



An Impossible Challenge: Mastering Life-Work Balance

*What are you to do if you no longer subscribe to the conventional notion of life-work balance, and yet remain dissatisfied because your life is simply too full and you are expected to do too much?
One idea: Shake things up a bit, and re-arrange your life.*

By Dennis Coyne

I am a student of life-work balance. The concept interests me. Sometimes my clients lament that they have not mastered life-work balance, and they look to me for advice. So I read what I can find on the subject. And occasionally, I attend a workshop for the latest insights. A few years ago, I attended a particularly valuable one sponsored by the local bar association.

Lawyers Teaching Lawyers About Life-Work Balance

The room was filled with lawyers eating their lunches. A bright and likeable young lawyer (“Mary”) stood and addressed the group. She spoke on the subject of life-work balance from her perspective as a partner in a downtown firm and the mother of two small children. Her voice was animated. She spoke quickly; so quickly that I had a hard time keeping up with her. She excitedly recounted the birth of her first child and the fact that she had taken advantage of the generous maternity leave at her firm. When she returned to work, her child was in day-care.

Life was stressful, particularly when the child became school age. Rushing home from work in time to meet her child’s bus was just one of many daily stresses Mary felt as a young mom and downtown attorney. But she “held it together”, at least until the birth of her second child. Again Mary took advantage of the firm’s maternity leave and relied on day-care as she returned to work.

Rushing home from work to meet her kids’ bus, together with other parenting responsibilities, began to wear Mary down. She became “frazzled” and it showed. The firm kindly suggested that she work at home a couple of days a week. And so she did. Through it all, Mary was able to “churn” her allotted billable hours. She then went part-time, but in reality kept working full-time. That way, she could exceed the expectations of the firm for part-time attorneys.

Mary described a typical day at home, in the same breathless rush of words - getting the kids up, fed and dressed and on the bus in the morning. Then a quick clean-up of the house, a load of laundry, a few quick calls to manage household tasks, and then a few hours of work, before the kids were home again. Then it was another load of clothes, preparing dinner, all the while watching the kids. Then supper, a quick pickup of the house, kids to bed and then a return to “work” until 2 AM, or so. (She spoke kindly of her husband, but I couldn’t figure out how he “fit” into the schedule.)

The only real “wrinkle” in Mary’s “balanced” life appeared to be the unwitting clients who, after receiving an e-mail time-stamped at 2 AM, inquired as to why Mary was working so late. In closing,

Balance continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

Mary again credited her firm and its generous maternity and parenting policies. She also acknowledged that her PDA was as an invaluable aid in “shoehorning” so many activities into a single day. Mary summed it all up by simply declaring that she “wanted it all”, and that “having it all” was possible. (She “obviously” knew what she was talking about.) Everyone applauded and Mary took her seat.

Then it was time to hear from a middle-aged lawyer (“Bob”). A friendly and energetic man, Bob explained that “balance” had never been an issue before the birth of his children. But, oh, what havoc children can play with anyone’s schedule! So how did Bob get “balance” back into his life? He, too, credited his PDA. But, more than anything, Bob and his wife rely on “family calendars”. Once a week everyone, even the youngest child, brings their calendar to the kitchen table. Then the master calendar is put together and everything “gels” for the week ahead.

Bob reassured the audience that “balance,” after all, is possible. It’s all about the mastery of family calendars and the use of a PDA. Bob’s message seemed to make a lot of sense to the audience. Everyone applauded.

Before I could raise my hand to ask a question of the “experts,” someone noted the time and everyone rushed out of the room. I imagined myself in a crowded theatre with someone shouting, fire! As the room cleared, it was back to work for everyone. Or, so it seemed.

I left the meeting feeling unsettled. Perhaps it was my perception that the two talented and likeable people giving such a frenetic description of the “balance” in their lives and their endorsement of the “mad scramble” personified the lives of many lawyers I knew. Perhaps it was the loud applause, as members of my profession rallied to the proposition that “having it all” was do-able. Whatever it was, my interest in “balance” was piqued, but I left somewhat troubled. What were the lessons about life-work balance that were worth learning?

Questioning The Notion Of Life-Work Balance

I questioned then, and I question now, that life and work are separate, and that it makes sense to balance life against work. Honestly, I don’t believe that anyone can have it all. I’m also not convinced that the clever use of electronics and calendaring systems is the key to balance. In sum, I’m not sure that the concept of life work-balance is helpful at all, for several reasons:

What Is Balance?

What is your image of balance? When I think of balance, I think of the blindfolded figure holding the scales of justice. That image suggests that life is to be balanced on the one side and work on the other. And life and work are supposed to be evenly balanced, every day. Living a static (perhaps tedious) life seems to be the goal. I can’t imagine living in such a steady state, free of the daily disruptions and surprises that keep us on our toes and challenge us. And then there are the deaths, births, marriages, divorces, and countless other challenges that disrupt our lives.

Why Pit Life Against Work?

Is the objective to compartmentalize our lives into at least two parts: (1) our life and (2) our work; and then defend life from work? Are we destined to fight for our lives, so that we are not cannibalized by our work as lawyers? As an aside, for those who want to read about “living a life divided no more”, I suggest a book by Parker Palmer - *Let Your Life Speak*.

Continued from page 2

None Of Us Can Have It All.

I have to admit that I do not have it all, and never have. I have had to make choices, about whom to marry, how to parent, where and how to live, and how to practice law. Some choices have been easy, while others have been difficult. But all the choices have informed me about who I am, whom I love, and what I value. So, in my view, making choices is a good thing. I don't aspire to having it all.

The Clever Use Of Electronics Is No Key To Balance.

While cell phones and calendaring systems are helpful (and I use them), I don't think that shoe-horning more and more into an already busy life will somehow provide balance, or satisfaction. Rather, electronics and time-management aids may simply allow us to accelerate the pace of our already frenetic lives. And simply moving faster and faster is likely to lead to exhaustion and burnout.

What Can You Do When Life Is No Longer Satisfying, Or Just Too Busy?

What are you to do, if you no longer subscribe to the conventional notion of life-work balance, and yet remain dissatisfied because your life is simply too full and you are expected to do too much? I don't have an elixir, but I do have an idea. Shake things up a bit, and re-arrange your life. My mentor, Frederic Hudson, writes in *The Adult Years* about the "mini-transition" that people do from time to time, as they decide that they will hold on to what is working; let go of what is not; take on new learning and exploration of ideas, and move on to new commitments. So the rules of the road for the mini-transition are simple - Hold on, let go, take on, and move on.

Hold On. Who do you love, and what do you cherish?

As you go from day to day, whom do you seek out, and what activities satisfy you? For example, several people have been my life teachers and mentors. I make certain that I spend time with them.

Let Go. What people and activities are no longer life giving?

Sometimes friendships are no longer vital, and saying good-bye is the constructive and courageous thing to do. Likewise, activities that once excited and sustained us can become a burden. I sometimes encourage clients who appear tired and beleaguered to imagine that they are carrying a backpack. I then challenge them to unpack the bag as I sit with them, and to examine each relationship or activity, to see if it is worth keeping. Some clients describe it as friendly and courageous spring-cleaning.

Take On. Who or what calls to you?

Likely, there are people who you would like to get to know, activities that you would like to experience, and new skills that you would like to develop. So who or what comes to mind when I mention this?

Move On. Time to act.

Once you become aware of what to hold on to, what to let go of, and what to take on, it is time to move on. This is a simple notion but it is often difficult or seemingly impossible to do. At that point, a mentor, a valued friend, or a life coach can be an invaluable help. The key is that she has the ability to listen and to support you, without a need to keep you as you are, or as they think you are. The other task for the listener is to hold you accountable to move on.

In sum, I encourage you to abandon the notion of a static life in which you tirelessly strive to

Continued from page 3

maintain the ever-elusive balance of life against work. Instead, I suggest you that you vigorously wrestle with the challenge - Hold on, let go, take on, and move on. In the meanwhile, I hope that you are informed and encouraged by the words of David Whyte, from "Crossing the Unknown Sea":

Often, in order to stay alive, we have to unmake a living in order to get back to living the life we wanted for ourselves. It is this cycle of making, disintegration, and remaking that is the hallmark of meaningful and creative work.



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