

FROM BURNOUT TO PURPOSE



Simple Strategies for a
Soul-Fulfilling Approach to Work

GINA S. CALVANO

FROM BURNOUT TO PURPOSE

INTRODUCTION

PRELUDE TO PURPOSE

Are You Feeling Burned Out—I Can Relate

Does your job have you feeling burned out? Very early in my career, mine did. Yet when I was in my early twenties, I didn't call what I did in response to that feeling as "choosing a path of purpose." I just remembered making a conscious decision to have "a good life"—whatever that meant. I wish I had known the power of that decision at the time I made it. I would have made that decision long before becoming burned out by the age of twenty-six.

It's true, by twenty-six years of age I was burned out.

However, you never would have known it by looking at me.

I exceeded beyond what was expected of me, which was to graduate high school as an average student, get married, have a steady job, and pop out a few kids all while keeping my husband's house clean. Instead, I graduated high school

as a National Honor Society Student. I then went on to college while working full-time most days. During my senior year of college, in a down economy, I landed an internship that turned into a full-time job in Human Resources (HR) for a New York (NY) financial services firm. During that time I still worked double shifts on the weekend at the waitressing job I had had through college. I needed that job to pay for *coffee, bagel, and lunch*. the expenses associated with the fancy New York City (NYC) job: train passes, parking passes, subway fares, suits from Ann Taylor, and the NYC

I was working what many would describe as "hard"—to the point that there was no mystery where I was—either sleeping in my bed (for far too few hours); showering at home; working at the library for school, at my NY job, at my New Jersey waitressing job; or transiting to one of those locations.

FROM BURNOUT TO PURPOSE

I kept that pace up for about five months straight. I wasn't a workaholic. I was doing what I thought I had to do to pay my bills—to survive. When I couldn't take it anymore, I decided I was done prostituting my soul for money and corporate HR experience, so I quit the waitressing job at the end of one Sunday night shift. I didn't know what that would mean for my "real job" as I literally had no idea how I would pay for a train pass next month to get me to that "real job."

I didn't care. Enough was enough. What good was making money if I couldn't even make it to the bank to deposit the cash? Plus, the way I saw it, I wasn't going to be unemployed forever.

The Ego Is "Large and In Charge"

The very day after I quit—a Monday morning—the head of HR at the financial services firm offered me a full-time job with enough money to equal what I was making as an intern plus the money I made from waitressing. I didn't have any other plans so I said yes. I stayed at that job for six years and went from chief HR lackey to assistant vice president by twenty-five. I was making way more money than I ever imagined I would at that age. Plus I was a valued top performer. I am not exactly sure what I was valued for—probably just plain ole hard work. I didn't think it mattered that I didn't know what I was valued for (or so I thought). I had all the professional markers for success—the title, money, autonomy, an office, and camaraderie with my peers

Personally I also had my own home (after having had the experience of living in Manhattan, of course), a nice new car (my second one actually), and a closet full of really nice clothes.

Basically, I got all that by saying "yes" to every opportunity that came my way:

- a new client group that would have stretched someone else beyond their capacity—"I'll take it";
- a difficult executive no one else wanted to deal with—"I'll talk to them";
- a merger with another firm—"I'll do all the mind-numbing documentation and acquisition of new employee files work";
- extra work that needed to be done ASAP—"I'll work extra hours this weekend, no problem."

FROM BURNOUT TO PURPOSE

I still didn't see myself as a workaholic. Instead I was doing what I thought I had to do to prove my value and worth. I wanted to be seen as a high performer so I could feel secure, valued, and successful. Yet all of that survive, arrive, and thrive determination had me operating at 110 percent availability to my job and at a deficit to my life, those that mattered most to me, and to my own wellbeing. If you had asked my family and friends, they probably would have said I had it all. Yet privately I thought I was having a nervous breakdown and I couldn't hide it anymore. I was so unhappy I couldn't control my emotions for the first time in my life. I either couldn't stop crying or I couldn't predict when the next trigger would start me crying again.

I think my family and friends were stunned because for years I had a killer game face. I was happy, funny, put together, responsible, energetic, successful, and had all the answers for everyone else's problems. I didn't even fully understand myself why this was happening.

The Flames of Burnout Emerge and Spread

I was emotionally and physically exhausted. I started losing excitement for my work, feeling the payback wasn't enough given what I was personally sacrificing. I felt unable to cope with the pace of the demands I felt were upon me

at work. As well I felt defeated that I couldn't take care of the things that needed my attention in my personal life. On top of it all, I felt guilty for wanting "more" from life and for not knowing what "more" looked like. I only knew what I didn't want—the things I feared most—losing my job, losing favor with my boss and peers, losing anyone's confidence in me, and not having enough money to support myself.

Those thoughts caused me pain and even paralyzed me at times. In addition to not knowing what I wanted professionally, I didn't know what I wanted personally. All my friends were getting married and starting families. Did I want to be married? To have a family? Not having either would have been blasphemy to everyone I knew. I didn't know if I was more afraid of being alone or of becoming codependent on a husband and losing myself in motherhood.

I could relate to the joke regarding singles or lonely spouses: "Would you rather be lonely or miserable?"

I realized that *I was so busy doing* what was expected of me that I had no insight at all into who *I was*. I wasn't sure what I liked, was interested in, or what I actually wanted for

FROM BURNOUT TO PURPOSE

my life. Because I couldn't connect with what I really wanted for my life despite all I had achieved, I was unhappy, exhausted, crabby, and felt powerless. Because I had no idea how to figure it out, I was suffering.

It was overwhelming.

I related to people who are abducted by aliens and experience "missing time." It felt like one minute I was a kid playing with my friends and Barbie Dolls, sure I would grow up to be an actress. Next, I was in an HR job in a NY financial services firm, and I wasn't quite sure how that had happened. I don't ever recall discovering who I was or what I wanted along the way. I just stumbled into it all, content that everyone else seemed pleased with "my" choices and "success."

My Choice for "A Good Life"—Whatever that Meant

Finally, I realized there was something I had accomplished all on my own. I had made all my fears a reality. I was living beyond my means, in that I had bankrupted my energy, natural optimism, and ability to get

anything done that mattered to me. I didn't even know what mattered to me. Measuring with my Faith Spectrum, I was living so far over into fear (believing something bad could happen) versus hope (believing something good could happen) that I thought I could never connect to what mattered to me.

Unconsciously, I blamed it all on my job. I left it.

And three companies later, the same pattern repeated itself: come in strong, rise to top performer, feel better about myself and my life for a while, and then slowly lose interest in the job, my boss, or the people around me. Why? Because everywhere I went, I was thinking my worth was wrapped up in my ability to fulfill everyone else's dreams, expectations, and needs. It was as though having my own dreams, expectations, and needs somehow made me weak. This way of being was not sustainable. It was clear that I was operating over and over again on the path of burnout.

Since not making any choice had been my choice, I had to make a new choice. I chose to have a happy life, whatever that meant. Immediately, I decided to find out what a *happy life* meant to me.

End of Excerpt