What's the Difference?

What's the big difference between this and that? If we get where we're going, why does it matter whether we get there the way we're used to or in some new way? Who says "new" is necessarily "better" anyway, if the old ways are working?

My father used to tell me about the first appearance of automobiles, when he was a little boy growing up on a farm in rural Connecticut. All the old-timers thought they were a passing fad, just toys, and expected everyone to return soon to the reliable horse-drawn transportation that had served them so well for their lifetimes and those of generations before them. His father and friends, he said, would sit around and watch the automobiles sputter by on rutted dirt roads and say to the children, "Don't be fooled. These silly machines are worthless." But the children knew, in their heart of hearts, they were seeing the beginning of a transformation of the lives they would lead as adults.

My father saw the introduction of airplane travel, too. The older generation thought it was a silly idea. They thought that no one would ever prefer to fly unsupported through invisible and intangible air instead of taking a train or boat, safely in touch with the solid ground or the buoyant water. But the younger folks, like him, were thrilled by the thought of flight, and sought opportunities to fly as soon as they were available.

So it was surprising to me how my father reacted when computers began to arrive on the commercial scene. I rushed home one day from a visit to an office where I had applied for a summer job and had been shown a computer actually generating blueprints. I was so excited to tell my father about this incredible machine! "Don't go to work there." he said, "They can't be practical. These things will never stand the test of time."

He and my uncles tried to talk one of my cousins out of investing in Cable TV when it first appeared on the scene because it was "too complicated" and wouldn't be competitive – and besides, people wouldn't want that many choices.

Who knows how and when or why it is that people go from enthusiasm for breakthroughs and challenges of established ways of doing things, to dedication to the status quo? All of us observe, though, that it happens, that we all form subtle attachments to the known and the tried and true. All of us observe that new ideas face their greatest obstacles when they confront our attachments to the familiar. All of us know that we have more flexibility in some areas than others as time goes by – for example, the same person who might have been thrilled to move into a house with a microwave, a convection oven or an electronic security system might not be willing to trust a disc to hold digital files in the absence of any paper. The same person who comfortably drives a car for which the ignition and operation is entirely guided by computer might not be willing to make an electronic ticket

reservation on an airline for fear the computer could not be trusted. Logic has little to do with our attachments; we just have certain ideas we do not question, while we have other ideas we're willing to question. As deposits accumulate in the bank accounts of our unquestioned familiarity, we are less quick to look with open hope at new ideas.

In recent weeks, I've had a number of meetings with people to suggest that the means are not only conceivable, but already in use and demonstrably effective, to change, simplify and dramatically improve our entire global strategy for promoting public health and well-being. In addition, the means to accomplish this are far less costly than everything being done now, the results far more sustainable, and the delivery of service far more humane. In these meetings, I learned a lot about the invisible power of the familiar; the irrelevance of logic in addressing the familiar; and the innocence of all of us when we're locked into the familiar. In reflecting over major shifts in the prevailing views in many different disciplines, I could see that staying safe in the embrace of the familiar is a universal human response, no different from our childhood tendency to curl up in a parent's lap and tuck our head against a well-known shoulder when something new enters the scene.

The "shoulder" we lean on is the "What's the difference?" question, always trying to show that the new thing really isn't that much different from the things we know, and that it won't matter that much whether change occurs, so why go to the trouble?

What's the difference if we go to town in our horse and buggy, or in one of those new-fangled automobiles? We'll get there either way. What's the difference if we cross the Atlantic on a boat, or in one of those flimsy flying machines? The boat may be slower, but it carries more of us and the trip is safer. What's the difference if we figure things out with calculators and on paper, or let the computing device do it? We'll still get the job done. What's the difference if we create a communications network capable of handling hundreds of channels of signals for all kinds of information we've never asked for, or stick with the straightforward system we have that brings us as much as we need to know? People don't have time to deal with the information they already have.

What's the difference if we teach people how to live without stress and distress, or take care of their stress and distress after it happens? We have well-proven therapies and drugs that deal with people's stress, so either way, we're taking care of people and teaching them how to cope better with life.

In retrospect, we can all answer the automobile, air travel, computers and cable questions. As we look back, we realize that the primitive forms of these enormously impactful changes in our prevailing ways of going about life were difficult to distinguish from the familiar methods they were replacing. After all, the first automobiles were less reliable than horses, and did have difficulty traversing paths that horses easily traveled, did break down frequently, and weren't designed to be any more comfortable or much more speedy than a horse and buggy. The first airplanes were rickety and couldn't travel far without

refueling and couldn't hold many passengers. The first computers took up rooms and rooms of space, required a lot of energy, were not as fast as today's average electronic address book, and required teams of inscrutable scientific types to operate them. The first Cable TV enterprises didn't reach many subscribers and had little market power to attract information or advertisers. But now that we see the promise in these innovations fulfilled and realize the opportunities they created for the evolution of society, we can't imagine not supporting their entry into the world. We laugh at the people who scoffed at them, without much consideration for what we might be scoffing at now that will amuse future generations looking back on our prevailing ideas.

New ideas begin their journeys as intruders in the infrastructure of the familiar. They are not as apparently revolutionary as they are seen to be in retrospect, after they have been developed into greater effectiveness and begun to create their own infrastructure. When we ask whether they're all that different from what we know, the truth is they aren't, at first. The difference is not in the early applications, but in the long-term implications.

So let's look again at the question I'm posing: What's the difference if we teach people how to live without stress and distress, or take care of their stress and distress after it happens? In the early applications stage, from which those of us who teach people how to live without stress and distress are just emerging, there wasn't much difference. We were all working after the fact, with people already stressed.

Now we're developing the capacity to engage a whole new generation in living without stress at all. And the implications are staggering. The difference is emerging, clearly.

If young people learn to live the rest of their lives without stress and distress, what are the implications for the elimination of human suffering?

If the majority of people on the planet are living at peace within themselves, in a state of mind that sustains good will, curiosity, enthusiasm, learning and a feeling of connection between all human beings, what are the implications for competition, for internecine conflict, for violence bred from alienation, for hoarding of resources or power?

If we could expend our energy as human beings in the quest for improving and enriching our lives, rather than draining our energy coping with or treating our dysfunctions, how many wonderful ideas might find expression and enhance the human experience for all people?

What's the difference? To me, it is as absolute as night and day, life and death, black and white, love and hate, zero and one. It's either one or the other: We assume it is part of the human condition that people will suffer stress and we have to deal with its negative consequences. Or we assume it is intrinsic to the human condition that people are resiliently capable of living stress-free and we can benefit from its positive consequences.

If you had even the remotest glimmer that this might be an actual, available choice, which would you choose?