

YES, XI CAN

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

Burnout Guide

Essays on burnout, work, self-worth,
sensitivity, boundaries, and recovery.

Xi Li

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A NOTE FOR READERS

This writing is for reflection and education only. It is not medical, legal, or mental health advice. If you are in crisis or feel unsafe, please contact local emergency services or a qualified professional.

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My Story

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I used to be a very typical overachiever.

I studied hard, went abroad, entered Big Tech, became a manager, bought a home, got married, got divorced, got promoted, and started a company.

From the outside, every step looked “right.”

But I became more and more tired.

For a long time, I believed that as long as I was hardworking enough, independent enough, clear-headed enough, and strong enough, I would be safe.

The truth was, I felt even less safe.

I used to be an EM at a big tech company, leading a very good team. The people on the team were strong, and there was a lot of trust between us. In theory, my job was not the worst kind of job.

But after the larger environment became unstable, and organizational pressure kept being passed down layer by layer, I still burned out.

At that time, it was very hard for me to admit that I could not keep going.

I looked fine from the outside. Why couldn't I keep working?

Other people could do it. Why couldn't I?

Was I too sensitive?

Was I not strong enough?

Until one day, lying in bed, I felt:

If there is such a thing as spiritual death, I think I am almost dying.

Later, I went on medical leave, joined an IOP, and relearned how to rest, how to process emotions, and how to be with my past self.

That experience made me truly realize for the first time:

I was not broken.

I had just gone too long without stopping to listen to myself.

After returning to work, I received some feedback that deeply confused me.

As someone who always gave other people a lot of space, and often even wronged myself, as a people pleaser, I was told that I was “not collaborative enough.”

In that moment, I felt very deeply a kind of powerlessness that women experience in the workplace:

You have to be assertive, but not aggressive.

You have to lead, but not overpower others.

You have to have opinions, but not make people uncomfortable.

You have to be strong, but preferably always gentle, cooperative, and easy to work with.

I did not want to keep passing this kind of pressure down.

And I did not want to keep living inside a system that constantly made me doubt myself.

So I left Big Tech.

I thought leaving Big Tech would make things better.

Later, I realized that intimate relationships carried the same logic.

In relationships, I was also constantly explaining myself, proving myself, and trying to make myself seem “reasonable.”

I thought that if I was understanding enough, tried hard enough, and communicated well enough, a relationship would get better.

But some relationships do not get better just because you try a little harder.

When a relationship constantly makes you doubt yourself, makes you more and more tense, and makes you repeatedly prove that there is nothing wrong with you, then in essence, it is not that different from a system that consumes you.

Later, I left that relationship too.

I thought this time, I was finally free.

But this was not the end of the story.

I wanted to start over. I wanted to start a company.

I wanted to build a tech startup.

At that time, AI was very hot, coding agents were very hot, and I had also built an MVP.

That path looked very reasonable: I had a Big Tech background, I had always worked in this area, and I knew this direction had a future.

But as I kept doing it, I began to feel a familiar emptiness again.

I realized that I seemed to be climbing another ladder.

Only this time, it was not called the corporate ladder.

It was called the AI founder ladder.

I asked myself:

If I really built this company successfully, and even sold it one day, would I feel satisfied?

The answer was: no.

Because this was not what I truly cared about in my heart.

What I truly cared about was women's growth.

So later, I left tech completely.

Later, I thought healing would be the way out.

I trained as a yoga teacher, practiced Ashtanga, meditated every day, recorded my dreams, and read psychology, philosophy, Jung, and the Dao De Jing.

All of these really helped me a lot.

But for a period of time, even healing became something I did with effort.

I would ask myself:

Am I more awake now?

Have I grown?

Have I cultivated myself better?

I had been climbing:

Corporate ladder.

Relationship ladder.

Self-improvement ladder.

Even yoga, healing, and meditation almost became another KPI for me.

This is what I truly came to understand later.

I read a large number of books in related fields, and spent several years focusing on the causes of burnout and the paths of recovery. I had deep conversations with people from different backgrounds, while continuously reflecting on and organizing my own experiences. Through this long accumulation, I gradually formed my own understanding: burnout is not only an individual-level problem. It is also a systemic problem. When a person burns out at work, similar patterns often appear in other areas of life as well. If the underlying cognition and operating logic do not change, life can easily fall into a cycle of one burnout after another.

These experiences made one thing increasingly clear to me:

I want to build a space.

A space for high-achieving, highly sensitive women.

Here, we do not need to keep performing strength, rationality, or being “fine.”

We can admit exhaustion and confusion, and slowly find our own rhythm again.

This is not a place that offers standard answers,

but a place where we can be seen, be understood, and slowly become safer.

I will not advise everyone to quit their job, end a relationship, or change their life path.

Everyone carries the weight of their own reality.

What I want to do more is record and accompany:

when a person begins to stop blindly rushing forward, and instead pauses to ask -

What is the life I truly want?

Can I stop constantly proving myself, and still be allowed to exist?

Here, I will write about Big Tech burnout, women’s growth, intimate relationships, money and freedom, and also those in-between states that are hard to name, but that many people have experienced.

If you are also in this stage,

then perhaps this place can become something we slowly build together.

We do not need to rush to find the answer.

First, slow down.

First, find yourself again.

Are You Really Living for Yourself?

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I had everything, but I became even less happy.

Seven years ago, I was walking under the plane trees in Shanghai with a gold-brown Birkin 25, wearing Brunello Cucinelli, with balayage hair and 18% body fat.

I soaked in private hot springs in Kumamoto, ate Michelin meals every day, and held a huge bottle of Juyondai sake in my arms.

At that moment, I thought I was living for myself.

But I still wasn't happy.

No - I was even less happy.

When it rained, I hid my bag under my clothes. My whole body was soaked, but the bag couldn't get wet.

To lower my body fat, I ate salads every day.

After taking photos under the plane trees, I hurried to the next café to check in.

For that job, I learned to be careful around everyone. Sometimes I really didn't want to smile, but habit made me put on a friendly face. I didn't dare offend certain people.

My Tesla Model X made me feel embarrassed. The doors opened too slowly, and I had to stand there waiting.

Seven years ago, it looked like I had everything: a "good job" in other people's eyes, a house, a car, luxury bags.

But I was still unhappy.

People around me said I was being dramatic, that I was never satisfied.

I couldn't even understand myself. I called myself dramatic too.

The most painful part was this:

I was clearly unwell inside, but people couldn't see it. Instead, they stepped on me harder.

The way my mom looked at me was full of disgust.

"Why are you always making trouble? What do you even want?"

But I really, truly, was not happy.

I felt like a walking corpse.

I still went to the gym every day. I still ate salads. But my heart was empty.

It all felt so meaningless, like I was shaping a form just so other people could look at it.

But then I slowly realized: other people didn't actually care.

Michelin meals stopped making me happy.

When I didn't even enjoy food anymore, I started wondering:

What do I actually like?

All this time, if I wasn't living for myself, then who was I living for?

Who am I?

When you were little, you actually knew.

You said, "I want to wear dresses."

"Why does a girl need to be so pretty? Just study hard."

So you lowered your head and kept studying.

Because studying made you a good child. An obedient child. A child people liked.

You said, "I want to be a scientist when I grow up."

"How much money can a scientist make? With money, every problem can be solved."

So you worked desperately to make money.

You said, "I like that person."

"Look at his parents. What do they do? His family has no money."

So having a husband who could make money became important, even after you were already financially independent.

You said, “I want...”

“What do you want? Stop daydreaming all day. Go do your homework.”

Little by little, your voice became quieter.

Eventually, you stopped speaking.

Because speaking didn’t change anything.

And just like that, you lost connection with your inner voice.

In its place came the voices of your family, school, and society.

Later, you thought those voices were you.

When I was little, I often saw unequal treatment.

Rich people and poor people were treated completely differently.

So I told myself:

I must become rich.

I must wear all kinds of luxury brands.

Then people will treat me better.

But that was not my true desire.

That was someone else’s insecurity, planted directly into my body.

For East Asians, life is deeply tied to money.

“What if you get sick and have no money?”

“If you have no money, people will look down on you.”

But what if working desperately for money is the very thing that makes you sick?

Why are you still chasing it?

Wasn’t the point of making money to avoid getting sick?

So is all of this protecting you?

Or is it consuming you?

“If you don’t work hard, one day you’ll starve.”

So I fought hard to become stronger, richer, more impressive.

Not because I truly wanted those things.

But because I believed that only then would I be safe.

I didn't know what I wanted.

I only learned what I was supposed to want.

What about you?

The things you are chasing now -

are they truly what you want?

The Root Logic of Burnout, Part One: Effort Will Be Rewarded

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Laozi spoke of wu wei - effortless action.

But what we were taught growing up was the opposite.

“Look at the people sweeping the streets. They still have to work outside in the heat of summer. Isn’t that hard? If you don’t want that kind of life, you need to study hard.”

Effort = less suffering.

“If you work hard, you will be rewarded.”

This is a core belief deeply carved into people raised inside the elite education system.

Work hard to get into a top high school.

Then a top university.

Then study abroad.

“Wow, you’re so impressive.”

The stars in other people’s eyes make you feel that all the effort was worth it.

When you first get your salary, you can finally buy the things you wanted as a student but couldn’t afford.

It makes you feel:

I earned all of this through my own effort.

So I must keep going.

When we were children, this belief was a tool to motivate us to move upward.

After we entered society, it became a whip used on working adults.

Then one morning, you wake up with a thousand pounds sitting on your chest.

Your body feels fifty times heavier under gravity.

You open your phone and it's full of notifications.

Your calendar is packed with blocks of every color.

Even your lunch break has a sync meeting stuffed into it.

You stayed up late working on a project for so long.

You know it was good.

But in your 1:1 with your manager, the feedback is:

“It's good, but the visibility is not enough.”

And you think:

I've worked this hard.

I'm mentally and physically exhausted.

I'm not happy at all.

What is all this for?

Suddenly, the whip stops working.

Your body starts resisting work.

You begin to question the value of every day.

You don't want to get out of bed.

That is a sign of burnout.

I've always felt that between university and society, there should be a kind of post-school.

A place where we learn:

Effort does not always lead to reward.

The scariest thing is this:

Your manager doesn't trust you.

So you work desperately hard to make them trust you.

But some people may dislike you from the first moment they see you.

And that may have nothing to do with you.

People are subjective.

People have biases.

It's the same as trying very hard in love and still breaking up.

It's the same as arriving at the airport two hours early, only for your flight to be cancelled.

You have to accept that no matter how hard you work, you still might not get promoted.

You might still get laid off.

Of course effort matters.

But maturity is accepting that effort does not always bring reward.

And then asking yourself:

Do I still want to continue?

Worship of Strength

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Burnout is a social phenomenon that has only recently begun to be taken seriously. It was only a few years ago that the WHO formally classified it as an occupational phenomenon in the International Classification of Diseases. The data is startling: in 2025, 66% of employees in the United States reported feeling burned out. In the tech industry, that number reached 82%. This means that out of every ten people around you working at a big tech company, only one or two are not burned out. Everyone is struggling to hold on.

The causes of burnout are deeply complex: socioeconomic systems, modern lifestyles, and even the effects of Covid, among many others.

I have read countless articles about burnout coaching: build stronger boundaries, stop being a people pleaser, heal the wounds from your family of origin, and so on. There are also many courses on physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

None of these ideas are wrong. They all make sense.

But here, I want to explore a deeper and much larger cause.

Why do you burn out?

Your body and mind already feel unwell, yet you keep pushing and are afraid to take leave because you fear the system will label you as weak.

Some people say they keep going for their family or their immigration status. But those are surface-level reasons. Look deeper: would your family truly abandon you? Is that status really indispensable?

You have developed a physical aversion to a situation or a person, yet you keep enduring it. From childhood, society teaches us that giving up is what weak people do - and that the weak will be eliminated by society.

Where does this subconscious worship of strength come from? It is not the fault of any one of us, and we cannot simply blame our families of origin.

Did it come from the First and Second World Wars? Or from even earlier colonial expansion, when the Spanish killed countless Indigenous people and, rather than being punished, were richly rewarded?

Or does it go back even further, to the survival instincts we developed when we still hunted in the wild?

This cruel logic has long been written deep into the collective unconscious of everyone raised under patriarchy. It has helped create many narcissistic personalities: as long as you are strong enough, you can do whatever you want, take no responsibility for the consequences, and dismiss anyone who cries as weak.

This is also why you encounter so many toxic relationships at work. When you feel manipulated, when a relationship feels toxic, your intuition is right. You cannot change the other person, because you are not facing just one individual. You are facing an enormous system.

Jung said, 'Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.'

*Beneath our desperate drive to become stronger is the desire
to feel safe.*

But if becoming stronger causes your body to collapse, your mind to become ill, and your very life to be depleted, how can that be called safety?

Once you see this clearly, you realize that many of the underlying beliefs forcing us to keep running forward make no sense at all.

So stop blaming yourself for burnout. It is not because you cannot handle pressure, and it certainly is not because you are too fragile.

See the system for what it is. When something feels wrong, stop and take good care of yourself.

Facing Harm, Our Worship of Strength Makes Us Accomplices

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Because we worship strength, we don't allow ourselves to rest.
We force ourselves to keep doing the thing.

The impact of this worship of strength shows up everywhere.

Your relationships with the people around you - your partner, friends, coworkers, manager - are all reflections of your inner relationship with yourself.

The way you treat yourself becomes the way you allow others to treat you.

How someone treats you is, in some ways, decided by you.

And underneath that is how you treat yourself.

There are so many articles online about staying away from NPD.

But the truth is, someone doesn't need to be clinically diagnosed with NPD to hurt you.

First, narcissistic traits exist on a spectrum.

Some people may not have a diagnosis, but they are still high on that spectrum.

Also, the same person can show up very differently in different relationships.

They may have learned how to behave in modern society.

They may have learned how to hide certain parts of themselves.

My ex was narcissistic, but his friends all thought he was incredibly reasonable and understanding.

The biggest trait of this kind of person is this:

When conflict happens, or when they feel hurt, they have very little ability to empathize with you.

Instead, they become the "stronger" one through words, physical intimidation, attack, and gaslighting.

And because of the inner logic of worshiping strength, a part of you agrees with them.

Their voice becomes louder than your compassion for yourself.

And you become their accomplice.

That is what causes the deepest harm.

Have you noticed this?

When you try to tell other people about this kind of hurt, they never fully understand why those words hurt you so much.

Only you know.

I had a real experience like this.

There was a coworker, A, who did some subtle things that made me feel disrespected.

Another coworker, B, whom I trusted more, asked me about it, so I mentioned it.

Then, without me knowing, the issue was reported to HR.

I only found out later from coworker A.

A went through HR training.

During our 1:1, A said to me:

“Now I have a black mark on my record. Why didn’t you just tell me directly back then?”

I felt extremely embarrassed.

I felt like I was no longer cool.

Like I was not a good teammate.

Like I had gone behind someone’s back and reported them.

At the same time, I felt deeply wronged.

I never wanted HR to know.

So I also resented coworker B.

The shame made me feel very isolated on the team.

In the end, I transferred to another team.

Looking back now, the HR training clearly didn't work on coworker A.

And the reason I was gaslit was that, deep down, I agreed with the accusation.

Not only did I fail to empathize with myself,

I joined in the attack against myself.

The one attacking me was the voice built up over many years -

the personal and collective unconscious that says:

"I'm just a drama queen."

Something similar happened to me in high school.

A boy made a sexual joke about me.

I went home and cried hard.

My mom said:

"It's not a big deal. Classmates joke around."

But I still forced her to go talk to the homeroom teacher.

Later, I found out that the boy's parents were called to the school.

One day, on my way home, I ran into him.

He looked exhausted.

He said:

"Did you really need to make such a big deal out of it?"

I immediately felt regret.

I felt like I was not kind.

Not friendly.

Like I had made a huge scene out of nothing.

I thought all my classmates must dislike me now.

That shame made me feel deeply isolated.

It wasn't until ten years later, when I talked about this with another classmate, that he told me:

“A lot of girls in high school were sexually joked about. You were the one who stood up. Everyone thought you were very brave.”

So many years of shame.

The reason I’m telling these two stories is this:

I don’t think they truly understood the impact of their behavior.

And that was not my responsibility.

But what really made me suffer in the end was the enormous shame.

It covered over my compassion for myself.

That shame came from the unconscious inheritance left by the previous generation.

It came from the collective unconscious of society.

If you want to be respected, you first have to love yourself.

The whole loop of harm is actually this:

Worshiping strength

- ➡ not allowing yourself to be sensitive
- ➡ unconsciously agreeing with the attacker
- ➡ feeling enormous shame
- ➡ isolation and inner exhaustion

The first step to breaking this cycle is seeing it.

I really want to hear:

Have you ever experienced something like this?

Perfectionism

XI LI ESSAY 06 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

I have to be good enough to be safe.

Ever since I was little, I have been absentminded. I could never score 100 on an exam; I always made some small mistake.

I did the bare minimum on homework whenever I could. I slacked off at work.

I never imagined that someone as careless as me could join a major Silicon Valley tech company and get swept so deeply into the grind.

Did I submit a PR today? How much did the metrics move? How much visibility did I have? I would agonize over a single message to a partner again and again.

I would revise a document repeatedly and ask other people for all kinds of feedback.

Everything had to be perfect. There could be no mistakes.

My mother said she had never seen me so driven.

Even someone as scatterbrained as me could become a perfectionist.

What drove me to compete this intensely was that the performance system had rewarded me before.

But the things that gave me dopamine and pushed me to strive were often the very same things that made me afraid.

The performance and feedback systems at big tech companies can magnify a single mistake many times over.

I was afraid of not doing well enough, receiving feedback, being disliked, and being criticized.

The system places a complex, living person inside a scorecard:

project impact, engineering excellence, people axis...

But people are inherently complex.

The same trait often has both a positive and a negative side.

For example, you may be able to drive a large project rollout and push things forward.

But doing that may also mean upsetting people.

Then the feedback says you are not collaborative enough. It feels almost inhuman.

No matter what you do, someone can find fault with it.

As layoffs have increased across Silicon Valley, everyone has begun living in fear.

People worry that any mistake could be used against them as a reason to let them go.

So everything has to be flawless.

It feels as though, if my work is good enough, no one will dislike me.

If I never make a mistake, I will not be abandoned.

So I became accustomed to telling myself:

I must never fail.

I must never make a mistake.

I must never disappoint anyone.

This fear keeps the nervous system constantly on high alert.

A lot of burnout does not happen because someone is not doing well enough.

It happens because they have never been allowed to feel:

This is already good enough.

They can only keep doing, revising, and proving themselves until their body finally stops them.

So perfectionism is not the enemy.

It is a protective mechanism.

See the logic behind it clearly.

Find more sources of support in your life:

hobbies, friends, family, and the things you genuinely love doing.

Learn to make yourself feel safe.

Then the way the system scores you will become less important.

Without those sources of support,

it is like handing the system a dull knife.

It does not cut you down in one blow. It slowly wears you away.

The Good Student Who Is Afraid to Stop

XI LI ESSAY 07 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

You do not love working hard. You are afraid to stop.

A friend of mine is an investor. Six months ago, he went all in on AI, exploring several directions at once: legal, mental health, data centers, and more.

When I saw him recently, he seemed completely overcaffeinated.

I asked him if he was high.

As he spoke, he said,

‘My consciousness is up here right now. I cannot come down.’

He gestured with his hand high above him.

‘I need to stay up here and keep pushing forward.’

I asked him, ‘Are you happy?’

He said,

‘I feel fulfilled.’

He reminded me of myself a few years ago, when the first things I did every morning were drink coffee and vape.

I could not stop.

And I truly never did.

The thought of stopping made me feel overwhelmed.

Everyone else was charging forward. What would happen if I fell behind?

Falling behind meant failure.

If I failed, people would not like me the way they used to.

What about my house, my vacations, business-class flights, and my reputation?

Stopping meant facing my own fear.

Why did I have to keep working this hard? What was the point?

Then came an enormous emptiness and loneliness.

I could not stop.

If I stopped, would I still be me?

Would all those years of effort mean I had lived for nothing?

The moment I considered that I might have been wrong,

darkness swallowed me whole.

A vast whirlpool of thoughts

pulled me downward.

No. I had to stay up there. I could not stop.

The people around me liked the version of me who worked hard and excelled.

If I stopped, would they still like me?

Stopping meant facing the fear that I might be left behind.

Even when completely exhausted in body and mind,

the good student still could not stop.

Until burnout caused the entire system to collapse.

I began to understand why so many people struggle to feel genuinely happy inside this heroic narrative.

When someone lacks a stable inner sense of worth, they need to keep themselves up there.

A body that cannot stop can only use coffee, stimulation, achievement, or a new goal to keep holding itself up.

At its core, this is much like the worship of money, status, and respectability in the Chinese cultural context.

A good student may be afraid to stop, not because they love striving,

but because they have been taught all their life:

only by continuing to excel,

continuing to move upward,

will they be respected

and live a comfortable life.

At a deeper level, they are afraid that after stopping,

they will have to face fear, emptiness, the collapse of their identity, and loneliness.

But over time, I slowly discovered

that everyone is busy living their own life.

Far fewer people care about your status than you think.

How many digits are in your bank account.

What level you reached at a big tech company.

Whether you fly business class.

Whether you stay in five-star hotels.

Truly, far fewer people care than you imagine.

You think that if you stop, the world will notice.

But the world is not watching at all.

The one who has been watching you all along

is the good student inside you who cannot stop.

The Root Logic of Burnout: The Self-Worth of Overachievers

XI LI ESSAY 08 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

Why the More “Excellent” You Are, the More Easily You Burn Out

My grandmother is in her eighties and still does housework from morning to night.

“I have to do it,” she says.

After my mom retired, she wanted to travel.

But then she said,

“I need to take care of your dad.”

They are both trying so hard to prove that they are needed.

That they are useful.

It made me think of myself sending PRs at night,

reading documents on weekends,

telling myself:

“I have to do this.”

But do I really have to?

Or am I afraid that if I don’t,

I will become useless?

People won’t like me?

I won’t be kept?

When you’re busy, you never think about this.

There’s no time to think.

And honestly, you're scared to think.

All along, you've been living inside fear.

A huge sense of unworthiness.

Self-worth is not the same as confidence.

It is not about believing, "I'm amazing."

It is whether you can see yourself from this place:

"I already have value."

Not because you are excellent.

Not because you are liked.

Not because you are useful.

You, as a human being,

already have value.

But many of us were taught from childhood that love is not unconditional.

You have to be excellent.

You have to be obedient.

Only then will you be loved.

And more seriously,

you may have felt since childhood that your very existence needed to be proven.

If someone does not believe they already have value,

it becomes very easy to place their sense of worth outside themselves:

in school,

work,

income,

body shape,

appearance,

houses,

partners,

parental approval,

manager feedback,

social media reactions.

It looks like hard work.

But underneath, this is the core belief of an overachiever:

Only when I perform well am I safe.

Only when I am useful am I worth keeping.

Only when others approve of me do I feel that I'm okay.

So even when you are exhausted,

you force yourself to keep going.

And eventually,

you burn out.

Once your value depends on the outside world,

rest feels harder than work.

Rest feels like losing control.

An ordinary life feels like failure.

You feel that if you stop,

you will be eliminated.

When rest feels shameful,

it becomes very hard to truly rest.

You don't dare stop trying,

because you don't know what would be left of you if you did.

So the morning after I quit without another job lined up,

I had a panic attack.

When a person needs outside approval to prove their value,
their self-worth rises and falls dramatically.

When it is low:

“I’m not good enough.”

“I’m not worthy.”

When it is high:

“You should listen to me.”

“How can you think differently from me?”

Sometimes you kneel.

Sometimes you try to control others.

It moves from:

“I’m not enough,”

to:

“You must make me feel enough.”

In front of different people,

it shows up differently.

But at the root,

it is the same unstable sense of worth.

Your manager doesn’t trust you,

so you work hard to prove yourself.

But some people may dislike you from the very first moment.

On the surface, it looks like arguing over who is right and who is wrong.

But deeper down, it is this:

“I can’t bear the way you see me.”

“Because when you see me this way, I feel worthless.”

One reason overachievers burn out so easily is that when they don't receive the feedback they expected,

they don't stop proving themselves.

They keep going until they collapse.

Healthy self-worth does not mean feeling great about yourself all the time.

It means:

When someone doesn't like you, it still hurts.

But it doesn't destroy you.

You don't need their approval to prove your value.

You know there are other paths.

You don't have to tie all your safety to one person,

one job,

one sentence of feedback.

You don't need to kneel.

And you don't need to control.

Later, I realized that self-worth is not something you simply think your way into.

It is something you practice, little by little.

I often hike alone.

I travel alone.

I learned how to knit.

Now I bring my knitting everywhere -

to airports,

onto trains.

As long as I have my knitting with me,

it feels like there is a small protective field around me.

Everything is okay.

I schedule rest time every day.

I am slowly making peace with my gray hair too.

When you no longer need outside approval,

the world becomes much quieter.

How Could Anyone Not Burn Out in an Environment Like This?

XI LI ESSAY 09 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

The highest ruler is one whose existence people barely know.

The next is one people love and praise.

The next is one people fear.

The worst is one people despise.

- Tao Te Ching

The best kind of ruler is one people only know exists.

The next best is praised by the people.

The next is feared.

The worst is hated.

After working in Silicon Valley for ten years, I increasingly feel that the Tao Te Ching already understood managers, and the systems behind them.

I was lucky to have once had a manager, A, whose presence I almost never felt.

He was my first manager at a big tech company.

During my first year, I happily worked on the projects I wanted to do.

I never worked overtime.

Every half, I got double bonuses.

It was A's first time being a manager.

We treated him like an older brother.

I used to tease him, saying he didn't really manage anything, and that he wasn't ambitious.

But looking back now, he supported all my projects.

He didn't take credit.

He gave rewards where rewards were due.

He didn't play political games behind people's backs.

He didn't say a bunch of inspiring words just to make me do more work.

He didn't oversell things with grand promises.

He didn't need to prove himself through "presence."

Before the big layoffs started in Silicon Valley, most managers I met were in the second layer.

They gave encouragement.

They gave people little doses of sweetness.

We drank milk tea together.

We played board games.

Some of them would even help debug.

When the system was still growing, everyone could still remain decent.

After the layoffs started, I saw too many managers from the third layer.

Fear made people's hearts smaller.

They began to threaten in all kinds of ways.

It showed up as:

talking too much in meetings,

putting pressure on team members,

saying things like, "I'm just reminding you, your visibility isn't enough,"

talking badly about others behind their backs,

taking on unrealistic goals,

and bringing up feedback again and again in 1:1s.

It felt like someone whistling desperately on a leaking boat.

And you,
the person desperately trying to patch the boat,
how could you not burn out in an environment like this?

Recently, I saw A again.
His T-shirts had become polo shirts.
He talked to me about recent business trips to London and New York,
instead of the small app he had just built.
His beard was unshaven.
Maybe it was my imagination,
but he seemed to have more white hair too.
His face was full of exhaustion.
He was now on a core team,
with more than twenty direct reports.
I guessed he was no longer the manager he once was.
Maybe he didn't change.
Maybe the system pushed him into that position.
Even the gentlest person,
inside a system like this,
may eventually start to "exist."
When you are inside the system,
how do you rise from the mud without being stained by it?
Which layer is your manager in?

Burnout Is a System-Level Workplace Injury. Before You Quit, Ask the Questions You Need to Ask.

XI LI ESSAY 10 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

Many posts have already talked about FMLA and STD - short-term disability - so I won't repeat those here.

I want to add one part I rarely saw people talk about back then:

Don't resign with nothing lined up when your burnout is at its worst, especially not with shame.

Fight for the benefits you are entitled to.

At that time, all I wanted was to leave as quickly as possible.

To end it quickly.

To escape from that system.

At the same time, I also felt that I had experienced some unfair treatment at work.

In the beginning, I had already decided to tell my manager I was quitting.

Later, I talked to two friends who had both been directors at big tech companies.

They reminded me:

You can leave.

But before you leave, talk to HR first.

Understand the benefits and separation options you may have.

So I consulted an employment lawyer.

I also had a formal conversation with HR.

I submitted the relevant records.

In the end, the company handled it in a way similar to separation / role removal,
and I received severance pay.

At the same time, I also applied for short-term disability.

That made the financial pressure of the following year much lighter.

Looking back, I'm especially glad I didn't just resign directly.

Because recovering from burnout may take much longer than you imagine.

Before you leave,

protect the parts of yourself that need protection.

I'm not saying everyone can follow this exact path.

Everyone's situation is different.

Company policies are different.

State laws are different.

Insurance terms and medical documentation are also different.

But if you are burned out and thinking about leaving,

at least understand these things first:

- FMLA / job-protected medical leave
- STD / short-term disability
- medical leave
- HR workplace concern / complaint process
- severance / separation package
- employment attorney consultation
- therapist / psychiatrist documentation
- internal company leave and benefits policies

Especially when it involves discrimination, medical leave, severance, NDA, or STD,
it's better to consult an employment attorney,

a doctor,

or an HR / benefits professional.

Burnout is often not a personal failure.

The reasons behind it are complicated.

It is more like the result of long-term systemic depletion.

So before you leave,

don't rush to escape.

Protect yourself first.

Understand your resources first.

Ask the questions you need to ask.

Capitalism Dismantles Community, Then Sells It Back to Us

XI LI ESSAY 11 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

By community support, I mean the kind I had as a child: when my mother had to work, an elderly neighbor would look after me. I visited her home so often that one shelf in her cabinet was filled entirely with my snacks.

After dinner, people would go for walks and talk about the everyday details of family life. That was probably the previous generation's free neighborhood therapy.

Back then, work did not consume people so completely. I was often sick as a child, and my mother could take time off to bring me to the hospital.

What about now? In both China and the United States, much of this community support has been commercialized. You pay for daycare to look after your children and a therapist when you need someone to talk to. In the United States, medical care can bring astronomical bills. I recently had an MRI of my right shoulder at Stanford Hospital. It cost \$11,000. I cried out in shock, and the person at the front desk said she completely understood. In that moment, I finally understood why I can live comfortably in the United States and still feel so uneasy.

We used to be able to drop by a neighbor's home for a meal. Now the neighbor is working overtime too. In Silicon Valley, ordering takeout for two costs at least fifty or sixty dollars. So much support that used to be free has become part of an expensive life, making people even more afraid to lose their jobs. If you lose your job, you have to pay for everything yourself. That makes people more willing to accept unfair treatment, including overtime. When everyone is working late and mentally exhausted, when 'time is money,' no one has the energy left to help their neighbors for free. And so the vicious cycle continues.

We keep working ourselves relentlessly until we finally burn out.

This system has given us benefits too. Greater independence can help us move faster. Society has made tremendous progress, and technology has developed rapidly.

But its problems are becoming increasingly visible. Burnout is one of them. Imagine a society with strong support systems and abundant community care, where people do not live in a constant state of tension and insecurity. How would they burn out so easily?

More and more people are choosing not to have children. I see that as a failure of society. Childcare, caregiving, and emotional support were once shared by an entire community. Now they have been placed on the shoulders of one young couple, sometimes with help from the grandparents.

And often, that burden is pushed even further onto one woman alone.

So when I hear that women 'must be financially independent,' I have complicated feelings. Financial capacity matters, of course. But telling a woman who has just given birth, without community support or adequate childcare, that she must immediately find a job is itself deeply cruel.

The system dismantles what communities were meant to provide, puts a price on each piece, and then sells it back to us.

Then it tells everyone: you must be independent.

You must work. You must carry everything yourself.

When did a woman's value become measurable only in money? Having no income for a period of time does not mean she has no value. Needing support does not mean she has failed.

I think of my mother and grandmother, neither of whom had a career. It did not diminish their standing in the family at all.

Perhaps the real problem is not that women are insufficiently independent. It is that for too long, we have all been expected

to carry everything alone inside a system that offers less and less support.

This fear and insecurity are not one person's fault. They are not the fault of another gender, nor are they solely the fault of the previous generation.

At its core, this is a systemic problem.

How Big Tech Repackages Bullying as a Strong Sense of Ownership

XI LI ESSAY 12 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

‘Welcome to the dark side.’

That is what another manager said to me just after I became a manager.

At the time, I thought the so-called dark side referred to things only management could see.

Things like the dehumanizing nature of performance reviews.

When discussing each person’s performance, the focus is on numbers, impact, and ratings.

It is a process that turns people into objects.

Someone has worked long hours and is exhausted.

Someone has been holding on for a very long time.

Someone is already close to burnout.

But without enough impact, the company will not give you a larger bonus simply because you worked hard.

It feels deeply impersonal.

But I can also understand it.

This is the company’s reward system.

These are the rules of the game.

Then there are the 1:1 conversations between managers.

They discuss the behavior of individual contributors.

When there is conflict, much of what is said eventually reaches the individual contributor in the form of feedback.

But what is said behind closed doors and what finally reaches that person are often very different.

I thought these things were the dark side.

Later, I realized I was still too young and too naive.

Managers at big tech companies have another very important responsibility:

dealing with bullying behavior.

Or, more precisely:

dealing with the consequences of bullying behavior.

Under the reward systems of many big tech companies, pressuring people, pushing KPIs, and creating urgency are themselves rewarded.

So many microaggressions are repackaged as:

high standards.

strong ownership.

pushing for impact.

driving execution.

Even pressure applied after hours is often quietly tolerated.

When the person under pressure goes to their manager, the responses they often hear are:

‘Don’t take it personally.’

‘That is not what they meant.’

‘Could you try to understand their style?’

‘They are just very direct.’

This is how organizations shield bullying behavior.

They do not openly say:

we support bullying.

Instead, they gently place the problem back onto the victim, again and again.

You are too sensitive.

You are overthinking it.

You failed to understand the other person's communication style.

If you truly dislike it, you can switch teams.

You can leave.

But the high performer who can push and deliver is too valuable to lose.

Many managers are not doing nothing.

They give feedback too.

They try to mediate.

They may sincerely believe they have handled the situation.

But the problem is that the feedback is light,

while the reward system is heavy.

As long as someone can still deliver, create impact, and push KPIs forward, the system will keep finding excuses for them.

In the end, the blame is still passed back to the victim.

Because that is the easiest thing to do.

Most people who apply pressure are also being pressured by someone else.

The pressure travels downward, layer by layer.

From the board to the CEO.

From the CEO to the VP.

From the VP to the director.

From the director to the manager.

And finally to the individual contributor.

At every level, people say:

we need to move faster.

We need more.

We need a higher bar.

We need stronger execution.

So the less empathy you show, the more pressure you apply, and the more fear you create in others, the more likely the system is to reward you.

This is fear-driven leadership.

It looks effective.

In the short term, people really do move faster.

They respond faster.

They ship faster.

They produce more.

But in the long term, it creates a toxic work environment.

People become afraid to tell the truth.

Afraid to reveal problems.

Afraid to admit they cannot keep going.

Afraid to innovate.

They only dare to protect themselves.

In the end, efficiency does not truly improve.

People simply become better at pretending they are still functioning.

What allows a team to go the distance has never been fear.

It is trust.

It is psychological safety.

It is an environment where someone can say:

I disagree.

I have not thought this through yet.

I need help.

I think this direction carries risk.

I cannot keep going right now.

And they do not have to fear being humiliated, attacked, or labeled for saying so.

Unfortunately, environments like this are becoming increasingly rare in Silicon Valley.

Often, the so-called dark side is not some secret known only among managers.

It is the moment you finally see clearly

that a system can claim to value people

while its reward mechanisms quietly encourage them to wear one another down.

It Was Never Your Fault

XI LI ESSAY 13 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

“**W**hen you were born, your grandma didn’t come to see you, just because you were a girl.”

My mom told me this.

The message behind it was:

“See? I’m the only one who still treats you well. Even your grandma didn’t want you.”

But underneath this sentence, there was no love.

There was no care.

There was only their complete surrender to the unconscious belief that boys matter more than girls.

That sentence locked you tightly into a codependent bond with her.

It never once challenged the premise that:

“Because you are a girl, you are not worthy of love.”

Otherwise, why would a child need to know this?

And so, something was planted into your unconscious:

You are a girl.

You are not worthy of love.

So you need to fight for love.

You need to work hard to become independent.

You need to be pretty.

You need to be considerate.

Only then do you “deserve” a tiny bit of love.

Even the physical punishments were part of it.

Were you ever pinched by your mother?

A friend once told me that if a child is pinched on the inner thigh, it is actually a form of sexual abuse.

Looking back now, I don't think my mother ever knew what it felt like to be truly loved.

Or truly respected.

Yesterday, I met an Irish woman at a café.

She was in her sixties.

She said she had just read Tiger Mom, and felt Chinese parents were really harsh.

In that atmosphere, where I felt allowed to be seen, my tears suddenly came out.

I said, yes.

I once wondered whether my mother hated me.

How could she say things like that to me when I was a child?

The woman looked at me and said:

Because her mother was Black, her grandmother threw her directly into an orphanage.

She was raised by nuns.

She met her mother for the first time when she was ten.

When she was twelve, her mother died by suicide.

Maybe what my mother meant back then was:

Inside that extremely cruel value system, one that did not welcome girls, at least she did not abandon me.

Otherwise, maybe I would have ended up in an orphanage too.

Writing this now, I suddenly feel a kind of compassion for her.

Because she, too, was a victim of this strength-worshipping system.

A system that stripped her of value.

Whether because of gender, or skin color.

The trauma inside this kind of family is actually built in the same shape as the harm we experience in society.

The unworthiness planted in us as children becomes the exact tool society and the workplace later use against us.

Your giving and your reward are not equal.

And your body begins to resist.

Think about it.

If you were respected at work,

if you received the reward you deserved,

would you still burn out?

If you were respected in love,

if you didn't have to desperately prove yourself,

if you weren't manipulated and gaslit,

would you still want to leave?

What if all of us had the privilege of white men?

At the root of all of this is unfair treatment of the weaker ones under systems of power.

Simply because of your skin color,

your name,

your gender.

In the past, this was called slavery.

Again and again, rights were won through strikes and revolutions.

And the most terrifying part is this:

As long as you also agree with this logic in your own heart,

as long as you accept that you are "not worthy,"

others can keep treating you this way,

without restraint.

Boundaries for People Pleasers

XI LI ESSAY 14 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

Do you dare to seem uncaring?

Growing up, I often heard people say:

‘That person has no consideration for others. They will not even help with such a small favor.’

Not helping someone = lacking human warmth = selfish.

So many people grow up afraid to say no, afraid to inconvenience others, and afraid to disappoint anyone.

‘Can we have a quick sync?’

You immediately stop what you are doing and type back:

‘Sure.’

It looks like a small, effortless favor.

But the cost can be very high.

Beyond the context switching,

a quick sync can turn into an hour-long brainstorming session.

More importantly, you are training the other person to believe:

I am always available.

You sacrifice your time for someone else’s convenience. Eventually, they truly begin to believe that your door is always open.

Many burnout recovery programs begin with a chapter on boundaries.

Because boundaries can stop the bleeding immediately.

You have to learn to say no in order to protect yourself.

But I am only writing about boundaries now because the previous essays have focused on:

how the system operates,

our inner drives,

and how to reconnect with our true selves.

You have to see yourself before you can stand up for yourself and say no.

The body already knows.

When you see the message, your chest tightens.

Your shoulders draw inward.

You feel a little irritated.

Your body is telling you: something is coming in too quickly. It is too much. You are overloaded.

In that moment, you need to respect your body.

If your inner world is a house, boundaries are its fence, its outer walls, and its door.

If there is no door and only walls, no one can enter. That is overprotection.

A people pleaser's door is always open. Anything can come inside.

Other people's emotions. Other people's needs.

The house becomes so full of other people that you have nowhere left to stand.

In reality, many of us do both.

Toward the outside world, the door is wide open. A message or call comes in, and we respond immediately.

But toward ourselves, there is only a wall. When we are exhausted, we do not ask for help. When we feel unwell, we hide by ourselves.

If I never inconvenience anyone, no one can reject me.

What are healthy boundaries? In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro refuses No-Face's gold because she does not need it.

But when Chihiro leaves, she still brings No-Face with her because she wants to.

When you know what you do not need, you can refuse it. But you do not have to knock the other person down.

I believe this is the truest form of consideration for others.

It is not coldness. It is finally knowing:

what is mine and what is not,

what I am willing to do and what I am not.

For example, I used to smile at people all the time.

It was not because I wanted to smile. I had learned from childhood that I should smile, because people would not like me if I looked unhappy.

Later, I learned that if I do not feel like smiling, I do not have to.

Do you dare not to say, 'It is okay'?

Do you dare to disappoint someone and become the person who seems 'uncaring'?

Boundaries are not meant to turn you into a cold person.

Boundaries mean you no longer have to exhaust yourself to prove that you are a good person.

Burnout Recovery Notes: Healing Is Not Giving Up

XI LI ESSAY 15 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

I once heard someone say that recovering from burnout can take two or three years.
For me, it took about three.

It was slow.

But at some point, I could clearly feel it:

the old me,

the one I thought I had lost,

seemed to finally be coming back.

During those three years, every time I rested for a while,

I thought I was better.

So I couldn't wait to pour the little bit of passion I had just gathered into something new.

Yoga.

A startup.

And other things.

But after a while,

the motivation would disappear again.

I would fall back into that empty, dark well.

It became hard to get up in the morning.

I wanted to stay home.

I didn't want to see anyone.

“What’s the point?”

And then it became hard to continue.

It felt very much like recovering from a sports injury.

The doctor tells you:

You can’t do this anymore.

But every time you feel a little better,

you can’t help going back to exercise.

Exercise makes you feel good.

But it triggers the old injury.

If you don’t rest properly,

the old injury becomes mixed with new injuries.

And you never fully heal.

So what does it mean to truly recover from burnout?

I used to think lying flat and FIRE were the goal.

Later, I realized they were not.

Lying flat is not the destination.

But lying down is at the center of recovery.

Because only after you lie down,

only after your body stops continuing to bleed,

do you have the strength to see clearly:

What do I truly need?

What is only an outside opportunity,

or a new temptation?

What is only coming from fear –

from wanting to prove myself,

to protect myself?

When these things slowly become clear,
saying no to many things becomes much easier.

Not because those things are bad.

But because I finally know
what is mine to do.

I started to see the old patterns underneath.

The coping mechanisms I once used to deal with pressure.

The things that had crushed me.

And then, little by little,

I began to replace them.

Resting,

reducing pressure,

and facing pressure at the same time.

Healing from burnout does not mean there will never be pressure again.

It means passion comes back.

It means when you wake up in the morning,

you no longer only want to escape.

It means you still have a little bit of anticipation for the day.

You no longer feel dried out in both body and mind.

It feels like that youthful state we all miss.

Like when you first started university,

and still had some longing for the future.

You do something,

not entirely for the result.

The process itself makes you happy.

I believe I can do it.

But I can also accept the version of myself who cannot.

No matter what I choose later,

I want to keep moving forward

with a little bit of eighteen-year-old passion,

and the wisdom burnout taught me.

Life will still have pressure.

Money.

Relationships.

Work.

The body.

But pressure no longer feels like a mountain crushing me.

It no longer feels like a wild beast chasing after me.

It becomes one problem after another.

Something that can be broken down.

Something that can be slowly solved.

When I see other people's messages,

my first reaction is no longer exhaustion.

I can be alone.

I can also talk to the people around me.

It no longer drains me from the inside.

Life returns to having myself as the starting point.

Riding the wind and waves does not mean you must achieve something.

It does not mean you must win.

It means that after being completely depleted,
you still choose yourself again.

You have the strength,
and the passion,
to face this day.

Maybe eighteen will never fully come back.

Or maybe it only comes back for a brief moment.

But life should not stop at the state of being eighty.

Life is alive.

It moves.

It can still grow again.

After Burnout, Don't Put Yourself Back in the Tiger's Jaws

XI LI ESSAY 16 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

Starting a side hustle or switching teams is not rescuing yourself. It is postponing the real decision.

In 2021, I developed pneumonia, followed by depression. I took medical leave for the first time. Beyond my physical health, there were also many things at work that made me want to leave. An engineering manager I had worked very well with suddenly changed, and I began getting pulled into office politics.

When I returned to the company two months later, I decided to switch teams.

‘I will give myself one more chance.’

During that period, I thought every day about when I could resign.

But I did not.

First, I joined a very relaxed team. The engineering manager was wonderful, and the pressure was low.

It gave me a chance to breathe.

But the product was boring. Six months later, the engineering manager was leaving too.

So I switched teams again. Somehow, I joined a core team and became an engineering manager myself. A former colleague said, ‘I thought you were going to leave. I never expected you to become an EM.’

I said, ‘Yes. I decided to give it one more chance.’

After only a brief rest, I felt capable again.

During my first year as an EM, I learned so many soft skills – about people, myself, and the system. I enjoyed it, but the role also had limitations. The pressure was intense, and there was very little I could control.

So I did what many people choose to do.

If I could not find complete fulfillment at work, I would find a side hustle. I became a consultant for a startup. I held 1:1s during the day and coded furiously at night.

On the surface, this helped a little. At least while coding, I regained some sense of control and some of the immediate satisfaction of building a technical product.

But it did not solve the underlying problem. What I clearly needed was rest.

Eventually, burnout still came, and it was irreversible. The entire system collapsed.

Looking back now,

I had been using 'switch teams' and 'start a side hustle' to avoid the real question:

should I leave this system?

The system had already tormented me to the point of deep distress. Why did I not leave? Why did I stay and place myself even deeper inside the tiger's jaws?

Many people do the same thing. When uncertainty feels frightening, they choose the path everyone else takes because it appears safe.

Switch teams. Find a side hustle. Give it one more chance.

These choices come with explanations, templates, and examples from people who went before us.

They appear to be rational, optimal choices. But that rationality was itself trained into us by the system. The system will never encourage you to leave, even when staying costs you your health.

But the path everyone takes is not necessarily safe. Sometimes it only lets you postpone confronting the question:

is it time for me to leave?

Looking back, I should have resigned in 2021. I could have avoided years of negotiating with myself, only to burn out anyway.

I should have trusted my body much earlier. But I did not. I was afraid to walk a dark road alone.

Now I have reached another crossroads in my life.

Everyone tells me

to choose the safer road.

If I do not take it, I can almost hear those voices again:

'That girl is so foolish.'

Just as they did when I first resigned.

But what about my own voice? What about my body?

If you are standing at a crossroads too,

do not ask only:

what would other people choose?

Ask yourself too:

do I genuinely want to continue,

or am I simply afraid to leave?

Do I genuinely want a side hustle,

or am I afraid to admit that I no longer like this and need to rest?

Do I genuinely want to give it one more chance,

or am I afraid to make a choice?

What does a sense of security truly mean?

Perhaps it means:

I am finally willing to listen to myself.

I am willing to admit what I do not want,

and willing to carry the uncertainty that follows my choice.

I know

that this time, I will choose myself. I cannot let fear place me back inside the place that made me
wither.

Working hard is no longer enough.

XI LI ESSAY 17 OF 18

[Read this essay online ↗](#)

Recently, I watched Chamath Palihapitiya's talk at the Stanford AI Club.

I've followed him for a long time.

Not just because he is a successful investor, or because he was once an executive at Facebook, but because he has always had a strong ability to think independently, and he has been consistently creating and sharing his own ideas over the years.

The part that resonated with me the most was this:

Working hard is no longer enough.

Don't keep trapping yourself in a finite game.

What is a finite game?

Promotion.

Title.

Performance review.

Salary number.

Success in other people's eyes.

These things are not unimportant.

But if you put your entire life on these external metrics, it is very easy to become someone who is constantly comparing, constantly anxious, constantly trying to prove yourself, and constantly afraid of falling behind.

I used to be like that.

When I was an EM at a big tech company, I also believed that if I just worked harder, I would be safer.

A higher title.

More impact.

More visibility.

Stronger performance.

But after burnout, I slowly realized:

A lot of the effort I was putting in was not making me more free.

It was making it harder for me to stop.

Harder for me to leave.

Harder for me to imagine another life.

It did not actually make me safer.

The previous generation always told us, “You have to work hard.”

And of course, in their era, that made sense.

Many of them probably worked one job for most of their lives, or at least stayed within one field. They also benefited from the tailwind of their time.

But that advice had one hidden assumption:

That the industry would continue to exist.

That as long as you worked hard, your skills would continue to be valuable.

But that assumption no longer holds.

We are now living through one of the fastest periods of technological change in human history. The next 20 years will likely be exponential.

Many jobs that exist today may not exist in 10 years.

Ten years ago, being a software engineer felt like a golden path: stable, high-paying, and full of future potential.

But now, because of AI, that is already beginning to change.

I believe many professions will be transformed.

So for Gen Z and millennials, simply working hard is definitely not enough.

What matters more is:

How fast can you absorb information?

Can you find high-quality sources?

Can you choose the right direction?

Can you learn more technical skills?

Can you adapt quickly?

In the past, a sense of security may have come from:

Getting into a good company.

Working hard.

Slowly climbing the ladder.

But today, security may come from a different set of questions:

Can I learn quickly?

Can I switch directions?

Can I use new tools?

Can I find my place again in a changing world?

The most dangerous thing in this era may not be a lack of effort.

It may be working very hard,

but working hard on a path that is disappearing.

After Burnout, I Took Up Pole Dancing

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What if I fall? What if I fly?

If you are like the person I used to be – not very confident, often anxious, including about your body, an overachiever and a people pleaser – I strongly recommend trying pole dancing.

In the summer of 2023, I burned out completely. I had relentless panic attacks every day. My mind kept imagining terrible scenarios, and I could not sit still. I thought I was losing my mind.

One of the most painful things about mental illness is that the people around you may not understand. They may even think you are being dramatic, overthinking, or too sensitive.

Because it is invisible, I looked completely normal from the outside. I could eat, sleep, and drink.

‘Aren’t you perfectly fine? Just endure it. You are making a big deal out of nothing.’

But mentally, I knew I was like a critically ill patient who had spent a long time intubated in the ICU. Our limited public understanding of mental health teaches us to empathize with cancer and car accidents. But burnout? No. That means you are too weak and not resilient enough.

But I knew I could not keep going.

‘If there is such a thing as psychological death, I think I am about to die.’

That is what I wrote at the time.

After handling everything related to medical leave, I stopped all work. It felt as though I had finally given myself permission to rest. Every day, I thought only about how to care for myself: what to eat, how to move, and how to let the child inside me play. What did she want? I wanted to try pole dancing. I had always been prejudiced against it, and I wanted to see what it was actually like. The girl inside me wanted to go play too.

In my first class, the teacher played music and asked us to improvise. The other students were incredible, climbing from one pole to another. Then it was my turn. I did not know any techniques, so I let the girl inside me come out and move freely with the music. When the song ended, the teacher ran over and said, ‘Wow, what was that? Amazing!’ American teachers can be wonderfully

encouraging. I was stunned that my body held so much power. Every student encouraged me. There were all kinds of bodies in that room, and every one of them was beautiful. Confidence is beautiful.

When I left, I felt happy and filled with a strength I had not felt in a long time. It was as though I could stand up again.

I have practiced on and off for nearly three years since then. I am always one of the least advanced people in class. As an overachiever, I easily demand too much of myself. But in this practice, I want to remain at the bottom and simply enjoy the confidence it gives me.

Every time I practice, I feel myself reconnecting with my body, accepting her, and trusting that she does not need to be controlled by outside judgment.

I trust that I can be completely fine on my own.

I have done many forms of healing. I have taught yoga for almost two years, and I meditate often. Pole dancing is different. It fundamentally changed how I understand my body and helped me rebuild my system of values. It allowed the version of me who had burned out inside the system to stand up for herself again without depending on external approval.

I do not need to strive for other people's approval, because my existence is already enough.

'What if I fall?'

'Oh darling, what if you fly?'

Thank you for reading.

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A NOTE FOR READERS

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