Dear Reader,

Welcome to a new understanding of burnout for our times. This is a sample chapter of my book, *The Joy of Burnout*. Please note that it is for personal use only.

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Warmly,

*Dina Glouberman*
THE JOY OF BURNOUT

How the end of the world can be a new beginning

Dr Dina Glouberman

SKYROSBOOKS

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Are You Burning Out, Burnt Out or Just Plain Sick and Tired?

Steps on the Burnout Trail

Jeff, Julie, Phil, Mary, David and Carol were highly competent, enthusiastic, energetic, talented and generous people to whom the following feelings, thoughts, and reactions came as a complete shock.

I was at work staring out the window and I realized I was gone. I wasn't really present. I was a ghost of myself behind some thick glass. Jeff, counselling manager

I was drinking too much. I wasn't sleeping. I was permanently worried. I got into conflicts with people at work. I saw very little of my friends. I became reclusive and remote. I couldn't make connections with people any more.

Julie, arts organization director

My body broke down. I was sleeping a lot and still feeling exhausted. I couldn't take a good lungful of air. I couldn't digest my food. And I didn't feel real. It was like being in a dream -everything seemed bright and the sounds seemed echoey.

Phil, insurance broker

I was driving myself to carry on and work harder and harder but I was achieving less and less.

Mary, airline planner

One of my clients phoned up in the middle of the night threatening to kill herself and I found myself thinking: 'If you're alive tomorrow morning, I'm going to kill you.'

David, social worker

I had run into a wall. I had nothing left. My reserves were empty. I thought I might be dying - but then I might at least get a rest.

Carol, health consultant

These are some of the voices of burnout. This chapter gives a sketch of the profile of those of us who are more likely to burn out and summarizes why and how we go on the burnout trail, what happens when we do burn out, and what it is challenging us to do.

I will also offer a soul perspective to help us consider what might be happening on another level. A checklist of questions can then help you to think about whether you or anyone you know is burning out or has burnt out.

Wherever the description veers from your own experience, please take your intuitive knowing seriously and adopt only what feels relevant to you. Not every person who burns out fits my typical profile. There are many reasons why we may take a different pathway to the same place.

My particular focus is on the individuals who burn out, rather than on the organizations or the situations that increase the likelihood of burning out, though these are also important. There is always an inner map that affects our choices, and we need to understand this map if we want to take responsibility for our lives. It is not our 'fault', but it is up to us to do something about it. There is no doubt, also, that some of us are very prone to burnout and have a great deal to learn from its lessons.

Those of us who burn out tend to be people who respond well to challenges. But when our heart goes out of our situation and we don't stop and reconsider, we become stressed, rather than stretched, put ourselves under even more pressure and soldier on in the direction of burnout or worse. If we are stopped by burnout before something more serious happens, it can save our lives, both physically and spiritually. If we listen to its message early enough, we can save our own lives.

The profile and situation of the typical burnout candidate

Those of us prone to burnout tend to start out as high-energy, ambitious and capable achievers. Whatever our calling in life, we manage to be the people who are enthusiastic, work hard and do whatever needs doing no matter what the cost. We often perceive ourselves as holding together situations which would fall apart without us. Sometimes this is true. Many of us think of ourselves as unlimited in our energy, even as 'Supermen' or 'Superwomen'. This is less a matter of pride than a statement of how our life requires us to be.

We are generally very driven and have a high need to be needed or approved of, or special. We often show a pattern of overdoing and overgiving without regard for ourselves. In extreme form, such a pattern has been referred to as 'workaholism' at work and as 'co-dependence' or 'loving too much' in intimate relationships. These patterns of over-responsibility are usually rewarded in the situation we are in, but may have begun when we were children in our families and felt loved for what we achieved or gave. As Jerry, a psychotherapist in the throes of burnout, put it: 'I started doing therapy at the age of five and started being paid twenty-five years later.'

The area in which we eventually burn out, whether at work, with our children or parents, in an intimate partnership, in a social or political group or elsewhere, has two defining characteristics. It is where:
We invest our creativity, our passion, our heart and/or our ability to contribute.

We earn a sense of identity, value, belonging, purpose and/or meaning.

It is more common for women to sink vast amounts of energy and creativity into an intimate relationship, whilst both men and women do so at work. Of course, these are generalizations and may be becoming less true as gender roles and expectations change.

As long as the situation we are devoted to is working and our contribution is effective, appreciated or rewarded, we remain whole-hearted. Our energy is high and vibrant, and our life probably seems positive and successful both to others and to ourselves. But if anything upsets this picture, we become candidates for burnout.

**Burning out**

At some point, something changes either in us or in our situation or in the relationship between the two. Our heart goes out of our situation. There is a dawning awareness, often hardly conscious, that there must be another way, that it can’t be right to continue as we are.

Some of us listen to this feeling and make significant changes in our lives - new job, a new relationship, or a new approach to our old job or relationship. In this way, we stop ourselves from continuing on the burnout trail.

But those of us who keep going, denying everything that contradicts the path we are on, are likely to head for a major burnout. Driven by fear of losing what we had rather than positive intention, we are no longer in a flow with ourselves or with our lives. We cut off from our bodies, our feelings, sometimes our friends and family. We become divided against ourselves. Our head, heart and soul are not in alignment. We operate like a car with the accelerator and the brake working at the same time and the tank down to empty.

At some point we start experiencing the range of physical mental and emotional symptoms described in Chapter 1. If we don’t take notice, these tend to get more and more serious. Jeff, counselling manager, described what adds up to a catalogue of classic burnout symptoms:

*The person sitting there wasn't me. I wasn't really there. I wasn't enjoying anything. I felt like I didn't fit my life. I was in the wrong position, doing the wrong thing, and I shouldn't be there.*

I was definitely losing it at work. I started to feel more indifferent to clients. I felt angry at colleagues. I had a combination of anger, cynicism, hate and disillusionment. I was furious -hating myself and hating them at the same time. An impotent rage. I was also terribly exhausted, and started getting physical symptoms. I also began to get more addicted to things, one minute chocolate, then drinking, then a phase of casual sex. I woke up one day and thought: ’I don't know why, but I need to go to the doctor.' The doctor said, 'You're not going back - I'm signing you out.' He thought it was burnout and depression. My thyroid had gone wrong. That's to do with energy. I was so exhausted I couldn't get up or do anything.

Once things get this serious, we are well and truly unable to keep it all going. We may not even be able to get out of bed.

Burning out may literally save our lives by stopping us before we suffer a more serious or fatal illness. It operates like a circuit breaker that keeps the whole system from blowing. On another level, burning out saves our life by showing us how and when our life lost its old meaning and by forcing us to do something about it. We may not save our old life, but we can free ourselves to be more fully alive.

**What went right**

When we are burning out, it is easy to feel like a failure. Yet we are talking here of success stories, in the sense that we have given, achieved, held together and cared for the people and situations we have been involved with. What went wrong?

It is what went right that went wrong.

As in the case of social evolution, our underlying personal direction is positive, but working it out can lead us temporarily into conflict, confusion and burnout. The process of evolution is always uneven, with one part of us ahead of another. When our situation changes, it challenges these stuck places and old attachments, and we can temporarily lose our way. If we take a more long-term perspective, we will see that a wrong turning every now and then is part of how we recognize the right path when we get back to it. Burnout ’is one of those times when we take a wrong turning and stay on it too long.

Wherever something is labelled as a problem or an illness, we must uncover the yearning that has not yet found the right outlet. Then we can help redirect its flow.

Thus if we look at the driven work and love patterns typical of burnout people, we will find in them an underlying yearning to contribute and make a difference. To redirect this yearning, we need to explore new ways of contributing that honour ourselves as well.
We all need to learn to love and take responsibility while being true to ourselves. On the whole, those of us who burn out have learnt to love and be responsible. Now we need to learn to be true.

The soul has its reasons

We have evolved far enough to have a sense that it is possible to take another step, but may not yet know how to do it. This is where the soul comes in. In a crisis, if we reconnect to our soul truth, we can find a way forward when our old personality doesn't know what to do. To understand how this works, we need to consider how our soul operates in our lives.

What is the soul?

Most people have a felt sense of the meaning of the word 'soul'. When we try to describe it, we come up with words like: our true self, our values, the eternal part of us, our highest and best purpose, our creative spark, our love, our human spirit, the part of us that knows, our essence, our being. In the following discussion, think of the soul in any way you are comfortable with, or just as a metaphor for our highest and most loving truth.

The soul, as it is generally understood, operates according to a different set of meanings than that of our everyday personality. The soul's meanings are more to do with being and loving and what it's all about and why things are the way they are, while our everyday personality is concerned with control, success, approval, managing the status quo and achieving personal goals. Our heart speaks of both worlds and can be a link between the two.

Acknowledging that our heart and soul are involved in our creative life is not just for caring professionals or idealistic workers for social change. Burnout is part of the business world and so are our heart and soul. Being connected to our soul just means that what we are doing has meaning for us, we care about it, and our sense of truth and rightness is behind it. We have some sense of purpose that goes beyond our own narrow ambition for ourselves.

When dealing with burnout, it is crucial to determine how our energy gets fuelled and then doesn't. Think of the soul as a large fiery light at the back of us, larger than ourselves or our everyday lives, fuelled and guided by something universal. When we are in a flow with our soul, this both energizes us and lights our way. Our everyday personality is also energized and directed by a flow with whatever is working for us in our lives. As long as these flows are working well, we feel fired up, we know what to do and we can accomplish extraordinary things.

But the flow with our soul and with life also raises the stakes. If our heart and soul weren't involved, feeling trapped and cut off wouldn't be so heart-wrenching and soul-destroying. The more attuned we are to our hearts and souls, the greater the perils of not listening to ourselves. We are like people who have got used to purer food and air and now feel ill when we eat or breathe food and air that once seemed normal. When we disconnect from ourselves on the way to burnout, we can't help suffering.

The Great Yes and the Great No

When our heart and soul go out of our situation, what we need to do is to stop, acknowledge our feelings and the outer realities, find our truth and follow it. In other words, we need to live truthfully. We must say what the Greek poet Cavafis called the 'Great Yes' or the 'Great No' – a Yes or a No in which we wholeheartedly put our will behind what we know to be true.

Even if we can't figure out what to do, we can just stop, surrender, and keep listening honestly to ourselves and looking honestly at what is happening. This reverses our pattern of trying to keep everything under control and to make things happen the way we think they should, and protects us from burning out. Eventually our soul will catapult us into a larger perspective which will give us a sense of where we need to be going, what choices are available to us, and what is really important.

Once we see the way forward, we can say that Great Yes or Great No and take our next step. By expanding, we turn a situation that stresses us because we cannot cope with it into one that stretches us because it challenges us to find that bigger picture.

Jurgen, a writer, told me how he got propelled into taking a larger perspective on his life after he achieved success as a Hollywood scriptwriter. He was finding that instead of enjoying life more when he became successful, he was taking on all the work he was offered and feeling more and more hectic, stressed and overburdened. He ignored these feelings and just kept going. Then two things forced him to stop. While he was away working in London, his house burnt down, complete with all the possessions he had begun to accumulate as part of his success. Then, on his return to California, he developed a life-threatening thrombosis.

Having your house burn down is rather more literal than the usual burnout, particularly since Jurgen wasn't there at the time so he had nothing to do with it. Nor is it clear that his illness was a result of stress. But I have noticed that at a time when we are burning out, occurrences like break-ins or fires or muggings or accidents or illnesses often seem more than chance and are perceived as messages from the soul. Jurgen himself thinks of these two occurrences as a burnout and as ultimately positive precisely because they were so shocking and pushed him to crisis point.
I had this doctor who was very plain-talking and he said: 'You could die from this if this blood clot breaks free. You probably won't but you could.' Not long after that I was lying in the hospital bed and I suddenly had this sense of euphoria. If I made it through this I could have a new start. Everything I had was gone in the fire. And I felt that appreciation of life you get when you thought you might die. And that's when I started looking critically at my life. I saw it had gone too far and I had somehow lost touch with that creative expression. Then I decided to move to London and balance my time between writing stuff for the theatre, TV, movies and films rather than just episodes of TV series which is what I was doing before.

The fire and the blood clot were actually helpful because they were shocking moments that yanked me out of the process. The dangerous thing is that the process carries you along, especially in Hollywood where it is related to material things: It's like a current that pulls you along. It's only if you get out of the water that you can evaluate it.

The euphoria Jurgen describes is typical of the experience of deep contact with the soul. He listened carefully when his soul spoke, said a Great No to his old life, and a Great Yes to his health and freedom, packed up the few belongings he had left and moved to London.

Thomas Mann's novel Buddenbrooks offers a beautiful account of the soul’s attempt to catapult us into a larger perspective, and of what can happen if we don’t listen. It is also a striking example of the way so much of what we learn through psychological research has been prefigured in the writings of great novelists and playwrights.

The central character, Consul Thomas Buddenbrook, is devoted to expanding the success of his family name and his hundred-year-old firm, and he succeeds beyond even his own expectations. At the point that he achieves everything he has ever hoped for, he senses that reaching the pinnacle of success can lead to an inevitable decline. However, he doesn't find a new vision to guide him, but clings to his old ways and becomes more and more driven. He starts to show all the symptoms we would now recognize as the classic signs of burnout, including exhaustion, inability to relax, insomnia, loss of appetite, constant worries and fears, chronic anger, minor illnesses, increasing ineffectiveness and general joylessness.

Then Thomas comes upon a book of spiritual philosophy and has an ecstatic transcendent vision of universal life and love that goes far beyond anything in his church upbringing. His soul is not so much whispering as shouting to him. Like Jurgen, he gets into a euphoric state. But unlike Jurgen, Thomas repudiates his vision the next morning as his middle-class instincts revolt against his unorthodox experience.

However, now that a bigger picture has been shown him, he is at risk when he ignores it. Thomas continues with a shell of a life until one day he has a tooth extraction and then, for no apparent reason, falls dead in the street. As Thomas Mann puts it, 'Senator Buddenbrook had died of a bad tooth. So it was said in the town.'

Surrender now or surrender later

When, like Thomas Buddenbrook, we are unable or unwilling to surrender to our soul's guidance, our soul withdraws its energetic support for what we are doing. Sometimes we can almost feel the soul withdraw. Alice, singer and songwriter, talked of what happened after her partner decided to live and work abroad without consulting her, and she refused to surrender to what was happening and listen to the truth.

It felt like such a gross injury, like such a personal wound. But in that moment I decided I would do whatever I could to keep the relationship alive, and that meant giving away my power, not feeding myself I needed to hold on to the magic, the romance and the fantasy of love forever, happy ever after.

I feel like my soul retreated, and I have this image of me sitting among the ashes trying to keep the fire alive. It's a bit like my soul shrank away at the horror of the thought. My exhaustion came then from sustaining this relationship which wasn’t a relationship any more, and keeping the myth of togetherness going, like keeping the home fires burning, literally.

Burnout is what we do to avoid surrendering. Yet in the end, we need to surrender to the burnout itself.

If we reach serious burnout, we have to stop and then we have another chance to listen to our soul and find a new way forward. This is how our old personality burns itself out and our soul fire begins to light our way: when our old ways have driven us to collapse, we can reconnect to our soul and our emerging truth can guide us forward. Burnout is pushing us to follow our love and our truth.

We do still have a choice. Some of us notice our burnout symptoms and move on to a new job or relationship without having moved through to a new place in ourselves. We do not say the Great Yes or the Great No. This pattern is likely to repeat itself. Others of us just resolve to put up with the situation, stop putting energy in and be 'sleepers' until we retire. Either way, we may not burn out, but we may also never get the lesson that burnout could offer us. If Instead we choose Radical Healing, we take up the opportunity that burnout has offered us to find a new and more joyful way to live. This is what this book can show you how to do.
Stop and keep moving

There is an old spiritual rule that the soul doesn’t care if we are in the light or in the dark as long as we keep moving and developing. Paradoxically, burnout, by forcing us to stop, makes sure we keep moving. We are forced to re-evaluate much of what we have held dear and to open up to new ways of seeing and doing things.

Our souls might not care if we are in the dark or the light, but we will. Being tired, miserable and ill is no fun. It is far wiser to stop before we are forced to. That way we can keep moving under our own steam and we won’t have to deal with all the unpleasant and potentially very dangerous effects of the burnout experience.

Consider This: Are you burning out?

The earlier you identify burnout, the safer and healthier it is.

How can you tell whether you or someone you know are burning out or burnt out? Here are some questions to help you work out where you are going in such a hurry and whether you might need to stop in order to find out. Don’t worry about what it all means. Just tick the boxes if the feeling is familiar.

Do you feel or notice:

- You are doing more and more and accomplishing less and less.
- You are doing more and more and feel appreciated less and less.
- The list of tasks is endless but you’re the only one who can do them.
- Your stress levels have hit the roof and are still rising.
- It will all fall apart if you stop.
- You are not doing as much as you should.
- You are losing faith in yourself.
- Everyone else is talking or doing things too slowly.
- You are in the wrong place doing the wrong thing.
- You forget things easily or sit and stare in the air.
- You have lost the plot.
- You don’t quite know what you are doing it all for.
- You are doing it all for someone else who should really do it themselves.
- You are doing it all so that someone else will think well of you or at least not despise/hate/be angry at you.
- Whatever you do makes no difference anyway.
- You are tired of taking care of everything and everyone but can’t stop.
- You are exhausted all the time and sleep doesn’t refresh you.
- You have started getting illnesses when you used to be so healthy.
- You are often angry, frustrated, cynical and/or disillusioned.
- You’ve stopped caring about your clients/colleagues/ family/or partner.
- You are trapped-
- You sigh or feel sad or cry for no apparent reason.
- You are detached from everything -no real feelings at all.
- You have an empty feeling inside you.
- You wake up worrying.
- You go to bed worrying.
- You don’t remember why living is cracked up to be a good thing.

How many ticks is a sign of burnout? There is no answer to this. Even a few can be too many if they are feelings that are new to you. Just look at the number and pattern of ticks. Notice if your alarm bells are ringing. Ask yourself when you started having these feelings. These questions are here to stimulate you to become more aware of what is happening in your life.

The deepest truth about all these questions is not on the surface. You could feel many of these things and not be burning out. The crucial question is: Do you really and truly want to be doing what you are doing or being what you are being?

And if the answer is no: Are you trying to ignore what you are feeling and continuing to put pressure on yourself to do what you used to do or be what you used to be? Have you speeded up, stopped functioning, or begun to alternate between the two, yet not stopped to fully consider why this is all happening and whether you are on the right track? Are you on a collision course with fate, hoping you knock fate out before fate knocks you out? And are you attacking yourself all the while, telling yourself you are wrong to be where you are?

If the answer to some of these questions is yes, this is where we come into burnout conditions. It is not the same as depression, nor the same as anxiety and stress. It is not the same as overwork. Nor the same as trying too hard to reach a goal. It is not just not liking your job.
It is definitely the end of a road, but the road signs do not give you any indication of this or you may be keeping your head down so you don't see the signs. If you don't stop, you may crash into a wall before you find out.

Finally: Too close for comfort

If any of this sounds too close for comfort, you may well be burning out or at risk of burning out. If so, notice how that makes you feel. Notice also all the other thoughts and feelings that have been building up while you've been rushing around ignoring them. Allow the feelings to come in and just listen. If they feel painful, just keep breathing and keep listening. Don't do anything about them. Just listen.

These feelings have been knocking at your door for a long time. In the words of the twelfth-century poet Rumi: 'Meet them at the door laughing ... for each has been sent as a guide from beyond.'

And now, are you willing to stop this mad pace before you burn out completely? This doesn't mean giving up your job or your relationship. It means stopping the pressure to keep going in the old way, just letting go of all the strings you are holding, and resting in yourself.

Please do. You are dangerous to others as well as to yourself. You need to stop hurtling towards destruction.

Give yourself a break.
Save your life.

If you wish to buy this book, please go to http://www.dinaglouberman.com/shop/