

## Paul Tournier Prize 2019

awarded at the  
12<sup>th</sup> Geneva Conference on  
Person-Centered Medicine,  
March 26<sup>th</sup> 2019,

“Promoting Wellbeing and Overcome Burnout”



Winner:  
Prof Alberto Perales, Peru

Welcome address of  
**Frédéric von Orelli**, Médecine de la Personne – international Group

### **Ideas of Paul Tournier about suffering put in relation to the Burnout-Syndrome**

Mister president, mister chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

Paul Tournier did not use the expression "burnout", because in his days the term had not been crafted yet. Nevertheless, I will try to tell you how he would have dealt with this pathology. Browsing through his last book "Creative Suffering", ("Face à la souffrance") that he wrote after he had just been affected by his wife's death, I found some interesting ideas about suffering and I will emphasize three elements that can help us understand burnout better.

He starts the dealing with suffering by describing his own circumstances, and especially his youth, marked by the lack and suffering he experienced as an orphan. He was deprived of motherly love, as well as of the firm hand of a father. The years he spent with an uncle and his wife helped him find his identity. The conversations he had with his professor of Greek led him to accept his situation better and to become creative. The lack of a family, which you could compare to the auto-isolation experience in burnout was compensated by personal discussions about his youth, his problems and on spiritual issues and helped him feel accepted and valued as a human being. Paul Tournier insists on the help he received from the couple of his uncle and aunt, his Greek professor and many friends to be able to get out of his suffering and overcome isolation.

A first element to get over the burnout would certainly have been for him the personal encounters, relationships filled with love for his entire being: listening, trying to understand, being given the opportunity to express oneself, taking his questions seriously and staying available.

The second element is in accepting. Accept your own age, your husband, your wife, death of beloved people, your illness, your suffering and, with regard to our burnout patient, your

limits. To write his book about suffering, Tournier had retired in a hotel in Palma where he was working alone at a table in the midst of the accompanied tourists. Also alone, he was feeling happy because, writing his book, he felt creative. But he makes it clear that, to be happy, you need to be in peace with yourself, to accept your faults, your lacks, your destiny. And he was happy, thinking that some unhappy readers could find strength and courage by reading his book. Nobody had told him to accept being an orphan or having lost his wife. He himself wouldn't have told a patient to accept his suffering. Acceptance never comes from the outside, by heeding to an advice received from someone, but rather by a slow, inner evolution. And later he said: "Who helped me accept my state of orphan and widower? Those who loved me enough to reveal God's love to me."

And to accept doesn't mean that you resign to the current state, that you give up and rest. Tournier speaks that way especially with regard to retirement. After you have given everything for your career and your property: from one day to the next there is nothing left, no work, no tasks, no skills, no respect for what you do. The identity is hit, the meaning of life questioned. Our whole life confronts us with the necessity to give up things. We go through different trying times, our transition from youth to adulthood and to retirement, when we lose our parents, go through a severe illness or an accident, or through a burnout. Trial creates new conditions. Life will not be the same as it was. This new phase needs to be built and not only endured.

This is the third element, after personal encounter and the help to accept: Tournier says: "You have to know what you want to do and especially what you want to become yourself. This means to revise your own values, to find a new inspiration. This way "bereavement" takes on a new dimension, a spiritual dimension that only spiritual life can offer." It doesn't only mean "parting from the lost object" like Freud used to say, but a spiritual creative acceptance in which the yes to suffering is linked to the yes to God.

Christian life stems from the close communion with Jesus. "For me – says Tournier – it is that communion with Jesus that compels me to an active acceptance, because it is in the trials that I realize his presence and his participation in my life. I believe, it is possible to face anything when you feel loved."

I close with this quote of Paul Tournier's book "Creative Suffering" which also mirrors the love he felt for his patients, so vital to give support to someone who is stuck because of a trial in his life.

Thank you very much Prof. Perales for your extraordinary engagement in diffusing the Medicine of the Person in Peru and whole South America and present you my very cordial congratulations on this award. We are proud and happy to award the Paul-Tournier-Prize to such a dignified personality.

Thank you for your attention