

My Battery is Low and It's Getting Darker

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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On February 13, 2019, a curious thing happened – NASA announced that the Opportunity Rover had concluded its mission on Mars. Originally intended to prepare the way for eventual human missions to the planet, it had an expected length of mission of 90 days. It lasted almost 15 years. You want to talk about over-functioning! But that's not the curious part, actually that's the amazing part. The curious part was the level of emotion that people felt about this robot. Someone tweeted out what the last bits of data could be translated to from the Opportunity rover and turned it into prose: “My battery is low and it's getting dark.” For a being powered exclusively by solar panels, it was an ominous message. And people found it moving – they related to it. People tweeted messages of the fact that that was how they felt lately – that their battery was low and it's getting dark. Others gave moving eulogies about a robot and its great striving for wonder, for discovery, for the advancement of humanity. Others crafted beautiful images of the first people on Mars turning Opportunity into a monument, honoring it as the first being on Mars. I was unexpectedly moved by both Opportunity and by the fact that people felt such resonance to the phrase: “my battery is low and it's getting dark.”

It sounded an awful lot like burnout to me, and I see burnout quite a bit in my office as a minister, and I experience it quite a bit as someone who works hard, is completing a doctorate, has a 2 year old, and just not enough time. According to Gallup: “A recent Gallup study of nearly 7,500 full-time employees found that 23% of employees reported feeling burned out at work very often or always, while an additional 44% reported feeling burned out sometimes. That means about two-thirds of full-time workers experience **burnout** on the job,” So needless to say, burnout is an issue, but I mean it in the much more general sense than workplace burnout. I mean the sort of weariness that stretches into the bones. You can feel burnout, if you've ever experienced it. I feel it in my bones, when it happens to me. My chest too.

So, what do you do with burnout? What do you do when you're giving your all, and all of a sudden it feels like you hit a wall? What do you do when you wake up and there's another school shooting and it feels like that's just too much. For me, this week, seeing the events at Santa Clarita shook me all over again. I'm getting back up again, plugging further in, but I gotta tell you, the events of the world are unforgiving if you're looking for a break. There isn't any break coming.

I have 4 recommendations for burnout:

The first recommendation is to accept it. If you're a high-achiever, or if you've got people depending on you, then you may be tempted to say that you'll power through. That you can punch out on the other side through pure strength of will. Well, that's not usually how it works. So, however you're feeling and wherever you are, I want you to know – that's OK. We have to have a non-judgmental disposition towards ourselves in moments of burnout. We can't be a bad friend to ourselves. And if you're like me, then you can support others in taking a step back, but you resist doing it for yourself. The first task is to get real. All healing flows from this starting point.

The second recommendation is to have some sort of spiritual practice. Might I be so bold in a church as to recommend some standard ones: meditation, prayer, quiet. There are of course myriad choices on what spiritual practice. If your spiritual practice is knowing what the moon is up to in its broad course across the heavens, which is my favorite nonstandard one, by the way, then that's awesome. If you have plants indoors, that's great. Whatever it is. Start doing it now. If you're burned out, definitely do it, but don't force yourself. If you're not burned out, then definitely start, because spiritual practices are one of the foundational ways that we ground ourselves and **build resilience**.

The third recommendation is to find community. Now, church is great for this, but so are a lot of others. There are some people in my office, however, who have been doing a lot around here and are experiencing some burnout in those roles. I will say publicly what I said in my office: churches play different roles at different points in our lives. There's a time for diggin' in, for administrating, for everything. There's also a time to take a step back for a few months and find where your wonder meets this congregation. The thing about church is that we're going to be here every week, doing what we do, and we're going to be having fun doing it. So, this place is a place of action, a place of reflection, a place of healing, and a place where people discern their great talents and gifts. It's all those things, not just one. It's robust enough that it is able to meet a variety of needs. So, give what you can, take what you need from this place. In doing so, you might find the balm you need out in the world, as well.

The fourth recommendation flows from our story in 1 Kings today. Here's Elijah is just done; he's frustrated, he is ready to give it all up. What is the lifesaving remedy to this that God administers. A nap and a snack. It feels stunningly simple, but get enough sleep, eat something, and do nothing for a little while. You'd be surprised what being in tune with yourself and your body's needs will accomplish. Our world is set up to deny these basic necessities but we have to take them. I have already preached one sermon about napping, so I will not go to in-depth here, but needless to say, I'm a fan.

So, in a congregation filled with doers, with people who are social activists, nurses, teachers, caring professionals, caregivers, moms, dads, worker bees, and retirees, I think we probably have some folks here who are currently or have recently experienced burnout. Maybe some of you resonate with "my battery is low and it's getting dark." I wish I could offer an easy way out, but be sure to try some of these. You may build resilience and find a way out of burnout to the wonder of being human.