

## How to have one's cake and balance it, too

By Ruth Ostrow

RECENTLY I was talking to a woman who I would describe as a sucker for love. A real romantic, she tends to do what a lot of women do: meet a man and project a whole story of "happy ever after" on his head, and then languish in dawning disappointment as she realises that such love is a very limited source of self-gratification.

Observing her feelings, I saw an obsessive need to make this man into what I'd call the centrepiece of her life.

Meanwhile, talking to people over summer I got a similar picture of imbalance.

Predictably, at a corporate seminar I attended, many of the participants -- male and female -- were predominantly interested in their careers. But, like the overly romantic woman, they had the same haunting sense of disappointment as the reality of thwarted expectation and limited satisfaction dawned.

And the same issue kept cropping up. A lack of fulfillment seemed to dog the parents I talked to who chose to parent exclusively; while those who zealously combined parenting and career seemed to be top-heavy with commitment.

And what emerged was the awareness that in order to have a fulfilling life, there has to be two processes at work. First, that we determine -- in all instances -- to be our own centrepiece rather than giving our power away to "the other". I don't just refer to romantic projections. It is equally unfulfilling to make the fabulous career or perfect family the enduring source of our happiness.

Second, having determined to take full responsibility for our own happiness, we ensure that everything we do is in harmony and in the right proportion. Using the example of a cake, a lover or partner becomes a very nice, fat, satisfying piece of that cake with syrupy chocolate on top -- but not the cake itself. Meanwhile the happiest workers are those who have their careers in balance with the rest of a nourishing bake that includes slices of family, hobbies, spiritual or personal growth, health, social life and pleasure.

Having discussed this with therapists over the years in a relationships context, I was fascinated to discover -- when talking to my partner Morris Kaplan, who is a finance journalist and corporate trainer -- that the hottest, newest buzz in the business world is a concept called "work/life balance" which is similar to what I've been thinking about these past months.

He explained that all over the world companies are bringing in trainers to teach people how to turn their lives into a full and balanced cake -- to use my metaphor -- on the basis that a happy workforce is a productive workforce.

Lend Lease through its Slice of Life program offers short courses such as fine art classes, wine tasting, mosaic-making, Italian language classes. Meanwhile IBM offers through its Quality Life Program 15 services to assist in work/life balance including financial planning, elder care information, tax and legal assistance, he says.

"Many companies including the likes of Flight Centre and Nokia have taken to introducing lifestyle skills to foster a broader sense of success so that people can have access to in-house yoga classes, tai chi, healthy eating programs, -- even laughter therapy and neck massages at the desk in some companies.

"Employers are beginning to understand that corporate life today is so competitive it can suck the life-marrow out of people. The corporate world demands long hours and creates endless stresses. So businesses are countering the negative effects by taking a nurturing role."

The point is to help staff create a well-rounded, healthy life, even going as far as sending people home early on Fridays to be with family.

He tells me that corporations are helping employees achieve balance because most people can't do it by themselves. But what's in it for the company? "Staff members are more creative, less stressed, and take less sick leave. More importantly staff hang around longer. Higher retention rates can save a company a fortune in lost revenue and lost knowledge."

I was interested in why a company would offer personal financial management for staff members. "This is so that people don't overcommit in areas like their mortgages and end up exhausted or depressed with worrying money problems that eke away at their productivity. The whole work/life balance trend is about training people to function well in all facets of life."

For those not in the business world, the model being shown by enlightened corporations sets a wonderful example of how to create one's own work/life balance -- whether we define work as our children, our marriages, our bodies or our art.

The principle is the same. Try to create a cake of one's own and divide the cake into pieces. Many areas of life should be represented including play time, love time, holiday time, alongside our more responsible pursuits.

There will always be some slices that are going to be bigger than others, particularly in the areas of family and career. But the ideal cake has room for everything in perfect proportion.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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