Burnout In Adventure Therapy: Bush-fire as a catalyst for change and soul work: An Australian perspective

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Figure 1: Natural bush and burnt bush *(Photo courtesy of Simon Heemstra)*

Introduction

As a background to the exploration of burnout as a psychological notion, it seemed appropriate to place it in a broader context. Both authors have at various stages, experienced symptoms of burnout, hence they were naturally drawn together by the need to understand this phenomenon more deeply. The bushfire metaphor seemed to link this naturally occurring event to the psychology of burnout. Rather than examining burnout from merely a pathological perspective, it was decided to look at it as a natural phenomenon that could perhaps unearth soulful qualities. In the tradition of Moore (1992; xiii), "soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination".

Fire is examined in its central role in the natural and human world. The etymological origins of words associated with 'fire' are explored, since they are pointers to the 'time closest' to the lived experience connected to the meaning of these words. From fire, the focus moves to

bushfires, in particular within an Australian context, enabling us to make links between the psyche and the landscape of fire. As bushfires are endemic to the Australian landscape, the proposition is made that burnout is endemic to programs that use the outdoors for therapeutic or educational outcomes. The psychology of burnout is then unpacked, including its causes, symptoms, and overall effects. Through this exposition the imagery of the bushfire is ever present, providing an ongoing link between psyche and landscape. The question that arises is whether a natural process can shed light on a psychological process, and whether this can deepen our connection between ourselves and the world of nature?

Fire, Bushfire and the Australian Landscape

> Bushfires being a commonly experienced natural and human-made phenomenon are endemic to the Australian landscape (Flannery, 1995, 2001; Horton, 2000). Both before and since human occupation of this country, bushfires have raged across this flat, ancient, island continent causing mass devastation and /irreversibly altering the pattern of flora, fauna and land usage. Australian bushfire authority Webster (2000, p.1) has articulated that this country 'was meant to burn, will burn and should burn'.

Fire is fundamental to life. The cosmological origins of the universe place fire at the centre of creation (Swimme and Berry, 1994). Humans appear to have an essential, yet ambivalent relationship with fire. The Greek myth of Prometheus hints at the nature of this relationship (Cotteral, 1989). Prometheus stole fire from the Gods on Mount Olympus to carry back and give to humankind. However, he paid dearly for this benevolent act. Tied to a rock by day an eagle fed upon his liver, at night his suffering was relieved and the liver regenerated. This he suffered for thirty years.

Burnout is a relatively recent word (early Nineteenth / Twentieth Century in English), meaning, 'to work too hard and die early (burn oneself out)' (Partridge, 1967, p.111). In Australian slang, burnout means to 'become exhausted, to become deficient in energy or drive' (Lambert, 1965, p.31). In examining 'fire' as a root origin, 'bernen' (Middle English) means, 'to be, to cause to be, on fire' (Partridge, 1966, p.65). The Greek 'pur', meaning fire, has its derivative from 'pura' (Latin 'Purus' means clean, pure, free from dirt, unstained, unspotted). Also 'pyra' (Latin) is 'a funeral pyre, for the burning of a corpse' (Partridge, 1966:214). So it can be identified that burnout, from the earliest times, has to do with fire and death, and also cleansing and purification. Fire is a constituent element of the universe. The 5,000 year-old Chinese philosophic system sees 'fire' as one of the fundamental 'Five Elements' (in addition to water, wood, earth, metal) whose law is an, 'expression of the evolution of being' (Hammer, 1990, p.87).

Jung (1981) in his extensive analysis of the psyche, believed that there were very strong links between landscape and psyche. Since bushfires are a characteristic of the Australian landscape, then it follows as a natural corollary that our psyche could be imprinted with this phenomenon. This aspect is articulated by Horton (2000, p.71).

> This is an Australian landscape, and I try to view it with Australian eyes, my body attuned to the rhythms of the country as much as to the movement of blood

in the veins. Here is a land where climate and landscape have shaped the vegetation, where climate, landscape and vegetation have created a particular fire regime for this area, and in turn, that fire regime has helped to modify the pattern of vegetation. It is a complex interplay in a land of complex ecology, whose secrets have been hard to unlock.

Despite the overall focus by Horton upon the, complex interplay of the psyche, land and bushfire in an Australian context, it can be posited that burnout, being seen through the metaphor of bushfire, is universal. Moreover, Bachelard, renowned psychiatrist and philosopher, in his book entitled 'The Psychoanalysis of Fire' (1968, p.10) states that fire itself is 'more a social reality than a natural reality'.

The Complex Ecology of Burnout: Unearthing the 'Secrets'

Being involved in adventure therapy/outdoor education places extraordinary demands on the leader. It is exhausting even reading about the expectations of such leaders. Sadly, it would be amusing if the reality of these expectations were not true, however, they do seem to be. To illustrate the extent of such expectations a somewhat hypothetical, yet realistic, job criterion implicit in this field is presented in Figure 3. In considering such job expectations, it can easily be identified how burnout is a 'plague' that afflicts our profession. In fact, it may not be going too far to describe burnout as being endemic to the field of adventure therapy/outdoor education. Furthermore, the high attrition rate in the field is most likely linked to burnout (Birmingham, cited by Edwards and Gray, 1998). Herein lies a secret, which has ramifications in terms of the construction and design of programs. The case study later in this paper attempts to consider some of these poignant issues.
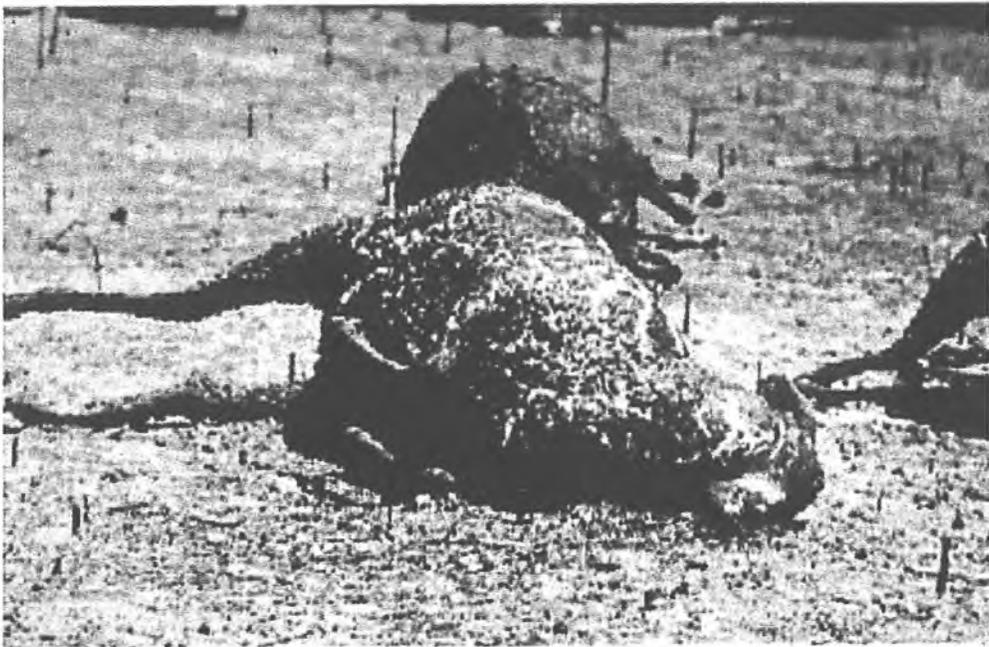

Figure 2: Sheep Carcass after fire

POSITION VACANT
OUTDOOR EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR/THERAPIST

Applications are invited for the position of outdoor educator/therapist. The successful applicant will be required to perform and coordinate the following functions: Educator, Nurse, Counsellor, Driver, Police Officer, Expedition Manager, Financial Manager, Team Development Officer, Buying/Purchasing Officer, Technical Wizard, Meteorologist, Legal Advisor and Administration Officer.

Qualifications: Applicants must have unlimited drive and the strongest sense of responsibility if they are to succeed in this job. They must be autonomous and self-motivated, be able to work in physically gruelling environments, in isolation and without supervision. They must be skilled in the management of people of all ages and adept at working under physical and emotional stress for long periods of time if necessary. They must have the flexibility to perform multiple tasks at one time without tiring. Similarly, they must be willing to manage their family commitments within the confines and demands of the job.

It is essential that applicants have the adaptability to handle new developments in the life of the team, including medical emergencies and critical incidents. They must be able to communicate on a range of issues with people of all ages, including teenagers, business people, teachers, public servants, delinquents, terminally ill and long term unemployed.

They must be competent in a range of outdoor pursuits (preferably at Olympic standard). They must be physically healthy, creative, active and able to foster social and personal growth within the group and team members. They must be loving, supportive, encouraging, imaginative, sensitive, and understanding since they are responsible for the mental and emotional well being of those in their care. Lastly, they must be up to date with the latest legal implications of work in the field.

Hours of work: On call all waking hours and a 24-hour shift when necessary.

Pay: Minimal pay. Allowances by arrangement, from time to time. The successful applicant may be required to hold a second job in addition to the one advertised here.

Benefits: No guaranteed sick leave, maternity leave or long service leave. No worker's compensation or superannuation. No guaranteed life or accident cover. No guaranteed holidays.

Table 1: The Multi-Skilled Outdoor Educator/Therapist Adapted from Edwards and Gray, (1998, p.37)

The image of the burnt dead sheep caught in the wake of the bushfire (Figure 2) symbolises years of exhaustive work in the outdoor field that under pays, under values and over works its staff. The adventure therapist is particularly vulnerable to this condition (Gass, 1993). The huge physical and emotional demands are compounded, not only by the therapeutic component, but also by the additional pressure to attain core competencies. If the adventure therapist/group leader is burnt-out, what are the implications for crucial decisions made at this time, both in terms of safety/duty of care and ethical considerations? Could we go one step further and challenge whether the five critical ethical principles, vis-a-vis: autonomy; non-malfeasance; beneficence; fidelity; and justice (Kitchener, 1984), are in fact jeopardized as a result of the facilitator/therapist being in a state of burnout? Given that ethical principles, 'when acted upon, protect the welfare and interest of all people involved' (Zygmond and Boorhem, 1989, p.273), we also need to ask the question, 'who is protecting the protectors'? In our opinion it should be mandatory for all organisations to acknowledge that burnout is a real issue which needs to be addressed by preventative and curative approaches. This point is reiterated upon by Corey. Corey and Callahan (1988), when they state that supervision should be mandatory for those involved in helping professions.

In addition, another thought provoking premise arises when we analyse why adventure therapists are drawn to the field. Quite clearly, a paradoxical relationship exists. In the first instance, the adventure therapist is drawn to spend time in nature as a source of renewal and sustenance, which then becomes the source of personal degeneration due to unrealistic work practices. Several other authors have alluded to the in-congruency between job expectations and job enactment (Cherness, 1995; Farber, 2000; Maslach and Leiter, 1997).

What is Burnout?

The devastation caused by a bushfire in Australia is often extreme, with the loss of life, property, livestock, wildlife and so on. In its wake, all appears black, dead and lifeless. The images seem to evoke conditions associated with the psychological state of depression – bleakness, lack of life, that is all pervasive.
(The 'Waste Land' of T.S. Eliot, 1963).

Burnout is an extreme state and requires an extreme response to remedy the situation. Many people are forced to leave the profession due to an inability to sustain themselves in their workplaces. A range of definitions that are commonly used around the psychology of burnout posit that burnout is 'a process in which a previously committed organisational member disengages from his or her work in response to stress and strain experienced in the job' (Shinn, cited in Pines and Aronson, 1988, p.5). Pines and Aronson (1988, p.9) also define burnout as 'a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding'. These emotional demands are most often caused by a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational stresses. Burnout is also accompanied by an array of symptoms including physical depletion, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, disillusionment, and the development of a negative self-concept and negative attitudes towards work, people involved in the work, and life itself. Personality is also seen as an etiological factor in burnout, for example being prominent in the driven, obsessive, compulsive, perfectionist type person (Abbott-Wade, 1997). Maslach (cited in Pines and Aronson, 1988) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory from research done in the field of

burnout. Individuals considered to be burnout scored highly in areas of depersonalisation, personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion (see Figure 4 for overview of these characteristics).

Characteristic	Indicators
Depersonalisation: *A loss of involvement.*	Viewing people as objects; distancing self from others.
Personal Accomplishment: *A loss of effectiveness*	Seeing themselves as not performing well on tasks that they perceive as being not particularly worthwhile.
Emotional Exhaustion: *A loss of energy*	Seeing themselves as operating beyond comfortable coping limits, and as approaching the 'end of the rope' in a psychological and emotional sense

Figure 4: Characteristics of the burnout individual (Adapted from Pines and Aronson (1988, p.12)

What are the Causes of Burnout?

In Australia, bushfires occur naturally and as a result of human interference. Natural bushfires can occur as a result of lightning strikes, spot fires, friction of trees and spontaneous combustion. However, the majority of fires (94%) are caused by people.   (Webster, 2000)

Human interference includes arson, modern fire control techniques such as back burning, hazard reduction and traditional fire stick management techniques, that have been used by Aboriginal people over the last 55,000-60,000 years (Flannery, 1995 and 2001). As such, bushfires may be out of control or under human control or a combination of both, where one may accidentally lead to the other. In Australia there are many cases of control burns which became raging bushfires due to unpredictable changes in weather conditions.

In comparison with the natural occurrence of bushfires, there are some causal factors in burnout that we can have control over, and others that seem far beyond our capacity to influence. Figure 4 identifies systems or operational levels within which each of us operates in the world. On each of these levels, there may be some situations within our control or, conversely, beyond our control. An analysis needs to be carried out in order to enact what can, or cannot be changed. For instance, on a meta-level (the peripheral rings of Figure 5), Golembiewski and Munzenrider (1988) identify five general causes of the increasing prevalence of burnout in modern western societies. These include: an escalating pace of life; dramatically extended life spans; escalating demands of work; intense commitment to work; disadvantaged groups; and 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

On a micro level, a person within a team/program/organisation (inner circles of Figure 5), may have control over decisions relating to intense commitment to work, but have absolutely no

control over dramatically extended life spans. Ideally, in the concentric zone diagram there is free flow between the different levels in both directions (what might be termed permeable membranes) where movement or flow is in both directions. For example, a team may be influenced by the organisation, just as the team may influence the organisation. In reality, there may only be a one way flow. For instance, the organisation may dictate to the team what and how programs are conducted.
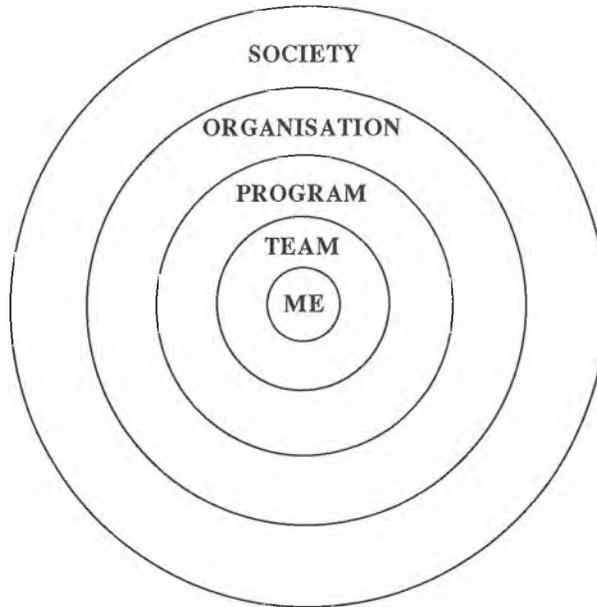

Figure 5: A model of systems or operational levels which burnout can manifest itself

The shift to a postmodern economic rationalism has meant the creation of changes to the workforce that can actively encourage burnout, and over which the individual may have little or no control. This includes down sizing, cost cutting, the prevalence of performance indicators in all work places and outcome oriented programs. Such factors have led to the workforce experiencing some, or all, of the following consequences:

> Organisational change and restructure
> Increased workload due to understaffing
> Lack of performance standards and job descriptions
> Lack of career development policy
> Poor delegation and motivation
> Ineffective management
> Unfair work practices/poor reward system
> Stressful work environment
> Lack of recognition/feedback
> Low group morale/poor company image (Video Trainers Manual, 1995)

Maslach (cited in Pines and Aronson, 1988) also identifies six target areas in the workforce that contribute to burnout. These include work overload, lack of control, insufficient reward,

unfairness, breakdown of community, and value conflict. Yet again, unfairness in the workplace may be a factor over which we have a modicum of control, whereas breakdown of community and value conflict may be impossible to address on a personal level.

What are the Symptoms of Burnout?

> A fire fighter may be able to examine the smoke from a bushfire in order to ascertain its level of severity. In fact, smoke colour provides an indicator of fire behaviour: dense white, grey, black, copper-bronze are the stages of a continuum progressing from mild to severe intensity.

When too many factors beyond our control dominate those within our control, symptoms of burnout begin to present: including a 'why bother' attitude, frequent illness, sleep disturbance, boredom, frustration and irritability, strained communications, lowered performance, loss of concentration, social and emotional withdrawal, loss of interest in sex, fatigue and lethargy (Video Trainers Manual, 1995). In fact, many of these qualities could be characterised as a person suffering from depression (Donatelle and Davis, 2000; Herman, 1992). During partial burnout, one or a few symptoms may present and, therefore, be representative of the lower end of the fire danger index (*white or grey smoke*). During full blown or extreme burnout, many of the symptoms manifest and are representative of the higher fire danger index (*black or copper-bronze smoke*). Perhaps, it is more useful to view burnout as stages on a continuum, with various symptoms manifesting at each stage. In the metaphor of the bushfire, due to sufficient fuel load (*leaf litter, twigs, branches and tall grasses*), the fire progresses from a ground level, manageable fire, to a dangerous, unpredictable fire, spreading rapidly from tree top to tree top. Within this context, the wild, raging out of control fire, translates as the person in 'full blown' burnout, exhibiting most of the above symptoms.

A Case Study of Burnout

This case study outlines a youth at risk program that was a funded initiative targeting young people with troubled behaviour (12-18 years). Treatment involved, adventure therapy through an extended camp, supplemented by intervention involving preparation and follow up (individual, school and family). The program was run on a Control Theory/Reality Therapy model (Glasser, 1984, 1990) with the understanding that each team member (of a group of five) were responsible for controlling themselves and their own behaviour, and unable to control the behaviour of others.

With reference to Figure 4, the team did not work in isolation. It worked within the context of other systems and influences. The concentric circle diagram seeks to show systemic levels of influence/impact on the team leader and the team. It can be seen that each one of these areas had some degree of influence upon another. In planning this program the team leader sought to minimise the risk of burnout amongst the rest of the team. This involved addressing the issues on each of the different levels in order to minimise the potential of burnout. The group met to discuss what could and could not be changed, what would promote sustainability, and to reflect upon personal patterns of behaviour. At various times throughout the year, the group met to consider the dynamics of the concentric circle model and review their experiences using a reflexive feedback process (Figure 6).

Concentric Zone	Issues Which Need to be Addressed
ME	• What can I and can't I change? • What are my strengths and weaknesses? • How do I manage others and myself? • Do I have appropriate boundaries?
TEAM	• Working with others at a close level – use of full value contract • Agreed approaches for handling conflict • Roles within team • Belief in training and debriefing as high priority
PROGRAM	• Understanding of real and perceived risk • Refining/managing real risks • Skills for working as in particular program roles • Flexibility to handle the unpredictable
ORGANISATION	• How does program fit into the organisation? • What does the organisation expect, is this realistic? • Pressures from politics from within the organisation – finance, documentation, research etc. • Does the organisation have ability to handle risks of working with damaged young people?
SOCIETY	• Do I live to work or work to live? • Where are my support networks? • What understanding does family etc have of the program?

Figure 6: Applying the Concentric Circle Diagram (Adapted from Birrell, Gray and Chapman, 2001, p.90)

In this case study, burnout was experienced only by the team leader and not the team who had been nurtured through strategies adequately addressing several levels, including team, program, and me. However, the team leader did not feel the same level of nurturing. There did not appear to be any reciprocity through the outer circle levels that involved factors far beyond the control of the leader. For instance, unrealistic expectations from the organisation level as well as politics within the organisation around finance existed. What was assumed to be a permeable membrane between levels, facilitating a two-way flow (or reciprocity), was in the experience of the team leader, discovered to be an impermeable membrane at certain levels preventing flow completely, or a semi-permeable, membrane with a one-way directional flow only. When there was not a two-way flow, burnout ensued. Thus, the community of support that had been carefully designed by the group leader had limited effectiveness. This concept is linked with the age-old wisdom of Chinese medicine, that sees disease as a result of energy excess, energy deficit or energy block (Hammer, 1990).

Initially the team leader continued to work with a lower level of efficiency and frequent fatigue: fire not out of control – yet still low grade burning. As Bachelard (1968, p.13) proposes 'fire smoulders in a soul more surely than it does under ashes'. Finally, the team leader's health began to suffer symptoms of sleep disturbance, increased stress, and loss of concentration, and

began to force frequent absence from work. Eventually, for self-preservation reasons, the team leader reluctantly resigned from the program. The team leader is fully burntout, the charred body demands withdrawal for rest and recuperation (*see* Figure 2).

Presumably, another team leader would have been employed, but one may wonder whether anything changed in the organisation to ensure the support of the new team leader. Sadly, the cycle of burnout continues, raging like an epidemic through our workplaces. Unlike most epidemics, burnout is deliberately not seen, not noticed – and so lives on: the small fire at the bottom of the gully I may not see, but when huge flames and smoke start billowing towards me I can no longer ignore it.

The Phoenix Rising Out Of The Ashes / Bush Regeneration

As described earlier, death and devastation seem to characterise the post-bushfire stage, however, this is not all the story, as was hinted at in the Greek/Latin etymological origins. Within a few weeks buds appear from the ashes, or the blackened trunks of seemingly dead trees; certain species of eucalyptus spread their seeds only due to the intense temperatures; grasses spring up from the dead earth. Within a few years, the total forest may be regenerated with very little evidence of bushfire scarring. This truly is a 'rebirth', purification and new life. Life and death are inextricably linked in this natural cycle, 'at the centres are the seeds; at the centre is the engendering fire. That which germinates burns. That which burns germinates.'   (Bachelard, 1968, p.41)

Figure 7: The Re-growth Following a Bushfire *(Photo courtesy of Rob Whelan)*

People who have been affected to a very large extent by burnout in their lives have the prospect of new birth, new life and purification. The mythical Phoenix bird is killed by fire yet rises above it in flight to new life. As the embodiment of the sun god, this sacred bird is consumed again and again from the fire and arises from the ashes (Cotteral, 1989). Such a mythological theme reinforces the lesson illustrated by the bushfire – which after death comes new life (see Figure 7). As Bachelard (1968, p.16) stated, 'the fascinated individual hears the call of the funeral pyre. For him, destruction is more than a change, it is a renewal'.

Choices may be made to pursue totally different career paths. Times of regeneration, rest and renewal are critical in bringing self back to a balance. Salient lessons are learnt from why burnout occurs, providing indicators for future behaviour. Bachelard (1968, p.17) hints at the drastic nature of the all encompassing burnout.

> Love, death and fire are united at the same moment ... this total death, which leaves no trace, is the guarantee that our whole person has departed for the beyond. To lose everything, in order to gain everything. The lesson taught by the fire is clear: after having gained all through skill, through love or through violence you must give up all, you must annihilate yourself.

The Chinese see the natural function of the fire element as it 'generates and controls, protects and integrates, sorts and harmonises energies for the joyful and loving expression of 'being' ' (Hammer, 1990, p.88). The message portrayed in Figure 8, by well-known Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig, portrays this notion.
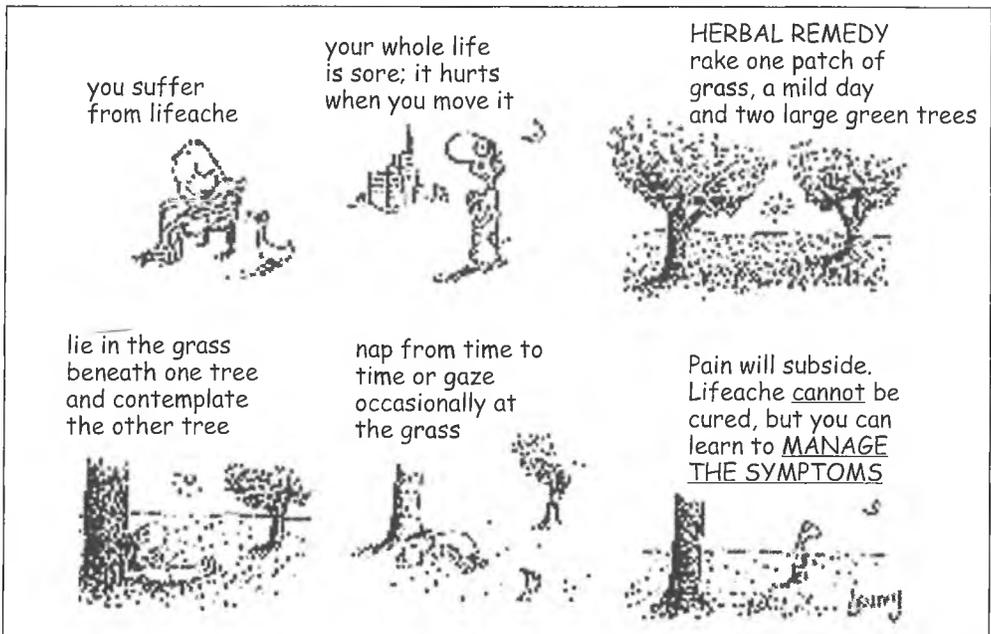
A HERBAL remedy for LIFEACHE

Figure 8: A Herbal Remedy for Lifeache *[Cartoon by Leunig (1995)]*

Hazard Reduction: Doing our own Back-Burning

> In Australia fire management procedures incorporate hazard reduction/control burn strategies in order to minimise harm. For example, homeowners in fire susceptible areas are encouraged to reduce the quantity of vegetation around houses. This may involve judicious pruning, weeding, tidying and burning since, 'doubling the fine fuel quantity causes sixteen times the damage'.
>
> <div align="right">(Webster, 2000, p.186)</div>

As the case study has shown, there are steps that may be taken when early symptoms of burnout emerge, or decisions made in regard to factors that are within our control, that make changes possible before burnout reaches such an extreme state. Not all fires reach drastic burnout stage. Frequent back burning minimises damage. The adage 'if you play with fire, you'll get burnt' is not the sole way of viewing burnout. 'Getting burnt' can be a soulful experience tapping us into new depths of our being. This is often referred to as soul work (Cousineau, 1995) and, as identified by Bachelard (1968, p.40), requires us to enter into the interior of ourselves.

> This need to penetrate, to go to the interior of things, to the interior of beings, is one attraction of the intuition of inner heat. Where the eye cannot go, where the hand does not enter, their heat insinuates itself. This communion at the interior, this thermal sympathy, will ... find its symbol in the descent into the depths of the mountain, into the grotto and the mine.

Therapist supervision and therapy for the therapist, are essential ingredients to ensure sustainability and longevity for those involved in the field. It may also be useful to consider the use of behavioural, personality or psychological profiles (e.g. DiSC Personal Profile System, Myers Briggs Type Indicator) to determine the capability and suitability of the therapeutic team. This point is reiterated by Maslach and Leiter (1997, p.9) who state that 'a mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who does the job' is problematic. To initiate the healing process, either during or after burnout, Australian naturopath Williams (1989) has suggested working with the nature of the metabolic imbalance. Diet, relaxation, nutrient replacement, avoidance of stimulants and people or situations which drain energy, are all factors which may assist recovery.

Personal Narratives of Burnout

TONIA'S STORY: I've Been to Burnout and Back!

To admit that I was 'burnt out' was like owning up to having contracted some weird communicable or infectious disease. I was mindful that some members of society would view me as being a 'leper', others may see me as being weak, unable to cope, and a sure candidate for a nervous breakdown. This added insult to injury, mainly as many of my close friends would have seen me as a perfectionist, high achiever, and someone who always set for high goals in life. I have since learnt, that this type of personality is prone to be afflicted with burnout. There was one defining moment that signalled to me that I was on the road to burnout. Intuitively, I knew I would 'spontaneously combust' if I didn't change my bizarre, frenetic lifestyle but it took this one moment, the death of my beloved grandfather, Pop Duff, for me to re-assess my crazy existence.

My Pop Duff was no ordinary grandfather. He didn't sit in an armchair all day, he never dribbled into his tartan dressing gown or lamented about all the aches and pains in his geriatric body. In direct contrast, he was a vital and energetic man, who was your classic textbook case of a healthy 79-year-old. In addition to his athletic body, he also possessed an inquisitive mind, doing his daily crossword right up until the morning he died. His sudden and totally unexpected death occurred whilst I was leading a wilderness expedition in a remote Australian setting. Being remote meant simply that we only made contact with the outside world if there was an emergency whilst on the hike. As the expedition had no emergencies, we never had the opportunity to turn on the mobile phone, hence, no one could ring me. At the completion of a six-day hike, I learnt that Pop Duff had died, and that his funeral had already occurred. What hit me like a 'ton of bricks' was that someone very near and dear had died, and I had not been part of that grieving process. The defining moment was the realisation that I was giving more to my students and my workplace than I was giving to myself. I was shot to pieces – not only from the physical demands of a gruelling six-day hike, but emotionally I hit rock bottom. I resented that hike, I resented the six days I'd spent with the participants, and more importantly, I resented having chosen a career that puts you in such a 'selfless' position.

In retrospect, I guess my story of burnout tended to follow a cumulative process or pattern. In keeping with the metaphor of a bushfire, my own experience started at a grass fire, and moved quickly, and unchecked into an intense inferno. In my instance, burnout was fuelled by many factors such as the break up of a relationship, working full time, completing a Ph.D. and re-negotiating the role of a single mum. My run down immune system somehow managed to survive each academic semester, and then, WHAM – my body would flop into a screaming heap, utterly exhausted and lifeless. I would frequently experience migraine headaches, regular bouts of the flu. There were periods where my life seemed like a series of juxtaposed events, operating mindlessly from one day to the next. My battery was flat. In fact, the flattened battery that had been jumped started so many times, now no longer responded to injections of short-lived energy (akin to caffeine overdoses and chocolate hits). Sadly, I was operating on a triage mentality, and my body couldn't sustain this indefinitely.

I've elected to stay in the same work environment, but I am learning to set boundaries. Quite often I find myself saying "no" to certain requests that would only exacerbate my personal stress levels and I have worked on strategies that have promoted my 'self preservation' goals. Personally, there have been some salient lessons learnt from being to burnout and back. I now do lots of preventative things to ward off burnout – such as running, swimming, eliminating 'toxic people' from my life (as I find that they drain too much energy from me), I live in an house/geographical location which nourishes my soul, and I have regular massages with periods of time for reflection.

In closing, one of the things that helped me through this period, is the metaphor of the fire, and a belief in personal regeneration and renewal which is inextricably linked to the fire cycle. I have clung to the belief that the re-growth after a bushfire always appears to be greener and more vibrant than before. I hope that my life has been enriched as a result of being burnt out, as it has provided an opportunity to redefine myself and prioritise what is most important in my life.

CAROL'S STORY: Burnt or Baked?

My fires were smouldering for probably about ten years before moving steadily towards full-blown burnout. Throughout this time of great stress, high work expectations, a counselling practice characterised by large numbers of sexually abused children, the holding of my own family together after a marriage break-up and the need for ongoing professional accreditation, eventually all took their toll. I felt exhausted beyond exhaustion. No sleep or rest alleviated this state. I needed time off work when I could not face yet another day. I dreaded the urgency of a new client. Migraine headaches started to appear; chronic indigestion and sleeplessness became a way of life. As each new symptom appeared, I would try to address it. I learnt to meditate, took up yoga, had a massage regularly, and saw a kinesiologist every eight weeks. I knew what I had to do to bring some balance back into my life, but there was a huge gap between the actual doing. It was as if the violin string was so taut that it was about to snap, scattering me into a million pieces.

Finally, I had to leave work. I collapsed into a heap in the country where I could rest a lot and stay far away from emotional demands. This was the beginning of the healing, but first, over the next six months, I experienced many fears and physical symptoms. These demons that had been suppressed for so long through busyness and tight lid closure, could now freely show their faces. I spent much more time in the solitude of the bush. These places I had recoiled from in the last few years, due to the demanding programs enacted in wilderness settings. Most of all, I demanded expansiveness. I dismantled my life and surrendered to the emergent process. Ironically, this time of allowing myself to utterly be with the depletion, the wounding, the grief, the parched burnt earth, turned out to be my greatest period of creativity. I earthed myself with clay sculptures, poetry sprang from my lips, I craved thick earth oil colours, and I drew until I could draw no more. I healed, very slowly and very painstakingly, and I am still healing three years on. Perhaps we need to learn how to 'play' with fire in all its faces, how to be with 'getting burnt' and 'not getting burnt', how to incorporate more 'fire element' into our lives. The reflections in the following poem articulate a vision of hope, of new 'budding' arising from the fires of destruction.

I hold now to a view of life that is more oriented to natural cycles, my cycles as part of these and to the wonder of all. This poem gives a taste of my experience of the 'ground of my being'.

Ground of My Being
Sleeping dragon, ever watchful
Ever alert
Poised to strike
Fiery outburst of viper's tongue
Aimed and received
Burnt.
Then sinks into supposed resolution
Knowing full well
Embers still hot
Ignition easy
Short, sharp stabs that burst into flame
Raging out of control
And just as quickly melt to ash

But thicker logs remain
Clog and burden with intent
Toxic residue of anger
Layers and layers eagerly await
Spontaneous combustion
And do just that
How to quench this fire?
Dowse with water?
Cold wet subdues hot dry
Easy equation for too complex a process
Starved of air?
Precious breath that fire breathes no more
Refuse added fuel?
So existing flame must run its course
Slowly, painfully towards extinction
But is there no other way? …
To use the alchemy of heat
To turn fire upon itself
To burn out layer on layer
'til softened ash is all that stays
Ghostly reminder of a once solid self
Blown away in a puff of smoke
The transformation cycle complete
Out of death new growth emerges
Stronger yet in enduring fires of destruction
Wizened out of purified wood
Catalyst for change
Possibility.

(Birrell, 1999)

Conclusion

This paper has shown that bushfires, a commonly experienced natural and human-made phenomenon, are a characteristic of the Australian landscape. Like Horton (2000, p.71), the authors believe burnout to be, "a complex interplay in a land of complex ecology, whose secrets have been hard to unlock". Those of us, who choose to use the natural environment, whether in a therapeutic or educational context, have a lot to learn from nature. The authors purport that through our imaginative examination of a naturally occurring process, light has been shed on a similar naturally occurring process in human beings. On a human level, can we afford to ignore the complexity of the issues that surround burnout in our profession? The time is well overdue for us to examine the nature of burnout in our personal lives and professional workplaces.

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