Columns
Ministry

A forest is pictured after a fire. (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service/Kenai NWR)

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A friend, a dedicated social worker of more than two decades, gave me a shock when she confided, "I feel that I have to quit, I cannot take it anymore! I am going through a *burnout*." I understood her pain, but also felt deep within that she would be able to navigate through this burnout experience and emerge afresh. There are several other similar cases of burnout in social workers in India — as they are involved in complex working environments.

It seems to me that the reasons for such stress can be traced to four causes: their work, the organization, their personal lives, and their own personalities. The nature of their work is dynamic and organic. The client or the stakeholder cannot be reduced to a mere "number" or a "case," for they are fellow human beings who need compassion and care.

Secondly, many organizations place high demands and set impossible targets, causing the social workers to overstretch their physical, mental and emotional capacities. Additionally, unsuitable and toxic working conditions, including poor salaries or remuneration, lack of recognition or organizational support add to the stress levels.

The third aspect — their personal lives — relates to the insufficient time that the social workers get to spend with their own families; and in several cases, a lack of empathy and understanding from their own family and relatives adds to the stress.

The fourth aspect is their own personalities: Some of them work without much awareness of themselves and — having "emotional baggage" of their own — they tend to cause more stress to themselves. No wonder that another friend, a social worker who had herself experienced domestic violence, found it very stressful to challenge the belief system of her clients.

The concept of *burnout* was first introduced and defined by Herbert Freudenberger in 1974 and later developed by Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson in 1981. Defined from a sociopsychological perspective, burnout is considered as "*a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment*." Constant struggle with value conflicts and role ambiguities often precipitate inner confusions, self-doubts, unresolved questions, stagnation, and saturation to the point of breaking one's morale on multiple fronts.

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I discovered that there could be three stages of resolving this issue. The first stage to resolve such troubled states of inner anguish and rise above them is *awareness of one's anchoring bias*. We hold on to the first information that we receive from outside sources — either about the task given or the situation. I recall an incident where a student pursuing her internship with me found it difficult to relate and work with women outside her own caste. Her thoughts were anchored on the bias she had developed since her childhood about persons of another caste. She was unaware of this cognitive bias. When it was brought to her notice she denied initially but gradually made efforts to free herself from it.

The second stage is the *movement into stillness*. Stillness is not an emotion. Stillness is the calm center of one's own self. It is a space that is attained when all beliefs, ideas, compulsions, perspectives, and unresolved accumulation of years that created the inner clutter are given an opportunity to be decluttered and renewed! It is the stage when moving towards stillness, one is able to name and own up to feelings of loneliness, loss of identity, uselessness, uncertainty, exhaustion, or hopelessness. This stillness is a gift, a divine invitation.

The third stage of resolving the issue of burnout is the *realization of a call*. It is to re-understand what social work is and what it is not. It cannot be reduced to a mere profession. It is a vocation. One of my college professors used to often remind us that social work was not just about accomplishing tasks/activities: Rather, it was about helping another person to evolve, become one's best version of themselves, and outgrowing the present tumultuous or stagnated moment. And so, sharing one's resources such as time, intellect, emotional energies, and other resources were not to be considered wasted. During a conversation with a colleague on social work as a vocation, she realized that and recalled moments when she had been instrumental in helping the others to discover their own *beloved-ness*.This helped her to face her struggles of being impulsive and has now helped her to ponder and respond creatively to life.

This is a *call* that social workers are privileged to receive. In the process of this vocation, every step in it, even painful ones, are nothing but reminders of this call. This way, burnout experiences become *reminders of the call*. Such reminders then become positive agents of renewal. They turn out to be blessings as they become

opportunities to move into stillness, thus decluttering thoughts and feelings, and helping us to realize our call at a deeper level.

All these three stages need time and courage. It takes courage to acknowledge our own burnouts and it takes courage to say goodbye to them too! Instead of quitting, if we are willing to look within and become aware of the various anchoring biases that we have; if we keep moving towards stillness; and if we can gain a new perspective and move away from the idea that we have a *profession* to the idea that we have a *vocation*, then, burnouts would disappear altogether!

After all, we are invited to keep going, keep growing, aren't we?!