

PART I

Into the Unknown

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step,” wrote the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, as sage advice to fellow travelers on the Taoist path. The renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell often referred to the first stage of “the Hero’s Journey” as “the call to adventure,” a step that all of us must take, many times in the course of our lives. The cautious first step into the unknown, however, is typically accompanied by fear—so much so, that it can immobilize us, make us want to refuse the call, rather than answer it. This part highlights our departure from the known into the unknown, from the familiar to the unbalanced brave new world we now find ourselves in, and the common dangers of getting stuck or lost on the way.

The Winds of Change Are Brewing



*When we forget our stories,
then we forget our dreams.
When we forget our dreams,
we lose our spirit.*

—MAORI SAYING

Remember when the world seemed like a simpler place to live? Not long ago, stores were closed on Sundays. Only girls wore earrings. There were just three television networks (four, if you could get PBS). Cell phones were considered science fiction. Only NASA engineers and MIT professors used computers. Some cows were a bit unhappy, but none were mad, and there were seven words you could never say on television. That was then. Things are quite different now!

The stormy winds of change are blowing fast and furious today, and, by all accounts, they show no signs of stopping. Change has always been part of the human landscape, but the rate of change occurring today, from near-instantaneous telecommunications to terrorism, genetic engineering, and globalization, is unparalleled in human history. Future shock has arrived, throwing everything out of balance. Experts suggest that we will see as much dramatic change in the next three to five years as our grandparents saw in a lifetime. Are you ready for this?

If your answer is no, you're not alone. Add to this list more social changes, such as nanotechnology, rapidly infectious diseases, and cloning, as well as any personal dramas that you might go through, whether a death in the family, the end of a marriage, or being downsized out of a job, and your pace of life has just accelerated tenfold. Social changes only increase your levels of personal stress. The winds of change are blowing at gale force, so it's best to batten down the hatches by using your inner strength.

Believe it or not, if you stay anchored to your inner resources (e.g., faith, optimism, courage), it is possible to stay calm in the eye of the storm. Yet most people, distracted by the newest technology craze or a plethora of shallow media events, find it hard to recognize their strengths, let alone make use of them. Whether welcome or unwelcome, change is often associated with stress, because with change comes uncertainty, and uncertainty breeds fear. Fear clouds the mind and robs the heart of its highest potential. Let there be no doubt that we are living in a time of great fear.

Nestled up against the foothills of the Rockies, Boulder, Colorado, may not be your typical town, but like everywhere else in America, the winds of change blow here regularly. Renowned for its mountain splendor and subtle mystique, “the Republic of Boulder” is sometimes described as ten square miles surrounded by reality. At the cash register of my favorite local bakery, there is a sign taped to a huge teacup. Unlike most signs that read “Need a penny, take a penny,” this one says “If you fear change, leave it here.” Every time I go in, I notice that the bowl is overflowing with pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters. I’m not sure whether people contribute their pocket change out of jest, guilt, or authentic fear, but without a doubt, not only is change brewing, like the pocket change in this teacup, it is overflowing. Change is inevitable, and with change comes fear, particularly fear of the unknown. Granted, while a little bit of change (e.g., new restaurants, new music, etc.) can interrupt life’s monotony, by and large, people don’t like change because it is perceived as stressful. As the expression goes, “The only person who likes change is a wet baby.”

The weather from hell. Traffic from hell. The stock market from hell. Have you noticed how popular hell has become lately? Hell is the metaphorical symbol of stress, and whether it’s frozen over or breaking loose, there seems to be no shortage of turbulent winds these days, all of which precipitate feelings of personal stress. Everywhere you go, people are tense, frustrated, and pushed beyond the limits of their patience. Take a look around. Listen closely. People talk as if they have Tourette’s syndrome, or they complain like Andy Rooney on *60 Minutes*. He gets paid to whine, though; the rest of us do it for free.

A Lesson from Churchill

Perhaps the first time the world's inhabitants were acutely aware of global stress was during the height of World War II. But even before the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, ushering in the age of nuclear destruction, Britain was continuously being bombed by the Germans in the famous "Blitz." Winston Churchill, the prime minister of England and a man known to never mince words, shared this thought with his countrymen: "If you're going through hell . . . keep going." Though slightly humorous, his message holds profound wisdom. In times of great strife, we often want to throw in the towel and give up. Many people, when confronted with stress, whether of the mountain or the molehill variety, admit defeat without even trying. Churchill's message was clear. Hell isn't meant to be a permanent refuge or a final destination, so keep moving.

The Hero's Code

At a recent dinner party I attended, the conversation was abuzz with personal strife and national calamities: the death of a mutual friend, a newly discovered cancerous tumor, and a hellacious divorce, as well as the stock market crisis, high school shootings, and weather storms of biblical proportions. Eight of us sat around the table, sharing moments of our lives, perceptions of the global village, and our visions of the next decade. With each new topic of the conversation, we tried to make sense of the rapidly changing world we live in, as well as determine our best course of action while individually navigating the shoals of impending disaster. It didn't take long for us to realize that stress was a recurring theme in every aspect of our lives. In the midst of our apparent abundance and prosperity was the inherent knowledge that things were terribly amiss.

Mark put down his wine glass and asked, "Is it me or has anyone else noticed that the planet earth has become a runaway train?" His question went unanswered for a few moments. Then the dining room became vibrant with conversation on how to take command in a situation where control is a tempestuous illusion. With a wary

eye on the future, we came to a simple consensus that the only way to deal with the turbulent times ahead was to have a clear mind and a brave heart with no trace of fear, for it made no sense to either fight with anger or surrender in disgust. We had too much living to do. Before we drove back to our respective homes, we made a pledge to return to the same dinner table in a few months, like knights returning to King Arthur's round table, to share with the group how we had slayed a personal dragon or two, found the mythical Holy Grail, and, in doing so, made the world a better place to live.

Brave New World Revisited

A hush fell over the crowd as the speaker walked up to the microphone. It was the spring of 2004, and the topic was "Global Change," a glimpse into the next decade through the eyes of one of the country's foremost futurists, Dr. Paul Kordis. His presentation was an eloquent synthesis of keen insights poised at the vanguard of what the next decade holds in store for earth's inhabitants. Dr. Kordis spoke of the advances in microchip technology, political upheavals, nanotechnology, the application of the Human Genome Project, newly revealed secrets from the Hubble space telescope, the bioengineering of food, and more. At the conclusion of his talk, he specifically addressed the fear that will accompany these changes, as paradigms crumble and belief systems collapse. "We have entered a time in the history of humanity when our capacity to use this technology has exceeded the consciousness to question whether it should indeed, be used. I am afraid to say there is no stopping it." Kordis paused to view the attentive audience. "Welcome to a brave new world," he said without a hint of cynicism.

In 1939 the book *Brave New World* rolled off the presses. It described a future utopian society—ironically, one not without problems. Its author, Aldous Huxley, like other science fiction writers of his time, used literature to make a philosophical point about many things, including spiritual hunger and the pursuit of happiness. Huxley died in 1964, but if he were alive today, he would most likely not be surprised to see the advances in

computer technology, cloning, and mind-altering pharmaceuticals that he envisioned so many decades ago. He might, however, be disheartened to know that with these changes, humanity's potential is far less than realized. Apparently, his warning went unheeded.

Like so many other science fiction books, Huxley's work wasn't so much a vision, as it was a spiritual wake-up call. Ever the philosopher, Huxley intuitively knew the dangers of a world that neither acknowledged nor fully embraced the spiritual dimension of life. In a later book of nonfiction titled *The Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley explored the deeper issues of human spirituality by synthesizing ageless wisdom derived from several of the world's cultures, traditions, and religions. Reality, he explained, is a shrouded mystery, hidden from people who are neither pure of heart nor light in spirit—in essence, those who are victims to personal events, by not learning from them or moving on with life.

People who travel the human journey with a pure heart and a light spirit, no matter what comes their way, will master the human condition. Huxley believed that while life is never easy, when one is armed with a pure heart and a hungry spirit that's willing to learn, the trials of the human journey are always rewarding. His call to action is as important today as it was when he first wrote *Brave New World* about half a century ago—given the state of current global changes and personal strife, coupled with futuristic technology, perhaps even more so.

A growing majority of people believes that brave or foolish, we truly have entered a "New World." In many ways, though, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Yet regardless of the personal issues and the global events that lie ahead, we still have valuable inner resources to cope with change. Patience, compassion, honesty, faith, humor, forgiveness, and a score of other human attributes have helped us deal effectively with personal crises and cope with stress throughout the course of human history. I call these inner resources "muscles of the soul." When we use them in trying times, they manifest as grace. To quote a familiar expression often attributed to Ernest Hemingway, "Style is grace under pressure." Undoubtedly, adapting to personal and global change in today's world without animosity, resentment, or fear takes grace.

The Way of the Tao

If one word describes Nien Cheng, it is grace. I was first introduced to Nien in 1987 through her book *Life and Death in Shanghai*, a remarkable, heroic story of the human spirit's triumph over indescribable adversity. With the rise of communism under the rule of Mao Tse-tung, all Chinese intellectuals who spoke English were accused of being spies. Nien had been educated in London and had lived in Australia as the wife of China's ambassador; she then took an assignment for Shell Oil in Shanghai after the death of her husband. Her past became highly suspect to the Communist Red Guard. In 1965, at the age of fifty-six, she was falsely accused of being a spy and imprisoned in solitary confinement for over six years. She endured horrendous living conditions and physical torture. She was never allowed to see her family, including her only daughter, Mei Ping. A U.S. détente between Nixon and Mao opened a window of opportunity in 1972, and several prisoners, including Nien, were released. Upon learning the unspeakable fate of her daughter, she made the decision to leave China forever, first immigrating to Canada, then relocating to the United States. If you were to meet her today at age ninety, you would see the scars on her wrists from shackles she was forced to wear. But more important, you would be struck by her sincere smile and bright eyes, conveying grace and dignity and giving no hint of the utter hell she endured.

While serving on the faculty of the American University in Washington, D.C., I invited Nien to be a guest speaker for my stress-management class in the spring of 1992. She graciously accepted. A wonderful friendship developed afterward, which over the years has been cultivated with letters, phone calls, and e-mails. When I return periodically to the nation's capital, we visit over lunch or dinner. Conversations with Nien are never boring, as she is well versed in many topics that range from politics, health care, and gardening, to current issues and world events.

Sitting in her living room sipping tea one afternoon, I asked whether she had seen the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Her face lit up with a big smile. "Oh, yes," she said, "I liked it so much, I saw it twice. You know, long ago, this was how they made

movies in China: flying on rooftops and such. As a young girl, I loved to see them. Then Mao Tse-tung took over, and they stopped making these films. The communists,” she said with a faint laugh, “they have no sense of humor.” Humor, I learned, was one of Nien’s many inner resources.

I mentioned that I, too, had seen it twice and was quite taken with the philosophical theme, as well as with the movie’s plot. Pouring more tea, Nien looked up to make eye contact and asked whether I was familiar with the concept of Taoism. Like many people in the mid-seventies, I first became aware of the Taoist philosophy by reading Fritjof Capra’s book *The Tao of Physics* while attending college and again, years later, while reading *The Tao of Pooh*. Taoism is rather hard to explain, so rather than risk embarrassing myself, I politely shook my head, hoping that Nien would share her insights. She did.

“We have a philosophy in China called Taoism.” She paused to collect her thoughts, before attempting to explain the unexplainable. “Taoism is not a religion, it’s merely a practical way of life: living simply, living a life of balance and harmony.” She looked out the window. “So many things are out of balance today.” She took a sip of tea, then shared her experience of being interned in Shanghai’s Number 1 Detention House. It became obvious to me that not only her faith in God but her subtle discipline of patience, integrity, and persistence, as expressed through the Taoist philosophy, had enabled her to survive such a terrible ordeal.

A Sage Named Lao Tzu

Many people are aware of the Taoist yin/yang symbol, a ubiquitous icon spotted everywhere in America, from bumper stickers to tattoos, yet few know the origin or the concepts of this ancient Chinese philosophy. As the author of the acclaimed book *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu is credited with recording the tenets of Taoism well over two thousand years ago. Although little is known about him, some people believe Lao Tzu to be a contemporary of the renowned philosopher Confucius (551–479 B.C.). It is understood that Lao Tzu wrote this manual of virtues, often called the wisest

book ever written, for the rulers of the Zhou dynasty. Over time, as Taoist concepts were integrated into Buddhism, the Zen style of Buddhism became popular in the Orient. Through the centuries, the *Tao Te Ching* made its way into the hands of the general public and is now accessible the world over. Although Taoism originated in China long ago, its popularity stems from the fact that the concepts of balance, simplicity, patience, and harmony are universal to the human condition.

The *Tao Te Ching* was a manual for living a life of balance, in harmony with the divine force of the universe. When translated into English, the Tao is perhaps best described as “the Way” or “the Path.” Many people think that George Lucas based his concept of “the Force” on the Tao, as the two seem nearly identical. Through countless observations of the natural world and human nature, Lao Tzu imparted his wisdom in richly worded poetic verse of eighty-one passages. His intention was to transform consciousness to its highest potential. It would be incorrect, however, to think of the Tao as a list of simple rules or dogma. The complexity of Taoism comes through its application to daily life, including the most simple acts of breathing and walking. A fundamental tenet of Taoism states that taking time to cultivate the inner landscape of the soul promotes an external harmony under any set of circumstances. If you read a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, and there are many, you cannot help but notice a sense of the divine that connects all things as one. For this reason, a strong, but subtle mysticism also infuses the Tao.

In the book, *365 Tao*, the author, Deng Ming-Dao, writes, “Those who follow Tao would first think to know themselves well. They believe that the outside world is only known in relation to an inner point of view. Self-cultivation is the basis for knowing Tao. Although Tao may be glimpsed in the outer world, individuals must sharpen their sensibilities in order to observe the workings of the great.”

A Chinese proverb states, “When there is peace in the heart, there will be peace in the world.” The American version suggests the following wisdom: let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. When there is peace in the heart of each soul, there will

be peace in the world. In the words of another great sage, Mahatma Gandhi: “To change the world, we must first be the change we wish to see.”

It’s fair to say that under the influence of chronic stress, balance is called into question. Taoism isn’t a panacea for stress. It merely offers suggestions for bringing aspects of life back into balance by going with the flow, rather than fighting the winds of change. Following the way of the Tao provides a sense of empowerment that allows us to overcome the most hellacious obstacles without animosity or anger—in essence, to walk the human path gracefully.

Recently, a 113-year-old Floridian was asked about the secret to his longevity. His answer embodied the wisdom of the Tao: “When it rains, I let it.”

A Crazy Little Thing Called Stress

The moment I walked off the plane, I was greeted by a man holding a sign with my name on it, who then escorted me to a limousine. I had just flown out to Hollywood to tape a talk show on stress. Los Angeles, the epitome of stress, was nothing less than frenetic, from the airport to the freeways to the heart of the city. When I walked into the studio, I thought, “You’d need an ax to cut through the tension in this place.” People were running around like crazy: beauticians from the makeup department pranced all over, producers roamed the halls in search of the show’s hosts, nervous guests paced the floors in their dressing rooms, and security guards with earphones and mikes raced around like the president’s Secret Service, trying to keep everything in order. I sat patiently in the “green room,” waiting to go on, and within minutes was escorted to the stage and quickly seated. After a brief introduction, the first question I was asked was “Dr. Seaward, what is stress?” At the time, it was hard to give a comprehensive answer in a sound bite, but I have more time now, so here is a more thorough answer.

Although there are many different definitions of stress, the one that I like best states that “stress is any change you encounter in your life.” Today the words *change* and *stress* are often used synonymously, particularly in light of global terrorism and the national terrorism alert code. As a rule, people feel threatened by

change. We don't like change because it tends to disrupt our comfort zones, which can include anything from our daily routines to our thoughts, opinions, and attitudes about all aspects of life. Like the tectonic plates that shift and crumble during a violent earthquake, change can dramatically shift the foundation of our lives and quite literally move the earth on which we walk.

There are many definitions of stress. Each definition depends on which expert (e.g., psychologist, sociologist, physiologist, or theologian) you talk to. The word *stress* comes from the field of physics. In the simplest terms, "stress is the force or pressure applied to an object, enough to bend or break it." If you have ever been emotionally distraught or overwhelmed beyond belief, you surely know what this feels like. Professionals in the field of medicine tend to see stress as "wear and tear" on the body, and sure enough, there is a strong association between stress and disease. Therapists and counselors in the field of psychology define stress as the "inability to cope with problems," as well as "the loss of emotional control." People with a more spiritual approach say that "stress is the absence of inner peace." Quite honestly, all of these insights together, when examined through the mind-body-spirit equation, only begin to approach the essence of what stress really is. Ironically, stress is almost as complex to define as it is to resolve. An ancient Chinese proverb offers this insight: tension is who you think you should be. Relaxation is who you are.

Where There's Unresolved Stress, There's Ego

Barely a household word a few decades ago, stress is now as American as apple pie and as common as the use of cell phones. In fact, stress is ubiquitous across the planet. Even the World Health Organization calls stress "a global epidemic." It doesn't matter where you live, how much money you make, what you do for a living, or how dysfunctional your parents were when you were growing up—everyone has stress. Stress, quite aptly, is called the "equal opportunity destroyer." Like change, stress has always been part of the human landscape, but in our rapidly changing world,

problems, both big and small, now form momentous headwinds. Sadly, the average person seems to have neither a clear reference point to achieve balance, nor a lucid perspective from which to avoid this deluge and take full command of his or her life.

The stress people feel today comes not only from a multitude of outside sources, such as the lack of job security or the looming threat of terrorism, but also from the internal voice of the ego, which constantly interprets both personal and global events. The ego itself can cause a tremendous amount of stress. If you were to hold a bunch of stress experts captive in a room and not release them until they came to a consensus, they most likely would say that stress, real or imagined, is a “perceived” threat to our physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual existence. Note that the word *perceived* is in quotes, because two people can experience the same situation, yet one may find it nonthreatening, while the other is freaking out. Ultimately, stress is based on your interpretation of each event, as well as your reaction or response to it. The ego reacts, the soul responds. Both reactions and responses are conscious choices; however, responses require a clear conscience, brought forth by a calm mind. This is what Aldous Huxley hinted at when he referred to a “pure heart.” And people who say, “I don’t have stress, I give stress,” are only fooling themselves—they are time bombs waiting to go off.

With a little prodding and encouragement, these same stress experts will admit that some stress is actually healthy, but beyond that point—which, of course, varies from person to person—stress can be quite harmful. In simple terms, chronic unresolved stress is deadly. Eventually, it kills. On the other hand, healthful stress is inspiring, motivating, and, yes, even euphoric. Downhill skiing comes to mind, as does falling in love. Unfortunately, most people who ricochet through today’s stressed-filled world are well beyond the point of motivation and excitement. They are heading toward burnout, which can manifest as either fear or anger.

Stressed Mind, Angered Heart

Not long ago, I went to a movie theater to escape the real world of cares and worries by entering into a world of fantasy. Despite

the fact that the movie was a comedy, anger was brewing in the aisles. About halfway into the flick, a cell phone went off, and the man beside me proceeded to whisper loudly into his hand for the next few minutes. People around me seemed irritated, but no one said anything. When the credits began rolling on screen, the man sitting next to me stood to leave. In a moment of polite assertiveness, I said, "Excuse me, but the next time you come to the movies, would you consider turning off your cell phone?" He glared at me as if I had tossed a verbal hand grenade and said, "Get a life!"

Astonished but composed, I looked him in the eye. "What did you say?"

He yelled a profanity and quickly walked away.

To live a life without stress is just not possible or even desirable. To live a life full of stress, however, is neither normal nor healthy. Balance is essential. It may sound rather clichéd, but coping well with stress comes down to one thing: your attitude. I have met scores of people who, on the surface, have enviable lives. They have more possessions than they can use and more money than they can spend, yet they are anything but happy and stress free. Conversely, I know many others whose lifestyles appear less than desirable, as measured by the "American dream," yet they have the world in their pockets. It's not that they don't have stress. They do. They just don't hold onto it. By cultivating a winning attitude, they have learned to adapt. They acknowledge stress, work to resolve it, and then move on. In tomorrow's world, survival of the fittest will mean the person who adapts well to stress by going with the flow. This is conscious evolution. To be ready for tomorrow, however, we have to start today.

Many sociologists suggest that living in America, the land of milk and honey, the land where dreams come true, has its downside. It has made us soft, perhaps even spoiled. Living a comfortable life tends to weaken our resolve when challenges, both big and small, come our way. Let there be no doubt: human life is full of ups and downs. Lao Tzu foretold this long ago. His advice was to see the bigger picture and the cycles that make up our lives. More often than not, though, unresolved stress creates a sense of myopia, and we miss the glorious big picture.

The quality of life in America is at an all-time high, while people around the globe struggle to make ends meet and earn only dollars per month. Surely, they are laughing at our contemporary stress “problems” (particularly, at the use of Botox to reduce the effects of aging). However, some Americans have lived long enough to know otherwise. While walking my dog in the local park, I happened to meet Al, an eighty-five-year-old man who takes his dog, Shadow, out to get his morning exercise. He confided that in the days of the Depression there was a lot of stress but not like there is today. “We take so much for granted today. It seems to me that no matter how good life is, people always complain. I am old enough to remember the Great Depression. People today don’t know how good they really have it.”

Fight, Flight, or Delight?

In a Los Angeles museum stands the skeleton of a six-foot-long saber-tooth tiger with an equally long tail. If you use your imagination a little, it could be scanning the crowd of tourists for its next meal. Chances are, at the intersection of Hollywood and Vine, many millennia ago, this same cat might have snacked on a human being for lunch. A distant relative of the saber-tooth tiger is the mountain lion, and today they roam freely, from the foothills of the Sierras to the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies. Every couple of years, newspapers report that someone was chased by a big cat with a long tail. This really is quite rare. For the most part, the felines are more afraid of us than we are of them, yet a chance meeting can occur and with it, stress.

For every human who became lunch meat for tigers, lions, and bears eons ago, many more escaped. What allowed them to survive these animals’ predatory instincts is called the “fight-or-flight response,” a survival dynamic that dates further back than anyone knows. The fight-or-flight response gives you a practical choice when you’re cornered by something bigger or more dangerous than yourself. You could either stick up your fists and draw blood or, more likely, head for the hills until the danger was gone. Because of our human physiology, we have the ability to do both—at the same time.

Like a fire alarm that rings in the middle of the night, the fight-or-flight response begins with a mental perception that something is amiss. Within milliseconds, the heart starts pumping blood to the extremities. Blood pressure skyrockets to aid the blood's movement to the large muscle groups. The skin becomes sweaty to cool the core body temperature, and a rush of hormones, from epinephrine to cortisol, is secreted to pump sugar and free fatty acids into the blood for energy. All of this (and a lot more) occurs immediately in your body, enabling you to avoid immanent death. This is the sole reason for the fight-or-flight response—physical survival.

With the exception of a chance unscheduled meeting with a mountain lion or quickly passing through a burning building, it's safe to say that (terrorism notwithstanding) most of us rarely find ourselves in the grip of physical danger. But the fight-or-flight response is ready and waiting, in case we ever need it. So, imagine how inappropriate it is for us to trigger this survival alarm when stuck in rush-hour traffic, debugging a computer virus, or coping with a tax audit. With rare exceptions, the fight-or-flight response is an antiquated survival method in today's high-tech world of computer crashes and poor cell phone reception. What was once a valuable asset at the dawn of humanity has now become our greatest liability, threatening our health and well-being. The association between stress and disease is astonishing.

Wired for Stress, Programmed for God

In 1990 the medical establishment dedicated the entire decade to the study of the human brain. With the use of MRI technology and other high-tech methods, long-hidden secrets of brain physiology were brought to light, including what happens during the stress response. In his book *The End of Stress As We Know It*, the researcher Bruce McEwen highlights some of these new insights, such as the fact that a preponderance of stress hormones is believed to inhibit new brain cell growth. Moreover, we now know the exact regions of the brain that are responsible for emotional thought processing, the specific effect of stress hormones, and the intricate relationship between the brain and the endocrine system. Perhaps it's no surprise to learn that we are indeed hardwired for stress.

Referring to the stress response as “allostasis,” McEwen says, “The physiological systems that support allostasis follow a basic pattern that’s been used quite successfully, for about 400 million years. Surely, these provisions did not evolve for the purpose of causing illness.” McEwen admits that for stress, as we know it, to end, there has to be a change in consciousness, or what he calls “positive health.” Positive health begins with a conscious response to stress and manifests as many healthful behaviors, such as engaging in cardiovascular exercise, eating a healthful diet, and getting adequate sleep; in essence, living a balanced life.

We may be wired for stress, but, according to Andrew Newberg, M.D., we are also wired for spirituality. In his book *Why God Won't Go Away*, Newberg describes information from brain-imaging data collected from both Tibetan Buddhists and Franciscan nuns, practicing meditation and contemplative prayer, respectively. A SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) machine shows the way that blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, which correlates with neuronal activity, indicates how people register a transcendent or mystical experience. Newberg found that when the brain is denied typical sensory information, the censor of conscious thought is unplugged, and thus space and time are perceived differently. Meditators often describe this enhanced conscious state as having touched infinity or “being one with everything.” The clinical search for the cerebral “G” spot in the brain has led to a new discipline called “neurotheology,” the study of the neurobiology of spirituality. Meditation of any type that promotes the relaxation response seems to enhance these euphoric experiences. Emerging leaders in this field of research have reached a consensus that everyone has the brain circuitry to elicit a mystical experience. Once again, the balance of yin and yang can be achieved through simple brain chemistry.

Mountains and Molehills

There is a world of difference between the stress of locking your keys in your car and that of coping with terminal cancer, but the way

some people describe their problems, you would never know it. The mind, in cahoots with the ego, has a great way of exaggerating things to produce the worst possible effect and the greatest amount of sympathy. Molehills quickly become mountains. Just as many people climb Mt. Everest these days, there is no shortage of people ranting about all kinds of catastrophic problems, most of which are molehills. As the expression goes, don't sweat the small stuff; you'll just get wet.

In simple terms, there are two kinds of distress: acute and chronic. Acute stress is very intense but very short term. At the most, these events may last about twenty minutes. Anyone who has ever been pulled over for speeding is familiar with this kind of stress. The list of acute stressors is nearly endless. Ironically, once the problem is over, our memory of it quickly fades and life goes on (until the next encounter). For this reason, acute stress, as intense as it might be, is not a major concern, in terms of its health risk. The problem today lies with chronic stress.

It would be nice if chronic stress lasted only minutes, but, typically, it results from issues and problems that persist for weeks, months, or years. Sometimes they may last even decades. Examples include, but are not limited to, bad marriages, terminal illness, a hostile work environment, addictions, elder care, financial problems, and rebellious teenage kids. At first glance these and similar problems seem insurmountable. Avoiding them, however, is not an option. A Zen proverb reminds us that often "the best way out is through." Stress must be confronted diplomatically, so that we can gracefully move on with our lives.

Despite the abundance of people claiming victimization, enough brave souls have learned to dismantle, circumnavigate, or climb over these obstacles and move on with their lives to show the rest of us that it can be done gracefully. We all have the same potential. If you were to ask people who overcame their stressors about their secret of success, you might hear this sage advice: if your mind got you into this mess, use your mind to get you out of it. These people refuse to see themselves as victims of their situation, and while they would not necessarily call themselves heroes, others surely do.

A Time for Heroes

I lifted the mike to speak and asked the audience members to call to mind a hero in their favorite book or movie. Seated in front of me, a large group of eighth-graders who were enrolled in a health class eagerly raising their hands, offering all kinds of answers.

“Harry Potter,” yelled one.

“Frodo Baggins,” shouted another from the back of the room.

“Ariel, the Little Mermaid,” said a young girl in the front row.

“Neo in *The Matrix*,” said a fourth.

“Stanley Yelnats,” said a fifth, and as he mentioned this name, I saw the students began to smile, comparing Stanley to Neo. The movie *Holes* had just opened, and from the sounds of it, every kid in the auditorium had seen it.

Ever since the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, I have been invited to speak to middle and high school students about coping with stress. One school, in particular, has brought me in several times a year to work with teens, in a class called Health Quest. In addition to teaching the kids about anger management, humor therapy, and meditation, I spend a full class period sharing Joseph Campbell’s wisdom of the Hero’s Journey: how to be a victor, not a victim, to life’s problems.

After explaining the difference between a celebrity and a hero, I mentioned a few recognizable names.

“Lance Armstrong?” I asked.

“Hero,” they yelled in unison.

“Rosa Parks?” I asked.

“Hero,” they again yelled in unison.

“Brad Pitt?” I said.

“Celebrity,” they shouted back.

“He’s my hero,” a girl in the front row said loud enough for the entire group to hear. Everyone giggled.

The Hero’s Journey Revisited

Joseph Campbell’s name became a household word in the late 1980s, when he appeared in a five-part series with the PBS host Bill Moyers. The show was called *The Power of Myth*, and it explored

the format for every great story ever told, a format as old as storytelling itself, and that which is used, with some variations, in novels, television shows, and movies today.

Campbell dedicated the better part of his life to studying the myths and the stories of nearly every culture, past and present, on the planet. Despite the differences in language, culture, climate, and history, he was amazed at the similarity in the structure of these stories. Campbell left no stone unturned when looking behind the message of each story. He found not only astonishing parallels (e.g., virgin births, resurrections, journeys, healings, etc.) but remarkable patterns, in terms of character development. Regardless of its origin, each story spoke to the nature and the triumph of the human spirit. Extrapolating to the human condition, Campbell often referred to each person's life, regardless of gender, as "the Hero's Journey." Perhaps it's no surprise that stress and tension can be found in every story. Apparently, it thickens the plot.

While historians and storytellers haven't kept a running tab on acute stressors over the ages, they have done an excellent job with chronic stress and people who deal well with it. In fact, not only is the stress response embedded deep into our DNA, but the means to solve and resolve problems are encoded as well. It's just that we forget (perhaps it's stored in the inactive strands of the double helix.) Regardless, the retelling of the Hero's Journey serves as a constant reminder to awaken our slumbering spirits and figuratively make our way back home. Now, more than ever, we need heroes.

Having studied the myths and the legends of all ages, from Ulysses in ancient Greece to Dorothy in Kansas, Campbell noticed this interesting trend: in each myth there is a hero, and although the face of the hero may change from story to story, the plot remains nearly identical. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell highlights the progression of the hero's journey, which, as it turns out, mirrors our own lives' sojourns. The three stages of each journey include the departure, the initiation, and the return. As we take a closer look at each stage, please pause for a moment to ask yourself where you are on your hero's journey.

- *The Departure*: The first step in any adventure is to leave your place of origin, which, metaphorically speaking, means change. The departure is a "call to adventure," where you leave your

place of comfort and venture into the unknown. Whether it's departing on a ship, as Ulysses did, or on a spacecraft like Luke Skywalker did (George Lucas was a student of Campbell's), every hero must leave home to find himself or herself. In Campbell's words, "The call to adventure signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of this society to a zone unknown." The departure stage is also called severance or separation, because in some stories, the reluctant hero may be unwillingly forced into a situation. Campbell cites Adam and Eve's exit from Eden as the epitome of a reluctant departure. There are many, many more. If we step outside of the classic myth tale into ordinary life, departure may begin with the first year in college away from home, the death of a parent, the loss of a job, or the end of a marriage. Some people begin their departure simply by driving to work each day. Departures can occur in a great many ways, and fear is never far behind. With the first step out the door, across the threshold, the journey has begun.

- *The Initiation(s)*: Traveling down the road far away from home, crossing many thresholds, the hero is always put to the test. Campbell calls this stage "the road of trials." For some people, the trial may be a dragon (a metaphor for fear); for others, it may be a symbolic river to cross (the River Styx). And for yet others, it may be an evil witch, a wicked stepmother, a daring rescue, or the betrayal of a close friend. In the legend of King Arthur, initially, it was the apprenticeship with Merlin and then the infidelity of his closest friend, Lancelot. Dorothy had the Wicked Witch of the West to contend with, and Frodo Baggins had the ring. In truth, all initiations are personifications that mirror the hero's ego, which he or she must ultimately overcome.

In your life, initiation can manifest in a thousand ways, including a debilitating injury, the boss from hell, or an abusive alcoholic parent. Some people refer to this life chapter as a rite of passage. Others call it "baptism by fire." In every mythological story, the hero must demonstrate strength, courage, patience, and willpower, to overcome adversity and do it gracefully. Nobody likes a cocky hero. If we fail with the first test, another will appear, until we are strong enough to conquer it

and move on. Rest assured, there are many, many tests. Campbell also noted that on every journey there is spiritual assistance, for although each journey is a solitary venture, we are never alone. Frodo had Gandolf, Dorothy had the Good Witch of the North, and we have an undeniable connection to the divine source of the universe, one that is always present.

- *The Return Home*: At some point in the journey, usually upon the success of the initiation process, the hero must return home (even if home is nothing more than a sense of inner peace or homeostasis). Frodo Baggins made it back home. So did Dorothy and the fish Nemo. Even Jesus made it home. Upon crossing the threshold of return, the hero shares the wealth of wisdom and riches acquired on the road. Symbolically, the return home may be accompanied by a trophy of sorts: magical runes, the Golden Fleece, or the medusa's head, all of which convey a pure heart. Campbell points out that there may be a reluctance to want to go home, either because of feelings of shame or, more likely, lust for additional conquests. But return we must, to complete the story. The stage of returning home is also called incorporation, where the returning hero is accepted by his family and peers as an equal, and everyone benefits from sharing his wisdom. Thus the hero becomes a master of two worlds: the one he conquered and the one he has returned to. The return phase offers a promise that all ends well. In the course of one's life, there are many journeys and many trips back home.

Campbell was of the opinion that the power of storytelling, whether around a campfire under the stars or in an epic story on the silver screen, is to remind us that we are participating in our own hero's journey. In all of these stories, the hero successfully overcomes adversity. With arms stretched overhead in the now-familiar Rocky pose, we become the victors, not the victims, of our circumstance. What do Lucy Ricardo, Pinocchio, Maria Von Trapp, Lance Armstrong, and you have in common? According to the template of the hero's journey, a lot. And Campbell had a bit of advice to his fellow travelers. In what has become his most famous quote, Campbell encouraged everyone to "follow your bliss" (a similar expression is "follow the Tao"), suggesting that if

your heart and mind are aligned, the journey is truly headed in the right direction.

More Than Fictional Heroes

As I wove Joseph Campbell's insights into the presentation to these teens, students eagerly called out examples of each stage of the Hero's Journey: from Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* to Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. They quickly grasped the concepts of each stage. To emphasize my point, I added a new name to the list: a real-life hero. As fate would have it, while driving to school that day, I heard on the news of a young man named Aron Ralston, who had gone hiking in Utah several days earlier, only to get his right hand and forearm pinned under a huge boulder—a tumultuous initiation, of sorts. For days, unable to move, he contemplated his ordeal. When it came down to it, he had only one choice. In order to save his own life, he did the unthinkable and amputated his arm with a pocketknife. The road of trials continued as he rappelled sixty feet down the rock face with one arm, to successfully make his way home. That was the day he became a hero. In an interview with the *Rocky Mountain News*, Aron said that his will to live was stronger than his will to die. Willpower, an undeniable inner resource, is a muscle of the soul.

E X E R C I S E

Your Hero's Journey

Briefly reflect on your own personal journey and where you are at this time in your life. With life being complex as it is, it may seem like you are on many journeys, all at the same time, but integrate these together and take a moment to describe the details of the stage where you now see yourself.

Stage one: The Departure

Stage two: The Road of Trials

Stage three: The Return Home

The Power of Myth

Before his death in 1988, Campbell grew increasingly concerned that many people were losing contact with these sacred stories and the wisdom they contained. There was a time when myths were passed down from parent to child and generation to generation, not merely for entertainment purposes but as ageless wisdom to guide the child on his or her life journey, serving as a wake-up call to the human spirit. Stories from the Bible, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and other sacred scriptures, as well as scores of legends, fables, fairy tales, and folklore, all serve the same purpose: to remind us that we have what it takes to gracefully overcome adversity and make it back home in one piece.

According to Campbell, the tradition of gleaning wisdom from these stories is slowly vanishing in the American culture. With the exception of classics like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, it certainly has become diluted in Hollywood's shock-and-awe approach to entertainment. In his discussion of *The Power of Myth*, Campbell related our state of increasing spiritual hunger to our lack of connection to mythological stories. As he explained, when a society forgoes the power of myth and instead replaces it with information, technology, or perhaps nothing, that society becomes less civilized and more destructive. In a few, simple words: perpetually stressed.

Knowing the power of myth, Campbell had an optimistic outlook on the journey of humanity, because he knew the end of the story. "We are at this moment participating in one of the very greatest leaps of the human spirit—to a knowledge not only of outside nature, but also our own deep inward mystery—the greatest leap ever," he said.

Whether we know it or not, we have all embarked on the Hero's Journey: a spiritual quest in human form in an attempt to reach our highest potential. Like stories, fables, myths, and fairy tales told over the centuries, the message of this book serves to gently nudge you from your slumber, helping you get back on the road and eventually home again—in one peace.

The Rules for Being a Hero

As I finished my presentation and made my way out of the auditorium, an eighth-grader approached me.

“My parents are going through a messy divorce, so I can relate to all of this pretty well. I thought you might like this,” he said, handing me a piece of paper. “It’s called the Rules for Being Human, but after listening to you today, it could just as easily be called the Rules for Being a Hero. Thanks for coming today. You put everything in perspective.” I opened the folded paper and read the following:

TEN RULES FOR BEING HUMAN

1. You will receive a body. You may like it or hate it, but it will be yours for the entire period this time around.
2. You will learn lessons. You are enrolled in a full-time informal school called life. Each day of this school, you will have the opportunity to learn lessons. You may like the lessons or think them irrelevant and stupid.
3. There are no mistakes, only lessons. Growth is a process of trial and error and experimentation. The failed experiments are as much a part of the process as are the experiments that ultimately work.
4. A lesson is repeated until it’s learned. A lesson will present itself to you in various forms until you have learned. When you have mastered the lesson, then you can go on to the next lesson.
5. Learning lessons does not end. There is no part of life that does not contain lessons. If you are alive, there are lessons to be learned.

6. “There” is no better place than “Here.” When your “There” has become “Here,” you will simply obtain another “There” that will again look better than “Here.”
7. Others are simply a mirror of yourself. You cannot love or hate something about another person unless it reflects something you love or hate about yourself.
8. What you make of your life is up to you. You have all the tools and the resources you need. What you do with them is up to you. The choice is yours.
9. Your answers lie inside of you. The answers to all of life’s questions lie inside of you. All you need do is look, listen, and trust.
10. You will forget all of this.

—Chérie Carter-Scott

A Time to Remember

At the same moment that I smelled an aroma of burning sage and cedar, a loud clap of thunder filled my ears. I was about to introduce Michael, a revered Lakota elder, to the conference participants who had assembled to study the art and science of complementary medicine. Michael looked at me and smiled. We both knew the power of offering cedar to cleanse and balance, and we also knew the healing power of thunder. In the time-honored tradition of seeking the sacred wisdom to be shared, on behalf of the entire group I presented to Michael a pouch of tobacco, which he graciously accepted. As I extended my hand in gratitude, I thought of Joseph Campbell, who had embarked on his journey to explore mythology through a similar encounter with a native elder when he was a teenager.

Michael began his eloquent talk with a mythical story of creation, about the spider spirit who weaved a world of creation around the planet earth. Then he spoke of the four directions, the four colors, the four totem animals, and the symbolic meaning that

wove all of these aspects together. Once again, the power of myth was resurrected.

“We tell these stories so that we don’t forget who we are or why we are here, so we don’t forget our sacredness. All life is sacred,” he said. “Unfortunately, there are many who have forgotten, even those from my own tribe. I come to honor the sacred hoop and share this wisdom because now is a time for all planetary citizens to remember who we are and why we are here.” His comments were punctuated by loud claps of thunder. “The spirits are speaking,” he said. “Their voice is a clarion call to remember.”

Of course, sometimes we do forget or, worse, fail to listen to the words that keep us on course. This is known as “falling asleep on the spiritual path.” Drifting off course may initially seem a bit liberating, but as the winds of change pick up, the emotional barometric pressure begins to increase to a point where feeling lost overcomes feelings of self-reliance, and hope begins to turn to despair. As the clouds move in, a bleak moment attempts to lure us into the dark night of the soul. This, too, is part of the Hero’s Journey.