

Falling Off the Balance Beam

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When I first started out in business (more years ago than I care to remember), I was an eager-to-please go-getter, thirsty for knowledge and experience, and truly excited about my work and the amazing contribution I pictured myself giving to the world. And, of course, I was going to make tons of money at my career, marry the perfectly understanding man and have a lovely home and family. Even though I came of age in the heyday of the feminist movement, I considered myself proudly a humanist, embracing some of the feminist ideals about opportunity and ownership of one's body and destiny yet still feeling very drawn to traditional ideals of home and family life.

Fast forward thirty years to a corner office in one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies and there you will find me, vice president of the global technology division. In those thirty years, twenty spent with the same company, I had traveled the world, made more money than I had ever thought possible, and lived the Manhattan/Hamptons lifestyle with collections of art and jewelry to spare. So, you may be asking yourself, what, if anything, is wrong with this picture? The answer is nothing and everything.

The funny thing sometimes about achieving your dreams is that you may one day wake up and realize they might not have been

your dreams after all. What I did know as I sat in that corner office was that something was missing. I had recently ended a serious romantic relationship (still hadn't found that perfectly understanding man!), was working, on average, twelve to fourteen hour days, and found myself burdened with a host of stress-related illnesses. My life was extremely busy and disturbingly empty at the same time. So, on a late spring morning in 1997 I made the decision that was to start me on a new phase of my journey. I decided to walk away from my successful career and into a void so large that it was frightening to contemplate. Even having made the decision, it took me another year to actually leave and, when I did have that final "goodbye" party, I felt the apprehension of someone stepping off a cliff hoping against hope that there was a ledge just out of sight.

Unknowingly, I had bought into the myth of the perfect life - the myth as it has come to be called of Work/Life Balance. The myth of work/life balance is the expectation that you can somehow not only have it all, but do it all and be happy and fulfilled in the process. This topic has become such a hot button for women in and out of business that everywhere you turn these days, you can find an article or book with advice on the subject. The only problem is that there is no such thing as work/life balance, as I learned when I finally stepped off that cliff and somehow managed to fall into my life in the process.

Instead I learned that we have only one life, of which work is a vital and important part. But so are the other parts - health, meaningful relationships, creativity (what I call play) and spirit (what I call self-actualization). It was this realization that life is not about having it all (or, god forbid, doing it all) but rather is about choice - choice deeply rooted in one's own self-interest, that enabled me finally to create a life that works for me. The issue wasn't balance, but boundaries. When we have strong boundaries we can make the choices that are right for us. When we have weak boundaries, as so many of us do as women, we can not always set the priorities that allow us to put ourselves first in the choices we make.

I'd like to tell you that my new approach to my life happened overnight but it is still very much a work in progress, but one I'm enjoying each and every day. Gone is my acid reflux, my irritable bowel syndrome, my sleepless nights (except for the roller coaster ride of menopause) and my general fatigue. Instead now I begin each day asking myself what I need that day in each of the main areas of my life, and then I do my very best to make sure I meet those needs if I can. I now know that the problem wasn't really the career, but my inability to set boundaries around that career so I nurtured and took care of myself at the same time. Now, taking care of me is my number one priority, and that means taking care

of myself in relationship, in my work, in my creative play,
my health and in renewing my spirit.

My experience inspired me to follow a new dream, one that had
been simmering since childhood. So I now am an author and
entrepreneur with two businesses, one a holistic wellness
center (nothing like starting an entire business to take care
of yourself!) and another under which I do my teaching and
consulting. My greatest joy these days is working with other
women caught in the work/life balance myth, either one on one
or at one of the mid-week retreats I do with Dr. Sylvia
Lafair of The Country Place Retreat Center in White Haven,
PA. I find there is nothing more powerful than women
supporting women - we may be the hand that rocks the cradle
but I believe that someday we will be the hand that reshapes
forever the world of work.