

Editorial: The power of breathing room amid stress

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I blew out a “Ha!” when I opened an email Nov. 1 and read the subject line: “Today is International Stress Awareness Day.”

“I don’t need any more awareness of stress than I already have,” I thought. The news makes sure of that.

The reality is, however, we do need to be more aware of the long-term effects of stress on our physical and mental health, as well as on our spirit and relationships. But it’s hard to see those deleterious effects when stress is capturing our attention.

Part of being aware is knowing when the stress is too much and when we need a break. I admit, though, even that seems to require a certain amount of luxury. To have a free moment for awareness seems to suggest a person isn’t completely surrounded by difficulty.

Breathing room.

There are days, these are some of them, when breathing room is about all the space, all the time we may be able to find. Will it be enough?

A recent storm is an example of just how powerful a little breathing room can be.

A little breathing room

I am fascinated by weather. I seriously considered changing my major to meteorology during my freshman year at Hardin-Simmons University.

During hurricane season, I follow National Hurricane Center forecasts. But I didn't see anything at the beginning of last week to capture my attention.

The next time I saw anything about Atlantic or Pacific tropical storms, it was a news report about the devastation caused by [Hurricane Otis](#). Like so many others, I wondered where that came from.

Otis has stunned meteorologists by how quickly it intensified in so little time. The National Weather Service defines "[rapid intensification](#)" as "an increase in the maximum sustained winds of a tropical cyclone of at least 30 knots [about 35 mph] in a 24 hour period."

Otis' maximum sustained winds increased more than 100 mph in less than 24 hours, growing from a typical tropical storm the morning of Oct. 24 to a powerful Category 5 hurricane as it made landfall that night.

People in Acapulco expected just another strong storm. Instead, they were subjected to what the National Weather Service called "a nightmare scenario." And with no warning as Acapulco slept.

Otis made devastating use of a little breathing room, leaving Acapulco without time to evacuate or even shelter. A little breathing room—or lack of it—made an enormous difference.

Storms and stress

Storms are an apt metaphor for the stresses of life. Right now, there are storms wherever we look. There is a storm in Israel and Gaza. There's a storm in Ukraine. There's a political storm in the United States. There's a religious storm in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The storms are enough that I wonder if what we need most now are not experts—forecasters and forecast models—but are those who can weather the storms.

I've heard more than one meteorologist say none of the forecast models or forecasters foresaw what would happen. They are taken aback, not only by the science involved, but also because of what it signifies for the limits of their ability to predict natural disasters—and thereby protect people.

Within the storms, we may be granted breathing room between the waves, between the storm bands, or in the eye as it passes over. We need to make the best use of that space whenever we get it.

Turning on each other, pointing fingers, bickering about who did what wrong and whose worthless idea won't work, hoarding resources, fretting, cowering in fear, freezing in place, panicking into aimless activity, opining—these are a waste of precious breathing room.

When the breathing room comes—and we are granted more than we realize—one thing is needed. And that one thing is powerful.

How to use breathing room

A furious storm threatened to kill Jesus' disciples, burying them at the bottom of the lake. Meanwhile, Jesus slept (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41).

I can only guess what his disciples did before they woke him up, but there was only one thing they needed to do—wake him up. It made all the difference.

The analogy isn't complete. I don't believe Jesus is asleep to our situation now. I also don't pretend to know or mean to suggest he will stop our storm now as succinctly as he stilled their storm then.

All I know is there is one thing we must do with our breathing room. We must turn to Jesus and, in the words of his mom, "do whatever he says to do." This is how we will weather the storms.

No, this isn't pray-harder-have-more-faith advice. Based on the story, there wasn't a whole lot of prayer or faith to it. Instead, this is just a simple action. Turn to Jesus, whatever the result.

We're an entertainment culture. When the pressure's on, entertain us, distract us. There's a place for that, I suppose. It was nice to watch the Texas Rangers win their first World Series Championship last night. But the morning still arrived, and with it, more howling wind.

The storms haven't passed. In them, be aware: Jesus is still with us. Let us turn to him, whatever the result.

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