



Building Resilience Through Contemplative Practice: A Field Manual for Helping Professionals and Volunteers

Bobbi Patterson

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From experienced practitioner of social work and a longtime educator, Bobbi Patterson, this book offers seminary and social work students a wealth of spiritual resources to support the long journey of a life in service. One of the key points Patterson makes is that the experience of burnout should be seen as a natural and expected part of service, rather than a sign of failure. This insight comes from Adaptive Resilience Theory, which is based on a life systems and social systems model that views periodic breakdowns as part of the life cycle of individuals and institutions. To see burnout not as a shameful or an avoidable experience, but rather as a catalyst for necessary change and adaptation, is to retell the story of service, which is how Patterson titles her first chapter: “Rewriting the Story of Service and Burnout.”

What is the story of service and burnout that needs to be rewritten? For ministry students and persons who are studying to enter service professions, there is often an unspoken assumption that persistence and perseverance is a necessary virtue. Such persons go into the service sector because they have a sense of duty or compassion that steers them towards vocations that tend to the spiritual and material needs of others. For many entering service professions, the work is also one’s identity. The image of oneself that enables a person to declare “I am a minister,” or “I am a social worker,” centers an individual’s identity on the work that one does in service to others. For that person to experience burnout, or to consider quitting the work, is to consider oneself a failure. To stop serving others is to fail at being the person who says he or she “is” a social worker or a minister.

On the other hand, to rewrite the story of burnout and service is to focus on the opportunities available in the breakdowns we experience. Patterson notes the many ways that breakdowns reveal to us patterns of unsustainability, of unmatched expectations, of mistaken ideas about individuality and independence within a field of work that is communal and interdependent. Key to understanding burnout in this new way is to let go of our self-judgment. Patterson writes: “Self-denigration dulls. It fosters empty preoccupations with trying to be someone you’re not while giving to others” (21). If we focus too much on our own failures or sense of dissatisfaction with ourselves, we lose precious energy that could be devoted to reimagining the next steps we need to take. The deep acceptance necessary for moving forward beyond our experiences of burnout requires that we see burnout as part of the process, and not an end point.

Patterson’s book weaves wisdom from the Christian contemplative tradition together with that from Buddhist meditation, in order to offer concrete and practical strategies for students and practitioners to move towards this acceptance. Each chapter draws from Patterson’s own experiences in service, showing examples of how frequently challenges occur within service settings that can lead us to the edge of burnout. At those edges, by shifting our frame of mind through these contemplative practices, we can begin to see our situation and the experiences of others in a new way. Patterson’s book is a welcome guide for persons preparing for service or currently in positions of service who want to approach their work with renewed energy and attention. Professors at seminaries as well as those teaching undergraduates preparing for service can use this book to provide students with supportive techniques for engaging their work thoughtfully and sustainably.