

## Say No to Burnout

by Elizabeth Ruth Skoglund, M.A., M.F.T.

In my undergraduate years I simultaneously worked toward a university degree along with a year's worth of study at a theological seminary. I held part-time jobs, taught Sunday school, dated my steady boyfriend several times a week and ran the local chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I went to church every time the doors opened and drove elderly ladies there on Sunday mornings. I also managed to graduate a semester early. Although I would not have subscribed to Edna St. Vincent Millay's overall philosophy of life, one stanza of poetry she wrote suited me well and somehow urged me on:

**My candle burns at both ends,  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes,  
And oh, my friends,  
It gives a lovely light!<sup>1</sup>**

With all my youthful idealism, however, I think I honestly did feel that my candle would last the night. After all, if I was burning out, wasn't I burning out for God?

Gradually my body began to deny my assumption that I could somehow walk on water. I started to experience profound fatigue, mixed at times with feelings of anxiety or gloom. It was more than just your everyday variety of tiredness. It became a form of pain. The magical cure of a single night's sleep stopped working.

In my panic that this feeling would never go away, I just pushed harder, trying by some illogical means to prove that I was still okay. Since I felt that God was calling me to perform all these activities, I felt my failure to keep up must indicate weakness on my part, or at least a lack of faith in appropriating God's strength. I was experiencing what health care workers now call burnout—a physical and emotional exhaustion.

### **What Is Burnout?**

Burnout is the current buzzword that simply reiterates a condition that has always been a problem for those who have too much to do and too little time in which to do it.

At times the word burnout has become so overused that its meaning has become blurred. It has come to mean everything from overwork to laziness and boredom. I have had people consult me after two days on a job complaining of burnout. Now, it is possible to feel that you have the wrong job after two days of work, but it is not possible to be truly burned out!

Chronic high-wire living, constantly pushing yourself to the limit, and trying to do it all, are more apt descriptions to me of what is commonly called burnout. Whatever we call it, however, none of us is equipped to cope with perpetually living in the fast lane. None of us can do it all. We must make tough decisions. We must choose priorities.

### **Do Many Great People Experience Burnout?**

Certainly I had good company in my commitment to burn out for God. I met people like Gladys Aylward, who because of her tiny stature was labeled the small woman, and who, when she was rejected by all the existing mission boards, took her own limited savings and traveled to China the long and cheap way—the Trans Siberian Rail-road. At great personal cost, she then did a remarkable work in saving children under war conditions in north China. Her utter abandonment to God was a formative factor in my life. I read, too, biographies of men and women who served God with Herculean strength, and I drew solace from their dedication.

One of those I read about was senate chaplain and noted preacher, Peter Marshall. He pushed himself night and day, suffered a major heart attack, and then resumed the same pace until a second heart attack killed him before he was fifty. Yet no one would dispute the impact of his life's work. He accomplished more before he was fifty than most people achieve in a much longer lifetime.

The same is true for J. B. Phillips. In *The Wounded Healer*, a book about the late Bible translator, we read a poignant account of how he burned out for God. The symptoms of burnout permeate a letter he wrote: "I can with difficulty endure the days, but I frankly dread the nights. The second part of almost every night of my life is shot through with such mental pain, fear and horror that I frequently have to wake myself up in order to restore some sort of balance."

The cause of his burnout is as clear as the burnout itself and is explained in *The Wounded Healer*:

When J. B. Phillips first went to Swanage, he accepted a programme for himself which measured up to his fantasy of a terrific person.... At first every invitation was accepted as a challenge, as a call from the Lord. But when invitations reached three hundred a year, that theory became ridiculous. Even under control, his was a massive programme of writing, speaking, conferences, broadcasts, visits to cities and towns in America and throughout Great Britain. From 1955 to 1961 he maintained this killing programme and at last, when he was fifty-five, he cracked. As one doctor put it, he was scooped out. He felt all his creative powers slipping away....

Even Dr. Phillips himself recognized the symptoms of burnout. In a letter he wrote: "Most of my life I have worked hard, possibly too hard, so that I am now quite unable to relax." And as a solution: "I have an invincible feeling that if I could rest even for a few days, nature would very quickly restore me to my normal health and spirits."

### **Is It Necessary to Burn Out in Order to Get Things Done?**

It is beyond dispute that God used people like Peter Marshall and J. B. Phillips in unusual ways. The question is whether the impact of their lives was improved or diminished by their burning out for God?

I first asked this question of myself when I wearily entered the work force and had one of my first real glimmers that burning out for God might not be God's desire for me. I was reading the biography of Hudson Taylor's daughter-in-law, Geraldine Taylor. She was the chronicler of that great missionary endeavor, the China Inland Mission (CIM), now called Overseas Missionary Fellowship. The CIM looms big in the history of Christian missions since it was the first attempt to reach all of the interior of China for Christ. Because my aunt had been a missionary with the CIM, I had read books about its founder, Hudson Taylor, since childhood.

But as I read a letter from Geraldine Taylor's father to his daughter, my whole approach to missions—and my lifestyle—came under question:

"How well I understand that nervous breaking down from which you have suffered. Let it be a warning. There is a limit you should not attempt to pass in exhausting labors. It is not easy to fix it, but experience shows pretty clearly where it is. I have gone beyond it at times, when all the foundations of life seemed gone. I cannot express what that means, and hope that you will never know. Most people have no conception how thin the foundations are which keep them above the abyss, where the interests of life exist no more. Learn to say 'No' to invitations or calls to labour which destroy the power to labour and the possibility of service."

**As Christians we are called to  
balance, not imbalance, even  
in the area of our work for God.**

This private letter from a father to his daughter was the beginning of my awareness that as Christians we are called to balance, not imbalance, even in the area of our work for God—perhaps especially in our work

for Him. God deserves not only enthusiasm and driving effort, but also the quality of a job done with care and balance.

### **Does God Ever Call Us to Burn Out for Him?**

Many biblical principles have exceptions. There are times when we may be called to temporarily live on a high wire. Peter, after all, was once told to walk on water quite literally. But the fact remains that he only endured as long as he kept his eyes on Christ, and neither Peter nor anyone else that we know of was ever told to do it again. "To burn out for God" for any length of time is not a command which many of us receive in our lifetimes, but it can happen. It is also important, however, to reemphasize that such a command is rare and that it is vital to know that the order does truly come from God Himself and not from ourselves. One way of validating what we feel is guidance from God is to ask our family and those who know us best. Another way is to take a hard look at our potentially hidden motives.

During the last few months of World War II a young Swedish diplomat named Raoul Wallenberg was sent to Hungary to save the last intact group of Jews alive in Europe at the end of the war. On July 9, 1944, Wallenberg left for Budapest. By the end of January 1945, he and a handful of colleagues had saved a hundred thousand Jews from death by the Nazis. He himself was then taken prisoner by the Soviet Union, captured by the very armies which had come to liberate the same people whom Wallenberg had so valiantly rescued from the Nazis. Why he was captured can only be a matter of speculation. In the year 2000 he was officially considered to have been murdered in the then Soviet prison system.

For the seven months of the rescue of "his Jews," as they came to be called, Wallenberg worked day and night against the clock. Nazi henchman Adolf Eichmann had vowed, even in the face of Hitler's defeat, to finish off the extermination of the Jews in Europe; and the "Jew dog Wallenberg" became Eichmann's greatest enemy. Only by quick action, clever acts of deceit and grueling hours of work could Eichmann and his Nazi machine be defeated. Right before his capture by the Russians, Wallenberg was described as "pale and exhausted." The life style of burning out was showing.

In his last conversation with Wallenberg, as Nazi revenge against Wallenberg accelerated, his co-worker and friend Per Anger begged him to hide and save himself. But Wallenberg replied that he could not leave until he had done everything possible to save the remaining Jews and to help restore them to normal life. No rational person could fault such an approach under the conditions of those closing, desperate months of World War II. To me, the example of Raoul Wallenberg is strikingly clear as the exception to a life lived in moderation and balance. There simply was no other way.

**There is but a certain quantity of spiritual  
force in any man. Spread it over a broad surface,  
the stream is shallow and languid; narrow the  
channel and it becomes a driving force.**

Yet for most of us most of the time, burnout only hurts the quality of our work and diminishes the quantity. A long time ago Samuel Rutherford wrote words which have become engraved on my consciousness: "There is but a certain quantity of spiritual force in any man. Spread it over a broad surface, the stream is shallow and languid; narrow the channel and it becomes a driving force." Trying to do everything makes our lives into broad, shallow and languid streams. Focusing our energies, on the other hand, can help us accomplish great things.

God is infinite. We are not. He never intended us to be. He can walk on water. We can't. When we try to go beyond what God has commanded us to do, we can become confused by God's apparent lack of help as we begin to sink. We forget that God has only pledged His support to that which He has commanded us to do. His work receives His supply and no more. We cannot do it all.

What Is the Difference Between Being Poured Out for God and Burning Out?

There is a difference between burning out for God and being poured out for God. Christ's life was balanced. He was not frustrated or hurried. Yet He came to this earth to give His all. In His redemptive act on the cross He gave the ultimate in obedience and sacrifice. He was poured out.

Certain world events are lasting in their impact. In the 1950s the world was gripped by the story of five young missionaries who were slaughtered on a lonely beach in Ecuador after an attempt to reach the Auca Indians for Christ. The pictures and story were on the covers of major magazines like Life. I heard firsthand details of their tragic deaths because relatives of one victim attended my church. The story of these missionaries' willing sacrifice for God deeply appealed to my own youthful idealism. As the years have passed, what happened back there had become an almost forgotten memory to me. Then not long ago, when I was going through some old books, I found two which I felt compelled to reread. One was written about the aviator of the Auca project, Nate Saint; the other was a biography of Jim Elliott. As I read, and the memories and feelings returned, the paradoxes also rose before me once more.

Here were five well-educated, sane young men, "wasted," some people would say, in an attempt to reach an illiterate tribe. Brilliance poured out on ignorance. Was this burnout or something different?

Before he went to Ecuador, Nate Saint went through a period of overwork after which he wrote a memorandum of lessons he had learned. One of the points, listed bluntly and simply, was that "overwork to excess is sin." He apparently did not believe in burning out as a principle of life. Yet none of the five men involved ever ignored the possibility that they might die, and death was not considered to be too high a price for reaching this tribe. They were willing to be poured out, yet not to burn out.

### **What Causes Burnout?**

1. In everyday living alone there are many potential areas for burnout. There are too many classes to study for, too many business trips, too many demands from elderly parents and too many needs from children who have activities ranging from Boy Scouts to Little League and paper routes. Add to these family illness, financial demands, job problems, delinquent children, home repairs and so on. Any of these, when added to just paying the bills and keeping up the house, can completely absorb the time and energy of those who are responsible for them.

2. No matter how well we plan our everyday life, there are what I like to call "hits from Mars." We don't create them by bad choices; we can't avoid them; they just happen. They include the death of a spouse, the loss of a home or job, changes in finances, natural disasters, and chronic illness. Because we never know when something unexpected will "hit," it is good to have the safety net of avoiding living on the edge of burnout. As one wise man said to me: "Don't fill your schedule so full that you can't handle something as simple as a broken faucet."

**"Don't fill your schedule so full that  
you can't handle something as  
simple as a broken faucet."**

3. Many of us aspire to something beyond the demands of everyday life, which opens us up to even more potential for burnout. We may be involved in concerns like world hunger, evangelizing the unreached, presidential politics, AIDS, abortion and many other social issues—each of which has the potential for consuming the lion's share of our time. Hobbies, physical exercise and just plain fun can begin to seem impossible when added to all these other demands which the majority of us face.

4. Sometimes we feel that if what we are doing fits into a neat time schedule, then we are doing okay. In this way we deceive ourselves into thinking we can do it all. I accomplished my overload in college with the help of several delusions. I arranged my classes at the university for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I went to the seminary on Tuesday and Thursday. My job fit in between classes during what I called extra time. Church and dating were necessary recreation, I reasoned. However, the plan didn't work. At the root of my problems was the attitude that if it looked good on a written schedule, it would work.

One problem with my schedule was that it didn't allow enough time for rest. It counted activities like teaching children as recreation, when in actuality they were work. It didn't allow for traffic jams, bouts of flu, telephone calls, cooking, car repairs, extra academic assignments, favors for friends, or even just time to be.

5. Many people just can't say no. For others, an overly-busy schedule seems to indicate success or being needed. For them, burnout becomes a status symbol. For all these people, high-wire living relates, at least partially, to low self-esteem and problems with declaring boundaries, since secure people are more likely to be realistic about their capacities and are better able to draw the line. In this way, our basic view of ourselves, as well as other personal factors like a positive or negative childhood, genetic predispositions, and whether or not we have developed a sense of humor, will influence the ease with which we can set boundaries.

6. Trying to win acceptance and recognition is a common cause of burnout. A young woman who feels inadequate may say yes to every request for baking cakes at church and doing extra duties at school just because she wants the compliments which follow. A child who does not receive enough affirmation at home may overextend at school, trying to get top grades and participate in too many school activities just to be noticed and approved of. Too much overtime at work, or too many dinner parties, or too much of any number of otherwise good activities, can produce burnout just because we are trying to prove our adequacy.

**Too much overtime at work, or too many dinner parties, or too much of any number of otherwise good activities can produce burnout just because we are trying to prove our adequacy.**

7. Some view God as a stern "taskmaster," demanding an excess of activity. Such people feel that they are truly burning out for God. Paradoxically, rather than viewing God as a motivating force in burnout, we often need divine guidance to discern when to say no. It may also take some special divine strength to utter the word no.

Entering into this way of thinking is what psychologist Rollo May has called the Messiah Complex. Good people often feel that a need constitutes a call. If there is a legitimate need, they must meet it. Underneath this mentality is the idea that if I don't do it, nobody else will. But this reasoning is as likely to reflect childhood feelings of inferiority as to indicate God's will. Good people need to confront the needs around them by asking, "Is this a need I am meant to meet?"

8. Sometimes when we do the will of God, we find ourselves in places of ongoing danger or at least in circumstances which militate against rest and recovery. Such stressors can ultimately lead to burnout if they are severe enough or if they are prolonged. For example, a missionary living in a country undergoing a revolution or a teacher in the United States working in the inner city may be operating under an ongoing threat of violence.

**There is growing evidence that prolonged stress can cause great harm.**

There is growing evidence that prolonged stress can cause great harm. Ironically, even the anticipation of danger or the "what ifs" of the future can cause the same physical damage as does stress which results from actual events. To be constantly on guard for your life, to fear physical attack whenever you go out on the street, can cause biochemical defense mechanisms which, if produced on a continual level, are emotionally and physically damaging.

According to recent research the stress hormone, cortisol, is produced to give us increased energy during stress. Because our stressors today don't usually require physical responses like running away from an enemy, the cortisol just sits there. If we add to that a chronic state of stress such as we have just referred

to, the high cortisol levels can affect the immune system and make us vulnerable to ulcers and a variety of illnesses.

Dr. Pamela Peeke in her excellent book, *Fight Fat After Forty*, refers to a work by Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D., *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. "Mammals," Sapolsky postulates, "don't get ulcers because they do not normally harbor chronic stress. That is something we humans do all the time.

"Imagine a zebra on the Serengeti Plain. He's grazing with other zebras under a noonday sun, enjoying the sweet grass. Through experience, this zebra knows that there must be a lion out there somewhere. He knows enough not to go near the lion's home territory. Instead, he lives in the moment, enjoying the grass, not stressing about where the lion is and dealing with the problem only if the lion actually appears.

"We humans, on the other hand, often make a second career out of wondering where our lions are."

2. On the simplest level, it is vital to be able to say no. No is one of the first words we learn to say as small children, and it is probably the first word which we are then taught not to say. It is hard to say no to tasks which we long to do and which other people are pushing on us. As a family counselor I hear all kinds of excuses for not saying no. "There is no one else to do it." "I enjoy it, so it won't take a lot out of me." (My personal favorite!) "I've always felt that if someone asks me to do something, then it's God's way of leading me." "I am best qualified for this job, and so I feel that I should do it."

These are just a few of the more lofty, sophisticated excuses for not saying no and burning out for God. The less-often-articulated, but at times more honest excuses, are: "I just didn't have the courage to say no to someone else or to myself"; and "I like thinking I'm so important that there is no one else who can do the job."

**When I discovered that burning out was  
not God's will for my life, one of my biggest  
problems was, "How do I say no?"**

How can I say no? By nature I have a very hard time saying no. For many years I got along by accommodating people and doing almost everything asked of me. When I discovered that burning out was not God's will for my life, one of my biggest problems was, "How do I say no?"

I quickly learned that I could not wait for people to approve of my saying no. I couldn't wait for their permission or for someone else to do the task in my place. I simply had to say no, whether or not anyone but God Himself understood.

At this time in my life, my private practice and my writing are my two major priorities. God has called me to these tasks. Sometimes public speaking can become a part of these tasks. But I have chosen to make it a third priority. Otherwise I'd start getting overtired, catching viruses easily and would in general find the quality of my work going down. The day I started saying "no" to certain speaking engagements was the beginning of a whole new arena of balance in my work.

I had almost forgotten about that hurdle until recently when someone was trying to convince me that I should be on more radio talk shows. In exasperation she finally said: "You just can't go through life saying no!"

I was stunned for a moment with the abruptness of her reply. Then I was amused. How unlike the old me, I thought. And I rejoiced in this small (but to me significant) affirmation that I had really learned to say no.

3. Give yourself time before saying yes. Don't say yes immediately. There are, of course, times when you will say yes. An opportunity that is too good to pass up will come your way. Or perhaps you will find God is leading you in new directions.

But it is still difficult to know when we are taking on too much, even after we have learned to say no. Often when I am asked to do something, I ask for time to think and decide. I don't want to say no immediately because I want to give God the opportunity to show me if a yes is in order.

**Often our problem is not so much in choosing between the good and the bad (which is usually quite obvious) but between the good and the best.**

I might respond, for example, by saying, "A lot of what you are talking about sounds appealing to me. But I need time to see if this is truly a priority that God wants me to take on." Often our problem is not so much in choosing between the good and the bad (which is usually quite obvious) but between the good and the best.

4. Schedule your recreation and restoration. To avoid a schedule which looks easy on paper but doesn't work in reality, we need to write recreational and rest requirements into our schedules with as much seriousness as we give to anything else. So be sure to plan your recreation and keep to the plan. Just having Sunday as a day of no work is a good start. On that day make your meal ahead of time or eat out. Leave some unscheduled hours in the afternoon. Plan days off, take time to walk the dog, spend some afternoons with the children, make time to read a book.

Taking an extra day off every month to go to the beach, have lunch with a friend, or work on that long-neglected scrapbook (men scrapbook too!) can also help with restoration. An occasional weekend away and a yearly vacation are great antidotes for preventing burnout. The great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said that taking a vacation was an obligation from God. He knew only too well how fatigue and overwork could destroy a person's usefulness for God.

5. Schedule time for the unexpected. Everything from death, earthquakes, floods and illness to traffic jams, clogged-up plumbing and lost dogs take away from the perfect schedule. If there is no "free space," such events will turn a neatly planned life into chaos.

6. Allow time for recovery. Not long ago someone returning from the funeral of a relative said of his surviving spouse: "She'll just have to go on now. It's over." In another instance an older man sought psychological help because "he was taking too long" to get over the death of his father who had died two weeks earlier!

**Some statistics indicate that it takes about two years to recover from the death of a spouse, six years from the death of a child.**

Grief, loss, trauma: these are occurrences in life which have a long-term impact. Some statistics indicate that it takes about two years to recover from the death of a spouse, six years from the death of a child. People vary; circumstances vary. But it is safe to say that in the case of death, the grief just begins after the funeral. Time is needed to recover from all these events in our lives which are indeed not self-induced but come from outside stressors. If our lives are already over-committed, it is harder to take the time we need for unexpected recovery.

7. Beware of the expectations of others. When I was living on a high wire during my college days, people whom I respected gave me mixed messages of approval and disapproval. They would tell me to "slow down" or warn me not to take on so much. Yet in the next breath they would compliment me on all I was doing. Or, worse still, they would add to my already overloaded schedule by asking me to do something else. Something worthwhile, of course! Yet the overriding message which came through was always approval, not disapproval.

I have found that friends who are committed to burnout will, of course, urge me to burn out with them! They may even try to make me feel guilty if I don't become involved in activities which in themselves are good,

but which may add too great a burden to my already overextended schedule. In the process I've discovered that the advice of even godly friends is only as valid as their own perspective on burnout.

8. Watch for physical warning signs. One way to know if we are doing too much is by paying attention to the reactions of our bodies. Falling asleep at the wheel of our car, dozing off in church, being unable to concentrate, or having sleep habits or bodily functions change (such as insomnia, rising blood pressure, aching joints or frequent headaches), may all be symptoms of a schedule which is too pressured.

It is dangerous, too, to compare one person with another. For example, I work and think fast and with great intensity. Therefore, I do more in less time than some people do in a longer period of time; but I also tire faster. I have to stop when it is time for me to stop, not when it is time for someone else.

Some people can sit on a log worrying for a short time and be more tired than a day laborer in a field. "Learn to listen to your body," a wise man once said to me, and his advice has made a great difference in how I feel and, ultimately, in how much I can produce.

9. Keep your focus. Finally, one of the surest ways I know to avoid the pitfall of burning out is to keep my focus on God. Great work is not ordinarily done in busyness. If, through prayer, Bible study and that inner speaking of the Holy Spirit within us, we truly commit our lives, not only to God's work for us but also to God's time schedule, we will find ourselves living lives of balance. A life lived for God in this way will not lack God's balance or God's supply.

10. Recognize the need for psychological help. This is important particularly after suffering a major trauma like street violence or a devastating tornado. Indicators of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome include ongoing changes in sleep patterns or eating habits, "flashbacks," diminished interest, feelings of detachment, instability and hyper-vigilance. This condition may require medication and counseling. Don't suffer needlessly.

For most of us who struggle to live a life of balance, it is instructive as well as humbling to remember the words of Peter Marshall after his first heart attack. As related in the book, *A Man Called Peter*, by Catherine Marshall: "Well, Peter," a friend asked, "I'm curious to know something. What did you learn during your illness?"

"Do you really want to know?" Peter answered promptly. "I learned that the Kingdom of God goes on without Peter Marshall."

1. Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Lyrics* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1959). Reprinted by permission, Elizabeth Barnett, Literary Executor.

---

**Elizabeth Ruth Skoglund, M.A., M.F.T.** is a counselor, educator, and writer. She is the author of over 27 books, ranging in subject matter from psychological self-help and bioethics, to biographies of great people. Her most recent book is *Bright Days, Dark Nights: With Charles Spurgeon in Triumph Over Emotional Pain*. She has also written her own newspaper column and appears frequently on radio talk shows. For the last 28 years she has maintained a fulltime private counseling practice in Burbank, CA.

Copyright © 2001 by Narramore Christian Foundation [Used by permission]