

Blood and tears

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This is a short aside about smoking, which does pollute the local atmosphere but that's not really why I'm writing. If you smoke, logic probably won't convince you to give it up. If the density of smoke in your lungs was repeated in the room you're in, you probably wouldn't be able to see the far wall, the smoke alarm would long since have gone off and general evacuation procedures would be bringing the emergency services at full tilt. However, that's a logical reason for not contaminating your lungs, as is the argument that you're much more likely to get cancer in later life, or obstructive pulmonary disease or prematurely age or a good number of other unpleasant later life afflictions. Indeed smoking reduces life expectancy by some 10 years, a fact that rises into consciousness the older you get. I had the misfortune of visiting a heavy smoking relative on several occasions in her later life. Her house always stank of stale cigarettes. She could hardly move from her chair towards the end and the last few months of her life were spent in the alien surroundings of a rest home, frequently breathing with the help of an oxygen cylinder, in pain relieved by morphine and still wanting a fag. Who said smoking wasn't addictive? It was a really sad and distressing end for a bright lady who was the first in my family to go to University. However, that's all part of the logical reason for giving up smoking and smokers will probably ignore the message.

What I wanted to write about was the purpose of breathing. We live minute by minute through the circulation of our blood. Bright red clean blood courses out of the left ventricle of our heart, through our arteries and spreads out from thick vessels to thin ones, bringing energy, food, repair mechanisms and much more to almost every cell in our body. The dirty blood, now dark purple with waste products and spent haemoglobin, returns through our veins. What cleans out these products and restores our blood to its bright-red working self? Breathing is the answer. Our lungs are an amazing organ in which the venous blood pumped from the right ventricle of our heart is divided ever more finely into thin capillaries that come very close to the highly divided surface of the lungs. Likewise our air passage bifurcates and then divides into ever finer passages within the mass of the lungs, ending in a vast multitude of microscopic little grape-like sacks. Deep within the mass of tiny passages, in these tiny sacks air meets blood and the miracle of physical chemistry is wrought that cleans the blood. Oxygen re-energises the haemoglobin, carbon dioxide passes out into the lungs. It all happens in seconds and then we breathe out again, hardly noticing the effort. How often do you ever think about this almost miraculous life sustaining process, simple in its broadest description but highly complex in detail? Probably never. A pity, particularly if you smoke. Clogging up the tiny interstices of both lungs at once with smoke particles and condensates is a steep price to pay for five minutes of relaxation. It affects your blood, your whole body, toes to brain, not just twenty years into the future but now. Your body copes, sort of, because you've spare lung capacity over what you need in your resting state, when you're young. The damage, though, is being done with every cigarette. Your lungs are being turned from a vibrant pink organ to the ashen grey sponge that may end up in a plastic bag in the post-mortem disposals bin. I can tell you from experience that in later years even the healthy will value all the lung capacity they have got and will wish for a bit more. Being permanently short of breath is a life sentence with no remission.

I'm not really into preaching. The world has got too many preachers for comfort but if you smoke you probably do so partly because of peer pressure; it's what many of your friends do so you've already been on the receiving end of subtle persuasion. You're more likely to give up smoking if several of your friends agree to do it with you but even if a single person who reads this thinks about the miracle of breathing and stubs out their fag for the last time then the lesson that my relative failed to learn the hard way, and paid for with her life, will have been worth passing on.

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