

A conversation on faith and mental health:

Breath, presence, and the *imago Dei*

Kate Bowen-Evans and Mark Bowen

Kate is a Biblical Studies PhD student and humanitarian aid worker. Mark is a Core Process Psychotherapist. They are siblings. Here they are in conversation about where their work and personal experiences overlap. Kate is parent to a daughter with complex physical and intellectual disabilities and Mark has lived experience of physical disability living with a spinal injury.



Kate: What words would you choose to describe yourself and what you do?

Mark: I am what is now called a psychotherapist, but in earlier times would have been a sage, the person who lived on the edge of the village and was able to speak from the outside in.

Kate: That's an interesting description of the liminality or the marginality of a certain type of insight that you can only have by being slightly on the outside or the edges looking in.

Mark: It's an echo of being in but not of.

Kate: It's also about what is acceptable and who holds the power and where you sit in comparison to that. What are your interests in mental health and theology?

Mark: Theology is the root because we were brought up in a Christian family, that's the lens through which I most easily access the language of Other or God. That comes with baggage and history that doesn't represent what I mean when I say God, so, for a period of time it's been hard to use that word because it's so loaded. That made it harder to pray, because this image of God doesn't represent

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my experience. Even if I don't necessarily agree with the framework, I believe that I'm held within something bigger, and that something bigger is a positive, affirming, patient, loving presence, not one that is to be feared.

Kate: How does that link to mental health?

Mark: Because no matter how low I seem, I know that I matter, that I'm worth something.

Kate: Tell me about your experience of breathing and body communication based on your body experience?

Mark: The training I did placed a lot of emphasis on listening to the body as a place where trauma is held, and not just trauma but also insight.¹ I spent most of my life seeing my body as something to be ignored or overcome. To suddenly be given the possibility that my body was still a source of information brought me into different areas of the imagination. I've been told I cannot feel. I have no sensation from my chest down. But if I pay attention to my toes, or my legs, there's all kinds of sensations happening. So, to suggest that actually they still held information was a paradigm shift. I began a new relationship with my disabled body that is still communicating with me despite paralysis. I was told medically that I could not feel but that was referring to my physical body. The lack of specificity in that language led me to perceive myself as emotionally unfeeling also. Simply using the word sensation instead changes things: I don't have sensation from my upper chest down, that does not mean I cannot pay attention to my body, what it's telling me, that does not mean I cannot feel! It's not what people say about your experience, or what the medical model says I am that matters but what my experience is, the value of my lived experience.² My experiences as a disabled person are of value,

¹ Mark trained at the Karuna Institute for Core Process Psychotherapy, <https://karunainstitute.co.uk/>.

² The medical model of disability says people are disabled by their impairments or differences, as opposed to the social model of disability which says that disability is caused by the way society is organised. Disability Nottinghamshire provides a succinct discussion on this: <https://www.disabilitynottinghamshire.org.uk/index.php/about/social-model-vs-medical-model-of-disability/>.

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because they are my experience. I live in a world that is constantly telling me it's not of value.

Kate: How does that message come across?

Mark: It is a challenge everywhere I go. I can't access life.

Kate: We are discussing breath, presence and the *imago Dei* today. Why does breath matter to well-being and mental health?

Mark: What we mean by breath is paying attention to physically breathing, to bringing the act of breathing to our attention. First, notice that you are breathing and then just experience the breaths. There are different qualities of breath; restricted, comfortable, deep, shallow. There is a short pause after the inhale and a short pause after the exhale, we can follow the breath around our body in and out. It just begins to create space and into the space things will come. The challenge is that it might be uncomfortable, traumatic or scary and that is when people say 'I don't want to do this.' But actually, if you can continue to breathe the space begins to grow around your feelings.

Kate: Simply by the type of breathing you're doing you can resist or welcome something. If I'm anxious, I do short breathing, I don't want whatever is out there to come deep within me, I keep it at a shallow level. Whereas if I'm willing to allow whatever it is to come deeper within me I act on that by allowing the breath to come deeper inside me, and to affect my body differently.

Mark: Then the space opens up for you to realise that what you're experiencing isn't you, it's your feelings, just as the breath comes and goes and goes, so our feelings come and go.

Kate: We breathe without thinking and yet it is essential to our lives, but we put no thought into it at all.

Mark: We are sustained every day by this thing that we pay no attention to. It takes us into our bodies, another area that we are sustained by and pay very little attention to. We're not listening to it, listening to what it's trying to tell us.

Kate: How do you listen to what your breathing is telling you?

Mark: When I sit with my clients we breathe and become present, feel the weight of our body in the seat, feel our feet on the floor. The breath

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is the way to begin that process; no effort, no words, there's nothing to do, nothing to be, just breathe. Once the body is settled it will have all sorts of reactions but we often ignore them all. Take notice of your breath and that is the first step towards the work of self-compassion. Breath is a powerful physiological regulator. When you notice your anxiety arising, engage with your breath and you can physically help yourself feel different. Breath gives me space, it gives me advanced warning of my feelings.

Kate: One thing that I find useful about breath is its accessibility. When I practice breathing mindfully I can tell the changes in myself. The completely free resource of breath work has a significant impact on my well-being in everyday life, and my relationship management because it creates space to know what's happening in me and hopefully without judgment. 'Actually I'm stressed about this, I'm taking it out in this way. I'm really worried about this.'

Mark: That is the big next step, to experience ourselves without judgment or notice how we judge ourselves. Instead of chastising ourselves, 'Why am I getting so stressed about this?' all we are doing is trying to recognise our feelings and we can begin to be kind to ourselves and choose how to respond. Feelings are like clouds, they come and they go. Once we've established breath we start to become present to ourselves and we become present to the experience of what it is to be in our body. Our particular body-mind, in this particular place and time through breath allows us a greater awareness of anything that is in me without distraction from ourselves. Richard Rohr says, 'How we do anything is how we do everything.'³ Everything is about relationship, our relationship with our partner, ourselves, nature. I imagine my roots going deep into the earth, and the earth holding me and loving me, and noticing that I'm on it, that I am taking part and suddenly I become part of creation. As I become more present to myself and the details of my experience space opens up for Presence, with a capital P.

Kate: What do you mean?

³ Richard Rohr, "Practicing Awareness," *Daily Meditations*, Center for Action and Contemplation, November 11, 2021, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/practicing-awareness-2021-11-11/>.

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Mark: We call it God, a higher power, Source, nature, creation, Gaia, whatever you choose to call it. There is the possibility that we are held within something greater. As we become more present to our own experience, we realise we are not a separate self but part of creation. We are part of a community by being present to our relationship with ourselves, with others and with creation.

Kate: I like to be able to see a long distance, it changes how I perceive myself. I'm no longer the biggest thing in my life because I realise I am part of this massive scale, so my perspective on myself shifts. I feel it in my lungs, I imagine I have more space to breathe, because I can see how big the space is.

Mark: That is exactly what the breath does, places us within a perspective that is larger than just ourselves.

Kate: In terms of your own journey with presence to self, body experience and then presence with a capital P, what has your own body experience been?

Mark: As I become more present to my own experience, my body, and my breath, I realise that it is of value. And if it is of value, is what I am experiencing of God? If all my experience is of God or if God is not separate from my experience, as the breath is not separate from my experience, then everything I am experiencing God, is in. So God is as saturated in my experience, as my breath is, I am not God but God dwells with and in me. That is the change for me, that was the paradigm shift, that if I deeply trust and listen to myself, or my inner voice, maybe that is God. So by listening to ourselves, we honour the image of God we are created in.

Kate: Jewish and Christian language speaks of the breath of God and the integrated nature of God with us. It is *ruach* in Hebrew and the *pneuma* in Greek.⁴ The theological idea is that God's Spirit is with us and dwells in us and makes us interconnected.

Mark: Yes, we're talking a lot about the individual experience but as we become more connected to ourselves and the experience of being in our own particular body-mind, that idea connects us to each other,

⁴ Genesis 1:2, 2:7; Psalm 33:6; Job 33:4; Psalm 104:29–30; Ezekiel 37:1–14; Isaiah 44:3; John 6:63, 20:22; Romans 8:10–11; Revelation 11:11.

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to creation, to the wider world. That links to the idea of the *imago Dei* in each of us, and more than just the idea, we begin to feel the interconnected experience of all beings.

Kate: So what you're saying is, a greater willingness to engage with ourselves leads to greater openness, ability, and willingness to engage with other aspects of the world and the shared experience of others. When you use the term *imago Dei* what does it mean to you?

Mark: My understanding is that we are all created in the image of God. Holding the image of God means we are all special because of this light that we hold and that I am asked to love people, because the act of loving people is loving God.

Kate: What about the idea of perfection and the image of God? For me that matters a lot, because I think we've really misplaced what the idea of perfection is, if it's relevant at all. And how we are close to the image of God, or far from the image of God, depending on our perfection.

Mark: I don't think God wants perfection. How can I as not-perfect be made in the image of God? If I'm created in the image of God what about my jealousy, anger, desire, greed? It is not about those feelings, or those emotions, but how I respond to them. How do I come into relationship with them?

Kate: Which is, I suppose, what Jesus in the Incarnation did. He experienced all of those things and didn't succumb to them in problematic ways. It is really interesting the type of image of God that Jesus is; as Jesus of Nazareth he was a poor, low-income carpenter.

Mark: And even more radical, a sensitive man, disavowed by his own people, deeply in touch with his feelings.

Kate: And brutalised and murdered by a powerful regime. It's really interesting how we reify a different perspective on what the image of God is, but if you look at Jesus' image of God it is a lot more like us than we perhaps let it be. Jesus was a man, walked this earth, he knew discomfort, hunger, and pain.

Mark: And that's the proof that there's a model that's possible within the breadth of human experience. In Buddhism the idea of the image of

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God is of brilliant sanity, that there's a place of inherent health for your true self.⁵

Kate: So how does breath, presence, and the *imago Dei* help you respond differently?

Mark: By coming to the breath attentively, I begin to see how I am relating to suffering. Because no matter how much I don't want to be disabled, I am. I'm not saying it's easy.

Kate: You describe your therapeutic process as holding the *imago Dei* of someone else for them, in the therapeutic relationship and reflecting that to them, especially when they are unable to hold it for themselves.

Mark: Part of my role is to hold on to the part of you that is always and forever well, the image of God in you. And not only well, but is your resource for wellness. That leads back to the breath, when I stop, and am still and breathe, I can find my way to a place inside me, despite all that I am experiencing. Knowing that and being familiar with that place, and resting in that place enables me to experience what is happening differently. I can potentially expand the space within myself that is a safe place, a good place, a resource for wellness. The more you add to the awareness of times and parts of yourself that are well, or have been well in the past, the greater your sense of confidence that it can be again. So you become familiar with this place, and when you're not there, you can still hold now for yourself that it is still there, even if you can't access it, and you know you've been given some tools, or you've learned your own resources that help you, whether it is having a cuddle with your dog, or walking by the sea, whatever it is that that helps you find your place, that's where the breath comes in.

Kate: It is interesting to think that some of that sense of well-being is helped by recognizing one's part in creation and part in the image

⁵ Louis Hoffman, *Brilliant Sanity: Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy* (University of the Rockies Press, 2008).

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of God, the reflection of the image of God, that language is really helpful for recognising that place of wellness.

Mark: I call it simply that I'm loved, that I matter.

Kate: I look particularly at the idea that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians of the body of Christ.⁶ The Spirit of God is what connects that body together. We might describe the greater sense of presence to self as increasing the recognition of presence with the other, Source, creation and other people. That is also how the body of Christ imagery works, we are connected – my connection to the earth beneath my feet, the tree next to me, the person at the bus stop – is part of how God is at work in the world. This interconnectedness also connects to the idea of the image of God being in all, and in creation itself, which reflects God's infinite nature. The image of God is absolutely tied into that. The breath of ourselves is absolutely tied into that because it helps us understand our connectedness.

Mark: And that brings us full circle to the sense that, although I am one piece of the infinite whole, I am an infinitely valuable piece of the whole. And however I look, however I am in any given moment, I am loved and that does not change. How I feel in any moment does not change that truth.

Kate: That's really liberating and affirming. It is really helpful to understand how these theological ideas we've talked about have a practical use in supporting mental health and wellbeing.

Mark: And that the practice of breath-work is in fact underpinned by and supports these theological ideas in turn.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.