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Space, The Final Frontier

By Jane Peterson, PhD

For those of you "seasoned" enough to have watched the original *Star Trek* on television, you'll recognize these as the words that series creator Gene Roddenberry chose to be solemnly intoned at the beginning of each show. I picked this title because it seems that "space" -- the kind of breathing space that makes for harmonious relationships -- is in short supply in most of our time-stressed lives. Yet, creating space, that sense of ease, of having the space to take a moment before responding can make all the difference in our relationships and in our lives.

Don and I bought a new dining room table recently. We really loved the one in the display and had our hearts set on this table. When ours arrived, however, the surface was marred with a strange finish. The merchant very generously offered to send us a new table-top. After some weeks the new table-top (a very heavy piece) arrived. The shippers brought it in and we prepared to remove the old top. Some intuition made me ask the shippers to open the box with the new top before we took the old one off. To our complete astonishment, this beautiful hand-crafted table-top was sitting loose in the cardboard shipping box with no padding at all. As I looked closer, I saw that one end of the new top had snapped clean off. In that moment, I could feel my pulse rate rise. We'd waited weeks for this new top to arrive, the merchant had emphasized that she had requested a special crate for the new top, and here it was in pieces on my dining room floor!

As Don was dialing the number of the merchant, I took the time to breathe. In that moment I realized that, appalling as this was, it wasn't the most important event in my life. Eventually we would have a new table-top, and the whole situation was rather amazing. (I'm still trying to figure out in what context it makes sense to spend time and resources to craft a beautiful table top, then stuff it in a big cardboard box without so much as a piece of cardboard for protective padding.) I realized then that the merchant was as likely to be as disappointed as we were, and my sense of humor at the absurdity of the situation returned. We were able to navigate that incident, keep our sense of humor, and keep a good relationship with the merchant and shippers. Eventually, we even hope to have an intact new table-top.

This personal anecdote demonstrates **four simple steps that can make a difference in the outcome of a stressful situation.**

1) **Pause.** Stop what you are doing and become aware of your self. Usually this it the



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moment when we speed up, our anger rises, and we react - just at the instant when a tiny bit of space, a pause, a breath, would allow something else to unfold.

2) **Become aware of your state.** Are you breathing rapidly? Is your heart pounding? Are you frowning? Is your body tight, muscles contracted? Just noticing that is the first step to allowing yourself to shift to a more resourceful and less reactive state.

3) **Ask yourself, how important is this really?** If your heart wasn't pounding, and you weren't in a hurry, would you be so upset? If you were looking back on your life, would this moment really stand out? Probably not.

4) **Breathe before you speak.** Let the old air out and give yourself the space to take a nice easy breath. You will sound calmer and feel calmer if you have some fresh air in your lungs. And your brain will work better, too. Sylvia Boorstein, Buddhist psychotherapist, demonstrates this process, and speaks to herself in a very compassionate way in her book [Happiness Is an Inside Job](#) (2007, Ballantine Books). When she finds herself distressed, she says, "Sweetheart, you are in pain. Relax. Take a breath. Let's pay attention to what is happening. Then we'll figure out what to do." (p. 10) I love that she addresses herself as "sweetheart" instead of how many of us do (like, "you dummy!" for instance. Which is more likely to bring your heart rate down and your resourcefulness up?) Just acknowledging her own state -- "you are in pain" -- is a great start. Relaxing, taking a breath, and paying attention to what is unfolding in the moment are the ingredients for a more successful response to any situation.

Making space -- just that extra pause before reacting -- creates the kind of opening that allows a different possibility to emerge in the stressful moments of our lives. Like the beautiful, sometimes painful, sometimes challenging, and always generative dialogue I've experienced with my fellow facilitators in dealing with the third US conference, when we approach each other with mindfulness, first of our own state, then with the awareness that the other is different, new possibilities emerge. Space, inner and outer, can be a new and useful frontier in our lives, placing us at the edge of new discoveries.