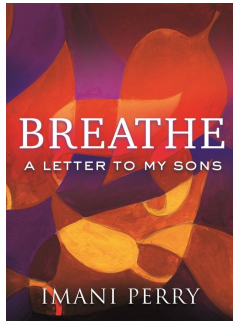


The 2021 Unity Congregation Book Read



Breathe: A Letter to My Sons Reading Guide

Breathe: A Letter to My Sons by Imani Perry

Beacon Press, 2019. 163 pp. \$18.

2020 Chautauqua Prize Finalist

2020 NAACP Image Award Nominee - Outstanding Literary Work (Nonfiction)

Best-of Lists: Best Nonfiction Books of 2019 (Kirkus Reviews) ·

25 Can't-Miss Books of 2019 (The Undeclared)

Emotionally raw and deeply reflective, Imani Perry issues an unflinching challenge to society to see Black children as deserving of humanity. She admits fear and frustration for her African American sons in a society that is increasingly racist and at times seems irredeemable. However, as a mother, feminist, writer, and intellectual, Perry offers an unfettered expression of love—finding beauty and possibility in life—and she exhorts her children and their peers to find the courage to chart their own paths and find steady footing and inspiration in Black tradition.

With original art for the cover by Ekuia Holmes, *Breathe* offers a broader meditation on race, gender, and the meaning of a life well lived and is also an unforgettable lesson in Black resistance and resilience.

Reading Guide Contents

- About *Breathe* and the Author
- NYTimes Book Review: A Black Mother's Love and Fear for Her Children in a White World
- "Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not." by Imani Perry
- Find Out More
- Beacon Press Readers Guide Discussion Questions

Breathe is available at [The Unity Church-Unitarian Online Bookstall](#), at [inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop](#), and at most independent and major booksellers online.

Also chosen as the 2020-21 UUA Common Read.

About *Breathe* and the Author

When I titled the book, *Breathe*, as many people have guessed, I was thinking of Eric Garner’s dying repetition, “I can’t breathe.” I was also thinking about my own days of sleeping with an oxygen tank when my lupus flared badly. I was born in Birmingham, an industrial city that at the time had the worst air quality of anyplace in the nation, and I carry diseases that are likely evidence of the consequences of that air.

Despite all of this, I want to remind my children, and all children, to breathe deeply where we can, to hold on to sustenance. It is at once a necessity for life and a form of refusal. Black Americans traditionally say, “As long as I have breath in my body . . .” before announcing the greatest of commitments.

From “[As Long as We Have Breath in Our Bodies](http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2020/06/as-long-as-we-have-breath-in-our-bodies.html)” By Imani Perry, June 02, 2020. Beacon Broadside: www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2020/06/as-long-as-we-have-breath-in-our-bodies.html

“In *Breathe*, Perry offers a lyrical meditation that connects a painful, proud history of African American struggle with a clarion call for present-day action to protect, defend, and celebrate the promise of the next generation.”

—Stacey Abrams, founder and chair of Fair Fight Action, Inc.



Imani Perry is the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, where she also teaches in the Programs in Law and Public Affairs, and in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She is a native of Birmingham, Alabama, and spent much of her youth in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Chicago. She is the author of several books, including *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry*. She lives outside

Philadelphia with her two sons, Freeman Diallo Perry Rabb and Issa Garner Rabb. Follow her on Twitter at [@imaniperry](https://twitter.com/imaniperry).

Imani Perry – Wikipedia:

Born: September 5, 1972 (age 48 years), Birmingham, AL

Nationality: American

Education: Georgetown University Law Center, Harvard Law School, Harvard University, Yale University

Awards: PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography

Nominations: NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work – Nonfiction

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imani_Perry

The New York Times Book Review:

A Black Mother's Love and Fear for Her Children in a White World

By Julie Lythcott-Haims. Sept. 28, 2019. BREATHE: A Letter to My Sons By Imani Perry

How do you instill enough self-love in your children that it will buoy them when racial hatred threatens to pull them under? This is the challenge for parents of black children, and the aim of “Breathe: A Letter to My Sons,” by Imani Perry.

A professor of African-American studies at Princeton, Perry is a prolific writer whose work, including her recent award-winning [biography of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry](#), contributes to a fuller understanding of black history and culture. But in “Breathe,” the scholar forsakes the safe harbor of academic objectivity for the wilds of personal vulnerability. Her exhale feels overdue, and deep.

This is a mother who has made it by most standards, yet she cannot guarantee the safety of her offspring because of the color of their skin. She stands guard at a crossroads where past is present, the political is personal and the abstract or purely hypothetical is all too real. Like any parent, she wants her children, two boys, to be able to create a decent and happy life for themselves. Yet the “terrifying specter” of the white imagination means they are often not seen as individuals but instead are judged for being black — “subject to the larger white world’s constant evaluation as to whether or not you are worthy.” (She compiles a running list of criticisms and put-downs to which her kids are subjected: “Too mobile, too slow, too fast, inattentive. Why are you still in the bathroom? It takes you too long to pee. It takes you too long to remember this algorithm, this table. You hold the pencil too tight, you do not hold it tightly enough.”) We hear echoes of Hansberry’s fictional family in “A Raisin in the Sun” debating the merits of moving to a white community versus allowing those would-be white neighbors to buy them off in exchange for staying put. Perry chose the former for her sons, along with its consequences. “You live in some worlds that are more white than black,” she tells them. “And so, you learn, early on, that the aversion to blackness can turn perfectly lovely people grotesque.”

One presumes she is referring not only to strangers but to those in the village it is said to take to raise a child — those who are supposed to care about *her* children in the manner due *all* children, and yet do not act. From them she regularly hears, “It must be terrifying to raise a black boy in America,” and her frustration with these newly, barely, woke folk is palpable: “Without hesitation, they speculate as if it is a statement of fact. I look into their wide eyes. I see them hungry for my suffering, or crude with sympathy or grateful they are not in such a circumstance.” It is not that she doesn’t want them to care about black suffering. Her point is, Would you stop pleading innocence and *do* something?

But educating those folks is not Perry’s primary aim; instead, “Breathe” centers on black endurance. Her book offers her children an elixir of history, ancestry and compassion, which,

together, become instruction. She shares a childhood memory of the grotesque as prologue: a brilliant teacher who repeatedly singled her out for mockery and degradation while white classmates looked on. “They were disciplined into passive acceptance, into reaping the rewards, while I was humiliated over and over again. ... Bewildered at the idea that they might have something asked of them to disrupt the hideous truth. This is what you are surrounded by. Silent witnesses.”

She reckons with how to stay in control when the news routinely offers a one-two punch: Black children are harmed and the wrongdoers go free. “Feeling deep love and complete helplessness to protect the beloveds is a fact of black life.” In one sobering passage, she imagines what could have happened to her teenage sons when a tripped alarm summoned the police to their home one night. What if an officer had mistaken one of her boys for an intruder? She admits readers may find this “melodramatic.” But whether a son would have been gunned down in his own home is beside the point; the stress of worrying accumulates and becomes its own specter: “Hypervigilant panic is our misfortune.”

Yet life is the gift Perry offers her sons, not fear or helplessness. “I cannot clip your wings. ... No, I want your wingspan wide.” “Breathe” is a testament to her long game, a refusal to let unwarranted and unpunished death frighten her sons from truly living. She steers them away from the belief that an admirable life depends on achieving professional and economic status: “The greatest legacy you come from, to my mind, is of the people who found meaning beyond the doors of universities or the luster of careers. Who were themselves, even in the tiniest of ways, when there was hardly any place to be.” Perry heeds the words of a Zen priest who speaks of “freeing oneself of the white mind, of its overwhelming method of seeing and interpreting, as a means of getting closer to truth.” “Breathe” models the practice.

Perry never reveals specific harms that her sons have endured, which is the book’s transcending quality; it is not about them. Instead, she insists that *all* black children be treated with dignity and kindness. Here her voice takes on an oracular quality: “Like the phoenix, in you the ancestors come again, rise from the curling red and gray ashes underneath lynching trees. ... That is what black reincarnation is. The debt is still owed. We keep making generations to collect our inheritance.”

It is when we know these ancestors, their history and their progress, Perry suggests, and when we believe in the right to a life of dignity despite what others may think, that our breath itself is power. “Breathe” is a parent’s unflinching demand, born of inherited trauma and love, for her children’s right simply to be possible.

Julie Lythcott-Haims is the author of “Real American: A Memoir.” Her next book, “How to Be an Adult,” is forthcoming. A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 24, 2019, Page 24 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Native Sons.

The Atlantic “Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not.” by Imani Perry.
June 15, 2020.

A lot of kind statements about black people are coming from the pens and minds of white people now. That's a good thing. But sometimes, it is frankly hard to tell the difference between expressions of solidarity and gestures of absolution (*See, I'm not a racist, I said you matter!*) Among the most difficult to swallow are social-media posts and notes that I and others have received expressing sorrow and implying that blackness is the most terrible of fates. Their worrisome chorus: “I cannot imagine ... How do you ... My heart breaks for you ... I know you are hurting ... You may not think you matter but you matter to me.” Let me be clear: I certainly know I matter. Racism is terrible. Blackness is not.

I cannot remember a time in my life when I wasn't earnestly happy about the fact of my blackness. When my cousins and I were small, we would crowd in front of the mirrors in my grandmother's house, admiring our shining brown faces, the puffiness of our hair.

My elders taught me that I belonged to a tradition of resilience, of music that resonates across the globe, of spoken and written language that sings. If you've had the good fortune to experience a holiday with a large black American family, you have witnessed the masterful art of storytelling, the vitality of our laughter, and the everyday poetry of our experience. The narrative boils down quite simply to this: “We are still here! Praise life, after everything, we are still here!” So many people taught us to be more than the hatred heaped upon us, to cultivate a deep self-regard no matter what others may think, say, or do. Many of us have absorbed that lesson and revel in it.

One of the classic texts in African American studies is Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Her playful yet profound articulation resonates for me now. She wrote, “I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it ... No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

Some of her words, I must admit, are too hopeful, at least for me right now. In fact, I *do* weep at the world; I am, in a sense, part of the sobbing school; and I am skeptical that my lone oyster knife can cut any of the rot out of this nation. But, like Hurston, I refuse to see the story of who I am as a tragedy.

Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. The scourges of racism, poverty, incarceration, medical discrimination, and so much more shape black life. We live with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow, and with the new creative tides of anti-blackness directed toward us and our children. We know the wail of a dying man calling for his mama, and it echoes into the distant past and cuts into our deepest wounds. The injustice

is inescapable. So yes, I want the world to recognize our suffering. But I do not want pity from a single soul. Sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy. As the poet Sonia Sanchez wrote in a haiku about her power—and her struggles:

Come windless invader
I am a carnival of
stars a poem of blood

People of all walks of life are protesting the violent deaths handed out by police officers. This is extraordinary both because the victims were black—and when does black death elicit such a response?—and because Americans in general have a hard time dealing with death. Think about how uncomfortable many Americans are with grief. You are supposed to meet it with a hidden shamefulness, tuck yourself away respectably for a season, and then return whole and recovered. But that is not at all how grief courses through life. It is emetic, peripatetic; it shakes you and stops you and sometimes disappears only to come barreling back to knock the wind out of you.

Black Americans right now are experiencing a collective grief, one that unfolds publicly. And we are unable to tuck it away. I do think Hurston would have to admit this too, were she around today. She wrote her essay before *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Birmingham crusade, the March on Washington, Freedom Summer, the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Acts, the rise of black mayors, the first black governor, the first black president. She wrote her essay before we understood how tightly this nation would grasp onto its original sin even after legions of black people came with razor-sharp oyster knives and hands full of pearls.

Black Americans continue to die prematurely—whether under the knee of a police officer, or struggling for breath on a respirator, or along the stretch of the Mississippi River known as Cancer Alley, or in the shadow of Superfund sites, or in one of the countless other ways we are caught in the spokes. The trauma is repetitive. We weep. But we are still, even in our most anguished seasons, not reducible to the fact of our grief. Rather, the capacity to access joy is a testament to the grace of living as a protest—described by Lorraine Hansberry, who, as one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American theater, wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*. Whenever she recounted the story of black America in lectures or discussions, she pointed to the extraordinary achievements we attained under obscene degradation. “Isn’t it rather remarkable that we can talk about a people who were publishing newspapers while they were still in slavery in 1827, you see?” she said during a speech in 1964.

Some of us who comment on racial inequality these days are averse to such accounts of black history, thinking them romantic and not frank enough about the ravages of racism. So I hope that no one is confused by my words. American racism is unquestionably rapacious. To identify the achievement and exhilaration in black life is not to mute or minimize racism, but to

shame racism, to damn it to hell. The masters were wrong in the antebellum South, when they described the body-shaking, delighted chuckle of an enslaved person as simplemindedness. No, that laugh—like our music, like our language, like our movement—was a testimony that refused the terms of our degradation. In the footage of the protests over the past several weeks, we have seen black people dancing, chanting, singing. Do not misunderstand. This is not an absence of grief or rage, or a distraction. It is insistence.

And so, I must turn the pitying gaze back upon any who offer it to me, because they cannot understand the spiritual majesty of joy in suffering. But my rejection of their account also comes with an invitation. If you join us, you might feel not only our pain but also the beauty of being human.

IMANI PERRY is the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, and her most recent book is *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*.

Find Out More

“Imani Perry Breathe” A Letter to My Sons.” Book Conversation with Tracy K. Smith at the Strand Book Store, New York City, September 24, 2019. YouTube-Strand Book Store Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxShfS7lhWo>

“Imani Perry: More Beautiful.” OnBeing with Krista Tippett, September 26, 2019. <https://onbeing.org/programs/imani-perry-more-beautiful/>

Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry by Imani Perry. Beacon Press, 2018.

Beacon Press, *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons* by Imani Perry

Readers' Guide Discussion Questions

1. Perry offers a meditation on race, gender, and the meaning of life through the framing of a letter to her sons. Why do you think she chooses to directly speak to her sons? What is the importance of this point of view?
2. Before beginning her letter, Perry notes the complexity of raising Black boys in the US, and she uses several metaphors to describe potential approaches: like cultivating diamonds, using coal for fuel or consolation Christmas gifts, covering her home in sacrificial blood, and stalking through a labyrinth while avoiding a minotaur (2). What approach does each metaphor entail, and what examples of each does Perry provide in her letter?
3. “George Washington’s false teeth were not wood, as you may have heard. They were actually made from a variety of materials, including Black humans’ teeth. The father of our country stole our teeth,” writes Perry (112). In this passage, what argument is Perry making about US history?
4. Over the course of *Breathe*, Perry raises the topic of home on several occasions. She tells her sons about their “ancestral home” (21) in the Deep South and their roots in West Africa; she details her usage of words like “finda” and “siditty” with those who remind her of her home in Alabama (76); and she notes her sons’ physical separation from Black communities that act as a secondary home for her (31). How would you define home, according to Perry? What similarities or differences does it share with your own definition of home?
5. How does Perry talk about death and its impact on many Black lives in the US? How is this embodied in her discussion of her late uncle, Boot (60)?
6. After discussing *To Kill a Mockingbird* with Freeman, Perry’s opinions on the novel and its characters change (68). Has your own view on *To Kill a Mockingbird* shifted after reading Freeman and Perry’s critique? Has someone close to you changed the way you felt about something you held dear?
7. After detailing the history of foot-binding, Perry urges Freeman and Issa to “Be careful to what you are bound.” (107) What does Perry seem bound to?
8. Why does Perry assert that children understand love and fairness better than adults (14)?
9. Perry highlights the duality of being Black in America early in the book. She tells her sons that in order to combat the racism that surrounds them, “I teach you to read well. I teach you second sight—the word and also its meaning” (11). What do you think Perry means by “second sight”? What are some examples she gives to Freeman and Issa?
10. What sentences from the book personally resonated with you—and why? Are there any particular passages from *Breathe* that challenged you or expanded your thinking?