The 40-Year-Old Burnout

Why I gave up tenure for a yet-to-be-determined career

By Jonathan Malesic | OCTOBER 05, 2016

Early in my career, when I heard the word burnout, I thought of aging. I imagined a senior professor who hadn’t updated his wardrobe or his lecture notes in three decades, someone who was stealing a position from a younger, more dynamic scholar. A burnout was a dinosaur, a silverback, deadwood. Something I, an ambitious and talented new faculty member, was sure I would never become.

I held onto that image right up until the point when — tenured and still in my 30s — I burned out. The job that I had prepared a long time for, that I had succeeded in, and that I was sure I would do for decades to come had become dreadful. It was ruining my life. When a good opportunity for a change came up (not for me, but for my wife, who was offered an academic job halfway across the country), I decided without hesitation to quit and go with her.

I was lucky to have an escape route. There is good reason to think that burnout is rampant among college professors, and given the poor state of the academic job market, many of those suffering from burnout have no appealing way out. That is bad not just for them but also for their students and for the profession in general.

Burned-out faculty cannot be the teachers and mentors that students need them to be. As the profession becomes more economically precarious — with more and more adjuncts teaching for less and less money or recognition — the working conditions that foster burnout become more widespread. The quality of students’ education and instructors’ lives will spiral downward together if institutions don’t face this problem.

It’s only in the past year that I’ve even been able to give a name to what happened to me. I encountered the research of Christina Maslach, a Berkeley psychologist who has devoted her career to studying occupational burnout. In The Truth About Burnout, a book she and Michael P. Leiter wrote, they...
describe burnout as "the index of dislocation between what people are and what they have to do."

A key dislocation for academics: We train as researchers but spend our days managing the emotions of late adolescents, haggling over budgets, and figuring out how to use Moodle’s gradebook.

Chronic dislocation produces the three main components of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of professional ineffectiveness. Burned-out professors, then, are people who cannot muster the strength to do the intellectual labor of their job, who see students as problems, and who feel their work has no positive effect. Maslach has shown that burnout results from a good thing — serious investment in one’s work and students — that in the wrong conditions comes back as continual stress.

Oddly enough, my burnout began after a year away from the stresses of my job. I had just been on sabbatical in a bucolic region far from my college. When I returned to work, I was teaching, directing a teaching center, chairing a core-curriculum committee, and giving frequent conference presentations.

At first, it was exhilarating. I’m not a morning person, but on my first day back that August, I showed up early for an 8 a.m. meeting, wearing a trim-cut linen suit, eager to do what I loved.

That energy and confidence didn’t last. The duties I took on to serve my colleagues and demonstrate my indispensability amounted to a heavy overload with no extra pay. I was also living apart from my wife, who was teaching in the town where I had spent my sabbatical. I felt every bit of our two-body problem. I started having recurrent and medically inexplicable sharp pains in my torso. My temper shortened. My doctor prescribed a couple of medications (neither one helped) for anxiety and acid reflux. I soon didn’t fit into the linen suit, ultimately gaining 30 pounds in a year.

Without getting to see my wife regularly, I depended more on my job to affirm my worth as a person. Maslach and Leiter write that without close relationships, workers "will be far more dependent on clients and colleagues for signs of appreciation." In my case, I became more sensitive to students’ base-level indifference to the required theology courses I taught. Their disinterest in the subject felt like an attack on my dignity. When I took the Maslach Burnout Inventory, I scored in the 98th percentile for emotional exhaustion.

Eventually, I came to dread every class meeting. I thought often of faking an illness and canceling class. (I never did.) My aim became simply getting to the end of class in one piece. Other teachers have described their burnout in similar terms. Maryellen Weimer, among the best scholars of college teaching, writes that she retired early after "struggling to stay alive in the classroom." In The Truth About Burnout, an exhausted high-school teacher reports being "just in a basic survival mode."

The language of survival is not mere hyperbole. The chronic stress associated with burnout problems.
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Planning the next day’s class sessions felt like doing a crossword puzzle in cuneiform. I stared at the textbook without reading, racking my brain for ideas about how to get my students to learn. My store of teaching wisdom was inaccessible in those moments.

All semester I completely forgot about simple but effective techniques I had used for years — like requiring short weekly reading responses to spur reading compliance and foster discussion. I wrote haphazard lesson plans on index cards and scrap paper. After class, I threw them away.

Student evaluations of my teaching remained positive, but I knew I was working below my previous standards in the classroom. And my writing and college service all but stopped. As I learned, competence offers no protection against burnout. In fact, Maslach discovered that the most competent and engaged workers are often at the greatest risk for burnout. Their willingness to labor for love and not money will, over time, expose them to chronic stress. That is especially true in universities, where there are few explicit limits on working hours.

Another researcher, Janie Crosmer, has found that burnout is more acute in younger faculty members than in older ones (and in women more than men). It’s easier to do too much too soon than to build barriers between your work and psyche.

But it shouldn’t be entirely up to the individual to keep burnout at bay. The factors that Maslach and Leiter say cause burnout — an overloaded schedule, lack of control, insufficient reward, breakdown of community, absence of fairness, and conflicting values — are characteristics of workplaces, not individuals. Some of those factors certainly shaped my experience. Academic culture fosters burnout when it encourages overwork, promotes a model of professors as isolated entrepreneurs, and offers little recognition for good teaching or mentoring. The persistent financial stress on colleges and universities only exacerbates the problem, because, as Maslach and Leiter put it, "individual employees become the ‘shock absorbers’ for organizational strains," including financial ones.

The response to faculty burnout should, therefore, not be to shrug and say that academic work is a labor of love, and some people just aren’t cut out for it. Instead, the response should be to find ways to give these highly skilled workers the rest, respect, and reward they need to stay healthy and effective. Institutions cause burnout, and only a whole effort of an
Facing an Impossible Choice
By Neil Beckett
That we as contingent faculty members take pride in our work is both our greatest virtue and our worst vulnerability.

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