

FROM



BURNED OUT



TO



BELOVED

SOUL CARE FOR WOUNDED HEALERS



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ONE

TRAUMA-INFORMED SOUL CARE



Sometimes resilience arrives in the moment you discover your own unshakeable goodness. . . . And when that happens, we begin to foster tenderness for our own human predicament. A spacious and undefended heart finds room for everything you are and carves space for everybody else.

FATHER GREG BOYLE, TATTOOS ON THE HEART

Prior to burnout, I was working two part-time advocacy jobs that added up to much more than full-time. One of the jobs was with Tierra Nueva, an international Christian ministry based in Burlington, Washington, that loves and accompanies people who are primarily affected by addiction, incarceration, and immigration. The other was at a domestic violence shelter, providing advocacy and support for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Throughout most of my days, I sought to listen empathetically to people's stories while suppressing my shock and grief at what they shared. Sometimes I let tears show, yet I fought hard to hold my emotions at bay and receive their stories with compassion.

A significant turning point came during a domestic violence advocacy appointment with a primarily Spanish-speaking mother. I was in the midst of translating a letter written by her daughter, who had been detained by immigration. For the first time, the daughter was revealing that she'd been in an abusive relationship for years. She described details of the abuse and revealed the shame that had driven her to keep it a secret.

Her mother's grief was palpable, yet through her tears, she asked me to continue reading. I read as my own tears started to fall. Suddenly the mother cried out, "Por qué los hombres hacen eso?" ("Why do men do this?") It was a question I myself had been grappling with, and the floodgates opened. We both sobbed and sobbed.

This moment broke something open in me. I lost my ability to listen empathetically and keep my emotions in control. My professional social-work armor of showing care but not being vulnerable had disintegrated. All the unprocessed stories had been piling up in me. I sobbed not just for this mother and her daughter but also for the many who had experienced similar abuse; all those stories I still carried with me. While tears can sometimes be connecting, I wasn't able to be present with that mother as my own grief poured out.

I left that meeting knowing I needed to make some changes. I couldn't stem the tide of tears. I took an emergency week off not long after that—to address my own mental health. I felt like I couldn't function. The grief, stress, lack of boundaries, and accumulated secondary trauma overwhelmed me. I was exhausted physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Desperate for respite, I drove to my parents' cabin, barely able to see through the tears that flowed. My armor had cracked, and I didn't know how to handle it.

Without realizing it, I was experiencing textbook burnout. I was overcome by emotional exhaustion, which is at the heart of the “burnout syndrome,” according to Christine Maslach, author of *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*. “A person gets overly involved emotionally, overextends him- or herself, and feels overwhelmed by the demands imposed by other people. . . . Once emotional exhaustion sets in, people feel they are no longer able to give of themselves to others.” The second burnout symptom is depersonalization, or a “detached, callous and even dehumanized response.” I didn’t want to get to that point of detachment and was grateful I was still able to grieve. Yet I knew I needed to make some changes for my own well-being and to avoid becoming unable to care well for the person in front of me.

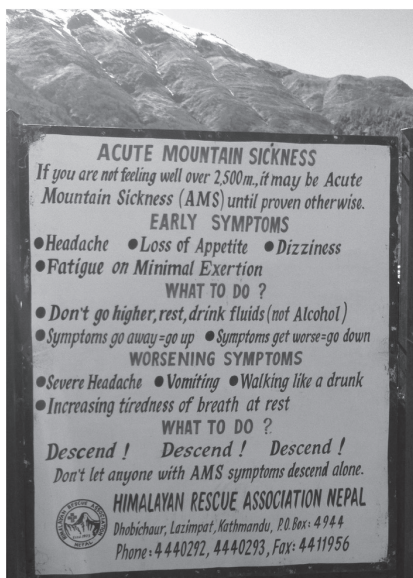
Although it took years to feel healthier and more grounded, I began to make some initial adjustments. I quit my job at the domestic violence shelter and moved farther away from the hospital and the center of town to create better boundaries with Tierra Nueva’s pastoral advocacy work. In this newfound space and time, I delved into inner-healing prayer appointments, therapy, and recovery work. I also slowly started integrating new rhythms of rest.

BURNOUT AS ALTITUDE SICKNESS

In some ways, burnout can be compared to altitude sickness. A few years ago, my husband and I hiked the Annapurna Trail in the Himalayas. This gorgeous trail starts in a tropical jungle at a low elevation and climbs to a 17,769-foot mountain pass. For many, that might not be appealing, but I was thrilled to be on that hike before heading to Kolkata, India. Aware of the immense privilege, I was aiming to live into my newfound permission to enjoy fun adventures.

Halfway into the trek, I was struggling with a bad cough and diarrhea. After crossing a one-hundred-foot narrow suspension

footbridge over a deep ravine at ten thousand feet in elevation, I sat down on a large rock and passed out. I had never passed out before. My terrified husband yelled for help to hikers behind us. Not understanding English, they were about to pass by when they saw a look of desperation on his face.



I woke up surrounded by my husband and a group of Italians. After resting and drinking some water, we retraced our steps back down the mountain, knowing that the remedy for altitude sickness is to go downward.

As this photo of a poster in the Himalayas says, “Descend! Descend! Descend!” Quite literally, if you don’t go down to a lower elevation, you will die.

Ironically, people who are physically fit are more susceptible

to altitude sickness. They ascend faster than their bodies can adjust to the higher altitude. They press on, thinking they’re capable, and they don’t listen to their bodies’ cues. While hiking, I had been denying what my body had been communicating to me for days—that I needed to rest and recover. In the same way, we can mistakenly think that we are “above burnout,” that we’re strong enough and don’t need care. But those beliefs make us more susceptible to burning out. We press on, disregarding the need for rest that our body might be communicating through headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and an inability to think clearly or creatively. We keep going until an emergency hits, and we’re forced to take a break.

Attaining rest can be especially challenging, even if we're able to change our circumstances or quit our job. Immigrant rights advocate Sayu Bhojwani describes how people of color feel overwhelmed "not just about resources, but also about feeling like we don't have the time or the luxury to take a break. We feel guilty caring for ourselves, or even for a child or loved one." She continues, "Denial of our authentic selves, coupled with the scarcity mentality and a competitive culture, wears us down." Exposure to continuous racism and institutionalized oppression can cause people of color to develop post-traumatic stress syndromes. Housing insecurity, illness, family issues, and gender discrimination may also compound workplace trauma. It's understandable to feel overwhelmed by the weight of the work and surrounding realities.

Other organizational pressures and unhealthy workplace dynamics also increase the likelihood of burnout. In America's white-dominated environments, it's all too common for exhaustion to be a barometer for success. Busier is better. I've felt ashamed for being at home sleeping instead of out at midnight like my colleague, who drove to visit young women sitting beside their gunshot boyfriends at the trauma center. Instead of honoring one another's hard work and welcoming our limitations, we act as though tiredness is proof that we're loving and caring for people well.

Many face a high level of need and an intense client/student/patient caseload with little support and heavy paperwork requirements. Some teachers buy breakfast for students because schools and parents can't provide it. Social workers often manage extra-large caseloads because of lack of funding. Societal systems of injustice and oppression feel out of our control. We're weighed down and aggrieved by the hunger, abuse, neglect, and mental illness that we witness.

Many have had to learn how to breathe at toxic altitudes. The ability to descend can be especially difficult, and thriving—let alone surviving—depends on finding ways to do so, even though trauma takes its toll.

Social workers, church leaders, ministry workers, therapists, foster parents, medical professionals, and teachers are often passionately serving our communities, yet all too often we are burning out and leaving the work. As noted in a 2018 Leadership Resources article, “[Fifteen hundred] pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches.”

What if instead of busyness being the barometer, we encouraged one another to work with greater self-awareness and to live grounded and at peace?

What if we acknowledged our wounds instead of pretending they don’t affect us?

What if we reckoned with how we have experienced oppression or privilege and with how that has diminished our view of ourselves and others?

What if we honestly engaged with the internal beliefs and values that distort our self-perception and gave ourselves permission to thrive?

What if we served out of a deep certainty that we—and all people—are beloved, just as we are, regardless of how we change or help others to change?

Just as with altitude sickness, the remedy for burnout is to go down and rest. Although physical changes may be required, the descent is largely into our own depths, where we explore our barriers and connect with the deep well of God’s presence within us.

FROM SELF-CARE TO SOUL CARE

Many social workers would say that self-care is important, but in practice we feel that it's one more thing to do with no time to do it. Institutional encouragement to practice self-care is often ineffective without the social worker having an understanding of secondary trauma and other internal barriers.

I've created numerous self-care plans at various workshops. Usually they involve looking at what the participants lack and creating plans to change that. For example, at one group session, I was invited to look at my life as a circle, with various areas that need tending to, such as physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational. We colored in each pie wedge to the degree we felt fulfilled in that area. Next we described what activities we needed to do to fill each piece up.

At a training for clergy and spiritual teachers on healthy boundaries, we used the Self-Care Inventory, which ranged from "I play a musical instrument and practice regularly" to "I eat most evening meals with my partner/family." Not only were these exercises based on privilege, but as I looked at my blank inventory and empty pie wedges, they also left me feeling inadequate and exhausted. How could I possibly find the time or energy to do what it would take to fill up all those areas? Where would I find the resources? Although such reflection has sometimes been helpful, more often than not I've felt unmotivated to change—or changing felt too hard and out of reach. Deeper soul care is needed to establish our identity as beloved, to explore the beliefs that drive our unhealthy behaviors, and to equip us to take care of ourselves.

The practice of holistic, trauma-informed soul care tends to the whole self in order to be grounded in God, to thrive, and to love others as we love ourselves. It involves knowing *who* we are, *how* we're impacted by secondary trauma, and *why* we must be on an ongoing journey toward recovery and healing.

Taking care of ourselves is essential for our well-being as beloved children of God, allowing us to be effective and resilient, loving people instead of using those we serve to support or enhance our own sense of worth. Here are the central soul care ideas we'll explore throughout this book.

We are beloved children of God. God loves us not for what we do or don't do. We can't do anything to make God love us more or less. We are deeply loved. Living out of our belovedness involves learning to receive love and to extend care to ourselves. We're invited to know ourselves, our motivations for our work, our desires, and the ways our unmet needs play out in how we engage the world.

Our inner beliefs and perceptions affect our care for others and ourselves. The beliefs we hold about ourselves can drive us to burnout. Without our awareness, false beliefs drive our feelings of anger, shame, guilt, or unworthiness. We end up less able to care for the person in front of us and more likely to be depleted due to stress and lack of rest. When such patterns continue, they often lead to utter exhaustion and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Some feel so disillusioned and disheartened that they leave their work or ministry—and even their faith. Understanding our beliefs is an important step to free us from shame and to help us move toward wholeness and resilience.

As we work with people in the midst of trauma, taking care of ourselves is not optional; it is essential. Soul care is for all people, not just those who feel weak or who are spiritually oriented. Secondary trauma—the emotional and physiological toll of hearing about another person's first-hand experience of trauma—is a well-documented phenomenon that can affect anyone. It's compounded when we carry our own personal trauma as well. Understanding its effect can increase our compassion for ourselves, our awareness of how we are being impacted, and our motivation to discover sustainable practices.

Being rooted in God and practicing holistic soul care benefits us as well as those around us. Self-care that engages spiritual practices has been shown to prevent burnout and improve coping strategies. When we partner with God, honor healthy boundaries, and commit to rhythms of rest, we are freer and healthier in our love and care for people. We live, move, and breathe knowing we are held securely in God's love, and we are able to love others out of a place of fullness rather than emptiness and striving. We tap into God's abundance and feel inspired by our work. We know we are worthy of care ourselves, regardless of what impact we have.

EMBRACING INNER WORK

Although I knew I needed to rest, to re-center in God, and to create better boundaries, I wasn't able to slow down. The real and perceived needs around me determined my pace. I had become addicted to busyness, and enjoyed the adrenaline boost that helping people in crisis brought. It was hard to give myself margins of rest and play. Often I stopped by someone's house on the way home, squeezing in one last visit. This meant I would be late to my next appointment or dinner with friends. When I got home, I kept going: paying bills, responding to emails, and even doing non-urgent things, such as planning an event.

To live the questions requires that you first look within yourself, trusting that God is present and at work within you.

HENRI NOUWEN

Juggling jobs, maintaining a household, and paying bills is often necessary to keep afloat. However, this is different from keeping busy to avoid processing or feeling emotions. I can now see how my pace of life was part of my coping strategy. I believed I needed to be productive. I didn't allow myself to stop.

Soul care requires that we slow down, because our pace of life likely prevents us from asking questions and facing traumatic realities. Poet David Whyte wrote, “Not only can we become afraid of these internal questions, but also we can become terrified of the spaces or silences in which these questions might arise. The act of stopping can be the act of facing something we have kept hidden from ourselves for a very long time.” When we start asking questions, we begin dismantling our false self. (We’ll explore this more throughout.) Whyte also wrote, “There is no first step toward self-knowledge without hazard or risk to the surface self you already know.”

In the same way that the soul is nonmaterial and unseen, as psychologist David Benner illuminates, so are the barriers to taking care of ourselves. If we just make goals and don’t address the internal barriers and the ways we are affected by trauma, our self-care plan will be just another thing we feel we aren’t doing well.

Taking an emergency week off was the “descent” that prevented further calamity in my life. I hadn’t recognized my own brokenness and inability to take care of myself. I had been ignoring my physical and emotional exhaustion. A kind of rescue came to me through a relapse-prevention program called the Genesis Process, where I started recognizing my subtle and not-so-subtle unhealthy patterns. Experiencing care for my own soul opened my eyes to the need to live beyond my understanding of self-care into something that tended to my *soul*.

At first I thought the changes I made post-burnout were sufficient. When I told a respected pastor a bit about my burnout story and my need for an emergency week off, his reply shocked me: “Only a week?! I was laid flat for a year after burning out.”

I was amazed; I couldn’t imagine taking that much time off. Yet after a couple of years of working while implementing my newfound practices, I still wasn’t healthy. I realized I too needed more time to

heal and to figure out how to make my work sustainable before I did greater damage. I was gifted with the freedom to take a sabbatical so I could rest, heal, and consider what was next.

Doing inner work is never easy. We prefer quick solutions and easy answers. Who wouldn't rather skip the hard work of recovery? Yet growth involves moving through barriers and wading into dark places, not skipping around and pretending they aren't there. But tending to our souls isn't just up to us. God is the restorer of our souls who might make us lie down sometimes. God knows what we need and values our restoration, our healing, and our transformation. As the psalmist states,

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. (Psalm 23:2-3)

Soul care doesn't just mean spiritual care. It means tending to our inner psychospiritual life, which affects our whole self. The Hebrew understanding of the self is holistic, with the body, soul, and spirit being interdependent. We are complex, intertwined beings, with our soul, body, mind, and emotions all amazingly interconnected.

Often I've been unaware of how stress impacts my body, not to mention my mind and emotions. I don't notice that I'm having trouble thinking clearly and am easily agitated. Acute stress is a natural physiological response derived from our flight, fight, and freeze survival responses. However, too much stress and prolonged chronic stress can have a negative impact on us.

When I was in the midst of burnout, my dentist took a look at my teeth and asked if I was stressed at work. He could see the effects of stress on my jaw and teeth. Understanding the multifaceted ways that stress impacts us can heighten our awareness of our stress levels and of our need to make changes.

Soul care doesn't necessarily involve self-care activities to add to our schedule but habits to break. It involves tools to extend empathy toward ourselves and to make us more grounded in our identity when we're feeling anxious. As I've begun to address the false beliefs that drive my unhealthy behaviors and integrate Centering Prayer as a daily practice, my whole self has benefited: I take bathroom and lunch breaks. I breathe easier and don't grind my teeth as much. I'm more grounded, less stressed, and more alive. I'm resilient and free to thrive. Soul care practices invite a new way of life—a life in recovery from addictions to workaholism and codependency.

Our soul care also equips us to love others from a healthier place; it doesn't just lead us inward. We're better able to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Pastors Reesheda Graham-Washington and Shawn Casselberry write about soul force, a philosophy of nonviolence rooted in the teaching of Jesus. Soul force “is not limited to personal spiritual growth alone; it transforms communities and social systems. Soul force creates an outward ripple effect, changing us and changing our world simultaneously.” Just as Henri Nouwen emphasized movement from solitude to community to ministry, we first need to engage in inner work that grounds us in God. We are then able to connect to community from a healthier place. Rooted and held, we are better equipped for our work and ministry.

STEPPINGSTONES TO RESILIENCE AND THRIVING

Holistic, trauma-informed soul care practices are the steppingstones to resilience—our ability to bounce back in the face of trauma and other hardships. People who experience primary trauma and oppression have to learn to be resilient to survive. One purpose of this book is that we learn to become more resilient, adapting and flourishing in the face of adversity. It's *also* so we can

thrive as beloved children of God, step into our calling, and know we are loved, no matter *what* we're doing or *how* we're doing.

It's becoming increasingly common to encourage practices that develop resilience. Rick Hanson, author of a number of books, including most recently *Resilient: How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength, and Happiness*, writes, "While resilience helps us to recover from loss and trauma, it offers us much more than that. True resilience fosters well-being, an underlying sense of happiness, love, and peace." Developing resilience is key to working sustainably with people who are experiencing trauma and to tending to the ongoing grief and triggers generated by our own trauma.

In addition, we need to recognize that being resilient in order to persevere in our work isn't always the key to thriving. Sometimes we need to make a dramatic change: quit our job. Years after burnout, I was working as a program manager for a youth residential facility. The job reality was far from the description portrayed in the interview process. The program, instead of being "smoothly running," was nonfunctional. There were no youth housed in the program due to insufficient staffing and failing to meet government standards. In order for it to reopen and begin hosting kids again, I spent the first few months hiring seven additional staff members and working as both the program manager and the mental health counselor.

It didn't take long to realize this wasn't sustainable for me. Though I believed deeply in the need to care for unaccompanied minors, the expectations for my work and the lack of organizational support were intolerable. The job wasn't about to change, and I realized if I were to thrive (let alone survive), I needed to quit, as heartbreaking as it was.

Sometimes we need to choose a new path. Maybe the path is a completely different trajectory. Founder and director of the Trauma Stewardship Institute Laura van Dernoot Lipsky invites workshop

participants and readers to consider their plan B. I remember sitting in her class and thinking, “Hmm, my plan B is to work with survivors of trafficking.” Then I heard her explain that a plan B isn’t just a subtle shift, like working at a shelter for survivors of trafficking instead of for victims of domestic violence. It was like she read my mind: I was currently working at a local domestic violence shelter and wanting to work more with survivors of trafficking internationally.

At the time, I couldn’t conceptualize *not* working directly with people in some form of advocacy or social-justice ministry. I found much of my identity in that kind of work, as it aligned with my passion, interests, and calling. I wanted to make a difference, and working with traumatized people was what I felt called to—and still do. These were valid reasons for doing that work, but I also needed to hear that I have value even if I don’t work with people experiencing trauma. Suffice it to say, I’m still discovering my plan B.

I frequently go with my young daughter to visit the local aquarium. She delights in seeing the fish and watching the octopus, and she’s gathering courage to touch the anemones. One day, as we watched a diver feed fish in a giant tank, I realized what might be obvious to others but was a truth I needed to realize: I could change my career and become an aquarium scuba diver, and God would still value me just as much.

RHYTHMS, RESOURCES, AND EXERCISES

Integrating life-giving rhythms is essential to rooting ourselves in God’s truth and to building resilience. Having regular prayer practices is not a new concept. Monastic and other faith communities have practiced daily rhythms for millennia. These valued traditions have helped many connect with God and themselves.

We'll explore rhythms more in chapter thirteen, but for now, I invite you to choose at least one daily or weekly practice to integrate into your schedule.

How to start a daily practice. Explore what practice and time-frame works for you. The important thing is to do it daily and to make it simple enough to be attainable. It could be five to ten minutes of stillness, stretching, or listening to music at the beginning or end of the day. Ideally, choose a centering practice that grounds you in God and in your identity as beloved.

Weekly practice. You may already have a weekly practice; however, like other rhythms, it too gets brushed aside to allow for the “more urgent.” As you read this book, consider what rejuvenating weekly practice you might want to include in your present season of life to nourish and bring you joy.

Exercises. At the end of each chapter, there are a few

reflection questions, exercises, and recommended resources. I've included a variety to fit different personalities, seasons, and moods—from poems to YouTube videos to prayer exercises. These exercises aren't intended just to be things you have to check off your list. Instead they're offerings you can choose from to go deeper with God in your recovery. Choose one or two that stand out to you.

Hold your commitments with courage and give yourself grace. Remember that the best way to move toward change is through small steps, integrating a regular practice, and addressing your inner beliefs.

Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go, we bypass the nourishment that would give us succor. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. We miss the joy and love born of effortless delight.

WAYNE MULLER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ▼ What are your reasons for wanting holistic, trauma-informed soul care and for taking this journey?
- ▼ In what ways are you being invited to lie down? In what ways do you need rest and restoration?
- ▼ Take some time to consider how stress affects you. How does it affect your mind, body, and spirit? Where do you carry it in your body? In what ways does work-related stress affect your life out of work? How do you cope with stress?
- ▼ What is your plan B if you were to do something other than caregiving?

EXERCISES

- ▼ Consider Psalm 23:2-3: “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.”
- ▼ Practice the five-minute Free-Write Exercise in appendix one.
- ▼ Watch Laura van Dernoot Lipsky’s “Beyond the Cliff,” TedX Talk, April 23, 2015.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Soul Force: Seven Pivots toward Courage, Community, and Change by Reesheda Graham-Washington and Shawn Casselberry

The Artist’s Way by Julia Cameron

People of Color Online Classroom, “Self-Care,” www.poonlineclassroom.com/self-care

Headington Institute, headington-institute.org/overview, an online resource center providing resources on stress, resilience, and humanitarian work.

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