

~ *Burnout* ~

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Mitosis of the Heart

It should take two hearts to pump life's rangy blood.

A heart to flood a lover's loins

or fill a fighter's veins.

Another heart to hold a dying hand

though that hand draws us after.

It's an everyday feat, a single heart can beat

systolic grief and diastolic laughter.

—Leslie DeBrock

WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

Wow that was some auction party last night! I went in feeling somewhat overwhelmed and came out several hours later feeling exhilarated. Especially that very last part, the clean-up, with teenagers and septuagenarians hauling these pews around, scrubbing a massive pile of dishes, and calculating thousands of dollars of happy exchanges.

The donations from inside and outside BUF were truly impressive. But what opened my eyes was the list of volunteers: pages of names. And the ability to coordinate their efforts toward a purposeful and rewarding goal—wow! Lauralee will be saying thank you again in a few minutes but I just have to say: it seems a little odd to be preaching about burnout this morning.

But not entirely. It's that time of year. In the Midwest folks tend to feel pretty stuck about now. And when I was here last February interviewing with the search committee, the Pacific Northwest was a pretty bleak frigid place. Historic patterns suggest that this would be a fallow time, not just for farmers but for a congregation that has been through a long transition leading to an enthusiastic crescendo with a brand new minister...followed by—wait, what? More transition? Good grief.

And ironically, though it's been a beautiful winter, even that feels a little worrisome. What if our flowering plants get clobbered now by an untimely freeze? What's it going to mean for our water table? Our bodies and our lives expect certain cycles and we act together, consciously or

unconsciously to create those cycles if we have to—because the earth has taught us that that is The Way.

So I am not going to assume today that anyone is burned out in any way whatsoever. But—we’re going to take things down a notch anyway, beginning with our gathering song, #90, from all the fret and fever of the day. Because it’s a little unfamiliar, Melanie will play it all the way through to cue us in.

GATHERING SONG *From all the Fret and Fever of the Day* #90

RE MINUTE / CHILDREN’S FOCUS “Alphabet Soup”

Summary: Grover, the waiter, attempts to provide cheerful service to his restaurant customer who has ordered *hot* alphabet soup. But the customer repeatedly calls him back because various letters are missing from the soup. By the time Grover gets all the letters, the soup is cold and the customer demands a new bowl.

NEW MEMBER WELCOME

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

Have you ever felt like Grover? No matter how hard you try, no matter how cheerfully you begin, you somehow fail to accomplish what you had set out to do. Then your enthusiasm dissipates, your motivation fades, your hopes burn low.

Burnout can happen when we don’t feel rewarded for our efforts. This may be in relation to clients and customers, family and friends, or even toward the universe and God—when these important sources of reward, recognition, or satisfaction don’t come through as we consciously or unconsciously expected.

In her book for caregivers who provide assistance to elderly family members, Rosalynn Carter identifies physical signs of burnout, including fatigue, headaches, insomnia, cardiovascular and gastrointestinal problems, and lingering colds. Plus emotional symptoms: frustration, anger, emptiness, pessimism, disappointment, inability to concentrate, loss of self-esteem, and a feeling of being overwhelmed.

It’s not surprising that burnout would happen to caregivers, who may be working 24 hours a day, isolated from the rest of the world by the demands of that job. But even if you have never found yourself in that intense caregiving situation, you know at some level that while caring often has magnificent rewards, it also has a price.

Carter identifies the following qualities of people who are prone to burnout

- high expectations of themselves and others
- a need to work hard
- dedication and idealism
- the need to prove oneself
- a strong goal orientation
- difficulty delegating responsibilities to others

- an unrealistic sense of one's limitations
- being a "giver" rather than a "receiver"

Many of these traits, clearly, are beautiful, noble traits that we try to cultivate here at BUF. But just as clearly, these tendencies can be taken too far. And it is not always easy to see when we have crossed the line.

Burnout happens at work, in church, and in all the voluntary organizations and causes we support. Burnout happens at home, whether the demands are from family members, finances, or household projects. It happens when roles are unclear, and when there is no end in sight.

Burnout does not come from just working too hard. Working to the point of exhaustion can be really satisfying when there are periodic rewards and good people to work with.

But if we think *we're the only person* willing or able to do an important job; if we're misled (or mislead ourselves) about how difficult a task is going to be, we can end up feeling trapped, and unappreciated.

So what's often best—both for us and for our families, organizations, or workplace—is to stop what we're doing. And, if necessary, leave a void. Allow the work to be left un-done.

But that's pretty hard to do. Because we probably believe in what we're doing - even if the work itself isn't exciting - we believe in the larger goals of our family, our workplace, our organizations... and we'll do whatever we can to ensure that they succeed.

Or, we may have trouble stepping back because we feel guilty. Maybe we wish to be indispensable. It's nice to feel needed, to feel unique. And yet, to support the long-term goals of our workplace or organizations, we need to prepare for our sudden demise, prepare for someone to follow us. Letting go of our indispensability can actually help to relieve pressure, enable us to perform better, and make it easier to quit when the time is right.

Burnout can come from having aspirations that are out of synch with reality. It can come from our inability to say "no."

So, for what it's worth, I hereby give you permission to say, "No." Let's practice. Pretend I'm inviting you to serve in a new volunteer role. Let me hear you say "NO," on three: 1, 2, 3, "NO!" ...Excellent, now again in Spanish! Uno, dos, tres, "NO!"

George Bernard Shaw writes: My life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatsoever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

This is a noble sentiment—this desire to be thoroughly used up when our life is over. I find it a common feeling among idealists and people of goodwill. The trouble is, sometimes we get to that point of being used up BEFORE our lives are over. So how do we continue to give when we have given and given and not been replenished?

MEDITATION

Uh Huh, by Holly Near

SILENCE (3:00)

CHOIR

Overflowing, by Brian Tate

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

The Joule (J-O-U-L-E) is a unit of energy. The laws of thermodynamics assure us that energy can be neither created nor destroyed. So there are exactly as many joules in the universe today as there were at the beginning. And the sum of all energies will never change.

Energy can, however, be transformed from one state to another. When we die, our energy dissipates into the world, but it does not disappear.

Not wanting to burnout prematurely, it is only natural that we seek to protect our joules. We do so through choices which, like investments, enable us to accumulate energy for later use. We can also safeguard our joules by making sure that we don't expend them carelessly. We try to be conscious of which energy expenditures are investments, which ones are frivolous treats for ourselves, and which expenditures are pure gifts—from which we expect no return.

But while the total energy within the universe will always remain the same, the level of order or organization will not. The laws of thermodynamics describe “entropy” as a measure of disorder or randomness. And within any closed system, entropy can only increase. In other words, things fall apart.

The natural tendency of all things, from our teeth to our thoughts to our closets—is to become less and less organized. This process can *only be reversed* if there is an input of energy from outside the system. The 2nd law of thermodynamics thus predicts that the universe, the whole, the interdependent web of all existence—which by definition has no outside, and no outside source of energy—the universe must eventually decay to utter randomness. This does not depress me though since that's likely to take another 20 billion years.

In the meantime, we live on a planet with astonishing potential. Gaia, the Earth is *not* a closed system; we receive enormous amounts of energy input every moment from the sun. While I don't worship the sun, maybe I ought to. Because the sun is making a heroic sacrifice. In *its* process of decay, the sun is burning itself out... thereby making it possible for us to live.

Photosynthetic plants use the sun's energy to convert simple molecules (H₂O and CO₂) into larger, more complex molecules—sugars.

That process is only 40% efficient, but these sugars are then available for another imperfect energetic conversion: into the beating wings of a hummingbird, into the electrical impulse of an

eel, into the light of bioluminescent bugs, into the thoughts pinging around inside *your* brain, right now.

In each transformation some energy goes astray. But before it is completely dissipated, that energy has been used to create and maintain the complex organization of structures and activities that we know as LIFE.

This scientific perspective, I think, is coherent with my theology. Because randomness prevails—rather than pre-existing cosmic purpose—randomness prevails also in my understanding of the universe. Randomness and disintegration, with totally awesome spinoffs of consciousness, kindness, and beauty.

So the idea that everything will ultimately decay to utter randomness does not lead me to nihilism—the ultimate burnout—the feeling that nothing I do matters in the grand scheme of things.

People can be nihilistic whether we believe in cosmic purpose *or* cosmic randomness. Those who believe that everything is predetermined by a divine plan are often pretty excited about that, but they could just as well feel dis-empowered: “What difference does it make what I do, if I’m up against god’s plan?”

And those who believe that everything is predetermined by the laws of physics might feel the same way.

And those who believe there is no plan, no purpose, and that entropy will ultimately prevail—they too *may* feel that there is no point in trying to change things... no point in trying to find meaning in a meaningless universe.

I don’t feel that way. Because I’m not going to be here for another 20 million years.

But within the limits of my lifetime, I’m confident that the future is open, and my input will make a difference, for better or for worse.

Rosalynn Carter refers to a study of caregivers in which a small proportion never seemed to feel burdened by their work. While some whose responsibilities were relatively light were quickly overwhelmed, others immersed in total care suffered no burnout at all. The difference, it seemed, were that those who were most successful considered their work *voluntary*, it was their choice. This is not to say that caregivers have many choices, but that they do have choices within limits.

So, though we probably cannot determine how things are going to turn out in the end, we can choose to let go of what we cannot control.

Let's say together the serenity prayer on the cover of the order of service.

May I have the Courage to change the things I can, Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, And Wisdom to know the difference.

May I have patience with things that take time, Appreciation for all that I have, Tolerance for those with different struggles, and the Strength to get up and try again, one day at a time.

Another set of prayers with a surprisingly broad reach are the psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Psalms are kind of amazing: filled with dissatisfied laments—cries to God that things are going badly and wondering why god doesn't fix things up.

These laments have been piously edited, always ending with: "but I'll hold out hope in your goodness." Still they remain stark indictments of the earthly experience into which we've been thrown. It sure *seems* like god either doesn't care about our welfare, or isn't doing a very good job protecting us.

So then why even bother to cry out our sorrows and dissatisfactions?

In my view, lament, prayer, and protest do not change our circumstances. But they are worthwhile nonetheless. Lament, prayer, and protest, approached with humility, can change *US*, so that we can change our circumstances.

When we cry out, we express our unity with one another. In our cries we find our common humanity—even with those who are very different from us. So our cries can empower us to become active agents of love, reconciliation, and renewal.

In the psalm—the love poem—Mitosis of the Heart, printed on the cover of today's order of service, I hear a similar lament: My heart is torn apart by all this love, all the different kinds of love that this heart longs to embody. Oh! If I could only tear this heart in two the world might begin to know all that I have to give. But ouch!

And so, isn't it just amazing, that day after day, pulled every which way, the beat goes on?