



In Support of Stress

by Tim McIntosh

Dear student, I heard that you believe that the assignment I gave you is too difficult—that it is beyond the training you’ve received in class and could even result in your failure. In short, the assignment “stresses” you.

People often use the word “stress” for unfocused anxiety. For example, much of ordinary American life is driven by a frenzied sprint to accomplish an innumerable series of economic tasks without relational or emotional resources. I googled the word “stress” and discovered that mentions of stress in letters, newspapers, and books has skyrocketed since 1800. Stress is on the rise in modern life. And no one likes to be stressed.

My assignment is not intended to create anxiety. (You probably have enough of that already.) If I wanted to increase your anxiety, I’d hand you a screaming baby and six-figure debt.

My assignment is intended to create a very specific stress. By “stress,” I mean a state of mental or emotional strain that comes from adverse or demanding circumstances but which is intended to promote growth. My assignment was designed to create a specific, focused stress that can be overcome. If you overcome this stress with industry, intelligence, and courage, you will receive a high grade. Furthermore, you will expand your ability to overcome future stresses.

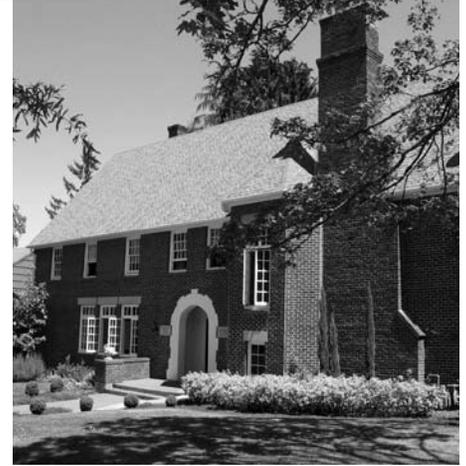
Think of my assignment like a trainer adding five pounds to a weightlifter’s maximum lift. Adding this weight creates a new goal that, with training, can be accomplished. But without adding those five pounds, the weight-

lifter will remain in “homeostasis”—that is, his ability will tend to remain at the same level.

Mark Rippetoe, one of the most decorated strength-training coaches in the United States, is fond of repeating a simple truth: The only way an organism grows stronger is by overcoming stress. Stress “disrupts homeostasis” and demands that the organism “adapt to the new requirements imposed by change.” Rippetoe reminds his weightlifters that they will only get stronger by attempting to lift more weight than ever before. A weightlifter with a maximum deadlift of 200 pounds will remain in homeostasis unless he attempts to lift more than he has ever lifted. To move from homeostasis—to get stronger—the lifter must add weight to the bar.

My assignment adds weight to the bar. Your past assignments have proven you are strong. Now it’s time to grow stronger. By attempting to lift slightly more weight, you will. Indeed, receiving and overcoming stress is the basic transaction behind all quality education.

If overcoming stress is the basic task of learning, homeostasis is the biggest obstacle that stands in the way of a meaningful education. And what is a meaningful education? It is not accumulated knowledge; rather, it is knowledge that leads to a life of good action. David Hicks, a leading light in the world of classical education, is right to argue that “the end of education is not thinking, it is acting.” As your teacher, my hope is that you will not just believe true things, but that you will become a first-class learner and that your knowledge will manifest itself in good actions: you will love your neighbors, pursue justice, and resist evil.



And so, I do not hesitate to put a stressful assignment into your life. I recognize, however, that the stress I have described is uncomfortable. Homeostasis—that tendency toward a stable equilibrium—is comfortable. We all prefer to remain in homeostasis. In homeostasis, the water isn’t too cold or too hot. The world is predictable, comfortable, known. But homeostasis suffocates a basic principle of life: If you are not growing, you are fading. The only time an organism achieves lasting homeostasis is by dying.

Do not mistake homeostasis for harmony. Harmony comes from the Greek word *harmos*, meaning “joint.” Living “in-joint” with others and yourself is one of the great joys of human life. Singing in harmony with family, friends, or even enemies, results in a beautiful sound. But those who have achieved *harmos* have learned from stress, not avoided it. The husband and wife who live in *harmos* have faced the truth that they are different people with conflicting temperaments, hopes, and wounds. The husband and wife achieve *harmos* by avoiding homeostasis and learning from the stress caused by conflict. Likewise, the violinist fails many times before achieving harmony with the cellist. If the violinist remains in homeostasis, she will not achieve *harmos*.

You’ve told me that you don’t like my assignment because it requires you to make your work public. Your paper will not just be seen and graded by me. It will be seen and assessed by others. This means that if you fail, others will see. *(continued, page 2)*



Community Class



In March, Gutenberg graduate Nigel Makela will teach a three-week series on “Kierkegaard’s *Practice in*

Christianity: Contemporaneity, Offense, and Indirect Communication.”

Kierkegaard’s *Practice in Christianity* presents a striking model for orienting oneself towards Christ. As one of his more healing works, we will explore Christ’s invocation to the suffering and what that means for us. Through this exploration we will be asking the following questions:

- What is the relationship between history and my faith?
- Does my relation to Christ affect the nature of my communication?
- Is there something absurd and offensive about Christ’s invitation?

This will be a collaborative discussion as we map out Kierkegaard’s project and work on these questions.

March 7: Introduction to Kierkegaard, looking at historical context and use of pseudonym. Building a map in order to better understand *Practice in Christianity*.

March 14: Exploring the role of history and man’s relation to God. Unpacking Kierkegaard’s concept of contemporaneity.

March 21: Spring break. No class.

March 28: Exploring Kierkegaard’s concept of offence in Christ’s invitation. Looking at the role of indirect communication in relation to God.

See www.gutenberg.edu for class descriptions, speaker biographies, and schedule changes. The classes are free and meet at Gutenberg College from 7:00 PM to 8:30 PM Please join us!

In Support of Stress, continued

Because my assignment is harder, you *are* in greater danger of failure. Based on your past performances, I do not believe you will fail. But you might. Any time you attempt something new and more difficult, the risk of failure increases. I’d love to assure you that you won’t fail, but I can’t. By risking failure and working hard, however, you can succeed and grow.

Public failure hurts, and I recognize how scary risking failure is. I still recall my own public failures. In college, the basketball coach publicly posted a clipboard listing the team roster. My name wasn’t on the clipboard. Not only did I not make the team, but I was embarrassed that everyone knew it.

Few things frighten like the possibility of failure before others. Some people believe that all our moral stances are actually attempts to be accepted in the eyes of our peers. They say that we tell the truth, not because it’s what God wants or because it creates harmony in the soul, but because our moral actions are driven by a deep-seated need to justify ourselves among networks of allies. In Plato’s *Republic*, Glaucon argues for this very point. He claims that virtue and justice are social-constructions. Instead of pursuing true, eternal norms of goodness, humans are motivated only by a deep desire to maintain their reputation.

Public failure on my assignment could result in disapproving whispers among your friends. I recognize how deeply these disapproving whispers might hurt you, but if you seek to achieve peace by constantly negotiating your reputation, you will not achieve the deep harmony you desire. Although Glaucon’s philosophy rightly describes much of human moral behavior, it does not lead us toward peace. Without a peace that springs from deep inside you, Glaucon’s philosophy will create greater anxiety by locating the source of your peace in the gaze of other people. In other words, if your value is dependent upon others, you will be their slave and will only feel free when others think highly of you. No matter how spotless your record, your reputation ultimately lies beyond your control.

The world’s great teachers align with Socrates, not Glaucon. Socrates recognizes

that genuine *harmos* cannot be found by seeking to preserve our reputation. Likewise, Marcus Aurelius warns against “the emptiness of applauding hands” and the people “who praise us,” because they are “capricious” and “arbitrary.” Jesus teaches against being like the Pharisees who “pray on the street corners to be seen by others.”

My assignment calls for your work to be seen and assessed by others. If your value depends upon that assessment, you will only feel at peace if others approve you. But this peace will not last. Life is a series of ongoing grades, public tests, and trials issued by other people. Many of these people will be fickle. Others will be confused. Some will be evil. Why would you depend upon them?

Instead, seek abiding peace inside, not outside yourself. The “peace that passes understanding” is founded upon your soul’s disposition toward God and the story He is telling through your life. Jesus’ repeated refrain in the Sermon on the Mount is to turn away from the daily anxiety of life and to base your life upon your soul’s deeper value:

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?
(Matthew 6:27-8)

I designed my assignment to produce a stress that can bring about growth. If you rise to the challenge of the assignment, you will earn a good grade, and, more importantly, you will grow in knowledge and skill.

But there is a lesson deeper than the assignment’s lesson. It is this: Life will present you with a constant succession of distractions—a constant series of bribes. These bribes are intended to move your gaze toward homeostasis, toward your reputation, toward your performance—anywhere other than a *harmos* of soul. As your teacher, I write against these bribes and in support of seeking peace through your soul’s disposition toward God.

Tim McIntosh, the provost and a tutor at Gutenberg College, earned his M.A. in Theology from Reformed Theological Seminary. He teaches writing to freshmen and sophomores. He is also a playwright, screenwriter, and actor.

2017 Summer Institute: Meaning and Flourishing in a Secular Age

Mark your calendar: July 27–29

Why do we suffer? How can we flourish? We humans have always asked such questions. In times past, our culture embraced (or tolerated) a Christian worldview that provided a foundation for answering those questions: meaning and purpose derive from our transcendent Creator. Today, however, we live in a thoroughly secular era, and answers are hard to come by. How did our culture end up here? How can a person of faith pursue a transcendent vision of life in such a culture? Gutenberg's 2017 Summer Institute will explore such questions. We'll search passages from the Bible, from the classics, and from contemporary works to find timeless truths and practical ways for pursuing God and flourishing in a secular age.



Student Art Show & Performance

April 21 at 7:00 PM
(Note new date.)

The annual art show at Gutenberg College highlights the performing and visual art of Gutenberg students. Performance begins at 7:00 PM. Limited seating is first-come, first-served. A gallery reception follows. A donation of \$5.00 for admission is requested but not required. All donations help support the arts at Gutenberg College. In the photo, Benjamin and Analia Chase perform at the 2016 Student Art Show.



President's Dinner

The annual President's Dinner, held in February, is always a welcome event in the dark of winter. This year, Dr. Chris Swanson served students and faculty Cuban food. And as is tradition, students provided the entertainment. This year's assignment to each class: write and perform a fifteen-minute dramatic or comedic cooking-show script in the style of Greek tragedy, Shakespearian drama, Platonic dialogue, medieval allegory, or Russian novel. In the photo, the cooking host (Joseph Sheild) is assisted by *Hamlet's* Ophelia (Emily Dunnan).



Gutenberg Ranks High!

The *Faith on View* Christian College Rankings ranks 201 institutions that are distinctively Christian and have this commitment at the core of their educational philosophy. These rankings are the only comprehensive rankings of Christian Colleges and Universities available. In its 2016 rankings, *Faith on View* ranked Gutenberg as follows:

National Ranking: 25
Western Colleges Ranking: 6
Very Small Colleges Ranking: 2
Best Value Ranking: 10

For more information about the rankings and the criteria used, go to <http://www.faithonview.com/christian-college-rankings/christian-college-rankings-2016/>.

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It's Time to Apply!

In the Gutenberg College winter art practicum, students learn about skills and mastery in the arts by learning from skilled artists and craftsmen. This term, the class visited the workshop of master flute-maker Todd Berger to learn about the art of instrument building.

Now is the time to apply to join these students and others at Gutenberg College in September 2017. See our website, www.gutenberg.edu/admissions, for admission requirements and to download an application.

Not sure? Come visit, attend some classes, meet our students and faculty, and ask questions. Email office@gutenberg.edu to make arrangements.