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YOU WILL NEVER ACHIEVE BALANCE—AND SHOULDN'T WANT TO

A BALANCED LIFE. Just reading that phrase likely conjures a sense of longing. And why wouldn't it? As you struggle each day to manage the barrage of forces competing for your time, energy, creativity, input, and attention, it's understandable that you want to find a simpler solution—picture a future moment when you are able to expertly allot your resources, perfect your priorities, and celebrate that everything has finally “evened out.”

We all crave balance. After all, countless books, talk show programs, and self-help gurus have told us that balance is the solution to our problems. So, it's completely reasonable for you to believe that finding balance in your life is intriguing, attainable, and desirable. Unfortunately, it's also completely unrealistic.

You will never achieve perfect balance. And neither will I. Frankly, I have given up trying to live my life “on balance.” Instead, I'm choosing to live *off balance on purpose*. This path and plan of action, as you will soon discover, provides a liberating and empowering alternative to improve the way we can engage life.

Although unconventional and inconsistent with what you have been told by “experts,” the off balance on purpose approach is rooted in truth, consistent with reality, and infinitely more practical than the fantasy of trying to attain some mythical balanced condition. When it comes to balance, you have been sold a bill of goods. It’s time to give yourself a break, embrace the life you have, and make adjustments that will allow you to grow in the areas that are crucial to your most important commitments as well as your happiness.

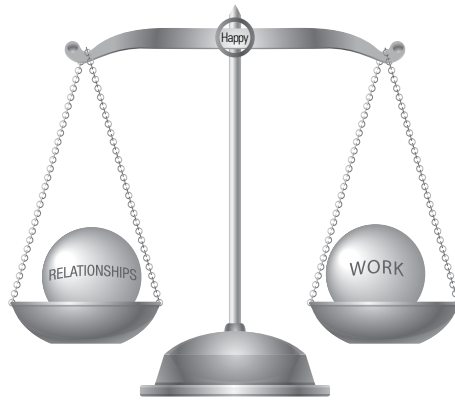
Balance Is Unattainable and Undesirable

We use the word *balance* freely and speak of the undeniable attributes of living balanced lives. But words are charged with meaning, and this word in particular embodies a definition that demands closer inspection. According to Webster’s *New World College Dictionary*, balance is “a state of equilibrium or equipoise; equality in amount, weight, value, or importance, as between two things or the parts of a thing.”

There’s more to the definition, but stop right here and ask yourself, Is this really the condition I am looking for in my life—a state of equilibrium? How about “equality in amount, weight, value, or importance”—does that appeal to me? Before you answer, I’d like you to imagine something. Picture a scale.

After all, if we are to seek equality or equilibrium, we will need to measure it. And what better way than a good old-fashioned scale? You know, the kind you used in your high school science class. On one side, let’s portion your devotion to your family, friends, and personal endeavors. Go ahead, scoop out a healthy amount—enough to keep you fulfilled, your significant other placated, your offspring well-adjusted and guided, and your friends reminded that you are still alive and well. But not too much!

Because on the other side of the scale we need to dole out the professional you—a person who is committed to your job, your career path, and your ongoing professional development. After all, you need to make some money if you are going to support your family and the lifestyle you want to



lead. And, in your professional life, the demands are significant, the expectations are increasing, and the competition is relentless. So in order to be a productive member of your team, you'll have to throw yourself against the challenge, committing your energy, time, creative thoughts, and unflagging determination. But not too much!

Maybe this doesn't accurately describe what you would try to balance. Perhaps your scale has your desire to become a published poet on one side and your love of food and shelter on the other. Or your love of spending time with your family on one side and your love of pursuing your creative passions on the other. Or your desire to travel the world on one side and opportunities to begin building your career on the other. Complete the mental picture with your own personal example. Regardless, you want to give both sides—every aspect of your life—adequate energy and attention. Just be careful not to devote too much to either side.

Because if you do, you may tip the scales. And remember, we are striving for that state of equilibrium. We are longing for the moment when the scale levels out and strikes a harmonious state of balance. Right?

Let's say you achieve that moment. Then what? How could you ever possibly maintain it? Is it realistic to think that you can keep your life in a balanced state, where everything is just as important as everything else and where everything gets just as much of your focus and energy as everything else? And, ultimately, would you want that? Of course not! If you were to

attempt this impossible feat, you would drive yourself bonkers second-guessing every action, contemplating the weight of each decision, and portioning time according to the clock, each second spent here balanced by a corresponding second spent there.

But again, this is an impossible state to achieve anyway. You don't have unlimited resources to tip the scale this way and that, moment by moment, keeping the magical pointer comfortably on the fine point of happiness. You have what you have. And when commitments you have made demand additional time and effort, you have to deal with that situation using the resources available. The question is how. Do you beat yourself up about it, experiencing constant conflict and forestalling enjoyment of your life until you find a way to achieve balance? Or do you embrace your present reality and find comfort in the fact that you are doing what is necessary to keep moving closer to your broader aspirations?

Life is sticky, and you are in the thick stuff. *Life is not a hypothetical future. It's an undeniable present.* It's happening now. And the way you approach challenging moments has immediate impact on everything you do, everyone you love, every part of who you are, and everything you may become.

Off Balance—Our Natural State of Being

Life is off balance, and that is a good thing. Off balance is the way we grow. It is the way we accomplish goals and good deeds. Off balance is our path to living lives that are significant, full of what we deem to be important and worthwhile. Off balance is also the way you love your family, get closer to God, and improve your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Each of these aspirations requires a decision and a commitment that takes you, at some particular moment, off balance.

It has often been said that nature is balanced, always in perfect harmony. Somewhere deep in the forest, a mouse leaves its borough on its morning commute to work. After all, it must provide food for its ever-expanding family. When the neighborhood snake eats the mouse, we are told it is merely a beautiful expression of nature's perfection and balance.

Tell that to the mouse. I would maintain that, to both the mouse and the snake, this was not a balanced moment. This was serious, off balance business.

It may be true that all systems seek a balanced state, but the part we don't often hear is that those systems never, ever get there. They are still "seeking"! Balance is something we can observe only over a long period of time. (Isn't it beautiful how the seasons in Chicago represent the full spectrum of weather throughout the year?) But in any given moment, we must deal with the reality of our present, unbalanced circumstances. (Damn, it's freezing in February. Has anyone seen my mittens?)

So, if what we are after is a fulfilling, rewarding, meaningful life, we should first understand that we don't live our lives with a constant long-term perspective. We live one moment at a time. And, from that nonnegotiable point of view, life will never be balanced. Were you to ask ten people today "How's life?" you would likely get an assortment of answers including "busy," "wonderful," "hectic," "fantastic," "insane," or "devastating." Not one person, I bet you, would say "balanced." Moment to moment, we are off balance, experiencing fluctuations through new ideas, new demands, new responsibilities, and new desires—as well as constant changes in our resources.

You can learn to be comfortable and proactive in the midst of this turmoil. In fact, you can even thrive in these circumstances! To do so, you just need to learn to experience life's fullness while keeping your composure. Take all that life has to throw at you, but keep your wits about you and maintain an elevated view of what is happening. I know . . . easier said than done, right? The first step is to accept the idea that we are all, in every moment, off balance. That is natural, normal, and wonderful.

Small Adjustments and Forward Perspective

Some people naturally excel in high-pressure circumstances, when change is erupting all around. Life's challenges, emergencies, surprises, and deadlines bring out the best in them. Other people become paralyzed by change and uncertainty. They shut down and withdraw. The disruption of their

diligently defended and perpetually precarious comfort zone is too much for them to handle. So they don't. Maybe you are like the first person I described. Or like the second. What is more likely is that you are somewhere between the two extremes. Regardless of where you are on the "managing change" spectrum, you can learn to manage and even embrace life's beautiful unpredictability.

We marvel at the gymnasts, dancers, yoga practitioners, and circus performers who display amazing feats of balance and make it look effortless. Imagine a tightrope walker suspended high above the ground. The audience watches in breathless anticipation as the funambulist (the actual word for a tightrope walker) maintains perfect balance. Or does she? Take a closer look and you'll see that, in order to stay up on the wire, she is constantly making small, critical adjustments. She lifts her "free leg" as a counterweight, shifts her head and shoulders, raises and lowers her arms, or adjusts her balance pole. There is never a moment when the performer is at rest.

In fact, she is never truly "on balance." She is perpetually off balance: making adjustments that bring her through a point of balance, only to readjust on the other side. Most of these movements are so subtle that they are imperceptible to the audience. She makes it look effortless. But the practitioner knows that there is no such thing as achieving balance. And there is no such thing as standing still. She must keep moving forward if she is to reach the other side. Safely traversing the uncertain and unsteady tight wire is something you work—and at times fight—for, step-by-step and moment-by-moment.

We are all just like the tightrope walker. We pass through the moments of balance, but we cannot stay there because life is fluid. What we can

achieve is awareness that allows us to recognize when we are tumbling in an undesirable direction and a mastery that enables us to make the small but critical adjustments that bring us back toward center. If you wonder, "How can I achieve harmony among all of the aspects of



my life?” you are asking a flawed question. Instead, you should ask, “What adjustments must I make to keep from falling off the wire, and how can I keep moving forward toward my goal?”

I have some personal experience with funambulism, as both a performer and an instructor. When new students step onto the rope or cable (depending upon the particular rigging), they almost always begin with the same flawed game plan. They stare downward at the wire to ensure that they have the proper footing. And so they fall. Have you ever attempted to achieve something in life and experienced immediate failure because all of your efforts were based on an uninformed and incorrect approach? If so, then you can relate to the immediate frustration of the student.

So what is the solution to this dilemma? If you have ever closely watched professional tightrope walkers, you may recall that they never look down at their feet or the wire or to either side at their hands (or the balance pole). Rather, they keep their head up and look forward toward the goal—the faraway platform—in front of them.

With this single instruction change, this mere shift in perspective—maintaining an upward and forward focus—I’ve seen novices find new confidence and achieve the breakthrough that enables them to make the trip across. The placement of each foot is not about visual confirmation. It is accomplished through confident movement, deliberate placement that happens with the toes feeling for and then acquiring the wire, and a well-timed shift of the weight once the foundation is prepared. It isn’t easy. But when the students persist and reach the other side, they’ve learned some important lessons:



- They were never balanced. They were in constant motion, falling one way, then the other, responding to every influence in the environment (the movement of the wire and the position of their body) as well as the mental obstacles of fears, emotions, and uncertainty. The chal-

lenge was really to manage those ever-changing factors and make adjustments that would allow them to continue across the wire.

- When focusing down at their feet or out at their hands (the source of the adjustments), they were incapable of determining which adjustments they needed to make, and they would immediately fall.
- By making a shift in perspective, and after a great deal of determined practice, they were eventually able to accurately assess the situation, control their emotions, feel the movement of the wire, and anticipate what to do next.
- In order to move forward on the wire, they had to step—off balance—in the direction they wanted to go. It was unnerving and difficult. But only then could they follow through with action and make forward progress.

Wire walking, even when undertaken with the right perspective, takes hours of practice. There's nothing "instantaneous" about it. It's not about one simple cure-all; it's about recognizing all the factors that play into the experience and maintaining the right perspective and posture. Life's challenges are like that, particularly when we take on any endeavor that is meaningful.

OVERCOMPENSATIONS AND LASTING CHANGES

When we experience imbalance in our lives, we often overcompensate by throwing ourselves headlong in another direction. We think that it takes bold, dramatic action to create change. Sometimes this is true—we reach moments in our lives when a huge shift in thinking or action is completely necessary. But usually when we find ourselves in that predicament, it is because we missed many previous opportunities to make smaller adjustments that would have prevented, or at least softened, the crisis. Often an attempt to overdo it, providing too much force in one direction or another too quickly, will only exacerbate the trouble. After all, that is how the problems probably began.

Making adjustments is not a one-time fix. It is something you must do regularly (which is what keeps chiropractors and mechanics in business).

In your life, you will constantly encounter situations that have the potential to knock you out of whack. Examples abound in your life and the lives of the people you know:

- Business “downsizing” means you are out of a job or, if you are the lucky one, have a job that now has half the benefits and double the workload.
- Your spouse says, “We need to talk.” What follows hits you like a sledgehammer.
- The results are in on your medical exam. “Are you sitting down?”
- A family member has been diagnosed with a “condition.”
- What you thought was a smart investment evaporates right before your very eyes.

Those are some serious real-life issues: any one of those scenarios packs a punch that would understandably knock any of us on our keister. But the impact of such a blow and the duration of devastation are lessened if our response is deliberate, yet spontaneous and purposeful. In other words, you are better equipped to handle any situation when you start with the proper forward posture and perspective. And, as the events are unfolding, the adjustments required to restore your well-being will be less extreme because you started with a strong foundation. Your lifestyle takes on a self-healing characteristic, and you develop the ability to shift your perception from the negative to the positive, finding value and meaning in even the most difficult situations.

Sometimes, adjustments aren't dictated by our environment so much as by our inner desire for growth. But when we decide we want to make a change in our lives, we often go overboard and try to change everything at once. Consider that with the beginning of each New Year we experience the thrill of a fresh start and the chance to remake or rekindle a wanting aspect of our life. When it comes to making these changes and maintaining them, most of us have a history of failed attempts. Well-intentioned resolutions are often difficult to sustain and are soon abandoned. Why is that?

With the New Year's mind-set, you resolve to take action. You decide that this year things will be different. And wanting to accomplish your trans-

formation as soon as possible, you decide to make a number of immediate and radical adjustments, possibly in multiple areas of your life. Making so many adjustments at once is, of course, a recipe for failure. Your exuberance pulls you off balance but in a dramatic and undesirable way, as you neglect important aspects of your life while you focus on your resolutions.

The way to make lasting changes in your life is to start with one small adjustment. Make one change you can implement and sustain. Once this takes hold in your life, you will see the impact it has on your overall well-being. Now that you have some momentum, a forward life posture, you can go further, making other adjustments to continue your progress.

The Question of Purpose

The phrase *on purpose* conveys two simultaneous connotations: bringing a sense of meaning to your life and performing deliberate action aligned with that meaning. Decide where you want to go and what events and experiences you want to enjoy (those things that create meaning in your life). Then, having made those decisions, initiate changes in your life—see the opportunities (which will unquestionably appear) to make fulfillment and meaning possible and engage them through deliberate action.

When life becomes overwhelming, it is easy to focus on the surface disruptions and their immediate effects. There are aspects of life we just have to deal with, of course, but sometimes we mistake those necessary “to do” items as the essence of or the driving forces in life. They are not—or at least they shouldn’t be. There is so much more to your life, now and forever, than the cumulative checkmarks on your lists. If you feel that your efforts each day are merely task execution, you will never experience true fulfillment. You must recognize and elevate the purpose or meaning that drives you to act in the first place. What is the point?

If we don’t seek to discover this answer (and the answer continues to grow and evolve throughout our lifetime), then we are living a life that is movement without meaning. You need purpose in your life. Activity and action are not enough. To be fulfilled, your actions must be connected to an idea that is greater than your personal desires. Your decisions about

how you spend your time every day should be congruent with your values and beliefs.

Life is full of surprises: new responsibilities at work, unforeseen health issues, changes in relationships, and unanticipated turmoil in many forms. Even when presented with requirements or circumstances that you didn't anticipate, you can make them purposeful by consciously deciding to be proactive rather than reactive in your response. (Boy, I didn't see that coming, but I'm going with it anyway.) To transform disruptive forces into empowering elements, you must make them your own. You may not be able to control life's details, but you can provide direction.

When I was eleven years old, I learned to juggle at a renaissance festival. Soon after, my mentor (a 6-foot-4-inch performer named Mike Vondruska) became my performance partner, and then our duo became a trio when Lester McNeely joined the show. The finale of our act featured me atop Lester's shoulders, Lester himself being atop Mike's shoulders—all of us simultaneously juggling. It was always a crowd pleaser, even the day, on the King's Stage, when it all suddenly came crashing down. I'm not sure what started my unplanned dismount. All I knew was that I was descending rapidly from my lofty perch. And because my legs were tangled up with Lester, there was no way to avoid a full body crash onto the wooden stage. But for some reason, after I made contact, I sprung into a pose—albeit lying on my side with my hands outstretched—presenting the fall with a stylish ta-da! The crowd went wild. Without question, they knew this was an unplanned moment, a potentially disastrous end to the show. The audience responded, I believe, to the way we handled the moment, restoring a sense of purpose to the performance.

ALIGNMENT WITH PURPOSE

The question of purpose makes me think of driving. Imagine that you are driving your car, headed to an appointment and running just a few minutes late. As you maneuver your car through traffic on the highway, you enjoy the rush of energy—anticipation mixed with adrenaline. It feels good to drive this way. Fast, but not too fast. The car handles well, responding to your input, heading in the direction you desire. Then it happens.

Maybe your thoughts are occupied with your impending meeting, or your focus is trained on the distant road, preventing you from seeing what is right in front of you. Whatever the case, you cannot avoid hitting a monster pothole. The instant your front tire plunges into the pit of disrepair, you know you are in trouble. Suddenly, your attitude and your driving experience are both profoundly reshaped, and not for the better. It is immediately apparent that your car has been altered substantially by the experience. As you continue down the road, you can feel the car pulling—and hard—to the right, darting dangerously toward parked cars, curbs, and other obstacles. It is controllable, but only with constant attention and effort. The faster you go, the greater the effort required to correct the situation. You are unmistakably out of alignment. What was an enjoyable, even effortless drive has become a strained and stressful experience.

We've all been there. Maybe, like me, in such a circumstance you have intentionally tried to hit other potholes in the hope that you could somehow knock your car back into shape. If not, don't bother. Trust me, it only makes matters worse. No. The only thing that can restore your car to its old form and return you to a state of effortless handling is a trip to the mechanic. You are in need of a front-end alignment.

This analogy speaks to me about life. There are times when we move through life with ease and agility. Our thoughts steer our actions with precision and expert timing. We bank into turns, moving gracefully from one encounter to the next with the unencumbered ability to express our thoughts and feelings. Other people seem to respond to us with helpful attitudes and a sense of relief. They are willing to help us continue our journey forward, offering directions, assistance, and encouragement. Or, at the very least, they are happy to get out of our way.

But when we hit life's unexpected potholes, the unforeseen and unpleasant challenges, our "driving experience" can change in an instant. Simple decisions are suddenly complicated. Making forward progress, even a short distance down the road, requires three extra turns and another tank of gas. What was once effortless now requires constant exertion. We are uncertain, and other people know it. Our lack of confidence stimulates doubtful looks, second guesses, and uncooperative responses from the people we hope will help us. Why is this? We are obviously out of alignment with

our purpose. Fortunately, we can remedy this and adjust our orientation by refocusing on our priorities or clarifying our intentions.

Off Balance On Purpose and the Alternatives

When I propose that you live off balance on purpose, I am talking about what I call your *life posture*. You need to *lean forward* with your thinking, your actions, and your recognition of important moments, as well as with the way you exert your influence in order to generate a personal momentum that can come only from deliberate action. You should be off balance. Read the lists that follow and answer the question, “Which do I want?”

BALANCE VS. OFF BALANCE

Balance	Off Balance
Stagnation	Growth and action
Sameness	Change
Protecting what is	Embracing what might be
Imaginary/unrealistic	Real/our natural state of being
Having a little of everything	Having more of what truly matters

Being unquestionably off balance is more than okay—it’s the way it’s supposed to be. And should you learn to make the most of it, you can find a new capacity to manage missteps and create your desired future. You’ll have greater energy, building momentum for your life that will propel you to greater (outward) successes and heightened (inward) fulfillment. And along the journey, you’ll inspire others with your actions.

Or not. What’s the alternative to being off balance on purpose? If we don’t strike this posture with our thoughts and actions, then what “default”

relationship do we have with our world and the people in it? The following alternatives may be familiar to you:

Off Balance Off Purpose—You are off balance, all right, but there is nothing fulfilling or directed about it. You attempt to respond to the chaotic events around you. The trouble is, you are always one step behind. Life seems out of control, and your actions bring no sense of meaning, joy, or accomplishment. To fill the void, some people in this condition seek pleasure through escapism and, in advanced cases, become addicted to unhealthy activities or substances.

On Balance Off Purpose—You are diligently working to maintain and protect a false balance. The only way to feel like you are winning this proposition is to constrict your life experience to an increasingly narrow view. (In order for my world to make sense, I have to shut out all but a few ideas, responsibilities, relationships, and activities.) Genuine opportunities often go unconsidered or are cast aside because you don't feel you have the resources to deal with them. They represent disrupters to your fragile state of security. In the process of maintaining this false front, you lose sight of who you are, why you do what you do, and any connection to a compelling mission. Life becomes routine, boring, and unsatisfying.

On Balance On Purpose—You are connected to your values and mission, but again, you remain so narrowly constrained that you will never grow to experience true and complete satisfaction. The focus becomes: "I have a good thing going here. Better not rock the boat." You have created your version of the perfect life with safe boundaries and limited requirements for happiness. Every thing is in its place, and you fight to keep disruptions at bay. This situation and the previous one are created by the scarcity mindset, that is, the belief that opportunities are limited so you need to protect what little you have before anyone tries to take it from you.

Off Balance By Accident—"Anywhere the wind blows, that's all right with me," says the free spirit who is quite comfortable when off balance. If this is you, you enjoy the fact that life is constantly unfolding into new experiences. That's great. But if your path is exclusively accidental, you are missing an opportunity to experience real satisfaction. This condition is a

natural phase of life—consider the college student who can't decide on a major or decides to backpack across Europe to “find himself.” It's fun for a while, but most people eventually graduate from this phase of life to find a direction to their paths. Seek to discover what you were meant to do then inject that purpose, or mission, into your life. Otherwise, life becomes a “joy ride,” and you are repeatedly left thinking: “That was fun. Now what? Can't wait to find out.” Sometimes, the freewheeler becomes a freeloader and imposes on others for life's necessities. When those around become enablers, it becomes even more difficult to discover self-direction.

Off Balance On Demand—You are living by someone else's values, goals, and beliefs. In the process of trying to be all things to all people, you lose sight of who you are. Satisfaction stems from external sources and the validation that what you did pleased someone else. You can easily see how this powerless condition subordinates your enjoyment of life as well as your sense of worth. The classic example of this situation is the woman who has spent years focusing on her spouse, children, and household and no longer knows who she is. When the nest empties and the next chapter of life begins, she is left wondering what to do. Similarly, the demands of your job can become a substitute for purpose, whether or not they have a direct relationship to your values, desires, and dreams. When you define who you are by what you do, true satisfaction takes a backseat to business.

Throughout this book, I will guide you through the process of reorganizing your thinking as well as your objectives. As you do, you'll gain a heightened understanding of the factors at work in your life and your ability to improve your orientation and effectiveness. I'm not trying to radically reshape your life here. We are just going to make adjustments. Even a small adjustment will bring you measurable, and immeasurable, rewards.

We want abundance, not scarcity. Life's joys and positive experiences are indeed limitless, and so is your personal potential. Instead of a life that is pointless, aimless, or protected, choose one that is pointed, aimed, and propelled toward a compelling target, one that excites you, drives you, and thrills you to become better every day. If you are unsure of your mission at

this moment in life, do not worry. Purpose is revealed to us when we ask the right questions. I'll show you how. And the answers come in layers. The great news is that you don't have to have all of the answers to begin. To engage life more fully, you first need to embrace its contradictions.