

Chapter 1

To Look Burnout in the Eye: Addressing Vocational Awe in Stories From Helping Professions

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ABSTRACT

Vocational awe is the “set of ideas, values, and assumptions” accompanying “sacred calling” to certain service professions. This idea was first put forth by Fobazi Ettarh in relation to librarianship where it is proposed as a narrative construct that justifies abusive and dysfunctional systems in library science. In this chapter, the authors discuss the ways in which vocational awe is endemic in the helping professions and how it may function in relation to burnout. Using the authors’ narratives of burnout as a framework for discussing vocational awe, this chapter focuses on similarities between teaching and family medicine.

TO LOOK BURNOUT IN THE EYE: ADDRESSING VOCATIONAL AWE IN STORIES FROM HELPING PROFESSIONS

One might ask, in a volume about stories of teachers transitioning from practical work in the classroom to higher education, is there a place for a chapter that pulls in librarianship and family medicine? However, as we meditate on the forces that drive people to make professional transitions, we cannot help but see similarity across the helping professions. We are a teacher educator and a family physician whose stories have intersected and resonated with one another in surprising ways for more than half our lives. Recently we were reflecting on our mutual stories and the way that burnout has shaped the telling of our stories with a librarian friend, and he shared with us an article from the library sciences that dealt directly and forcefully with concepts we were struggling to articulate. Fobazi Ettarh’s “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves” was a reading we approached timidly because it seemed to know our very different stories in an instant. We felt “seen” together, though our professional stories

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differ as being a doctor differs from being a teacher. The “lies” of vocational awe we have told ourselves involved individually and collectively venerating a profession in order to motivate sacrificial labor and underwrite identities and literacies of self-sacrifice.

Burnout is a buzzword in teaching and in medicine, and something we both have experienced. But to date, we have not seen burnout addressed in the literature in terms of Vocational Awe. Specifically, we are defining Vocational Awe as the collection of stories we repeat internally and collectively that couch the vocation of teaching, medicine, or librarianship in quasi-religious language of ultimate meaningfulness and hold it out as inherently good work that is above criticism. We tell stories that give us strength, but these selfsame stories have a shadow side. The awe that our respective institutions command—that we offer through our stories and the language entwined in our practices—might better be viewed as “a method of eliciting obedience from people in the presence of something bigger than themselves” (2018, para 15). Vocational awe is the “set of ideas, values, and assumptions” accompanying “sacred calling” to certain service professions (Ettarh, 2018, para 5). So vocational awe offers us ways to see the shadow side of our stories within these professions and their institutions, allowing disruptive, and potentially liberatory retellings.

Matt Standridge is a family physician educator in the Big Bend of Florida. He entered Family Medicine with a vision of serving indigent families. His experiences range from rural Appalachia to inner city Chicago and across cultures from migrant farm workers to suburban Florida. As his family grew, his medical practice shifted toward more traditional clientele and work in higher education. Still, in North Carolina and Florida, he continued to maintain a focus on rural medical care among underserved populations.

His practice shifted. This language is euphemistic, quasi-religious. Medical practices shift because of burnout.

George Boggs is a teacher educator specializing in content area literacies. He began his teaching career in western Washington state teaching English in a middle school and coaching. Early classroom experiences drew him toward students disaffected with school in general, and reading and writing in particular. He finished his English teaching career as a high school teacher in a reform school for young men, returning to teach there again prior to completion of the doctorate. Burning questions and a desire to make a difference propelled him into teacher education.

Propelled him. Do teaching experiences really *propel* people from middle school classrooms into teacher education? Certainly they do. But teaching experiences also propel people out of teaching, and ritualistic language is available to hold the profession of teaching blameless, holy as it is.

This chapter is about retelling our stories and embracing the lifelong opportunity for revision, reversal of fortune, and redemption. As we sat together and discussed how vocational awe shaped our professions and our stories, we began to think about how we could tell our stories in ways that did not reify what we are coming to see as a serious contemporary problem affecting many fields in the United States.

Vocational Awe

Teaching and family medicine are professions shaped with religious self-sacrificing language and that are strikingly similar to Ettarh’s description of a central problematic in librarianship: “Martyrdom is not a long-lasting career” (2018, para 14). The sense that professional martyrs are keepers of a sacred flame and that their chosen professions are more than a job sets up a brutal dynamic: The institution of primary care medicine is good, so those called to its service participate in its sacred goodness as a path

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