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The Best Physicians are Destined to Hell

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'The best physicians are destined to Hell'. This is a famous teaching of the Mishna, which in the Jewish faith is the commentary on the Torah, our Bible. Now why would the Holy Book of the Jews make such a statement? Well, it turns out this is about arrogance. And it is about humility. The 'best' physicians, as we all know, may also be the most prideful. They may not realize they need help. And if they do realize it, their macho self-assurance may prevent them from asking. And for this, they may fail their patients.

Perhaps there is some truth in this. Most of us have had moments where in our professional lives, we have not reached out to colleagues, for fear of looking stupid or of feeling incompetent. Of this, I know I have been guilty.

Mea culpa.

But this teaching may be true in another way. Sometimes when we, 'the best physicians' are suffering from emotional exhaustion and staring burnout in its charred face, we ourselves don't reach out. We don't ask for help. For many of us, the story of our professional lives is this: we face overwhelming workloads, long hours in the hospital, and even more hours at home with our hospital computer (nicknamed my 'Laptop Lover' by my wife.)

We spend countless, frustrating hours doing clerical work that a medical secretary could do. We cancel dinner dates with spouses and friends. We miss our kids' soccer games and music recitals. But, in the face of this overwhelming pressure, what do we do? How do we respond? Most of us do what we always have done. We put our heads down and work harder. We plow through. We suck it up. We tough it out because 'when the going gets tough...' (you can fill in the blank.) We are made of grit, backbone, pluck and spunk. We are not quitters. We

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bite the bullet, swallow the pill, pay the piper. We do all this, but we don't ask for help. We persevere in silence. And while we may tough it out, our flame gets dimmer. We see (or maybe we don't see) the beginnings of Burnout.

So, if there is a kernel of truth in all this for anyone, please reach out to someone: a trusted colleague, a loved one, a Physician Well Being committee member, the Employee Assistance program, a psychiatrist, a counsellor in your faith community, a Balint group, SOMEONE.

Maybe the 'best physicians' are 'destined to Hell'. But if you, my physician brothers and sisters, feel like you are headed toward this destination, please heed this warning: Do not take this journey alone.

And if you see your fellow physician brothers and sisters heading down this path, think about lending a helping hand, a warm shoulder, or a listening ear.

Remember: Friends do not let friends become 'the best doctors'.