

CHAPTER 1

THE MISSION OF STRESS

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Julian of Norwich

Stress may be a stimulus or a burden, a fairground ride or a nightmare journey, but it can also be our partner and opponent in the inner game of life.

Despite its frequent unpleasantness, when approached in the right way, stress can become the means to learn and grow, for it has a positive mission. Stress symptoms can be our guide through the trials of life.

Just as the ordinary athlete uses exercise and challenge to develop physical muscles, so the inner athlete may develop calm, courage, imagination, balance, compassion, resilience, vision and presence of mind. Those who learn to pay attention to the physical, mental and spiritual signals that we call stress and discover how to respond will develop great personal gifts. Distress is only the outcome of failing to listen.

Though one man conquer a thousand men in battle a thousand times, he who conquers himself is the greatest warrior.

Buddha, *Dhammapada*, 103

From Stress to Serenity is therefore not only for those feeling stress or burnout and who are looking for a way to cope, it is also for everyone wishing personal, soul or spiritual development, or wanting to understand the *meaning and use* of stress. Sometimes it is just telling us to relax, like heat warning us away from a hot object. Yet, stress is also like a path of initiation arranged by nature or the gods or our own initiative to nurture our fullest potential, no fun at the time certainly, but ultimately an invaluable gift. Merely knowing this makes a difference. As Nietzsche commented, 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.'

For leaders arise from this path, and leadership is much needed by humanity. Leadership waits not just in the corridors of power, but also in



Cheerfulness and pain: faces from mediaeval Lincoln Cathedral

every person, beginning with the process of really choosing how you will lead your own life—so developing life-wisdom and self-leadership.

The deeper meaning of stress

It is hard to be born as a human being, and hard to live the life of one. It is even harder to hear the path; and harder still to awake, to rise and to follow.

Buddha, Dhammapada, 182

Engineers think of stress as anything that puts pressure on an object. In the same way, stress is anything that puts pressure on our inner responses. If we cannot respond, then the pressure becomes *distress* and potentially causes damage. (Fortunately even this may eventually have positive outcomes.) Stress is therefore simply the effect of a mismatch between life's trials and our individual capacities.

The mission of stress is to develop these inner, spiritual capacities (like positivity, tranquillity, resourcefulness, love and judgement). As they grow, so do we. Great personalities are those who have gained and use such qualities. This secret is not new.

The warning feeling of distress is a valuable stimulus to reflection, to the recognition that all is not well, and that change or development is needed. Furthermore, as I shall explain, it acts as a specific symptom that can point to exactly what needs to change.

Perhaps it is an overused point, or perhaps it is a point used so often because of its fundamental truth, that the Chinese word for ‘crisis’ consists of two ideograms meaning ‘danger–opportunity’. Realizing that effort and even pain precede learning and personal growth was an important personal discovery for me. Even illness usually has value, typically as a rest or as a spur to a change in lifestyle. Instead of using drugs or other techniques to smother stress, there is another way.

There are western and eastern psychological traditions that refer to this as development through Fire. Indeed, alchemists, who evolved sophisticated meditations and exercises to transform their consciousness into the mature wisdom that they called the ‘philosopher’s stone’, were also known as the ‘Fire philosophers’. The great twentieth century psychologist Jung studied alchemical psychology extensively and considered its insights of the first importance. He commented, ‘The genuineness or incorruptibility of the stone [i.e. the developed consciousness] is proved by the torment of fire and cannot be obtained without it. This leitmotiv runs all through alchemy.’¹ In other words, stress is essential for self-development. In a later chapter I will explore the ‘trial by fire’ in more detail, but its theme runs throughout this book.



The fire trial was an important image in alchemical literature

Normally, each period of change and transformation involves a crisis or even pain at the outset. But it is a curiosity of human nature that the more difficult the task, the more joy and fulfilment we get in its achievement.



That this represents hope will be important for many. Many people seek healing and another way of life. The word 'stress' appears on over ten million pages on the Internet.

Contemporary advertising, self-development books, laws governing businesses, and even clip art (like this) are strong witnesses to the prevalence of anxiety, worry, burden, exhaustion, obsession and pain in the modern soulcape, as well as the wish to do something about it.

Stress as a personal guide

All that we are is the result of our thoughts; it is founded on our thoughts and made up of our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. If a man speaks or acts with a harmful thought, trouble follows him as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. All that we are is the result of our thoughts; it is founded on our thoughts and made up of our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world. If a man speaks or acts with an harmonious thought, happiness follows him as his own shadow, never leaving him.

Buddha, Dhammapada, 1 & 2

Each of us meets an individual world.

This world is tailored to and by our individual attitudes and aptitudes. For example, we tend to notice what we like or don't like, or what is important to us. We are also most affected by whatever helps or obstructs us. According to the scientists of the biology of cognition, Maturana and Varela, 'Every act of knowing brings forth a world.'

That is why stress is also so personal. One person is afraid of flying and another does it for a hobby. One person copes with thirty children and another can't manage one. One enjoys the quiet and another is bored. She seems to have tireless energy and enthusiasm while he spends any amount of time saying how busy he is. When we are unable to cope with what another can thrive on, this signals a need for personal growth.

The *amount* of stress is therefore not what creates distress but our *capacity* to

cope with it. Some people easily cope with what would destroy others. Gandhi triumphed over the might of an empire. So a wise attitude to stress not only adjusts the environment to reduce stress, but also increases the capacity to cope.

Recent research suggests that the capacity to cope with stress and avoid depression may be biologically influenced. Certain genetic patterns make individuals more or less susceptible to stress. This is, however, only one of many examples of variation between people. Our biological constitution, life experience, life-style and unique outlook all affect our capacity to cope. What matters is responding to this current reality and deciding what to do about it.

Each time I experience stress it is a signal to reduce the pressure or develop increased capacity. Rather than just seeing stress as an ogre, you can productively imagine it as *the initiator of personal development* and of an improved lifestyle.

It is useful to think of stress as a *personal* coach. This guide helps us to achieve our fullest possible potential. For example, people who lack stress or challenge tend to become bored and eventually depressed. Then they begin to seek more challenge. The feeling of stress is then the guidance that shows where self-development is needed.

The mission of stress is to develop the capacities and lifestyle that end distress.

So, the first step in a more positive and productive relationship to stress is to recognize that its signals in the trials of life are a gift. How do you feel about *Ms Stress*, your personal life guide?

I believe that we almost always have the power and the imagination to do something about the stresses we meet, providing we are not lazy or locked in to bad habits (in which case the stress tends to increase until it matters enough to get our attention).

Furthermore, the unpleasantness of stress *nearly* always has beneficial aspects that make the temporary suffering worthwhile. Nelson Mandela's trials in prison under the apartheid regime were undoubtedly stressful, but they were also significant in creating a great man. Brian Keenan, who was kidnapped and held prisoner in Beirut for four and a half years, wrote, 'There were many other incidents in this hole in the ground. But each of them was an affirmation of human capacity to overcome despair.'

In an age when the pursuit of happiness is an assumed right, the idea of

trials is not popular. Yet, these are central to self-development and have always been so recognized. Trouble builds character.

Viktor Frankl, after surviving the Nazi death camps, went on to develop logotherapy, one of the most influential psychological systems of the twentieth century. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which has been described as one of the ten most influential books in America, he comments on this experience: 'It is often just such an exceptionally difficult external situation which gives man the opportunity to grow spiritually beyond himself.'

The audience in a Shakespeare play such as *The Tempest* not only accepts the principle of trial, but I think it vicariously accompanies the stage characters. In Shakespeare, as in all great literature and not a few Hollywood movies, trials test and redeem characters. The members of the audience participate imaginatively in the drama's process and so by sympathy accompany the characters in their development. In this respect, I believe literature authentically reflects reality and serves to enrich its audiences.

World-renowned scholars Joseph Campbell, in the field of mythology, and Chris Vogler, in literature, have both described a recurrent theme that seems to bring meaning to human beings. It involves the hero being awakened to a task, refusal of that task until circumstances force them into it, and then a process of personal development, a kind of rite of passage in which they discover new faculties and in due course wisdom. This is typically called 'The Hero's Journey'.

According to Duane Elgin in *The Promise Ahead*:

...it is essentially the story of an individual who grows up by going through a series of tests that teach him or her about the nature of life. The person then brings this precious knowledge back to his or her personal life and life of the community.

She describes the journey's three stages of separation, initiation, and return in this way:

It begins with the hero (or heroine) leaving home to search for the deeper meaning and purpose of life. This is the stage of separation. There eventually comes the stage when the hero undergoes a supreme test, whereby he is initiated into the nature and ways of the universe and no longer feels separate. With initiation, he experiences the deep unity and aliveness at the foundation of the universe and his sense of life-purpose in relation to it. He returns from his adventure with that hard-won knowledge and the capacity for personal renewal.

According to Campbell, the reason for this journey is to awaken in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of the universe. This is indeed a recurring theme of this book. Experience tests our capacity, the feeling of stress or comfort giving us feedback on our personal development.

'Heroes' are people who have mastered stress and gained the capacity to act with wisdom. Perhaps they have developed indomitable courage and assurance, like Winston Churchill. Perhaps they have developed tireless compassion and care like Mother Theresa or St Francis. Perhaps, like Florence Nightingale, they not only have the energy ceaselessly to care but also the organizational ability and forcefulness to change the way things are done.

Heroes break their mental chains to refashion the world—as for example when Martha Graham fashioned a controversial new dance form or Emmeline Pankhurst challenged the social equity of women. When they do, they typically meet both trials and blocks. This it seems to me is akin to Christ's remark, 'I come not to bring you peace, but a sword,' the sword that cuts chains and barriers to human progress. When the Impressionists, such as Monet, rethought and re-created art they met a storm of protest, as did Stravinsky with his new ideas in music. Sometimes this opposition becomes violent, for example in the opposition to Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese politician, Martin Luther King or Joan of Arc.

Heroes are also realists. Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest-ranking United States military officer in a prisoner of war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. He was tortured over twenty times and lived out the war without any rights, release date or certainty as to whether he would even survive. The story of his leadership and contribution to his fellow prisoners is inspiring. It is fascinating to note, however, that he credits his survival to two factors: that he never lost faith and he was never an optimist. The prisoners who died, he said, were those who kept believing that they would be out 'by Christmas'. On one occasion he reported, 'You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.'

Fortunately I think we do not all have to experience giant trials. My sense is that most people get just what is quite enough! And this 'enough' may also be very significant, more indeed than we think. Heroes come in many forms: not all are famous; indeed most are not. When we pay our respects to the 'great', the universal and noticeable figures in history or in

our times, we should not overlook the fine deeds and qualities of many 'ordinary' people.

I know a woman with endless ingenuity to respond to circumstances, a man capable of mastering highly complex systems, and many people with wonderful ability to solve social problems. It takes fortitude and care and creative energy for a parent to wake for the third or fourth time in the night, for the third or fourth or fortieth night in a row, to feed or calm a baby. It does not get written about in the history books, yet such care was a gift received by most great men and women when they were babies, and it has been the experience, mostly forgotten, of most of the six billion people alive on earth today. Nelson Mandela testifies to the love and support of his mother and of how she was the centre of his early existence. What part did her love have to play in the subsequent transformation of a bitter nation?

When a teacher enters a classroom and moves and inspires a class of children, it may not make it often into the papers, but Mandela acknowledges its importance to his education. For example, he describes how the taboo marriage of his popular Zoology teacher, Frank Lebentlele, to a woman from a different tribe undermined the parochialism that had previously imprisoned him. On another occasion he was inspired by the courage and dignity with which his black house-master, Reverend Mokitimi, insisted on his own responsibility and authority despite the attempted interference of the white headmaster wanting to 'solve' a problem. And his 'imagination was fired' by listening to stories of great Xhosa characters told by the village headmen as they gathered at the end of the days at the Xhosa leader's 'Great Place'. Did these people know what contribution they were making to the future of a nation? We rarely know how our lives might influence another's greatness.

Causes of stress

Life, the Universe and Everything.

Douglas Adams

There are three major causes of stress:

- The first of these is when we are out of tune with our environment, with nature and the natural world;
- The second is when we are out of tune with others;

- The third is when we are out of tune with our own spirit, the questing impulse towards self-fulfilment, self-actualization and self-transcendence through the divine.

In each case this might also be expressed as being separated from a fundamental aspect of the world in which we live. Separation or alienation is a primary cause of anxiety and hence stress.

As later chapters will show, responding positively to the challenges of stress grows and ripens a rounded and balanced resourcefulness that leads the emerging, free individual towards a wise and mutually loving relationship with the natural and life environment, people and spirit. This is the mission of stress and the way to turn stress into inner strength.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure,
It is our Light, not our darkness, that frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant,
Gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn't serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We are born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own Light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our fears,
Our presence automatically liberates others.

Nelson Mandela