

Priority Balance: The Things That Matter

Linda Eyre Richard Eyre June 5, 2008

Conceptually, priorities are simple, even obvious. We should know what is important to us, and we should spend our time and our thoughts on the high priorities rather than the low ones.

But in reality, in the day-to-day, it is not so simple. There is often little correlation between how important things are to us and how much thought or effort we give to them. We constantly find ourselves wishing we had time for the really important things, wishing there were more hours in the day, wishing life were less complex and wishing we were better at juggling all the things we need to do. Priority balance is intended to help you stop wishing and start changing.

Simplification and Perspective

Why do we let ourselves want so much but get so busy and burdened? When will we learn that the trade of time and freedom for things, money or excess involvement is a bad deal? And when will our society outgrow the rather juvenile notion that big and complex is better than small and simple? We admire the Gandhis of the world, who get rid of everything but their eyeglasses, scripture and loincloth so that they can focus on what is important. We admire them, but we don't emulate them.

To know whether something is worth doing well, ask the three questions, "Will it matter in five years? Do I need it? Can I simplify it?" With the habit of these questions will come some new skills—the skill of discretionary neglect, the skill of selective prioritization, the skill of deciding what not to do, the skill of discerning which things are worth doing well, which things are just barely worth doing, and which things are not worth doing at all. "Adding on," too often complicates our lives and contributes to the loss of self. "Casting off" simplifies our lives and helps us find ourselves.

Concentrate on What's Important

We took all of our children to Mexico one summer and spent six weeks in Ajijic, a little mountaintop-fishing village high above Guadalajara. I (Linda) was in the midst of writing a book and needed background material and solitude, but the primary reason for our trip was to give the children perspective on the privileged lives they lead.

Because we had no car while we were there, we arranged for horseback transportation. A Mexican man would arrive every third day with eight horses (the smallest two children rode double) and peso signs gleaming in his eyes at such a large account. (It costs approximately \$12 to rent eight horses for two hours).

Each time we rode along the beach, we saw the village women pounding their washing on the rocks, and when we clip-clopped through the village streets, we saw families with ten children in one room. With eyes wide, our children gazed into the eyes of the native children, whose eyes showed reciprocal amazement.

One little 9-year-old Mexican girl visited our condo every day. Too shy to venture in at first, she became braver each day as she watched the children play in the small front yard swimming pool. Neatly dressed in the same blue dress and no shoes, she was always smiling and happy and came day after day to interact with our children (who were not the least bit inhibited by the language barrier). But she turned down all our invitations to go swimming with us. On the last Wednesday before we left, she finally consented to swim. We were all amazed when she jumped into the pool in her blue dress. At that moment we realized that she had no swimming suit or shoes—nothing besides the clothes she wore.

Our leftover food went to her family on the day we left. When we delivered it, we found a happy family in a home with only three walls, and a muddy front yard, occupied by a cow, a pig, and two chickens. When we asked our own 9-year-old what she had learned from our time in Mexico, she said, "That you don't need shoes to be happy."

Unlike the problems of the people in Ajijic, Mexico, the problems of “fast track” Americans do not stem from scarcity or lack of options or challenges. Instead our challenge is whether we can sort out and balance the most important and meaningful things from among all the needs and demands that surround us.

We asked a seminar audience what needs or aspects of their lives they were trying to get in balance. It was like opening a dam. We were trying to make a list on the blackboard, but it was hard to write fast enough.

If we can reduce the things we are trying to balance to a small number, we can categorize the important things into a few key areas, and we can increase our chances of achieving balance.

Three Areas of Priority

The easiest number of areas to balance is three. It's relatively easy to juggle three balls, whereas four are many times more difficult. The mind can stay consistently conscious of three areas. With four or more, some are always overlooked or forgotten. A triangle has no opposite corners or side, each is connected to all. A three-legged stool is stable on any rough terrain.

Life balance is best pursued when we create three areas of priority. They are family, work and self. The deepest and truest priorities of life all fit somewhere within these three categories.

Most people quickly accept family as one of the top three priorities. And work is such a necessity for most of us that it is no argument. Women who choose to stay home with small children have the challenging and important career of domestic management as the second of their three “balancing points.”

But many people question the third area. Should self be one of the three points on which we balance our day? Doesn't that imply a certain selfishness or self-centeredness? What about service to others? What about prayer or religious commitments? What about civic or community involvements or responsibilities? If viewed correctly, the prioritizing of self does not eliminate these things; it includes them.

Often the best way to serve others is by taking care of ourselves and by changing ourselves for the better. (Ultimately this is the only way, because water cannot be drawn from a dry well.) We don't get to be better parents by changing our kids, or better friends by changing those around us. We become better parents and better friends to better serve others as we grow and develop within ourselves.

And just as we increase our ability to serve others by improving ourselves, so also we enhance ourselves by involving ourselves in service.

A Necessity for Balance

When we ask ourselves, “What do I need today?” The answer, at least part of the time, should have to do with service—“I need to fulfill my civic or religious assignment.” “I need to help someone in need.” “I need to be needed.”

There is a necessity for balance within the third balance point of self. Some days we need something just for our outer or inner selves—such as a nap, some exercise, a little time to read, prayer or meditation. Remember that even very self-serving things can be done with others in mind—doing them will make you a better parent to your children and a better friend to your friends, a better member of the community. Other days our self-priority should be some kind of service, such as making a call to cheer someone up, doing a church assignment or working as a volunteer. Remember that this kind of thing, while aimed at others, is still an important factor.

With this clarification, most people are able to agree that the three priorities of life that require daily thought are “family,” “work” and “self.” The first step in obtaining life balance is to spend five minutes each day, before you write down any other plans or think about your schedule, deciding on the single most important thing you can do that day for your family, for your work and for yourself. List these three choose-to-dos before listing any have-to-dos.

Even if you do nothing each day except the three key priority items, in a year you will have accomplished more than 300 specific, clearly thought out things for your family, for self, and for work.

Remember that the key lies not in balancing our time equally between the three balance points (although each balance point does need some time each day) but in balancing our mental effort. And thinking hard enough to establish one single priority for each day will cause your mind to stay aware of all three areas all day long. By narrowing down and naming the three balance points, we begin to gain control.