

What's So Great About Balance?

Why living to the extreme may not be so crazy

Jeremiah wore a yoke. John the Baptist subsisted on locusts and honey. Hosea married a prostitute. Tamar dressed up like one. Moses talked back to a burning bush. Esther broke a royal decree. Mary of Bethany dared to study under a rabbi. Jesus washed feet.

The Bible would not be nearly as interesting if it told the stories of normal, balanced lives.

And yet we know from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes that “there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (3:1, NIV)—birth, death, wounding, healing, tearing down, building up, balance and, perhaps, imbalance.

While Americans spend a great deal of emotional energy striving to achieve a balanced diet, a balanced work and home life, a balanced schedule, and a balanced budget, it is my contention that balance, though often a worthy goal, isn't always healthy. As the stories of our favorite biblical heroes and heroines reveal, sometimes we have to go all-in. Sometimes we have to drop our fishing nets and follow the guy who says he'll make us fishers of men. Sometimes we are called to engage in radical acts of faith in order to live more compelling, God-honoring lives.

The Cost of Balance

I've never been good at achieving balance. Prone to exaggeration and just a tad obsessive, I tend to get focused on one thing while drowning everything else out. Most of the time, this causes problems: I'll commit to running six miles a day and only stick with it for a week; I'll get sucked into a

writing project and neglect my friendships; I'll decide I want to repaint the entire house and then wonder why no one's done the laundry.

But sometimes my unbalanced tendencies pay off: If you ask me to make something a priority, I'll get it done; if you need someone to conduct a thorough investigation, I'm your girl; if a project needs some focus, I'll bring it.

Most recently, my lack of balance led me to engage in a radical yearlong experiment in which I followed all of the Bible's instructions for women as literally as possible.

Intrigued by the ways in which the phrase "biblical womanhood" was invoked within the evangelical Christian subculture, I decided to take a page from A.J. Jacobs (*The Year of Living Biblically*) and try "biblical womanhood" out all the way—no selectivity. As a result, I ended up growing out my hair, making my own clothes, camping out in a tent during my period, celebrating the Jewish holidays and even calling my husband "master." (That last one I only did for a week!)

It was one of the hardest years of my life, but it was worth it. It was worth it because, as a woman, the concept of "biblical womanhood" had always been a source of frustration and confusion for me, and there was something about immersing myself completely in that concept, something about confronting my fears head-on and asking those tough questions out loud, that left me more in love with the Bible and more content to be a woman than ever before.

For a year, my life was completely out-of-balance, yet that lack of balance led me on a journey that changed my life. I couldn't run from my fears or questions anymore; I had to face them.

Living the Story to Remember

I am not the first to try such a thing. Many of my favorite

books fall into what some have called the “schtick lit” genre, where a person lives a radically different lifestyle for a year—off the grid, among the Amish, cooking through Julia Child’s first cookbook, eating only McDonald’s, focusing on happiness, living like Jesus, living like Oprah, observing the Sabbath, reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica* cover to cover. These books always make interesting stories to me because they highlight how much a person can learn by trying something totally new for a year.

Author Donald Miller has said that “if what we choose to do with our lives won’t make a story meaningful, it won’t make a life meaningful.”

The upside to embracing imbalance every now and then is that it leads us to live more interesting stories. When we listen to that quiet voice inside, when we take that county road we’ve always wondered about, when we allow ourselves to wander off the path, when we try on a different lifestyle or a different place for a while, we pick up on new truths and encounter God in new ways.

The stories we tell our grandchildren one day are unlikely to be the easy, routine stories of a perfectly balanced life, but rather the stories of time when we took living to the extreme—dancing in the rain, embarking on a pilgrimage, going to the circus, taking up our crosses and following Jesus through dangers, toils and snares.

The downside to imbalanced living is that we can get so swept up in our own stories, so focused on our own thing, that we forget we’re not the point of this Grand Story.

This is why I think it’s important for people like me with a penchant for imbalance to practice spiritual disciplines such as praying the hours or observing the Sabbath. These daily or weekly actions help pull us back into reality and remind us that the world does not revolve around us. There are people to

pray for, a God to thank and responsibilities to honor. In even the most extreme of circumstances, we must seek to nurture the sort of gentle and quiet spirit that honors the glory of everyday obedience.

But in the end, we must keep in mind that we do not serve a “balanced” God. We serve a jealous God, a God who chooses nomads and slaves as His people, a God who has made galaxies no human eye will ever see, a God who loves to the point of death, a God who wrapped Himself in flesh and lived among us, a God who washes feet, a God who asks us to count everything else in life as rubbish compared to knowing Him.

And so sometimes God’s image is most evident in our lives when they take radical, imbalanced turns.

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