

1

To Care *for* Oneself: Work-life Balance

*“Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep
your balance you must keep moving.”*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

What does it mean to “care for oneself?” Does someone who loves her job and works every day of the week, including weekends, care for herself? Is it reasonable to expect a physician to live a “balanced life” when she works a 60-hour week and is on call 24/7? What does it mean to live a balanced life? It may not be a simple matter of equally portioning out eight hours of sleep, eight hours for a personal life, and eight hours for work. Living a balanced life might be as much a state of mind as a physical apportionment of time.

Are those who work in health care settings expected to dedicate themselves to caring for their patients even if it results in their own physical or emotional exhaustion? Are health

care providers expected to work longer hours than people in other professions?

Let’s look at some examples of people who are passionate about their work. Consider how you would determine if they are caring for themselves or living a balanced life. Reflect on a deeper definition of “self care” and what it means to live a balanced life.

Does this well-known maestro care for himself? He clearly loves what he does:

REPORTER: “I heard someone say you work seven days a week. Is that true?”

CONDUCTOR: “Yes, that’s the case.”

REPORTER: “Why do you do that?”

CONDUCTOR: “Because that’s all the days there are.”

How about the lab technician who, five days a week, arrives at work at 9 a.m. and leaves exactly at 5 p.m. so he can get to the gym before going home for dinner? Do his daily work-outs indicate that he cares for himself?

Can a working mother of three preschool youngsters have time to care for herself?

Before answering these questions, we need to clarify what we mean by “balance.” The answers will vary depending on a person’s health, personality, temperament, responsibilities, and situation.

When we think about the need to care for ourselves by living a balanced life, we probably envision an old-fashioned scale. The scale is balanced when the beam holds equal weights on both ends and imbalanced when one arm of the beam is heavier than the other. In this analogy for explaining the desire to take care of ourselves, work is usually on one arm of the scale and the remainder of life on the other. The challenge is to find ways to balance the two.



A Reflection

BALANCE

I'm in the Dallas airport with a three-and-a-half-hour layover waiting for a flight to take me to a meeting in Minneapolis. There's a group immediately across from me waiting for the same flight—three couples, four children, and two infants. For comfort and to entertain the children, everyone is sitting on the carpeted floor. The group seems more like a happy tribe than families headed by young affluent professionals.

"It's been wonderful," one of the mothers says, "but I miss my own kitchen. It's hard to relax in someone else's home even though it was fun being in Orlando with the kids."

Two of the men shake their heads in unison. One says, "I never thought I'd say it, but I'll be happy to get back to work."

Vacationers like these are pulled from their homes by the excitement of getting away. Patients may be pulled away by illness. In the airport, I started to think about those of us in health care. Caring for others can pull us to the point where

we, too, want to return home—not to a place, but to ourselves. Who among us has not felt so scattered or overwhelmed that she craves just a minute or two of quiet?

It's easy for health care professionals to get pulled away from themselves and their personal needs by patients' needs, the demands of time, the expectations of others, and the demands we place on ourselves. In fact, there's always more work than enough time to do it. Generous caregivers can easily lose their balance. ♡

If you're trying to find balance in your life so you will have time to care for yourself, you're not alone. More than 51 million people have Googled the phrase "work-life balance." There are more than 9,000 printed books offering advice on this subject and more than 6,900 offering advice on "self care." Of these 6,900 books, 570 address special issues facing women, 160 focus on the challenges facing nurses, 150 are for physicians, and 49 are for social workers. The number of such books continues to swell. Many of them suggest that work-life balance and self care are a matter of time management. They advocate limiting the amount of time spent working so there will be free time for other activities, such as loving relationships, play, and exercise.

David Whyte, the philosopher-poet, thinks otherwise. He believes that attempting to achieve life balance through time management is too simplistic. Instead of thinking of it as a time-management exercise, he writes about the need to live more reflectively and honor three fundamental commitments: to our-

selves, our loved ones, and our work. To accentuate the need to be faithful to each, Whyte calls the three commitments “marriages.”¹ The marriages are also sacrosanct; overvaluing or disregarding one at the expense of the others is to risk trouble, as subsequent chapters in this book will make clear.

For example, a distorted commitment to work can destroy a love relationship. By focusing exclusively on work, we ignore our significant other’s need for intimacy and connection, and the relationship deteriorates. Conversely, over-investing in a love relationship can destroy our work. We’re so distracted by that relationship that our commitment to the demands of work and to fulfilling the job requirements is diminished and we fail. Equally unfortunate is when love relationships and work lead individuals to overlook their own needs. People who direct all of their energy, attention, love, and time to relationships and work wake up one day and find themselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually depleted. They are spent, sometimes become physically ill or run down, and have nothing left to give.

Then again, you might ask: What’s the big deal about overlooking any of the three marriages? Sometimes we must be selfless and devote our lives to work if it means accomplishing a significant project. And what’s so tragic about putting loved ones ahead of work or career? Nothing. We’re not talking about right or wrong; rather, we’re referring to what happens when one

marriage outweighs another and to the problems that arise when we ignore our basic human needs.

The award-winning author Thomas Moore has a third perspective. Instead of trying to care for ourselves by pursuing a balanced life, he suggests living a “soulful” life. The distinction is more than cosmetic, as he explained in *Care of the Soul*:

*A soulful life is one of thoughtfulness, care, and engagement—you are present in everything you do, not just going through the motions. You give attention to the things that matter most. You take care of your body and your health. You make your home a place of comfort, welcome, and beauty. You educate yourself throughout your life in values and solid ideas. Your leisure time relaxes you, gives you a rich social life, and provides fun and play. Your spirituality is deep as well as visionary, and you incorporate contemplation, discussion, ritual, and prayer into everyday life, and you do all of this in a style that suits you as an individual.*²

The question is, how can we possibly live a soulful life in today’s world? Viktor Frankl, the world-famous philosopher and author, has yet another perspective. He’s suspicious of people who are preoccupied with caring for themselves or who want to live a balanced life if, by “balance,” they mean a life without tension: “I consider it a dangerous misconception of mental hygiene to assume that what [we] need in the first place is equilibrium...What [we] actually need is to strive and struggle toward a worthy goal.”³ He maintains that what we need isn’t

discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled.

Frankl arrived at this belief during World War II while suffering immeasurably in a Nazi concentration camp, where he was inhumanely stripped of his possessions, identity, autonomy, and dignity. He realized how our expectations of the future shape our present moment: “Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. Those who felt that they had nothing to expect from life were lost.”⁴ Frankl called this hoped-for future one’s “vocation”—something even more important than the basic human needs of dignity, identity, autonomy, pleasure, power, and possessions.

Whyte’s, Moore’s, and Frankl’s views are key to understanding what’s necessary in caring for ourselves as we care for others. Among the fundamental issues they address are what we value, the responsibilities we bear, what is asked of us in life, and how we choose to spend the commodity of time.

Before addressing these topics, we must dig a little deeper into our relationship with work—why and how we learned to work the way we do and the underlying factors that affect the role work plays in our lives. This is critically important because we cannot change distorted ways of working until we become aware of the influences that have shaped the way we work.



Case Study*

SELF AWARENESS LEADS TO POSITIVE CHANGE

“You ask if there was an unforgettable moment that changed the way I do things. Yes. It was almost five years ago when I arrived at work and my manager asked if I could take her place at an important off-campus meeting. Unexpectedly, she couldn’t go.

“‘We have to have someone there,’ she said. ‘It’s about this year’s budget. We’ll regret it if someone from our department isn’t there.’ Without a moment’s hesitation, I said, ‘Sure.’

“Moments later, my husband called. He told me that the school nurse had called to say that our eight year old was sick and we should pick her up immediately.

“At first, I didn’t know what to do. I had just told my manager that I would go to the meeting. Should I call my husband and ask him to go? I also felt other pressures. I had a paper due that evening for a class I was taking and I was counting on completing it after I left work at 3 p.m. On top of it all, it was my responsibility during the day to call all of the volunteer blood donors scheduled for the next day. If I didn’t make those calls, chances were that some of them wouldn’t show up, and we needed the platelets.

“Without much thought, I asked the manager if I could go home to pick up my child. That’s the day I learned that fear of displeasing others, feeling that I was not a very responsible person, and that following a to-do list too doggedly are all stumbling blocks. I now try to avoid them. That day really has changed the way I work.”

YOUR INSIGHT:

LESSON: Become aware of the stumbling blocks that hinder you from putting first things first.

**The case studies in this book reflect real-life experiences of caregivers in various settings. To safeguard individuals' privacy, names have been changed. These scenarios aim to stimulate thinking and group discussion, which, in addition to fostering a lively, provocative exchange of ideas, hopefully will enable participants to get to know one another a little better. With familiarity comes the trust and team building that lead to better patient care.*



A Reflection

LIFESTYLE

The Op Ed pages of our newspapers reflect the controversy surrounding the need among many physicians to find a little time for themselves in a profession that historically has required near constant availability. Phrased somewhat negatively, they ask whether it is possible to be a “part time” physician.

The New York Times ran an Op Ed piece stating physicians need to return to the practice of expending themselves selflessly for their patients and be less concerned about their personal needs. In reply, this is how one physician feels:

I am a full-time emergency physician. I am also pregnant with my first child and planning to go part time after the delivery. Dr. Karen S. Sibert



[the author of the Op Ed piece] writes that we have a “moral obligation” to serve our patients. What about our moral obligation to our children?

The sacrifices that my family and I have made should be enough. My parents spent more than \$350,000 to send me to college and medical school, and I have spent nearly a decade of my life in medical school, residency and fellowship training. I have spent nights and weekends in the hospital — often missing family events, weddings and holidays in the process — and I have seen plenty of women put their personal lives on hold for their medical careers.

Dr. Sibert claims that “medicine shouldn’t be a part-time interest to be set aside if it becomes inconvenient.” I would argue that the same holds true for my child.

The New York Times, 06.15.2011

Today, significantly fewer physicians maintain solo practices. Doctors are forming group practices or choosing to work for large organizations or medical centers. There are three reasons: to provide better patient care, greater financial security and thirdly (and what most would say is the major reason), a more balanced lifestyle. They can have a life apart from work. As one physician told me, “Now I have a schedule ... I know when I’ll be working ... When I’m not around I know my patients will receive good care ... I can’t tell you how important that is for me at this time in my life ... Another perk is knowing that in a few years I’m entitled to a six month sabbatical.”

Most of us are not physicians. However, we struggle with the same issue of trying to balance a desire to reach out selflessly to others in caring ways and at the same time care for ourselves. On the need to reach out selflessly, Mitch Albom, author of *Tuesdays With Morrie* learned, “The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.” Yet it was Shakespeare who reminded us that we must also care for ourselves. “Self-love is not so vile a sin as self-neglect.”



