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Burnt-Out Lightbulbs: A Review of Can't Even

Abstract

"Given the ways in which personal technology and social media amplify burnout, millennials, who came of age as the Internet invaded all aspects of life, are perhaps especially vulnerable to it."

Posting about the book *Can't Even* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/burnt-out-lightbulbs-a-review-of-cant-even/>

Keywords

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Comments

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in things

January 7, 2021

Burnt-out Lightbulbs: A Review of *Can't Even*

Mike Janssen

Title: *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*

Author: Anne Helen Petersen

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

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Pages: 304 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0358315070

For over a year (at least!), the light in our upper oven hasn't worked. It was already out when we bought the house, and for a majority of the time we've lived here, I assumed there wasn't even a bulb in it. Eventually, we realized there was, but still haven't gotten around to doing anything about it. Intellectually, I know it wouldn't be that hard: find the owner's manual (either in the house or online), look up the replacement part, and order it. But the value added seems low in proportion to the required work, and so I haven't bothered.

Upon hearing this story and learning my age, some might call me a lazy millennial¹. But in *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*, the follow-up to her viral 2019 BuzzFeed News piece, cultural scholar and journalist Dr. Anne Helen Petersen identifies this phenomenon as *burnout*. Rather than a result of laziness or entitlement, Petersen argues, millennials struggle with "adulting" (a word coined by millennials to describe the duties required for independent, self-sufficient life) because they have internalized the notion that they should always be working.

By far the biggest target of Petersen's ire is the nature of modern work. Many jobs, especially entry-level positions, disappeared in the Great Recession, right as many millennials finished college and entered the workforce. Wages remain stagnant (relative to inflation), so many millennials also enter the gig economy, perhaps driving for Uber in their off hours to make ends meet. Overwork is the norm, encouraged in the workplace by the consultant's emphasis on efficiency and profit above all, and enabled by the always-on, always-connected nature of modern technology, which allows for constant surveillance and inconsistent schedules set by algorithms.

Petersen also gives attention to the attitudes that parents of millennials instilled regarding college. Given the precarity of the middle class, it's not surprising that getting into a "good" college began to take on outsize importance. The extreme version of this was a childhood oriented entirely around resumé-building, replete with numerous Advanced Placement courses, extracurriculars, volunteer work, and so on. But even millennials whose parents didn't force these resume-building activities upon them often felt the pressure to go to college, possibly graduate or professional school, which has increasingly meant taking on student debt only, Petersen argues, to graduate in the late 2000s into a job market which shrunk enormously, and for which they were often overeducated for the positions that were available.

At the same time, Petersen argues, millennials were encouraged to follow their passions—*where is it that your deep gladness meets the world's deep need? Where is God calling you? Better get it right!* But what if you're convinced you were called to a certain place, only to find you didn't enjoy the work, or couldn't make ends meet? Would you take less money than your work is worth, or become disillusioned with the whole idea of "calling" when you're unable to accumulate any savings or financial security despite doing work you find meaningful?

Petersen concludes the book with chapters on leisure and parenting. Leisure, she argues, has been spoiled by overwork, thus reducing available leisure time and forcing the adoption of optimization techniques to maximize the time that is available. Additionally, stagnant wages and the precarity of the middle class has caused many millennials to try to monetize their hobbies. *Do you like movies? Perhaps you should start writing about them, or launch a YouTube channel!* The felt pressures of a curated social media presence only further drain hobbies and leisure activities of their restorative qualities. Similar pressures and levels of burnout exist in parenting, another life milestone often delayed by millennials due to rising childcare costs; though, as Petersen reminds us, they are typically felt more acutely by women, who are generally expected to sacrifice their careers if those costs become too much.

One of the criticisms of Petersen's original article was its focus on the white middle-class experience. This has been largely overcome in the book by the inclusion of numerous anecdotes from millennials of all sorts of demographic backgrounds. As one reviewer notes, the book is written with deep empathy for its subjects. If millennials have made choices that in hindsight might appear unwise, such as taking on tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars of student debt to get a good middle-class job, it's worth asking why they thought that was a good idea in the first place (perhaps because someone older—or societal pressures—told them it was), or why some colleges cost so much, and where good middle-class jobs have gone. And of course, the problems identified in the book are not exclusive to the millennial generation. However, given the ways in which personal technology and social media amplify burnout, millennials, who came of age as the Internet invaded all aspects of life, are perhaps especially vulnerable to it.

The book seeks no solutions; the problems Petersen identifies are structural. Instead, she aims to provide a lens and a vocabulary for readers to see and describe the burnout condition in their own life and the lives of others. To that end, the book is successful. I share several traits in common with the author; we are similar in age, education levels, and family history. By many metrics, I am fairly successful—I'm highly educated and fortunate to have a career in which I feel a sense of calling.

But I am burnt out, too, especially as I write this at the end of a COVID-riddled semester of overloaded teaching. Perhaps during this Christmas break, I'll get around to changing the light bulb in the oven. But spring classes will be here before you know it, and I have a lot of work to do to be ready.

FOOTNOTES

1. The name given to the generation born between 1981 and 1996 who came of age in the early years of the 21st century.