

I've Fallen, and I Can't Get Up!

She could feel it happening: the familiar tension in her shoulders. The quickened step. The terse directives to her daughter to put her shoes on and brush her teeth already. Her stomach knotted and she reached instinctively for her coffee mug, searching for something familiar to help her breathe.

Just. Breathe.

They were running late for school, and for as long as she could remember, running late was a source of stress. She thought of the friends and loved ones who had suffered her sharp tongue if they'd been with her when she was running late for something. "I know it's not pretty," she whispered. "And please know that it doesn't bother me if *you're* running late. My sister's been showing up late every day of her life and I love her madly and will take her in my life, late or otherwise. I'm just worried about me."

So, yeah, her running late is stressful. So is money, and anything generally unknown—like not being sure where she stands with someone, or the possibility of heartbreak, or not having a clear idea of what she's supposed to do.

Otherwise? She's totally chill. She doesn't worry about colds or someone stealing something from her car or running out of gas or a thousand-and-one other ordinary things that might stress other people.

Who is she? She's Julie Richardson, one of my favorite bloggers, and I've just shared—in third person—the opening remarks from one of her recent blogs.

We've all got our baggage, right?

Understand I'm not referring to the kind of stress that spins out of mental illness or depression. That's a whole 'nother ballgame, and most of us know and love people who struggle against that monster. I watch them fight against it and I want so much to make it stop...because I know some days they're so tired of trying to silence the noise in their brains and hearts.

What I know in my own life, and see in the lives of others, is the everyday stress that happens when we come face-to-face with the very real truth that we are not, after all, in control—of very much at all—like the woman in the old commercial (and the title of this sermon): "I've fallen, and I can't get up."

We do our best to make good decisions. We work hard to point our feet in the right direction. We read books and attend seminars and talk with friends about the choices we want to make and what kind of person we want to be.

But control—of any kind—is a complete illusion, and our insistence on trying to grasp at it feeds a kind of stress rooted in some deep, unidentified primal fear: at any point in time it may manifest itself in a fear of catastrophe; or a fear of not

being able to provide for our children, or fear of losing a loved one, or fear of loneliness. Perhaps most of all, fear of falling short; not being enough.

Stress is a bully; and it lies. Stress lies and convinces us we don't have what we need to get through a moment, or stay in a relationship, or excel at a particular task, or pass that math test next week.

And so, we reach for some imaginary control panel and try our best to reign in our lives so we feel more in control. We go searching for security in things (always a disappointment) and we lose sight of what matters most and how those things that do matter most are almost always all we need to get through.

Above all, the biggest lie stress tells us is that we can't do it—whatever "it" is. We can't survive the grief. We can't excel at the new job. We can't find a way past the anger. We can't thrive past brokenness. We can't...we can't...we can't....

And the thing is, we CAN. We absolutely, one-hundred percent, CAN. Sometimes it's hard. Really, hard. But we CAN.

In the first of these sermons, I said about stress: "I have come to trust in a presence that surpasses all the human contradictions and failures within me and gives me strength I didn't know I had. It goes beyond the people and institutions that have disappointed me. Jesus said, "I am with you always;" and Paul wrote, "...nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

Even in those moments when I don't feel that presence, I know it's there, because I have experienced it in the past. And in that presence—or even in the memory of that presence, I know I can deal with the stress of the moment.

Last week we looked at an entire generation that finds it increasingly difficult to trust any human institution, and that includes the church. They feel isolated and disconnected in a world they experience as, in the words of one of them: a cultural and moral 'whirlwind of barbarism.'

I understand that. I, too, am increasingly discouraged and disappointed with church. And yet, it also is within the fellowship of the church that I most clearly experience that presence from which nothing can separate us. I think that's because I am connected—I am invested in the church.

For you, it may not be the church; maybe you've been disappointed and hurt by some experience in the church. I have, too. Maybe you've heard horror stories that act as a barrier you can't get around at this point in your life. But, don't stop looking. Get connected. Somewhere there is a congregation that fits you.

Recently, I was talking to a friend who told me that for the first time in years, he feels like his head is above water. He's from that generation I was talking about last week. Sometimes he just feels he's playing against a stacked deck. And

he is, in a lot of ways.

He's been through a divorce, with all the emotional and financial stress and feelings of failure that go with that. He had a job that wasn't fulfilling; and was feeling guilty because he felt that way. After all, he did have a job.

And there was the everyday drama of raising teenagers.

Life is difficult, and sometimes just holding your head above water is serious and difficult, and God knows, some days, you just want to give up. Wave a white flag. Throw in the towel and call a truce with what has undone you.

But you can't. You have to keep going. Swimming up—because, every so often, your head breaks the surface and you can breathe again. Even if there still are challenges ahead, you can breathe again. *Just. Breathe.* Breathe deeply, and then dive back under and get back to work.

That's what I want focus on today. The breathing. In the languages of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the same word is translated Wind, Spirit and Breath (breathe, in its verb form). Paul shares his secret:

PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13 (NRSV) *I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

Paul says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Now, that doesn't just happen. It is the result of ongoing, intentional, faithful discipline. Richard Foster discusses 12 classical spiritual disciplines in his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*:(

1. The inward disciplines
 - Meditation
 - Prayer
 - Fasting
 - Study
2. The outward disciplines (inward realities resulting in outward lifestyles)
 - Simplicity
 - Solitude
 - Submission
 - Service
3. The corporate disciplines
 - Confession
 - Worship
 - Guidance
 - Celebration

Now, I know what you're thinking: you're thinking, "I've already got too much

on my plate; that's what's got me so stressed in the first place! And now you're telling me to add yet something else? *Get real preacher!*"

There's validity to that; but, for crying out loud, if you have too much on your plate, lighten your load! While one of the biggest lies stress tells us is, "We can't;" a close second is the lie, "You have to do more!" And, consider the title of Bill Hybels' book, *Too Busy NOT to Pray!*

And, please! If you want to start practicing the Spiritual Disciplines, don't take on all of them at once! Add them, one at a time. I suggest you begin with regular, scheduled, disciplined prayer, and then add meditation. Those two alone will center your life and help you to see more clearly and to accept your limitations as well as your potential.

When I first tried to get into the Spiritual Disciplines, the most frequent counsel was, "Get up a half hour early in the morning." Well, you have to understand, getting up in the morning is one of my biggest stressors! So, that just doesn't work for me. But, find a time and a place, and start.

I'm going to offer a Prayer Lab during Lent (which begins February 14). If there's enough interest, we'll do it. I promise you: if you will learn the Spiritual Disciplines of prayer and meditation, you'll discover your level of stress going down.