Introduction

Several years ago, instead of spending my mornings getting ready for my job as a college professor, I would lie in bed for hours, repeatedly watching the video to "Don't Give Up," the English pop star Peter Gabriel's 1986 duet with Kate Bush. In the video, the two singers embrace for six minutes as the sun is eclipsed behind them. Gabriel's lyrical expression of despair and desolation echoed my inner monologue. It didn't matter how many times I heard Bush compassionately repeat the song's title and her assurance that this suffering would pass. The words never rang true.

My first class was at two in the afternoon; I'd make it there barely on time and barely prepared, then go right back home when it was over. At night, I ate ice cream and drank malty, high-alcohol beer—often together, as a float. I gained thirty pounds.

By any objective standard, I had a fantastic job. I exercised high-level skills and training in something I was good at: teaching religion, ethics, and theology. I worked with intelligent, friendly colleagues. My salary was more than adequate; my benefits, excellent. I had great autonomy in determining how to teach my classes and pursue research projects. And with tenure, I had a level of job security unheard of outside academia and increasingly rare within

it. Still, I was miserable, and it was clear my job was at the center of that feeling. I wanted to give up. I had burned out.

At the time, I thought something was wrong just with me. Why did I hate such a good job? But as I eventually realized, the problem of burnout is much bigger than one worker's despair. Residents of the United States, Canada, and other wealthy countries have built a whole culture of burnout around our work. But burnout doesn't have to be our fate.

The End of Burnout springs from my desire to understand why millions of workers across all industries find themselves drained of the strength they need to do their jobs, and why that makes them feel like they have failed at life. I define burnout as the experience of being pulled between expectation and reality at work. And I argue that burnout is a cultural phenomenon that expanded in the past five decades but that has deep historical roots in our belief that work will be a means not just to a paycheck but to dignity, character, and a sense of purpose. In fact, despite widespread concern about burnout, burnout culture has persisted *because* we cherish these ideals; we fear losing the meaning that work promises. And yet the working conditions that are typical in the United States and other rich, postindustrial countries prevent us from attaining the very things we seek.

I hope this book will help our culture recognize that work doesn't dignify us or form our character or give our lives purpose. *We* dignify work, *we* shape its character, and *we* give it purpose within our lives. Once we realize this, we can devote less of ourselves to our jobs, improve our labor conditions, and value those of us who do not work for pay. Together, we can end burnout culture and flourish in ways that do not depend on work. In fact, many people already embrace an alternative vision of work's role in a

well-lived life. And they often do so at the margins of burnout culture. This book will introduce you to them.

The End of Burnout appears in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which upended work around the world. In the United States, the mass unemployment caused by society-wide quarantine demonstrated once and for all that our ideals for work were a lie. People's dignity, their worth as humans, had nothing to do with their employment status. A waitress who lost her job due to the pandemic had no less dignity than she did before stay-at-home orders forced her restaurant to close. The pandemic has, in this sense, given us an opportunity to make a decisive break from the ethos that has governed our work and caused our burnout over the past fifty years. It's a chance to remake work and reimagine its place in our lives. If we don't take this opportunity, we will slip back into the patterns that created the burnout culture in the first place.

Burnout represents a strange puzzle for the way we ordinarily think about problems with work. The fact that it can happen to tenured college professors means it isn't only about poor conditions of employment. It isn't something we can eradicate just with better pay, benefits, and security across the board. Working conditions matter, and I do think workers deserve better, but they tell no more than half the story.

Burnout isn't only a problem of labor economics. It's an ailment of the soul. We burn out in large part because we believe work is the sure path to social, moral, and spiritual flourishing. Work simply can't deliver what we want from it, and the gap between our ideals and our on-the-job reality leads us to exhaustion, cynicism, and despair. Additionally, our individualistic approach to work keeps us from talking about burnout or uniting in solidarity to improve our conditions. We blame ourselves when work doesn't live up to

our expectations. We suffer alone, only exacerbating our plight. That's why the cure for burnout has to be cultural and collective, focused on offering each other the compassion and respect our work does not.

Before we get to solutions, though, we need to understand the experience of burnout. Stories about burnout lack an inherent drama. They're not like stories about a great discovery or catastrophe or love affair. There's no clear threshold from ordinary, functional worker to crumpled husk tumbling through your workday. There probably is a first morning you wake up and think, "Not this again," but it passes unnoticed. By that point, it's too late anyway. Your chance to avoid burnout has already passed. You were just doing your job the way you're expected to, and day by day, your ability to do it withered. At some point, you realize you can barely do it at all. You're too tired, too embittered, too useless.

I'll begin by telling you how all of that happened to me.

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I dreamed of being a college professor almost as soon as I met my own professors. I wanted to be like them, reading strange books by Nietzsche and Annie Dillard and asking challenging questions in class. One of my favorites taught theology and lived on campus as a faculty advisor. On Friday afternoons he opened his small, cinderblock apartment to students. I was a regular. I sat on the burgundy upholstered institutional furniture and, over coffee, chatted with him about heady topics like the theological implications of the universe's expansion. He also showed movies in the residence hall's TV lounge, mostly foreign and art films from when he was our age: *My Dinner with Andre, Crimes and Misdemeanors, Au Revoir*

les Enfants. We all had lengthy discussions afterward. To my eyes, this man lived the good life. He lived for knowledge and art and wisdom and got paid to pursue them and hand them on to a young generation eager for them. Well, I was eager for them, anyway. He had turned late-night dorm-room conversations into a profession. I did all I could to follow his lead.

Over the next decade, I did the things you need to do to live that life. I went to graduate school, finished my dissertation, and went on the always-difficult academic job market. After a few tries, I succeeded: I landed a full-time, tenure-track position teaching theology at a small Catholic college. This was my shot at my dream. My girlfriend and I packed up my dozens of boxes of books and my tweed jackets and moved me from Virginia, where I had gone to grad school, to northeast Pennsylvania. Then we moved her to Berkeley, California so she could go to grad school, in pursuit of her own dream of being a college professor.

With a long-distance relationship, I threw myself into the work. I assigned Nietzsche and Annie Dillard and asked challenging questions in class. I published, I served on faculty committees, I worked late at the office. I was determined to be inspiring, like my professors were, and not like the dinosaurs who lectured from the same yellowed notes year after year. The biggest problem I faced was students' indifference to my subject matter. They all *had* to take theology, but hardly any *wanted* to take it. So I came up with some techniques—tricks, really—to get students to put in a little more effort to learn than they would otherwise. It sort of worked. I even tricked a few students into becoming theology majors. I showed movies in class—*The Apostle, Higher Ground, Crimes and Misdemeanors*—and had a few rangy conversations about them with students. I was living my dream.

After six years, I earned tenure. By this time, my girlfriend had become my wife and moved back east. She finished her PhD and got a job in rural western Massachusetts. I had a sabbatical, so I followed her there for a year. Day after day, I wrote and exercised in the morning, and in the afternoon I either read in a café or went for a bike ride past hillside pastures and disused water mills. I couldn't have been more content.

But then I had to return to my job, and my wife and I went back to long-distance. To see each other, we drove four and a half hours, two or three weekends a month. Once again, I threw myself into the work. But it was much harder this time. For one thing, I was no longer new to the job. I didn't have to impress anyone for my tenure application. More important, though, the college faced two crises: one pertaining to its finances, the other to its accreditation. People got laid off. Salaries and budgets were frozen. There were concerns about enrollment. Would tuition payments be enough to keep the college out of the red? And there was much more work to do, to satisfy the accrediting agency. Everyone seemed to walk around the campus in a constant state of worry.

The stress got to me, too, despite my job security. I was working harder than ever—not just teaching and doing research, but heading up committees and leading the college's center for teaching excellence—but I felt I was not getting much recognition from the college's leaders. I wasn't getting affirmation of my work from the students, either. It seemed like they were learning nothing from me. Peers, including my department chair, continued to compliment my teaching. I didn't believe it; I saw my daily failure in the classroom firsthand, in every blank face of every student who wanted to be anywhere but at a desk listening to me.

It feels like an admission of shameful weakness, a pseudo-problem of privilege, to say that the thing I most needed was acknowledgment that my work meant something to someone. Don't people put up with far worse than a lack of recognition? I made decent money. I got to do interesting work. I didn't have a boss looking over my shoulder. Why couldn't I just shut up and do my job like everyone else? What was *wrong* with me?

My temper grew shorter. I started returning students' papers later and later. Class preparation became increasingly difficult. I faced a mental block every night as I tried to remember my pedagogical tricks. I had forgotten everything I knew about good teaching. And I watched "Don't Give Up" over and over.

It no longer felt like I was living a dream. It wasn't the life I'd imagined two decades before. After two years of progressive misery, I took a semester of unpaid leave and returned to the bucolic site of my sabbatical to live under the same roof as my wife again. I hoped some rest would help. I came back to Pennsylvania for the spring semester, but nothing had changed. The job was the same. I was the same. In fact, things were about to get even worse.

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The classroom is silent as the projector's light shines straight into my eyes. My department chair sits at a desk in one corner, taking notes. It's the day of my annual teaching observation, and none of the twenty students in my social ethics class makes a move in response to the harrowing video to Kendrick Lamar's song "Alright." There's the scene of the white cops, wearing mustaches and shades, shuffling down the street, the car on their shoulders

like a coffin, as Kendrick rocks in the driver's seat and someone empties a bottle out of a rear window. There are scenes of black men, including Kendrick himself, being gunned down by police in the street. Maybe no one says anything because the video is too new, too weird, too confrontational for the students. Every second of silence is emotional torture.

Eventually, a brave, sincere girl in the front row raises her hand. She mentions how disturbed she was by the video's language and images. We talk, her voice cracking. But the conversation doesn't go far. I ask the class more questions: "Did anything you saw in the video connect to anything we've talked about in the class so far? What about the scene where Kendrick stands on the telephone wires like Jesus on the parapet of the temple? If he's Jesus, then who is 'Lucy,' tempting him with money and cars?"

Nothing. No one says a word. I feel the adrenaline rise up my back.

Fine. Onto the next thing on the lesson plan, an 1891 document by Pope Leo XIII on labor in the industrial economy. Who can say what Leo thinks about private property? Who caught a biblical reference in there? The students don't budge. Who has a question? Anyone?

I do, but I don't voice it: *Who has a single thought in their head? Not one goddamned person?* The adrenaline surges to the back of my skull, telling me it's time for fight or flight.

Do I lash out at the students for ignoring the reading? For being lazy, for not even trying? Do I shame them, maybe remind them, like a pedantic prick, that it's their education at stake, not mine? Do I tell them that everyone who didn't read has to leave? Then wait, repeat the words to show I'm serious, and stare them down while they put away their notebooks and pull on their coats?

Or do *I* pack up and walk out? That's a gambit even my extremely sympathetic department chair could not ignore in her observation report. It would, however, get me out. I would live.

My jaw clamps shut. My face reddens. I don't fight. I don't run. I breathe deep and force myself into a professional composure. I stand at the podium and deliver a condescending lecture on the homework reading assignment. I don't bother asking the students to participate.

I have never felt so stupid in my entire life, never so humiliated in my eleven-year teaching career. I can't even get twenty-year-olds to have an opinion about a music video.

Mercifully, the class period's time runs out. The students zip their backpacks and leave. As my department chair walks past me to the door, she says things didn't go as badly as I thought they did. But I know it's over.

I have arrived at the antithesis of the good life I had glimpsed when I was a student. The professor whose life I envied was never pedantic. In class, he sat with us in a circle and nodded his head as we spoke, inviting us to "say more" when we haltingly tested our new ideas. He was affably erudite. I am angrily dogmatic. My dream of being a college professor, which had sustained me through grad school, the job market, and the slow climb to tenure, has fallen apart.

A week later, I decide to quit.

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In the United States and other rich countries, burnout is much discussed but little understood. We speak about it imprecisely, which only contributes to burnout culture's persistence. I feel like I have read the same unhelpful article about burnout dozens of times in

business magazines and on popular websites. The writers often call attention to the way burnout causes workers to lose sleep, disengage from work, and become more likely to get heart disease, depression, and anxiety.[1] Many point out that workplace stress costs Americans up to $190 billion a year in excess health-care costs and untold amounts of lost productivity.[2] In addition to providing these facts, the authors also dole out dubious advice. One typical article recommends that, to avoid burnout, you should do three things:

> First, find ways to serve every day. . . . Second, choose organizations to work for with the right mission and culture that fits who you are. Third, 'entrepreneur' your job: take ownership of your situation and creatively find ways to integrate your values, strengths, and passions into your work—while also meeting your performance expectations—so that you achieve not only success but also significance.[3]

These suggestions are comically out of touch, betraying an ignorance of both the psychological literature on burnout and the reality of working life. Authors like these don't just put all responsibility for burnout on the shoulders of the worker; they also posit that workers have total control over where they can find a job and what aspects of it they can "take ownership of." This article was published during the depths of the Great Recession in 2008, in a month when US employers shed more than a half million jobs.[4] I wish I could say it's an outlier, but it represents the common public wisdom on burnout, absolving companies and their managers of any fault for the stress their workers experience.[5]

The dreary familiarity of most writing on burnout shows how our collective thinking about this problem is stuck. We keep read-