

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

The Inspiration for Inspiration

Prepared by

Julie Francis

Julie@optionsforease.com

March 2013

Ongoing Discussion Host: Bill Bellows

william.bellows@pwr.utc.com

for

Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne’s

InThinking Network

What inspires you?

Years ago, while traveling the winding country roads of northern England, I had one of those aha moments that quite literally took my breath.

The summer had been a long and cold one marked by months of rain. Not the sudden violent Midwest summer storms I'd grown up with nor the steady rains of the Mid-Atlantic States I had recently left. This English rain was pervasive, part of the fabric of the sky itself. One step outdoors and all was wet with no apparent direction or flow of precipitation. An umbrella offered scant protection from the prevailing moist and even less so against the oppressive gray.

Used to the heat and humidity and brilliantly blue summer skies of the Washington, D.C. area, the cold and gloom were an especial challenge. I mustered my optimism, declared it summer and donned short trousers with my woolen socks and sweater. Would I ever see the sun again? I began to wonder.

Life progressed as it does and I chastened myself to find the positive in the situation. All that moisture was definitely good for my complexion! Allergens were kept at bay. And, oh the flowers! The incessant rain brought with it an incredible perfusion of color. There was a silver lining. Perhaps even a diamond one.

While wending my way along the hedgerows, oblivious to what had now become a routine of gray, the rain stopped. The clouds parted and a sliver of azure streamed forth a beam of light. It was magical, a pastoral re-imagining of the holy cards of my childhood with their pictures of saints enveloped in heavenly light. And then I rounded a bend. As I did, the light caught the settled beads of atmosphere that blanketed the sheep and pasture. The scene was transformed. What had once been merely sheep in a pasture became an ocean of the

most vibrant green I could ever have imagined, more emerald than Oz itself, dotted with glowing beings and all sprinkled with diamonds that scattered rainbows of light in every direction. I gasped, that quick little inspiration of air that comes out of nowhere, lasts but an instant yet fills the memory forever. My inspiration lasted only a moment, the speeding car and shifting clouds taking me beyond the play of light. But I will never forget that instant of beauty.

Take a mental wander through your own life. When have you been “inspired”? Can you remember a time when the magnificence before you made you gasp?

Are you inspired?

What does it mean to “inspire”? From a purely physical perspective it means to inhale, to take in breath. Clearly you are breathing. If you weren't you could not exist. But are you breathing in a way that supports your whole being and allows you to be fully present to the moment?

Sit quietly and notice your breathing. Where do you sense movement as you inhale? As you exhale? Does your breath move in easy waves, or is there an effort or strain to its rhythm?

Now, take a moment to think about your life. Do you face each day with a full breath and relaxed muscles? Or, do you gear up by tensing and tightening – steeling yourself for the next big deadline or “discussion” with a colleague? What happens to your breathing as you ponder?

Breathing is fundamental. It is the primary movement of life. It happens without our conscious effort – if we allow it. Watch a baby breathing. Its belly fills and its whole being becomes part of the ebb and flow of inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale - the rhythm of life. Yet, how often we adults interrupt our natural rhythm, tightening our muscles, locking our ribs, gripping our bellies.

In moments of anxiety we are told to breathe. Take a big breath then let it go. Effective? Maybe. But this approach is probably not as effective as it could be. Think of your lungs as balloons inside a cage. If the stays of the cage are fixed as they are when we are tense, the balloons can fill only so much before they are restricted by the limits of the cage. This is what happens when we try to force air into a chest that is locked by tight muscles. But if we hold our breath...

Without doing anything special, without “taking” a breath, simply hold your breath. As you hold, notice the changes that begin to occur in your ribs. Can you feel the slightest movement of the muscles between your ribs? It's as if they are trying to figure out what needs to be done to allow the next inhalation. When you feel you need a breath, let go and allow your breath to take you. What happens?

Did you feel your ribs expanding in a way they didn't when you tried to breathe? Your conscious pause gave your body permission to let go, to switch the fixed stays of your ribcage into the pliable, organic participants in the breathing process that they really are.

Notice that you don't need to work to breath. In fact, if you get out of your own way, your body knows exactly what to do and you become not just the breather, the one who breathes, but the breathed. You become inspired. This state of inspiration is your natural state, the one you were born with. If only we could breathe as nature intended. It is possible if we gently remind ourselves to allow instead of take, to let go into our natural rhythm.

Are you inspiring?

Breath that is quick and shallow is compatible with tension and anxiety. Breath that is free and deep creates calm and mental clarity. It also inspires a sense of calm and clarity in those around you.

Thinking back to my childhood, I note the contrast in my parents' parenting styles. One bent rule and my mother would fly into a rage. Her anger only created tension in the household and did little to inspire me to better behavior. Instead, it caused me to become secretive and distant. I wanted and needed a mother who could listen and guide but feared the volcano of criticism and anger that often accompanied honest talks. Instead of creating a supportive relationship, my mother's anger and my withdrawal created a chasm.

My father, by contrast, was a model of composure. Rather than lashing out, he would sit me down and we would have a talk. Why did I do what I had done? His question, raised without a hint of blaming, asked me to look clearly at my actions and to assess them with a critical but non-judgmental eye. I could see, really see, how my actions weren't in line with what I wanted for myself, and the lessons stuck. I felt safe and supported in exploring my adolescence. I had an ally, a confidant. Most of all, I was inspired to be and become my highest self.

In her anger, my mother's breath expelled in staccato bursts. Her inhalations were quick and shallow. She volleyed the next torrent before she had time to recover from the first. This pattern of breath manifested in other physical ways as well. Consistently tense and anxious, it was impossible for my mother to carry a cup of coffee from the counter to the table without spilling. Her grip on the cup caused her arm to shake. The intensity of her focus, directed as it was to the cup she held, affected her balance. Coffee stained her clothing, the floor, and the little spills escalated her irritation. Not infrequently, my father would demonstrate the

importance of ease. He would take the cup and walk, letting his arm relax using only as much effort as was necessary, the weight of the cup and coffee borne through his bones. The ease allowed for tiny adjustments that kept the coffee in its cup and the floors stain free.

Watching my father's demonstration inspired me. His ease allowed me to breathe without the grip of anxiety and fear. Now, when facing a challenge or potentially tense conversation, I pause to remember my father's lesson and I feel inspired. My breath shifts from shallow and quick to slow and steady. My anxious anticipation turns to ease and I face my task with an open mind and heart.

Who and what in your life inspired you? Can you remember a time when your anxiety was disarmed by another person's calm?

You might take a moment to remember an event that felt mildly stressful – running late for a meeting or being unable to find a parking spot. Notice how your body begins to tense and your breath become shallow and quick. Keeping the image of the event in your mind, begin to focus on your exhalation, pushing out just a little bit more air each time you breathe out. Notice how this creates space for more air to come in and feel how the tension in your body begins to lessen. With each long exhalation, you give up the tension and your body in turn does what it does best without out effort – inspire. Soon, even this stressful event carries little angst. You can envision yourself remaining at ease, being inspired.

When have you served as an inspiration to others? Can you remember a time when your own calm breath and presence allowed someone else to be fully themselves? Can you envision yourself, breathing freely, allowing another to risk vulnerability and perhaps spark the creation of a new product or idea?

The ability to inspire is only a breath away.

Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne's InThinking Network's Ongoing Discussion
March 2013
Julie Francis, GCFP – The Inspiration for Inspiration

BIOGRAPHY

Julie is a Guild Certified Feldenkrais® Teacher and Assistant Trainer of the Feldenkrais Method® who works and lives in the Chicago area. She came to the work in the early 1990s while searching for a way to help her disabled daughter unlock her potential. Julie maintains a private practice in the Chicago area. Her volunteer efforts include bringing Mindful Movement to adult participants at The Helping Hand Center in Countryside, IL. Julie received a B.S. in Environmental Engineering and an M.S. in Urban and Environmental Studies from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

You can find examples of Julie's work in the form of little lessons on her website: www.optionsforease.com. Look under 5-Minute *Feldenkrais* for downloadable PDFs and Audios.

CONTACT

Julie can be reached by e-mail at Julie@optionsforease.com for additional information about this Ongoing Discussion.

WEBSITE

www.optionsforease.com

LINKEDIN

www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=103085889&trk=tab_pro