Unraveling Faculty Burnout

Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal

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A goal is not a life—but it may be what gives shape and direction to the way we live each day.

—EMILY NAGOSKI AND AMELIA NAGOSKI

Here’s a confession: I only started my PhD program because I (almost) got fired from the real world.

In the spring of 2002, I asked my boss, the owner of a boutique marketing-communications firm in Silicon Valley, if we could have a meeting at the end of the day. For the three weeks prior, I had been on probation, and Bob had given me a long list of things I had to do or prove to keep my job, my first grown-up job as a marketing agency writer. The day he expressed his dissatisfaction with my work and gave me the ultimatum, I somehow made it home to the house I shared with two other women and our landlord, who used our dining room as the hub of her real estate business. I fell catatonic onto my bed as soon as I shut the door to my room, not moving from the same spot until the next morning. And he’d given me the news on a Friday, so I had to sit with it all...
fulfilling” (Headlee 2020, xii). As Brené Brown (2017) says of her own perfectionism, “I got sucked into proving I could, rather than stepping back and asking if I should—or if I even really wanted to” (194).

As I came out of burnout, I started to realize I could grow into other values and reshape my purpose in different ways. Nagoski and Nagoski contend that “our culture treats you as if ‘being productive’ is the most important measure of your worth, as if you are a consumable good. . . . You are not here to be ‘productive.’ You are here to be you, to engage with your Something Larger, to move through the world with confidence and joy” (184). If I could define excellence and success for myself, instead of looking for outside validation, I could finally revisit my purpose and how I make meaning of my life and work with a greater sense of who I am and who I wanted to be after burnout.

Katherine Segal offers a guided pathway for approaching burnout as an opportunity to reflect and recapture your purpose.

As a coach and therapist, I have worked with hundreds of clients with the goal of implementing plans to change their behavior. I have found it essential to address resistance and motivation before implementing new behaviors as well as throughout the change process. With that in mind, I asked my study participants to describe their process of healing from burnout. Most described the experience of burnout as traumatic, and their motivation for behavioral change resembled post-traumatic growth. Further, they described burnout as a catalyst for reflecting critically on their lives, particularly assessing the time and energy taken up by their careers.

Post-traumatic growth “refers to positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, 1). In reflecting on this source of motivation, the participants described a strong desire to...
engage in behaviors that would help them overcome burnout. Several participants attributed their growth to viewing burnout as an opportunity to transform their lives.

Another aspect of post-traumatic growth for the participants was devising a plan to create a sustainable career, which included the following steps:

1. *Begin by reflecting on your motivations for becoming an educator.* Maybe you have a strong passion for educating the next generation. Maybe you want to be the kind of educator who inspired you. Maybe you want to be the kind of educator you wish you had had throughout your years of schooling. Or, maybe being a professor is the only way to make a living in your field of study. Whatever your reason, write it down. Read it aloud. Revise. Continu-continue reading it aloud and revising until you feel it fully captures your reasons for pursuing and entering the role of professor.

2. *Shift to thinking about why you want to remain an educator.* As before, whatever the rationale, write it down without judgment, read it aloud, and revise. Continue until your stated reasons for continuing in this profession (not this particular job) are clear and deeply resonate with you.

3. *Picture your future life.* Answer the following questions to add detail to your vision: If I were to wake up in my ideal life, what would I see, feel, or experience? As I move through my ideal day, where am I, what am I doing, and who am I with? How does my career fit into my ideal life? Consider these subquestions:
   a. What do I want to achieve throughout my career?
   b. How do I know I am being successful in my career?
   c. How much time do I spend on work responsibilities?
   d. How do I feel while engaging in work responsibilities?
As you form this vision in your mind, try to move through the scene from a first-person perspective rather than a third-person perspective. Notice how you feel emotionally and physically as you sit with this vision. As before, write this all down, read it aloud, and revise as needed. You aren’t looking for the most polished piece of literature, but for the answers that feel true to you. Completing this activity might be difficult at first for those who have spent a long time in the narrative of what we should want compared with what we do want. But just allow your experience of burnout to serve as the motivation for transforming your life.

A Note on Meaningfulness in Career Choices

Aligning our values with our purpose can be a source of deep meaning. When that alignment is off or others exert their values and purpose on you, it can be a source of burnout. Alaya Malach Pines (1993) and Bert Loonstra, Andre Brouwres, and Welko Tomic (2009) agree that when we do not feel as though our lives and work are meaningful, we open the door wide for burnout to enter. The existential crisis that can arise from such a misalignment is born in part from “cultural messaging everywhere that says an ordinary life is a meaningless life” (Brown 2012, 23), that the only good career in academia is one of constant striving for more and better, whether measured in teaching evaluations or grant money awarded, the number of committees led, or articles and books published with prestigious outlets.

Mai experienced this disconnect in conversations with administration about women and full professorships at her institution:

At one point I was having this intense conversation with some of our faculty who know our campus has some old sexist structures that