

Good article, friend...sorry about the layout. I spent all morning looking for a picture or a drawing of a light bulb that I was going to paint black (you know, sort of the "burned out bulb" graphic)...but I couldn't find one. In this whole place, not one lousy lightbulb.

You know, I counted them up the other day and I've pasted up 76 issues of this magazine, almost 6 years worth. Not all that long as jobs go, I guess, but sometimes I wonder if I've run out of ideas, I mean how many more cartoons and photos can I think up?

I love this job, Bob, but today I just felt like sitting down and saying what difference does it make. So I just gave up

sorry

ed

I found one →



BURNOUT

A hazard of community life.
by Robert Sabath

Burn-out. The word has been around for a long time. It has become such a jargon phrase that we easily forget the vivid imagery that called it forth. The word suggests a waning vitality, a fire going out. At worst, it denotes what is left over at the end: a cold vestige of something that once was aflame. Burned-out buildings are not an uncommon sight in our neighborhood. A charred, gutted, empty shell of what was once a building thriving with life is an ever-present reminder of burn-out's destructive reality.

Many recent articles and books have studied the phenomenon. All of them conclude that burn-out comes with the task of helping people. One writer humorously thinks that a mandatory caution should be written into every recruitment program for the helping professions: "Warning: Helping people can be extremely hazardous to your physical and mental health." Jesuit writer Alfred Kramer laments that

"brevity" seems to be the one common characteristic of many forms of social ministry in direct contact with the poor and their problems. "Why is it," he asks, "that activists in Jewish social ministry seem to have the longevity of a bomb squad leader?"

Burn-out cannot develop without dedication to high ideals. It has its roots in the unrealistic enthusiasm determined idealists who have unlimited commitment to whatever they undertake. Burn-out-prone people are the helpful, caring ones among us who have a sense of mission and are especially vulnerable to the excessive demands that are made of them. They cannot compromise or admit defeat, but bring their habitual dedication to whatever thankless situation they encounter.

Burn-out does not necessarily come from overwork, as many commonly be supposed. In fact, workaholics are not generally the burn-out types. Rather, burn-out begins with the disconfirmation of great expectations. Perhaps the most helpful, popularly written book on the subject is by psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger. *Burn-Out: The High Cost of High Achievement* describes burn-out as "a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward."

Other recent studies confirm that the discrepancy between expectation and reality is the central cause of burn-out. It is a progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose that comes from excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation. Another recent book by psychologist Jerry Edelman understands burn-out as "stages of disillusionment" that come from "a revolution of unfulfilled expectations."

Such conclusions about the context and causes of burn-out make it easy to understand why renewal communities often can be breeding grounds for burn-out. Communities call for high expectations and grow out of the "unrealistic" vision of God's kingdom. They attract determined and dedicated people who are willing to pay the price to see that vision become reality. Communities also qualify for classification under the hazard-prone occupation of "helping professions." Many find themselves juggling intensive pastoral ministry with demanding involvements with the poor or with various social causes. The stage is set for burn-out.

Our expectations are almost never met—at least not in the way and timing that we desire. Conflict develops between people. The healing and reconciliation that we thought would happen is slow in coming. People we thought were here to stay decide to leave, breaking long patterns of friendship. We are hurt when our ideals for certain aspects of community life seem so imperfectly embodied. We struggle together for five years, or 10, and wonder, "Is this all we have to show for it?" The vision that called the community together seems lost in all the energy that just goes into the maintenance of our lives. Even in the midst of growing and successful ministries, we can lose heart. We work for racial reconciliation in poor neighborhoods, but still we are misunderstood. The vision we hold of a world at peace seems so distant, and even God's people often seem hardened to this word.

Leaders of renewal communities find themselves in a particularly stressful role. Experimentation with new roles of leadership necessarily involves much trial and error. Our early growing pains to exercise pastoral leadership are often met with resistance and sometimes with open hostility. Many of us, now for the first time, experience the projected anger of others as we seek to enter deeply into their lives. Raymond Fritz and Lawrence Cada describe the failures and tentative conclusions that are an inevitable part of renewal communities: "The revitalization processes imply that only a small number of the many community experiments that are tried will eventually be selected out to be incorporated into the transformed community structure. Errors will be much more prevalent than successes. The ability actively to commit oneself with great hope to social experiments aimed at improving the community must be tempered with an awareness of each experiment's low likelihood of success."

If renewal communities are to have any staying power, it is important that they learn to understand the dynamics that lead to burn-out and to recognize some of its symptoms. Only in this way can individuals learn to redirect it before it reaches the chronic phase where serious work and life crises fully erupt.

Recently I was working at my desk at the *Sojourners* office, feeling exhausted and unable to concentrate. I turned to a collected volume of Thomas Merton's poetry that had just arrived. As I leafed through the book, my eyes unexpectedly fell on a poem entitled, "Whether There is Enjoyment in Bitterness." It was a poem about burn-out! There was something in me that took great delight and comfort in knowing that Merton too knew burn-out, and that it could strike even the most faithful of God's people. I have not seen the inner spiritual dynamic of burn-out anywhere better expressed than in his words:

*This afternoon, let me
Be a sad person. Am I not
Permitted (like other men)
To be sick of myself?*

*Am I not allowed to be hollow,
Or fall in the hole
Or break my bones (within me)
In the trap set by my own
Lie to myself? O my friend,
I too must sin and sin.*

*I too must hurt other people and
(Since I am no exception)
I must be hated by them*

*Do not forbid me, therefore,
To taste the same bitter poison,
And drink the gall that love
(Love most of all) so easily becomes.*

*Do not forbid me (once again) to be
Angry, bitter, disillusioned,
Wishing I could die.*

*While life and death
Are killing one another in my flesh,
Leave me in peace. I can enjoy,
Even as other men, this agony.*

*Only (whoever you may be)
Pray for my soul. Speak my name
To Him, for in my bitterness
I hardly speak to Him: and He
While He is busy killing me
Refuses to listen.**

Here in Merton's poem were all the classic symptoms and causes of an advanced case of burn-out. His burn-out was caused by disillusionment in the results of his ministry; in his attempts to love others, he hurt them and was hated by them. He became alienated from his true self, angry, bitter, disillusioned, withdrawn from his friends, angry at God, and unable to pray.

Burn-out is not always so readily apparent. It is a process that happens slowly and often goes unnoticed in its early stages. Almost everyone experiences the early stages of burn-out: physical and emotional exhaustion; greater impatience and irritability; disorientation at work, including limited concentration, forgetfulness, and impaired judgment; withdrawal from friendships; psychosomatic complaints of headaches, backaches, or lingering colds. The severity and duration of these indicators are minimal in the early stages of burn-out. But as burn-out progresses, these symptoms become more stable and tougher to get rid of.

In its most advanced stage, burn-out takes the form of apathy and pronounced emotional detachment. In addition to chronic physical fatigue, spiritual and emotional exhaustion set in. The cynicism and withdrawal that develop are less a poised distancing than a kind of numbness and deadness. The desire to help gradually erodes; people bore you; causes seem trivial. Where once meetings engaged your full attention, you now sit silently, wishing you could get away. This discouragement is a self-protective device to ward off the pain of feeling let down by people and situations.

Of all the stages of burn-out, this last is the hardest from which to bounce back. It is the most deep-seated, takes the longest to reach, and lasts the longest. It stems from a decision, reached over a period of time and reinforced by one's peers, to stop caring.

* From *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ©1957 by the Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

So what can be done about burn-out? Just as overwork does not necessarily cause burn-out, so rest does not necessarily cure it. Recent studies show that for some people, burn-out cannot be prevented, but it can be turned into a source of creative energy.

Ignatius, the 16th-century founder of the Jesuits, in his *Spiritual Exercises* describes many of the inner dynamics of burn-out as "spiritual desolation." Ignatius' insights about this can help us learn to cope with burn-out.

Ignatius says first that "we should not try to change a previous decision or come to a new decision. At a time of desolation, we hold fast to the decision which guided us during the time before the desolation came on us." Burn-out is a time when we may be tempted to leave community or change a basic life decision. While it may be helpful to change jobs or roles, this is not the time to consider whether to leave the community. When the intensity of burn-out passes we will have the emotional clarity to evaluate that kind of decision.

Second, Ignatius pleads with us to let "patience mark even the efforts we undertake to work against the desolation which affects us." The burn-out personality thrives on intensity and brings to the chosen remedy the same personality traits and behavior patterns that led to burn-out in the first place. The cure that is undertaken for pleasure or relief—whether a retreat, a new job, a playful hobby—soon becomes governed by the same burn-out-producing work ethic. It is important to learn how to relax, to keep a time perspective, and to be free from expectations of immediate results.

Third, Ignatius advocates intensifying our prayer and making a closer examination of ourselves and our life of faith. People who burn out seldom take time out to be alone. It is imperative to seek out extended time to pray and sort through all the compacted experiences that led to burn-out. Self-knowledge is essential if we are to recover. In every case of burn-out, there is an element of blindness. We become separated from our true inner self, and suppress our spontaneous feelings, especially our negative ones. The secret to recapturing energy is listening to our real feelings, needs, and desires.

While a foundational principle of all community is Jesus' teaching that we must lose our life to find it, "losing" our life does not mean being out of touch with our feelings and needs. Jesus knew his true wants and in Gethsemane could say, "Father, remove this cup from me." This self-knowledge was crucial before he could with integrity say, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." We are not to let our own needs determine our actions, but neither are we to act without knowing our deepest feelings and wants. Burn-out can come through refusing to admit who we are and to meet our own legitimate needs. We cannot forget that we are human beings with limitations. There is a fine line between dedication and overdedication; if it is crossed, burn-out, and not the renewed life that comes from "losing our life," will result.

Fourth, Ignatius recommends that a confessional closeness be developed with a trusted person so that our "secret temptations" and actions can be brought into the light of day. Just as distancing can intensify burn-out, closeness can help overcome it. In one way or another, nearly all burn-outs are loners who find it difficult to reveal themselves, even within community. Precisely those who call others to community may themselves be among those denied its consolations. Overcommitment to any job, including building community, can become such an absorption that our myriad activities keep us from experiencing closeness in what, to all appearances, are legitimate ways. Communities can become so stretched that not enough time is made for camaraderie. The burn-out may find it very difficult to initiate relationships at this time, but it is crucial to find at least one person to whom all the repressed needs and disappointed hopes can be fully spoken.

In all these suggestions, perhaps the most important is to develop a faith perspective about the burn-out that is happening to us. In order to live effectively in community, we must undergo a deep conversion. The burn-out process can be part of our continuing crucible of conversion.

Burn-out consumes our illusions and false expectations. God alone is our hope and expectation, our vision and joy. Community itself can become a great idol, and God's work can become more important to us than God. Burn-out is a refining fire that can detach us from an excessive identity with the results of our work and the impact we make in the world. It can teach us deeper trust in God by forcing us to withdraw all hope, idealizations, and expectations from every other object, situation, thing, or person—except God. So burn-out becomes not just stages of disillusionment, but if persisted in faithfully, it can become a maturing process of faith. Burn-out disestablishes our illusions and establishes true faith.

By all the normal laws of psychological process, the people of faith in Hebrews 11 should have all ended up burned-out. They all "died in faith, not having received what was promised" (verse 13). Talk about disappointed expectations! Yet faith conquered their burn-out and became for them "the assurance of things hoped for." They understood "that what was seen was made out of things which do not appear."

A close friend in the community recently said to me that the only difference between a cynic and a saint is faith. Both the cynic and the saint know the same discouraging reality of the world's pain and the difficulty by which any true healing and redemption come. The cynic withdraws and despairs of hope for any real change. The saint responds with faith, maintaining hope and zeal in the face of the many discouraging failures and partial embodiments of God's promise.

Burn-out holds the potential for making of us either cynics or saints. In the midst of burn-out, we have a choice: We can swing from the heights of all our unmet expectations to the detached withdrawal of no expectations at all. Or we can learn to grow in faith and transfer our misplaced expectations to their proper focus on God alone.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Robert Sabath has been a member of Sojourners Fellowship for 10 years.

For further reading...

The following resources were helpful in putting together this article and offer more information for those interested in pursuing the topic of burn-out:

- Brockman, Norbert. "Burn-Out in Superiors." *Review for Religious*. Vol. 37 (November, 1978), pp. 809-816.
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- Freudenberger, Dr. Herbert J. with Geraldine Richelson. *Burn-Out: The High Cost of High Achievement*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1980.
- Gill, James J. "Burn-Out: A Growing Threat in Ministry." *Human Development*. Vol. 1 (Summer, 1980), pp. 21-27.
- Kramer, Alfred. "Burn-Out—Contemporary Dilemma for the Jesuit Activist." *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (January, 1978).

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