

## HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR VALUE & WORTH?

Genesis 3: 1-7; Luke 4: 1-13

Anne Helen Peterson is a senior writer for one of the largest digital media companies in the world today - BuzzFeed. Recently, Peterson wrote an article that became hugely popular. The article is entitled: *How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*. What's a Millennial? If you're between the ages of 22-38, you're technically a Millennial. Peterson's basic argument is that many Millennials are reporting serious burnout, where they somehow hit a wall and cannot cope anymore. Even simple tasks become overwhelming. But why the burnout? Many of the generation older than Millennials often criticize Millennials for being too privileged, lazy and living off their parents support and hard work, not having learned how to manage and work for themselves.

Peterson wants to argue that this couldn't be farther from the truth. The Millennials she interviews feel like they are working all the time. They have to sell themselves and compete with other Millennials for jobs often precarious with limited benefits, on contract and therefore no guarantees into the future. The cost of living just keeps going up and they can never hope to catch up or live into what's expected of them. And so they burn out.

In one radio interview, Peterson went into further detail on the whole area of 'branding.' We live in a world where everything we do is done with a view to how we project ourselves to a wider audience. Whether we post on Facebook or any number of other social media, we are promoting ourselves in a way that markets what we have to offer. Even what we do in our leisure time, our hobbies, with our families and friends – all of it is part of a larger campaign of self-promotion and branding. What pressure! We are on all the time with no time to check out lest we miss that opportunity someone else may seize. No wonder there is so much burnout!

So, what's behind this constant self-promotion and branding? Where is the pressure coming from? It can't just be because of technology and how the millennial generation is the first generation to have grown up in an internet age. And it can't just be about achieving greater success or financial security. Maybe if we can get to the deeper malaise, we can find a deeper way forward to a more redemptive way of living, breathing and finding meaning. Let's ponder our scripture readings for some revelatory wisdom.

Our reading from Genesis is foundational revelation into what it means to be human. Adam and Eve are representative humanity. They are you and me. We are created to live in relationship to the whole – us in relation to all creation and us in relation to the ground of all being whom we call God. Adam and Eve don't create themselves or their purpose. They live within a larger givenness. Their lives are given them to be enjoyed by connecting lovingly with other life. Their purpose is to find their fulfillment and joy in celebrating life as a gift by

caring for each other and for all life on this planet. To connect lovingly we need to respect other life and give it space to be. We need to give as much as receive. We need to respect boundaries. We need to delight in the beauty of others as much as others may be inspired to delight in us as gifts to them. Our value and worth is in being loved and cherished for being the unique, one-of-a-kind creatures we are, not in what the market needs or others demand of us. The value and worth of life is not in achievement, success, being better than others, or earning and deserving our value and worth. That's where a lot of the negative stress comes from and that's how stress unrelieved leads to burnout.

But why has this state of affairs come to be? How is it that we modern humans have eclipsed any sense of a larger givenness of life as a gift? How is it that we have lost any sense of purpose in love received and love shared? How is it that we have become so insecure in our value and worth?

Adam and Eve are all of us in how they fall from their state of fullness in love. They don't like having to live within boundaries and limits, which is what the tree and its fruit represent – boundaries and limits. There are plenty of other trees and fruit to enjoy. But somehow, this tree and this fruit represent a limit, and we humans don't like limits. Somehow, they feel they want to decide for themselves where the boundaries are and what life's purpose is all about. Adam and Eve are what modern philosophers call post-modern. There is no larger givenness to life. We live life as autonomous individuals who create and construct our own purpose and our own selves. There is no higher God than me and mine and all other life is for me to decide how to treat or use. My value and worth is dependent on achievement and recognition based on merit as I and others around me determine it to be. Value and worth are not givens beyond anything we can do to earn or deserve.

So what happens when we become our own creators and gods? We are confronted by how vulnerable and naked we are. We create a world of fierce competition. Others are not there to be cherished, but to be overcome. I need friends to like me and I need people who will recognize and appreciate my brand. Imagine if everyone is like that? Who's left to really love me and treasure me for simply being who I am as I am with all my flaws and limitations? I now have to be somebody of commercial value to you or a promotion to your career to be precious to you. And I will value you only as you serve my own brand and self-promotion too. What a brutal, pressure-filled and desperate life I'm now having to live outside the garden, having to manufacture my own clothing because I'm suddenly aware of how naked and vulnerable I am. I am totally dependent on how others value my worth as measured by my success, achievement and usefulness to their purposes. I need their valuing of me to clothe me.

Ok. Preacher. Perhaps we can go with you this far. Living life's value and worth as measured by others in a competitive, dog-eat-dog world where we constantly have to be branding and promoting ourselves 24/7 is a recipe for major burnout. And perhaps an older, more biblical understanding of life as created to be lived within a larger givenness of value and worth beyond what we achieve or fail to achieve is better. But how do we move from our modern

state of affairs to a more biblical vision of our personhood for the sake of our mental and spiritual health?

This brings us right to our gospel reading. Jesus is in the wilderness 40 days. 40 is the biblical number of testing, struggling, questioning and searching. But searching for what? Purpose, direction, vocation. Jesus needs to figure out how he's going to live his life, what his purpose is, who he is as messiah and as a human being. The gospel story is written with Jesus' path being like tracks for us to follow. To follow Jesus is to learn from him and give ourselves in faith follow in his footsteps as we try to figure out our own direction and vocation. We, too, have to figure out our own purpose and who we are as human beings. Where do we find our value and worth? Jesus has to struggle with severe temptations as do we. The world pulls us and pushes us. The world draws us here and triggers us there. We are vulnerable and naked in our need for appreciation of our value and worth. We can be taken advantage of. We can feel inadequate, deficient, unworthy. We can see others not only as competitors, but as threats. Or we can see them as simply useful means to our own brand appreciation. We've totally lost our way. What light does Jesus shine?

The devil represents all that destroys our sense of self. And the more we are cut off from our larger givenness in God, the more we are vulnerable to the devil's lure. Jesus is tempted in three ways. First, he is tempted to make bread. Bread represents food. Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days. He is hungry. What kind of food are we hungry for? How does that make us vulnerable? Will we fight for bread by stepping over others or stealing their bread for ourselves? Imagine the bread being our inner worth. We want that worth and are willing to fight for it, beat others out for it, or take any worth going their way and direct it to ourselves because all eyes must be on us if we are to succeed. Jesus says no to this temptation: It is written in scripture, he says, "One does not live by bread alone." God is the one who not only gives worth, but has given me my worth. You can only take it from me if I give you that power. Why have we given so much power to others as competitors to define our value and worth? What do they have over us? What do they have that we need? Only when we feel worthy and valued in ourselves can others become human beings to care for rather than competitors or threats.

Temptation # 2: The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory: that's fame, power, money, status, success... We want it all. Making it feeds our value and worth while failure to make it demolishes our sense of value and worth. But what is Jesus' vocation as representative humanity before God going to be? How will love define success rather than success being the measure of my lovability? Jesus will not sell his soul, he will not worship the devil. As scripture declares: We must worship and serve God above all else if our humanity is rooted in genuine love. Love will define Jesus' purpose, his passion and the development of his gifts. Growing in love past the obstacles all around us is true success.

Temptation # 3: It's all about security. "throw yourself from this height, Jesus, and see if you'll be protected and secure," the devil whispers. But protection and security from what? Our vulnerability, that's what. It's all about making the kind of clothing that can truly cover

up our nakedness. What's going to do that? Money, a great job and career, fame, fortune, success and popularity? Or is it something else that will make our vulnerability a source of inner strength, compassion and generosity of spirit? How is our human vulnerability going to become an integral part of who we are, the way we do our work, the service we offer and the talent we are passionate to develop and share? Is our sense of self part of a larger givenness that is not dependent on the ups and downs of human praise and recognition?

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season for serious self-examination. Who are you? Who am I? What are we here for? What's our purpose? What should we put our energy and focus into? What are we developing our talent or craft for? Why are we going to school and trying to build a career? What are we living our post-working life years for? What will matter when we die and after we die? For what will we be remembered? May you and I come to some new places and spaces where love is opened up. May we experience a new path to the kind of peace that doesn't need the world's praise and glory to feel infinitely beautiful and sufficient before God. May we experience new contentment in the simple things of life which are the more important things of life – quality versus quantity when it comes to relating with other life and the creator behind it all; Amen.