

Breathe to Heal

An Interview with Max Strom



Max Strom

EDITORS' NOTE Max Strom (maxstrom.com) is impacting the lives of people from all walks of life, teaching breathing patterns and personal transformation worldwide. His method is known to produce immediate results in alleviating anxiety, PTSD, and sleep disorder that are meaningful to both the student and their family. Because of its success across the world, Strom's work is now being offered to corporations as a sustainable well-being program to organizations that want to not only be successful, but also healthy and to make a meaningful difference in the world. Strom's TEDx talk, *Breathe to Heal*, is approaching 3 million views on YouTube. Many know him for his two inspiring books: *There is No App for Happiness*, addressing the challenge of finding meaning in the digital age, and *A Life Worth Breathing*, published in five languages and used as required reading in many yoga trainings. A dynamic speaker, Strom has presented three TEDx events, keynote addresses at medical, well-being and corporate conferences as well as many yoga festivals. Most recently he presented at the World Government Summit in Dubai, the first Wellness Symposium in Saudi Arabia, and the Inner Peace Conference in Amsterdam. A U.S. citizen, Strom is based in the Netherlands.

Your journey in personal transformation began when you were 15 years old. What led you to this interest and focus?

Most people at some point in their life, usually after a crisis, begin questioning what life is – are we just animals that live a short time and die, is there more to us that lives on, is there a God that created the world and runs it – what is going on? I came to that point really early when I was 15 years old and I was quite fervent about it. I began reading about all the world's religions and about all the world's philosophers that I had heard of at that time. I started meditation when I was 16, although I had no direction and just made it up, but it had a big impact on me. When I was 18, I started qi gong, which is Chinese yoga, and this was my first introduction to the concept of breathing. That was life changing.

When you look at different aspects of personal transformation, such as meditation, spirituality, breathing and yoga, do you see these as being interrelated?

I would say that personal transformation happens on two tiers. The first tier is when people realize that they just need to get better – they need to not have this addiction or this repetitive behavioral problem that is interfering with their relationships, for example. This is their first introduction to personal transformation, and it is about improving a person's health and well-being, which is important. The other tier, which I would put side-by-side with the first tier, is when someone wants to understand the nature of the universe we live in and our place in it – what our purpose is and, if there isn't a purpose, how to create one. This is a different group of people and usually happens after a crisis or a major trauma.

When I look at most of the self-improvement courses, there seems to be missing a psychological element, particularly in the yoga world, which includes very little psychology. The psychological elements must be addressed if we are going to transform, because until we self-regulate and self-improve, our bodies are going to be chained, so to speak. You need to free yourself of those chains or you are not going to be able to go anywhere.

You have said that self-awareness should be taught at a young age in schools. Will you discuss the teaching of self-awareness, and do you feel there are aspects to being self-aware that a person is born with?

I think it is true that self-awareness can be taught and that there are also aspects that a

person is predisposed to. One of the assertions in the book I am currently writing is that we are miserably educated when it comes to our emotions, and with some decent education we simply would have different lives. For example, if you look at the military, let's say the American military – the military is getting better and better at dealing with trauma of its soldiers, while civilian America is not. The number one cause of death in the United States for those between the ages of 18 and 45 is now opioid overdose, so psychologically speaking, we are in real trouble. We are not heading toward the drain, we are going down the drain, culturally speaking, and until we address these issues we are not getting anywhere.

An example I like to give is this: when I address a crowd, I will ask them to raise their hand if at some point in their life they were taught CPR, and the majority will raise their hand. Then I ask them to raise their hand if as a child or young adult they were taught to deal with the emotion of grief or the grieving of others and, even in a crowd of 500 people, not a single hand goes up. My assertion is that if someone's heart stops, we know what to do – but if someone's heart breaks, we have no idea what to do.

Your book, *A Life Worth Breathing*, was published in 2010. Were you more optimistic about the future at that time and what are your views on the current state of the world?

I was more optimistic then, but I am still optimistic that we can create tremendous change at the grassroots level, although we have been quite distracted by COVID over the past two years. The other thing that happened after I wrote and released that first book was that social media and the smartphone became ubiquitous. When I released my second book in 2013, *There is No App for Happiness*, I addressed this. It was one of the first books that really looked at the damage that social media was going to have on us. Social media has been a destructive factor in our world and continues to be to this day. The good news is when people like me deliver a message that is simple and easily understood, it allows us to reach many people very quickly. This is important because I believe that we are going to have to make cultural changes without the government and without the pharmaceutical companies. We are going to have to do it ourselves at the grassroots level, and social media will actually help make this possible.

How concerned are you about the prevalence of anxiety today and do you feel that it is rampant in the business world?

Anxiety is rampant in the business world. It manifests as sleep issues, restlessness, loneliness and working 60-70 hours a week and coming home late to put on the television to fall asleep. Whenever I talk about this in front of a group of people, they begin laughing because they know I am talking about them. A story that I told in my TED Talk about a CEO is one I use often since that one example tells the story of tens of thousands of people. The story took place when I spoke at a small, exclusive meeting of CEOs, mostly from the marketing world, about happiness, breathing and grief. Afterward, I was waiting alone for an Uber in a courtyard area when I was approached by one of the CEO's who had followed me down to the courtyard. He looked around to make sure no one could hear him, then he struck up a conversation with me revealing that he had started having panic attacks. He was really concerned as it always happened at the most inopportune times, such as an investor's meeting or a board meeting. He said that his neck would get stiff, he would have a terrible headache, and he just wanted to run screaming out of the room. He asked if I could help him.

I always point out when telling this story that the CEO's request included no connection to *cause*, to why he was having the panic attacks and why they started happening. I led him through a line of questioning, starting with asking how long he had been having the panic attacks. He initially answered vaguely by saying it had been for "some time," but I was eventually able to get him to specify that it had been about six months ago. The next obvious question was to ask what happened six months ago, and he finally told me that this was when his brother had died. I suggested that he must have been very close to his brother, which he confirmed. I followed by telling him he must be a workaholic, which he also confirmed. At this point, he thought I had some magical powers of sight, but this was all very predictable. I told him that I did not think he had a panic attack problem, but that he had a grief issue. I told him that I assumed that after the funeral he went back to work that same day and had been working more and more hours each week. He became very quiet and then said, "that's right." His way to try to not feel the pain of the loss of his brother was to work himself to death.

I once told this story to a group of physicians when I was invited to a hospital to talk about breath work. I asked the physicians what they would have said to him at this point and one of the doctors shouted out "Xanax." They all started to laugh. When I asked them if they were seriously all in agreement, they said they were.

But I suggested something entirely different to the CEO. I explained to him that he had not grieved the loss of his brother at all, and he needed to allow himself time to grieve, and that instead of grieving alone, to also include others who loved him. When we grieve with others, it accelerates the process of healing. Neuroscientists do not yet know why, but it is true nonetheless. I also

suggested that he come to my breathing workshop the next day, and when I said "breathing," he looked at me with skepticism. But to my surprise, he showed up at the workshop and learned a few daily breathing exercises. He wrote to me about a month later and told me that he had not had a panic attack since he had seen me and, when I checked in on him a year later, he had still not had another panic attack. So, without medications – simply by taking the time to grieve his brother and by doing breath work every day – he had stopped having panic attacks.

When we suppress our feelings in our chest, they pile up and stay right there. Eventually, that energy has to get out somewhere, and it is going to come out as anxiety and/or panic attacks. The breath work provides a way to release that energy – the accumulation of stress, anger, and any other emotion you can think of – so that you clear this pile up sitting in your chest. We have not been able to scientifically define this connection between breath and emotions, but we know that the breathing releases anxiety and positively impacts our emotions. We know that when we think something is funny, our lungs do a strange thing we call laughing. We know that when we become sexually aroused, we start breathing deeply. Our lungs express emotions when we are cheering at a sports stadium, or when crying, which we should remember is the first thing we do when we are born. Crying is a language that we are born with that alerts our family, our tribe, that we are in trouble, either emotionally or physically. However, as we get older, we are told not to cry, and that when someone is crying we should leave them alone. We should be going toward each other when in crisis, not away from each other.

I do a lot of one-to-one sessions with CEOs which are often about panic attack problems, and most who I have met have been existing

on anti-anxiety drugs and sleep medications, but it usually takes just a short time to end these attacks..

What can be done to address the stigma around these issues?

We have to learn that vulnerability should not be mistaken for weakness. There is a perceived vulnerability about talking about our feelings, which is what we really need to do and we need to have the people who are close to us listen deeply and intently so we know we will not be shunned if we reveal our feelings. There is a term I am defining further in my new book and that term is "burden," because people say that they do not want to be a burden. This is a phrase that is used all over the world and reveals a tragic misunderstanding. If you and I are best friends and you tell me about your deepest pain, it should be a great honor for me to be close enough to you that you would consider sharing that with me. It should be an honor for me to look after you as much as I can when you are in crisis, knowing that next time I am in crisis you will do the same for me.

In the military, they use the term, "no one left behind." When someone is wounded, you do not abandon them; you make sure they are taken care of even if it means risking your life to do that. In the business world, it seems the opposite is often true.

You have said that personal transformation is not only imperative for the individual, but it is what can save the world. Will you elaborate on this concept?

If someone gets an addiction in our own home, whether it is one of our parents or a child, we know that it affects the rest of the family. Addictions can tear families apart, whether it is to drugs, alcohol, or other things. The opposite is also true in that, when someone heals, it impacts the entire family as well. It lifts



Max Strom giving a lecture on inner peace

them and gives them inspiration and a sense of hope. When we improve ourselves, we are doing everyone in our lives a favor.

What are the steps that someone can take to find their meaning in life?

I spoke to a CEO recently who said, “I have it all. I have money. I have power. I have prestige. But I have no meaning.” He said that he really wanted to get out of the big company he was running and create a small company that does something that helps people since the products from his current company were not making a difference. His objective was to create change for the better and to find meaning.

To me, happiness is a term that we often have not contemplated. When you ask someone what makes them happy at the deepest levels, they scramble for an answer since they may not have thought about that since they were much younger or maybe ever. This is a major problem.

I have asked huge groups to raise their hands if they want their children to be happy, and every hand goes up. Then I say to raise your hand if you can tell me what happiness is in two or three sentences, and most of them cannot do this. It starts with the need to clearly identify what happiness means to us. For me, it is meaning. It is about having meaning every day and having the kind of life that creates meaning. Meaning involves serving others in some way or being involved in a cause that serves others.

The question I ask CEOs that gets them to lean in and listen is, “Let’s assume you meet all your personal goals through your work, whether they be financial or other goals, what will be left of you to enjoy them?” This question makes them stop for a moment. I follow it up with this question, “Would you advise your children to live their daily life the way you do?” About half the audience at this point usually has some tears in their eyes. Sometimes you have to ask hard questions to make people stop and think.

The breath work is something that people had been skeptical about. It is less so now than five years ago, but still people feel they know how to breathe since they do it every day – they make it a joke. I ask them to give me ten minutes to do exactly what I instruct with breathing exercises and assure them that they are going to feel better afterwards. A ten-minute commitment is something they will do, and then they really do feel something new and are very surprised and ready to learn what else they can do.

What do you feel are the essential things that are needed to have meaning in life?

I think that there are some core needs all people intently need. One is that we have love, and that we love well. Most of us are not good at this – we can barely say it while making eye contact. If someone says “I love you” to us, we get embarrassed and look at the ground, even though we love hearing it from them. We need to be seen for who we are, not for the façade we create. If my good friend knows me for who I am, and still loves me regardless of my faults, then it feels like a safe relationship. In a safe relationship, there is



Max Strom teaching a class

no anxiety around the relationship since you create a culture of trust. We need to be loved and we need to be seen. We also need to know that our existence matters, which we can achieve by being a parent or being involved in our community – with the knowledge that if we were gone tomorrow, we would be missed. We need an in-person community, not an online community. We need real friends, and one of the most important ways to establish real friendship is to be there for someone during a crisis. Be one of the ones who shows up in the first 24 hours of a crisis and your friend will never forget it and will know that you always have their back, like two soldiers on the battlefield. This is how you develop powerful relationships.

In Northern European culture, which includes North America, we don’t do enough of that. We scatter during a crisis. I was in front of an audience not long ago and asked for them to be honest in answering the following question – “Have there been times when you have had a friend in crisis and you avoided them because you did not know what to say or what to do?” Virtually every hand went up in the auditorium. I have done this as well, sadly, because we receive no education on this topic. We teach people CPR, but we don’t teach people how to talk to each other. If we can learn how to communicate during a crisis – and this includes within a company – it creates genuine emotional intimacy and that creates the strongest of bonds.

There is an important story about Alexander the Great, who is still studied in military schools. He never lost a battle during his ten years fighting, which is an extraordinary accomplishment. He was part of the cavalry on the front lines and would go with his horse into the arrows

and spears. He had a special horse his father gave him named Bucephalus which he rode into battle for more than five years, and then one day the horse was killed by a spear. Alexander the Great still won that battle but afterwards went back to his camp, went into his tent, and would not come out for two weeks. He mourned his horse for two weeks. People smile when I say that, but just imagine the pet you have loved the most, and then imagine that pet has saved your life multiple times on top of it. It is a very particular relationship as war horses are in the fray with you. Alexander the Great did not care that people knew that he was hurting or that they could hear him crying in his tent – and no one could accuse that guy of being soft. When he finally came out of his tent, he said that he wanted a statue made of his horse put in a specific spot and that the city was now to be named Bucephalus.

You mentioned the difficulty for so many people to be able to express love. Why is this?

Having myself grown up in a household where this was the case, I am somewhat of an expert on this. Not only my father could not express emotions, my mother couldn’t either since she was raised without a mother. The way I like to say it is to imagine that on our chest we have a bunch of dimmer switches and each dimmer switch is for an emotion – we can turn it up or down or off. We think that we can say that we are warriors so we can turn off fear or turn off shame or turn off loneliness or turn off grief and so on. But it seems that what actually happens is that when we start pulling one switch down, we pull them all down. The same people who pull all those down, those socially unacceptable emotions, are also not good at saying, “I love you” or “I am sorry” or, in some cases, “I am proud of you.” Many of us have a parent who we know loves us and would die for us, but they won’t tell us. Many of us have no problem expressing our anger toward someone, but when we try to voice something that is vulnerable the words get stuck in our throat. The vulnerability I am talking about is voluntary vulnerability – in the dictionary the word for that is courage. It is choosing to be vulnerable even at risk.

You have touched so many lives over the years. Do you take moments to reflect and appreciate what you have accomplished and the impact you have made?

Because of the way I was brought up, it is difficult for me to accept compliments. Early on in my working life, it was really hard for me to feel that I was making a difference and to accept positive feedback. It took some time for that to change, and I still need to remind myself to take moments to stop and smell the roses in terms of what I have accomplished in regard to helping other people. It always feels that there is more to do and I am hoping to get my current book out within the year since I think it is a very important book. There are a lot of books on grief, on anxiety, on intimacy, and on breathwork – but not one book that says that this is all the same subject. This is how I see it – this is all the same subject. This is the missing link to our happiness. ●