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—PATRICIA KATZ, productivity and balance strategist;  
author of *Press Pause . . . Press On*

“I have benefited from the previous books by Richard Swenson on margin and overload, so I was excited to hear about *In Search of Balance*. In the midst of the aggressive progress of our age, we are no longer in tune with the rhythm of God’s creation. Richard Swenson warns us about profusion and provides practical help in connecting balance (equilibrium) with margin (capacity).”

—KERBY ANDERSON, national director, Probe Ministries;  
host, *Point of View* radio talk show

# IN SEARCH OF BALANCE

*Keys to a Stable Life*

**RICHARD A. SWENSON, MD**

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Dedicated To  
*Nico Everett Swenson*  
7-7-07 to 6-3-08



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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

CHAPTER  
1DREAMING THE POSSIBLE  
IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

“BALANCE IS BUNK!” screamed a title in the magazine *Fast Company*. “Living in a postbalance world” requires that we should “embrace imbalance” and become “happy workaholics.”

The global economy is antibalance . . . Someday, all of us will have to become workaholics, happy or not, just to get by . . . Great leaders, serial innovators, even top sales reps may be driven by a kind of inner demon—the need to prove themselves . . . anxiety is a central part of our existence . . . Can any couple facing two full-time jobs, kids, aging parents, groceries, the dog, the bills, and telemarketers at dinnertime expect anything but all stress, all the time? . . . successful professionals found ways to switch the focus of their full attention with lightning speed among activities and people in different realms . . . Consider it an exercise in continuous redesign, in adapting to ever-changing circumstances and priorities. For couples, this also requires constant rebalancing of roles and responsibilities . . . Those who succeed are the people who learn to dance with change . . . They don’t make decisions once or twice, but all the time.<sup>1</sup>

This particular author is not alone. “I really dislike the phrase work-life balance,” wrote a female scientist, who nevertheless traveled overseas for her prestigious degree and career precisely so she could experience a better balance between career and family. “Balance is impossible,” began a state supreme court judge’s presentation on the tension between personal and professional life. “Balance is an excuse for noninvolvement, for not doing your best,” said a Christian leader.

“Accept the craziness of your life,” writes a prominent leadership trainer in the *Harvard Management Update*. “Do what you can do now. Let go of everything else.”<sup>2</sup>

So, balance is now an impossible, bunk of an excuse for being a bum. And craziness is the new normal.

I wonder if the scoffers carry their thesis into other areas of life. Do they vote for the party with the least fiscal restraint because balancing the budget has no standing as a concept? Do they use their checkbooks with a similar casualness? Do they say to their pistons and spark plugs, “Feel free to do your own thing, don’t worry about the other guys in there, I’m OK and you’re OK, timing will fend for itself, and the engine won’t mind”? Do they tell their thyroid that it is acceptable to be hypo and their blood pressure that it is hip to be hyper?

I am amazed at how quickly some have given up the battle for balance. A few have even trivialized it as a convenient fiction for the weak who do not wish to do the difficult work of life. Others have dumbed it down or redefined it into a shadowy principle that is as unrecognizable as it is ineffectual. Still others maintain that balance is, frankly, an impossible dream. It’s both unrealistic and unattainable—and possibly even undesirable.

The trouble with simply giving up the struggle, throwing in the towel, and accepting an all-stress-all-the-time lifestyle is that it won’t stop there. If we yield to the cultural treadmill, it will push us first into mild imbalance, then moderate imbalance, then severe imbalance, then beyond. Many are apparently unaware that we are waist deep in a dynamic situation where imbalance will continually escalate unless resisted. This is not a fight to be abrogated unless we don’t care about the consequences of continuously worsening dysfunction.

Not to romanticize the past, but in 1960 most individuals, families, and workers were able to achieve some level of balance. Now, fifty years later, these same people find it difficult to achieve. What happened? Between 1960 and 2010, what pushed us—individuals, families, the workplace, and, indeed, the entire society—so forcefully in the direction of disequilibrium? The full explanation will be dealt with later in the book, but for now I wish to propose a more limited query. Regardless of what process caused this imbalancing momentum, do we have evidence that it has now finished its work and is prepared to leave us alone so we might reestablish a new equilibrium? On the contrary, the proliferation and profusion phenomenon that brought us to this place will only continue to accelerate. Any thought to the contrary reveals an underlying naïveté concerning the powerful forces that propel us forward.

Let me make the same point from a different direction. An eighteen-year medical study “Adherence to Healthy Lifestyle Habits” in *The American Journal of Medicine* examined five health habits and reported steadily worsening behaviors: the percentage of those with overweight body mass increased 8 percent, those with moderate alcohol use increased 11 percent, those achieving physical activity twelve times per month decreased 10 percent, and those eating five or more fruits and vegetables per day decreased 16 percent. Of the five monitored, the only lifestyle habit that did not worsen was cigarette smoking, holding steady at 26 percent (hardly qualifying as a victory).<sup>3</sup> Should we deduce from this study—and nearly every other study on this topic—that it is impossible for people to comply with healthy lifestyle habits and therefore we should all quit trying? Let’s just cozy up on the sofa with our chips and dip and watch another movie marathon.

Trends in marriage are another illustration. Over the past several decades, many sociologists have asserted that the frequency of divorce and subsequent dissolution of families is now so commonplace that we should stop fighting it. Let’s just accept this modern development and move to lessen the pain. Simply stated, this theory asserts that our age is inevitably driven by forces that uproot families and make people unable to remain together. The fast-paced requirements of our continuously

changing culture have antiquated the “till death do us part” vow.

Consider, for example, the rather sensational divorce announcement of Sandra Tsing Loh in the *Atlantic* article “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” (gruesomely subtitled “The author is ending her marriage. Isn’t it time you did the same?”).

Given my staggering working mother’s to-do list, I cannot take on yet another arduous home- and self-improvement project, that of rekindling our romance . . . And along the way, I’ve begun to wonder, what with all the abject and swallowed misery: Why do we still insist on marriage?<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the sooner we accept that marital harmony is mostly a mirage, the sooner we can decompress all the stress. “Family phase-two” means we will now have “serial marriages” and “temporary marriages” and our children will grow up with a big friendly group of semi-siblings.

But is the solution really to define away the pain rather than to counter the forces that cause the pain? The breaking up of families is *inherently* painful. This is not a wound because judgmental pulpit-pounders manipulate guilt. It is a wound because it is a wound. Ought we not work to strengthen the sustainability of love rather than justify the tenuousness of modern relationships?

Forgive me if either of these illustrations is uncomfortable—that is not my intention. I only wish to point out that many problems in life are best served by solving them rather than yielding to them. Balance is one such issue.

Thankfully those who have caved to the imbalance-is-inevitable view do not represent the majority opinion. The great preponderance of breathless moderns understand intuitively that balance is not only important but critical for healthy living. And they are willing to fight for it if given direction.

To be fair, the scoffers add some important correctives to this topic. Many of their concerns will be discussed at appropriate points later in the book, and at that time I’ll gladly thank them for their contributions. As they point out, there is indeed much unrealistic thinking and simplistic

analysis about the balance doctrine, and many of the resultant interventions seem inadequate. In addition, there are occasions when imbalance is expected and even helpful. At such times, appropriate imbalance can test us, discipline us, fortify us, and cause us to grow.

But to cut to the core, despite confusion and a few high-strung naysayers, balance is crucial. It always has been, and it always will be. Yes, balance has become *more* difficult to achieve—without a doubt. But if anything, balance is more important today than ever precisely because it's been wrenched away from so many of us with such dramatic force. When someone carjacks our vehicle, we tend to want it back rather than simply normalize our new walking blisters.

## Balance Matters

In tracking this discussion and debate, it is interesting to note three recurring themes:

1. There is a *great deal of concern* about life balance today, much of it bordering on desperation. We witness this in magazines and books, in casual conversations and emails, in conference presentations, in family dynamics, and especially in the work environment.
2. There is a *great deal of confusion* about how to approach balance—even how to think about it, let alone achieve it.
3. There is a *great deal of evidence* that the requirement for balance exists far beyond the context of our busy lives, extending into every facet of existence.

To illustrate the imperative of balance, let's take a quick tour of the universe, from large to small, organic and inorganic, social sciences and physical sciences, and beyond. Pick up any rock in the universe and we will find the principle of balance inside, winking back at us. From the quantum structure of subatomic particles to the entire breadth of the cosmos itself,

the balance of the universe is at a level that staggers comprehension. The human body has an inherent and inviolable demand for balance called homeostasis. Speaking as a physician, let me strongly suggest you not fall outside the parameters of homeostasis or you will quickly encounter both pain and expense.

We speak of balancing our budgets: corporate, personal, family, city, state, federal, and international. We are encouraged to eat a balanced diet. Knowing that falls are one of the biggest enemies of the elderly, we seek to find ways to maintain their balance and equilibrium. We laud an ecological balance and a balance of nature. Farmers are advised to practice a balanced crop rotation. Pilots and airlines are responsible for determining the appropriate weight balance in airplanes lest they fall suddenly from the sky. Our constitution guarantees a balance of power in the government, and we likewise desire an international balance of power to stabilize the prospects for global peace. Researchers and policy setters seek to balance risk versus benefit. We balance the tires on the outside of our automobiles and the stereos on the inside. Work-life balance in the marketplace has become such a widespread issue that it has spawned an entire industry to address it, with varying degrees of success.

We are surrounded, continuously, by the requirement for balance. Why, then, in our social infrastructure, is balance largely ignored? And as a spiritual principle, why is balance neglected and even scorned? In that regard, imbalance is like a flat tire, only showing up on our radar screen after we veer into a tree.

Blithely we heap more and more upon our already constrained twenty-four-hour days with a mysterious disregard for the consequences. And then we wonder when it was, exactly, that our lives spiraled out of control and our hope disappeared.

## Sustainability in the Balance

A Phoenix builder told me of his prosperous commercial property development company that fell off a cliff in the 2008 global economic meltdown.

It took nine months before orders began to trickle in again. Then came the surprising part of his story. “You’d probably expect me to say how horrible this experience was,” he said. “But when we hit the bottom, I can truthfully say that I didn’t mind. Actually, I was glad. I was so burned out. Now after almost a year, I think I’m about ready to get back to work.”

The man had a good job and a generous income. His company provided livelihoods for many workers. He had the privilege of driving around the city and pointing out all the tangible contributions he’d made to the growth of his community. But he could not sustain. The outflow exceeded the intake. The lack of balance caught up with him. I’m not referring here to the economic depression that brought him low—that crisis was international in scope and largely outside of his influence or culpability. Instead, I’m talking about his own internal emotional makeup. He’d simply run out of gas.

In a world where sustainability has become a rapidly moving target, balance provides a stabilizing influence. We might have the privilege of good work that we enjoy, yet, in today’s whiplashing world, how many can sustain it over time without being stricken by that often-reported smoldering weariness? Those who are hyper-driven and rewarded by huge wealth seem best equipped to sustain the longest, perhaps simply because their internal intensity wiring and love of the bank ledger keep them energetic. Yet this same personality configuration is usually coupled with inadequate warning signals. They seldom realize when their limits have been exceeded. They also do not accurately understand that *all they are gaining* is being offset by *all they are giving up*. Balance keeps the needle set on the middle.

The focus of this book, of course, goes far beyond the elite of the corporate world. I’m equally concerned about the many well-intentioned working parents confronting screaming babies and smelly diapers in the middle of the night, knowing their alarms are set for 5:00 a.m. How are they going to sustain? What about the people-helping professions such as teachers, pastors, counselors, nurses, and doctors who have the double job of producing *and* relating? Or the farmers confronted with collapsing milk prices and no rain on the horizon?

Balance is not a panacea and it cannot work miracles. But balance can help people sustain in the midst of stress and overload by keeping the highs and lows from swinging wildly.

Balance can direct us toward simplified lifestyles, anchored contentment, nourished relationships, reasonable expectations, and manageable work. Balance can model for us the pace of faith with its gentleness and goodwill. Balance can equip us with a gyroscope that stabilizes our orbit securely around our timeless priorities. And, in the end, it's all about priorities.

## Great Gifts or Grace?

“People with great gifts are easy to find,” Emerson wrote, “but symmetrical and balanced ones, never.” I wonder if we need more “great gifts” today, or if we need more grace? Where are the symmetrical, balanced people who are great because they have the time and energy to be kind?

The hunger of our day is not for inner-demon-driven, all-stress-all-the-time, switching-focus-at-lightning-speed, constant-rebalancing workaholicism—we already have literally millions of twitching rascals with prodigious productivity racing faster than photons. We have enough stuff, we have enough speed, we have plenty of progress, and we especially have a superabundance of *more*. But will you permit me to inquire about the status of our truth, love, faith, relationships, health, joy, depth, and peace? What corridor do we choose if we wish to rediscover the green pastures and still waters? What set of priorities will point us in that direction?

Balance is not the Kingdom, but if our priorities lie in that direction, balance can help us sustain our focus all the way Home.