

PUBLICATION

The Secret to Finding 'Balance'

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Balance eludes us, all of us. The concept is not hard to understand, but achieving it often feels impossible. "Balance" is a now-taboo term to refer to the art of finding the optimal, joyful mix of "work" and "life." The term has been rejected recently by those who believe "balance" is unattainable and so to use it suggests a standard of perfection that defeats those who pursue it. I use the term "balance" fully knowing this because it is indeed attainable. First, define "balance" as having sufficient energy to do, and enjoy, what is most important to you. Second, judge whether you achieve balance over the course of a lifetime, not a day. If we master the following six truths, we will achieve balance because our energy supply will fuel a full life and our lens through which we judge success is a life-time wide.

1. Know what renews your energy and tap into it.

Energy is the personal fuel we burn on the pursuits we deem worthy of the investment and then refuel constantly throughout our lives. The math is simple; you must put in as much as you take out, preferably more so you have some cushion. Consider the Earth's energy source: the Sun. In the summer when the sun is providing the maximum amount of energy, flowers bloom and birds make families. In the winter when the energy source is less present, roots hide in deep cool places and rest, awaiting the return of the sun. This is natural and doesn't mean flowers are failing. Rather, they are resting until their energy source is renewed. Birds migrate leaving places that do not give them what they need to thrive in favor of places that sustain them. Birds don't beat themselves up about needing to make a change. Like flowers, a time comes for us to rest and renew. Like birds, we must identify our energy sources and chase them.

It is hard work to discern our best energy sources, and then intentionally and ruthlessly pursue them. Consider making a list of people, places, and things that often leave you feeling renewed. Be careful not to put things into this box too quickly. Some important pursuits that are worthy of our very best do not renew our energy source – caring for an infant or aging parent, all-weekend work emergencies for great clients, and hosting a celebration for someone we love, are examples. Still, for me, these fall into the next bucket, things worthy of investing my energy because they bring me immense joy and purpose, though not renewal.

2. Identify what depletes your energy, both the good and the bad.

Having gotten a healthy handle on what renews us, let's turn a critical eye to which pursuits deplete us. Many of these things will bring us great joy or real purpose and are exactly where we should be spending our energy. Certain things that exhilarate or bring purpose may also leave us in need of renewal time. Healthy examples of this for me include going to trial on a case, helping a friend or stranger in an emergency, hosting a big celebration for my daughter's song release, traveling numerous weekends in a row to watch my son play college football and baseball, traveling to be with my mom as she fought and beat cancer, and completing a difficult hike that is outside my comfort zone. I choose those things with a deep understanding that I will be tired after, but it is happy-tired, satisfied-tired, the kind of tired where I collapse into a chair with either a smile or a settled sense of purpose that I made a difference. There is nothing wrong with being tired. Tired is our mind and body's way of telling us it is time for renewal. If we arrive at tired with our energy intentionally spent, tired feels great.

Likewise, we must discern when unproductive, often unintentional, pursuits steal our precious energy. Unhealthy examples for me include stewing over a mistake I made after I have done my best to make it right, spending my emotional energy on people who are unkind or unsupportive, agreeing to do tasks that are not high on my priority list that rob me of time to do well what is more important to me, and doing things myself that I could hire someone wonderful to help me with. The biggest regret of my twenties and thirties is not asking for help so I could be more present with my family and friends. Create a To Don't list of things you identify as unhealthy or unnecessary depletions of your energy and stop doing that energy-sucking stuff.

3. Evaluate how to keep your career from stealing your balance.

My own experience and countless conversations with those seeking balance taught me that careers are the number one balance thief. So, let's look our careers dead in the eye and reach some conclusions so we do not waste precious energy worrying about it. Work either gives us energy or depletes it at different rates based on our perspective, our planning, and our relationships with those with whom we work.

First, my perspective on my career comes primarily from my parents. My mom was a scientist – she dissected frogs, oversaw science fairs, taught about constellations and chemical reactions, and graded tests at night. She taught middle and high school science and got her master's degree when I was little. She loved her fellow teachers, and they still meet for lunch regularly. My dad fought crime – he wore a starched uniform with well-polished brass, and perfectly shined boots and kept our town safe. At night he studied for exams so he could be promoted and rose from radio operator to troop commander. He loved his fellow officers and gave them affectionate nicknames. As an adult, I now understand that my mom was teaching students in overcrowded classrooms that included underprivileged teens with no family support, and my dad was working wrecks with fatalities and responding to dangerous domestic disputes. Still, they chose to love their jobs of helping people, never stopped learning and advancing, and built strong relationships with their colleagues. I am certain many children of schoolteachers and policemen did not conclude that their parents had cool jobs that they loved. My parents gave me the gift of perspective that there is great satisfaction in hard work, helping others, providing for family, and a job well done. When we choose this view of our careers, it uses far less of our energy and so we can do more without emptying our tanks. If we find ourselves unable to find joy in our careers, it is nearly impossible to find balance because an unfulfilling career will burn energy fast. If that is where you are, you have two choices, fix it or find a place where you can find joy in your career. My parents found it in underpaid, underappreciated, yet noble professions. Surely, we can find it in ours.

Second, much stress in our careers can be avoided or mitigated with planning. I have been practicing law for 26 years and so I have the luxury of leading my teams. I set the rules for preparation and minimization of last-minute emergencies, and the balance of working very hard with taking time when we need it. When I worked primarily on teams led by others, they set the rules. They earned that right, and it was a season when I learned much about how I want to run my teams. On my teams, we call it the 'lice happens' rule, which I named when my children were in elementary school and the school called about a lice outbreak and I needed to leave work quickly. The rule is to submit everything at least one day before it is due. A cushion on deadlines decreases stress and so uses less energy. Consider what you can do to minimize stress at work. I try to set an example of an extraordinary work ethic so that when I need help, there is a trusted colleague to get my back. And there always has been.

Finally, strong relationships with colleagues and clients make work fun and fulfilling, and consequently, work zaps less energy. Some of my closest friends are relationships built over decades at the same firm. I am drawn to colleagues who feel the same gratitude and passion for their careers and sometimes I tap into their energy to renew mine. My heart is full when I think about my work friendships. I have no doubt that when I need them, treasured colleagues will take care of me and I will do the same for them, joyfully and with little depletion of my energy supply because it's a privilege. And then there are those precious few colleagues who tell us the hard stuff and do it because they care. They tell us when we are out of balance and when we are not executing on

our priorities. Call it an accountability partner, call it a dear friend, but we all need at least one. If you don't have one, make it a priority.

4. Use your precious energy to do incredible things.

Now to the fun part: Finding joy and leaving a legacy with our jealously conserved energy. With this renewed energy, dream big. I have kept a list of my 100 lifetime goals for more than 15 years. I revisit it yearly and revise based on my growth. I divide my list into four categories – physical/financial; mental growth; emotional/relationships; and spiritual/core values. It is an exhilarating exercise to dream of lifetime goals. When we clearly envision the reward we will reap from a well-tended energy supply, it motivates us to give ourselves what we need to be fully fueled. My Goals List has been filled with items I achieved and removed that I never would have accomplished without honest self-reflection and committing the dream to writing. "Buy a beach home" took many years from when I wrote it. There are constants that have remained despite yearly re-evaluation – like "Take each of my children on a trip alone every year." That's my favorite. Some goals were removed and never achieved because as I worked toward them and saw them up close, they were no longer my dream. An early draft included "Learn to scuba dive and dive the Great Barrier Reef." Within a year of writing it, my husband and I took scuba lessons and traveled to Belize to dive. We had fun and I learned that I love scuba diving 15 feet below the surface and not 100 feet below. I did not fail by removing it from the list, because I learned what felt great and adjusted. Tuck away plenty of things on your Goals List directed at the discipline of keeping your energy source intact. A constant on my list is "Sleep 8 hours every night" because it makes me a superwoman. I can hardly form a complete sentence, much less leave a legacy, on seven hours.

When we consider a decision to invest our energy in something, we can pull out our Goals List and ask – "Is that on my list?" If yes, go all in. If not, we can ask "Is that more important than what I have on my list?" If no, then politely decline. We are all bad at saying 'no;' it's not just you. Reframe the question as, "Am I going to say 'no' to the current ask or 'no' to the goal on my list, because my energy supply is finite?" That makes the 'no' a lot easier. Balance is impossible without ruthless execution of a well-considered plan as to how we will spend our energy. Well-intentioned people will try to divert us from this plan. That is okay because they don't know our plan. But we do, and so it is our job to stick to our plan and no one else's. The payoff is well-rested, joy-filled, and soul-satisfying.

5. Achieve balance by watching your energy gauge closely and listening for warning signs.

We have a lifetime to enjoy the adventures on our Goals List, so let's relax, watch our gauges, and listen carefully for signs that we are burning more energy than we have stored. I have so miserably failed at this that I have a pocket full of lessons I learned while face-down, literally. My law partner picked me up off the floor when I passed out in a deposition; that was embarrassing. My husband picked me up from a client's office with rug burns on my knees when I passed out during a Board meeting; that was even more embarrassing. My kids saw me pass out on the subway in Europe; that put a damper on Italy. I heard a rumor that I was dictating a brief while I was in labor; that's not true, or at least I don't remember it. One of my best friends told me that sometimes when I am in the room, I am not fully present. That is a good friend that gives the hard truth because if I don't have time to give those I care for my best when we are together, I fail at balance. Epic failure has taught me to keep a steady eye on my energy supply.

Take a hard look at what you have upcoming and, when you see something depleting on the horizon, go into it mostly charged and set aside time to recharge after. I love hosting Thanksgiving and it simultaneously drains me. After ending up snippy with my family and not having fun on Thanksgiving Day, I figured out that I need to take off the entire week and plan an entire recharge day after everyone leaves. I now love hosting Thanksgiving again. For seven consecutive years, I took off every Friday in the last month of the fiscal year to work alone on my family scrapbooks. I did it in the last month when I had already nailed my goals for the year

and was using well-earned rest. I started each new year renewed. Look at your calendar for the year, build in renewal periods, and guard them at all costs.

Listen for rumble strips. The goal is to stay in the middle of the path and out of the ditch. Rumble strips are the patches we feel when we have veered too far from the middle but are not yet in the ditch. We can listen and correct or end up wrecked. When I crash, I retrace my steps prior to the crash and ask what the signs were, and what I can learn from them. For me, 60-hour work weeks must be followed by rest. Periods of grand performance must be preceded and followed by retreat. Necessary times with those who deplete me must be bookended with those who restore me. Signs that my body cannot keep up with my pace must be heeded at all costs.

6. Judge your success through a wide lens with a soft gaze.

My Goals List includes: "Exercise six days a week." For several years after I began practicing law, I did not exercise. "Take great care of my friends." For more than ten years, I did not go on a girl's trip and spent every weekend with my family. "See live music and independent films at least once a month." Until my children were old enough to stay home alone, independent films and live music were endangered pleasures on the brink of extinction. "Stay steadfast in my spiritual journey." For my children's elementary school years, I directed our church children's choir during the Sunday School hour and missed my spiritual study. "Find joy in singing to others." For nearly all of my thirties, I did not sing for anyone except my children. I could conclude that I failed at balance if I judge my success with a narrow view of an incomplete set of my goals and within the small window when I had young children and was working to become a sensational attorney. But age brings perspective. During that time, I raised my children, built my law practice, and most days kept my sanity. I had nothing left to give. In fact, there were times my energy supply was insufficient to sustain even that. With the softer gaze that time brings, I laugh remembering trying a case for six days while eight months pregnant, alternating every other day between my only two maternity suits. I smile thinking of falling asleep in my work attire reading a book to my children in their beds. I balanced late nights at the office with trips alone with each of my children every year. I achieved many things I am proud of on my Goals List during that season. "Be my adult son and daughter's close friend" has been on my list since they were in daycare, and they are now adults and are my close friends. My career did not steal that from me. I buried other important goals in a soft cool place awaiting the return of an energy source sufficient to sustain them. We pause certain goals, not because they are unimportant, but because they are so deserving, that we await the season when we can give our very best. Anticipation can be exhilarating. I am in a season where I have dug up girls' trips, weekly bible study with women I treasure, regular live music and film, singing for others with my bluegrass band, and weekend trips alone with my husband. The season is coming to dig up; the book I want to write, the guitar I want to learn to strum, time at my beach house, and discern and embrace my next career goals.

You deserve a full life, so strengthen your energy supply and find joy and satisfaction investing it in what is important to you. You deserve grace, so broaden your lens and soften your gaze through which you judge success in achieving balance.