

CAREER Burnout



**GETTING PAST YOUR
EXPIRATION DATE**

Rediscover the love for your work as a legal administrator by focusing on your craft and always aspiring to learn.

Editor's Note: This article is excerpted with the author's permission from his book, *Second Innocence: Rediscovering Joy and Wonder* (Berret-Koehler, 2004).

When I first met Mrs. O'Donnell she was already sixty-four years old and had been teaching for more than forty years. One year away from retirement, even a casual observer could see the youthful enthusiasm she demonstrated in her classroom full of active, noisy fourth-graders. She seemed to have the bright-eyed innocence and wonder of a recent college graduate, even though she had been doing the same thing for four decades.

I have encountered many teachers (and other professionals) who have lost that innocent wonder – often at a much younger age – and meeting her made me ask: Why is it that some people never lose heart? How do we keep the fires of passion burning in our work? Why do some of us stay innocent and joyful long past our predicted expiration date?

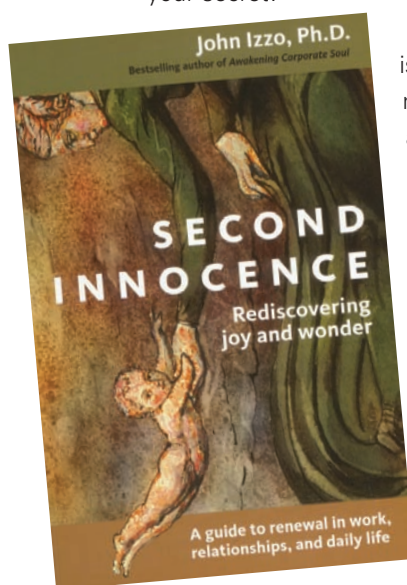
SHORTCUT

How do we keep our innocence and avoid becoming “burned out” in our careers? And why do some people never lose their innocence about their jobs or careers no matter how long they do them? There is no secret formula, but the answer begins with one word: craft.

In the world of work, we have a word for those who have lost their sense of wonder; we say they are “burned out.” When we say we are burned out, it is our way of raising the white flag, surrendering to the loss of whatever wonder once captivated us in our jobs. Burnout is different than stress because it cannot be relieved with a vacation or time off; it is the work itself that we have fallen out of love with. When we have truly fallen out of love with our work, time off doesn’t renew our interest. It merely reinforces that the job just isn’t fun anymore.

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A year after meeting Mrs. O’Donnell, I decided to ask her that very question: “I spend a great deal of time working with people, working on how to keep soul in their work, and I am struck by your youthful enthusiasm for your job. I was wondering, what is your secret?”



“I think one of the secrets is that every year, throughout my teaching career, I have always had things I was trying to be better at. That is, no year has gone by that I haven’t focused on improving in some key area of teaching. This year I’m working on how I can make the children feel more loved. My eyes are always open to new possibilities. Why, just last week, I sat in on the classes of the four newest teachers in

our school. These young teachers come with all kinds of new ideas, and in each class I picked up at least one thing I’d like to try this year. When you first start your career,” she said, “you’re always finding new ways of doing things. Then some people get into a rut. I guess I never found the rut!”

Although she never used the specific word, it seemed to me that she was really talking about the concept of craft. Craft is a wonderful idea and not much used in today’s society. We are a microwave culture, and craft is a word that hints at the need for patience and time. Craft comes from a German word for power and strength; to be a craftsperson is to let our inner power come forth into our outer work. Paying attention to one’s craft is to look at something we have seen a thousand times and to see more possibilities.

Mrs. O’Donnell had been teaching fourth-graders for most of her life but never stopped looking at her job with fresh eyes, the perspective of a craftsperson. Each year she identified ways she wanted to come closer to perfection. Each term she would visit the classrooms of other teachers and bring back ideas. But, most importantly, she never allowed herself to believe she had exhausted all the possibilities, and it was this posture of innocence that sent her out into the world seeking for more.

A WORKING RENAISSANCE

The journey towards renewal in our work must begin with the choice to engage with our work as craftspeople, as seekers of perfection, striving to use our fullest inner powers.

In my own career, I have witnessed the power of craft to renew my innocence about my work. The primary way I make my living is to speak at conventions and corporate events. Since I have given several thousand of these presentations, the potential for burnout and loss of innocence is very high. How many times can one tell the same story and present similar ideas without losing one’s sense of wonder? And there have been times in my career when the fire has burned less brightly, when my enthusiasm for the work I do had faded.

What I have discovered is that when I pay attention to the craft of my work in a deeper way, my innocence inevitably returns. When I dig more deeply into one area, learning and honing my skill in a particular aspect of work, the soul engages.

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For example, a few years ago I became fascinated with storytelling. I started studying great storytellers, learning about the techniques of storytelling, reading books about it, and watching other speakers and the methods they used to tell tales. Most importantly, I experimented with new techniques in telling my own stories. During this time, my work was infused with much of the same innocent wonder that I had when I began my career.

When we pay attention to our craft, we are in fact looking at our old job with a fresh set of eyes. In the process of nurturing our craft, we begin to see possibilities and our job becomes a “new” job, as we nurture aspects of our inner powers not yet fully developed.

Rather than changing jobs, we must often change the way we do the job. The power of shifting our perspective is demonstrated by the many people I have met in my coaching work who have gone back to school in their profession, only to report an increase in satisfaction and engagement. The jobs did not change, but they came back with a fresh set of eyes.

And why would we not lose our innocence and enthusiasm when we do our jobs the same way over and over again for many years? The Chinese written word for “boredom” consists of two characters, one for heart and the other for killing. Boredom kills the human heart, for we are craftspeople most of all, explorers who like discovering better ways to do things. Perhaps we burn out because we stop looking for the deeper experience of craft and cease to identify learning possibilities for ourselves.

Some time ago I met a physician who was well past traditional retirement age. His younger partners envied him, because even after decades he had the enthusiasm of a fresh graduate. His spirit was infectious, so to speak, and often produced an unintended result: patients wanting to leave his younger colleagues and become one of his patients instead.

One day his young colleagues got up the courage to ask him his secret. Like Mrs. O’Donnell, Dr. Bob did not have a ready answer for them, but he did have a thought.

“You know, even after all these years, I am always trying things that I think might make me a better physician. Just last year I started experimenting with how to make patients feel more cared for when I did rounds at the hospital. I started reading all the literature I could get my hands on and began experimenting with different behaviors as I did my rounds. Out of that inquiry came several specific ways that my practice has changed. I sit now when I enter a patient’s room; I always touch the patient on the arm or hand; and before I leave the room I simply say to them: ‘Patients tell me they are often intimidated when the doctor visits them and so they don’t ask the questions they want an answer to. So before I go, is there anything you want to ask me?’” He told them that this “practice” of focusing on areas for greater perfection was one that he began in the middle part of his career when was losing a bit of his edge: “I just began focusing on getting better, one aspect at a time. I never stopped wondering what it meant to be a better doctor!”

Forty years of practicing to be a doctor and his craft was still being honed. The job changed every year because he never ceased to innocently ask how he himself might change to become a better doctor.

So why do some people never burnout? How do a job, a marriage, a profession and a life continue to become new again, over and over? There probably is no secret formula, but the journey can begin with a single word: craft. ✨

about the author

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