

What is Balance, Anyway?

By Stephanie MacKendrick

A recent conversation reminded me how much I enjoy talking with CTV President Trina McQueen – she's never predictable, always offering her views in a concise, yet passionate, manner. Thus I was delighted to have a chance to talk to her about work/life balance in preparation for a panel on the same topic at the annual conference of TIA – The International Alliance of business and professional women, in October in Toronto.

I opened a volley of email correspondence with the glib assertion that any one with a single iota of common sense seriously weighs the issue of work/life balance. I railed against the nauseating discussions that persist as to *whether* women really can combine work and home responsibilities, be a CEO etc. etc. I proclaimed that the focus should be not on *whether* we could balance, but *how*.

Trina brought up a good point, not excluded but sadly lost in the clamour of my earnest statements. She said that if you're passionate about your work and want to devote your entire life to it, that's a legitimate choice and should be perfectly okay and that the reverse, devoting oneself to domestic pursuits, should be equally commendable. Simply said and true.

This apt reminder tugged me sharply back from the danger of the creeping tunnel vision. Look at how the movement decades ago to assert the right of women to pursue careers, *if they chose to*, somehow veered toward a mindless prescription dictating that women *must* achieve outside the home to be considered praiseworthy.

So, while I was madly tilting at the work/life balance windmill, I had quietly forgotten that not everyone aspires to what I might view as balance and that balance means different things to different people. The point is an important one. It's about choice. By extension it's also about developing workplace environments that offer flexibility to support the quest for balance, whatever one's personal definition might be. That's not to advocate a symmetrical 50-50 work/life model - it rarely exists, except on paper. It's more likely a series of compromises over time or between family members, and not just women.

Where it gets messy is in situations where the workplace structure and/or demands are so great that there is no room to make choices, where putting in extra hours, weekends and evenings is not the fast-lane, but the survival track, even in relatively non-senior posts. In those situations, the choice has been made by others, and that is both stressful and frustrating.

Since we've already de-constructed the workplace, which now features revolving door executive tenure and widespread contract work, perhaps the responsibility of the workplace is to take it further and introduce some positive non-traditional concepts like meaningful, secure part-time work that is so sanely used in Europe.

Our challenge as individuals is to accept that sometimes you can't have it all - or at least have it all at one time – because, as our parents tried to drill into us, choice also brings responsibility. We all have to make hard choices and some of the toughest, most emotional ones involve combining career and family. It seems to me that the key to

balance is to determine what mixture or balance is right for you and make sure you understand the consequences of your choice, including its limitations. These limitations may last a short while, or they may be lifelong, but once the deal is made, we need to take responsibility for the path we're on.

And I guess that means if you decide to go for broke on your career, it's pointless to lament your withering social life, your untapped talent as a novelist or the fact that your garden has gone to hell. Likewise, if you prefer to tend the home fires, you'll forego titles and business cards, external validation and the ability to earn a living. To paraphrase Janet Yale, President of the CCTA, once wisely advised a CWC panel audience, "Know what deal you're making, understand the terms and once you've accepted it, live with it. If the deal becomes untenable, change it as best you can. But don't accept a deal and then complain about it."

So for those whose choice in work/life balance is black and white - all career or all family/personal pursuit - perhaps the choices are clearer, if more extreme. For those in the gray areas of juggling and adjusting, the Quixotic quest continues.