

## THE STRESS MANAGER...

### HAVE A MERRIER CHRISTMAS!

Christmas 2008 is arriving in one of the most challenging economic times of our lives, at least for those of us under sixty years old.

In this particular season, it's difficult to avoid the deep sense of uncertainty that has been thrust upon us by forces out of our control.

Even before the economy shot down like Santa in a chimney, stress was perhaps the fastest growing sector of goods made in America, whether for domestic consumption or export.

And now, on the night before Christmas – to borrow from Clement Moore's famous poem – our stress shoots up "As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly/When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky."

Stress, as we are all learning, is the physical symptom that follows the common emotional reaction to meeting an obstacle in our lives. The perception of an obstacle often gives rise to a sense that we are not in control, and the perception of being out of control causes fear, which causes stress.

Stress is what we feel when the immune system is suppressed, blood rushes from the brain and the core of the body out to the arms and legs, our breathing becomes shallow, and our senses become hyper alert. The body is making ready to flee from the tiger. Unfortunately, in modern culture, the tiger is everywhere, and there's nowhere to run.

Merry Christmas.

It's a gift.

Bear with me here. We're not the first people in history to feel stress, and worse. Far worse. Our stressed ancestors have communicated some wisdom down through the ages. Although our culture is a very smart one, but we are far smarter than we are wise.

Wise men and women have said for thousands of years that the idea we are in control of our lives is simply an illusion. Life – like stock markets, moving trains and our teen's desire for a cell phone – is bigger than our ability to overcome it.

On the other hand, the same sages have pointed out the control exception to the control rule. There is something we *can* control, which is our own internal, emotional reaction to the events in our lives over which we have no control.

Why is increasing stress a gift? Well, there's a point at which – when stress is big enough – we finally get the message that control of events in our lives is indeed illusory. Something has to overcome the tendency of our minds to think . . . well. I can stop there.

Thinking is a straight line to stress. When we look at the world through our minds, we necessarily separate the world into us and everything else. That's not a bad thing in itself. To the contrary, we couldn't do our best critical thinking and analysis without it.

However, when our lives also seem out of control as they seem now, then our mind's usual tool of seeing that *we are separate* puts our foot on the slippery slope that leads to the conclusion that *we are vulnerable*. There's an emotional reaction that goes with the perception of vulnerability, which is fear.

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In fact, research suggests that anytime we are thinking, regardless of the content of thought, we are going to experience anxiety.

So, when we say life is a matter of how you look at it, you might consider that – regardless what you are thinking – merely thinking is a way of looking, and that way of looking causes anxiety.

But what's the alternative?

The same wise sages suggest that we can instead look at the world through our hearts.

We are accustomed to how the mind looks. It observes things, and thinks thoughts. The heart works differently. It experiences, and does so with different capabilities than the mind has in its toolbox.

The heart has the capacity to look out upon the world and experience that the fundamental nature of the world is about connection. The experience is how the heart senses, and connection is its tool, just as separation is the tool of the mind.

The emotional response to an experience of connection is not fear, but a sense of well-being and safety. For myself, I reserve the words “love” and “compassion” for the non-emotional experience of connection. Compassion, or love, is the primary experience of looking through our hearts. The most skilled of those who perceive the world through their hearts know that love is not diminished by the nature of what it looks out upon.

Well, easy to say. But how is that done?

We have to bring attention to our hearts. It takes more than a little practice.

Do we have to throw our minds away to see the world through love? Absolutely not. But when we look out upon the world through our hearts first, the thoughts that then come to mind, just as the emotions that our human hearts experience, have a different quality than when thoughts and emotions arise from the sensation of separation.

The beauty of the mind is that it can frame experience into understandings that can be translated into words. The beauty of the heart is that it simply knows, without the need for understanding.

Do you love your children? The heart knows the answer. Do we even have to think about it, or understand it? You get my point.

Research – by golly – understands this. Lab testing has shown that, when we bring our attention to the heart with an experience of appreciation and some deep breathing, which is no more than looking out upon the world with that felt sense of connection, our adrenal glands turn off.

Uncertainty is always and forever with us. But we can stop the stress reaction, even if we can't stop the world. We do it with our hearts. No wise person ever said to follow your head.

Try it out. Take a moment. Put your hand on your heart. Shift your attention. Take a deep belly breath. Experience some appreciation, even a little. The look of uncertainty might change, and might appear more like opportunity.