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BREATH

The New Science of a Lost Art

By James Nestor

304 pp. Riverhead Books. 2020.

Having tirelessly sought treatment for his own afflictions (recurrent pneumonia, a deviated septum, and stress), journalist James Nestor helps his readers in arms (the majority of the population that has trouble breathing) consider ways to breathe better. For all of us, he submits, the breath is "the missing pillar in health" (xix), that is, improved lung capacity, diaphragm function, blood and oxygen flow, and immune response, and greater calm. *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* vivifies forgotten innovators across time in science, medicine, opera, sports, and yoga—a collective he calls "pulmonauts." Nestor doesn't prove the literature, but instead, joins a Stanford otolaryngology study (alternately plugging his nasal passages and then his mouth for ten days), and tries out rebranded techniques (such as Buteyko Breathing, aka hypoventilation). His findings? Breathe through your nose and not your mouth. Exhale fuller and longer. Chew well. Manipulate the breath at times and on occasion, vigorously. Controlled breathing can increase carbon dioxide levels and blunt an asthma attack, and can also recondition chemoreceptors in the brain and thwart a panic attack. (For tutorials of breathing techniques, see [mrjamesnestor.com/breath-vids](http://mrjamesnestor.com/breath-vids).) As for an optimal breath rate, Nestor saw concurrence in the religio-spiritual realm, from Christianity's prayer "Ave Maria" to Kundalini's mantra "Sa ta na ma": about a 5.5 second inhale and a 5.5 second exhale, and 5 to 6 breaths a minute. Yogis call it "sama vritti," equal ratio breathing. There's an app for that. —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 18 October 2020