

## BOOK ONE: THE PROBLEM



ONCE UPON A TIME there was a man who was a minister who had lost touch with the meaning of life. This seems impossible because ministers are in charge of the meaning of life, but nonetheless, it happened to him.

He had graduated from Seminary 20 years before and worked hard within the system. He had been promoted to increasingly more challenging positions. He had volunteered the little free time he had each week in working as a volunteer in his denomination and in the community.

He had done everything he was supposed to do, and it wasn't working.

So he worked even harder, assuming that the problem was a lack of effort and that, by sheer investment of energy, he could break through the walls which seemed to enclose him. He would prowl through the bookstores buying manuals on time management, success and motivation. He felt envious and angry toward colleagues who seemed to him to be less talented but achieved more in their work. He spoke less and less with his wife about what he was feeling because he did not like her answers.

He came home tired and couldn't sleep. He would rise in the night and channel zap through 133 channels on his cable TV, looking for something that could hold his interest.

One night when he came back to bed, his wife woke up and she sleepily began

to pat him the shoulder and murmur into his ear: "It will be OK, honey, it will be OK."

He began to cry. She woke up and comforted him, and he couldn't stop crying. After about an hour she whispered the words into his ear that would change their lives:

THIS IS TOO HARD  
FOR YOU  
TO DO  
ALONE.

"You're right" he agreed, surrendering, and immediately fell into a deep sleep.



The next morning at coffee he was embarrassed. "Admitting that I am in a position where my life is unmanageable is one thing, and admitting that I have no clue as to how to solve it is another. It's obvious that I need someone with a fresh perspective to show me the way that I can't find for myself anymore."

"I agree," she said, pouring him a second cup of coffee. "That's why I've already called my brother Frank. He'll call you at the office today."

Frank was the head of personnel for a rapidly growing corporation in Capitol City, about 30 miles away. "Why Frank?" he asked.

"Honey, if you were unique, your problem would be unique, and it would have no solution. But it's not unique, and, as troubled personnel is his business, Frank has

probably seen it before." She bent over and kissed his forehead. "And you're never going to shut me out of that part of your life again."

"Amen," he said, and kissed her thoroughly.



"Carol and I have been worried about you," his brother-in-law Frank said over the phone after hearing about his frustrations. "The dark night of the soul, eh? That's rough."

"Dark night? Or just not able to handle Mondays anymore?" The troubled minister found it easy to talk with him. "Frank, what should I do about this?"

"Well," his brother-in-law began slowly, "I wish I could tell you that your problem is unusual, but it is not. Now that big business is turning to the model of volunteer for employees, we are getting a lot of the same problems in business. A volunteer works hard, doesn't worry about overtime, and passionately cares about a job. But if a volunteer begins to feel used and taken advantage of, that volunteer quits or decreases the work they accept; an employee doesn't have that choice. The fuel for those extra hours is the passion and excitement; when that motivation is used up, our employees are crashing in patterns similar to what you are experiencing."

"What are you doing about it?"

"Right now, we're just trying to define it. We're calling it 'burnout' although that word is inadequate. Our first thought was to educate our managers, but many of our employees burn out in response to their own volunteering in the workplace, not

because anything imbalanced is asked of them by management."

"You mean they do it to themselves?"

"Yes, to a large degree."

"Well, I certainly have volunteered for my burnout; I don't have a boss who is looking over my shoulder every minute acting like a slavedriver."

"Are you sure about that?" Frank asked. "If you've been working like a slave, how can you be certain there is no slavedriver?"

The troubled minister had no answer for that question.

"We're seeing two interlocking concepts as people break down: *doing the wrong thing and trying harder* and *doing the right thing without enough help*."

"I know the last one is my problem," the minister said.

"They probably both are, but without enough help - and the idea of enough includes the right kind of help - any task will fail to be accomplished. Enough help is enough to not only get it done, but in a way that leaves everyone involved healthy."

"I know I'm rushing from one thing to another and always having to cut corners."

"So you know you have a problem?"

"I know I do," the minister said.



Frank changed the subject. "You know I attend First Church here. About a year ago our minister started talking about this subject and has changed a lot of his working habits as a result. I would like to invite you to a meeting this Wednesday night to meet

with him and talk about it."

First Church in Capital City had steadily grown over the past 20 years under Frank's minister, and significantly in the past few years. It had gone from being a church a little larger than the one he had now to the largest church in their denomination in the state. There was a lot of envy and criticism among the ministers about that, but a lot of curiosity as well. Certainly if anyone knew how to deal with being overwhelmed, it would be the minister of First Church, Capital City.

"Let me get my calendar." Frank heard the shuffling of pages. "I have a meeting this Wednesday evening. Perhaps he would meet with me during the day."

Frank laughed. "I don't think he would; I'm sure he'd tell you to come Wednesday night. Tell me about your Wednesday night meeting. Are you chairing a committee?"

"No, it's one of our women's circles. I like to make as many of their meetings as I can to keep in touch."

"So your presence is appreciated but not truly necessary?"

"When you put it that way, I guess you would say that it's not necessary."

"So you will have to decide which is the best use of your time: learning about a new way to work and live, or perpetuating your old ways."

"When you put it that way, I guess I will see you Wednesday."

Frank gave him the details of where they would meet next Wednesday and that he would send him a copy of a test he was using to help identify burnout. "Would you like a tip that would increase the value of your experience?"

"Sure."

"Come a couple of hours early, grab some food and take it to a park. Use the

time to stroll, relax, think about your situation. Sit on a bench and don't move for a while. Give yourself an hour to think. Then come to the meeting."

"That makes no sense at all."

"Just try it. Give yourself an hour to think."

"OK, OK! I promise!" the minister said, laughing, as he disconnected. Frank was pushy, but he could tell that Frank really cared about him.



It was raining hard the following Wednesday, so that meant the park would not be that pleasant a place to spend an hour. He had had trouble keeping his promises lately with so much to do, but it felt important to him to keep this one. But how?

He decided to keep his promise by going to the mall; it wasn't quiet but it would be sufficient. He would just be surrounded by human nature rather than nature.

He picked up a tray of his favorite food at the food court and began to observe the river of people flowing down the walkways of the mall. The burnout test from Frank lay beside him on the table.<sup>1</sup> His score put him in the danger zone, with the only blessing being that his marriage and health had not yet been significantly affected - yet. He had far too many "5" answers for "Usually true." He definitely had a problem and he definitely had to do something.

The test was pretty straightforward and convincing. He reviewed the questions and his answers again.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dstress.com/burnoutq.html>

- \_\_\_ 1. *I feel tired when I've gotten adequate sleep.*
- \_\_\_ 2. *I am dissatisfied with my work.*
- \_\_\_ 3. *I feel sad for no apparent reason.*
- \_\_\_ 4. *I am forgetful.*
- \_\_\_ 5. *I am irritable and snap at people.*
- \_\_\_ 6. *I avoid people at work and in my private life.*
- \_\_\_ 7. *I have trouble sleeping due to worrying about work.*
- \_\_\_ 8. *I get sick more than I used to.*
- \_\_\_ 9. *My attitude about work is "why bother?"*
- \_\_\_ 10. *I often get into conflicts.*
- \_\_\_ 11. *My job performance is not up to par.*
- \_\_\_ 12. *I use alcohol and/or drugs to feel better.*
- \_\_\_ 13. *Communicating with others is a strain.*
- \_\_\_ 14. *I can't concentrate on my work as I once could.*
- \_\_\_ 15. *I am easily bored with my work.*
- \_\_\_ 16. *I work hard but accomplish little.*
- \_\_\_ 17. *I feel frustrated with my work.*
- \_\_\_ 18. *I don't like going to work.*
- \_\_\_ 19. *Social activities are draining.*
- \_\_\_ 20. *Sex is not worth the effort.*
- \_\_\_ 21. *I watch TV most of the time when not working.*
- \_\_\_ 22. *I don't have much to look forward to in my work.*

\_\_\_\_\_ 23. *I worry about work during my off hours.*

\_\_\_\_\_ 24. *Feelings about work interfere with my personal life.*

\_\_\_\_\_ 25. *My work seems pointless.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Total:*

*Scoring:*

*25-50 You are doing well.*

*51-75 You are OK if you take preventive action.*

*76-100 You are a candidate for burnout.*

*101-125 You are burning out.*

*You are burning out.* He got a refill on his drink and watched people for a while. He suddenly noticed how few of them showed any signs of happiness or enjoyment. Their faces were either set in a look of grim determination or lost in a vacant passivity. The passive ambled as if unsure of their direction. *You are burning out.* The grim ones marched forward as if expecting a battle at any moment.

He found it amusing until he realized that they seemed to be mirroring his dissatisfaction in life. After a while, without consciously realizing it, he began to pray for them and, eventually, also for himself. *You are burning out.* The hour passed very quickly.