

CONTROLLED BURN

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The Work of Bonfires

This is a story about lighting and warming spaces and journeys – what I’ll call *Deep Work*. Deep Work is about designing the bonfire experience, moving from raging risk and danger to a controlled burn. About moving from personal crisis to self-renewal. To help do your own Deep Work, you’ll encounter the tools I used to start and control the fire within myself, from therapy and spirituality to self-care and study. I say “encounter” the tools because I’m going to mention them in my context but will not teach you to use them in yours.

Deep Work and The Work and Controlled Burning, which I’ll sometimes use interchangeably, are phrases used in a lot of those self help books I sometimes loathe and sometimes love and sometimes use as fuel for fires, literal and figurative. You’ll witness some of the discoveries I’ve made in the light of these fires, from the importance of connecting the elements with my core identity to learning to release some core elements, too.

A fire creates and destroys. We tend to think of creation as a good thing and destruction as a bad thing, but I’m here to tell you that the creation of a raging forest fire that burns homes and lives is no good. And the destruction of the effects of trauma is very good. We have to take care both with what we create and what we clear and burn.

Deep Work often finds us by way of simple themes: creation, destruction, story, fairy tale, nature, space. I’ll look a bit at all of these themes. If you find my stories too indirect, too abstract, I invite you back here to refresh yourself on how they connect.

The Work is often buried under what we call “work” – that’s why we have to get to thin places and do a controlled burn of the “work” that distracts us to see what’s really underneath. Also, the work we think we’re doing is almost never the work we’re actually

doing, but is instead an honorable but naive efforts at recovery or self-care or manifestation or pick-your-self-help-buzz-word. These efforts often don't light the spark or that might pour unnecessary fuel on a very hot fire.

Instead, Deep Work is spending time in the darkness – the tomb – working the ground, laying out the kindling, planning for the as-yet-unrealized hope that this space and ourselves and our communities will soon find light and warmth.

The Work is the story – the reflection, the depth, the yearning for connection – we will tell around the bonfire. The ones that are true and truly us, not the ones we distract ourselves with. Not the ones we want others to tell about us.

The Work is becoming a gracious storyteller – embracing the singed whiskers and the drunken honesty and the friends who didn't accept the invitation – not glossing over the stumbles and pitfalls, but embracing them as inevitable and welcome in the story.

Controlled Burning is deconstruction – the preparation for and execution of the controlled burn when we are intentional and the uncontrolled blaze when we are not – the burning of no longer useful things, harmful fuels, risky environments.

Deep Work is party planning. The bonfire begets community. Meals. Bread and wine and marshmallow communions. Laughter. Belonging. Shared Stories.

The Work is intentionally setting things on fire and letting them burn and burn. It is also not letting things catch fire unintentionally or, if they do, finding a way to use the fire for good destruction and not bad destruction.

Controlled Burning is tending to the fire and the things on fire. At the end of the bonfire and the end of our journeys, we emerge new and transformed. The thin space thickens, the night of enthralling wonder and sparks and stars slips off into dreams and slumber. But someone has to put out the fire or make sure it goes out on its own. Someone has to awaken and tend to the forest and the char.

Deep Work is reconstruction. It is taking delight in new things. It is hope that the forest will see new sprigs of green – tender, weak, but delightful in their hopefulness. A sign of new life. It is walking around covered in beautiful soot.

Overall, Controlled Burning is an invitation to be active and experiential in The Work – not simply watching the fire happen, but tending to it, making space for it, and inviting folks over to share in it. Reading this book but never going into the woods for yourself (both literally and figuratively) will do you little good.

Let's light a fire, gather 'round, and tell stories.

Definitions

I've introduced some terms here and will bring some others to bear before too long. Let's take a moment to define them. Definition – as in where the fire can and cannot go – is one of the hallmarks of Controlled Burning.

- *Body*: Our own bodies, the bodies of our communities (i.e., a theatre company or a religious body or even a great class), and the bodies of the things we make, including bonfires.
- *Bonfire*: The actual thing burning. Could be oneself (metaphorically speaking, of course), a campfire, or an event, moment, or season of time. Sometimes I use this image interchangeably as a concrete or embodied emblem for Controlled Burning.
- *Bonfire Experience*: A magical series of moments that happen when the space in our lives thins out, our senses and stories take over, and transformation happens. A Bonfire Experience can involve a literal bonfire or a metaphorical or symbolic one. A good play is a Bonfire Experience. A great meal, like a potluck, held in community, can be a Bonfire Experience. There are tons of other examples. Managed well, a Bonfire Experience can be sustained throughout one's life as an individual and as a community.

- *Controlled Burning*: the ongoing, necessary, destructive-and creative work that is essential to bring about new growth – and the personal, communal, or ecological art of burning the (metaphorical) undergrowth in the thick places in our lives. Sometimes used interchangeably with Deep Work or The Work.
- *Deep Work*: The Work under the work that makes the magic happen: using the fire intentionally and well. Sometimes used interchangeably with Controlled Burning.
- *Embodied*: The quality of being in the body – one’s own, a corporate one, or a physical object like a piece of art.
- *Magic*: The moments of ineffable, ethereal, and often in describable transformation that happen in all kinds of bodies as a result of Controlled Burning, Bonfire Experiences, and The Work.
- *The Work*: See Deep Work.
- *Thick*: The nature of detritus around us – literal and metaphorical, physical, mental, spiritual, and relational – that has caught or easily catches fire.
- *Thin*: The quality of space, time, and spirit that is clear of thickness, eager for possibility, and ready for magic to happen.

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