

# Spiritual Soup

**Kurt Venables**

## **Peace, Goodwill- and Stress**

I'm writing this the day after Christmas. The kids, Samantha and Blaine, must have been good this year (perhaps while I wasn't looking) because Santa brought lots of presents. Samantha's favorite this year is Scamps, the Playful Pup; Blaine's favorite is his remote control truck. Closely associated with this time of year are peace, goodwill- and stress. After having recently endured the frantic annual rite of passage known as Christmas shopping, I am convinced that neither peace nor goodwill is actually experienced during the holiday season, leaving only the stress. Just kidding, of course (kind of).

Stress is one of the Four Horsemen, spiritual maladies I have identified that are rampant in our culture. Stress is a natural reaction to a threat, and the psychological responses naturally include selfishness and aggression. Physiological responses occur as well, including the circulation of stress hormones that liberate energy reserves, increase pulse rate and blood pressure, etc. Stress is often known as the "fight or flight" response. I believe that our forebears generally lived under far less stress than we do today. We were not built for the kind of stress we commonly endure in our modern world. Prolonged, continual stress causes spiritual regression; it causes one to shut the light out of one's heart; it tends to tip the spiritual balance away from love towards selfishness. Prolonged stress also has serious physical impacts which we are only beginning to recognize, including sleep difficulties, high blood pressure (which increases the risk of stroke and heart disease), etc.



I believe that the source of most of the stress in our modern world is twofold. First, numerous, urgent demands on our time and energy create stress. People often juggle the demands of work, school, family, home, and other responsibilities and interests. This is often referred to as "the rat race". I certainly am well aware of these pressures. Secondly, because of high population densities, a general sense of alienation of individuals from society, and rampant arrogance and selfishness, simple everyday interactions, often with strangers, may be viewed as threatening because they present opportunities for conflict. Although we do have some control over our exposure to these external demands and maladies, they are exceedingly difficult or impossible to completely avoid. What we do have a great deal of control over, however, though many do not realize it, is our response to these problems.

Because the Light and stress are diametrically opposed, it makes sense that striving to open one's heart to the Light brings, among other benefits, a reduction in stress. Let me explain why. Experiencing the joy of the Light within brings a realignment of priorities in life. It brings a recognition that what really matters is the joy of life itself, striving to allow the Light

to shine more brightly within the heart, and serving the aims of the Light (working for the good of our loved ones and humanity). The false priorities so prominent in our culture, such as materialism, superficiality, prestige, and arrogance, cease to hold much value. Experiencing the Light is like a great weight being lifted off our shoulders because the stress of having to meet the demands of these false priorities evaporates. Certainly, some material priorities exist, such as family, friends, and health. These do have legitimate value and create demands for a level of material well being sufficient to support these goals. However, truly bringing the Light into our lives still greatly reduces stress by eliminating the excesses of rampant materialism, as well as fostering the disintegration of the need for arrogance, prestige, etc. In addition, the optimism brought to us by the Light helps to put priorities in perspective. The Light reveals the wonder of the ordinary. It reveals the wonder of life and consciousness, the beauty of the earth and sky, the specialness of the little things in life. It's hard to get too upset because you couldn't do this or couldn't get that when your head is reeling from the beauty of the first snow or the joy of watching your children laugh and play.

The Light also lifts the stress of interpersonal interactions. With the Light comes a love of others. We may not like every single person to the degree that we want to be best friends, but the Light brings a general love of others and a willingness to overlook faults. This love transcends all boundaries and prejudices. When we view others in this way, all others, the stress of dealing with those we do not know (and the stress of dealing with some we do know) dissipates. We view interactions as opportunities to make friends and feel that conflict can be resolved through cooperation.

As the Light casts its glow, it changes the way we view the world. A reduction in stress is one important consequence. As we say this season:

**Peace on earth, goodwill to men.**

-Luke 2:14

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

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