

WOMEN IN THE LAW

A confessed 'wobbler' muses on time management

By Dennis Coyne

On the subject of "life balance," I must admit I am a "wobbler," finding my balance as I go along each day.

Every day I make course corrections. In saying this, I am reminded of the imagery of Ella Wheeler Wilcox in "Winds of Fate":

One ship drives east and another drives west with the self-same winds that blow.

'Tis the set of the sails And not the gales That tells them the way to go.

In the past, I thought of balance as finding some time in the day for myself, all the while using time-management techniques to compress more and more billable hours into a day. Billable hours were king and the measure of my worth. I have a different perspective now and I'd like to share it, in the context of two recent conversations.

"Having it all"

At a recent seminar, a bright and likeable young lawyer, Mary, talked about the subject of life-work balance from her perspective as a partner in a downtown law firm and the mother of two small children. Her voice was animated. In fact, she spoke so quickly that I had a hard time keeping up with her.

Mary excitedly told about the birth of her first child and the fact that she had

taken advantage of the generous maternity leave at her firm. When she returned to work, her child was in day care.



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Mary's life was stressful. Rushing home from work in time to meet her child's bus was just one of many daily stresses she felt as a young mom and downtown attorney. But she held it together, at least until the birth of her second child. Mary again took advantage of the firm's maternity leave and again relied on day care when she returned to work.

Rushing home from work to meet her kids' bus and the other hassles of parenting began to wear her down. Mary became frazzled and it showed. The firm (kindly) suggested that she work at home a couple of days a week. And so she did. Through it all, Mary was able to "churn" her billable hours. For a while she went to part-time status, while working virtually full time.

Mary described a typical day at home, again in the same breathless rush of words — getting the kids up, fed, dressed and on the bus in the morning, a quick cleanup of the house, a load of laundry, a few quick calls to manage household tasks, and then a few hours of work before the kids were home again. Then it was another load of laundry and preparing dinner, all the while watching the kids. After dinner was cleanup, kids to bed and a return to work until 2 a.m. or so. (Mary spoke kindly of her husband, but I couldn't fig-

ure out how he fit into the schedule.)

The only real wrinkle in Mary's balanced life appeared to be the unwitting clients who, after receiving e-mail time-stamped at 2 a.m., inquired as to why Mary was working so late at night.

In closing, Mary credited her firm and its generous maternity and parenting policies. Mary also acknowledged that her hand-held computer was an invaluable aid in shoe-horning so many activities into a single day. Mary summed it all up by simply declaring that she wanted it all, and that having it all was possible. Everyone applauded and Mary took her seat.

But I felt unsettled. Perhaps it was such a talented and likeable person giving such a frenetic description of the balance in her life and her endorsement of the proposition that having it all was doable. Perhaps it was the loud applause, as other lawyers appeared to endorse the mad scramble that characterizes the lives of so many lawyers. Whatever it was, my interest in life balance was piqued.

The discipline of having less

A week later, my wife and I had dinner with Kathy and Joe. Kathy is a middle-aged partner in a downtown law firm. Joe is an executive. They have a couple of kids, now grown. We met at their lake place.

Kathy reminisced about her interview for her first law job. The partner matter-of-factly told her that if she wanted a job in his office, the job came first and the family came second. Kathy calmly replied that if the firm hired her, her family would always come first, as it always had, and the job would be second. She got the job.

Kathy struggled to keep her balance in her early years at the firm. She took on more and more responsibility, she gained the confidence of her clients and they wanted her to do their work. She found it all too easy to say yes and was too often unable to say no. More and more, living was a struggle and less of a joy.

One day Kathy asked a friend to go to the movies. They both loved the movies and a weekday night out proved to be a great tonic. It wasn't long before Kathy and her friend had a standing date to go to the movies on Tuesday nights. Many years have passed and Kathy and her friend are still going to the movies on Tuesday nights, sometimes to faraway film festivals.

Kathy credits the movies with helping her find balance. As she says so, Kathy laughs. For she knows that the balance she discovered came out of her decision to take time for herself — a Tuesday night out each week. What movie she saw wasn't all that important.

Just say no

Still more interesting to me was Kathy's comment that for many years she and Joe have kept their calendar relatively simple by saying no to some invitations and opportunities. And sometimes Kathy and Joe say no to opportunities that are highly desirable. Then it isn't easy to say no, but on the whole, they have decided they don't want it all. Instead, they have devoted a lot of time seeking relative simplicity in their lives.

Some of the decisions that Kathy and Joe have made are big decisions, like moving from their beautiful home into a small downtown apartment only a few blocks from where they both work. Now the time they would otherwise

spend commuting and doing household chores is free time they can use as they please.

However, most of the decisions made by Kathy and Joe are small and recurring decisions, reflecting the values they hold at any point in time. Achieving balance is a daily task, with course corrections made as they move through their days. It isn't an exact science at all. It is more of a disposition or resolve than a formula.

Kathy and Joe sometimes wobble. They know that balance is slippery and requires self-awareness, discipline, communication, compassion and a sense of humor. They don't want it all. They just want what they prize — a life that is reasonably congruent with their values, with time for Tuesday night at the movies.


Unpacking the calendar

So what is my take on all of this? I like these people, Mary, Kathy and Joe. I think they could learn a lot from each other. I bet their discussion of having it all would be animated. If they asked me for my views on balance, I would weigh in on the side of unpacking the calendar and sorting and sifting daily demands with an eye on what I value at this time of life.

I would encourage them to become aware of what brings them joy and to dream again, and to note when they are energized and when they feel depleted. I would encourage them to practice saying no so that they could more often say yes to self.

I would also identify resources (including a spouse, partner, friend, or a personal coach) who could be helpful in aligning a busy schedule with one's personal values, and then staying on course. While a hand-held computer might be one of the resources used, it would never be a substitute for unpacking the activities that don't really matter.

I'm not an advocate of having it all. But I am conscious of catching my breath, focused on spotting what I really want, and intentional about devising a strategy to get where I want to go. I am sure that there will be continuing course corrections as I go, and occasionally I'll wobble. My life is not — and never has been — a straight-line trajectory, nor has it always been smooth sailing.

I believe that discernment is the key — knowing, as best I can, who and what nourish me, where I'm headed, and who my allies are along the way. Being 58 years old and having practiced law for more than 30 years, I've learned something about the paradox that having less is somehow having it all. And now in my role as a certified coach, I'm able to work with lawyers, helping them to set their sails, balance their busy lives and find the way to go. 

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The Minnesota State Bar Association's Life and the Law Committee will soon begin a "discussion thread" on the topic of life balance. To be included, contact Sue Bores at (612) 278-6325 or e-mail her at sbores@statebar.gen.mn.us