

Air

In the last of this four-part series, **Melissa Addey** discusses the element we can't easily see

On our planet we rely on a very particular mix of gases that we call 'air' (oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide and argon as well as some water vapour and small amounts of other gases). Any one of these would not be good for us alone, as you will find if you want to explore the depths of the sea or the high mountains, let alone any other planetary bodies! Try snorkelling to see how it feels to breathe underwater, and you will find a whole world of creatures who have learnt to breathe in a different way from us. In very high altitudes such as the Andes, the local people have actually evolved to cope with the 'thin' air, but if you visit such an area you will probably find that you need to acclimatise or face altitude sickness as your body struggles to cope with a different mix of air.

Air is all around but easy to forget about until the air pressure in your ears changes when you go up a high hill! Try holding your breath to suddenly become aware of how much you need the air around you. See how long you can manage and whether you can improve your time if you keep trying. The record for holding breath stands at just over 15 minutes! You can survive for a long time with no food, and a short time with no water, but even that extraordinary record-holder could survive only minutes without air. Many religions place their gods in the air, sky or heaven, perhaps because it seems so important, so vast and a place we cannot hope to visit without help.

Use your senses to explore air. It can carry smells to you. What's cooking? Is there a bonfire nearby? Are you close to a perfume shop or a swimming pool? Near my house is a rose bush and I can smell it even from across the road when I walk by. If you hold your nose, can you still 'taste' the air? Can you see air? It seems invisible, but we can 'see' it as the trees bend and our clothes swing on the washing line on a windy day. How does

the air feel on your skin when you are wet or dry? Is a fan blissful on a hot day? Does a strong wind feel like it could blow you away? What does the air sound like – rustling leaves, swishing through the grass, or rattling windows? Think about and research the immense power this invisible force has, creating hurricanes, tornadoes and huge waves.

Now that spring is here, rush outdoors to fly kites or simply run as fast as you can against or with a strong wind – feel how it helps or hinders your progress! Watch the clouds rushing by on a windy day and see their shapes change. Imagine what they are and what they might become next. Choose a tree or even a small branch and make a 'wishing tree' by tying on little scraps of cloth or paper with your wishes written on them to float in the wind and perhaps grant your desires one day. Invite neighbours and visitors to add their own wishes when they drop by, or make a portable wishing tree for a new baby, a marriage or a birthday celebration. Blow dandelion clocks. Go bird watching to see how different birds use the air. Look out for a good washing day to see how quickly your clothes dry when it's windy compared to on a still day.

If you're stuck indoors, use a warm hairdryer to dry hair and bodies, to make paint dry faster, to tickle each other. Make fans for hot days or blow on baby bellies. Whirl smaller children around with your arms under their armpits so they can fly. Design and build your own kites – from simple to complex. Blow bubbles and pop bubble wrap. Use ribbons tied to rings or sticks to ribbon dance indoors or out, making the ribbon your dancing partner. Study the history of human flight, and then make your own paper airplanes. Experiment with making and playing different wind instruments, from wind chimes to flutes. Fill bottles with water to different levels, and blow!

For older and more adventurous family members, take a deep breath and try hang-gliding or hot air ballooning, or even take flying lessons. Attempt skydiving (there are indoor wind tunnels for this as well), or trust yourself to the wind's kindness and cooperation when sailing a boat. Challenge each other to air guitar competitions! You could try falconry or beekeeping to be closer to the creatures around us who can fly, and learn more about their skill. A kite festival would be ideal for the whole >