

Can We End Burnout by Redeeming Work?

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JONATHAN Malesic's *The End of Burnout* opens with a deeply personal account of burnout's devastating impact, linking misery and despair with a tinge of first-world guilt. ("Why did I hate such a good job?") The author's intimate experience of burnout serves as a thread that loops together the various elements of this sweeping exploration of the topic. Personalizing the book this way, memoir-like, proved an endearing narrative technique, and I was hooked from the start. This is a remarkable book, a comprehensive and multidisciplinary scholarly work, but an accessible one that for many readers will succeed in forcing a test of their assumptions and a careful examination of their own cultural context. It certainly prompted this response from me. In this brief reaction to the book, I focus on three points. First, after explaining my own frame of reference, I reflect on Malesic's central proposition—that a primary causal factor in our cultural burnout epidemic is, paradoxically, the shared belief in the "noble lie" that work gives people dignity, character, and purpose. Second, I poke a stick at Max Weber's thesis that the driving force of capitalism flows out of a culturally internalized moral and emotional need, influenced by historic Calvinism, to prioritize material prosperity (originally viewed as a sign of God's favor). Instead, I argue that idolatry, not Calvinist theology, is at the heart of the noble lie. Finally, while largely affirming Malesic's perspective on how to fix the problem, I suggest an overlapping but slightly different solution.

The Dark Side of Work as a Calling

Malesic's personal disclosures do more than evoke empathy; they also help readers understand the lens through which he explores the topic. Here I follow the author's lead and offer a few clues into what shapes my own perspective. Professionally, I am a vocational psychologist and professor at a public research university. My research investigates the notion that work can be pursued as a "calling." I have carefully defined calling (as a transcendent summons toward purposeful work that benefits others), developed scales to measure a sense of calling empirically, and investigated the difference it makes when people think of their work this way. I have

published books with titles like *Make Your Job a Calling*, *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace*, and *Redeeming Work*. I teach courses like “Positive Career Counseling and Coaching” and “The Psychology of Calling and Meaningful Work.” There is no denying it; I have an optimistic bias when it comes to what people can experience within the work role.

Yet I found myself reading *The End of Burnout* during a precarious time in my own career journey. I am currently wrapping up my third (and, mercifully, final) year of a difficult administrative appointment that has proven to be thoroughly crushing. Nearly everything about it has been thankless and grueling. It has kept me up far too many nights, demanded inordinate amounts of emotional energy, and killed my research momentum. When I exit the role, I assume (hope, anyway) that my vigor and joy for my work will return, but I know that some healing will be necessary before I get there.

This disconnect between what I believe to be true about work (at its best, anyway) and the frustration in my current work situation made me particularly receptive to Malesic’s definition of burnout as “the experience of being pulled between expectation and reality at work.” I could relate to the metaphor of trying to stand on stilts that have parted and are falling away from each other. So Malesic’s argument was of natural interest to me. Does our cultural belief that work offers “dignity, character, and a sense of purpose” inevitably set us up for burnout, not despite those ideals but because of them? I am self-aware enough to see that the burnout I am enduring now was initiated by a series of decisions driven by a sense of calling. I agreed to take on the administrative role because I support the mission, tend to respond to need, sensed I could make a positive impact, and felt that I was uniquely suited to do the job at the time. But I also knew it would be extremely stressful. Worse, I agreed to serve not long after immersing myself in the growing body of research on the so-called “dark side” of calling.

As context, a wealth of evidence has accumulated showing that, ordinarily, people who report they are living their calling at work (approximately 1/3 of the U.S. population¹) experience tremendous benefits, both in terms of their work lives (e.g., higher job satisfaction, confidence, intrinsic motivation) and in general (e.g., higher affective well-being, sense of meaning, self-rated health).² Yet evidence also suggests that sometimes, for some people, a sense of calling can have deleterious effects, making them vulnerable to exploitation, workaholism, and yes, burnout.³ Still unanswered in the research literature are these key questions: How can something that ordinarily is so positive turn into something so bad? And what is the tipping point?

One answer that aligns with Malesic's argument is that some people with a calling rationalize an unhealthy overinvestment in their work *because they feel called to it*, and the resulting overinvestment leads to workaholism and, finally, burnout. Theoretically, burnout vulnerability is especially high for workers with a calling who are highly conscientious, possess perfectionistic tendencies, display a high need for achievement, suffer from low self-esteem, and work in relatively unsupportive organizations.⁴ Perhaps a shared experience of many such people—and the fundamental problem—is that they view work as their *source* of dignity, character, and purpose rather than as a life domain in which their *inherent* dignity, character, and purpose might be expressed. I find Malesic's logic in support of this possibility to be compelling. But ultimately it is an empirical question—a hypothesis that as far as I can tell is still untested, one that I am eager for someone (maybe me—after my time of healing!) to investigate.

The Weber Thesis, Idolatry, and Redemption

One of the roots of burnout culture, according to Malesic, is summarized in Weber's famous *Protestant Ethic* thesis. For good reason, Weber's thesis is considered "one of the more brilliantly creative theories ever developed by a sociologist."⁵ But like many scholars, Malesic seems to consider the thesis to be axiomatic, when in reality, the empirical evidence supporting it falls somewhere between weak and nonexistent.⁶ Furthermore, if any Calvinist Protestants in the industrial age were motivated toward productivity out of anxiety over their eternal salvation, they were operating under a deeply flawed interpretation of their own theologian's teachings. Yes, Calvin's reading of the Bible suggested that salvation is an unearned gift and that, once saved, good works (more so than economically productive works) should be performed out of obedience and gratitude. But in Calvin's view, assurance of salvation comes from the gospel promises and the sacraments, not from worldly success; interpreting such "good works" as evidence of one's salvation functions as just another type of works righteousness. For this reason, theologically speaking, the fruits of this "spirit of capitalism" are actually an insidious form of idolatry. In the words of prominent contemporary Calvinist pastor Tim Keller: "More than other idols, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we are ourselves God; that our security and value rest in our own wisdom, strength and performance."⁷ A shorthand, broadly relevant definition of idolatry is "making a good thing an ultimate thing." This, I believe, is at the heart of the noble lie. Work is good, but when it becomes an ultimate thing, it corrupts. And Malesic's

point is well-taken: it does so not only on a personal level, but on a cultural level as well.

How to undo the burnout culture? If the problem is that we have made a good thing an ultimate thing, one solution is to focus on what economist Steven McMullen describes as a creative service narrative.⁸ In a creative service narrative, good work is putting one's gifts *to work* for the well-being of the whole. For McMullen, the labor market "builds communities and networks of people with specialized skills in ways that other areas of life rarely do," and work "often provides people with the best opportunity to tangibly serve people around them."⁹ The fundamental concern about technological change and the rise of automation, from this perspective, is not that displaced workers will live in poverty, but instead that more people may struggle to find clear opportunities to serve others. In McMullen's words, "Our true challenge is not to avoid work but to figure out how to do the most good possible as we participate" in the world of work.¹⁰ I agree with Malesic that human flourishing requires universal dignity and compassion for self and others, and surely freely-chosen leisure plays a role as well. Yet, when the average American adult spends more than half their leisure time watching TV,¹¹ and when those outside the labor force spend fewer hours volunteering on average than do employed adults,¹² it is hard to conclude that more leisure time naturally fosters an other-oriented focus. For most people, work remains a more reliable pathway for engaging in service to their communities.¹³ Still, after reading *The End of Burnout*, I recognize that ennobling work via the creative service narrative makes burnout less likely only if work is viewed as a way to express a broader sense of meaning in life, rather than serving as the source of meaning. Held in check this way, work can still work for us. Work "as we know it" might not be worth saving, but I think work is worth redeeming.

¹ Micah J. White, Dylan R. Marsh, Bryan J. Dik, and Cheryl L. Beseler, "Prevalence and Demographic Differences in Work as a Calling in the United States: Results from a Nationally Representative Sample," *Journal of Career Assessment* 29/4 (2021): 624–643.

² For a brief review of this research, see Bryan J. Dik, Michael F. Steger, and Kelsey L. Autin. "Emerging Perspectives: Calling, Meaning, and Volition," in *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work*, ed. Steven D. Brown and Robert W. Lent (New York: Wiley, 2020), 237–270.

³ Jeffrey A. Thompson and J. Stuart Bunderson, "Research on Work as a Calling...and How to Make It Matter," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 6 (2019): 421–443.

⁴ Ryan D. Duffy, Bryan J. Dik, Richard P. Douglass, Jessica W. England, and Brandon L. Velez, "Work as a Calling: A Theoretical Model," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 65/4 (2018): 423–439.

⁵ James J. Chriss, “Weber’s Protestant Ethic Thesis in Five Steps,” *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 20 (2019): 51–65, at 59.

⁶ Ibid. See especially the annotated bibliography of criticisms of Weber at the end of Chriss’s paper.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Viking Press, 2009), 75.

⁸ Steven McMullen, “A World without Work?” *Comment*, May 5, 2016, online at <https://comment.org/a-world-without-work/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Average Hours per Day Spent in Selected Leisure and Sports Activities by Age,” online at <https://www.bls.gov/charts/american-time-use/activity-leisure.htm>.

¹² See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Volunteering in the United States, 2015,” online at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>.

¹³ See McMullen, “A World without Work?”