



The Limits of Care: Burnout as an Ecclesial Issue

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Boston — Doctors, social workers and therapists are giving a new name to a syndrome they say is draining their ranks: “compassion fatigue.”

It strikes people who take on too heavy a load of other people’s burdens, leaving little time or energy for themselves. Victims become disillusioned and depressed, and often start to show cracks in their professional veneer. Compassion fatigue is gaining recognition. A half-dozen presentations were devoted to it at a recent National Association of Social Workers conference.

Dr. Edward Poliandro, of Mount Sinai Medical School in New York, said people “were hanging from the rafters” to hear his workshop on stress management.

Some hospitals are offering support programs that feature stress management classes, longer staff meetings, and even daily walks through the park.

As many as 20 percent of caregiving professionals suffer such burnout, said Dr. Lyle H. Miller, head of the Biobehavioral Institute in Boston.

Typical victims sound almost like TV stereotypes of social workers or doctors, working too much, sleeping too little, sacrificing their own lives and families for case after case. “It’s the best and the brightest and the most committed and the most energetic that burn out,” Miller said....

Compassion fatigue went unrecognized for a long time because of the stigma attached to it, experts say....

The best way to fight compassion fatigue?

Take a vacation, Poliandro and Miller agreed.

Administrators can help, however. The boss can force workers to take lunches away from their desk, outlaw working past 9 p.m., or forbid employees to work weekends, Poliandro said. (*Durham Morning Herald*, November 27, 1989)

The phenomenon described in this newspaper article is a compelling one today, particularly for the ministry. The phenomenon is, of course, often described by the metaphor “burnout.” It seems that the minister is asked to be too caring, too compassionate, too concerned with other people’s lives and, as a result, simply burns out.

I. BURNOUT: A NEW DEFINITION

How did this metaphor of burnout become so prominent, not only to describe ministers,

but many others in the professions? It is usually meant to describe people with high ambitions to care for others but who eventually find they cannot sustain that ambition for their original calling. The syndrome, however, is by no means easy to pin down as the symptoms are often associated with exhaustion and fatigue, insomnia, loss of appetite as well as overeating, and increased use of drugs. The causes are also often multiple, such as an intense interaction with clients, long hours, little time off, role ambiguity, a sense that there is little control over outcomes, monotony and isolation, as well as personality characteristics such as perfectionism and unrealistic expectations.

We believe that the very ambiguity and lack of specification about burnout indicates that we need to step back and take another look at ministry as a caring profession.

Interestingly, burnout is a relatively recent image. It seems to be associated with rocketry. The rocket soars skyward on a huge burst of energy, then it “burns out” and falls to the earth. Of course it might also be associated with camp fires which die more gradual deaths. These associations imply that burnout is a huge burst of human energy which dissipates. Based upon this model, our involvement in our callings is seen as a scarce resource. As individuals we have only so much energy to care and, when our energy is depleted in one area of life, it is not available for another. Therefore energy is described as an economic entity of which we have only so much to spend. This model suggests that a burned out person is one who is simply used up, worn out. The cause of burnout, as shaped by this image, is over-caring beyond our capacity—too much involvement, commitment, overwork, or care. The cure, it seems, is to reduce involvement, to cut back on our commitments, to work less, in fact, to care less.

A different view of burnout is suggested by a recent article by Ellen Mahler.¹ Following Emile Durkheim, she notes that energy can be seen not as a scarce, but as a renewable and expanded resource. Therefore, far from depleting us, energies expended in behalf of our meaningful social involvements can nourish and energize us.

Energy, like love, is not a scarce resource we might use up, but when appropriately embodied, creates itself. Picture the family which says, “We cannot have another child because we have only so much love to give.” However, on having another child they discover that love is not a scarce, depletable resource, but in fact the other child makes more love available.

This understanding of burnout implies that the problem is not over-involvement, but under-commitment. Burnout denotes an unconscious “cop-out” in roles in which we feel uncommitted. To plead that we lack energy to fulfill a role is in fact a culturally accepted justification. It is not that we have lost fuel, but the fuel we supply has failed. Our store of energy is not depleted because we have wasted it or because over-commitment has allowed it to drain away, nor even because we

¹Ellen Mahler, “Burnout; Metaphors of Destruction and Purgation,” *Soundings* LXXII/1 (Spring, 1989) 27-37.

have worked too hard; rather we are burned out because our work has ceased to produce the energy infusion we experience under conditions of high commitment.

II. RECLAIMING THE PROFESSION OF MINISTRY

If we take this alternative description of burnout seriously, then the cure for burnout lies in *enhancing the quality* of our activities, not simply in *reducing their quantity*. Of course this

can be done in many ways, such as improving the quality of our human relationships as well as renewing a sense that we are making a difference through our activity. However, we believe that the crucial factor in avoiding burnout is a recovery of the vision that our ministry is not finally judged by its results. Rather, *ministry is an intrinsically good service to a community that knows how to name the good which it serves.*

It is important to reclaim the understanding of the professions, and in particular the ministry, as activities. By activity we mean something like Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of "practice":

Practice is any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the results that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²

Activities are inherently energizing as they concentrate our activity. Put differently, such activities give us power which is not unlike that which is given by the virtues. As Aristotle pointed out, the virtues are like a second nature which gives us power that we would not otherwise have—like the kind of practice necessary to enable one to shoot a jump shot in basketball. Our habits form us to do what otherwise we would be unable to do, and as a result we have powers we had not anticipated. Good habits empower us to be more than we could be if left to our own devices.

There is a strong political or societal dimension to this notion of power. Activities which are formed in service to communities that we call the professions have the following characteristics: They are done by people whose whole life is dominated by that activity. They require a body of skills which can be learned only through apprenticeship. They involve significant matters about life and death, health and salvation, that are at the very heart of what we are about.

Therefore the professional is granted the right intimately to enter other people's lives at those moments in which we are the most vulnerable. That, of course, is the reason why the professional must be trained to sustain such intensity for a lifetime. As anyone who has ever tried it quickly learns, when one enters another's life during a time of vulnerability in that life—birth, death, pain, sickness, sexual matters, bereavement, conversion, transition—the would-be caregiver is made vulnerable. Thus society tends to isolate sick, confused, hurting people and relegate them to the care of professionals because society realizes that it lacks the resources to enable it to be exposed to such pain.

²Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984) 187.

III. MINISTRY IN COMMUNITY

How is the professional able to enter other people's lives at vulnerable, deeply dislocating moments without being burned away by the pain? The predominant method of handling it today is through the development of professional distance, a kind of protective shell. We consider

professional distance-in which the caregiver feigns care but doesn't really care-to be a testimony to the moral decay of the professions. Professional distance is only disengagement from care, a reduction of care to a sort of economic arrangement in which I care, but only to the degree to which I am paid to care, not in a manner which "costs" me too much.

The Christian ministry cannot handle the problem of the minister's exposure to the vulnerability of others through professional detachment. Pastors are able to care, and to care deeply, without being consumed by the pain of others because the pastor has something even better than the pastor's own care, namely, the power of the community. The power that the profession called Christian ministry professes is called church.

Pastors are called to profess God and God's people before they are called to care. Indeed, without their prior commitment to the church and its good, pastors would not know how to describe what form care would take. The church defines the content and the goals of our care of people, not the other way around. This common good, namely, the church, and the habits necessary to sustain church in a fallen world, are the rationale for ministry.

Because sustenance of the church and its people is so tough in this world, we are justified in setting aside a few of our people (pastors) to do nothing but to concentrate on those goods. Of course it can be dangerous to be so concentrated, and that is why the professional requires the support of a whole community. We authors can underscore this point by noting the problem one of us has being a teacher. As a teacher, my life has been set aside to do nothing but read books and to think hard about matters that matter. This not only breeds professorial absentmindedness, but even more dangerously, it can lead some of us to think that all problems are basically amenable to the power of the mind. While the church needs teachers, teachers only make sense in the context of the whole community and its variety of gifts and offices. I think so that other, more activist, less academically inclined folk don't have to. Without their need for my thinking, my vocation would be pointless, idiosyncratic, and selfish. The church and its needs become the rationale for my vocation as a teacher.

When we lose the political, ecclesial justification for setting some people aside to be so concentrated on the goods of a community, then we lose the moral rationale of the ministry as an energizing activity. We believe that is what has happened today. Thus the phenomenon of burnout is a sign of the moral confusion of our times. Burnout reminds us that we lack the common agreement in our communities today which is necessary to justify setting some aside to do nothing but to be present with our people in their pain.

IV. THE PLACE AND PURPOSE OF MINISTRY

This situation is particularly destructive for those in the ministry today, as they end up thinking that the ministry is defined fundamentally as care and compassion. But care and compassion are distinctly secondary virtues.³ In order to be able to care and to be compassionate we need to know what it is we need to care about and how we are to be compassionate. Lacking such knowledge, those in the ministry are often reduced to nothing more than quivering masses of availability that are quickly used up in the bottomless pit of a people whose needs have no limits.

The way that those in the ministry care must be formed by the authority they have been given—as those set aside to lead worship, and to oversee the upbuilding of the community of

faith as a holy people. Unless the way that ministers are formed to care is governed by those activities, then compassion cannot help but be a formula for the destruction of those who give their lives to it. The church gives its pastors something more significant to care for than the needs of the church's people. Limitless "care," undefined by the goods and goals of the church, is an animal with an omnivorous, voracious appetite.

Added to this danger is the fact that people who go into the ministry today are generally nice people. They want to please and to be liked. So it almost becomes impossible for them to say no. As a result, being a minister today is like being nibbled to death by ducks. People assume that we are paid basically to do nothing other than to be kind. As a result the ministry quickly loses any sense of integrity of the goods and goals that make us ministers to begin with.

As we pointed out in *Resident Aliens*, this creates the problem of self-hate and loneliness.⁴ The ministry is tempted to self-hate because none of us can be misused forever without hating those who so use us, and as a result, we end up hating ourselves for being so abused. No wonder pastors often seem so lonely; self-hate creates a person who cannot make friends worth having.

One of the other aspects of the ministry that makes ministry so difficult is that one never knows when one is a success. In teaching one never knows when one has taught well. Both vocations, of course, are different from bricklaying. When one finishes laying brick, one can step back and say, "That's not too bad." However, when one is in the ministry or teaching, one so rarely sees results. For example, think of the problem of the average minister who goes to work everyday, often with no clear agenda. There is just too much time on the minister's hands, and it tends to be filled up with busywork. As teachers, we love to go to class because that seems like the only place where we know what we are doing. It seems so unsubstantial to think that we're working when we take a day to read a book. The ministry suffers from the same problem. It is hard to believe that you can take a whole day to do nothing but pray and study. Of course without such activity, ministry is unintelligible.

All of this is aggravated by the loss of the pastor's cultural status. Being a minister today is no longer highly valued—other than in very vague sentimentalities. As a result, ministers continue to look for those kinds of activities in other

³See, for example, Oliver O'Donovan's *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 10-12.

⁴Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 123-127.

professions that they can imitate in order still to appear as people of power and accomplishment. Counseling is the last socially acceptable activity for pastors.

Combined with this is the problem that, in the ministry, one must work with people, often the same people, year after year.⁵ They have the same problems every year, the same complaints every year, and the same stories every year. Add to that the fact that they are volunteers (which means that you must keep them interested even when their interests are not all that interesting to you) and it's hard to sustain a sense of pastoral integrity in such a context.

All of this combines to make it very difficult for the ministry to be an activity that is inherently energizing. Indeed it often seems that the most energetic ministers are there largely because they made an earlier mistake. (A friend called one of us soon after I came to Duke and asked how I was doing. I said I was very depressed and I suddenly realized that the problem was

the Methodist Church. I had assumed that anyone going into the Methodist ministry today must be angry about the condition of the church so my job would be to counsel patience as well as to provide the skills to start the necessary reforms. Instead what I found was that many people going into the Methodist ministry looked upon it like going into the military—namely, so long as you do what you are told to do you cannot fail. Going into the Methodist ministry was like retiring at a very early age. Their apparent delight with and accommodation to the present state of the church was depressing.)

So what bothers us about so many people in the ministry today is not that many are failing or burning out, but that *more are not failing and not burning out!*

Given the situation, if one does not feel a bit burned, we can think of only one good reason—one suffers from a lack of imagination.

V. MINISTRY AND MEDICINE

In this respect it might be interesting to compare or contrast medicine and the ministry. Medicine seems to be in so much better shape than the ministry; people still think of doctors as people who care and are compassionate and yet have real power. Medicine therefore seems to be energizing.

But those who know much about medicine in our society know that in many ways it is beset by even more difficulties than the ministry. Because of the cultural status medicine enjoys, too often medicine has become a new witchcraft built upon false salvation. Namely, medicine often is forced to offer ersatz cure when the best it can provide is care.

One of the great problems of medicine is how one can sustain the practice of the care of the ill for a lifetime when all of those one cares for are going to die. Medicine's rationale, after all, is not finally cure but care.⁶ In that sense it is not remarkably different from the ministry.

Medicine is similar to the ministry because it must draw upon a cultural consensus about the good that we hold in common—namely that it is good to care for the ill, even when they cannot be cured. Such goods, of course, are exactly what

⁵William Willimon, *Clergy and Laity Burnout* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 34-36.

⁶For this account of medicine see Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986) and Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

we are suggesting renders professions intelligible as professions. Some people are entrusted with activities required for the pursuit of a certain good and a cultivation of those virtues necessary to achieve it. Therefore our desire for good health is entrusted to the medical profession, even with its uncertain virtues. Good societies offer divisions of labor that allow us to serve one another in this way. Such a division of labor requires trust in those in the various callings. Remove that background of trust, however, and the moral rationality of the profession is lost.

So medicine and ministry are not that different. Both are losing their coherence in a culture which no longer is able to provide the rationale for a coherent diversity of gifts to serve the variety of goods that make our lives together liveable. We have come to live in a society of strangers. As a result we end up burned out.

VI. A SOLUTION?

There is no easy solution. In a context of detached, individualized professions, the temptation is to think there is something wrong with those who are burning out. We thus say that they need to have a more realistic sense of their potential, or be less idealistic, or get rid of their perfectionistic tendencies. All of this may be true but it doesn't get to the real issue. For if the problem is as we have described it, then in fact we think there is no solution. The problem goes to the very heart of the incoherence of our culture and the loneliness it produces. The issue is not why people are burning out in the so-called caring professions, but why more are not. When care becomes an end in itself, then it cannot help but destroy those who find themselves identified as "care givers."

Caring—detached, ill-defined, unrelated to some larger communal good—is a demonic, consuming animal that demands to be fed. Ellen Mahler suggests that perhaps the metaphor burnout can be seen in a positive light.⁷ Burnout is not simply destructive but also purgative. Fire is used to purify metal; Christian theology often borrowed this image and applied it to our growth as Christians. In purgatory, for example, we are purged of our impurities so that we might begin movement toward perfection. Like purgatory, burnout may be part of the journey, not just for those in the ministry, but for the whole church today. In experiencing burnout in ourselves and observing it in others, we learn how inadequate are our rationale for and understandings of our ministry. Thus, we are driven to a more purposeful basis for our care. We reach out for those habits and activities that enable us to go on in service to one another because we have learned, through burnout, how much we depend on one another. Even more, we learn how much we depend upon God to sustain ministry.

⁷Mahler, "Burnout."