

FROM DUST TO ASHES: BURNOUT IN THE ARCHIVES

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ABSTRACT: In contrast to several studies on burnout among librarians, nothing comparable has been attempted for archivists. For want of hard data, the author has attempted to indicate similarities and contrasts in terms of stress between the two professions. The reader is introduced to Charlie, a mercifully fictitious character, who, as a result of his education and subsequent career, achieves massive burnout over time, and in circumstances familiar to many archivists.

The principal causes of burnout among librarians are seen to be management-related, and have to do with poor working conditions, role conflict, and insufficient training. This may be true for archivists as well.

At a deeper level, archivists also may be disturbed and confused by profound changes in the production and management of information and mixed media in an electronic age less heavily reliant on the printed and written word. The whole field of heritage is becoming increasingly interdependent, and the old familiar "spaces" and categories of job classification are also changing. An imaginative education, coupled with a "non-specialist preparation of awareness" of changing patterns, is becoming essential.

"Burnout" has been defined as failure and exhaustion resulting from excessive and severely stressful demands on energy, strength, and other personal resources. What we have here is perhaps not so much a diagnosis as a space age metaphor to cover not just the dying embers of a campfire, but rather the status of a very complex first stage rocket which has helped others on their journey and which must now be retrieved for recharging and re-use. We have probably all witnessed, or ourselves experienced, forms of human burnout, vaguely aware that a number of factors contributed to the condition. "The term crystallizes something that people have always been experiencing but have found difficult to express."¹ The term only appeared in professional literature as recently as 1974, but librarians have up to now contributed over fourteen articles on the subject. Most of these discussed symptoms, causes, and remedies in a general and largely unscientific way. Very little has been produced statistically or by way of quantification as a means of assessing its impact upon the profession.² By contrast, there is nothing comparable on archivists.

This total of fourteen is impressive, but librarians are thick on the ground and library literature is vast compared with that for archives, and the relationship with users is rather different. Our material is not out of the repository on

loan when it is requested; we do not have problems over fines and rarely over damage by users; we are not asked by unreasonable parents to do their children's school assignments for them; we are not usually faced with unruly teenagers. "It is the violent disruptive library user that causes the most stress," which can result in something akin to "combat neurosis."³

The pressure from inconsiderate readers, coupled with administrative, mechanical, and electronic breakdowns, generate relatively more stress in libraries than archives. It may be significant that none of these causes emerges directly from the librarian's work in fulfilling the legitimate requests of the public, but rather from the external collapse of acceptable norms in other fields. Such breakdowns are less common in archives, but they may be at the heart of complaints about overwork resulting not so much from weariness as from anger and frustration.

Since librarians are our professional cousins, it may be helpful to review in more detail some of the material on burnout in the context of archival experience. The following characteristics have been associated with the condition (without the necessary knowledge I am not prepared to identify them as symptoms): on the one hand, quick temper, an intensive emotional state, and a bushy-tailed over-confidence; and on the other, chronic boredom, resentment and discontent as reaction sets in, a weariness analogous to battle fatigue, a lack of creative involvement in day-to-day processes, an emotional exhaustion leading to disgust with self and others, and the feeling of being in a rut and under severe stress arising from service to the public or management responsibilities. I should hasten to add for the benefit of all hypochondriacs that to be out of humor in any of these ways may not necessarily indicate burnout! In addition, there is generally a progression from over-enthusiasm to stagnation as expectations fall short of reality. Frustration follows, and the social value of the job is questioned as a once clear purpose in life becomes blurred. Finally, apathy, "turning off" or "tuning out," results in a minimum of effort sufficient only to avoid dismissal. This cycle may not go through all the stages outlined above, or it may be repeated many times according to the nature of the individual.

We all can recognize the above patterns and even identify with some of them. Rather than line them up against specific archival examples, I have decided to present a scenario, an outrageous fictive fragment from the chronicles of a Canadian provincial repository which, since it does not exist, had best remain nameless.

Charlie had always enjoyed history. His early and complete sets of bubble gum cards still attest to a young passion for the pastime of hockey. An almost photographic knowledge of his history textbooks gained him straight A's at school and straight B's at the university. After such a record, school teaching seemed vaguely incestuous and an academic post remained out of reach, so Charlie set his sights on the local provincial archives. An earlier make-work project had found him happily arranging the laundry lists of a premier who had long since ceased to require laundry, and, as a generous government had awarded forty-two students work in the archives with a permanent staff of five, supervision of Charlie's work remained erratic at best. He meanwhile reveled in his task, surrounded by piles of grubby little paper slips covered in the dust of time and redolent with the odor of age; here surely was the stuff of history

from which the premier's life would have to be rewritten! It seemed to him that he had become an archivist almost overnight with the future of the past in his power.

The provincial archivist was pleased with Charlie's work: 3,000 laundry lists in date order and cross-referenced by type of garment—all in three months. Industry received its just reward and when a vacancy occurred, Charlie joined the permanent staff. He now saw himself not only as a keeper of the well of learning, but also as a member of a helping profession who would tirelessly aid all who sought to draw therefrom. He would arrange, describe, and make available all media of record better, faster, and with more enthusiasm than any before him, and he would never be surpassed.

All went well for a time; he was given quite simple collections to process; neither his work nor his illusions suffered. After a while he took his turn at answering enquiries by mail; his replies sometimes ran to six pages of secretarial labor and provoked only the mildest of rebuffs. At the enquiry desk he found that people could not be shuffled like paper. Collections got larger, the time to sort them shorter. Back on the desk his ignorance of the resources in the archives as a whole mortified him and it soon became clear that genealogists, with what he saw as their infuriating requests for biographical trivia, far outnumbered historians. Gratitude was in short supply all round; he mistrusted the accuracy and completeness of the finding aids and, thanks to the snide remarks of users, was suffused with collective guilt that the repository was saving all the wrong things. Finally, there was not time to do justice to that *wonderful* letter from a historian who required a list of all the laundries that had ever existed in the province. And so Charlie's temper got shorter and, when the pressure really began to build, senior management provided a "cooling off" room for him where he would be joined regularly by fellow sufferers who did absolutely nothing to help. Unlike Charlie, space, it seems, was not a problem at the time.

All this caused Charlie to question (and grumble about) his work space, his pay, his group benefits, and just about everything else to anyone who would listen. He had incurred a wife, a new home, and three kids, in that order in an effort to take his mind off his troubles, but to no avail. Breeding turned to brooding; his work, once tireless, became tiresome, yet he still felt driven to produce. He worked late and his family life suffered. He saw himself as being broken on the wheel of life, richly deserving of that nervous breakdown he had promised himself which would allow him to loaf with honor, to stop the world and get off for a while. No one would really notice. No one noticed archivists anyway; hardly anyone had heard of them. Poor Charlie was the ultimate non-person in his own eyes.

But it was not to be. The provincial archivist was so impressed with Charlie's sacrificial approach to his job that he promoted him to be head of a new media division. Charlie was now approaching the threshold of unlimited and total incompetence, but he was doggedly determined to "make good" now that he had escaped from the rock of public service, little realizing that he had landed on the hard place of middle management in a period of recession and a shortage of everything including, once again, tempers. Decision-making terrified him, problem-solving all but defeated him, communication with his staff was always by memo. He submerged his newly won suffering in apathy, the avoid-

ance of challenges, and a determination at all costs to avoid the rocking of boats which would endanger a job that paid more than he could ever hope to make again. Charlie quite simply had burned out. They brought in a consultant to advise his division on automated applications. He immediately went on sick leave for six months

All this is, of course, a caricature, a travesty of real situations, and some might argue that for those enduring burnout, an exercise in poor taste as well. My intention is to highlight in brief compass the kind of environments, circumstances, and attitudes that debilitate the luckless. We will now take a closer look at our Charlie's career and see what might have been done to help him.

In common with most of us, he was exposed to school history courses and the illusion that textbooks contained all that was needful for salvation. Unlike those who, with a healthy if unconscious skepticism, resisted them, he eagerly absorbed their idealizations, the over-simplifications and the neat batches of cause and effect which he tossed back for his straight A's. At the university this approach did not work so well, but his uncritical sense of control over well-digested and organized secondary sources prevented the development of a common sense, that is, all his senses playing in concert on the untidy reality of history and the world in general. Too much formal education still prepares students for the specialization of industrial society and the norms of bureaucratic security at a time when these hard-edged concepts are crumbling, and not least in the archives. We are not prepared or taught to live in an age changing more rapidly than most. We are still programmed to cope with the predictable, and are more than ever liable to overheat and burn out through friction with the unexpected.

Like many others, Charlie got summer employment in the archives, but he had no opportunity to grasp the comprehensive nature of the professional work there, ironically because of his intense but limited enthusiasm. Of course, these jobs can be helpful, and a good way to experience a life with documents at first hand; a series of them is no substitute for the broad archival education which is becoming increasingly necessary. Again, university graduates are not trained to work in a bureaucracy; that is something else that has to be learned¹.

Most archivists, at least during their early years in the profession (the dusty years), derive intense and fruitful satisfaction from the arrangement and description of public records and private manuscripts, and for good reason. The search for pattern recognition and the recovery of order in the microcosmic world of archives nicely unites the new values with the old. Documents are man-made and tractable, they do not talk back, and they stay where they are put. Service to users is, as Charlie soon realized, something else when carried on amid the uncertainties of skimpy finding aids and indexes and a very imperfect understanding of user dynamics common to the entire profession. This also holds good for librarians, in spite of the studies made by that profession which I have discussed elsewhere.⁵ Our ability to cope depends less on the information readily available than on our ability to provide a supportive and enriching experience to the user, which might require the skill of active listening to an extent not generally appreciated. People usually do not mind searching and failing. Frustration comes when the system inhibits their work and archivists fail to understand their needs.

If we are badly hurt by stress in an archives, we tend to block our pain by concentrating not on genuine needs, such as the need for recognition as a profes-

sional, but by substituting “wants” as Charlie did. Do we regard *ourselves* as professionals (whatever that may mean)? Do we really need recognition from the world outside as a prop to our self-esteem? We may need it for other reasons. We need to review our personal successes from time to time, and to concentrate on changing what can be changed. We usually find we have done better than we think. Burnout is not a problem with under-achievers.

Charlie saw his promotion as an escape from tasks he could not handle, only to discover that management requires even more self-knowledge and capacity for vulnerability than public service, in order to negotiate effective solutions and (at times) make lonely decisions. Unhappily, bureaucracies are filled with managers like Charlie in the final stage of a sometimes well-concealed burnout. The trap of life-style and commitments has long since closed on them. There is nowhere to go but along the bleak and lonely road to retirement.

If archivists suffer less from the slings and arrows of outrageous readers than librarians, they should be eternally grateful. Should archives become more central to our culture this could change, but meanwhile a few less than helpful genealogists can still ruin our day! Our public does not expect instant retrieval of a book or piece of information and consequently is, on the whole, more understanding. For the novice user an archives is so awesome that expectations of a successful search do not run high. For the more experienced, there is rarely a quick informational fix in answer to a query, whereas there is a familiarity with libraries which can result in their being treated like department stores complete with check-out counters for information “off the shelf” and a lively expectation of customer satisfaction.

I suspect burnout in the archives may have more subtle origins, related to the archivist's attitude to the record. Our education is based upon book learning with all the advantages and disadvantages of text, where the librarian has created for us a universe of order and classification based on a knowledge theory centuries old. Archives, on the other hand, are a rumpled and often untidy mixture of media and messages where concrete “facts”, as an encyclopaedia would understand them, are usually as trivial as they are inaccessible. The rest is wide open to various “meanings,” and the subjective interpretation of the archivists transposed into idiosyncratic finding aids. We lack the assurance of conformity's embrace; we have too much freedom (though descriptive standards are changing this), and we rarely enjoy the assurance of being “right” in a world of relationship and approximations. Archives is such an inexact “science” that nowadays it is more modestly called a study or a form of administration. We are more like artists striving to create “causes” in the way we pattern our records that will have specific informational “effects” on our end-users. Given the size and nature of our holdings in proportion to available funds, we have to paint with a very broad brush. Subconsciously, we may still be thinking of documents as hand-written books full of “content” about something, without a proper understanding of the nature, message, and meaning of this material.

Do we become frustrated, bored, and apathetic about processing and retrieval because our methodology is as yet undeveloped, based as it is on a few basic concepts such as *provenance* and *respect de fonds*? Archival education is still in its infancy, and only a much more vigorous study of the record and an enhanced skill in dealing with it will provide archivists with the resources and discipline necessary to withstand the *ennui* of largely mechanical “process-

ing". For many, the only escape is the challenge of administration, but here again a limited vision may result in a lack of perception both of the problems of line archivists and their creative solution via sound policy, goals, and objectives.

We have to recognize that stress is endemic to a society which is undergoing one of those axial transformations which we must suffer and embrace if the planet is to survive in all its richness. Thoreau's "quiet desperation," now so widespread, touches the archivist, the user, and their families, and pervades their lives. We may be better off than some, since we are a helping profession in the communications business, where exciting and stimulating innovations are emerging around the electronics of networking and the necessity for less structured human relationships in the workplace. We have to learn to live with the paradoxes of our profession and not try to resolve them; communicating and recording are part of the greater paradox of life itself.

The vicious cycle of burnout can be broken by what are called "interventions," and this may be a good time to introduce what the experts recommend (Table 1). In the words of Smith and Nelson, whose table this is:

An intervention can break the cycle of burnout. The solution may be self-initiated or may occur in response to an immediate frustration; however, the change may be more effective if carried out consciously and with a clear purpose. The intervention may be a temporary or a permanent change. Careful consideration should be given to the right intervention used at the appropriate time. Choose the interventions carefully; what works for one does not necessarily work for all.⁶

**TABLE 1
MOST OFTEN CITED INTERVENTIONS BY
PROMINENT BURNOUT RESEARCHERS**

INTERVENTIONS	RESEARCHERS															
	Carroll	Chernis	Daley	Edelwich	Emerner	Freudenberger	Greenberg	Kafry	Kahn	McQuade	Marshall	Maslach	Moe	Munro	Pines	
Improve Working Conditions	x	x	x			x	x		x		x				x	x
Positive Job Support	x	x	x			x	x	x	x		x				x	x
On-the-job Training	x	x	x	x		x			x		x					x
Self-awareness	x		x	x	x	x	x			x						x
Physical Exercise					x	x	x			x	x		x	x		
Set Realistic Goals		x		x	x		x						x			x
Vacation	x		x	x			x					x	x			
Hobbies				x	x		x	x			x		x			
More Education	x			x			x				x		x			x
Breaks During Work	x		x												x	x
Family Support				x			x	x			x					x
Workshops/Seminars	x					x									x	x
Decompression											x	x				
Change Jobs	x			x												
Improve Salary Levels	x														x	
Sense of Humor						x										x
Meditation/Yoga	x					y	x				x					

x = approved
y = disapproved

You will notice that high on the consensus scale are improved working conditions, positive job support, and on-the-job training, all of which will help to provide physical and psychic space needs common to all the helping professions. Physical exercise certainly deserves its place as a means of reducing tension, but unfortunately the symptoms of burnout include a lethargy hard to break out of. On the other hand, why is a sense of humor so little regarded, I wonder? You will also notice one dissenting voice for meditation/yoga on the grounds that introspection is not what the burnout person requires. All the experts would probably agree, however, with the *preventive* value of all the interventions.

There is a tendency when discussing burnout to locate the causes within particular phases of an archivist's career, such as shortcomings in schooling and university education as opposed to on-the-job conditions. More likely all phases are contributory, since the likelihood of burnout will vary from person to person and is dependent on an attitude of mind. I am *not* saying it is "all in the mind" because the kind of exhaustion demonstrated can be very real, especially to the sufferer, and that is what counts. I believe, as I have tried to show in Charlie's case, that educational systems are by nature conservative and changes taking place here will help. Meanwhile, we can only deal with things "where it's at," and that may be the immediate circumstances surrounding a case of burnout, including the family situation.

The top three "interventions" in Table 1 confirm that a prime cause of burnout among librarians (in addition to pressure from readers) is management-related, and concerns role definition and role conflict, which is equally applicable to archivists. Management must decide which archivists do what and ensure that tasks do not overlap, causing tension and friction. Once this "space" is clearly defined, it is amazing how much cooperation, allowing for individual adjustments, can then take place, which is enhanced by improved physical working conditions. As for the remaining interventions, it is strange that a sense of humor rates so low, but I suppose this cannot easily be learned by the sufferer or applied by the intervenor. Meditation would seem to deserve a better place and physical exercise likewise, though this latter is ranked fifth.

The top three priorities, then, are clearly the responsibility of management, and I firmly believe that a good manager should perceive the onset of this condition or at least the conditions that will make burnout likely to occur. Unfortunately for Charlie, a "cooling off" room, as was once provided for waiters in smart restaurants, is not the answer.

We should perhaps be careful not to confuse burnout with a "pseudo burnout," which is a form of growth and may lead to "breakdown as breakthrough". This may well occur when new percepts and old concepts are in collision, and be experienced in the shape of the supervisor saying "we've always done it this way"; giving rise to a deal of justified frustration, apathy, and cynicism. I suspect there is a good deal of this about, particularly at the hands of die-hard professionals jealously guarding their turf or vested interest. I am generally leery of the term "professional" nowadays, at a time when we desperately need less specialized but well-educated "comprehensivists" who are more concerned with relationships than the old-style "generalists." Out of normal and temporary tensions *should* come resolution, but if not it may be necessary to resign and look for work elsewhere—which is easy enough to say. When I had to take this road,

there were other positions available. Moving is always difficult and can be highly disruptive for a family. "Dropping out" to stay when the action is elsewhere should not be seen as "copping out".

So much for aspects of burnout *per se*, but there is a more fundamental and closely related problem, which is already causing anxiety and stress within archives, museums, and related heritage institutions and which has been described as a "collapse of space" between them and the contemporary cultural scene from which they draw their artifacts, their financial resources, and their users. We are at the beginning of a vast information implosion whereby the planet is enclosed in an envelope of information, and every computer terminal could put us instantly in touch with people and resources at the point of our decision-making. This has led to an erosion of the old hierarchical, specialized institutions that created so much of our record and, since we are also bureaucrats, governed so much of our working lives with their clearly defined spaces.

Time was when the operational parameters of libraries, archives, museums, and art galleries could also be clearly defined, until we became more aware of the nature of the media and information they contained. Libraries have long been places housing manuscript collections, but were not many of them archival? Archives collected *ephemera* along with libraries; museums often housed historical photographs and archives. Art galleries (as art museums) contained topographical art and photography *inter alia* which could be considered archival. Historic sites and small museums have collected almost everything. It is this realization that has caused the tidy and comfortable demarcations of territory to crumble. We do not have separate spaces. We are in each other's backyard, and we have to understand each other and communicate better. It is not only the public which is gradually crowding in on us, but our professional colleagues in other heritage fields. This threatens us.

Alongside our administrative hierarchy we are recovering preliterate forms of communication and ways of thinking which are particularly disturbing to those caught on the boundaries of the purely literate mode—but it is at these very boundaries, intersections, and gaps that the action is, as any wheel knows that wants to run on an axle. Those who cannot move, lock on and burn out. Archivists are faced, if not with the death of history, then increasingly with its metamorphosis into mythic forms as we come to realize that life and culture, nature and the environment, move to a cyclical rhythm. We have to develop a total awareness of the past constantly replayed in the present. We can no longer place the past record in a neat little box marked "archives," when data bases swirl, reform, and update, and manuscripts can now be stored as an automated digital image capable of instant and, if need be, enhanced reproduction, in time to be content-retrievable through indexing.⁷ I am sorry if this sounds like third-rate Alvin Toffler, but I am trying to convey a great deal very briefly.

I have discussed in a previous paper the manner in which to some extent public services in archives, along with other social services, have decayed as a result of the reorganization of social life itself.⁸ The boundaries of work and recreation are blurring, and we are rediscovering the extraordinary resilience and persistence of play in our culture albeit in all sorts of serious guises.⁹ We can no longer hide behind our experience and expertise, but must dare to be amateurs in the literal sense, organizing our ignorance for discovery in fields which now are tilled in common with our own. For example, we cannot

fully understand the nature of record through the study of history alone, but must grapple also with anthropology, linguistics, communication theory, and semiotics where we remain rank amateurs but undoubtedly better archivists as a consequence of our exposure.

To be able to dialogue with modern people caught in extremely complicated situations requires precisely the encyclopaedic range of awareness of the ancient humanist. That is, the complexity of the contemporary world demands a nonspecialist preparation of awareness which is almost poetic in its scope and sensitivity to pattern. The answers to all contemporary problems are to be found in the problems themselves through dialogue in the eco-world: you've got to have somebody to listen to you, just as they need somebody to listen to them. Opposition to the mainstream is for steering past breakdown to breakthrough.¹⁰

And so to practicalities: an imaginative initial training and education to the archivist, and an opportunity for subsequent short courses to fire up dying embers, so that we can have a real understanding of the differences between sacred and profane (secular) space in our daily lives as we learn to embrace the world pressing in on us, yet manage to reserve a timeless space for the recovery and discovery of ourselves and what we should be about. Remember that the Phoenix transcended the ashes: in his end was his beginning.

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NOTES

1. N.M. Smith and V.C. Nelson, "Help May Be Harmful: The Implications of Burnout for the Special Librarian," *Special Libraries* 74 (January 1983): 15.
2. I am particularly grateful to Tina Roose, director of the System Reference Service, North Suburban Library System at Skokie, Illinois, for sending me a copy of the following article in time for me to write mine: Mary Haack, John W. Jones, and Tina Roose, "Occupational Burnout Among Librarians," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 46-72. This most valuable paper contains in the footnotes a select bibliography of contributions on burnout by librarians and others. The paper consists in the main of a description of clinical case studies based on projective drawings by those asked to express burnout and their reaction to it, coupled with answers to a questionnaire based on *The Staff Burnout Scale for Health Professionals* by J.W. Jones. This could also be adapted for archivists. Examples of the drawings are illustrated in the paper. The authors make the point that "many of the subjective and idiosyncratic attitudes and feelings that accompany the burnout syndrome are not assessed" in the above SBS, hence the use of drawings.
3. Rudolph Bold, "Librarian Burnout," *Library Journal* (November 1982): 2049.
4. Haack, Jones, and Roose, "Occupational Burnout," 48.
5. Hugh A. Taylor, *Archival Services and the Concept of the User: A RAMP Study* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 98. For an interesting recent contribution on this theme, see also Sara Fine, "Research and Psychology of Information Use," *Library Trends* (Spring 1984): 441-60.

6. Smith and Nelson, "Help May be Harmful," 16-17.
7. W. J. Boyne and H. Otano, "Direct Document Capture and Full Text Editing: An Introduction to the National Air and Space Museum System," *Library Hi Tech* Issue 8 (1984): 7-14.
8. Hugh A. Taylor, "The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage," *Archivaria* 15: 125.
9. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1970).
10. Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt, *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Javonovich, 1972), 191.