



## Vision and Viewpoint

Joan Chittister

We are all living with more stress than we can handle now, one way or another. So what is stress, and is it all bad? When is enough of it enough? And what, if any of it, is holy?

If you rub the thumb of one hand up and down on the other hand from the root of your finger to the back of your wrist, that's not stress. If you rub your thumb up and down from the root of your finger to the back of your wrist for one straight hour, that is. The skin begins to breakdown, to get inflamed, to swell a little, to break. It isn't that rubbing the back of one hand with the thumb of the other is wrong. In fact, massage therapists do it with great therapeutic effect. Your mistake is that you should have stopped rubbing it much sooner than you did.

Too much of anything in too great a dosage is stress. Too much traffic for too many hours a day for too many days a year is stress. Too much pressure, too much fatigue, too much debt, too much worry is stress. Too much of anything, in fact, is stress.

But stress itself is not necessarily bad. It takes a good deal of stress to do the creative, backbreaking work of meeting deadlines, writing papers, building a house, painting the living room. But, in most instances, that kind of stress is time-bound. If it has to be done by a certain day and hour, it probably will be, however incomplete. A due date becomes what stops us from spending our lives doing something that can be done in far less time and ought not to consume a life in the first place. Work that is limited, periodic, or confined to a certain time or place moves us from one thing to another in life, helping us to measure ourselves every step of the way.

Obviously, stress can be a senseless burden as well as a good gift. When it wears us down physically, it limits what we ought to be doing with the strength we have. When it wears us down emotionally, it affects the way we respond to other people and pollutes their lives as well. When it wears us down psychologically, it confuses our reactions and befuddles the mind.

The point is that stress can be both positive and negative. But in the end, it has something to do with whether we turn our life into a living flame or burn it quickly down to black ash.

—from *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World* by Joan Chittister (Eerdmans)