

2023

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Malesic, Jonathan (2023) "Do One Thing : Academic Vocation in the Age of Burnout," *Intersections*: Vol. 2023: No. 58, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2023/iss58/6>

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Do One Thing: Academic Vocation in the Age of Burnout



IMAGE: SARAH WALL

I'll start with the bad news: You and I and everyone we work with and everyone we know is going to die. Sooner or later, and I hope it's later, each of our lives will run out. The British writer Oliver Burkeman's recent, excellent book on "time management for mortals" is titled *4,000 Weeks*. That's

a little less than 77 years, roughly the life expectancy of someone in the United States. Thinking about our lifespan in terms of weeks is clarifying and perhaps a bit jarring. You only have so many more Tuesdays left.

It's tempting to react to this grim realization by trying to cram as much as possible into those remaining weeks, to "seize the day," as they say.

Burkeman thinks this is the wrong lesson. The fact is, no matter how long we live, we will almost certainly die with things still on our to-do list. You simply cannot do everything you might like to do. There is no lifehack, no motivational mantra, no self-management habit that will make it possible to accomplish everything you want. Burkeman counsels readers to accept that they won't be able to cross every item off the "bucket list." Once you accept that, you're free to let go of the things you know you won't get to.

Here is much better news: Mortality is only half the reason we can't do all we might want to do. The other half is that we are desiring, imagining beings. The scope of what we can picture ourselves doing, what we might wish to do, is virtually limitless. And so we live forever in the contradiction between what we can imagine and what we can accomplish. You might see this condition as a tragedy, the source of endless frustration. But many thinkers have seen it as a great condition of possibility for human thought and action. The writer Annie Dillard, for instance, wrote that "Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand—that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us." That search for compromise is human life.

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This tension between what we might like to do and what our limited nature will allow us to do also exists on

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the smaller scale. I have taught at the college level for 25 years, in 14 or 15 week increments, each semester about four tenths of a percent of my allotted 4,000 weeks. There is so much my students don't know, so much I want to teach them. At the start of a semester, writing a syllabus is an exercise in cutting topics, readings, and assignments. By the end, we usually haven't even covered everything that was on the syllabus. And yet, the enterprise is still worthwhile. My students still learned something.

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The fundamental contradiction between what we can imagine and what we can accomplish is true for colleges and universities, too. They typically have longer lifespans than we do—and, in fact, one reason people found universities and other institutions is to continue a project for longer than a single lifetime. But their lives do eventually end, too. Finlandia University, founded in 1896, was a member of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, but it closed earlier this year. Several other small religious colleges have also recently shut their doors. More, unfortunately, are sure to follow.

Even a college that's in a stable position can only accomplish, year to year, what its budget, its strengths and weaknesses, its culture, and the time and talents of its employees will allow. And yet our institutions face tremendous pressure to do more and more. These pressures come from sources like enrollment trends, accreditation, public skepticism toward the value of higher education, and the continued disruption caused

by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the regions of the country facing the "demographic cliff" of smaller traditional-aged student cohorts, colleges are competing with each other to recruit and retain a shrinking population of prospective students at the same time as students are struggling with cost, mental health, and academic success. Often, institutions respond to such crises by chasing an untapped applicant pool, a grant, a donation, or national prestige. They start doing things they have never done before, that they don't know how to do, and that may either replicate or conflict with other work they are already doing. The education researchers Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner named this expansive agenda "projectitis." It diffuses the college's mission, and it often doesn't even work to stabilize the institution. As I write this, West Virginia University is proposing deep cuts to longstanding academic programs—things the university had done well for decades—to cover losses incurred by an unrealistic, failed expansion begun in 2014.

All of these pressures, internal and external, are ultimately borne by employees. They are the ones who carry out a university's mission. If that mission expands without a corresponding expansion of the time and resources needed to carry it out, then university employees are highly susceptible to burnout.

Burnout is the experience of being chronically stretched across a gap between your ideals for work and the reality of your job. Ideals are the things workers feel they can expect from their work. These expectations often motivate workers to do their best. Key expectations can include explicit promises by an employer, including a reasonable schedule, salary, and benefits. Ideals also include implicit promises of dignity, or an opportunity to serve or express oneself in one's work. These implicit promises come as much from the culture as they do from an employer. Parents, pastors, and politicians help set our ideals for work. So do movies and TV. What did "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" say we should expect from work? What does a more recent show like Apple TV's "Severance"?

When someone's working conditions do not match their ideals over a long period of time, they undergo the stretching we call burnout. That mismatch might stem from unmet expectations for salary or promotion. Or from

suffering discrimination. Or from working in an institution whose values do not match one's own. It's important to remember that there are two sides to the gap that causes burnout: Unreasonable expectations contribute just as much to burnout as inadequate conditions. Burnout can result not only when a reasonable promise is not kept but also when an unreasonable promise should never have been made in the first place. Burnout, then, is a small-scale instance of the fundamental tension in human life between what we can imagine and the finitude of our lives. Burnout can perhaps never be entirely done away with, but it can certainly be mitigated.

The culture of academia contributes to burnout. Academic workers often have high ideals, and those ideals sometimes cover up poor working conditions. In religious academia especially, the ideals of work are often put in terms of vocation—the individual worker's calling to a specific line of work. Christian ideas of vocation can contribute to overwork and burnout as people persist in conditions that supposedly reflect God's calling for them. Martin Luther, for instance, wrote that every office, every "station" in life was ordained by God, from prince to tailor. "If he is a Christian tailor," Luther wrote, "he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor." Vocational language can be inspiring. It elevates the work you do to a transcendent level. Your work matters; it matters to God.

But keep in mind: Burnout results when ideals depart from reality. The idea of vocation raises your ideals. At religious institutions, the appeal to mission or vocation can often seem like a way to get people to keep working, or work harder, in conditions where they don't have adequate support. "You're fulfilling your divine calling," a leader at such an institution might say. "You're doing God's work. Why can't you do a little extra? Why do you need a raise?"

The pressure on academic institutions just to survive is no excuse for them to allow the gap to widen between their ideals and the working conditions they provide. When enough of the faculty, staff, coaches, and administrators responsible for the college's mission burn out, the

institution will fail at its central purpose. And in that case, it may as well shut down, regardless of its financial health.

To overcome burnout, academia needs to narrow the gap between the ideals people bring to work and the reality they encounter on the job. Some ideals are individual, but many are drawn from the institutional and academic culture at large. Likewise, working conditions are largely set by employers. Because the causes of academic burnout are primarily institutional, the solutions need to be institutional, too.

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Before any college can fix its burnout problem, it needs to understand not only how prevalent burnout is, but how its workers are experiencing burnout. Burnout has three key dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness. In some workers, burnout will look like chronic weariness. In others, it will look like cynicism—antisocial behavior that could include anything from outbursts in meetings to gossip.

To get a sense of the patterns of burnout in its workforce, an institution could undertake a psychometric survey of its employees. But it can also gather useful information simply (and more cheaply) from interviews and conversations with employees. Through conversation, workers can give voice to their ideals and specify where those ideals are being met and where they are not. A benefit of holding such conversations is that they can enhance the sense of community on campus; that alone might begin to chip away at some burned-out workers' cynicism.

To become not just better places to work, but better colleges and universities, academic institutions also need to rethink what they mean by "vocation" and "mission." As I mentioned, these terms are too often used to justify doing more: "You need to do this new thing for the sake of the mission." But then the mission gets lost amid all these proliferating projects.

A mission should not be a mandate to do anything and everything that seems financially expedient. Rather, a mission should be *one thing*. I'm borrowing this idea from the Danish Lutheran writer Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote a book in 1846 called *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. For Kierkegaard, the "one thing" is the Good. "There is only one end: the genuine Good," he writes, "and only one means: this, to be willing only to use those means which genuinely are good." A pure heart, Kierkegaard argues, will subordinate all other things to the Good and desire it for its own sake. If you desire something other than the Good for its own sake—even something relatively good like honor or wealth—then your will is divided, your heart impure.

If we apply Kierkegaard's notion to colleges and universities, then we might say academic workers should think of mission as the *one thing* that matters most to their institution, department, or office. Perhaps that mission will be the *one thing* they can do better than anyone else. "Ideally,"

Fischman and Gardner write in *The Real World of College*, "any significant program should clearly reflect—indeed, embody—the school's announced purpose and mission." An institution should be clear about the one thing it is best positioned to do, and then make sure that the things it undertakes for the sake of the mission do not become ends in themselves. That will involve sacrificing some quite worthy activities that nevertheless distract from the one thing that matters above all others.

As Burkeman argued in relation to our individual lives, there will always be more good things we might wish to do than we ever could do. If we tried to do them all, we would fail anyway. Letting go of some of those things in order to focus on a few of the very most important may be painful. But it's also a necessary step to do the one thing that matters most in academia: the transformational education of students, undertaken in a way consonant with the university's values.