



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## a different way of dealing with stress: when silence is NOT the answer

**S**tress! The word evokes the feeling! Life is stressful but there are lots of different kinds of stress and not all are bad. We even welcome the stress of starting a good job, taking care of our first-born child, learning a new and challenging skill or sport, or moving into a new home. It turns out that what makes stress toxic is stress that is accompanied by a sense of lack of control. Moises Velasquez-Manoff reports on important scientific findings in the July 28 issue of the Sunday Review of the *New York Times*: "The more helpless one feels when facing a given stressor... the more toxic that stressor's effect."

We often think that being the CEO of a large corporation would be the most stressful work, but in fact the opposite is true. "Those on the bottom are more than three times as likely to die prematurely as those on the top. They are more likely to suffer from depression, heart disease and diabetes," Velasquez-Manoff wrote. And this is the most distressing finding: "Perhaps the most devastating, the stress of poverty early in life can have consequences that last into adulthood." He goes on to relate that even those whose economic status improves and thus have better access to good nutrition, health care, etc., are more prone to illness than those who were never poor. To restate this, the effects of early poverty are not entirely reversible even to those whose lifestyle improves.

Given the direction this country and our state is moving, that last point breaks my heart. I feel like the majority of citizens are being squeezed and of course the poor are affected the worst. Where has our compassion gone? Congress wants to cut food stamp funding. Our state refused to accept Medicaid funding that would have improved the lives of 500,000 citizens and likely saved us money by shifting the primary source of their care from the Emergency Room to private physicians.

We cut the unemployment benefits of 70,000 people even though our state has the fifth worst unemployment rate in the nation. We abolished tenure, cut out supplemental pay for advanced degrees, and slashed the number of teachers and teachers' aides, and we already are close to the bottom in teacher pay in the United States. We cut funding for a very successful Pre-K program for at-risk children, even though research continuously supports that early intervention is the best way of improving the lives of children at risk.

We funded school vouchers and cut university spending, which will further erode public education. Finally, we passed a tax cut that will cost around a billion dollars a year in revenue and 75 percent of the tax cut will go to the top 5 percent of taxpayers (*Southern Spaces*, September 24, 2013.) All of these things affect the people who have the least control, the people at the bottom of the rung of the economic ladder, and—most of all—our children. While the poorest are the hardest hit now, ultimately not being able to attract good teachers and cutting University funding will affect everyone. (The most comprehensive view I have found about what happened in North Carolina is <http://southernspaces.org/2013/north-carolina-state-shock/>)

David and I are deeply distressed about these issues so instead of just sitting around, writing letters, signing petitions, and complaining we decided we would move forward in an act of civil disobedience to express as powerfully as we could our concern. We were among the around 900 citizens of North Carolina who were arrested in the Moral Monday protests that occurred this past summer. I see now that this act was a way of taking control and decreasing the toxicity of our stress.

I knew as soon as I heard about the Moral Monday witness that I would be one of those arrested. I have felt ready to do such a thing for a number of years. As an older white person I have little to lose and I think it is my civic duty to stand up when I can for what I believe. I also relate to the words of Luke 12:48: "... From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." I have been very blessed in my life and am grateful to be able to give back.

In terms of civil disobedience our experience was easy—the officers who arrested and detained us were professional, respectful, and in some cases kind and friendly. The facilities were new and clean. The time spent was minimal.

Being arrested on Moral Monday was a privilege. Exercising our right to engage in civil disobedience was empowering. Being surrounded by the love and support of the other protesters was a blessing. Doing something besides writing letters and signing petitions was rewarding. Getting to know the other arrestees was a gift. Songs of love, courage, and change surrounded us. I still feel the sense of hope and possibility that I felt that afternoon in June.

We did not accept the plea bargain that was offered to dismiss the charges and will move forward to trial, likely to occur sometime in the next year. Should we be found guilty of second degree trespass, failure to disperse on command and violating legislative building rules, the consequences will likely be minimal—a fine, perhaps a sentence that will be suspended for being on parole.

On Moral Mondays we came together with many other citizens out of love and concern for all the people in our state. We knew the power of what Martin Luther King describes as soul force and spoke truth with love to power. We looked to a new way of doing business—not out of fear, but from a place of love and compassion.

We shared our outrage at the regressive acts of this Legislature. The seeds of violence that were planted this session will harm us all. We do not live in isolation, we are all part of a family and when one member suffers the others will eventually suffer as well. We don't believe that our actions were in vain. I think we are called to what Brian Andreas describes:

*In those days we finally chose to walk like giants and hold the world in arms grown strong with love. And there may be many things we forget in the days to come, but this will not be one of them.* ❧❧❧

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