

Balancing Your Life, Some thoughts by Ann Bykerk-Kauffman

One of my favorite self-help psychology books, *The Road Less Traveled*, by M. Scott Peck, opens with the sentence “Life is difficult.” The longer I live, the better I understand how true that sentence is. But, as Scott Peck promised, once I fully accepted the fact that life is difficult, life became a lot easier; I no longer felt uniquely burdened nor did I feel the need to blame myself or anyone else for my less-than-perfect life. Difficulty is just a “fact of life,” like death and taxes. Finding balance is an especially difficult task in life. Once found, balance can easily be lost and must be re-found. Sometimes, it seems as if my entire life has been a struggle to find and maintain balance, to feel at ease instead of feeling pulled in all directions at once. I have found balance many times, but lost it again just as many times; I keep trying though and it has gotten easier. So, what I present today is not the final answer, just a few strategies that have helped me sometimes find (and re-find) balance.

Putting Your Needs First

In an academic environment (and the “real life” alongside it), it is very easy to get caught up in other peoples’ needs—the students’, the dean’s, our colleagues’, our spouse’s, our childrens’, the worlds’ (how many of us got into academia with a “save the world” goal?). But we can’t truly meet any one else’s needs if we haven’t first met our own. So take care of yourself. Get enough sleep. Eat healthy food. Get enough exercise, have fun with family and friends, spend time in the great outdoors, and find some quiet solitude. Make yourself your highest priority—who else will?

Make it Convenient to Meet Your Needs

We are much more likely to do things if they’re convenient. If possible, make it more convenient to meet your needs than to neglect them. For example, I need exercise; I feel awful if I don’t get enough. So I purposely purchased a home on a bicycle-friendly scenic route to campus. It’s far enough from campus to provide some real exercise (15 minutes each way) but close enough that I stay reasonably sweat-free and actually save time over driving—the parking situation near our campus is, thankfully, atrocious. I send my children to schools that they can easily bike to so I don’t have the “I have to drive my kids to school” excuse. I even style my hair so that “helmet-head” isn’t a problem. Good rain gear, baskets and a trailer help too. Thus I have no incentive whatsoever to drive to work. I get at least 30 minutes of exercise automatically, every single day. Bicycling has become so natural to me that I often do my shopping and other errands by bicycle too. It works; I feel great and I have maintained my high-school weight without ever dieting.

If a social life is a priority, it helps enormously to live near people you want to hang out with. I live in a cohousing community of 31 homes facing each other and surrounding a common building, pool, lawn, playground, and garden. Self-selection insures that we are all generally compatible. Social interaction is as simple as walking out the door and seeing who else is around. Common meals (2-3 evenings a week), group camping trips, parties and informal get-togethers provide all the social life I would ever want. Perhaps best of all, having other kids around makes play dates unnecessary and babysitting and carpooling easy to arrange.

Build Personal Priorities Into Your Normal Routine

It is easy to do things that are routine; it feels strange when we don't do them. So schedule your personal priorities at the same time on the same day each week. For example, I am signed up for yoga class every Tuesday and Thursday 5:30-7 a.m. and every Saturday 6:30-8 a.m. Sure, I sometimes miss a class but it feels "normal" to go; it's the default position. My husband and I have, at various times, scheduled a weekly date (writing this reminds me that we need to get back into that routine); we invariably found that we were able to spend more quality time together that way. Weekly dates with friends are also a great idea.

In today's crazy world, I need a laugh sometimes. I also need to tidy my office. So, I've developed the habit of—at least once a week—spending the last half hour of my workday tidying my office while watching segments of the Daily Show on my computer (those ultra-fast on-campus internet connections are good for something after all).

Budgeting Your Time

A Time-Budgeting strategy that has worked for me (sometimes, not always—perfection is not the goal, perspective is):

At the end of each week, sit down and...

- (1) Make up a schedule for the entire coming week that shows all scheduled events. In addition to classes, meetings and appointments, be sure to schedule personal commitments such as family time, exercise time, walks with friends, etc. I do this step by creating a table in Microsoft Word; there is also a variety of scheduling software available for this purpose.
- (2) Make a "To do" list of tasks you wish to (or must) complete during the next week; be sure to include personal items as well as the crucial task of budgeting your time for the following week. I do this step using Microsoft Excel.
- (3) Estimate the time required for each task on "To do" your list.
- (4) Figure out exactly how many as yet unscheduled hours you have available to do these tasks. Unless you are a very unusual person, you will invariably find that there aren't enough hours available to complete your entire "To do" list.
- (5) Trim your "To do" list to fit the available time, leaving several hours open for unforeseen circumstances. This is the most difficult step of the budgeting process because you must face reality, prioritize, and discard the least important tasks. If you just can't discard them altogether, roll over some trimmed items into the next week.
- (6) Schedule each remaining item in your "To do" list into a specific time slot.
- (7) Make a blank schedule. As the week progresses, record what you actually did during each time slot. This will help you plan more realistically in the future.

To date, I have never perfectly followed my planned schedule, but the act of making it helps me feel more in control. And seeing how unrealistic my initial "To do" list is has always been enormously helpful.

Take Advantage of Sabbaticals

This may seem obvious, but most of my colleagues at CSU Chico apply for sabbaticals much less often than they are entitled to; some never apply at all. Perhaps the hurdles of having to come up with a project and complete an application are just too great for some. I never found the process very daunting and—Wow!—sabbaticals worth it! By the way, take a full year if you can afford it. A semester flies by too quickly to get much accomplished.

The Option of Advancing at a Slower Pace

This option isn't for everyone but it's one I have taken. I worked extremely hard during my first six years (50-60 hours/week) and got tenure and promotion to Associate Professor at the expected pace. But I got rather burned out. So I slowed down. I could; my husband had completed his computer science degree and gotten a full-time job, so I was no longer the sole breadwinner. In order to save (gain?) my sanity, I took a full-year sabbatical. During that year, we moved into a cohousing community and had a second child. When I returned from sabbatical, I limited my work hours to 40/week, taking time to be with family and friends, do some on-going soul-searching, read a bit, do yoga, get outdoors, hang out in the neighborhood and relax. In order to do all of this, I had to give up something. I couldn't, in all good conscience, neglect the students so I neglected my scholarly activity. I published nothing for awhile. I don't regret my choice, I am much happier than I used to be, but I did pay a price. I stopped getting pay raises and, after 16 years at CSU Chico, I have yet to be promoted to full professor. But, hey, promotion to full professor is nice, but not essential for keeping one's job. I'm slowly getting going on research and writing again; my hope is that the time "off" will actually enhance my productivity in the long run and I'll get promoted. I may; I may not. Either way the time "off" has been worth it.