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The Art Of Balancing An Unequal Life

By Eileen McDargh, CSP, CPAE

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Study the best seller lists of the past few years and you'll notice titles that range from Peter Lynch's "Beating the Street" to Thomas Moore's "Care of the Soul: How to Find Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life." This juxtaposition captures the dilemma facing all of us in the business world. How does one swim with the sharks, squeeze the margins of an angst-filled financial world, and still lead a life of wholeness in spirit, mind and body?

Nor is this a new question. Marsilio Ficino's 15th Century treatise, "The Book of Life," sought to help the Medicis and their merchant counterparts create a renaissance of spirit amid the draining demands of commerce and a new creature called capitalism.

Whether a Renaissance banker or the CEO of a high tech conglomerate, whether a guild master of stonework or a manager of information services, the issue is still one of balance.

But balance is not an equal measure of work, love, prayer and play. Nor is it a state that can be achieved and frozen in form for all time. Rather, this amorphous thing called "balance" is an on-going, deliberate set of decisions that make the journey of life much like the metaphor of sailing.

Consider the single person sailboat. When there is much wind, the little boat appears off balance, moving forward at an angle, sails filled to bursting and the sailor leaning back over the craft, with one hand on the sheet and toes hooked under the railing. What allows the sailor to stay in the boat is that he is connected to all the important parts of that craft. When the wind shifts, so too must the sailor.

Life is also like that. We give ourselves tremendous mental stress when we think that life must balance. Having a different image allows us to see where we might be out of control.

Briefly, there will always be competing and unequal demands upon our time ... much like the tug of the tiller or the push of the wind. Depending upon the course we have chosen for ourselves, we respond to these demands. We might decide to change direction, seek harbor, or give full rein to the beating waves and blustery wind. The quality of these decisions depends upon the direction of our sailboat, the

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prevailing winds, the depth of the water, and the need for overhaul and repair.

Direction refers to the goals, created by our values, which we have established. The wind and the depth of the water represent those people and events, outside our control, which make demands upon our time. Lastly, overhaul and repair stands for the need to cease and desist, to nurture and renew our physical and spiritual self, and to re-examine the course we are sailing.

If we consider sailing as a metaphor for the "balance" we all seek along life's journey, then what is needed are navigational aids. What could help all of us on such a journey is a process, a formula, whereby we might take stock of our decisions, weighing them against our personal values, goals, and physical requirements. Since we are all bound by the same relentless 24-hour day, we would be best served by looking at not how much we can cram into the blocks called "time", but how wisely do we

choose what we put into our finite day.

Step 1: Answer these questions to help you determine what is of value to you. Value has more to do with who you are and how you live your life, not what you have achieved. For example, you might value life-long learning, financial security, service to others, loving relationships, and spiritual growth. Once you have identified what is of value, you have a screen with which to filter through goals and activities.

One of the best ways to identify values is to create an imaginary sounding board composed of 4-5 people whom you value and admire and who, in turn, sincerely respect and like you. If each one were to give eulogy, what type of person would they say you were and why. What values arose? What goals or activities supported those values? Isolate those values and write them down. You might even be able to rank order the values.

Step 2: For the period of one week, keep a pad of paper handy and make a note of every task you perform and what role you play. For example, my roles are professional speaker, writer, wife, mother, friend, office worker, manager, daughter, sister, student, volunteer, and just plain ME. The latter refers to a role that nurtures and cares for me, not necessarily anyone else. Amazingly, I've discovered that every task is related to a role and that almost all tasks come in 15 minute increments.

Step 3: On a scale from minus 5 to plus 5, rate these roles and accompanying tasks according to enjoyment and personal value. In looking at the tasks of a week, interesting discoveries arise.

Are the various tasks and roles you've played congruent with the values you've identified? Are you putting more time than is reasonable into some tasks and roles? The operative word here is "reasonable." For example, a special friend lost her husband and had no one to help her with grief and anger, not to mention funeral arrangements and lawyers. My value of service and loving relationships and the role as "friend" and also surrogate "daughter" created many tasks and demands. For me, it would have been unreasonable not to spend considerable time with Jeanne. The sailboat headed in her direction.

Another example. I discovered that I was putting far too much time in the role of "office worker" rather

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than in the role of "manager". Instead of assigning tasks and growing others, I was taking work on that did NOT need to be done by me. Time to alter course and allow my associates to hold the tiller.

Finally, by putting so much emphasis on the role of professional speaker and its tasks, I had let drop ME. Time to make decisions for overhaul and repair, saying "yes" to a day off, to a day of contemplative silence. I realized that without the silence, all I bring to the platform and my audiences are echoes of words rather than insights.

Step 4: Now that you have identified what is, make a list of questions to ask yourself when you begin to take on a role and task. My list looks like this:

- Does it support my value for life-long learning and make a difference? Will it stop another person from growing?
- Will it stretch my abilities?

I recently accepted an assignment that will cost time, money and effort as well as time away from

home. I accepted it because it will move me into trying something that I have never done before ... an activity directly related to my role of professional speaking and service.

- Does it allow me to be with people whom I care about?

How often have we all said "yes" to an engagement because we feel "guilty"? The reality is that we find the people tedious, demanding, and downright boring. I have finally determined that if I have limited time with my family and friends, it is perfectly fine to periodically decline such invitations.

- Is it irresistible?

That's right— "Irresistible". Does what you are about to say "yes" to come without a significant doubt. Does the request come without compromise or force from either the offeror or me. There is no emotional blackmail, no "should", no social obligation. Irresistible requests are gifts to be gratefully accepted. If our time is filled only with "resistible" demands, how we will ever be able to accept the irresistible?

- Is it fun and will it allow for creativity and a change of pace?
- Will it create organization and structure in my life? Am I the only one who can do this?
- Will it nurture my physical well-being and respect my natural pace?

I have discovered that unlike many of my colleagues, non-stop travel is exhausting and not fun. My body requires seven hours of sleep, regular exercise and down time. I can take only so many back-on-back engagements before I must say "no". Trusting that I can say "no" is a lesson I struggle to learn.

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· Is it authentic to me and of service to others?

I was asked if I would run for the Board of a non-profit. Knowing I have strong organizational and leadership abilities not to mention an ego- saying "yes" to serve the membership SEEMED appropriate. However, when I tested the request against the other questions listed above, more negative responses appeared.

The art of balancing an unequal life means that we seek answers to all these questions before choosing the next activity to put in our life. Yes there will be days, even months, when the pressure of every day pushes us into knee-jerk reactions and work seems to be working us. External forces and folks seem to be pushing us for more, for faster, for further. Once realized, stop. Lower the sails. Breathe. Ask yourself these questions. Remember, there is a big difference between the leading edge and the bleeding edge. Alienation from our authentic, deepest self and each other draws blood. Connection to our core and the humanity around us draws life.

Sail on!

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Eileen McDargh, CSP, CPAE, is an international speaker, author and seminar leader. Her book 'Work for A Living and Still Be Free to Live' is also the title of one of her most popular and upbeat programs on Work/Life Balance. For more information on Eileen and her presentations, please call 949-496-8640 or visit her web site at <http://www.eileenmcdargh.com>.

I've Learned To Love Teen Art

By Martin Stoleman

I have loved art for as long as I can remember. As a child I spent hour after hour doing art projects of all kinds with my mother and my siblings. We would paint, practice sewing or create things out of clay for hours on end. I never knew that the amount of art projects we worked on was abnormal until I got a bit older and heard all of my friends and school talking about their years of playing with trucks and action figures or being outside building forts. I guess our mother wanted us to be well rounded individuals so she started us on all things art from the start. I don't remember exactly what kind of teen art I created during my formative years, but I do know that it wasn't until recently that I learned to appreciate teen art.

To the surprise of no one that I knew, I decided to become an art teacher when I went to college. I loved art so much that I couldn't think of a better way to spend my days than on teaching children and teens more about the things I loved. I enjoyed my elementary aged students immensely from the beginning. I loved their curiosity and I enjoyed the way they saw art. It was the teen art that my junior high aged students were creating that took me a while to adjust to.

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The thing about teen art is that it is less than traditional and often it needs to be classified outside of any established genres of art. The teens in my art classes saw art in a much different way than I expected, and hence their work was much different as well. I would give them an assignment and they would create work so unlike what I had asked for and yet so creative that I couldn't complain.

I have realized that teen art needs to be a genre of art all by itself. Why? I've determined that teen art is so unique because of the time of life that it represents. Teens are going through the ultimate time of transition, so it makes sense that their art would have a particular perspective and slant. And as different as teen art can often be, I have learned to appreciate it. I have learned to see it through the eyes of a teenager exploring the world and trying to make sense of their place in the world.

If you have a teenager who likes to play around with any art form, then you probably know exactly what I'm talking about with teen art. In fact, you've probably had similar issues in trying to recognize, define or categorize the art work that seems to make your teen come alive. My advice to you is this: teen art is something entirely of its own kind. Stop trying to make teen art into something else, and instead just enjoy it for what it is.

Martin Stoleman is an elementary and junior high school art teacher. He loves working with students and seeing what kinds of teen art they will come up with next. See

for more

details.



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