

“Respiration”
by: Stephanie McCullor

Under the carport, my stepmom and her sister deposited things into the trash can, talking nonstop. I stared at old clothes in the driveway. The purging had begun. A faded blue jacket read Sulphur City Council on the pocket. My daughter liked it because it had a soft fleece inside. I picked up a USMC garrison cap (cover) in the heap of discards and ran my fingers over the coarse fabric. It was forest green and moth-eaten with my Dad's name stamped inside. HOO HAA! Sempre Fi!

Inside, my younger sisters discussed where a treasured item would remain. One wanted the well-worn, acoustic Yamaha guitar to stay and the other to take it home. They lived far away, and taking it seemed impractical, but I understood. Things ended in a fight, and I was in the middle. My sisters did not speak to one another for a year.

I wanted to escape the buzzing dialogue and wrap myself in a bubble. I stretched out on the pavement, feeling the warmth and steadiness underneath me. Little puffy clouds drifted across the pale November sky without care. I closed my eyes and focused on my breath, trying to rest. We had buried my Dad the day before. How far away peace seemed. The banging of the trash can lid startled me each time it made contact.

Laying in bed the night of the funeral, I told my boyfriend of six years I missed him. I yearned for quiet time together since I hadn't seen him in 11 days. I finally let down and felt the softness of the bed. I wanted to be held, but he offered minimal comfort. "What is this?" I thought. I didn't understand; it was confusing. Then he told me he wasn't coming back to Lafayette.

I didn't realize he had already betrayed me. One week after leaving for work in New Orleans, he transgressed. The truth emerged six weeks later, and I threw his remaining items into the yard. It was not a one-time lapse, as he assured me. I had agreed to let him live with us while he looked for steady work, and I was so excited about his opportunities to get back on track. There was little remorse and zero accountability for his nonexistent rent contributions for the past nine months. Being sparsely employed, he often sat on the couch at 3:30 p.m., watching Jeopardy!

Growing up, our family hosted CODOFIL teachers arriving each August from Belgium, France, and Canada. We helped them find cars and settle into housing. The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana works to preserve Louisiana's French language, heritage, and culture. My parents did not speak Cajun French. Still, as educators, they supported these efforts. We cooked, played music, and sang together during countless parties and crawfish boils. His guitar symbolized FUN! They laughed with my Dad at what they called his "French." "Frituur de Gulf?" he would question and follow that up with a wildly enthusiastic, "Croque Monsieur!"

He called himself "Bathlic," being raised Baptist and marrying a Catholic (twice). Playing a game of HORSE with him was maddening because he was ambidextrous and could shoot

basketball with either hand. My grandpa went to his elementary school and insisted they let him write left-handed; this was problematic in those days.

My youngest sister wanted his class ring. She was his Mookie, the baby born when I was 16. We saw a professional baseball game at the Astrodome when she was little. We loved hearing the announcer say, "Moookie Wilsooon!" The nickname stuck.

Dad played college baseball at McNeese State University and guided us in softball, track, golf, and basketball. As a former lifeguard, he challenged us to tread water for 10-minute increments, knowing this skill was lifesaving. He had a solid moral compass and treated others fairly, respectfully, and kindly, which served him well as a long-time school principal. In earlier coaching years, his creativity played out on the field, designing game-winning football plays and winning the Calcasieu Parish Jr. High Basketball Championship.

Witnessing him losing the ability to walk, toilet himself, and eventually swallow was difficult. He told me he wanted to die in his deer stand and let the animals eat him. The month before he died, he contracted COVID-19 and was too ill to take his medications for advanced Parkinson's Disease.

His wife wanted a military funeral. His uniform still fit after so much weight loss. The bang of the 21-gun salute was harsh and caught me lost in my thoughts, facing the coffin. My aunt leaned over during the funeral arrangements and whispered, "Doug hated the Marines." She said he cried with her when he stepped off the train from Camp Pendleton. His superior officer was found guilty of beating my Dad and other Marines at a court-martial. Dad ended his six years of service in 1968 as a Sergeant E 5 and received the Rifle Expert Badge.

How do you deal with betrayal, lies, and disrespect by a partner while also grieving the death of a parent? At the same time, I faced crushing financial struggles from the pandemic. How could I know that the unemployment board would eventually admit mistakes they made and reverse their recent threat to sue me? Unfortunately, I had not hired an attorney, and two earlier appeals were lost and \$12,000 returned.

Despair wrecked my days, and worries haunted me at night. The sinking feeling of repeating all of this the next day was overwhelming. I forced myself to breathe, not only for myself but for my teenager. It is hard to hide pain from someone you love. It is unbelievably challenging to "be" a Mom and feel so much loss and grief. It will nearly kill you, trust me.

But then a breakthrough: my first 15-minute breath session brought calmness and clarity that was hard to attain otherwise. I found it online, a place of refuge to tend my heartbroken soul. That session turned into several sessions a day.

My breath originated within me; I didn't have to seek it anywhere but inside and tap into the healing it offered me. I was befriending my breath, a powerful tool to shift my state; my breath became a trusted companion and ally I could draw upon daily.

Louisiana followed European civil law traditions governing inheritance until 1996. Now, only a child under the age of 24 years or one who cannot care for themselves is a forced heir. My stepmom asked my Dad to sign everything for her once we reached that age. Having no children, her nieces and nephews would inherit alongside us if my father outlived her, with no concessions

for us if she survived him. When my middle sister asked why he did this, he said that's what she wanted. He passed inheritance on to us when his father died; this disinheritance was out of step with who we knew him to be. I found the succession online (she never shared it with us). Her words to me afterward were, "Everyone takes care of themselves." Who does this? People do, and those left behind find ways to move on.

Good friends held me and listened when I most needed support. I breathed all my worries and concerns through my body. With conscious manipulation, breath retention improves lung capacity, strengthens the diaphragm, reduces stress and anxiety, decreases the heart rate, and increases blood flow to vital organs.

The esoteric quality of the breath is seductive; it is enticing to go deeper and feel more, and every time I complete a practice, there is a sense of peace, centeredness, and hope. Its transformative quality unfolds in the present moment, and many moments strung together can provide relief.

Sometimes, I ruminate. I calm myself with my old mantra, "Everything is okay." I use the Physiological Sigh to regulate my mood, reduce anxiety and stress, and help with sleep. It is a double nasal inhale followed by an extended exhale through the mouth. We do this reflexively every few minutes to reset our system.

On the way to the hospital the day I was born, my mom stopped breathing. Dad gave her CPR. She had Preeclampsia, a high blood pressure condition in pregnancy. Doctors lost her twice before stabilizing her to deliver me. She stayed in the hospital for two weeks; my grandparents said she looked like a corpse. He had saved us both. My birth story made it harder to accept the abandonment I felt at his death.

My middle sister plays his guitar on Ireland's west coast now. The class ring is in Costa Rica, with my youngest sister. She is expecting his third granddaughter soon, and we are overjoyed. I keep the Marine hat as a reminder that we can endure hard things. I am a certified breathwork guide and use this healing modality to help others. I completed my studies with Our Breath Collective in June of 2023.