



DEATH BY STRESS

TRISH ROHRER SPENT HER LIFE STRIVING TO GET MORE DONE AND TO DO IT FASTER AND BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE. WHEN HER HEALTH BEGAN TO FAIL – SHE TURNED TO CHINESE MEDICINE AND TRANSFORMED HERSELF BODY AND SOUL

For a long time I was exhausted. I'm not talking about the kind of fleeting fatigue that comes from staying up too late or getting up too early. I'm talking about dragging my ass around town, feeling as if, on any given street corner, I might collapse. My exhaustion came, certainly, from a combination of the job, the kid, the house, the sporadic exercise, the worry over bills, the travel for work, the endless acquaintances, the demanding colleagues, and the friends and family, all of whom needed tending in their own way. But also I had been bleeding between periods on and off for seven years, from my late thirties.

I'd been to several gynecologists, and they all said there was nothing wrong with me, that the bleeding was hormonal, probably having something to do with the fibroids I'd had since I was in my twenties. The only thing I could do to stop the bleeding was to have a hysterectomy, and nobody was pushing for that. Otherwise, it would resolve itself with menopause. No one seemed worried. After a while I concluded that exhaustion was part of having a full, working life in your thirties and forties.

But then last year, on the recommendation of a friend who thought I didn't look well, I went to see Frank Butler, an acupuncturist and doctor of Chinese medicine, which means Butler did four years of graduate work at the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in New York and apprenticed for seven years under the late, renowned Chinese medicine practitioner Kenny Gong. In his small, plain office near the former site of the World Trade Center, Butler looked into my eyes, checked my pulse and tongue, and felt the temperature of my hands and forearms. Then he asked some personal questions about my habits and my life—particularly about my job as a magazine editor, which was difficult but rewarding, and my boss, who was hypercritical and impossible to please. Butler listened. Then he stuck me with some acupuncture needles, turned off the light, and left the room.

When he came back half an hour later, Butler said this: "Your bleeding and your exhaustion are a result of stress." I was surprised. No one had ever told me that. It had never even occurred to me. "Because of the stress," he continued, "your hormones are going crazy." Butler, a student of his had told me, had foreseen the death of his mentor, Gong. Apparently Gong had not

believed him when Butler said he was very sick. And then suddenly, Gong died of cancer. If Butler thought my bleeding and fatigue came from stress, I had to at least consider it. Stress was workable, I thought – better than a hysterectomy.

But Butler didn't stop there. "You're at a crossroads," he said. "If you lower your stress immediately, you can probably lead a relatively healthy life for the time you have left. If you don't lower your stress, your health will be very; very poor. You'll never recover." I was speechless. How absurd to think things were that bad! I was healthy, just tired. I laughed. But Butler didn't laugh. He said I had to quit my job. That was nuts, I thought. I couldn't quit my job. My life revolved around my job.

"Look," he said, "when something's wrong, your body tells you. At first it throws pebbles to try to get your attention." He threw a few imaginary pebbles out into the tiny room. A little spotting between periods is a pebble. Or a few cramps. "Then," he said, "if your body doesn't get your attention with pebbles, it throws rocks." Now he had an imaginary rock in his hand, and he tossed it in his palm like a baseball. "What your body is doing right now," he said, referring to the very heavy bleeding between periods and the extreme fatigue, "is throwing rocks." After that, he told me, would come bricks, which would be hemorrhaging or a fatal disease.

"And after that?" I asked. "After bricks?"

"You don't want to know," he said.

What has struck me most since my first visit to Butler is how hard it is to know what's stressful and what isn't. I'm so used to pushing myself beyond my limits – something I've viewed as a virtue all my life and have been rewarded for over and over again – that I don't know what my limits are. I was never aware of my body talking back to me, telling me I was putting it in danger. But in fact, much of what I've done over my lifetime I've done to the extreme. I've worked as hard as the other type-A women I know, pulling all-nighters, not leaving my desk for hours and hours so that I could make deadlines and please employers. When I ran, I ran every day and lifted weights every second day. When I did yoga, I did power yoga, two and a half hours a day, six days a week, for years. I raised my daughter, who is now graduating from high school, on my own, working hard at my computer from before she got up in the morning until she got home from school in the late afternoon. When she went to bed, I went back to work.

Sometimes I enjoyed this demanding lifestyle – I thought it was cool and a sign of my strength – and sometimes I just plain felt driven to live this way, like it was a habit or an addiction. In either case I always felt, at bottom, that I had no choice in the matter; practically speaking, I couldn't stop. Not only did I have a somewhat expensive lifestyle to maintain, but I had a career to nurture, a reputation to uphold, and colleagues, I imagined, who would forget me.

Whether we're accepting a coveted award in front of 400 people, getting ready for an assignation with a new love, or having an argument with our spouse, stress is stress: The fight-or-flight mechanism kicks in, our bodies tense up, our cortisol levels rise, the viscosity of our blood changes, and all of our systems – including our immune system – begin to shut down. When that happens, according to Chinese medicine, our energy can't permeate the body the way it needs to. The natural flow of all that keeps us healthy and alive – oxygen, blood, and what the Chinese call Qi, our life force – begins to stagnate.

A short-term example of this, according to Butler, would be someone who's going through a bad breakup. We've all seen it, our friends aging before our eyes on account of stress. And when our immune system remains compromised for years at a time – from not sleeping and eating well, say, and from working way beyond 40 hours a week our bodies become unable to control the life-threatening illnesses that otherwise would have been held at bay.

I began to watch my body. It turns out that Butler was right: I bled when things between my boss and me were not going well, and only then. And the more stressed I was, I noticed, the harder I pushed myself – a weird, ass-backward way of trying to stay one step ahead of debilitating anxiety. Then one day, while my boss and I were locking horns, neither of us backing down, his nose began to bleed. A real geyser, it bled down his shirt to the front of his pants. When I pointed it out to him, horrified, he tried unsuccessfully to stop up the blood with his hand and kept yelling. It turns out he had pneumonia and had had it for weeks. A few days after the nosebleed, when his doctor told him that he had to stop working and rest, he didn't. He couldn't stop. And that's when I saw it: He was killing himself with stress.

And so was I. So I quit. And quitting, in combination with herbs and acupuncture and weeks and weeks of sleep, stopped my bleeding completely. (The bleeding didn't have to do with my fibroids after all – they're still there, unchanged and benign.) But what I saw in the quiet that came after was that all of the resilience I'd had in my twenties and thirties was gone. Whenever I pushed myself physically, my body pushed back so hard that it knocked me down. If I exercised while I was menstruating, I might feel good that day, but the next morning I'd have to drag myself out of bed. I felt as if my body were a puppet and the puppet master had dropped the strings. I hadn't recognized how depleted I was until I stopped riding on the rush of my job. And even then I didn't know how to stop pushing myself.

"You don't get it," Butler said to me one day when I came to his office worn out after having driven by myself from Nova Scotia to Manhattan in 16 hours straight – a two-day drive in one day. He seemed fed up. I really did want to "get it," but I couldn't. I was feeling better now. So what was I doing wrong? I'd driven all day-so what? It was only driving.

Butler sat down on the chair where I'd flung my coat and socks and told me that, according to Chinese medicine, human beings are like batteries: We have a finite amount of energy. When that energy is used up, we die. Butler gave the example of *karoshi*, a well-documented occurrence in Japan, which means "death by overwork." The victims of *karoshi*, thousands of them, all work up to a hundred hours a week, every week, for months on end, and then suddenly die of heart attacks or strokes due to stress. It's so clear that their deaths are work-related that employers often wind up compensating the families of the deceased.

"These young guys," Butler said, "30 years old, in great shape, karate experts – drop dead. Just drop dead. All done." Butler looked at me and held up his hands as if to show that he had nothing left to give me, no more left to say. "You watch people deteriorate, right?" he said. "It's common sense."

Gregory Pitaro, MD, an instructor of clinical medicine at NYU Medical Center, says that while Western medicine wouldn't make a claim one way or the other about the finite quality of our energy, studies have proved that there are decreases in immune function from stress. People with higher stress levels, Pitaro says, get more colds and more upper respiratory diseases and have a higher risk of depression and cancer. In fact, Pitaro says, there is a stress component to every disease. "So even though in Western medicine we don't say there's a certain amount of energy that you're going to use up, clearly we know that stress does lead to ..." he pauses, "early exits."

Butler had been trying to get all my systems back in balance. I went to see him for acupuncture once a week. On my own time, he had me meditating every day and getting eight hours of sleep a night. I was allowed to do a reasonable amount of exercise – not too little, but not too much. He'd been supplementing my meals with herbs from a "pharmacy" in Chinatown – pungent and fascinating handfuls of twigs, bark, dried orange peels, and large, misshapen, unidentifiable pods that I'd boil on the stove for an hour each morning and then drink while holding my nose. (The original formula Butler had given me to stop the heavy bleeding contained flying-squirrel shit, which, though repulsive, actually stopped the bleeding completely within hours of my having drunk the tea.) He was trying to teach me that, sure, you can work hard, but every day you have to take time to sit by the fire and read a book, or have a glass of wine with a friend, or go for a hike in the woods. But I kept throwing my body out of whack again with new stress.

I got it, finally, a few days after that visit with Butler. I woke up one morning and, lying in bed, thought about the drive from Canada and what it had been like. It had been okay at first, even exciting. But after seven or eight hours, all I could do was will the time to go by, will the car to make it through Maine faster than it ever had. In Massachusetts, I willed the sun not to go down so that I would have more daylight to drive in. In New York, I willed the cars around me not to come too close, because we were all driving like maniacs in the dark.

What if I let it all go? I thought-let go of trying to make winter turn to spring, to get flowers to bloom early, to be good at what I didn't care about, to maintain a lifestyle that was killing me? What if I began to simplify? That morning, I asked myself, What does my body really want? The answer came easily: I wanted to stay in bed and look at the sun streaming through the window and the chimney smoke floating across the sky. I wanted to stop for a few moments and notice how good my breath felt moving through my body. I wanted to lean against my stacked pillows and drink a cup of coffee with steamed milk. Later on, maybe, I would take a bath, or sit in a comfortable chair in a warm room with a good book. Maybe I'd go for a walk in the park with my partner and our dogs. Maybe I'd take a nap. I could feel myself relax just thinking these thoughts.

My body had been telling me for years that I needed to slow down. My mind, though, had always been running ahead, looking for something more: money, reputation, entertainment, possessions. Not that those things are bad – they're not; they can be incredibly energizing and fulfilling. But if you can't handle stress like I couldn't and you're making yourself sick, you have to begin to prioritize – even if that means changing jobs or scaling down on spending. And women have made such progress in our fight for independence and our struggle against sexism in the workplace, no woman wants to be told that she can't have children and a great job all at once. But as my good friend Berkley put it when I told her I didn't think I could quit my job, "Your daughter would rather go to public school instead of private than have you dead."

She was right. Though of course it wasn't easy after I quit – I had to jump-start my old freelance writing career, which meant borrowing money to tide us over and depending on my partner more than I felt comfortable with – we all survived the initial shock of significantly lower income and the inevitable aftershocks. The transition has been stressful, but not nearly as stressful as my old career was. In fact, there's a lot of peace in our lives now. My daughter and I don't miss eating out or Showtime on Demand. I don't need a new computer, and she doesn't need another pair of jeans. She's going to a great college in the fall on a huge scholarship. So the fact is, we have everything we need.

I feel much better than I did a year ago – my energy is back, and I can exercise again as long as I don't do it when I'm already depleted. When I'm tired, I have to remember to take it easy. And sometimes I don't – I still get stressed out, and sometimes it's so bad that I begin to bleed between periods. So I've got a ways to go in lowering my stress.

But we have to start somewhere. Right now I'm just beginning to understand that if I really listen to my body, all it wants is what I have right here: a warm, sunny day, my daughter's morning kiss, the sweeping, circular wag of my dog's tail, the laughter of the people I love. That's what Butler has been trying to tell me: Slow down. Be gentle. Take care. □