
The Illusive Search for Balance

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It was the first Monday after the holiday break. I was walking up the hall and spotted a colleague whom I had not seen for a few weeks. I greeted him and asked, “how was your break?” He responded, “too busy. I didn’t really find any time for a break – I worked the entire time. I really need to find better balance in my life.” Scenarios like this one seem to happen often, at least among the people with whom I work. His refrain – “I really need to find better balance” – is familiar to many of us. We have probably expressed it about our own lives, but it is almost certain that we have heard many other people use it to describe themselves. We sense that something is amiss in our lives, that we are spending too much time on some things and not enough on the right things. We yearn for more hours in the day, a better allocation of our time, and an improved flow to the days and weeks that make up our lives. We want our lives to unfold in a way that feels right and so we set out on a search for balance. As hard as people try, I have yet to find anyone who feels that they have been able to find and maintain the balance they are working so hard to achieve.

The motivation at the heart of this search is important and worthy, but to be successful, I think we need a new metaphor to guide us. Both science and experience suggest that metaphors can be very helpful to us, but in my view using “balance” as a guide can actually lead us away from the better life we are searching so hard to find. I have been searching for a better metaphor and will share some of the top candidates here, metaphors that might work better, but the main theme of this article is to encourage others to jettison the balance metaphor and

find one that works better. But first, I need to offer some convincing reasons to stop using balance as the principle that guides our search for a better flow to our lives.

Why is balance illusive?

Hoping for perfection. Although I do think we need a better metaphor, part of making progress in our search for balance is to adjust some of our expectations. One of those is to recognize that sometimes we expect the impossible. We often hope to have a great work life, a great social life, a great recreational life, a great love life, a great... Expecting greatness in the important domains of life can lead us to establish standards that our real lives will never meet. Sometimes the best jobs require us to spend periods of intense work on unfulfilling tasks. Weather or other obstacles might keep us from engaging in the activities we love. And even the best marriages have their rough spells. On a daily basis, some parts of life might not meet the standard of greatness we seek. We make it even harder on ourselves when our standard of greatness is vague. We know there must be something better out there, but cannot define specifically what that something better is. In these cases, nothing can stack up against our vague, but pervasive notion that life can be better.

Ruthless competition. We also need to recognize that competing priorities do compete, and they often compete ruthlessly. Work tells us that we *must* spend more time there, our physicians tell us we *must* exercise more, our friends signal we *must* spend more time with them, and it

goes on and on. The responsibility for deciding how to allocate time and effort among these often heavy demands rests squarely on us, and no matter what we choose, one or more of those priorities will shout, “bad choice!” Another reality complicates this: the different domains of life have different measures of success. When I gather with friends at church, I do not report that I prayed an average of 4.2 times per day for an average of 10.63 minutes and that the Matt-to-God connection was successful 32.1% of the time. Likewise, I do not tell my wife that I feel the ROI on my contributions in our marriage is underperforming last year’s level. Even as these different domains urge us to measure success in different ways, we are living one, single life. When I was a consultant, being busy was a measure of how important and talented you were. No one would have allowed themselves to be underworked because, we assumed, it meant you were underperforming and that you were not an important player. My family, on the other hand, wanted more of my time and they deserved it. The choice of how to allocate my time was left to me, and too often I chose poorly. For most of us, the decision about how to fit these different views of success into the one life we are living is ours alone – and we wonder how can we possibly chose right.

The goodness of work. Another challenge is that we really do care about work. Work is important to us and it constitutes an important part of life. But in some circles, admitting this can garner criticism. I think this is particularly challenging for women. If a woman chooses career over family, she is often told that she sold out on

family. If she chooses family over career, she has sold out to social pressures. And woe to the woman who tries to do both: she is criticized for trying “to have it all.” But, work does not have to be a four-letter word. Science shows us that work can enrich our lives, help us find a meaningful way to use our talents, and help us grow toward our fullest potential. Work can also be stressful, frustrating and life depleting, but it can also be wonderful.

It's personal. We also need to realize that balance is personal. What constitutes balance for me as a professor at Notre Dame likely will not be balance for any of my colleagues. Likewise, what made for better balance when our children were small is not what makes for better balance now that Kim and I are empty-nesters, so we can invest more into our work. In fact, mid-life is often one of the most productive periods of life. Similarly, what constitutes the right investment in work differs from person-to-person. IF we judge our investments against those of others, we are almost certainly doomed. We have incomplete information about their other life investments, but more importantly, we are not living their life!

Balance and guilt. Lastly, we need to recognize that balance, when we do achieve it, can be a guilty pleasure. If we have it, but no one else does, we feel bad. Most of my students complicate this further. They are conscientious people of profound integrity, so when they experience balance, they tend to wonder if they are shirking their responsibilities somewhere, and so they

find a place to, once again, get busy and in the process lose balance.

Jettison the balance metaphor

I have suggested that balance is the wrong metaphor, but why? One reason is that balance implies that we are spending exactly the right amount of time, effort, and personal resources on each important area of our life. That is, we consider our lives to be in balance when each life domain gets its rightful share of our time and attention, and all those shares match-up or balance out against each other. That is very difficult to even for one domain of life. It is very hard to determine how much time, energy, and effort is the “correct” for work today, much less trying to balance out today’s allocation for work against those needed for family, spirituality, health, and recreation. If it is difficult to determine these allocations for today, it is impossible to predict what will be the right allocations in the future. To achieve balance, we must be able to plan the future precisely, since trying to do it on-the-fly is far from effective. But, the world changes and we must often adjust to those changes. Yet, we still think we should be able to determine, with a high-degree of accuracy, how much time will be enough tomorrow, next week, and maybe even next year.

We also tend to think of balance as occurring at a single point in time, but as I have mentioned, what seems like balance today might not seem like it tomorrow. And, even if we can achieve it, the changing world or our guilt will usually knock us out of balance once again.

Alternative metaphors

I will suggest four alternative metaphors that I think might serve us better. I have used all of them and always use one or two to help me make better choices. My metaphors might not work for everyone, but the key is to find one that does work and use it.

The portfolio metaphor: Achieving balance over the long run. Before I became a professor I worked in for a large financial services firm as a financial advisor. The basic approach we used to help clients invest their financial assets can be useful for us as we invest something much more valuable: our time, effort, and talents. We always began our work by helping our clients establish their investment philosophy. This included their basic beliefs about money and wealth, their risk tolerances, and the like. Using the portfolio metaphor to guide our life investments begins the same way. We need to clearly define what are our core life beliefs and values. Core beliefs are things we hold to be true in the absence of proof. It would be odd to say I believe in gravity: gravity is a scientific fact. My belief in a loving God cannot be proved – brilliant people like Aquinas admitted they could not do it – yet this belief is at the very center of my life. Another way of thinking about core values and beliefs is to think about the themes we want to see play out over the course of our life in the decisions we make, the things that we stand for, and the ways we invest ourselves. In business terms, these are the “non-negotiables” of life.

The second element of the portfolio metaphor is to establish investment objectives that flow from and are consistent with our investment philosophy. Two people with different investment philosophies – one a risk taker and the other risk averse – can both have the objective of saving for their children’s education, but the way each would pursue that object would be different. For our life portfolio, our investment objectives are the ways we define what it means to live fully and live well. In other words, they are the way we chose to define success in life. Clearly defining our own standards of success provides the basis we need to make our life investment decisions.

Another important element of this metaphor is to judge each investment opportunity – the offers, orders, demands, request, and choices that we face each day – against our investment objectives. Like all wise investors, we have to adjust as conditions change, but with this approach we can do so thoughtfully, carefully, and purposefully. It also reminds us that investing 100% in one place is rarely a good choice. Rather, we need to decide which kinds of investments are best for us and how much to invest in each area. Furthermore, it allows us to evaluate whether any investment opportunity is truly a good one for use. Even good investment opportunities might not be right for our portfolio if they will not help us enact our investment philosophy or achieve our investment objectives.

Lastly, the portfolio metaphor reminds us that balance is something we achieve over time and momentary

imbalances are not necessarily failures. To achieve this long-term balance, we need to clearly define our investment philosophy, set objectives that are consistent with that philosophy, and use our objectives to decide which investments will properly fit into our portfolio. We will also need to adjust the portfolio from time-to-time, as life conditions change, as new opportunities arise, etc. The best portfolios are stable, but organic. They stay true to an investment philosophy, but calculated changes are made when the conditions are right.

Mending the line or following the beacon. I am neither a fly-fisher nor a pilot but metaphors based upon these endeavors have helped me. As I understand it, fly fishing involves trying to make human-made lures look like real insects. To do this, fly-fishers have to “mend the line,” by making a series of adjustments to their line to get it into just the right place in the water. Usually, these are small changes to the line, but sometimes the entire line has to be reeled in and cast again. Similarly, when pilots are flying to an airport, they use a homing beacon from the destination to guide their flight. Staying in the center of the beacon is the most direct line of flight, but wind, weather, and sometimes the pilot’s own actions cause the airplane to move out of the beacon. Consequently, pilots must make a series of smaller and larger adjustments to keep the airplane as close the center of the beacon as possible.

This metaphor plays off a similar theme: we need to establish an objective, a destination, and a beacon to help guide us. Both the destination and the beacon

derive from our core life beliefs and values. The destination is a life goal that is consistent with these values and beliefs. The beacon is how our daily life maps onto the values and beliefs.

This metaphor also reminds us that balance is achieved through a series of mostly small, but sometimes large decisions. As such, it tells us that the small decisions do matter: Sometimes we get out-of-balance because of a series of small decisions that, together, pushed us out of our life’s beacon. It also reminds us that finding balance sometimes requires large decisions. When I was 32, my wife and I decided we should both quit our jobs, sell our house, and move with our two small boys half-way across the country so I could pursue my Ph.D. and change careers. Recently, my wife quit her job as a high-school science teacher calling to pastoral ministry. These are large changes that have helped us find more fulfillment in life. However, we have made many more small changes -- deciding which work projects to join, setting daily schedules, organizing home life – that have also helped us find a mend the line of our lives.

A rhythm to life. This is my favorite metaphor. It begins with the idea that there is a tempo or melody or rhythm that underlies our lives and this rhythm can tell us when we are in or out of balance. We can even use this rhythm to help us regulate the life choices we make. When the rhythm resonates with us, life *feels* right and we are pleased with what we see in the content of our days and the outcomes of our efforts. Sometimes this rhythm is chaotic and discordant. We can’t get a sense of where

we are or where we are going, and everything seems out-of-balance, constantly on the verge of sending us into a tailspin. I think this tempo or rhythm comes from our core values and beliefs – our spirituality – and how we translate those into life goals and daily choices. This metaphor reminds us that there is a feeling to life and we should pay attention to that feeling. When our melody or rhythm is well-formed – when it is based upon values, beliefs, and goals that we know matter to us – it is an excellent way to measure balance. When the rhythm seems chaotic, frenetic, or discordant, we know that some small or large changes are needed to return us to harmony.

The rhythm metaphor also suggests that both fast and slow rhythms can be melodious or discordant. That is, sometimes you are living fast, moving from activity-to-activity quickly, but feeling great. At other times, a fast pace is chaotic and on the verge of becoming frenetic and jarring. Sometimes a slow life can feel out-of-synch, as if the base line and the melody line don't match up. I hope each of us has experienced moments when the slow pace is like a sweet interlude: relaxing, refreshing, nourishing.

Good rhythms must have an underlying structure, but they must also allow for improvisation. That underlying structure is our core values, beliefs, and life goals. We always follow that structure, but improvise when life demands it or provides good opportunities for it.

Good rhythms are also played: on paper they are a possibility, and it is not until they are lived that they become real. So, we live our rhythms, sensing when the pace and beat are life-giving, improvising when they are not, composing again and again as life changes necessitate. And this leads to the last insight from this metaphor: good rhythms are composed with a sensibility to both structure and beauty. The structure is our notions of virtuous living – our core values and beliefs. Beauty is a sensibility to inspiration, joy, and passion.

The journey metaphor. This is a well-known metaphor, so it can be a hollow cliché. Used well, however, it can be very helpful and it has proven to be a useful metaphors for me. Although this sentiment is well-worn, the journey metaphor reminds us that our how we live our daily life matters. It also reminds us that any journey – any life – has peaks and valleys, twists and turns, good weather and bad, the dark of night and the light of day. It reminds us that all of these things, even the difficult parts of the journey, can lead to good. As a child, I was afraid of the dark. As an adult, it is one of my favorite times of day. In the dark, I am not easily distracted. I feel peace in the dark and often find myself feeling closer to God. Journeys help us to deepen our wisdom and broaden our understandings.

For me, the most important guidance offered by this metaphor is that the best journeys are undertaken with companions. I need a life partner, faithful family, and true friends to help me through the difficult times: Companions can do things I have neither the talent nor

temperament to do. I need companions to care for me and I need companions that need my care and concern. And, lastly, companions bring us some of the greatest joys in life. There is nothing better when we are traveling than great companions. The best journeys of my life have been with family or friends, they have not been solo trips.

Find a better metaphor

Metaphors can be very useful guides as we strive to live meaningful, purposeful, happy lives, but we need to pick the right metaphors. I have argued that the most widely-used metaphor – the balance metaphor – may not be helpful for most of us. I think we need better metaphors. Regardless of the specifics, there are common elements to all good metaphors. Good metaphors remind us that living well begins with a clear understanding of our core values and beliefs that then lead us to setting life goals and aspirations that are consistent with those values and beliefs. A good metaphor reminds us that living well arises out of how the smaller and larger decisions we make in life fit together. Good metaphors remind us that, while short term gains are important, it is best to think of our lives over the long run and that joy can arise even in life's more difficult moments. Lastly, good metaphors remind us of a fundamental truth: we need other people and they need us.



enjoy work.