authored by clinical psychologist Joseph P. Rhinewine, PhD., hypothesizes the mechanism of action that can undercut our rigid defense structures.

The active agent of breathwork is conscious breathing and it is certainly work, for participants and facilitators both. Essentially the breathing alters the homeostatic relationship between oxygen to carbon dioxide in the blood, temporarily inhibiting the frontal cortex whilst simultaneously enabling access to the emotional or middle brain, offering the real possibility for a meeting with ourselves, an openhearted understanding of oneself *by* oneself, free of the well-meaning interpretations of professionals. During this process, typically around three hours, the necessary real-time presence of trained facilitators offer their watchful presence to always support, but never direct, whatever movement or sound or gesture the participant's inner self chooses to express to advance its own unfolding. As much by their non-actions as by their actions, breathwork facilitators truly express the original definition of the word therapist; from the Greek "therapeutes", meaning "an attendant to the healing process"

And the outcomes are considerable. The testimonies of many of the more than one million participants who have been successfully exposed to non-ordinary states of consciousness with breathwork, backed-up by clinical and lay observations of facilitators worldwide, attest to the staying power of the changes that can occur as a result of exposure to this work. One facilitator, who worked in the 1990's as a consultant to the Office of Trauma Services in the Maine Department of Mental Health, concurrently offered private breathwork groups to individuals suffering from the impact of trauma and abuse. Fifteen and more years after their exposure, many credit their recovery, from such conditions as dissociative identity disorder, anxiety, depression and debilitating anger, to their experiences in breathwork. They moved to a state of unified-self identity and experienced other beneficial and permanent life-changes that have maintained until today.

A testimonial from one traumatized and subsequently alcoholic individual comes from Simon, the firstborn son of a rageful and violent father and a sexually dysfunctional and emotionally smothering mother. He writes, "I was a gentle boy, sensitive and intelligent, drawn to books and to religion. I had mystical experiences, reported to me by my parents,

since before I could remember”. Sent away to a minor seminary at age fourteen to become a missionary priest, he struggled with his own homosexuality, having dangerous liaisons as part of a pattern of wanton sexual behavior whilst abusing drugs and alcohol. He was also “...taking so much medication that the pharmacy had to call the prescribing physician to check it was the right dosage.” He was “lonely, melancholy and depressed”, had suicidal ideation “...and a plan...”. With his weight fluctuating between 300 and 320 pounds he asked his superiors for help with his eating disorder. Diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and major depression at an Arizona addictions recovery center, he spent six months at a Canadian facility undergoing “...psychotherapy and body related therapies; bio-energetics, yoga, swimming, massage.” Introduced to breathwork upon his return, for two hours of his first three-hour session “...my legs moved on the mat as if I were doing some kind of tribal dance. I had never felt such energy in my legs. I’ve always been a top-down kind of person; spirit, head, heart, no lower than that. Breathwork gave me my body back. I found my own power, my sexuality, my grounding and my voice; it has been an integral part of my healing. I have been abstinent from alcohol and drugs, and sexually sober, for 15 years. I had gastric-bypass surgery and have lost 150lbs. I am free of all psychiatric medication, feel a strong sense of self and have good self-esteem. I have worked as a psychotherapist for fifteen years helping people recover from difficulties similar to my own.”

The power of breathwork to enrich awareness and give meaning is illustrated by the testimony of Polly, a state registered psychiatric nurse and new grandmother, who has participated in workshops for the past few years. She says, “Having been in analysis for probably twenty years, I tried breathwork and had some really amazing growth experiences. In the first I reworked a situation with my father; I knew the facts, I knew the feelings but in the session I was able to actually *experience* this and stay with it. I did not allow myself to be dismissed and then was able to feel a major connection with him. I thought ‘This is really powerful’; I could go beyond all the analysis and therapy that I had done and come out with a totally different awareness of how it could have been different had my father either been more receptive or if I had not allowed myself to be dismissed.’ She has continued with breathwork a few times a year and says, “I feel like I have just

become more real in every aspect of my life, where I am not afraid to talk and not afraid to think differently. I feel my potential is growing and being developed more.”

Polly’s experience speaks to breathwork’s ability to allow the breather to be present inside an experience *as an active participant*. This vital affirmation of Lao Tse’s ancient aphorism, “Tell me and I will forget; Show me and I will remember; Involve me and I will understand”, is key to understanding the healing potential of holotropic states of consciousness, defined as non-ordinary states of consciousness that move the participant towards a healing event. Such healing is most likely to occur with prior acknowledgement of, and compliance with, the importance of ‘set and setting’, where ‘set’ is the intentional mind-set of the participant and ‘setting’ the supportive personnel and milieu. The presence of both these essential elements creates and maintains the optimum environment for the duration of the session, allowing the ‘movement towards wholeness’ to proceed unimpeded toward its own resolution, in its own time and supported within a safe place.

The healing potential of the breath has not entirely escaped the attention of medical professionals. Andrew Weil, MD, founding director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, speaking generally from his long-standing interest in various breathing techniques, says; “Over and over again, I’m impressed by the power of the breath and its ability to correct specific health problems and promote our general wellness.” In his seminal 1972 book, “Natural Healing”, Weil pointedly suggests “...that every human being is born with an innate drive to experience an altered state of consciousness periodically - in particular to learn how to get away from ordinary ego-centered consciousness... Non-ordinary experiences are vital to us because they are expressions of our unconscious minds and the integration of conscious and unconscious experiences are the key to life, health, spiritual development and the fullest use of our nervous systems”. Weil’s statement speaks directly to the action of breathwork.

Understanding this principle, some psychiatrists have instituted institutional programs with an aggregate total of 41 years and counting. Between 1988 and 2000 psychiatrist

Jimmy Eyerman, working in St Anthony's, a St. Louis, Missouri psychiatric hospital, exposed over 8000 individuals to breathwork; in their hospital exit interviews they said it was the best element in their program. Between 1990 and 2004, Stanislav Kudrle, a psychiatrist specializing in addictions, ran a successful recovery program in Pilzen, Czech Republic that utilized breathwork as the foundation of their work. And since 1998 Vladimir Emelianenko, MD, has added breathwork as an adjunct to the program in a psychiatric hospital in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, where a twelve year pilot study found positive outcomes across various conditions, most notably with addiction and alcoholism; recovery rates doubled with the addition of eight sessions of breathwork to the first month of their on-going 12-Step program. At 24 months post-treatment the breathwork plus 12-step group achieved a recovery rate of 36% compared to recovery rates of 18% with the 12-step only group.

Tim Brewerton, MD, of the Medical University of South Carolina, presented his paper "Long-Term Abstinence Following Holotropic Breathwork as Adjunctive Treatment of Substance Dependence" at the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual meeting of the International Society of Addiction Medicine in Cape Town, South Africa in November 2008. In 2012, Brewerton, James Eyerman, M.D., and colleagues published a case-study in The International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction from four case reports detailing "...the successful use of HB in four cases in which abstinence was obtained and maintained for extended periods." Such peer-reviewed research is now bringing empirical support to the many remarkable reports of healing outcomes from throughout the breathwork community for years. One woman, a problem drinker for twenty-five years and a prevaricator towards recovery, had a significant insight during her first breathwork into her relationship to the "numbing" potential of alcoholism. She writes, "By the end of the (breath)workshop I had made the decision that I did not want to take another drink. I admitted my addiction, that I had no control over the addiction, and that I was turning it over to God. I will continue to attend AA - and this time with full intentions. For the first time, there is no doubt in my mind that I want to stop drinking - totally, and I believe with the combination of AA and breathwork, I can finally do it. I am very thankful for

the light this experience has brought into my life and am very excited about the road ahead of me.”

Such testimonials are not uncommon, and addictions specialist Brack Jefferys, PhD., wrote a monograph in 1999 from his doctoral research that studied 29 adult clients at St. Joseph's Addictions Recovery Program in Asheville, North Carolina; 20 males and 9 females completed a 13 month outpatient treatment program for chemical dependency that principally included breathwork, with other approaches. At one year post-treatment they were assessed by an independent employee assistance/managed care firm that determined overall treatment outcomes of 76% improvement. Dr. Jeffreys has now established Katharos House, a Transpersonal Center in Asheville that offers breathwork as the foundation of a four to six week residential program for men and women who are in the initial phase of the recovery process.

Breathwork, however, still remains on the margins of therapeutic practice; it is not taught at medical schools and has received scant attention from the healing professions. But breathwork's reputation rests largely upon the word-of-mouth of participants as much as it does upon Grof's extensive body of written work. In addition to existing journal articles, studies, doctoral dissertations and academic articles, current research under consideration seeks to subject the testimonials and anecdotal reports to the rigorous scientific examination that could empirically establish its true utility.

Maybe it is time to do so. Certainly the bloom appears to be off the psychopharmaceutical rose with regard to their much-promoted potential as a major pathway to mental well-being, tardive dysphoria. Addressing this condition in his book “The Instinct to Heal”, psychiatrist David Servan-Schreiber, MD, PhD, writes, “Americans seek therapy in record numbers and consume more medications than ever before, yet stress, anxiety and depression continue to rise to epidemic proportions. People can spend years on the psychoanalytic couch without making any progress. And for many psychiatrists, the prescription-writing reflex has become almost automatic, despite the fact that benefits often disappear as soon as drug treatment stops. Standard treatments

simply aren't long term solutions." This opinion is borne out by numerous studies demonstrating that SSRI's, once promoted as a "miracle cure" for depression, have performed over time only slightly more effectively than placebos. SSRI's, like Prozac, perform worse than a placebo control in individuals over 59 and neither are they clinically effective in younger individuals. Clinically effectiveness occurs at effect sizes of 0.5 and above; the effect size of SSRI's in individuals under 59 is 0.2. Additionally the current academically acclaimed champion for psychotherapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), has an effect size of 0.3, which is also beneath the bar of clinical effectiveness.

In these circumstances it is legitimate to ask if we are encountering the limits of our medical model in which the body is regarded as a machine requiring the skilled intervention of individuals with specifically applicable skills and extensive knowledge. We know from the Genome Project that our physical bodies, as defined by DNA, are 99.96% similar, and with one human body being constructed so much like another this modus operandi of skilled intervention has merit. The same body-as-machine theory, however, is proving woefully inadequate to deal with, or even explain, the infinitude of subtle and not-so-subtle confusions that can occur within our psychic selves, and the inter-personal healing relationship necessitated by physical challenges to the body does not necessarily transpose lock, stock and barrel to the therapeutic relationship appropriate to challenges presented by the mind. The compact of the "therapeutes" role functionally changes the relationship we have to our own healing, making it an empowering *intra*-personal matter that elevates the participant's own role to primacy as they engage with the material arising from within.

This inner healing action can be seen from clinical studies of another intra-psychic process, meditation. In 2003 The Harvard University Press published "The Dalai Lama at M.I.T.", that asks, "Is there any substance to monks' claims that meditation can provide astonishing memories for words and images? Is there any neuroscientific evidence that meditation will help you pay attention, think better, control and even eliminate negative emotions? Are Buddhists right to make compassion a fundamental human emotion, and

Western scientists wrong to have neglected it?" The book concludes that the scientists find "startling support for some Buddhist claims."

Breathwork has been described by participants as "active meditation", "industrial-strength meditation", "meditation on steroids" and other terms that speak to its pro-active nature. Meditation is a practice of quietude and deliberation within which we may experience insights and understanding that can lead to a life characterized less by anxiety and fear and more by an optimistic serenity. Breathwork, following the same inner-directed trajectory by a different form, has demonstrated comparable resolutions by supporting and facilitating with skillful means the boisterous, shambolic and noisy expression of feelings. Your inner skeptic may be forgiven for considering this to be new age magical thinking of the worst kind, but the understanding of the considerable power of robust expression is anything but. Writing at the time of Christ in the Gnostic Gospels, Saint Thomas states, "If you bring forth that which is within you, that which you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth that which is within you, that which you do not bring forth will destroy you". And psychologist and meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, PhD, who for the past twenty years has conducted weeklong 'Insight and Opening' retreats with Stanislav Grof in Europe and the US that combine Vipassana meditation with breathwork, describes it as "among the deepest and most profoundly comprehensive work of the spirit being offered today."

At first glance these two forms may appear to have little in common; meditation presents the very model of composure and focus, breathwork the very model of lack-of-composure and chaos. In fact they are two sides of the same coin, both seeking to actualize release from the overly-rational worldview of Homo Sapiens Sapiens; The Wise Human. Ha! In view of the limits of success resulting from the approach to psychic disturbances relying exclusively on the mind, maybe it is time to include true freedom of expression by involving the whole person and by so doing expand our self-description to become Homo Sapiens et Affectus; the Thinking and Feeling Human.

This is no dainty academic exercise; Michael Schermer, drawing on psychology, biology and evolution, asks in his 2008 bestseller, “The Mind of the Market”, “Why do we get so emotional about financial decisions?” Robert J. Schiller, respected professor of economics at Yale University, says that the efficiency market theory, “...represents one of the most remarkable errors in the history of economic thought”. In the preface to the 2009 Second Edition of his prescient classic on behavioral economics, “Irrational Exuberance”, Schiller says, “Underlying all the disruptions that we are facing is an aspect of human nature that is not consistent with our idea of rational man. It is an aspect that we as a society need to confront so that we can design our economic institutions to guard against decisions based on irrational exuberance”, behavior that he says has today resulted directly in “an economic crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930’s.”

The existence of psychiatry implicitly acknowledges that there are no limits to which the mind will go to deceive itself and the many schools of philosophy that have flourished throughout human history, to say nothing of the many schools of psychoanalytic theory, demonstrate the regrettable propensity of logical thought to devolve into circumlocution. One individual caught and held within this framework of belief, and suffering from pervasive anxiety said, “I worry when I don’t worry”, a tautological loop creating a mental double-bind. Perhaps we might exercise our vaunted wisdom and acknowledge, as Dr. Grof has pointed out, that, “If the mind was capable of healing itself it would have done so a long time ago”.

Observations from facilitators with experience conducting this work over many years have clearly established that when the mind works synergistically with its partners in consciousness, the heart and the body, it can result in considerable cognitive benefit. When these three essential centers are enabled to work together, their collective power to resolve issues that beset the individual are exponentially increased. In the case of the worrier who worries when they are not worrying, the mind is caught and held in a situation from which it cannot extricate itself *by itself*, and the individual becomes legitimately frustrated, exhausted and ultimately depressed from being stuck in this place

of “no exit”. But if expression of that frustration is not seen as an unwelcome end result but as the beginning of a healing trajectory, and if the individual is allowed to express that frustration vocally, emotionally and physically, greater understanding and mental balance can result. Within such resolution the worry can be re-framed, receding to occupy a more appropriately proportional status, whilst other more positive psychic elements may advance and contribute to a new stability. By allowing the vigorous expression of their caught-and-held internal condition the individual can free themselves from states of mental confusion that could not be resolved by even the most strenuous solo mental effort involving will, self-discipline or feats of logic.

Such robust expression, however, may not fall within the range of behavior by which we identify ourselves or with which we are comfortable. In this situation the non-ordinary state of consciousness serves as an arena in which we can leave behind the self-imposed limitations of our “I like this but I don’t like that; I want this but I don’t want that” comfort zone. Such egoic formulations may be necessary for our survival in a world where we can feel challenged by social situations, family and professional relationships, unexpected events and the like, but in the safety of the ‘set and setting’ offered by breathwork, where such considerations are rendered neutral by prior agreement, by the action of the breath and by the support of the attending facilitators, the utility of these ideas is called into question. The experiences of Ben, a fifty-something small business owner, speak to this point: “The surprising aspect was when the music came on, within about five minutes or so... I was transported to a place where all of my previous worries seemed very funny to me, and I started to laugh; there was no way that anyone could even describe this. It felt like I was in a quite different place and it sort of made all the rest of all the concerns and explanations seem very beside the point. I realized that the world itself, the possibilities of experience in the world and of being alive and so forth, were much greater than I had previously narrowed them down to by pigeonholing myself, “I am a businessman, I am a father, I am a husband, I am a son”, and it opened my mind in a way that I would not have expected. These are provisional roles that I had assumed and that we all assume, but is there another, a whole other dimension to being? Behind the scenes, beyond the whole metaphor of being an actor in a drama, was something else

much, much bigger, and I have to say it was much more blissful. My first experience was of so much joy that I hadn't felt in years. Without realizing it, I had excluded the possibility that at my age and in these roles that I could have fun; that I even should have fun was ruled out. So it just blew that all away very directly. If someone had asked me before that first breathwork if I was an open minded person, I would say "Oh, of course", but I didn't realize the way I had excluded so much from my life."

Thus, with breathwork and the non-ordinary consciousness that arises from it, we are aware of our life situation but choose to allow it to become background for the duration, whilst simultaneously choosing to attend to the foreground events unfolding from within and to experience them within this expanded consciousness. Similarly, in ordinary consciousness our focus is most frequently on the specific tasks we need to perform, but when we put this focus aside for the duration and our psyche is allowed to expand from the small to the large, it seizes upon this expansion as freedom to express feelings that in ordinary consciousness would be considered inexpressible. Ben's testimony demonstrates how the experience and expression of this content often leads to insights and resolutions that we can carry forward into our lives. This is the trajectory of holotropic states of consciousness occasioned by breathwork; to value non-ordinary states consciousness in such a way that allows them to fulfill their potential to heal.

Freud's contemporary, the influential Harvard psychologist William James, described this faculty in his seminal 1902 book, "The Varieties of Religious Experience": "Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus and at a touch they are there in all their completeness." James' focus of attention has not been incorporated by the psychotherapeutic community, yet evolution, (within which *only* that which works survives, discarding everything that is not of utility), has preserved this faculty for some purpose. The very existence of the vast realm opened up to us by non-ordinary consciousness *presupposes* that it is of utility to the organism and it seems churlish of us,

at a minimum, to willfully ignore it. Moreover, here in potential we may find answers to questions that pertain to our own forgotten truth, a notion exquisitely expressed in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Fenelon Prayer; “Give to thy child that which he himself knows not how to ask. Behold my needs which I know not myself.”

Many individuals have found essential support and help in managing challenges of sadness, confusion and other deprivations within familiar formats. Numerous other conditions however, to which the term “treatment-resistant” has been applied, are immune to the benefits of ordinary interventions; fear, depression, anxiety and other dysfunctions, like trauma, alcoholism and addiction, that may stubbornly persist for years and even decades. It is in this context breathwork may have a particularly useful contribution to make, and efforts to establish partnerships with institutions that can adequately support individuals caught and held within such challenges is ongoing.

The writer B. H. Friedman has said, “The important thing is opening the door and the recognition of the other side.” What if our innate capacity to enter non-ordinary states of consciousness, dismissed by consensus as a void of dubious significance at best and mined with potential traps and snares at worst, proved to be the very thing we need to understand ourselves? What if non-ordinary consciousness contains, in an inchoate form, information that can help us to become whole, rebecoming our true selves to an extent not possible absent this un-valued condition? What if we truly understood R. D. Laing’s statement that “Our behavior is a function of our experience” and could honor Harvard psychiatrist John Mack’s admonition that “We need to legitimize experience itself”, learning about hidden aspects of ourselves by so doing? What if, from our willing exposure to, and interaction with, this “terra incognita” we can become better connected with ourselves, body, mind and spirit, enabling a greater capacity for meaningful connection with our fellows and the world at large? The ancient seafarers, “bound where mariner has not yet dared to go”, often marked the unknown territory on their maps with the warning, “Here There Be Dragons”, something we know existed nowhere but in their own minds. What if, as the poet Rilke suggests, “Perhaps all our dragons are princesses

waiting to see us once, beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything is, in it's deepest being, something helpless that wants help from us.”

Maria, an Argentinian woman, writes of her experience with breathwork. As a forty-nine year old single mother suffering from malnutrition and excessive alcohol intake, she had chosen to enter psychiatric clinics on a number of occasions. Raising her three sons alone following her divorce, she was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder with episodes of panic and anxiety and prescribed Tegrethol, Seropram and Lorezepam. In her first breathwork she found herself “...on the brink of an abyss and had to jump; I knew there was no turning back. Both facilitators encouraged me to make my great cosmic leap and told me that they would be waiting for me. It was a quantum leap that would change the way I perceived both the world and myself; forever. Then I experienced moments from my childhood where the first signs of my addiction appeared; drinking tiny caps of cough syrups I found in the medicine cabinet, drinking beer people had left in their glasses during local celebrations. I saw myself hiding behind a sofa in my grandmother’s house hoping to be found by my family. It was then that I identified the relationship between this game and hiding the bottle; it was as if it were a child's game, like playing hide and seek.” A short while later, medical examination revealed calcifications in her right breast and fear of surgery caused her to relapse. Entering AA and continuing with breathwork, her calcifications decreased and surgery was no longer indicated. “I made six or seven more breathworks. In each of them I discovered new aspects of my inner being, experiencing them with love, knowing that everything that happened was an important learning experience. My heart was open. I experienced absolutely mystical and overwhelming events; I went to different stages of my life. Sometimes I would be living situations that had been completely hidden within the depths of my soul. At the end of each experience, however, I felt a great sense of Unity with myself and with everything around me. This sense of unity is present with me now, and almost permanent. Since that time I have no problems, only issues to be solved. Nothing could be worse than being imprisoned within oneself and not be able to find a way out of the maze.

In science, radical discoveries are commonly ignored when they challenge socially accepted truths; Benjamin Franklin said, “You will observe with concern how long a useful truth may be known and exist before it is generally received and practiced on.” Over 85 years ago Alfred Wegener proposed that the continents of Earth were once a single land mass that he called Pangea, a theory rejected by his contemporaries who believed that the Earth was rigid. Subsequent findings in marine geology, paleomagnetism, geophysics and seismology have all supported Wegener, however, and his theory is now part of the accepted theory of plate tectonics.

Today, with multiple conditions demonstrating stubborn resistance to current treatment options and with cost-effectiveness being paramount in our personal and political considerations of our health-care choices, it is respectfully suggested that we acknowledge the promise indicated by provisional findings of increased well-being across many health challenges following exposure to breathwork, and begin to formally examine the healing power of this seemingly improbable technique.