

Lifebalance and Self-control

– Richard Eyre

True Balance

In the Western world, before the industrial revolution, the prevailing personal challenge was *survival*.

In the West following the industrial revolution the personal challenge was physical and economic *quality of life*.

In the West today the personal challenge is *balance*.

- Because there are so many possibilities and responsibilities, it's hard to balance our *time*.
- Because there are so many needs and demands, it's hard to balance our thought and our *attention*.
- Because so many things are available, it's hard to balance our *resources* and desires.
- Because we have so many options, alternatives, choices, and opportunities, it's hard to balance our *priorities*.
- Because there are so many things we want and so many people who need us or who we care for, it's hard to balance our goals.
- Because to be successful we need to be strong and structured and to be fun we need to be flexible and free. It's hard to balance our attitudes.

We have the same amount of mental energy and the same number of hours in a day as people of other generations and other locations, but we have so many more demands, so many more things.

We live in the first time and place in the world's history and geography where our challenges stem not from scarcity but from surplus, not from oppression but from options, and not from absence but from abundance.

Instead of struggling to find our next meal, we are struggling to get our busy families together long enough to eat a meal. Instead of fighting for freedom to make our choices, we are reeling in the complexity of 250 TV channels, tens of thousands of consumer items, and almost limitless numbers of education, job, and life alternatives.

It's not the sparse simplicity of too little but the crowded complexity of too much that plagues our lives. And the answers lie not in the balance of our abilities but in our ability to balance.

Christ as the Ultimate Example of Balance

Christ stands as the ultimate example of the balance of *all* good traits – even those that, at first, seem to us to be opposites of each other:

confidence/humility
conviction/sympathy
stern standards/tolerance
susceptibility of grief/deep joy
ambition/interest in ordinary persons
self-culture and development/self-denial
self-devotion/other devotion
commitment to a cause/patience, freedom from anxiety
compassion/righteous indignation

It is truly amazing to ponder that list and to realize that Jesus *combined* them, perfected the “opposites” simultaneously. He was completely confident, yet completely humble. He had maximum strength, yet maximum sensitivity. The list goes on and on.

There is greatness in balance, and balance is often the result of two great moral forces, each pulling in opposite directions. Even the earth we live on is held in place by centripetal gravity (holding in) and centrifugal force (holding out). Danger lurks when one character trait overpowers its opposite. Conviction without sympathy makes the bigot. Liberality without positive

conviction of truth leads to thoughtless toleration. Compassion without indignation produces the holy man of the East who peacefully meditates while children around him starve.

Balance is everywhere in the Lord's teaching. He didn't say "love others." He said love others *as* yourself (see Matthew 19:19), love yourself *and* love others. He wants us to seek the best for ourselves *and* for others. The concept of "and" was important to Christ. He didn't want us to develop one good trait at the expense of another. He wanted *both*, for each of us.

He said, "For *their* sakes I sanctify myself" (John 17:19). Is he saying that he made himself good so that he could help others make themselves good? To Christ, the sin of selfishness had to do not so much with caring about oneself as with not caring about others.

Christ epitomized perfection not only in the qualities of strength and leadership, but also in the qualities of sensitivity, loyalty, tenderness, devotion.

He is the ultimate example of the assets of youth – delight, adventure, and freshness – but he is also the ultimate example of the assets of age – wisdom and consistency.

He is the ultimate in "Western virtues" – practicality and *action*-oriented – but also in "Eastern qualities" – meditation and *thought*-orientation.

Jesus Christ is the model for *all* good, and the example for *all* people, of any age, of any sex, of any time.

Lao-tzu, who lived six hundred years before Christ and who created the philosophy followed by hundreds of millions of Taoists today, taught that all things were held in check by two great opposing balancing forces: the yin and the yang. He grouped all opposing forces into these categories – the warm and the cold, the masculine and the feminine, the old and the young. He indicated that if there should ever appear on the earth a being who possessed all the qualities of the yin and all the qualities of the yang, that being would be God.

Six hundred years after Lao-Tzu's profound prescription came Jesus Christ.

Appetites, Passions, and Bridling

In order to find balance as mortals, we must learn to understand and bridle our passions and appetites. God made eating and drinking a pleasurable and infinitely varied experience and gave us appetites and tastes and expandable capacities. Why? Could it be that our food appetites are the most basic physical representation of all our other appetites and that by learning to control that most obvious appetite we can learn the principles that control all other appetites? Perhaps the most stunning way in which man is different from animals is that animals reach their destiny and fulfill the measure of their creation by following and being subject to their instincts and appetites; while humans reach their fullest potential and gain their highest destiny by controlling and mastering their appetites.

The word "appetite" often carries a negative connotation unless it is modified by a positive adjective like "healthy." By itself it sounds a little like a foe or an enemy or at least an unpleasant challenge. In fact, appetites are what make life exciting. They are our passions, the very drives and urges that motivate us and that make life enjoyable. Yes, they require controlling, but even that can be a pleasure. Try to imagine a life without appetites and we find ourselves contemplating a flat, effortless, and boring state. Could joy be defined as appetite control? Is self-mastery ultimately the source or at least the trigger of happiness?

In the larger perspective, appetites may be perceived as the passions and potential joys that come with this mortal opportunity, and diet may be viewed as how we choose to think and to live while we are here on earth.

Now think about some of our other appetites ... sex ... sleep ... ownership ... control ... independence ... comfort ... fame (or recognition or credit) ... acceptance ... achievement ... position ... ambition ... power ... wealth ... love ... understanding ... knowledge. Do they all respond to (and become magnified by) similar efforts to control?

What are appetites? Are they things we need? Things we want? Things we desire? Are they instincts? Natural attractions? Are they learned or inherent? With animals, appetites or instincts are built-in purpose and energy-producing urges which allow them to survive. Are they more or less than that with us? Are we best served by subduing them or celebrating them? Can we do both? Are there good and bad appetites? Are our longings for things like love or wisdom too high and too pure to be called appetites? Are those with stronger or weaker appetites higher or lower beings? What does it mean to bridle appetites or passions?