



Thoughts from Linda:

Breath
The New Science of a Lost Art

James Nestor
2020

What irony that this book was released in May of 2020, while we were in the depths of the COVID pandemic and focused on breathing, only in those days, our focus was more on how to breathe through masks, and in general, how to avoid the breath of others. And at the same time, people continued to struggle with the other aspects of living a healthy life. They dealt with stress, hypertension, breathing diseases such as asthma and allergies, and many other issues. The immediate popularity of *Breath* speaks to its content, the author's amazing storytelling capabilities, and its timing. It is an important book for everyone to read.

This book suggests that there is nothing more important to our health than the essential bodily function of breathing. Nestor notes that we will take 670 million breaths in our lifetimes (based on the law of averages.) As you will discover in this most intriguing book, the way we take a breath in and expel it out can dramatically influence our health. For sure, the first lesson he offers is that we should breathe through the nose and not the mouth, which he notes is a "backup ventilation system" not intended to be the main event. Benefits from this simple change are enormous and one of the simplest techniques to incorporate.

The book is an international bestseller, having been on the NYT bestseller list for 18 weeks straight after its release. It also won the Best General Nonfiction Book of 2020 by the American Society of Journalists and Authors. It is to be translated into 35 languages by the end of 2022.

James Nestor is from California and became inspired to quit a full-time job in 2010 to become a freelance magazine journalist. He took on jobs that interested him, including one to the Arctic Circle in Norway. He joined a group of professional surfers challenged to tackle never-before-ridden waves. His story on this adventure was called "Tasty Freeze" and was nominated for the Best American Sports Writing of 2011. He quickly gained a reputation as an excellent storyteller. And his interest in the Nordic experience propelled him forward.

His path changed in 2011 when he discovered freediving and was soon sent to Greece to report on an international competition there. That is where he saw how athletes could use their breath for diving deeply below the water's surface (hundreds of feet) and heat themselves by using their breathing. Often, they would hold their breaths for up to 12 minutes. He also

learned their stories of how the breathing techniques they employed produced incredible healing from chronic conditions. He describes this experience as being “like a new birthday” as it altered the trajectory of his career and life.

Nestor says, “I couldn’t help wondering how many wondrous abilities and skills we as a species had lost and were losing sitting around in offices all day.” This was the moment he recalls that he vowed to spend the rest of his life researching the science behind the human body’s lost potential and how to get it back. We are all the better for his commitment to this lifetime vow.

This book sits squarely in that space and is the result of almost a decade of his research on the topic of breath. The subtitle: *The New Science of a Lost Art* refers to the pattern he noticed quite quickly that the so-called new discoveries were not new at all but instead had existed for hundreds and, in many cases, thousands of years. He describes the early breathing pioneers as ‘pulmonauts.’ He notes that most were not scientists but a collection of rogue thinkers and innovators, who, for one reason or another, sought answers to personal questions of health.

On the journey, he takes us to a Civil War surgeon, the collection of 6 million people buried under the streets of Paris in France, the world’s current most renowned expert on yoga, mystics from India, Ukrainian cardiologists, North Carolina choral coaches, and Olympians from Czechoslovakia. There is also a long list of noted experts from Stanford to Harvard to Southern Methodist University. The ‘re-discovery’ of so many of the studies and insights from history are gathered in these pages and tell quite a compelling story. Modern medicine and current tools validate ancient practices and make it possible for many people who suffer from certain maladies to re-gain their health by focusing on how they breathe.

He tells this story from his personal experience as an American who suffers from numerous respiratory illnesses. He shares his journey of academic discovery and from personal encounters and interviews. Most interestingly, he takes the reader through the numerous experiments he engaged in to personally experience what others were advocating. Some of these are harrowing to read. You will join him as he goes to some extremes, such as using techniques in different ways to increase his carbon dioxide levels and live for weeks at a time with artificial supports, such as nose plugs to force mouth breathing while registering the chemical impact on his own body.

His insights from the book are powerful.

Here are a few:

1. Our modern skulls allowed our brains to get bigger at the expense of smaller facial cavities. The implications explain why we are the only modern creatures with crooked teeth and snore.
2. Most humans breathe too much, and up to 25% of the population suffers from more severe over-breathing. We need to breathe less.
3. “The key to optimum breathing, and all health, endurance, and longevity benefits that come with it, is to practice fewer inhaled and exhaled in a smaller volume. To breathe but breathe less.”
4. Chinese doctors some 2,000 years ago advised 13,500 breaths per day for optimal health.

5. All these pulmonauts reach the same conclusions about the optimum amount of air we humans should take in at rest: 5.5 liters per minute. The breathing rate that supports this is 5.5 breaths per minute. That's 5.5-second inhales, and 5.5-second exhales. This is, according to our author, "*perfect breath.*"

The book's ten chapters take us on a wonderful journey with him. They are *The Worst Breathers in the Animal Kingdom*, *Mouthbreathing*, *Nose*, *Exhale*, *Slow*, *Less*, *Chew*, *Breathing*, *More*, *On Occasion*, *Hold It*, *Fast*, *Slow*, and *Not at All* and finally, the *Epilogue*, *A Last Gasp*.

As he says in the introduction, the average reader will spend about 10,000 breaths to read this entire book. I have learned about specific practices that I should stop and am working to do just that. I've learned much about restorative promises from making these changes. I've already referred many friends and family members to this because I think it is a most important book. I found it to be a page-turner.

These are the best 10,000 breaths I've spent in a long time.