

# Unpacking burnout: We're not burning out- we're resisting being blown up

When I began to work with refugees and survivors of torture, many caring and well-intentioned folks echoed a powerful story that I would burnout as these people were at the top of some hierarchy of pain. This prescription that I would burnout was pervasive, presented as common wisdom, and scarce on hope. I found this collective fear of working alongside the Nelson Mandela's of this world curious- yet I also gravely respected it. But I wonder where this fear of burnout was when I was doing what gets called "family work"- much of which consisted of working with youth who had been raped by family members who loved them.

"Burnout", is an idea that is very individually structured, as if there is something about us personally that makes us measure up to this work or not. I think that the level of what is being called burnout says a lot more about our society than it says about us as workers. I don't think as community workers we are burning out- we are resisting being blown up. The problem is not in our heads or in ourselves, but in the real world where there is a lack of justice. The people I work alongside don't burn me out and they don't hurt me, they transform me, challenge me and inspire me. What is trying to blow me up is the injustice they live with and my frustrating inability to personally change the problems that they wrestle with and live in.

Ideas of burnout sound like we're not doing enough yoga or drinking enough water- and those are important things I do yoga and I drink water- but self-care is not enough to offset the issues of poverty, violence, and basic dignity people struggle with. Self care puts the burden of working in unjust contexts onto the backs of us as individual workers. Work alongside people with more money, resources and status is less likely to result in what gets called burnout and can make those workers look more professional, when in fact all people's pain is real, and we don't want to be pitted against each other as workers. The problem of staying alive in the work gets constructed as a very individual project. Yet the issues are social and require collective actions and accountability.

When we feel that our work alongside exploited people asks us to accommodate people to poverty and violence we can easily become exhausted, isolated and spiritually pained. This *spiritual pain* I'm talking about is the discrepancy between what feels respectful, humane, generative, and contexts which call on us to violate the very beliefs and ethics that brought us to this field. The point is not just to keep on keepin' on. Fostering sustainability in the face of this *spiritual pain* is difficult when the unjust conditions of people's lives do not improve, and helpers experience their work as shoveling water. We know we're working hard, and working harder isn't working. The smell of a particularly individual incompetence begins to creep in. This is the dirty work of isolation. I believe that *spiritual pain* and isolation are more useful ways to understand what hurts helpers in the work- more useful than the prescriptive and individual ideas of burnout. Isolation breeds despair, despair being a lack of spirit. But what of our collective resistance to despair? Despite the fact that our work is not innocent, and need outweighs resources, here we are, to quote Bud Osborn, "amazingly alive against long odds".

For me, sustainability refers to an on-going aliveness, a genuine connectedness with people, and a presence of spirit. I am intrigued by questions not so much of resisting burnout, but of how we can act in solidarity to keep the spirit of justice alive in our collective work and lives: How can we be connected with this aliveness? How do we hold onto collective integrity and dignity more fully? I'm interested in what sustains us as community workers. How can we change the unjust structures that oppress people? What are the boundaries of justice and just practice in a society which is more just to some than to others?

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