

“Tipping the Balance”
Rev. Susanne Intriligator
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Reading

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest and a professor of religion who writes about spiritual practice. About observing a weekly Sabbath, she wrote:

If you slow down for a day, then all kinds of alarming things can happen. You start crying without having the slightest idea why. You can start remembering what you loved about people who died before you were 10, along with things you did when you were 18 that still send involuntary shivers up your back. You can make a list of the times you almost died in your life, along with the reasons you are most glad to be alive.

Most people I know want to talk about why it is **impossible** for them to practice Sabbath, which is an interesting spiritual exercise in itself. If you want to try it, then make two lists on one piece of paper.

On one side of the paper, list all of the things **you know** *give you life* that you **never** take time to do. Then on the other side, make a list of all the reasons why *you think* it is impossible for you to do those things.

That is all there is to it. Just make the two lists, and keep the piece of paper where you can see it. Also promise not to *shush* your heart when howls for the list it wants.

This will help you remember who you were created to be.

Sermon: Tipping the Balance

The last time I came up those stairs over there, last Sunday, I tripped, rather blatantly. And now here I am preaching to you on the theme of balance. Clearly I am an expert.

The philosopher Susan Sontag once said, “The truth is balance, but the opposite of truth, which is unbalance, may not be a lie.”

In my case unbalance is certainly also true.

The psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, author of the famous *The Road Less Traveled*, told this story:

"I spent much of my ninth summer on a bicycle. About a mile from our house the road went down a steep hill and turned sharply at the bottom. Coasting down the hill one morning, I felt my gathering speed to be ecstatic. . . . So I resolved to simultaneously retain my speed and negotiate the corner.

Of course my ecstasy ended seconds later when I was propelled a dozen feet off the road into the woods. I learned right then that that the loss of balance is ultimately more painful than the giving up required to maintain balance.
Endquote.

There you go. Sometimes you're moving too fast, sometimes the road bends, and if you don't slow down . . . crash! That's how **literal** balance works. But what about **metaphorical** balance? Does it work the same way?

In the media, when we hear the phrase "work-life balance" it usually means work-*family life* balance. And in this metaphor, like a scale, these two elements – work and family life -- are discussed like polar opposites – two facets in stark opposition, two things that cancel out or counteract one another. Enemies, really.

Stewart Friedman, a Wharton professor who has studied this very phenomenon for over 30 years said it best:

"If you're searching for "work/life balance" you'll always be disappointed because "balance" connotes a zero-sum equation." Endquote.

In a zero-sum equation, When one side gains, the other must lose. For working parents, trying to balance out work and life can often feel like a **no win** situation. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Lose, lose.

Which means the kids lose. And with them the grandparents, the teachers, the schools, future employers, the whole economy and culture.

A 2016 study found that overwork is on the rise in the US across the income spectrum, and especially for those working in higher paid professions. Nearly 30% of management and legal workers reported working 45 hours or more per week, followed by 20% of those working in the farming, fishing and forestry industries. Architects and engineers, and those in business and finance, also indicated that long hours were the norm.

Rising economic inequality may be one cause. Research finds that rising economic inequality increasingly causes workers—even those near the top of the income ladder—to feel financially insecure. In the wake of the Great Recession professionals feel more precarious and they spend more and more time working.

And according to this same 2016 study, all this overwork isn't helping our economy. It's hurting us. Not only does overwork increase our risks for stroke, heart disease, and injury, but actually cuts our productivity. Stanford University economist John Pencavel finds that, generally speaking, a worker's output is fairly constant if they work less than 49 hours per week. But beyond that 49-hour threshold, a worker's output drops sharply if maintained over several weeks. In fact, ever since the days of Henry Ford, research has proven that the 40-hour work week actually maximizes profit.

So how do we cut down on this lose-lose-lose overwork?

Let's go back to Wharton's Stew Friedman. He says that step one is philosophical. We have to ditch the metaphor of balance. The image of the scale makes you think of tradeoffs. The idea that work competes with life ignores the more nuanced reality. "Life" is actually the intersection and interaction of four different domains: work, home or family, community, and the private realm of mind, body, and spirit.

Harmony among these four domains is possible, says Friedman. If you are lucky enough to have some control over your time and your work-life situation, you can learn the skills you need to integrate, to harmonize the four domains.

In fact, Friedman can teach you to do it. As a consultant to Ford Motor Company, he developed a widescale training program that transformed management life there. Then Friedman went back to the Wharton School, where he researched and refined it further and published several books about his method. He teaches it to leaders around the world. Harmony is possible, says Friedman.

He starts with 3 principles: Be real. Be whole. Be innovative.

1. Be real. Act with authenticity, clarify your vision and values and let your life flow out from there. For example, says Friedman, Michelle Obama follows her own moral compass, often in the face of intense pressure to do otherwise, when making decisions big and small.”
2. Be whole. Act with integrity, connecting the different parts of your life. Things you learn in your personal life apply to your work life and vice versa. One of Friedman’s exemplars used the attitude and skills he has acquired as a boxer in his career as a military officer. Another, a finance exec, connected with his sister, a special needs teacher, via service on a community board about education. This board service later helped him with career advancement.
3. Be innovative. It flows from the first two. Being real and being whole open up spaces in your life where you can act with creativity and courage, especially in service to others. When you live from your values and your wholeness, you can challenge assumptions and create solutions. Here Friedman points to Eric Greitens, the former Navy SEAL who started The Mission Continues, a nonprofit that helps connect wounded veterans with opportunities to serve their communities. Living from his values helped Greitens to see a need and create a way to address it.

Another example is legendary musician Bruce Springsteen.

Friedman quotes Springsteen: “[I create music] to make people happy, to feel less lonely, but also to be a conduit for a dialogue about the events of the day, the issues that impact people’s lives, personal and social and political and religious.” endquote

Springsteen, the Boss, is living from his values, moving through the world in wholeness, which, Friedman argues, has led him to create a culture of innovation in his band. It keeps his music fresh, alive, and relevant.

“From years of studying people in many different settings,” writes Friedman, “I have found that the most successful people are those who can harness the passions and powers of various parts of their lives. . . . Successful people make it their business to be conscious of who and what matter most. Their actions flow from their values. They strive to do what they can to make things better for the people who depend on them and on whom they depend, in all the different parts of their lives.” endquote

Integration across domains. Harmony. Success comes not by working longer or harder. Not by trading off one thing you love for another. Success comes by working smarter. By clarifying your values, holding on gently to your wholeness, and letting the creativity flow from there.

How do we do start? How do we connect **today** with our values and our wholeness?

Luckily, today is the Sabbath. What better time is there?

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests:

You can start remembering what you loved about people who died before you were 10, along with things you did when you were 18 that still send involuntary shivers up your back.

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It reminds me of the famous quote on vocation from the Christian theologian Frederick Buechner. Claire referenced it last week, in speaking on mission.

"There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, Buechner wrote, "and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest" (118).

"By and large a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. ... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Let us pray.

May you connect today and tomorrow with your own deep gladness – the memories, the love, the shivers, all of the things you know give you life. May your inner joy manifest outwardly, in all you do, and let it bless the world.

May your creativity flow, may your harmony sound.

And May you sail forward through life, through this world and this universe,
balanced,
whole
holy
and home.

Amen.