THE BELIKOV SYNDROME

by Jon Hassler ’55

Editor’s note: Jon Hassler delivered the 1982 Commencement Address. The text of his remarks is printed here in response to the requests of many graduating seniors, their parents and members of the faculty.

If I hadn’t rejected it for sounding too dismal, the title of this talk might have been, “Burnouts I Have Known.”

The subject of vocational burnout has been on my mind ever since I delivered a commencement address in a small high school in northern Minnesota, where I was seated on the stage next to the superintendent of schools, and as we watched the graduates come forward to receive their diplomas from a member of the school board, I was astonished to hear the superintendent muttering into my ear about how much he hated his job. He spoke in the bitterest terms. He said the town was provincial, the men and women of the town were ignorant, and the students — he said this pointing to several examples — were savages. He said he would soon qualify for his pension and he could hardly wait.

Put yourself in my place. It was one of those rare moments in life when two opposing alternatives become so tangible that you can reach out and touch them. In front of me were four dozen 18-year-olds wearing their caps and gowns and expressions of hope, and beside me was a man coming to the end of his career in a state of absolute cynicism. In front of me, punctuated by flashbulbs, was that community’s most important ceremony of the year, and beside me the man who had organized the ceremony was insisting, in the gloomiest terms, that the community was not worthy of him.

I came away believing that I had never seen such a graphic case of the Belikov Syndrome, which is my term for life-avoidance, which is also my term for what I see in people who suffer from severe cases of burnout. By life-avoidance I mean the constant desire to hold life — and particularly one’s vocation in life — at arm’s length. I mean the refusal to immerse oneself in the stream of the human condition. I call it the Belikov Syndrome because Chekhov portrays it too well in a short story about a man named Belikov, a schoolmaster in 19th-century Russia. The story is entitled, appropriately, “The Man Who Lived in a Shell,” and this is one of the opening paragraphs:

“You have heard of Belikov no doubt. The curious thing about him was that he wore rubbers, and a warm coat with an inner lining, and carried an umbrella even in the finest weather. And he kept the umbrella in its cover, and his watch in a gray chamois case, and when he took out his penknife to sharpen his pencil, his penknife too was in a little case. And his face seemed to be in a case as well, because it was always hidden in his turned-up collar. He wore dark spectacles and a sweater, stuffed his ears with cotton wool and when he got into a carriage he always told the driver to put up the hood. In short, the man showed a constant and irrepressible inclination to keep a covering about himself, to create for himself a membrane, as it were, which would isolate him from outside influences. Actuality irritated him.”

How could actuality possibly irritate us — we wonder on the day we receive our bachelor’s degree or our master’s degree. On that day, for most of us, life is still too fresh to irritate us or bore us or repel us. When I left this university 27 years ago, what did I know about burnout? In those days, as now, literature was my guidebook to life, but Graham Greene had not yet published his novel A Burnt-Out Case. I had seen Hamlet but was more interested in the swordplay than in Hamlet’s decision to be or not to be. It was only after I went out and took up my vocation that I saw the symptoms of life-avoidance first-hand among some of my colleagues, and discovered the germ of it in myself, and by reading closer realized that authors had been writing about it for centuries.
So now I'm back to say seven things about burnout. For all I know, my seven discoveries might be old discoveries, but each one, in its time, was news to me.

One, the less tangible the rewards of a particular profession, the higher the incidence of burnout. Teaching, for example — that strange profession that has us constantly giving away all we know — indeed more than that: all we think we know — and giving it to people who rarely come back to us to tell us what they did with it. Which is not to say that most teachers are burnouts. The vast majority of teachers I have known have been supremely conscientious, but we are all acquainted with the two or four or six percent who are so lethargic that the high point of their school year is the day they go on strike.

Two, no one is immune from the Belikov Syndrome, the periodic urge to give up and withdraw. No matter how zealous you are about your calling, there comes a day when the novelty of your vocation disappears and you discover that the race you entered was not, as you thought, the 100-yard dash in front of the grandstand. The 100-yard dash isn't even on the program, and what you're running instead is the cross-country marathon, which only begins and ends in front of the grandstand. Between the degree and the pension you do a lot of running through the woods.

I remember the day I made this discovery for myself. I won't say what year or in which high school, but it was January and I was standing on hall duty outside my classroom between period two and period three and wondering as never before where in the world I would find the strength to persevere through periods four and five and six and February and March and April and May. I was doubly disheartened because I was really quite fond of teaching, and how could a job I liked be so hard? My students had turned into cannibals, it seemed, consuming me by eating away at my spirit. I felt I had to quit giving so much of myself away.

Now as it happened, there were two veteran burnouts on that faculty who for years had been quietly going about the business of not teaching, and I took a sudden interest in their methods. One of them, a history teacher, showed films of World War Two five hours a day, and the other, a physical education teacher, threw out a ball and said to his class, "Go chase it." I had just enough imagination left to be dissatisfied with these two methods, so I devised my own, or I should say a certain book company devised one for me, for this was the era when the programmed-learning textbook first came upon the scene.

This was a kind of super workbook which led the students through the syllabus by a clever system of questions and answers and saved the teacher the trouble of teaching. There was in that school a roomful of these workbooks which the school board had bought from a zealous book salesman, whose rewards had been so tangible that the district tax mill rate had had to be raised. I issued those workbooks to my classes and I sat at my desk, never having to come out of my shell except to answer some rare question the workbook couldn't handle, such as, What's for hot lunch? It was life-avoidance in its pure form and within a week I was alarmed to discover that a crippling sort of malaise was spreading out from my teaching and pervading all my waking hours. Burnout turns up at work and follows you home. The following week I gathered up the workbooks, along with my strength, and went back to giving myself away to my students, having made discovery number three — namely that the fatigue of overwork is nothing compared to the fatigue of doing nothing.

Pascal knew this approximately 300 years before I did. Pascal defined the awful consequences of burnout in the year 1650 when he wrote: "Nothing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversion, without study. There will immediately arise from the depth of his heart weariness, gloom, sadness, fretfulness, vexation, and despair." It was those very things — weariness, gloom, vexation and despair — that I was hearing from that superintendent in northern Minnesota who spoke to me from inside his shell.

Four, we all carry within ourselves the seeds of life-avoidance, and for good reason. We all need respite from our calling. We all need to step out of the marathon from time to time and sit in the shade. That's what vacations and retreats and leisure time are for, and professions that do not have a system of sabbaticals ought to institute them. There is a term for such measured withdrawal. It's called rest, and it serves as an immunization against burnout.

But the danger is in assuming that if a little withdrawal is good, a lot of withdrawal is better. A lot of it gets you exactly where it got Belikov, who after years of living in his shell, fell in love with a young woman who moved into his village, and he discovered that he had grown too hidebound, too remote from life, to relate to her. He had spent so much of his life evading life that he no longer knew how to live. His shell had grown too tough and he couldn't hatch.

Five, be forewarned, the vocation you love, like a person you love, will make the most demands on you. I found this fact illustrated recently in a novel by Shirley Hazzard entitled The Transit of Venus. One of her characters, a dedicated astronomer, has gone off to a foreign country to oversee the installation of an enormous new telescope and he writes this in a letter home: "What an atrocious, sustained effort is required, I
cially if it's what you love. A vocation is a source of difficulty, not ease. To do is difficult enough. To be, more difficult still.

To do or to be. There is a difference. It's one thing to teach and another to be a teacher. It's one thing to write and another to be a writer. The difference is in the degree of investment. To do is to fulfill your job description. To be is to invest so much of yourself into your calling that you and your calling begin to blend. We have all known certain teachers or nurses or parents or carpenters or clergy or shopkeepers whose dedication made them the emblem of their calling. "A natural style" is Pascal's term for this. In speaking of a book he admired, Pascal wrote, "When we see a natural style, we are astonished and delighted, for we expected to see an author and we find instead a human being." This, then, is the opposite of the Belikov Syndrome — instead of withdrawing, investing. It requires great effort and leads to great satisfaction. It's been my observation that those men and women in whom the flame of dedication burns the highest are the least likely to burn out. Or, to put it another way, the more of yourself you invest in your calling, the more interesting your calling becomes. We are all narcissistic enough to be intrigued by our own reflection, and the more of ourselves we see reflected in our work the longer it holds our interest. Without investment, there is no interest.

Six, most burnouts I've known have been men. And this in a profession almost equally divided between men and women. I believe this is because a man is less likely than a woman to keep his mind alive after college. In other words, a man is less likely to read books. I mean fiction and nonfiction generally, which serve to stretch the mind and keep it agile. "Go forth and read books," I have been saying to my students for 27 years and my students have promised to do so, the boys as well as the girls, the men as well as the women, but then I began publishing books of my own and discovered that precisely 5 out of 6 people who read books and think about books and respond to books are women. In the days when I was addressing civic groups and study clubs about my books, I was invited to a dozen women's clubs before I was invited to a men's club; and therefore I thought it quite a breakthrough when the program chairman of the Rotary Club called me up and asked me to speak at Rotary on the following Tuesday. Telling myself that at last I had discovered a group of literate men, I said yes, I would be happy to speak on Tuesday, to which the program chairman

ladies' day, and we like to have something for the ladies." So I say it once more: I challenge the men of this class to break out of that masculine stereotype that has me believing that the last thing a man is likely to read is his degree, to keep in mind that if graduation marked the end of intellectual development, it wouldn't be called commencement.

Seven, every burnout I've known has come to the point of thinking (usually by mistake) that he is unsuited for his work. Either he will come to believe that he is not worthy of his work, or (and this is more common) that his work is not worthy of him. Sometimes it's true, but more often it's not. I have been struck by the almost miraculous instinct people have for matching themselves up to work that suits them. In the burnout's case the problem is usually not his being in the wrong profession, but rather his faulty vision of that profession. By that I mean most burnouts are either too nearsighted or too farsighted. The nearsighted become so preoccupied with small irritations and interruptions — that is, the actualities of their calling — that they lose sight of their long-range aspirations. The farsighted, on the other hand, spend so much time dreaming of their long-range aspirations that they have trouble dealing with the day-to-day actualities. I am reminded of what it was like to walk a rail as a young boy. If you don't watch your feet you lose your balance. If you don't look ahead down the track you lose your balance. The trick is to do both at once.

I conclude with two quotations illustrating that success requires a balance between the nearsighted and the farsighted, a combination of the visionary and the mundane.

About the mundane, C. S. Lewis says: "The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's real life. The truth is that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life — the life God is sending one day by day."

And about the visionary, I quote from Henry David Thoreau. I wrote this passage on a card and pinned it to the wall over my typewriter when I began writing the first draft of my first novel. If my prose became too prosaic, it was very helpful to look up from my labors and see this: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."