"Stress of not being yourself" from The <u>Brighton-Pittsford Post</u>, July 22, 1998

Back in the days when medical science discovered that stress contributes to pain and disease, I saw it as a welcome piece of enlightenment. By now, I am getting mighty tired of hearing people attribute their symptoms to "stress," as if that explains everything and, of course, not much can be done about it except by me, their bodyworker, who is supposed to magically smooth it away with my hands.

My  work is to deal with the effects of stress on my clients, so I've asked myself just what stress is and what do we do about it? The obvious answers, which you can find in popular magazines as well as books and articles by physicians: Stress is life—pressures at work, relationship difficulties, parenthood, illness. What to do? Learn to meditate, get a massage, exercise, eat right, take a stroll in the park, do yoga, etc.

These are all positive suggestions that can relieve some symptoms, but they don't solve the problem. I've had meditation and yoga practitioners on my table with stiff muscles and rigid bodies, fitness nuts with ulcers. I've known for years that there are some people I can massage into relaxation and some I can't, and it has nothing to do with their size or strength (or mine). So I've come up with my own definitions.

Stress is not being yourself.

Relaxation and well-being result from telling the truth about your experience.

The problem is that we have been conditioned, threatened, and sweet-talked out of being, knowing and expressing what we really think and feel, what we really want. Stress is more than your boss or your spouse yelling at you. It's what you do in order **not** to feel or say "that hurts" or "I'm angry."

Drs. Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks report that scared people who were hooked up to biofeedback machines lowered their stress readings simply by saying, "I'm scared." Stress is the way we make our breathing small, tense our muscles to hold back motions or emotions, gear up for fight or flight without doing either. We shut down and disappear from ourselves and from our own resources for creative solutions to the stress.

I'll never forget the client who came in with severe neck pain. Sure enough, her neck was like rock, and no manipulation I did softened it or lessened her pain. Finally, I asked her what was going on in her life. She told me her dearest friend had died of cancer that week. As she said that, her tears began; her neck relaxed, and the pain went away.

Then she said, "But I'm not here to grieve. I just want to feel good."

She stopped her tears; her neck seized up again, and the pain returned. We went back and forth like that a couple of times—either neck pain or tears. She had her choice.

I used to be amazed at the number of people who believe that feeling a feeling would destroy them. I can expect statements like, "If I start, I'll never stop." "I'll fall apart." "I'll end up in R wing." "What good will it do?"

Now I understand that this overwhelming feeling was part of an original scenario of "stress" we grew up with.  "Stress" is a mild word for the normal but nevertheless severe traumas of life. Many of us don't even recognize that our experience (e.g., a

violent parent, surgery and hospitalization, or growing up in a pervasive atmosphere of neglect and isolation) can be labeled "trauma."

Part of the trauma is how you're treated around it. Think of all the things you've been told in order not to react in a normal way to something hurtful—things such as "Shut up or I'll give you something to cry about" or "There, there, it's nothing." Sometimes you didn't have to be told anything; all you had to do was watch your caretaker disappear into fear or tears or rage when you raised your feelings, even feelings like exuberance or joy. You got the same message: don't be the way you are.

The good news is that it's actually a relief to be the way you are, no matter how that is. For instance, I had a client with a migraine who wanted a massage. She could not relax under my hands until I asked her to notice what she was experiencing. The truth was, she didn't really trust anyone. With my encouragement, she was able to say "I don't trust you" to me. She relaxed and started smiling after that; her migraine was gone.

Sometimes my clients and I are amused by how good it feels to say something awful. The relief is in undoing the stress of keeping it hidden. Anything that is being real ultimately feels better than acting a pretense, even if you've identified with the pretense for years. There are times when giving up a pretense or defense feels like dying because we think we **are** our cover story, or we're not quite sure we are safe in the present. The present is safer if you simply say what you feel and want, rather than "dumping" on the people around you. We all need to learn how to hear what others feel without taking it personally, and by responding appropriately if a change in our behavior is called for.

When we actually connect with them, feelings often have a pretty short life span, especially if they're feelings left over from the past that have been stored in your body as "stress." For instance, at one time it might have been worse to feel helpless than to blame yourself for a situation. Now, the actual experience of fear or helplessness lasts a few moments. I've rarely seen it take up most of a session time. What emerges when you let yourself be the way you are is a sense of kindness and generosity toward yourself.

I've noticed that no matter who the person or what the issue, when you get to **be** yourself, you love yourself. All the usual self-deprecating messages are simply gone. So is any sense of powerlessness, incompleteness or stress. This is true even for people who confront acts they have done that were harmful or unethical.

Under all the layers of our personal history, our feelings, and our behaviors, there is the being. When we experience that, we experience our goodness and our power to respond to stress creatively. The cure for stress is to be real and to engage our ability to change stressful situations.