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No honk, no hassle

Joan Chittister | Apr. 16, 2008 From Where I Stand

This week I'm coming back from doing a series of lectures in Hawaii. But I learned more about here than I did about there while I was at it.

I learned that it may be more what we do to ourselves than what is done to us that increases or decreases our quality of life.

The whole experience made me stop and think all over again about the way we learn to live life.

No doubt about it, Hawaii is a beautiful place: the sun is bright, the land is lush, the flowers are sumptuous, the trade winds are cooling. It is also slower paced, more smiling, happier acting with one another, I noticed, than the impersonality of major cities usually allow.

The temptation is to assume, therefore, that weather is what makes the difference between here and there, right? If we had less snow, less rain, less wind, less sand, fewer people, we'd be more like them, wouldn't we?

I didn't expect the answer to that question to come the way it did.

Trouble often comes from places I least expect. But then, so does help, come to think about it. Which means that it's important to stay alert. One slip and you could miss the message of a lifetime.

For instance, I get a lot useless e-mail. Some of it is in Russian, I think. The rest of it is in English, but if I don't know what a piece of mail is about or where it's from, I delete it.

I've probably been missing a lot of good things, as a result. For instance, there are daily pitches for green tea, which I guess is supposed to be pretty good.

Then, there's something called "Real Age" which I gather is supposed to make me understand that the number of years lived and the physical condition of the body at any age are not necessarily the same thing. That makes sense so that's probably pretty good, too. Right now, however, I'm just trying to make the best of what is rather

than spend a lot of time trying to figure out if it's the years I've lived or the way I'm living them that will determine how many more years I have.

Most of all, though, I notice that there is a real emphasis in the e-mail these days on how to handle stress. I never notice that so much when I'm out of the country. Stress, it seems, is a local invention, more homegrown than global. Most everywhere else I go, people don't run, they kind of idle along. If they don't get to do a thing today, they'll do it tomorrow. Maybe.

But here stress is a growth industry. You can buy books on the subject. They all say the same thing: stress can kill you. Stress is nothing to ignore. You can do breathing exercises to control it, the self-help articles say. You can go to a massage-therapist, who when you are already tense and tight, will help you to relax. Or you can do aroma therapy and burn candles or use various scents designed to reduce anxiety or make you sleep or calm you down.

And they all work. And they all do you good. They are all antidotes to stress. But they also usually come after the fact. After you're all worked up, or taut, or on edge, or strung out, these things undo the bad that has already been done.

But not in Hawaii. In Hawaii stress relief is built right into the fiber of the environment. And they ask their visitors help keep it that way.

Driving down a strange freeway, reading a map and road signs at the same time, going places you've never been with names you can't pronounce is enough to tighten any driver's muscles, to stress anyone out. Except in Hawaii.

Right there, in the middle of the map they give visitors in those tourist magazines is the secret. Easy to miss, astounding to read, and totally life changing. "Please do not use your horn," the direction read. "No honk. No hassle. Just relax."

And they don't. They don't honk their horns in downtown Honolulu. They don't honk their horns on the freeway either. They also do not go screeching by you, zipping in front of one car, pressing another driver from behind. They do not careen across one lane after another.

Instead, they slow down so other drivers can get in front of them. They wait for cars around them too pull out or back up or park or turn around and head the other direction. And they do it all in silence. Quietly. Patiently. Without honking their horns. "No honk. No hassle." And suddenly you find yourself relaxing -- on strange roads, with strange maps and even stranger road signs.

It takes a day or two to adjust to patience because it's so hard to believe it's happening But eventually, you find yourself enjoying the scenery as you go, noticing all the flowers, being soothed by the sea, and fascinated by the street theater around you on the beaches in the center of the city.

For a while, it all seemed impossible. "No honk, no hassle?" Can it possibly be that simple? The confusing thing

is that it worked.

From where I stand, it makes you wonder what life would be like everywhere in this stressed out, hard-driving society if we all changed this one thing in the environment that adds din and urgency and tension and competition to life.

One thing for sure: It would clear out a lot of spam e-mail as well as save lives and nervous systems for the bigger things in life. It isn't what I expected to learn in Hawaii, but it was more meaningful, more spiritual, than any essay on stress that I read this week.

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