

“Off Balance and On Track”

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January is the season of getting back in balance. In December things get out of whack. We eat too much and too richly, we spend too much and too freely, we busy ourselves with festivities and spread ourselves too thinly. In January we like to correct and sometimes over-correct that manic pendulum. Someone just handed me a prayer that says it all. “Dear God, my prayer for 2011 is for a fat wallet and a thin body. Please don’t mix these up like you did last year. Amen”.

So we resolve to spend less, get more organized, exercise more, eat better and live healthier and less stressful lives. Even if we cut out the extremes of December and then January from the year, finding life balance is still something most people strive for. It is ironic, because we have so many tools that have made life easier from dishwashers to smart phones, but life doesn’t seem to be any easier or less stressful.

A lot of the life-balance discussion focuses on ‘work-life balance’ which Wikipedia defines as “the proper prioritizing between “work” (career and ambition) on one hand and “life” (pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development) on the other.” For the most part we want more time for the pleasure, leisure side and less time on the ‘work’ side. This is a pretty universal theme. But the sense of what is a good balance differs from person to person. It even differs from country to country.

I traveled to South Korea last spring to visit my brother and his wife and daughter. Mark has been there for about a decade or more. One of the things that totally struck me was just how different they are in that work-life balance. Most Koreans work at least 12 hour days, many work more, and a large percentage work six days a week. Even the children work long hours. Because I brought my son Stanley, I was eager to have him meet some kids his age. I asked my sister what time the kids finish school and she laughed at me. She said, “This is Korea. In Korea, after school the children go to school.” And it was true. You think your kids or grandkids are involved in a lot, you should see Korea. Every day these little kids go unaccompanied from piano lessons, to English lessons, to Taekwondo and Math lessons. You name it, they take various lessons until about 8 at night when their parents return from work, and the day starts all over early in the morning. It’s not a balance that I could live with. On the other end of the scale, there are plenty of cultures that have a lot more leisure time than our country does.

What does our faith have to say about life balance? Where does your faith fit into the life balance? Wikipedia put Spirituality in on the leisure side of the balance. Is faith something to practice in our spare time? Somewhere between the laundry and walking the dog? Sometimes it seems that way.

Even our mindset around going to church can be interesting. I remember when we first moved to Calgary and I decided to take some time before I looked for a position at a church. It was nice to have weekends together as a family and to have a choice about what we would do on a Sunday morning. Most Sundays we went to church. As a family we attended Central United in downtown Calgary. But I can remember with just two kids what a battle and an ordeal it was to get to church every Sunday morning. Inevitably someone always lost it, whether it was a kid having a temper tantrum or me or Alex losing our patience. Here we were yelling at each other so we could go and worship God. I remember driving to church one morning and thinking “It’s no wonder that more young families don’t go to church. This sucks!” We always loved church when we got there and were glad we went, but somehow getting there was brutal and I wondered if it was worth it. Because Michael Ward is such a good preacher and Central a really wonderful church, the answer was yes, it was worth it, but only barely.

I can’t remember how the epiphany happened, I know it was God at work, but we did something that completely changed that Sunday morning dynamic. This is what we did: we took the choice out and made a commitment. We declared that Sunday was not a day off. Once we had made a commitment as a family that we were going to church every Sunday, everything changed, and everyone just relaxed into the routine.

We have a quote on our fridge that I ripped off a disposable Starbucks cup. It’s called *The Way I See It #76*: “The irony of commitment is that it’s deeply liberating—in work, in play, in love. The act frees you from the tyranny of your internal critic, from the fear that likes to dress itself up and parade around as rational hesitation. To commit is to remove your head as the barrier to your life.” I think it’s brilliant.

While researching this sermon I took a quiz on life-work balance on the Canadian Mental Health website. It said that my life was out of balance and I’d better do something soon. It was a pretty limited little quiz and I failed because I often work

through my lunch, look at emails at home and don't get enough "me" time. But the one thing it didn't get at or really ask is "Are you satisfied with your work and life?" I am deeply satisfied with my work and life. It's a little crazy, but it's satisfying.

We're all searching for that illusive "balance", or perhaps more than balance we are seeking a deep satisfaction with our life. The funny thing is most of us on the surface equate that with more time on the beach or on the ski hill or at least more time for ourselves. But it's a lie.

If you want to have a deeply satisfying life, don't look for more "me" time. Commit your life to Christ. I mean entirely. Faith isn't just something you fit into your life. It is something you give your life to. We really value our choices and our freedoms, so the idea of giving your life to something, to someone is really foreign to us. The language that the Bible uses often is that of becoming a "servant" of Christ. We don't live in a culture that has servants, but even if we did that's not the role we would chose. We like to be the master of our life... to call the shots and have control. But this is all an illusion. The great irony is that it is in giving up control and becoming a servant of Christ that you find the greatest freedom. Picking up a heavy, ugly cross and following someone on a road that leads to God-knows-where is no picnic. That's what Jesus calls us to do. He never gave us an option about fitting God into our life. He never said "I hope you make me *part* of your life." He wants our life. Our whole life.

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was asked the secret of his amazing Christian life. Booth answered, "I told the Lord that he could have all that there is of William Booth." When you look at just about any of the amazing Christians of the present or the past you will find that same kind of servant mentality. Look at Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King Jr. In the end I don't think they accomplished amazing things because they were born with a super-human faith. They were able to serve the poor and fight for justice because they surrendered their lives to Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man He bids him come and die." Bonhoeffer did end up dying in Nazi Germany for his faith, but Bonhoeffer didn't mean it that way. He meant that we must die to ourselves and live for Christ, and yes, for a small number that means dying for your faith, but for absolutely everyone it means living for your faith. It means making the difference in the world only you were created to make. Is it easy? No. Is it worth it. Absolutely. Talk to the people who work with Canadian Aid for Chernobyl. Talk to Pastor Doug about his work in Kenya. Talk to people who serve our community dinners. Easy? No. Worth it? Yes, absolutely yes.

That said, there are a lot of burnt-out Christians out there. They are reading their Bibles and going to church and working towards justice in the world. They are going through the motions but the battery is just about dead. We might call them 'the dedicated and the drained'. If serving Christ has lost its joy for you, then you are probably in that category. If you are feeling drained and burned out, then you are either not doing what you are called to do—it's not your spiritual gift—or you're not letting Christ be the center of it. I'm not saying that serving Christ is a piece of cake. Discipleship is not Disney Land or an all-inclusive vacation. But something is not right if you are constantly being drained and if you find yourself getting bitter and angry.

As a Christian, it is not so much a question of balance as it is obedience. The good news is there's a whole lot you are *not* called to do. When you give your life to Christ, you have to give up worrying about other peoples' expectations. You have to give up any feelings of wanting to be needed or fears of having enough time or energy. There's a whole host of reasons why people serve and give of their time, but the only one that matters is whether this is what Christ has called you to do. If it is, then you can trust Jesus to provide what you need for it. If it is Christ calling you, then even though the journey is hard sometimes it will fill you with joy and you will feel satisfied.

This is an area that the Lord has been working on in my life. Particularly with my preaching. I enjoy preaching. To borrow a line from the Christian runner Eric Liddell, when I preach I feel God's pleasure. But for years I have struggled writing the message. It's a bit like the difference between giving birth and the labour that leads up to that moment. Lately what God has been teaching me is that I need to do only what I am called to do, no more and no less. God wants me to:

1. Work hard.
2. Bring the Lord into the work—which means spending some time in prayer and it means trusting that he will provide. A bit like making sure there is oxygen, not just wood for the fire.
3. Relax and enjoy the labour.

The composer Johannes Brahms reached a point in his life when his composing almost came to a halt. He started many things, serenades, part songs and so on, but nothing would seem to work out. Then he thought, "I am too old. I have worked long and

diligently and have achieved enough. Here I have before me a carefree old age and can enjoy it in peace. I resolve to compose no more." This cleared his mind and relaxed him so much that he was able to pick up with his composing again without difficulty.

If we remember the one who called us to do whatever it is we are called to do in the day and in our life and if we bring him into that work then we will have balance. It won't be the same balance as that person or that person. But it will be true balance for you. The one who calls us is the one who equips us. The Lord is the source of our strength and God will enable us not just to plod wearily through life, but to soar. Not just to survive, but to serve and make a difference.

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."
(Isaiah 40:31)

Thanks be to God.