

# Thoughts About Breathing and Not Breathing During This Time of Escalating Emergencies Facing the Entire Planet, and Where Our Energies Can Best be Focused

I have been thinking a lot about breath lately - about breathing and not breathing.

My father died one and a half years ago, up in Bellingham, at the age of 95. Even though he was unconscious his last few days, he waited to take his final breath until I was in the room, holding his hand and talking to him, after I had raced up there on an Amtrak train to be with him.

In March, those of us who live here in the United States started to take notice of a strange and scary virus that was starting to sweep across the world. Within weeks, massive numbers of us were dying. One of the first things that became obvious was that the virus attacked a person's ability to take a breath.

Not too many more weeks after that, George Floyd was murdered by four policemen in Minneapolis. Some people in the Black community called it a lynching. He kept pleading with the cops, saying he couldn't breathe. More than [6000](#) Black people have been lynched by White people between 1865 and the present day. Lynching is the ultimate terror weapon, as it strangles the victims until they die, unable to breathe.

The [Movement for Black Lives](#) had already been building up steam for five years at that point, and the local Twin Cities group had been laying the groundwork for much larger scale organizing during those years. So when the police murdered George Floyd, the Movement was able to immediately mobilize a massive public response, which rapidly spread across the countr - like a virus.

I had already attended many Black Lives Matter rallies here in Portland before this latest social eruption. The sign that I always carried, slung around my neck, includes the words, "I can't breathe!" This exclamation originated from the police murder of Eric Garner in New York City in 2014. Eric was thrown to the ground, and placed in a chokehold. In Eric's final moments of life, he pleaded with the cops, saying "I can't breathe"- eleven times!

Almost exactly one month ago, millions of California residents found themselves living in a dystopian hellscape filled with the smoke of hundreds of wildfires. The sky turned orange. The sun disappeared. Millions of people could no longer safely breathe outside, and they all became environmental refugees in their own homes. At least the lucky ones did. The tens of thousands of homeless Californians weren't so lucky.

Just two weeks ago, residents of Oregon and Washington experienced a similar fate. Again, more than a million of us could not breathe, as wildfires raced down mountain valleys, pushed by unimaginably strong hot winds. Yesterday, those of us living in the #1 worst air quality in the world - here in Portland - finally got a reprieve from the suffocating smoke. It rained. Thank goodness it rained! We could breathe again.

I feel like I have been holding my breath for eleven days straight. And now for the first time in my life, my whole body understands what it must be like for those poor souls who live and work in

industrial cities in China and India, who have to breathe foul air for much of their lives. And to a large extent, they struggle to breathe because their cities are manufacturing that toxic crap that We First Worlders buy to try to convince ourselves that we are happy. This too must stop!

And then, just yesterday again, after only half a day of joyous recovery of breath, with windows flung wide open, my breath suddenly narrowed yet again, when I heard that Ruth Bader Ginsburg had just died. I couldn't even feel pure sorrow about her death, or feel joy about her extraordinary life, because my mind immediately raced forward - to what I knew was coming next.

With not a second to spare, Senator Mitch McConnell was already planning a rapid launch of another Supreme Court nomination process to replace this gem of a human being - RBG - who took her last breath yesterday. Shame on him! Just thinking about this pisses me off. And once again, I can't breathe!

So many of us were already feeling traumatized by these past four years of Donald Trump as our..... as our.....sorry I can't say it. I can only refer to him as Resident Trump. He doesn't deserve the P word in front of his name. He hasn't earned it!

The presidential election is just 45 days from today! I know absolutely nobody across the country who isn't feeling a great deal of panic about what is going to unfold on Election Day, and in the days and weeks after Election Day. And I personally know a lot of folks across the US, because for many years now I have been criss-crossing the country leading workshops and giving talks as a national leader of the Community Rights movement. That is until Covid struck and life changed, virtually overnight.

In the days after November 3rd, Trump might refuse to leave office. He might declare [Martial Law](#) There might be battles in the streets between two armed factions of citizens. And that's only if he loses!

If he wins, the steady drift towards corporate fascism will continue. It's frightening to even try to imagine what the US will be like after another four (or more) years of Trump. And just thinking about this, which I do every single day, makes me feel, once again, like I'm holding my breath. I'll bet many of you are having a similar experience.

Black people and other People of Color are used to feeling short of breath. They are used to experiencing violence and [trauma](#) pulsing through their veins their entire lives. But for White folks? This level of trauma is a new experience. Every day seems to bring another traumatizing news story.

Just in the past few days, hundreds of thousands of [migratory birds](#) have literally fallen out of the sky in the Southwest states. "They're literally just feathers and bones. Almost as if they have been flying until they just couldn't fly any more," said a graduate student in New Mexico who has been collecting carcasses.

I don't know about you, but every time I hear about a massive die-off of different species, I feel like I am suffocating, as if I cannot access the air I need to simply breathe. And the scary ecological news just keeps on coming.

Just this past week the United Nations [reported](#) that the world has failed to meet a single target in the last decade to stem the destruction of wildlife and life-sustaining ecosystems. Wildlife populations are in free-fall around the world, driven by human overconsumption, population

growth and intensive agriculture. All of these creatures stopped breathing! Since 1970, global populations of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles have plunged by 68%. Just in the past fifty years.

Massive police violence, hundreds of years of white supremacist culture disguised as background normal, huge corporations out of control across the planet, widespread collapse of entire ecosystems, catastrophic climate destabilization, the economic collapse of working families everywhere, a continuing Covid-19 global crisis.

Are you remembering to breathe?! ..... Or are you holding your breath?! ..... This is painful stuff!  
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And yet, in my increasingly long life on this planet - 62 years and counting - I have never before seen this scale of social movement organizing! Never! The public is mobilizing itself like it never has before. The Rabble are Rousing! It's very exciting to watch and to participate in.

But time is short. We truly have no time to lose. We have to think carefully, reflectively, deeply, about where to put our energies and money and time - for maximum impact.

For me, it's very clear. I absolutely believe that the Community Rights movement offers us the most effective strategy for solving these enormous problems - which is why I have been active here for more than twenty years now.

For those of you who are not already familiar with the Community Rights movement, we help communities across the country to pass legally and historically groundbreaking laws that put democratic power and authority back in the hands of local majorities of residents and their local elected officials. We help communities to push back against state and federal governments when they claim that local communities have no right to protect their own health, safety and welfare. We don't buy that for one second! That's a ridiculous notion, and our organizing strategy is based on refusing to accept that ridiculous notion. Of course local communities have the right to protect themselves! In fact, that right was among the most important aspects of why there even was an American Revolution.

### [The right of local community self government.](#)

It was baked right into the revolutionary fervor. But the ruling elite of this country has since buried that widespread understanding - that powerful demand from the citizenry. And we're here to give that demand water and air again, so that it can put down strong roots and sprout again, reaching towards the sky. So that We The People can freely breathe again.

We in the Community Rights movement understand that we find ourselves in a most urgent situation - so urgent that when the federal government refuses to protect and defend the health and welfare of our nation's people, and the natural world that sustains all of us - and when our state governments do not have the resources to offer similar protection - that We must exercise our Constitutionally guaranteed authority as the Sovereign People - as We The People - in the places that we live - be they cities, towns or rural areas. Because no other scale of government is doing the job that it is constitutionally required to do. Our federal and state governments are utterly failing us, week after month after year. And that's why the Community Rights movement is sprouting up all over the country.

The Community Rights movement has already assisted more than 200 communities in twelve states - both conservative and progressive communities - helping them to pass [local laws](#) that stop corporations and governments from forcing harmful activities on those communities. Our movement helps communities to make the bold claim that people, not giant corporations, should be the sole decision-makers as to how a community designs and unfolds its own future.

Those of us who live in this country have been obedient to unjust laws for far too long. We have allowed our giant corporations and our government to ignore our urgent pleas for protection. We simply cannot wait any longer for our so-called “leaders” to lead us. Because in fact, We are the leaders we’ve been waiting for.

What does this mean for Portland? How would the Community Rights movement assist the people of this wonderful city? Well.... the first step is to begin to envision what it is that we actually want and urgently need for our city.

Today, Portland is experiencing numerous crises, numerous emergencies. We are on the verge of a mass eviction of renters and homeowners. We’re on the verge of about half of our beloved small businesses closing their doors permanently. Massive numbers of residents are out of work, with little if any government support forthcoming. Our police force is literally out of control - refusing to abide by the guidelines set forth by our newly elected [District Attorney](#). And there’s a fast growing ecological crisis unfolding all around us - in our local forests, our farmland, our wetlands, our rivers.

Believe it or not, We can start to meaningfully and boldly address all of these issues through the Community Rights local law-making process and legal strategy.

It’s time for our City Council to start passing Community Rights laws that begin to turn this giant ship around. Voters can also pass these laws directly through local ballot initiatives.

Here are some examples of what could be passed into law here in Portland - or any community or county for that matter:

- \* We could place at least 5% of our city's annual budget into a newly designed “[participatory budgeting](#)” process that gives all local residents an opportunity to envision how we want our hard earned money spent, as numerous cities across the US and beyond are already doing with great success and massive public involvement.
- \* We could prohibit residential and business landlords from evicting their existing tenants for as long as the Covid crisis continues.
- \* We could prohibit utility companies from shutting off essential services to homes and businesses, which will be even more essential as Winter approaches.
- \* We could prohibit local police from responding militarily to First-Amendment-protected protests.
- \* We could pass a whole new variety of taxes - on the ultra-wealthy, on corporate profits, on stock transactions, on gasoline sales, etc - and pour that vast amount of wealth into the effective social service programs that prior budget cuts eliminated. And we could fund state of the art public transit improvements that actually succeed at getting most of us out of our cars entirely. And we could begin

to provide comprehensive services to help our homeless community to get back on their feet. And begin again to build public housing that low income residents are proud to live in.

\* We could require that all of our grocery stores begin to sell a larger and larger percentage of their products in truly reuseable or genuinely biodegradable packaging, in order to end our utterly outrageous dependence on single-use plastic packaging.

But that's just for starters!

I want to hear from many of you during our Q&A time together. What are some of your bold ideas for local law-making? Ideas that could begin to profoundly change how we live here in this very special but very endangered city.

Can we deepen our neighborhood connections and reclaim more of our urban landscape as [The Commons](#)?

Can we transform our police force and our prisons away from punishment and violence-based solutions?

Can we re-wild our [urban landscape](#) to encourage local wildlife to reinhabit our city, by day-lighting our buried creeks, by eliminating toxic discharge entirely, and by depaving many of our streets?

We The People of Portland can do all of this and more if, and it's a really big if..... if we are ready finally to recognize that we truly are out of time, both socially and ecologically. Our federal and state governments are not coming to rescue us. They simply are not! It's up to us - wherever we live - to take the bull by the horns and become the leaders we know we need to be. It's time to stop begging and pleading. It's time to exercise our Constitutionally guaranteed self-governing authority. It truly is up to us.

And once we begin down that understandably scary new path, as we re-learn the skills necessary to practice genuine local democracy together, I can offer you one guarantee. We will start to breathe again more deeply, more calmly, more fully. We will conspire together, which literally means, "to breathe with"! Because we will have reclaimed our very lives, in community together, where all of us belong.

Thank you!