

Introduction

Making Friends with Pressure: Follow the Clues

“The next message you need is always right where you are.”
Ram Dass, American spiritual leader and author

It's Humanitarian Day at the United Nations. As the seats in the General Assembly fill up, the excitement is palpable. Onto the stage steps Beyoncé, dressed in an elegant long white sequined dress. With the symbol of the United Nations behind her, she stops center stage and waits for the music to begin. The pressure must be enormous, yet she is so centered and upright, she doesn't display it. She begins to sing "I Was Here," a song that encourages people to use their lives for the common good. Behind her, a video shows people from around the world. For a moment her hand rests on her heart. The camera immediately pans to the audience, who were clearly touched by her presence and words. Presence.

The music builds; her energy intensifies, embracing the far reaches of the hall. Her arm naturally rises to align with her center and then sweeps across her body in a semi-circle. Behind her, a video of rescue efforts plays; the emotion builds; the audience rises. Beyoncé arches her back, lifting her arms, chest, and head as if empowered by a force from above. She bends her knees, and as she straightens, I can see that she is deeply grounded. Her voice becomes more compelling even as her body movements emphasize her words. When she is done, she stands erect, fully present and quiet seemingly undisturbed by the magnitude of energy that had just pulsed through her. I watch this video countless times, each time spotting the clues of how she befriends pressure, which might otherwise create stress and I know that I have witnessed a master in action.

Although few of us have achieved such proficiency, life provides us with clues to teach us how to use pressure by pointing the way to an ideal state in which one's mind/body/energy system is opened and aligned to the larger energy field that nurtures and sustains us. Although no one, even scientists, knows exactly what energy is, for our purposes I define it as an electromagnetic vibration that composes and connects all life by transmitting information. We can't always perceive energy, but it is always there and when the personal and universal fields unite, the feeling is extraordinary--inspiring, empowering, confidence-building and peaceful. In these moments of union, we feel inspired, empowered, confident and at peace. The energy that was pressing on us becomes the fuel that uplifts, making us as big as the challenges we face. As our decisions and actions reflect our inner state, we lead and function more effectively and effortlessly. Not only do we cognitively understand the essence of leadership, we embody it. Thus to lead a stress less life, we need to spot and sense/feel the clues and identify the changes we need to make to live more consistently in this ideal state. That's what this book is about.

Much of the time, however, we are so engrossed in our life dramas, (I was promoted; my boss micromanages me; I didn't get the account...) that we fail to ask the bigger questions and thus miss the clues. Yet, if you would step back and with the detached eye of a researcher review your experiences, you would notice energetic habits-repetitive tendencies- that run through your stories. For example, you may discover that your fear of being swallowed up by your team's expectations is really the result of a frequent lack of energy coming from you (outflow) which limits your ability to participate and express yourself fully. Similarly, your frustration with your boss's autocratic style might stem from an inability to stand rooted in your own power (as Beyoncé did so) you are not victimized by his need to control

Energetic habits underline and inform all of our perceptual, emotional, and behavioral patterns. Change these habits and it is easier and faster to break free from limiting self-definitions, emotional reactions and behaviors. Similarly, by paying attention to when you are high performing, confident, and happy, you will begin to spot the energetic habits that align you with the larger energy field. Noticing what works provides a process that transforms pressure from an enemy into an ally and makes the extraordinary, ordinary.

How this Book Will Empower You

Stress Less offers a step-by-step map with practical exercises for the individual and his or her team to turn pressure into a positive force. Unlike other books that only focus on diminishing the pressure in your busy life, which may be unrealistic, I'll show you how to expand your capacity for handling increased amounts of pressure while rediscovering the wonder of being alive. As an executive coach, psychotherapist, trainer and organization consultant, I have used this process with hundreds of clients including senior and mid-level managers of Fortune 500 companies, psychologists, professionals, scientists and artists, with extraordinary results. By shifting their energetic patterns, they learned to effortlessly transform their limited reactive habits and function more skillfully. In the majority of cases, people reported an expanded sense of self that is not dominated by their egos, a heightened sense of connection and an increased ease and effectiveness in handling professional and personal challenges.

As you will read, I didn't come to this knowledge without help. Instead, I was blessed to find an extraordinary teacher, Robert Nadeau, a seventh Dan aikido master, and inner researcher of states of consciousness whose work has been the subject of numerous books. Today, the work of scientists validate many of the descriptions Bob discussed and guided us to experience over thirty years ago.

Even before I met Bob, I collected clues about how to relate effectively to pressure, although I didn't yet understand them or their significance. I offer you my story hoping that it will inspire you to review the clues in your life, and that you will make time to think about when you were at your best under pressure. What was unusual about this experience? What did you feel and sense at the time? What did you learn from your experience? You may discover that you know more than you think about using pressure to your advantage without hurting yourself or others.

Collect Clues: Discover What Works for You

When I was seven, I experienced my first petit mal seizure, a mild form of epilepsy. Though I outgrew it by age thirteen, the memory of the seizures and the symptoms leading up to them remains fresh. Physical exertion and/or emotional stress triggered an attack. During these times, I felt my consciousness lift upwards through my body. My legs became weak and I lost all sense of connection with the ground. Simultaneously, my world contracted and darkened; it was as if the space around me was being sucked into a vortex over which I had no control. Out of the silence, I heard a sound similar to an ocean's whooshing resonate in my ears. Then I lost consciousness.

I now know these episodes resulted from my inability to handle pressure. My attention was habitually located outside myself in others; I was more aware of what they thought, felt, and sensed than what I did. I easily took in other people's pain and tension without consciously realizing it. To survive I became a helper and a fixer.

Fortunately, my parents recognized I had a talent for dance. And sent me to dance school. My teacher's name was Marjorie Marshall. Today she is probably best known as the mother of movie directors Penny and Gary Marshall, but to me she stands out as the first person to show me how to use pressure positively. Her school was located in the basement of a Bronx apartment building, but entering it was magical. Here the pressure of sound, physical exertion, and my teacher's demands were fuel that expanded rather than diminished me. As I let go of my self-consciousness and need to understand, please, and control, I felt centered and grounded in my body. This inner balance gave me a sense of extraordinary well-being, which, until then, I had rarely experienced. As I followed the pulsations that arose from my deepest core, I was transformed from a physical body in motion into a boundless energy field. I felt released and connected to something much larger than myself. I was present and fully myself - I was free.

The ability to handle pressure might have eluded me had it not been for Marjorie Marshall. She was the first person (other than my parents) to teach me discipline and its importance in coping during difficult times. Influenced by the precision dancing of the Rockettes, the Radio City Music Hall dancers, Marjorie made us practice our tap dance routines until we were all perfectly in step and in line. We had to be aware of our bodies' physical boundaries as well as the space between us. Though I didn't realize it, we were developing our kinesthetic sense by learning to shift our attention from our thoughts into our bodies and energy fields, which prevented us from bumping into one another.

Despite this training, I still didn't know how to translate what I had learned from dancing to other areas of my life. In fact, it never dawned on me that this was possible. Nor did I know how to intentionally call up the larger me that occasionally appeared while dancing. A year after joining the school, my mother went to work and my dancing career ended. I now realize that dance provided me with a large experiential clue to handling the pressures of life. Fifteen years later, life provided me with the next level of my education.

The Inner Map to "Stresslessness"

In 1978, I began studying aikido with Robert Nadeau. Unlike many martial arts teachers, his focus is more on functioning better in the world than it is on learning the techniques. Training put us under pressure; not just the pressure of another's attack, which was a metaphor for life's challenges, but also the pressure that came from our own systems, which rose up in response to the attack. Instead of being eaten up by pressure, we learned through practice to open up and allow it to stream through our mind/body/energy systems. As we surrendered to the experience, we found ourselves connected to a higher level of consciousness that enhanced our perceptions and performance.

To aid us, Bob offered a simple inner map that focused on attention, center, ground, and energy or "ki" outflow. Together these elements, when in a large enough space, birth a new identity that is more creative and capable of handling pressure. Think of it as you would a plant, which when fed the right nutrients and placed in a bigger pot grows taller and stronger because it has the room to grow deeper roots. As we practiced each of these skills individually and together within aikido techniques, new pathways became imprinted on our nervous systems, enabling us to bypass our habitual modes of reacting and shift to a more responsive and effective way of being and behaving.

Although these elements actually operate as a whole, to help you understand them better, I discuss them in separate chapters after first laying the foundation for why this map is so important for high performance and quality of life. Thus, Chapter 1 sets the context for the book. In it, I discuss the accelerated pressure most people experience in the workplace; the essence of pressure, how it differs from stress, and why the usual approaches to stress reduction are not enough in today's fast paced world. It concludes with a formula for mastery under pressure

Chapter 2 focuses on the mental patterns which arise from our personality type and how these affect our perceptions and actions under pressure. This information is based on the Enneagram, an ancient Sufi tool that describes nine personality types. As more organizations recognize the influence of personality on work relationships, decisions, and actions, the Enneagram is quickly gaining prominence. In this chapter as well as chapters 6 and 7 you'll find information about your personality's coping style and stress triggers. The internal energy map is the focus of chapters 3 through 6. These chapters offer an in-depth view of habits of attention, centering, grounding, and extending your intrinsic energy. In these chapters I also discuss why these components are essential to using pressure wisely, as well as how each of them translates to the workplace.

With the map serving as our guide, chapter 7 focuses on resolving conflict harmoniously (the essence of aikido), while chapter 8 addresses moving through pressure by connecting with your heart not your mind. In chapter 9, we look at sparking creative solutions to high-pressure situations by listening to our inner wisdom. I conclude by bringing us full circle and focusing on issues of faith, hope, destiny, and the importance of clues in dealing with all our experiences of pressure.

Although no book can replace the clarity and power a skilled teacher brings to learning, I have designed the book as a guide to start you on your way. Throughout, you'll see quotations, which I call seeds of truth that highlight key points and, I hope, make the ideas memorable. Sections called Personal Practice contain mind/ body/energy practices and reflective questions to spark new ideas and levels of understanding. Finally, each chapter contains a section titled Initiation to help you reduce stress in your team, and/or workplace and encourage collaboration and high performance.

For more advanced readers who are already involved in meditation and/or other spiritual practices, Stress Less will increase your ability to work with pressure throughout your daily life and deepen your current practices. Please use this book however you choose. Whether or not you do the exercises or read the book fully, you will find that particular something that you need to know now. There is no right or wrong. For those who are deeply attracted to this work and would like to participate in a training program, you'll find my contact information in the back of the book as well as the names and contact information of practitioners doing similar work.

In looking back at the mosaic of clues I have been given and the teachers who have guided my way, I see how perfectly my life has unfolded. What began as a search for understanding over 35 years ago quickly moved beyond the realm of curiosity and cognitive knowledge to incorporate an experiential knowing. I am blessed to have learned an easy, effective, and joyful way to enhance my performance and the quality of my life. This book represents my opportunity to share what I've learned.