

Breathing Room

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How many breaths do you remember? Did you breathe easy after graduating from high school or getting into Albion? Have you struggled to breathe after an intense workout? Was your first crossing of the Mackinac Bridge breathtaking?

I'm awed by the thin atmospheric layer that provides the breathing room of our planet: the immense thunderstorms of the great plains, the dazzling brilliance of the northern lights, the interplay of clouds and light throughout the day, the flight of a honeybee seeking flowers, the call of a sandhill crane across a summer field, and the whisper of the winter wind in a white pine. All known life exists in this little shared air bubble that surrounds us.

Take and hold a deep breath. Ponder the magic that happens automatically millions of times a year. Breathing fills your lungs with fresh oxygenated air. In your lungs, air molecules travel along repeatedly branching bronchial tubes until they reach one of hundreds of millions of alveoli. Oxygen is exchanged with carbon dioxide. Now exhale. In doing so, carbon dioxide leaves your body. That breath will sustain your life for a

short moment. Some reasonable assumptions and simple mathematics show that every breath you take likely contains a molecule that was in the dying breaths of Abraham Lincoln—or Breonna Taylor—or George Floyd.

Breathing is one way we experience the world: the smell of new fresh coffee, a lab partner's halitosis, the sting of tear gas, a deadly virus. Breathing also gives us our voice. We exhale and vibrate our vocal chords, filling the air with energy that passes from our lips to another's ears. We talk. We protest. We sing. We teach.

What happens when the only air you breathe is toxic? The World Health Organization estimates that ninety-one percent of humanity lives in areas with unsafe air quality levels and that seven million people die prematurely every year from air pollution. It is difficult to quickly detect hazards such as lead dust, asbestos particles, and radon gas. It is even harder to detect airborne viruses that cause influenza and COVID-19.

Learning is another way we experience the world: we read ancient texts, we watch YouTube videos, we form questions, we experiment, we develop mathematical models, we create, we analyze, we debate, we write. Like the

Charge from the Faculty, Matriculation Ceremony, Albion College, August 21, 2020.

exchange of gases in our lungs, the exchange of ideas happens at Albion through the magic of learning.

What happens when the facts you learn are toxic? It is often difficult to quickly detect the falsehoods and unsound arguments that bombard us every day. The boundary between truth and embellishment, artistic license, tall tales, or white lies is not always clear. Misunderstanding others is easy when we start from conflicting assumptions.

Our assumptions filter what we find to be truthful. As with masks that have been developed to protect from environmental hazards, education helps us develop filters that can shape the way we interact with the world. Education develops new ways of knowing and communicating about the world. Learning may also change your long held beliefs. With new filters we gain fresh perspectives and have new experiences. We grow into better people.

During the next four years you will be challenged in many ways: challenged by a raging pandemic, challenged to respect others as you negotiate shared physical and mental spaces, challenged to see the humanity in people who are different from yourself but who all share the same planet; we all breathe from the same atmosphere regardless of race, ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status.

You will be challenged to learn new concepts that confront long-held assumptions: challenged to think logically, challenged to find the

needle of truth in a haystack of uncertainty, challenged to communicate effectively.

You are not alone in these challenges. Thankfully, countless doctors and scientists around the world have been working on ways to reduce the spread, formulate treatments, and develop cures for COVID. Even in the midst of challenges like this pandemic there is room for the excitement of research and new learning. How can we limit the spread? How can we cure the sick? How can we maintain a robust economy? Here at Albion, faculty and staff have been focused on learning how to provide an excellent academic experience during a pandemic.

I always ask graduating students about factors in their success at Albion. Nearly every student has indicated relationships with faculty have been very important. Many said they wished they had gotten to know their professors better earlier. Albion's professors are challenging yet supportive. We believe your presence makes a difference. We value you. You matter.

Not every breath or course you take will be easy. Seek us for help when you struggle. Meet with us in person or online. Ask questions during and especially out of class. We truly want you to be successful at Albion and go on to lead happy, meaningful, and productive lives.

I wish you all a healthy and successful start to our joint academic adventure. Welcome to Albion College!