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Nothing Left to Give: A Reflection on Burnout as an Obstacle to Liberation and First Steps to Healing

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THE KENNETH P. SAURMAN AWARD

This award honors Kenneth P. Saurman, who will long be remembered for his dedication to the field of student affairs and to the graduate program at The University of Vermont. After his death in 1980, a memorial fund was established for a prize recognizing the outstanding graduate in the program. This award is a reminder of the professional excellence and commitment Kenneth P. Saurman inspired in his students and colleagues.

Each spring, a committee of faculty members in the College of Education and Social Services selects a student, or students, who best display(s) the established award criteria. Those recognized: (a) show a record of outstanding achievement; (b) demonstrate ability to make outstanding future professional contributions at both local and national levels; (c) demonstrate future ability to make outstanding intellectual contributions to the field in the areas of research and scholarship; (d) show evidence of having fostered a sense of community and cooperation among peers, staff, and faculty; and (e) show evidence of outstanding contribution to the University through internship and practical experience.

In May 2021, the Kenneth P. Saurman Award was proudly presented to:

Chantel J. Vereen
&
Janelle Raymundo

Nothing Left to Give: A Reflection on Burnout as an Obstacle to Liberation and First Steps to Healing

Janelle Raymundo

[background: hopeful, light piano]

[effect: typing] So I'm crafting this reflection a little less than a year after graduating from HESA and starting my first full-time higher ed. job. Things are not what I expected.

As graduation approached, I felt a range of emotions. Excited. Nervous. Fulfilled. Tired. But overall, I was still looking forward to my new job that seemed to balance my higher ed. experience and love for graphic design. I was especially thankful to have found a "good" position relatively quickly in a job market that had been turned on its head from the ongoing pandemic.

After intense and critical conversations around what it means to value and practice social justice, coupled with naming harm we experienced in HESA and Vermont in general and moving towards healing, [background effect: footsteps] I took these next steps with a hopeful energy that I could continue these conversations and actions in my professional career. I felt ready to take on the world outside of grad school.

[fade background]

What I was not prepared for, however, was the burnout.

[background: soft, reflective, somber]

I loved my time in HESA, and I made plenty of memories that I'll look back on fondly. At the same time, I had more than enough moments that

Janelle (she/her) graduated from the University of Vermont in May 2021 with her M.Ed. in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration. She currently works in communications at Swipe Out Hunger, the leading nonprofit committed to ending college student hunger. She graduated from Rutgers University-New Brunswick in 2019 with a B.A. in Social Work.

drained me until I had barely anything left to give. But, I always managed to bounce back and recover. Or at least, that's what I thought at the time.

In retrospect, I can see and feel how every heavy moment, especially from the beginning of the pandemic, chipped away at me. I know I am resilient. I know I can get through many different challenges. But I didn't know what the total toll of going through 19 consecutive years of formal education (that's k-12 plus 4 years of college plus 2 years of graduate school) and everything that came with it (internships, research positions, part-time jobs, assistantships) would be.

[background: building, dramatic chord]

[effects: sporadic typing, email alerts, ambient conversations, Microsoft Teams call ringtone, phone ringing, alarms]

It wasn't until I began working in this new position that the weight of that toll really hit me. I couldn't always gather the energy to speak up when I felt something was wrong. Anything that I accomplished felt insignificant and empty. Issues that I would normally have considered to be small felt bigger. Issues that were already big felt insurmountable. I felt like I had nothing left to give.

[background & effects: build to peak and drown out narration, then cut sound]

I was burned out. [effect: Microsoft Teams call ending ping]

[brief pause]

One of the many things I learned in HESA is that higher education wasn't made for everyone. Higher education is a system that oppresses people who are already marginalized and feeds off of them for superficial "diversity, equity, and inclusion" goals to save face in a society that is (beginning to) demand more. This system takes a toll especially on those with marginalized identities.

[background: inspirational and upbeat "commercial" music, but ironic]

So many of us and our students with marginalized identities are told to be

resilient, to be strong, to persevere. The oppressive systems of higher ed. are to be overcome, and to overcome these looming walls while jumping through a thousand hoops to earn a degree (or two) as proof that “you made it” – we are told that this is what success looks like. [effect: applause, but ironic]
[fade background and effect]

Few of us, if any, are told about burnout. All of those walls we climbed and hoops we jumped through make our bodies and minds tired. Exhausted. We might feel like we can't move forward anymore. Like we have nothing left to give.

[background: thinking, a bit upbeat, sparse]

When I first felt this type of burnout, I wasn't sure what to do. “Self-care” had become a buzzword, especially among student affairs practitioners. But this type of burnout required more than a superficial “self-care” day. [effect: chimes, inhale and exhale] A \$5 facemask and essential oil diffuser isn't going to cut it.

This type of burnout forces us to interrogate why we and our students experience so many obstacles in an institution that is supposedly an “equalizer.” This type of burnout calls us to dismantle oppressive systems that traumatize and restrict marginalized communities. This type of burnout demands radical transformation of higher education.

But how can we as student affairs practitioners do all of that if we're already burned out?

[effect: office chatter and ambiance] Something I've been more seriously reflecting on since recognizing my burnout is interrogating “traditional” notions of work and my identity as a “worker.” In our capitalist society, we're led to tie so much of our identity and self worth to our jobs. Productivity often trumps personal needs. I have lived the majority of my life believing that my success in my career and how closely I could follow societal expectations around work determine my worth as a human being. I feel that this is especially true in higher education. [fade effect]

But we don't need to live our lives that way. We're allowed to say no, and

to nourish a healthy relationship between our work and our personal lives. We don't need work to be our life or to define who we are or our self-worth. And in a role that is service-oriented, we need to be kind to ourselves and approach our work with balance. Make time for breaks, and truly separate yourself from work when you do. Part of this balance is also knowing when to step away, which can be a really difficult decision. But we cannot adequately advocate for and support our students when we do not do the same for ourselves.

[fade background]

I know I'm not perfect when it comes to resting and saying no, but I feel like I have come a long way in my journey to establish a healthy balance of my personal life and work, as well as disconnecting my sense of self-worth from my work. I've been so lucky and grateful to have some wonderful, kind, and generous friends and mentors who remind me of these things and who encourage me to be more compassionate to myself. We need to rely on our communities for support and for gentle reminders, too.

Higher education as an institution is slow to change. [effect: clock ticking] Transforming such a resistant system that is too often stuck in its old ways requires a lot of our energy, time, and willpower. It's no surprise that so many of us are burned out. But to move towards liberation, as this year's journal theme calls for, an important first step is to re-ignite ourselves by beginning the journey of healing from burnout. [effect: fire crackling]

[background: hopeful, light piano]

For me, a significant first step was stepping away from that first, full-time job. Those who have more traditional beliefs about "proper" career etiquette have said that leaving a job after less than a year was a pretty big professional taboo. At the same time, I kept grappling with my burnout, asking myself why I had to continue putting my well-being last when it came to my career. But after seeing that so many others in my community were also struggling with similar challenges and burnout, I knew that something had to change. I saw flickers of hope in others who made the decision to leave their jobs and prioritize their mental health. We don't have to keep putting our wellbeing last. Our lives go beyond our jobs.

Deciding to leave was difficult. But I am incredibly lucky and grateful that this decision led me to a new opportunity where I could still prioritize my wellbeing while working to change higher ed. from a different angle. I'm still un-learning a lot of the toxic behaviors and expectations of my relationship with my job, but I feel so much lighter. I'm in a space where boundaries are respected, I feel holistically supported, and I can disconnect at the end of the day. Because of this new environment and culture at work, I have the fuel to dream and to take action, to lift others up without putting myself down.

When we find and create space for ourselves and others to truly thrive, we are, at the same time, deconstructing and reconstructing the “traditional” (as in, capitalistic and white-centric) workplace culture that is prevalent in higher ed. This freedom from the traumas and toxicity of that workplace culture gives us the fuel to continue working to revolutionize higher education and authentically embody liberation.

[fade background]