

Breathing embodiment

a study of Middendorf breathwork

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2007

Abstract

This thesis is about Middendorf breathwork, a way of cultivating breath and body awareness developed by Ilse Middendorf (b.1910, Berlin), based on sensing subtle bodily movements that occur with breath as it is allowed to come and go on its own. Drawing on the author's personal experience, together with interviews and formal workshops with peer participants, the thesis describes the practice of Middendorf breathwork, traces Middendorf's forebears and contemporaries, situating her work in relation to other somatic bodies of work, and discusses the significance of Middendorf breathwork in relation to contemporary discourses around breath, embodiment, and experience. The author proposes that the practice of Middendorf breathwork invites a different experience of embodiment through an integration of the kinæsthetic realm with thought, emotion, and intuition through breath. This practice can connect the individual with the somatic 'intelligence' of their body and offer an experience of how this links them in to a greater whole. Such an experience, it is argued, is a valuable redress to experiences of bodily abstraction in an increasingly technoscientific world.

I, John Donald Howard, declare that the PhD thesis entitled 'Breathing embodiment: a study of Middendorf breathwork' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date

Acknowledgements

Firstly I wish to acknowledge and give special thanks to my supervisor, Mark Minchinton, and my partner, Helen Sharp. Both have given me much support and inspiration.

I offer my thanks to all my volunteer co-researchers, especially the small group who came to more than forty research workshops each, and to the many readers of the various drafts of this work.

My thanks go also to the Middendorf breathwork practitioners I interviewed, to my breathwork teachers, fellow students and colleagues in Berkeley, with particular acknowledgement of Anne and Charlie Smith who hosted my many visits with generosity and warmth.

Finally, I thank Ilse Middendorf who, with her students, collaborators, and antecedents, has created a complex and provocative body of work. Her work has invited me down an unforeseen path where I have experienced breath anew and been provoked to reconsider the place of breath in my life and in the world.

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Preface

I sit on a stool sensing the movement of my body with my breath as it comes and goes on its own. I have my feet wider apart than usual as I roll slowly forward; my head first, then my neck. My arms start to move with my upper back. I let them come down between my legs and when my hands reach the floor I place my palms flat on the floorboards with the fingers turned towards the fingers of the other hand. By this time my head and neck hang free. I still sit on the stool, but much more of my weight is over my feet as my torso hangs between my legs. I notice how my inhalation pushes out my back body wall and how it swings back with my exhalation. I come off the stool and stretch my sacrum gently up towards the ceiling and let it go. This stretch brings an inhalation and as I let go the exhalation comes. I keep doing this until I've had enough, which is pretty soon because my legs won't take too much of this, and then I lower myself back on to my stool and slowly come back up, head last.

When I arrive back up I find that I sit with an ease and lightness I have never experienced before. I let my breath come and go in its own rhythm and I sense my torso growing wide with each inhalation and swinging back with the exhalation. I perceive movement in my legs too, as if they extend away a little from my torso as breath comes in. I feel I inhabit my body easily. It feels right to sit here on a flat wooden stool. Here I am; this is me. I feel that I have a big wide base in my sit-bones and pelvis, my feet and legs. I am this breathing, perceiving, living body. I like this. If a simple movement sequence can bring me this joyful liveliness then I want more of this. I understand that the movement itself has not brought me this but the way I have done it, with attention, with awareness, with my full presence. It must be possible therefore to have this much sensation and pleasure in many different moments in my life, and I want this too (and, yes, not just this) (Journal 15 August 2004).

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This is a story of experience. Experience of breath, of presence, of sensation, of body, of becoming. Giving voice to that experience, seeking the connection of breath to that experience, to the many modes of experience that make up my experience, is part of the story too. Central to the story is a body of work with breath developed by Ilse Middendorf, born in 1910, who is still living and teaching in Berlin, Germany. Her work is *Erfahrbare Atem*¹. It is based on sensing bodily movement that occurs with breath as it is allowed to come and go on its own. Middendorf has written two books, the first of which is available in English as *The perceptible breath: a breathing science* (1990).

On breath

The OED in hard copy defines ‘breath’ as ‘the air *taken* into and expelled from the lungs’, noting that this is now the main sense of the word, which colours all others. In the online version of the OED the same part of the definition of ‘breath’ reads ‘the air *received* into and expelled from the lungs’ (my italics). In the context of this project it is a remarkable difference. The former sounds active. It implies that breathing is something we ‘do’ – we take air into our lungs and then expel it. In the latter, the air is ‘received’, without the same implication of a ‘doing’, though the expulsion sounds laboured. The next step could be ‘the air received into and allowed out of the lungs’. This would more closely describe breath as it is approached in Middendorf breathwork – being allowed to come and go on its own.

‘Breath’ occurs first in written English in the ninth century and means ‘odour, smell, scent’, coming from the Teutonic base referring to the smell of anything cooking or burning. The OED notes:

¹ Middendorf’s work is now known in English as ‘Experience of Breath’, in the US as Breathexperience™, and previously as ‘Perceptible Breath’. I generally refer to it as Middendorf breathwork.

The sense passed in English through that of 'heated air expired from the lungs' (often manifest to the sense of smell, as in 'strong breath') to 'the air in the lungs or mouth' (OED online).

The word 'breath' replaced the early middle English 'ethem', which comes from the same source as the German 'atem', and the middle English 'ande', deriving from the old Norse, which is still around in dialects in the north of England today. 'Teeth to rote, breeth to stynke' is found in 'Cursor Mundi', a Northumbrian poem of the 14th century (OED online).

It is curious that English has settled so strongly on 'breath' and 'breathe', with their earthy associations with strong smells when other Indo-European languages use words more connected with air and spirit. The connection of breath and spirit, life, that which animates us, seems an obvious and straightforward one to make. When we stop breathing we die; when we die we stop breathing. Breath and life are intimately interwoven.

The words for movements of air, breath, and spirit are the same in Greek and Hebrew. English uses 'pneuma', direct from the Greek 'pneuma' (πνεῦμα), which carries the meanings of wind, breath and spirit, and it uses 'inspire' from the Latin 'inspirare', to blow or breathe into, ultimately from 'spiritus', spirit. But earthy 'breath' remains the most commonly used English word. It makes me wonder if the very earthiness of it is somehow responsible for the relative lack of interest in 'breathwork' in English-speaking countries compared with the German-speaking. The connection to the metaphysical, to the divine, is already there when I am 'inspired', but not when I 'breathe in'. Perhaps

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our breath – our life and speech – is grounded in earth and, as Irigaray (1999) writes of Heidegger, we have forgotten air.

Early experiences

I first encountered Middendorf's work in 1996 through my classical singing teacher. She had me lie down on the carpet of her room with a small cushion under my head, close my eyes, and place my hands on my body. She instructed me to focus on the part of my body beneath my hands and to sense how my body moved with breath there. I usually left my hands in the one position for six to eight breaths, then moved to another. After the lower abdomen came the 'middle space', one hand placed on the middle of the front of my body between the navel and the sternum. Then I would place one hand on my upper chest just beneath the opposite collar bone, and after six to eight breaths change hands and sides. The next position was the ribs at the sides, as high up as I could manage to place my hands. After the front and sides I would roll over and do the same sort of thing with my back. In the early stages my teacher placed her hands on my upper back, which was awkward for me to reach, but later I did this myself. I usually covered my back in three positions – the upper, the middle, and the lower. On my lower back I would place one hand each side of my sacrum.

The order of positions was not fixed, though these were the main positions I learned to use. Sometimes I included my ribs lower down at the side. In each position I focused on the part of my body beneath my hands and on my breath. As I understood it I was supposed to imagine breath going to my hands without deliberately engaging the muscles to make that happen.

When I first started this exercise it was apparent from the movements of my torso under my hands that I mainly breathed into my belly and lower chest and barely at all into my upper chest. In the first few weeks I found little movement of my body under my hands when I placed them below my collarbones and even less in the upper back. Over perhaps six weeks of daily practice things gradually changed: these places started to expand with inhalation and swing back with exhalation. I felt that my touch and attention on that part of my body drew my breath; I was not trying to direct my breath there.

Early on in my practice I found a 'pause' developed after the exhalation as I waited for my body to breathe rather than consciously initiating the breath cycle. This time of waiting for breath felt at first like a moment of nothingness, a moment in 'suspended animation'. At first I found it disconcerting, and used to wonder if I would ever need to breathe again. But as I became accustomed to it I started to find it relaxing, a special moment before a new beginning. The more I was able to let go of any muscular tension while lying down the longer I felt this pause becoming.

Looking back at the work I did with my singing teacher I recognise that I entered into a new relation to my breath and I developed new habits of breathing. They served me well for a time, as habits will, but they turned out to be at odds with the grounds of Middendorf breathwork. The primary basis of Middendorf breathwork is to let breath come and go 'on its own' – not to draw it in or push it out, but to let it find its own rhythm. It is this that distinguishes Middendorf breathwork from most other bodies of work with breath. I recognise now that I was extending my inhalation, enjoying the unfamiliar bodily sensations and wanting more. I would have long inhalations and pauses lasting up to fifteen seconds. I must have had exhalations as well, but I didn't register those

at the time. For me at that point, breathing was really about inhaling – if I had a ‘good’ inhalation I could sing a long phrase.

Some years later in Berlin, during an individual session with a Middendorf practitioner, the practitioner gently asked me whether this was really my breath, and if it was to let it continue, and when it wanted to change to allow that. That led me to an awareness that I was *making* my breath long and deep, and it fostered in me a different appreciation of my breath, where bigger was not necessarily better. A new possibility arose for allowing breath to come and go on its own. As time has passed and I continue this breath practice further possibilities and experiences continue to arise.

Try this 1: basis of Middendorf breathwork

I believe all this will make more sense if you, the reader, have some experiences of Middendorf breathwork as well as reading about my experience and those of my volunteer co-researchers. So I make some ‘offers’² for your experience in these early parts, which I hope you will try. With these beginnings you can then try anything else I describe later on from the workshops.

Begin by bringing your attention to the movement of your body with your breath. Sitting comfortably, place the palms of your hands somewhere around the middle of your torso. Can you sense the movement of your body walls with your breath? If not, it may help to close your eyes or move your hands to some other part of your torso.

² The word ‘offer’ is much used in the Middendorf breathwork training in Berkeley, as in ‘make an offer to your breath and see how it responds’. This reflects a particular approach to the breath, that of an encounter with a living thing rather than the investigation of some object. It also reflects that we do not know what the response is going to be; that there is not a ‘right’ response.

Can you be with this movement and allow your breath to come and go on its own? What else do you notice? Does this activity have an effect on your mood?

When you have had enough of this, let yourself stretch like a cat or dog does when it wakes. Extend your arms, your legs, in any way that you like that feels good to you. After some stretching while seated, stand and continue – stretch the sides of your torso, your back, your front. When you have had enough stretching, sit, close your eyes and ‘resonate’, that is, sense for a few breath cycles what this has done for you. What has changed? Where do you experience movement of your body with breath now? Do you have an experience of more space for breath in your body? Is it easier to let breath come and go on its own?

I once offered this short sequence of Middendorf breathwork at a writing seminar, at the end of a full day. There was little time for feedback, but afterwards one of the participants said that as she sat after stretching she felt ‘pregnant with breath’ and she liked this sensation. In my experience many people report feeling more spacious in some way after this sequence, and many say they find it difficult at first to let breath come and go on its own; for some it feels like the act of bringing attention to breath changes it in some way. This seems to pass with repeated encounters with this breath practice.

When I ask, ‘Where do you experience movement of your body with breath now?’ I direct your attention to the sensations of that movement. Attending to the sensations of these movements while allowing breath to come and go on its own, is a basic ground of Middendorf breathwork. The movements can be those of the torso expanding with the inhalation and swinging back with the exhalation, or they can be more subtle micromovements that may be almost undetectable to the

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eye. The attention brought to these sensations has a particular quality denoted by the idea of 'participating in' or 'being with' compared with 'observing from a distance'.

When I ask, 'Do you have an experience of more space for breath in your body?' that is more of a leading question, more directive I could say. I want to begin to establish a language for talking about the experience of breath, and 'space' is part of that. A sense of bodily space is usually associated with inhalation in Middendorf breathwork.