

Thoughts on Ministry Burnout, from Ministry Burnout, Paulist Press, 1982

From John A. Sanford, Episcopal Priest and Jungian Analyst

Sanford has long been one of my favorite authors. Even though this little book was published years ago, the wisdom shared is timeless. I share quotes and thoughts from the book. All of these are John Sanford's ideas.

Burnout is a problem of energy. As Freud and Jung have shown, humans have a certain quality of libido or psychic energy at one's disposal. It is this energy that enlivens consciousness and makes effective living possible. Furthermore, this energy can be used up, but more psychic energy can also be generated. At the end, will look at how the Ego can become exhausted when it has expanded its quantity of psychic energy, and we will examine the possible ways of renewing that psychic energy so that life can once again be effectively lived.

Special circumstances faced by spiritual caregivers...

- 1) The job of the ministering person is never finished.
- 2) The ministering person cannot always tell if his/her work is having any results.
- 3) The ministering person is always dealing with other people's expectations both conscious and unconscious. All have Inner Monitors. Often times, the Inner Monitor seems to speak with the voice of God. That is, we hear this voice with its "shoulds" and "oughts" to speak with great authority. But though it poses as God, upon closer inspection, we discover find that it is built up from the collective expectations of many people compounded with our own fears of failure and guilt. We are not allowed by our Inner Monitor to have a Shadow, that is, a dark side with its own impulses, needs, and desires. We may make a great effort to fulfill this goodness, but the result will be weariness of soul and exhaustion.
- 4) The ministering person must work with the same people year in and year out...staff in the hospital, members of the congregation
- 5) Because he/she works with people in need, there is a particularly great drain on the energy of the ministering persons.
- 6) The ministering person deals with many people who come to his/her church not for solid spiritual food but for "strokes".
- 7) The ministering person must function a great deal of the time on his "persona". It is the front or mask we wear in order to relate to the outer world. When we are being genuine, energy flows in us naturally, but when

we have to cover up part of our genuine feelings, or, worse yet, assume a posture that does not belong to us at all, a lot of energy is required. Anger is one of the toughest.

- 8) The ministering person might become exhausted by a sense of perceived failure.
- 9) If the work is repetitive, the ministering person can lose his/her creativity and exhaustion and boredom are the inevitable results.

The Problem of the Exhausted Ego – Read the story of Elijah in I Kings 19

The story of Elijah is about an Ego that has become exhausted. He suffers from more than chronic depression; he is exhausted so complete that only the pilgrimage to Mount Sinai and the personality reorientation dialogue with God can cure him. Burnout and the Exhausted Ego are similar. Burnout is largely task oriented and, by definition stems from the wearing out of one's work. The problem of the Exhausted Ego is more fundamental, for it revolves around the wearing out of a person's entire Ego orientation. A life in which love, and morality predominate has tiring quality to it because it revolves around real relationships and requires the effort of caring. The problem of the Exhausted Ego is further complicated because it is almost always accompanied by the wearing out of what Jung called "the superior function." These functions are thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition. We have all four, but we use one that is our superior function that is most natural to us. Feeling or intuitive types often become as spiritual caregivers and the superior function serves them well for long periods of time. As we age and overuse that superior function, we become worn down and the meaning once derived begins to lose meaning. This is the point when the Ego becomes Exhausted and might collapse completely or person's vitality made gradually fade. The solution to this problem is entirely individualized. The Exhausted Ego finds new life not through rest and repose but through a life of a different and renewed activity, whether this be expressed inwardly are outwardly. It is not rest that restores, except temporarily, but tapping into the energies within us we have not yet used. The solution to the problem of our deeper exhaustion is to undertake what we would call in religious language a spiritual pilgrimage or search for God, and what the model depth psychologist might call individuation or the search for wholeness.

Finding energy again,

Psychic energy is constantly being broken down and must be built back up. Most of our psychic energy is spent on meaningful relationships, worthwhile work, and creative play. Psychic energy must flow in and out. For this reason, any block to our flow of energy is a threat to our well-being. If a person's work is boring, that is a threat to his life vitality. If someone loses people, he/she loves, that too is a threat to live, and may even lead to illness. Human beings cannot always pour energy out; there must be times when energy flows back in.

An exercise. If you are feeling depleted, close your eyes, become relaxed, and picture a lake. The image that comes to your mind may show you where you are. Is the lake full and brimming? Is the lake stagnant and blocked up? Is the lake becoming drained and empty? So, it may be with your energy. If you then picture streams flowing into the lake, renewing it, you may help energy recreate itself within you.

Here are other suggestions for renewing energy.

1. A change of outer activity, something entirely different from our work.
2. Creative relationships
3. Using the body creativity, preferably something that requires deep breathing.
4. Mindfulness and mediation
5. Dream reflection – energy that flows up from the unconscious
6. Keeping a journal
7. Paying attention to our fantasies
8. Active imagination – we deliberately interact with thoughts and images – prayer of the heart