

## ELUSIVE BALANCE

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Good morning! When Ramona approached me about her theme for this month, I essentially said, put me down on the list. I realized during the preparation for this talk that I gave a talk on Balance in December of 2015. Here I am again, presenting on balance! Achieving balance in my life has been an elusive goal for me. Much of my interest in this subject has been because of my career choice of being primary care doctor of medicine. Unexpectedly, I also became both a single parent and a doctor when my daughter was almost a year old. The divorce was not in my plans for life balance. About 2 years later, in 2004, I developed breast cancer. My life has been forever shaped by the lack of balance. Growing up with an old-fashioned Wyoming work ethic combined with a focus on high achievement and perfection led me into the trap of relentless, excessive work. A poor life-work balance and trying to “do it all” while not dealing effectively with stress undoubtedly caused my cancer. As many of you are aware, I have continued to experience gradually increasing health issues until I became disabled in 2015. I’ve been seeking a balanced life for 3 decades. I’d like to share some thoughts and research with you today.

Opposites must exist in order to create balance. Finding the middle of the spectrum is tough. I’d like to explore some of the various themes around balance. There are many different concepts, both concrete and theoretical, out there to balance. Deciding what is important and valuable to you is the first step in working toward balance.

According to organizational guru Stephen Covey, “The challenge of work-life balance is without question one of the most significant struggles faced by modern man.” **Life-work balance** is the ultimate goal most people are chasing in our American society. I note that Mr. Covey is so focused on material success that he even places work before life in his pairing. Many of us prefer to place living life first.

Another set of concepts to balance is **healthy versus unhealthy**. Every day, and particularly as we age, improving our health and living a healthier lifestyle is essential. It becomes an important priority for most of us. We generally know what we need to do to be healthier. Lose weight, eat cleaner and leaner, exercise more, sit less. It’s easy to know and say, but tremendously difficult for most of us to do. If you think about it, most New Year’s resolutions are about a better balance in our health. All things in moderation is great advice to live by. Moderation is a challenging self-discipline in our privileged, rich, Western country.

The next areas to balance: **Spiritual and secular**. Human beings have a basic requirement for nurturing their spirits, regardless of what beliefs that entails for each individual. I used to date a guy whose family was from the Philadelphia area. They weren't religious, but his mother always said that his father belonged to the "Church of Joe Paterno". The father is a University of Pennsylvania alumnus. His "church" held its services even after football season, too. This "football as spirituality" has struck me as the pinnacle of American secularism. Football Sundays are rapidly outpacing church attendance as a weekly ritual. Later today, on Super Bowl Sunday, as a country, we'll watch the New England Patriots and the Philadelphia Eagles duke it out. This is bittersweet for me, as I'm a huge Green Bay Packers fan.

**Giving versus receiving** is another common balance. It's one we work hard to impart to our children. Don't take too much! Share with one another. Say thank you. Show gratitude. We hope they learn that stuff is not really what is important in life, but people are. These are important life lessons. It makes a difference in our relationships with each other. A quote from American opera star Jessye Norman, sums it up. "Problems arise in that one has to find a balance between what people need from you and what you need for yourself." This can be a really tough balance for a lot of people. Sociopaths are takers. Codependents give too much. Too much empathy is just as unbalanced as too little.

We are currently extremely worried about in our country's place in the world community. **Peace versus aggression and/or war** is a flashpoint right now. International relations appear disastrous, even with our staunchest allies. Our current President enjoys taunting dangerous dictators with nuclear weapons at their disposal—on Twitter. Modelling peaceful conflict resolution, participating in non-violent demonstrations, and speaking out against racism and religious intolerance is essential right now in our society. Indifference is approval.

Along the same lines is the balance of **power and weakness**. Power shifts in the world at large are currently extreme and generally the powerful are gaining and the less powerful are losing ground. This trend needs to be corrected as soon as possible in our country. Congress is making tax cuts that benefit the rich, while penalizing the poor. A basic human right, adequate health care, is endangered for many of us. Our country, and its dark money politics, is changing the power structure. We find out after the fact where the real power lies, instead of with the people.

The good news? We can all improve our issues with balance. "Balance is not something you find, it's something you create." This quote from YouTuber, blogger, and Mother of 3, Jana Ringsford went viral all over the internet. Yes, this is a departure from how many of us think of achieving balance in our lives. Creating instead of finding. It's a different mindset.

True to the spirit of American entrepreneurship, achieving balancing has been widely for sale. (Think of the King of paper Planners, Stephen Covey) it remains an elusive goal for most of us. At least those of us that are perfectionists! Many cookbook type solutions are neatly packaged purchases. Look at the recent boom in the new field of Life Coaching. You can train to be one online, in 2 months or less, at the

amazing low price... While the concept of life coaching is not new, it was previously included in mentoring, counseling and other less profitable forums.

I Googled the phrase “How to find balance in life.” I got 29,900,000 results. Yes, nearly 30 MILLION! What do people think will bring them balance and therefore, happiness? In a recent study of millennials, 80% think being rich. 50% think being famous. I suspect that this is not much different from past generations. Prior to survey monkey and social media, it was just far harder to assess.

During the course of creating this talk, I listened to several TED podcasts about balance to hear a variety of ideas. My favorite is by Dr. Robert Waldinger, Harvard Psychiatrist, scientific Researcher, Psychoanalyst and Zen priest. Hmm interesting combo, huh? He spoke at the TEDxBeacon Street in Boston in November 2015. The title of his presentation is “What makes a good life? Lessons Learned From the Longest Study on Happiness.” He is the current head researcher of the world’s longest human study in happiness. It is now more than 75 years old and began with 724 participants. The Study of Adult Development tracked 2 groups of men from widely different socioeconomic backgrounds. Part of the research group were from the toughest neighborhoods and tenement slums of 1940s Boston. Many of these young men grew up without hot and cold running water. The other young men were privileged Harvard sophomores, including JFK as a member in the original cohort. The remaining living participants are now in their 80s and 90s. Going forward, it now includes women and many of the children of the original participants. It is an intergenerational longitudinal study lasting into its eighth decade and boasting its fourth director, Dr. Waldinger.

So, what keeps people happy and healthy? Believe or not, it’s not fame, good fortune, or wealth. **The clearest result from this decades long research is that good, “warm” RELATIONSHIPS keep us healthy, as well as happy.** Strong social connections with family, friends, and the community were the MAJOR predictive factor of better health and reported happiness. 1 in 5 Americans report being lonely. Loneliness kills. The experience of loneliness seems to be toxic. Isolated people report being less happy, their health declines earlier in middle age, and their brain functioning declines sooner. They live shorter lives than people who are less lonely. You can be lonely even around people and in relationships. It turns out that the quality of close relationships matters. Living with conflict is very bad for health, possibly even worse than getting a divorce.

Living in the midst of good, warm relationships is protective of health. The people most satisfied with their relationships at age 50 were in the best health in their 80s. The health benefits stretch directly to brain health, as well. The participants in the study who were best protected from memory decline had securely attached relationships, the kind where someone really has your back. The people with less happy, less secure attachments had earlier memory decline. It doesn’t mean people can’t bicker, but the

ability to really count on someone when the chips are down is what is protective. To quote Dr. Waldinger, "The good life is built with good relationships."

The initial investigator of this study, George Valliant, wrote several books and many academic papers on the various results of the study over the decades. A kind of humorous main finding of the study was on political mindedness and sexuality. The most politically conservative men stopped engaging in sexual activity at the average age of 68. Those who held the most liberal beliefs had active sex lives into their 80s. For many UUs, this is excellent news! In all seriousness, an important factor in healthy aging is a vibrant sex life.

So, I've shared some ideas about creating balance in your own life. I really feel encouraged after researching this. I'm certainly not the only person who has struggled with balance.

I'll end my talk with some sage advice from author, and internet personality Nishwan Panwar. "Life is about balance. Be kind, but don't let people abuse you. Trust, but don't be deceived. Be content, but never stop improving yourself."

Thank you.