

The Lie of a Balanced Life

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Work/life balance is the buzzword of the moment joining such infamous terms as 24/7 and Y2K. We hear about it all the time...live/work/family/friend/health... That's a whole lot of balancing. It is a Cirque de Soliel of balancing, and like Cirque, it is supposed to look effortless.

Why is balance so important? I suspect it's our human desire to try to make things even, fair, and neat. In that vein, work/life balance purports to be about people having control over when, where and how they work. In itself, there's nothing wrong with seeking balance.

Even special interest groups are invested in our perfecting our balancing act. For example, the Work to Live Campaign is interested in our gymnastic development. The group, with its omnipresent TV commercials about the health benefits of vacations, is involved in amending the national labor laws so that work practices allow us to live our various non-work related roles. Certainly, we can't fulfill our other duties and responsibilities with a 60-hour week and a one-week vacation a year. Maybe we are cynics, but what else does this group have in mind?

While amending labor laws and increasing vacation time may be a start in your efforts to become a circus performer, it is only the beginning. But, stop a moment; do you really want to begin this balancing act? If its pursuit is adding

additional guilt to your already overloaded self-reproach reservoir and taking the joy out of your life, the pursuit needs examination.

The reality of focusing on the importance of life/work balance may produce unanticipated results among those who are already overburdened by time constraints. For example, such focus may create significant angst in mothers who are also professionals. These women may feel unnecessary culpability when they take essential “personal” time away from their families and professions. They frequently attend to their children’s every need tend to ignore their own desires. Taking a couple of hours out of their week to have lunch and shop with a friend becomes a feat akin to doing back handsprings.

It seems fairly evident that balance is important in a well-lived life. Such balance is an intensely personal state in which work is only one aspect. The “life” part, consisting of family, leisure, spiritual factors, and laundry, plays an important part of the whole, but how does this concept pertain to professional mothers?

After all, these women turned the noun, parent, into the active verb, “parenting.” While parenting, they attempt to give “quality time” to everyone but themselves. Now, we are not suggesting that all mothers become self-absorbed narcissists, but we do wonder if their kids, with their every need and want anticipated, are on that road.

Think about it. Maybe it is the children who need balance. By that, we mean that kids who live lives that are hermetically sealed (free of all

disappointment, unfairness, inconvenience and disruption) are ill prepared for “real life.”

Speaking of real life, it's never balanced. Some times are chaotic, some are relatively calm. If you are reading this thinking “my life is never calm”, we are talking to you. Remember Holly Hunter in “Broadcast News”? Her character was a network news producer who lived life as though she were shot out of a cannon. However, she scheduled five minutes every day to weep uncontrollably. Now, this approach is not recommended by us mental health professionals, but it may be a better plan than that some of you follow!

Okay, so what's to do? Jettison the idea of balance and follow our simple ten rules. Okay, they are not all that simple, but they may help.

Rule one -- see scheduling as your friend. Schedule *at least* one hour a week for purely frivolous endeavors. This time can be used for activities ranging from staring at the ocean to purchasing stilettos (no weeping allowed). Note -- one hour is the bare minimum for this happening.

Rule two, if you are married with kids, you must, must have a “date night.” Children are like gas; their needs and demands expand to fill any available container. Contrary to popular psychology, children do flourish with constant attention.

Three, if you are single, with kids, Rule 2 applies but double it. If you have no significant other, “date night” can be a time to treat yourself well, to be with friends, whatever.

Rule four beings with your screaming “what about childcare?” We know, for some, paying babysitters for one or two nights every week is a financial impossibility. For others, cash isn’t the issue. But, for both groups, time away from children is a necessity that just requires advanced planning. Find competent babysitters or make friends with other moms in your situation who are willing take turns with the kids.

Rule five -- delegate. Whenever you can, outsource meal preparation, laundry, and heavy cleaning. Remember your family: kids should be assigned age-appropriate household tasks. Unfortunately, we have no suggestions as to what tasks are age-appropriate for husbands.

Rule six -- let go of whatever you truly wouldn’t care about if you weren’t playing to that imaginary judges’ table in your head.

Rule seven – again LET IT GO.

Rule eight – instead of doing laundry, buy more clothes. We are just checking to see if you’re paying attention!

Rule nine – create a simple, soothing atmosphere at home and work. Get rid of clutter, listen to calming music, and learn to relax whenever you have a free moment.

Rule 10 -- instead of reading/watching things that make you feel inadequate, read Real Simple magazine.

Please do not see these rules as more rigid “shoulds” in your world. Choose what works for you and jettison the rest. But, before you ditch our suggestions, realize that while life is much like a Cirque de Soliel of balancing, it

can be a blast. Get rid of the guilt and allow joy to seep in! Don't just get by... enjoy the circus. But, stop a moment; do you really want to begin this balancing act? If its pursuit is adding additional guilt to your already overloaded self-reproach reservoir and taking the joy out of your life, the pursuit needs examination.

-Dr. Boswell and Dr. Winterbotham are Co-Directors of the Boswell Center for Life Enrichment.