

On Burnout, Acedia, and Total Work

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MY MOTHER DIED THIS YEAR at age 102. She was wise and witty, and a very good letter-writer. Her grandchildren and great-grandchildren discovered this and would often use her when they had an assignment in high school to interview someone who “went through WWII” or knew the “days before television.” When I was going through her papers, I discovered a letter she wrote to one of her great-grandchildren that included these lines: “You asked if I was stressed in high school. The answer is, ‘no.’ When I was your age the word ‘stress’ was not in our vocabulary. Maybe people were stressed but we didn’t identify it as that.”

This puts me in mind of “burnout.” It is, as Jonathan Malesic points out, a relatively new word. Is burnout itself new, or have we now named what was always there? On this score, Malesic’s book distinguishes itself from other contemporary treatments that offer self-help or therapeutic advice without ever stopping to think about the fact that a few decades back no one had the slightest idea what it meant to be “burnt-out.” By contrast, Malesic is aware of, and attempts to explain and address, the newness of burnout.

Besides being historically aware, the book is also engagingly written and often whimsical. Unfortunately, it is ultimately unsatisfying, even confusing, about how we really are to understand burnout as a new thing that also relates to older things. It founders on the very questions it (rightly) introduces. To interpret the spirit behind my mother’s comments about “stress,” first off, what is going on that has brought us of late to talk in the ways we do about “burnout” (or stress) in our day? Second, surely people experienced something akin to burnout (or stress) in the past; human beings have always suffered disappointments and pressures in their work lives and were worn down by these. What names did they give to these experiences or feelings?

While I don’t find Malesic’s answers to these questions satisfying or complete, he brings up words for the past and critiques of the present that can help. I want to focus on two points he considers: (1) the historical connection between burnout and the moral vice called acedia and (2) the rise in recent times of what Josef Pieper calls “total work.” Acedia and the rise

of total work make guest appearances in Malesic's book. I think they should be the main players.

Malesic initially treats acedia as one of burnout's predecessors: first melancholia for the Greeks, then acedia for the medieval Christians, neurasthenia in the nineteenth century, and now burnout.¹ This narrative display is largely unhelpful. It makes it appear as if words and ideas are simply locked in different times: medieval Christians had their acedia, we have our burnout. Yet Malesic pauses to quote Evagrius, who says of acedia that it "instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor."² Appreciatively, Malesic adds the following: "It's too bad the term acedia has disappeared from Western culture, since it perfectly captures the anxious distractibility typical of our workers today. In the desert of the open-plan office—or the improvised home office, a laptop on the kitchen table—our temptations are online, just a click away from our work. We are not being especially productive, but we aren't being lazy either. We're at work, after all."³

Acedia is also referred to as sloth, the term most often used to identify it as one of the seven deadly sins (which began among the Eastern Christian ascetics, as Malesic notes, as eight "bad thoughts"). In our modern vocabulary sloth has come simply to mean laziness. This is not what the Desert Fathers meant. Malesic's "anxious distractedness" is actually a fine beginning description of acedia that needs elaboration.

Drawing from Evagrius and his pupil Cassian, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung notes that acedia involves shirking a specific kind of work, namely, the work tied essentially to one's identity as (for Cassian) a monk. That shirking "signals a distancing of oneself from one's identity and investment as a member of a spiritual community bound by its love for God."⁴ It involves giving into distractions from doing what matters most—and not because your boss told you so, or because it is more "productive" or "effective," but because it relates to who you ultimately are: in religious terms, who God made you to be. Aquinas identifies this as "aversion to the divine good in us," which DeYoung interprets as a kind of refusal to "accept a new identity that needs to be lived out, day by day, for the rest of your life."⁵ Accepting this new identity in its fullness is difficult; it will take work, but good work that will transform us. This is the work acedia resists. The resistance can take various forms, including the "restless distractions of endless activity"⁶—which yields a discovery: acedia can take the form of workaholism. The workaholic busies himself in an effort to distract himself, or give himself an excuse for not doing the most important work in human life, what DeYoung calls the work of love.

Is the work we are often pressed to do in our current culture the kind of work that helps us and others in the communities of which we are part grow in love? Often it is not. When it is not, perhaps it *should* burn us out. Or, perhaps more subtly, as we do our work, whatever it is, can we also come to see it as good to do despite all its trials, learning how to do it as a kind of work of love? In some cases, this is impossible since the work is intrinsically destructive or demeaning or utterly meaningless. But in other cases, work that initially seemed odious, the culprit in our burnout, can be transfigured when it is done in love. One wonders if this might have been partly what Malesic's personal work history shows, going as he does from burnt-out tenured professor to reasonably happy adjunct professor, whose job is really not so bad since "someone is depending on me."⁷

Perhaps burnout does not so much historically replace acedia as reflect its effects on a new scale. How much of our modern work, and of our modern view of work, has written within it an avoidance of the work that matters most—the work of love, or the work that most closely connects us to our true identity? Victims of acedia consciously avoid this work; perhaps we have come to do this wholesale, and largely unawares.

This brings us to a second matter, our current culture of "total work." Malesic offers insights to be remembered, such as that in our time "burnout" is often actually a badge of honor. We love to tell each other how busy we are so as to prove how important and useful we are. When we do, we reflect not just our own hubris but a kind of cultural agreement: you are worthy if you are vital to "the work" (whatever it is).

Malesic is helped to make these points by Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*; there Pieper uses the term "functionary" to describe how the culture of total work redefines its participants.⁸ Yet we need to know a little more about what Pieper thinks leisure is, and how it opposes the world of total work. For Pieper, "leisure" is not what we might think; it is not a vacation or a "break." A break is "something that has been built into the whole working process, a part of the schedule. The 'break' is there for the sake of the work."⁹ Leisure, on the other hand, "is not justified in making the functionary as 'trouble free' in operation as possible, with minimal 'downtime,' but rather with keeping the functionary *human*, and this means that the human being does not disappear into the parceled-out world of his limited work-a-day function, but instead remains capable of taking in the world as a whole, and thereby to realize himself as a being who is oriented to the whole of existence."¹⁰

For Pieper, this orientation to the whole is a kind of worship. Worship is distinguished in part by its effortlessness, for in worship we receive and respond; we do not cause and manipulate. For Pieper, in worship we

contemplate the whole of creation, recognizing our part within it, celebrate what we do not control, and acknowledge what we have been given that we did not make. For Jews, this corresponds with the true meaning of Sabbath rest, which is decidedly different from our idea of “the weekend.” Importantly, we celebrate the Sabbath together, and in the celebration the distinctions of rank or relative productivity fall away. The leisure of the Sabbath breaks total work’s stranglehold of productivity. Sabbath returns us to ourselves, reminding us we are not what we achieve but rather are each precious to God, human beings made in and for love, and worthy of the highest respect.

At the end of his book, Malesic reaches for something like this, invoking Pope Leo’s vision that “all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God,” which Malesic thinks there are “many paths to.”¹¹ Yet this affirmation of our worth irrespective of our work lacks the compass Pieper’s leisure brings. On Pieper’s view, the receptivity of leisure, its “effortlessness,” rightly orients our efforts (and not the other way around). Because of the Sabbath, we know what we are doing for the rest of the week, and why, while we are not defined by it, it is good to do. The Sabbath celebration of creation reminds us of why we work for its good, including the good of our fellow human creatures who deserve justice and compassion.

Malesic presses near the end of his book for a human dignity that is not dependent on work, but gives little indication of how we might live *and work* in the light of this. Gestures in this direction, for instance, about how the Benedictines combine work with prayer, are eclipsed on the last page where he tells us that work isn’t really worth saving. “Maybe that’s because work isn’t inherently very good. Maybe we should just let the robots have it and figure out a way to distribute the fruits of their labor.” Then we can walk our dogs when we want, “play tennis at noon,” and “stare up at the sky for hours.”¹² Put in Pieper’s terms, this sounds more like self-indulgence than leisure, an endless weekend rather than the Sabbath. It is advice that, by simple negation, remains tied to the terms set by the world of total work. To address the rise of burnout in our time, we need another, deeper vision of who we are and why we work.

¹ See Jonathan Malesic, *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022) 39–48.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 84.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷ Malesic, *The End of Burnout*, 215.

⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁹ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 53.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Malesic, *The End of Burnout*, 211.

¹² Ibid., 230.