

OPINION

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SURVIVING IN THIS FIELD BUT WERE TOO BURNED OUT TO ASK

—by Kee MacFarlane

Have you noticed that there is no formal category in the DSM-III for burnout? You can classify the maladies of your clients into any number of different categories yet you, yourself, may be suffering from something which has no proper psychiatric status.

In its early stages, burnout can be difficult to self-diagnose, because when you work in the field of child protection you're never sure if what you are experiencing is symptomatic or the way you're supposed to feel. Actually, now that we have "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome," we don't have to worry about the early stages of burnout; it's the advanced stages we want to watch out for. Fortunately, they are a lot easier to spot. Advanced burnout happens when our bodies and our brains conspire to enforce the old rule about use-it-or-lose-it emotional vacation time.

At a conference in Australia a few years back, I heard it described as "melt-down." It implies something that attacks your core. I also like Lance Morrow's definition in *Time* magazine (Sept., 1981). He called it, "The disease of the thwarted; a frustration so profound that it exhausts body and morale. It is the entropy of the other-directed. Even the best worker—especially the best worker—will often, when thwarted, swallow his rage; it then turns into a private conflagration, the fire in the engine room."

I never used to believe in burnout—at least, not for myself. Considering all the years I'd worked in this field, I thought I was immune. But I hadn't figured on having a seven-year nightmare called "McMartin." Some people survive actual child abuse; others survive working with those who have been abused. You never know what you can do until you're tested.

These days I let others talk about how to prevent burnout. For me, it feels reminiscent of efforts to prevent child sexual abuse: I'm sure it helps to say no, to run away, to trust your "funny feelings," but sometimes it happens to you anyway. What interests me these days is survival. It's a term that gets used a lot in our business. To me it means getting a grip on your sense of perspective, your sense of humor, and your sense of who you are. Then, you hold on and ride it out. The perspective part is critical to survival, and sometimes the toughest to find: it is being able to remember the good things, even when all you can see is the bad.

The good news in this field is that we've come very far in a relatively short period of time. We've expanded our knowledge, services, funding base and the number of voices that speak out for abused children. The mass media have increased public

awareness of this problem to a level that was inconceivable a decade ago. The good news is that society is finally getting the message that this is a bigger problem than anyone ever imagined.

The bad news is that society doesn't like the message. To a nation that likes to think of itself as child-oriented, the message that millions of kids are being victimized is unacceptable. So is the idea that perfectly respectable-looking people are responsible for it. It's human nature, I suppose, to seek alternative explanations for problems we are unable to contemplate. It may also be human nature to want to kill (or at least maim) the messengers of such tidings. In these instincts lie the seeds of backlash—the public demand for different answers.

This demand is being met by small armies of lawyers, their clients, their clients' insurance companies and a new-grown crop of defense experts. Most of them know better than to blame small children for the increase in reported cases. Rather, they blame "over-zealous" professionals who are said to possess the power to convince children that they suffer from confusing and traumatic experiences that never occurred.

How are we holding up under the onslaught? Things could be better. Backlash aside, this has never been an easy career path. If you stay long enough you will eventually see too much pain in the eyes of too many children, and you will participate in a system that, too often, reneges on its promise of help. Why do we do it? It may be that, regardless of our particular disciplines, we're simply more at home in the white hat, on the white charger, carrying the white flag—even if our side does lose more skirmishes and sustain more injuries. Maybe we sleep better at night knowing that, if we made a difference that day, it was for kids, not just for our wallets or for somebody else's stock values.

But such attitudes tend to make us vulnerable in other ways. Whether our training was in medicine, law enforcement, or mental health, most of us are not well prepared for a frontal attack on our self-image. If we had aspired to be professional gladiators we would have gone to law school or gotten MBAs. As it is, the gladiators have a real advantage on us: they expect to go to battle, they've been taught how to fight, and they don't take the battle personally. We can learn a few lessons from them.

There is a war going on out there, and like most wars, it's affecting people who didn't enlist in the army. We are among those people; children are others. Professional schools, it seems to me, are doing a poor job of preparing students to survive in the fields of family violence, child protection, and public child welfare. It takes determination, commitment, and the expectation of a long, tough fight as much as it takes training in specific skills. It takes less energy to put on psychological armor before battle than it does to mend your wounds afterward. It's just as the airlines tell you: In case of

emergency, put on your own oxygen mask before trying to assist others with theirs. You'll be no help at all if you get knocked out first.

We expect abused children to come forward and risk being disbelieved, ridiculed, and discredited by others. We should expect no less of ourselves. It is not just a war about the credibility of children, it is a test of our own credibility as well. When you take risks, sometimes you also take it in the chin. We have to grow tougher skins. We have to prepare ourselves mentally to get up and reload.

We also need to differentiate who we are from what we do. If we don't, we become more vulnerable to attack. Given the adversarial nature of the legal process, what we do will always be subject to attack; *who* we are need not be a casualty of the battle.

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that not everything about the backlash is bad, regardless of how it feels personally. The backlash is a sign of life. When I began in this field, there was nothing to lash back at; society's denial and ignorance about child abuse was undisturbed. Now we have gone into the cave and poked the sleeping beast of public morality and vested interests, and it has come out swatting at us. It's not a fun position to be in, but it's better than no reaction at all. As things get progressively better for children, they may have to get worse for us, their advocates. We have touched a powerful nerve: we may be doing something right. If those who speak against the interests of children aren't against you, you're probably not doing your job.

The Chinese ideogram for the word "crisis" combines the characters for both "danger" and "opportunity." The danger to ourselves right now of being criticized, harmed, or even successfully sued is less than we imagine; the opportunities to make a difference are greater than we realize. Goethe, the German poet, once wrote, "God has reserved a special place in hell for those who refuse to take a stand in times of moral crisis." This is one of those times in our field. It's time to plant our feet.

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CORRECTIONS

In the upper right-hand corner of the masthead, the last issue of *The Advisor* was identified as "Volume 3, number 4, Fall 1990." It was late, true, but not *that* late. Please correct that issue to read "Volume 3, number 3, Summer 1990." This issue is the Volume 3, number 4, Fall 1990 issue, as the masthead correctly indicates. Sorry for the mistake.