

The joys and rewards of an asymmetric life

The benefits of living a balanced life is a very popular concept. But I beg to differ. Balance in one's life is overrated. Allocating equal time to the various components of one's life may sound admirable, but it is a recipe for an ordinary life, with no major achievements or a memorable legacy. Scoring a "moonshot" achievement while living a balanced life is highly unlikely.

The benefits of deliberately leading an "asymmetric life" is an epiphany I acquired as a young boy addicted to watching stellar Olympic athletes win gold medals. I dreamed about being the best in the world in a sport, or in something else. As I read about the lives of my Olympic idols, my mind was opened to the fact that each of them led an unbalanced life in the pursuit of their cherished goal to be the best in the world: a gold medalist. I found out that for several years before the Olympic games, these athletes spent a disproportionate amount of their waking time (≥ 10 hours a day) practicing their sport, strengthening their muscles, building up their stamina, and honing their physical skills and mental toughness. Those sacrifices were necessary—in fact, indispensable—to set themselves apart from us mere mortals. Their social life was quite

restricted, and even their educational pursuits had to be reduced or deferred.

I realized at a young age that to be the world's best athlete, one must lead a purpose-driven life and channel a tremendous amount of time and energy to achieve the cherished goal of an Olympic gold medal. I understood the sacrifices necessary to excel in sports, and concluded the same was also true outside of sports, such as for Nobel Laureates, world-class pianists, prodigious authors, ballet dancers, opera divas, or self-employed entrepreneurs.

As I grew up, I repeatedly heard people praise "the balanced life," but in my heart, I knew that was a fallacy. I had already decided in high school that I wanted to become a psychiatric physician. I was a premed major in college and very aware that our medical school enrolled only 44 students into the Med 1 class. There were >350 other premed undergraduates. Thus, without hesitation, and with gusto, I deliberately led an unbalanced life, studying countless hours each day to achieve an A grade in all required and elective courses to earn a spot on the Dean's list. I already had confidence in my academic skills because of my excellent performance in high school, but I was not going to take any chances because I recalled a quote commonly attributed to Thomas Edison: "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." This is obviously antithetical to living a balanced life.



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I have strategically led an unbalanced life, enjoying every minute of it, and reaping the fruits of my labor

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I matriculated in medical school, and my unbalanced lifestyle continued unabated. Most readers of this journal are fellow physicians who know well the heavy demands of medical school on our lives, in both the preclinical and clinical years. Trying to lead a balanced life during the 4 years of medical school can have disastrous consequences. We all led an “asymmetric existence” with 75% (or more) of our waking hours invested in our careers and 25% (or less) directed to our social lives (and fortunately, our families and friends generally understood). That is what it takes to earn the coveted MD, the equivalent of an Olympic medal for intellectual athletes.

Then came 4 more years of psychiatric residency training, and the long hours of work continued, along with many nights and weekends on call. As a resident, I treasured the modest but precious amount of time I had outside work. I was lucky to have a very supportive and competent wife (a psychologist), who spared me from having to wake up at night to feed our first baby or do various household chores, so I could read the many articles and books on my desk and catch up on my sleep after my frequent night and weekend call shifts.

My unbalanced life continued when I pursued a postresidency fellowship at the National Institutes of Health, where I conducted numerous clinical research trials, brain imaging studies, and postmortem research on a large collection of brains from deceased patients with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. I worked 12 to 15 hours a day to write up the data I had collected, submit it to scientific journals, and revise it as needed. I knew from the strategic plan I had set for my life that the neuroscience fellowship would launch my academic career, and indeed it did.

Reaping the benefits

Fast forward 30 years and you will still find me leading an unbalanced but joyful and fulfilling life. People often ask me how I was able to achieve so much (authoring several hundred scientific publications; publishing 13 books; receiving dozens of grants; editing 3 scientific journals; founding an international schizophrenia society; assuming many leadership positions, including becoming a department chair at 2 universities and being elected to the presidency of several associations; lecturing around the world and making hundreds of scientific presentations at national and international conferences; seeing thousands of patients; teaching, supervising, and mentoring countless medical students, psychiatric residents, and young faculty members; and creating a nonprofit foundation [CURESZ.org] with a former patient who recovered completely after 5 years of home classes and treatment-refractory command hallucinations who then graduated from college with honors in molecular biology after I prescribed clozapine to “cure” her from what was deemed a hopeless and irreversible mental disability¹). In all, thanks to my unbalanced life, I have achieved 12 moonshots and each is a major achievement of which I am proud.

My answer to those who ask me how I did all that is simple: I have strategically led an unbalanced life, enjoying every minute of it, and reaping the fruits of my labor. I do not waste an inordinate amount of time watching TV or participating in social media like many others might. And more importantly, despite this unbalanced life, I have been married to my college sweetheart for several decades and have a son and a daughter who are very high achievers and make me proud. I do budget time to regularly take my children and grandchildren

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on family vacations to exotic locations. I have dinner with my family every night. I am very happy with this so-called unbalanced life. I have received numerous awards and recognitions for my accomplishments, including the Distinguished Scholar Award (the highest academic recognition at The Ohio State University), the coveted Stanley Dean Award for research into schizophrenia from the American College of Psychiatrists, 4 Golden Apple Teaching Awards, and the Daniel Drake Medal, the highest honor that the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine bestows on a faculty member. (Dr. Drake founded the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine 200 years ago, a major moonshot, and among his many accomplishments, he also established the first psychiatric hospital in Ohio, another consequential moonshot. I am sure he led a very

productive, unbalanced life, and that is why he is still remembered and revered 200 years later.)

It is said that at the height of his prominence 90 years ago, Sigmund Freud was asked, "What is life all about?" He responded with 2 words: "Liebe und arbeit" (love and work). Importantly, he did not specify which proportions those 2 major functions should occupy in one's life. It was left up to each individual to make that choice. In the constitution of our country, that freedom of choice is the secret sauce of "the pursuit of happiness."



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