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Growing from *Stress to Strength*

Natalie Fee looks at how day-to-day stresses can be used as a way to increase your health and happiness, resulting in a peaceful and balanced atmosphere in the home.

I remember reading a poem at a friend's house when I was a little girl. It was framed and hung in their downstairs loo. I don't remember its name, but it was about peace and happiness. Not being overly concerned with either of those things, aged eight, I didn't think about it much. But it obviously made an impression on me, as I remember it often. Over the years its meaning goes deeper, as I slowly start to realise its power in my day-to-day life.

It said something along the lines of 'if you create harmony in yourself, you create harmony in the home. If you create harmony in the home, you create harmony in your street. If you create harmony in your street you create harmony in your town....' and so on. Thinking back to the family who had the poem hanging in the downstairs loo, they did have a harmonious home. It was a madhouse, three girls and their two crazy Welsh parents (now living on the Gold Coast!)—but there was a real sense of harmony. And they went out there and seemed to spread it wherever they went. Was it all down to the poem? Probably not. But it definitely had something to do with it.

I was about 16 when I became interested in matters of the spirit, and also in the environment. Since then I've been through various lifestyles—the business executive turned hippy, the eco-warrior, the workshop junkie, the aspiring yogini and motherhood. My energy changes as I grow, so naturally some things get left behind, and some things stay on...motherhood being one that stays! But my focus has shifted a lot in the past few years, away from feeling frustrated about the state of the planet, towards a place of real change and awareness. The more I became aware of my energy and how it affects others, the more I realised that the biggest form of pollution in my life was me: my reactions, my stress—and how these things cause a negative chain of events around me (something annoys me, I blame someone for it, they feel bad, etc.). So I remember Gandhi's famous quote, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. If I wanted a greener planet, I'd have to start going green on the inside first—and taking responsibility for my stress. Well, certainly at the same time as recycling and eating organic! I want my child to grow up in a harmonious home, and take that experience out into the world. To do that, I have to create harmony in me. And what's stopping that?

Stress.

When we think of stress, most of us think of being stressed at work, or being stressed by someone we know. Stress comes up in all kinds of situations and, for many of us, fairly frequently throughout the day.

I'm not going to go into the physical effects of stress, as there's plenty written on that subject. What gets less attention is the effect it has on your energy. And how that in turn affects the energy of those around you. Basically, anytime you feel out of balance—for example, feeling frightened, angry, hurt, or confused—you're under some kind of stress. And when you feel stressed about something, it's simply a sign that one or more of your chakras is lacking in a certain energy. For example, if you're paranoid about your children falling over and hurting themselves, you're lacking energy at your third chakra—resulting in fear. If you can't stop questioning your partner over where he's been and who he's been with—you're lacking energy at your sixth chakra—resulting in jealousy. Every form of stress corresponds to a lack of energy within us. It's a pretty radical way of seeing things, as suddenly no one else is responsible for how we feel. Sure, someone can be acting in a negative way towards us, but does that mean we have to get angry or feel hurt? No. Because if your energy is strong, you won't feel stressed by their actions. If you feel stressed then

Looking after your energy is a huge part of self-care that often gets overlooked. Yet it's at the foundation of mental and physical wellbeing. By 'your energy', I mean your energy body. We all have one, it's just Western science is a little slow at proving its existence. Eastern seers and sages could perceive the energy body very clearly thousands of years ago, and traditions like Ayurveda, Feng Shui and yoga were born from such direct awareness of our energies.

Fortunately in the West, many of us are becoming more aware of the existence of our energies and their profound influence on our lives. Although day-to-day cultivation of this awareness is still relatively unknown, even just a little such awareness can have a hugely positive impact on your life, which ripples out into the lives of those around you.

they've done you a favour by showing you a part of you that needs to become stronger. Which chakra it's stemming from—although fascinating—isn't of any particular importance. What is important is what you do can about it.

For example, the other day I was feeling extremely low. It doesn't happen to me that often, but there were a number of 'good reasons' for my feeling bad (we get very good at finding a reason for feeling bad!). I'd been sick for ten days, I was due for my period, and my partner had just told me that the romantic weekend away without the kids wasn't happening. Great. I felt uncontrollably emotional. But I knew in that moment that I had a choice. Either I could wallow in self-pity, make my partner feel bad for not taking me away

(ignoring the reality that we just couldn't afford it right now) or I could do something to change my energy. I sat down to meditate and calm my breathing, bringing my attention to my breath, but I was too disturbed to concentrate, so I put my coat on and went for a 'power walk'. This is a walking meditation that uses a mudra (hand position) to eliminate stress from the energy body [see sidebar]. After power walking for about 25 minutes I was much calmer. My energy had changed. I still felt some stress over the situation, but I was able to see what I needed to do. Doing an energy practice doesn't necessarily mean you'll feel instantly better—sometimes you will—but the benefits to your energy are still there, even if you don't always feel them. On this occasion I did feel better. The power walk had given me the clarity to accept the situation, instead of feeling bad about it. I wasn't angry anymore.

Here's another example. I was rushing out of the door with my son to an appointment. Just as we shut the front door he said, 'Mum, I need a poo!' So back in we went, and I stood outside the bathroom door, telling him to hurry up, while feeling annoyed at him for making me late. Then I noticed my energy. I felt stressed. Why? It wasn't my son's fault (when you gotta go, you gotta go!) and these things can't be hurried! Perhaps I should have left more time, but blaming myself and feeling bad won't help my energy either. So I said, 'It's OK, take your time.' And I went to meditate in the lounge. In that moment I decided to stop the stress and use the time in a positive way. Both my son and I gained immensely from that choice.

It's these kinds of energy practices that can successfully transform the stress being experienced into positive energy. Unfortunately just 'thinking' it away, or saying an affirmation, although it may make you feel better, doesn't cause sustainable change by itself. If you really want to strengthen your energy, you'll need a few ways to do that! Through my training, I've built up a 'toolkit' of practices and remedies for transforming stressful situations—you'll find a couple of them in the accompanying sidebar.

If you want to live a peaceful existence and not let yourself be knocked about emotionally by other people's actions or stressed by the amount of things you have to do, then you must be able to make this choice in times of stress. Do I carry on losing energy and feeling bad? Or do I do something to increase my energy and feel better again?

When you live your life in this way, things change. It's not something that happens overnight—it's a process, full of ups and downs. *Continued on page 66*

2 simple energy awareness cultivation practices

Having enough energy to choose to act differently, to not be taken over by your reactions, results from cultivating your energy a little bit at a time, day by day. So here are some ways in which you can do that and begin to take responsibility for how you feel—making what happens 'out there' less likely to throw you off balance!

Shining Sun

The Shining Sun is a simple weave, or movement, that strengthens your energy body's ability to let go of its weakening connections with other people. In other words, it helps you to free yourself from any negative influences in your life. The weave involves a circling, sweeping movement of your arms, co-ordinated with your breath.

1. Standing facing the direction of the sun with your feet one shoulder-width apart, outer edges parallel.

2. Breathing in through your nose—raise your straight arms, with wrists crossed, up and forwards, fingers splayed, until they naturally uncross and open out wide above your head, with your back arching back as far as possible, without strain. Head looks up and back.

3. Breathing out through your mouth—bring your straight arms down and out sideways, shoulders pulling back, then down to the floor between your feet, keeping your legs straight, wrists crossing in front of your ankles until your palms touch the floor.

4. Repeat steps 1-3 twenty or thirty times each morning—and any time in the day you feel the need.

5. At the end, briefly touch your fingertips together in front of the lower half of your chest—like in a prayer position.

Make the 'high' and 'low' positions as big a stretch as possible, but without strain. If you can't touch your palms to the floor, just go as low as you can.

Power Walking

This powerful and brilliantly easy practice is designed to eliminate stress from your energy body. Can be done while walking anywhere!

Form a claw with each hand so that the back of the hand is straight—fingers and thumbs bent in towards the palm. Then extend only the little finger. This is the mudra for leaving past angers behind. As you walk, keep your hands in the mudra, while keeping

the backs of your hands facing forward. There are three more points to remember while walking:

- Breathe deeply and be aware of your breath at the tip of your nose.
- Focus your eyes on the horizon (ie, don't be too distracted by what's around you).
- Feel the ground beneath your feet as you walk.

Try to power walk for about 30 minutes a day, or try it when you feel a reaction coming on (or in the middle of one!) and let that stress just stream out of you!

When all else fails...

Remember to breathe. Sometimes all it takes a few deep breaths to take the edge off a stressful situation.

Cold water treatment

When you really can't seem to stop yourself from crying, or are having repetitive negative thoughts about something, step outside and pour a cup of cold water over your head. It may sound extreme, but it's powerful medicine.

Source: Exercises are from the School of Energy Awareness

have looked to the US for leadership in solving problems like global warming register dismay. Many activists are saying that what is still lacking is the widespread religious commitment, moral imagination, and ethical engagement to transform the environmental crisis from an issue on paper to one of effective policy and action.

A friend, a parishioner at a large suburban parish, recently said that she had not heard one word from a Catholic pulpit on the subject of the environment. There is still much work to be done. What Berry began, others are feeling an urgent need to continue, spending their lives just as Berry has.

It takes a universe

Berry has spent his life answering the basic religious questions: Where are we? How did we get here? What do we do about it? From his academic beginning as a cultural historian, Thomas Berry's thought has evolved. His deep absorption in Asian religions and spiritualities, his study of the worldviews of indigenous peoples, and his realisation of the importance of the scientific story of creation, all have combined to link the sunlit, flowery meadow on the outskirts of town with distant galaxies.

Primary in his thinking is an understanding of the psychic-physical character of the unfolding universe. If there is consciousness in the human, and if humans evolved from the earth, then from the beginning, some form of consciousness or interiority is present in evolution. Matter is not simply inert or dead, says Berry, but a numinous reality with both a physical and spiritual dimension. As self-reflective creatures, we need to realise our responsibility for the continuation of the ancient and awesome evolutionary process.

Rather than a theologian, Berry considers himself a cosmologist and 'geologist'—an Earth scholar. He believes the only way to effectively function as individuals and as a species is to understand the history and functioning of our planet and of the wide universe itself, like sailors learning about their ship and the vast ocean on which it sails. 'It takes a universe to make a child,' he says, adding that he is 'trying to establish a functional cosmology, not a theology'. The amazing, mind-boggling cosmological perspective, he feels, can resuscitate human meaning and direction. The

most important spiritual qualities, for Berry, are amazement and enchantment. Awe is healing. A sense of wonder is the therapy for spiritual autism.

In other words, caring for our planet, and ascertaining where we are in the universe, goes to the heart of what it means to be a faithful Christian. Nothing is really itself without everything else. Christianity's task, if it is going to survive, will be to place itself within the context of science's new story of our human origins and the evolution of the universe.

The best hope for a renewed earth, many feel, is a reawakened belief in the Spirit as the divine force within the cosmos who continually indwells everywhere and works in amazing ways to sustain all forms of life. This renewal is happening on many fronts today, thanks to advance work done by Berry, to his sweeping synthesis, realism, imaginative insight, and courage to confront the narrowness of traditional theology. This priest with the tousled hair and sly grin raised the challenge; it will be the work of others to move churches and communities forward towards Tom Berry's dream: all of us honouring the earth as the epiphany of God, making a prayerful event of every dawn and dusk.

'Whoever you are,' writes poet Mary Oliver, 'the world offers itself to your imagination and calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place in the family of things.'

Retired from teaching and writing, Berry is back home in the green hills of North Carolina. His passion for cherishing a Carolina meadow, one that called to him like the wild geese when he was a child, has taken him across the world and deeply into the minds and hearts of many who also lovingly roamed forests, hills, seashores, or desert valleys when we were kids.

Along with Berry, we all share Mary Oliver's sentiment: 'When it's over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement.' ■

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Of course you can't get it right all the time. There will be times when you scream and shout, 'It's not fair—it's not my fault!' But those times get fewer and fewer as your energy becomes stronger. Slowly, you notice that even though you're still affected by things, it doesn't last as long as it did before. And then, over time, you realise that you're less affected by what's happening around you. Eventually, you stop being at the mercy of your circumstances. It's a bit like going to the gym. You expect to

have good days and bad days, but you know each time you go you're getting fitter. And that's what's happening when you start trying to change your energy. It may feel like you're getting nowhere, but every time you choose to not react in the usual way, and instead choose to act in a way that helps your energy, you're making a huge difference to your future. You really are creating (or revealing!) a happier, peaceful, and more balanced you—which of course goes a long way to creating a happier, more peaceful, and balanced family. So here's to inspiring

poems in downstairs loos. I think I'll go buy one for our house, to inspire the kids that come to play and pee here! ■

Writer and mother, Natalie Fee, is based in Glastonbury, UK. As well as writing, she runs 'Everyday Alchemy' sessions and workshops with clients around the world. Her next trip to Australia is planned for 2009/2010, when she'll be combining visiting her family in Melbourne and Sydney with Everyday Alchemy workshops. Visit Natalie's website, www.everydayalchemist.com, to book a phone or face-to-face session, see her range of energy products, or simply read her weekly blog.



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