

## Are You Dangerously Tired?

Exploring the Symptoms and Sources of Spiritual Exhaustion in Ministry

by Ruth Haley Barton

*Because we do not rest we lose our way.  
Poisoned by this hypnotic belief that good things come only through unceasing  
determination and tireless effort, we can never truly rest.  
And for want of rest our lives are in danger.*  
Wayne Muller

**One of the deadliest issues facing ministry leaders today is the fact that many** are experiencing serious levels of depletion. As one pastor shared recently, “I have struggled for a few years now with emotional exhaustion and have felt guilty for the way I have felt during this time. My whole life seems to be consumed by the worries and the stresses of ministry. I can no longer figure out where my life ends and my ministry begins or vice versa—it is very much melded together. Because of this I feel unable to shut off the worries or emotional upheaval that can accompany my job. Several times in the past few years I have looked at my spouse and asked, ‘Is ministry worth this price?’”

These sentiments, expressed over and over again by Christian leaders, never surprise me for it is my story as well. There was a time in my own life as a ministry leader when I recognized that I was too tired and worn out to keep going in ministry the way I had been. Even though all was going well externally, there was something terribly wrong under the surface. I was frustrated with how difficult it was to clear time in my schedule for intimacy with God. Even when I found the time, I was too tired to give him much alert attention. During times of solitude I fought feelings of exhaustion by attempting to do something that felt “productive,” like reading my Bible, journaling or meditating on some very profound thought. Most often, I was giving more thought to my next message prep or book project rather than being available for true intimacy with the Lover of my soul. Basic elements of Christian living such as loving my husband and children were difficult to impossible depending on the day.

During this time, I was very grateful for the story of Elijah who seemed to have had a similar experience. Even though his ministry was going well, in I Kings 19 we find him slumped down underneath a solitary broom tree, exhausted and depressed. Beyond the point of fighting it any more, he told God that he was ready to give up. As gut-wrenching as his communication with God was in this moment, Elijah’s story was somehow freeing. It invited me to stop fighting my exhaustion and surrender to it in God’s presence just as Elijah had done.

I, too, was worn out and disillusioned and needed to acknowledge that all of my efforts to ignore my tiredness or fight my way through had not provided any lasting solutions. Yes,

I could sometimes press on with spurts of energy motivated by a well-developed sense of “ought” and “should.” But the exhaustion and discouragement were always right under the surface, threatening to overwhelm me with the temptation to give up. Elijah’s experience demonstrated that God is willing to meet us in the midst of such tiredness. In fact, it appears that the very willingness to be honest about our condition and even surrender to it actually creates the opportunity for God to minister to us in very practical and personal ways.

### **Listening to Our Exhaustion**

Since then, I have learned that there are two kinds of tired in this world. One is what I call “good tired” and it is the kind of tiredness that we experience after a job well done. This is a temporary condition and when it comes, we can be pretty sure that after an appropriate period of rest and recuperation we will soon be back in the swing of things.

But there is another kind of tired that is more ominous; it is what I call “dangerous tired.” This condition is deeper and more serious than the temporary exhaustion that follows times of periodic intensity in our schedules and workloads. The difference between “good tired” and “dangerous tired” is like the difference between the atmospheric conditions that produce harmless spring rain clouds and those that result in the eerie green tint of the sky that portends the possibility of a tornado. When the sky is an angry green, you’re not quite sure what’s going on, but something just doesn’t feel right and you know you had better pay attention. One atmospheric condition is normal and predictable; the other is risky and volatile.

Dangerous tired is an atmospheric condition of the soul that is volatile and portends the risk of great destruction. It is a chronic inner fatigue accumulating over months (and sometimes years) of time that doesn’t always manifest itself in physical exhaustion. In fact, it can appear to be quite the opposite because it can actually be masked by excessive activity and compulsive over-working.

When we are dangerously tired we feel out of control, compelled to constant activity by inner impulses that we may not even be aware of. For some reason that we can’t quite name, we’re not able to linger and relax over a cup of coffee. We can’t keep from checking voice-mail or e-mail “just one more time” before we leave the office or before we go to bed at night. Rather than reading anything for the sheer pleasure of it, our nightstand is piled high with books and professional journals that cram our heads full of more information that will keep us “at the top of our game.” The idea of taking a full day off once a week seems impossible both in theory and in practice. We rarely (if ever) take time for a real break or vacation, choosing instead to work through holidays and break times. Not surprisingly, we might find that even when it is time for well-deserved sleep or rest, we are unable to relax and receive this necessary gift.

While our way of life might seem heroic, there is a frenetic quality to our activity that is disturbing to those around us. When we do have discretionary time, we indulge in escapist behaviors such as compulsive eating, drinking, spending, television watching—

because we are too tired to choose activities that are truly life-giving. When we have drifted into the realm of being dangerously tired, we might also be numb to the full range of human emotion. It might seem like a relief to be unhampered by the negative emotions that bog other people down, but when we are dangerously tired the positive emotions become elusive as well. We don't feel much of anything—the good or the bad.

### **Exploring the Sources of our Tiredness**

The sources of inner exhaustion for those of us in Christian ministry are many and varied. Some of the sources are as straightforward as simple over-scheduling or poor time management, but there are more subtle forces at work as well. We might be functioning out of an inordinate sense of “ought” and “should,” convinced that we ought to be willing and able to be exhausted in the service of God and others. Because we identify so strongly with our role as servants of others, we find it difficult or humiliating to receive help from anyone. We have unrealistic expectations of ourselves and don't know how to honor the limits of our own humanness—those times when we are tired, grieving or confused. Because we don't know what to do with ourselves during such times, we just soldier on without stopping to care for ourselves.

Many of us have few or no boundaries on our leadership and availability to others. We always feel like we should be doing more because there is always more to do. While this non-stop pace is often tied to genuine passion and a heart-felt concern for others, there is a darker possibility as well. We might be completely unaware of the fact that we are driven by a need to perform and to prove our worth through constant achievement and success. When we are not achieving, we are not sure who we are—a reality much too frightening to face. Thus, we are on a performance treadmill that never stops.

Many Christian leaders are also carrying the heavy burden of unresolved grief and pain from their past. It might be a childhood trauma, a place of emptiness or unresolved relationship within their family or a betrayal that they have experienced somewhere along the way in their ministry experience. Due to a distorted view of what a Christian leader ought to be, we think we should be able to handle it and so we soldier on without dealing with it, but the truth is that every day we are using energy to keep the pain of these experiences buried underneath the surface of our lives; however, this unhealed emotion only gets buried alive until it becomes too much to bear and wreaks deeper havoc in our lives.

Another source of spiritual exhaustion that is very hard for us as ministry leaders to admit, is that over time there is often a slippage in our own spiritual practices—those activities designed to help us keep our full selves before God so that he can comfort our pain, nourish our souls, transform our brokenness. The very elements of the spiritual life that we are seeking to lead others into become void of meaning in our own lives. We have little or no time for solitude and extended retreat times. Prayer becomes a performance, one of our professional duties. Scripture is reduced to a tool for ministry rather than a place of intimacy with God. We are busy creating community for others but

we do not have a safe place in community for our own souls. Thus, we are always giving out but not taking in enough spiritual nourishment.

### **Naming the Truth in God's Presence**

As you read about these symptoms, you may be noticing that you are teetering on the brink of dangerous tired; or you might realize that you are already over the edge. This can be a painful realization. But what would happen if, rather than judging and berating yourself, you lingered with your awareness, noticing the weariness that many of us in Christian ministry have come to accept as normal? What if you allowed yourself to wonder about your tiredness just a bit and opened it up in God's presence, "Wow, I am really tired. I'm not sure I was aware of just how tired I am. What is *that* all about?"

Then, rather than trying to just push through it, what if you chose to stay in God's presence with your tiredness and talk to him about it, acknowledging it as a child with a parent who cares and can help? What if, rather than feeling alone and weighted down by the seeming impossibility of your situation, you invited God *into* it by saying, "God, this is what is true about me. What are we going to do about it?"

When we become aware of our inner tiredness, Elijah's story invites us to stop fighting our exhaustion and to pay attention to it in God's presence as Elijah did. At such times, we acknowledge that all of our efforts to ignore the tiredness or fight our way through it does not in the end provide lasting solutions. Yes, we can sometimes press on with spurts of energy motivated by a well-developed sense of "I ought to this" and "I should do that." But when the exhaustion doesn't go away, we need to stay with it in God's presence until God helps us to know what to do. Elijah's experience demonstrates that God does not chide or scold but is willing to meet us in the midst of such tiredness and disillusionment, helping us to find rest for body and soul.

As the angel pointed out to Elijah, if we do not attend to the symptoms and the sources of our exhaustion, opening ourselves to God's care and guidance in that place, the spiritual journey and our life in ministry could very well be too much for us.

### **Practice**

Take a few moments to become quiet in God's presence, aware of his loving presence with you. Without judging yourself or trying to fix anything, allow yourself to become aware of any symptoms of spiritual exhaustion in your own life right now. Sit quietly with God with whatever it is you are noticing.

Then, invite God to show you what the source (s) of your tiredness might be—again, without judging or trying to fix anything. Don't try to think your way into this awareness; instead, allow God to show you what he wants you to see.

As you become aware of the sources of exhaustion in your own life, ask God, "What are we going to do about that?"

Ruth Haley Barton, a spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, is co-founder of the Transforming Center. She is the author of spiritual formation books and curriculum including *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* from which this article is adapted.

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