

WEBWORDS 30

Work-life balance and authentic interests

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"The right time is ANY time that one is still so lucky as to have." – Henry James

When it comes to novelists, late starters are an awesome breed. Take Annie Proulx (1935–) of *"Brokeback Mountain"* fame, who at the age of 58 was the first woman to win the prestigious PEN/Faulkner book award for her debut novel, *Postcards*, having spent part of her early career writing "how to" books. This was no flash in the pan for Proulx, and the very next year she won a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *The Shipping News*. Other literary late starters include provocative columnist and broadcaster Norman Lebrecht (1948–) who received the Whitbread First Book Award for *The Song of Names* at 54, and Booker Prize winner Penelope Fitzgerald (1916–2000) who wrote her first novel at nearly 60. Most famously, Mary Wesley (1912–2002) found fame as a first-time novelist at 70. How did Proulx and Wesley approach issues of work-life balance, in lives filled with marriages, motherhood, early financial struggle and regular day jobs?

Describing the writing process, Proulx revealed, "I find it satisfying and intellectually stimulating to work with the intensity, brevity, balance and word play of the short story", possibly conjuring an image of a privileged life in which opportunities to write any time, for however long, and uninterrupted were a given. But Proulx who has had three husbands and three sons must have worked hard to attain and maintain the discipline, time management skills and boundaries required to address family responsibilities and to achieve creative space. Maybe she honed her intense writing practices to fit with her domestic and employment situations, or perhaps she is one of those extraordinary older women who have the apparently effortless knack of fitting everything in. Wesley, who turned 19 the year Proulx was born, expressed firm views about work, and about courage, ageing and retirement. In an interview shortly before her death, she snapped, "I have no patience with people who grow old at 60 just because they are entitled to a bus pass. Sixty should be the time to start something new, not put your feet up." Like the unretiring Australian ex-prime minister John Howard (1939–), Wesley had much to say about women and family life too, and would probably have weighed in fearlessly to any discussion around the vicissitudes of work-life balance.

"Women's courage is rather different from men's. The fact that women have to bring up children and look after husbands makes them braver at facing long-term issues, such as illness. Men are more immediately courageous. Lots of people are brave in battle." – Mary Wesley

Barbecue stopper

As an issue, work-life balance divides social and economic conservatives, impinging upon family values, work choices, and men's and women's role in society. Speaking at the Aston Electorate Dinner in Melbourne on 16 July 2002, Howard described the battle many people have to keep work pressures at bay as topic of conversation that could bring a barbecue to a standstill.

"And nothing is more important than the debate that goes on in the community. I call it a barbecue stopper, about the balance between work and family. I find that if you really want to get a conversation going, particularly amongst younger people, you'll start talking about the competing challenges of work and family." – John Howard

Until British sociologist **Catherine Hakim**¹ persuaded the former PM that not all women were the same, he held staunchly, and irritatingly for many men and women, to the view that the gold standard for a functional family was a two-parent arrangement with mother at home, father at work, and children protected from the ghastliness of childcare centres. Hakim turned this around when she explained that there were at least three types of woman ("home-centred", "work-centred" and "adaptive"), and that social policy should acknowledge each, and not expect all women to find happiness at home bringing up children and looking after husbands, as Mary Wesley put it. When Don Edgar of the RMIT Centre for Workplace Change looked into the situation for his book, **The War Over Work**², he found that 70% of women *had* to be adaptive out of economic necessity, doing the family-work/paid-work balancing act.

Simplicity

Struggling with competing deadlines, shifting priorities and constant interruptions it was becoming difficult to write coherently on this journey from Proulx, via Lebrecht, Fitzgerald, Wesley, Howard, Hakim and Edgar, and lately to Sogyal Rinpoche. I was almost *waiting* for the next distraction when Claudia from a couple of streets away sidled into my office.

"I've been knocking for ages. You're not busy are you, Caroline?"

"A bit, I'm writing my column."

"But you said you would listen to my talk," she glowered, sixteen going on four. "Mum's minding Peter and she says she can't entertain him and listen to me."

I directed attentive eyes in her direction, composed my best you-now-have-my-undivided-attention face and hoped not to forget how I had intended, seconds before, to integrate the Rinpoche quotation into my piece. It was not worth asking whether it *had* to be now. It had to be now. She cleared her throat importantly, surveyed an imaginary audience somewhere beyond the window, smiled graciously and declaimed, "According to the UK-based Work Foundation, '**work-life balance**³ is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society.' What do you think?"

My mind was still on Rinpoche. "It fits perfectly with what I'm writing. Look." She scanned the spiritual master's words.

"Our task is to strike a balance, to find a middle way, to learn not to overstretch ourselves with extraneous activities and

preoccupations, but to simplify our lives more and more. The key to finding a happy balance in modern lives is simplicity.
– Sogyal Rinpoche

“That’s that Tibetan guy?”

“It is. He teaches Rigpa Buddhism.”

“Rigpa?”

“Rigpa is a Tibetan word that implies ‘intelligence’ or ‘awareness’, and, at a deeper level, ‘the innermost nature of the mind’. Rigpa aims to present the Buddhist tradition of Tibet in a way that is both completely authentic, and as relevant as possible to the lives and needs of modern men and women.”

“Cool.” she chirruped. “I like that simplicity idea.”

“You don’t think it’s a simplistic idea?”

“No, I think it’s interesting...”

I maintained the attentive visage, even though the word “interesting” had triggered a memory of wise Eleanor Roosevelt. Should Eleanor follow Sogyal? I tracked the idea through as she read me the rest of her talk, and made us both a cup of tea.

Minding Peter

When she had finished extolling the virtues of combining work with further study, flexitime, me-time and job sharing, providing examples of family-friendly work places and wondrously accommodating employers (were they fictional?) of parents with young children she was ready to chat.

“Isn’t your mum normally at work today?”

“She took a day off without pay because of Peter.”

“Really?”

“Well, Sal had to go to work and Vince is in PNG for another week, and Peter could not go to school because he was playing with this kid who’s got impetigo.”

“He’s not sick then?”

“No, but his teacher reckons he’s probably infectious and she doesn’t want the whole of Year 1 catching it.”

“What’s happening tomorrow?”

“Sal says she’s taking a day’s annual leave to stay home with him because anyway their new ginormous plasma is being delivered and the warehouse could not give her a definite time...”

“And the next day?”

“He’ll just have to go to school because mum’s coming to my talk and Sal has to be in court. See, she can’t justify taking two days off with her career and everything to think of. Not when she’s got exams coming up and she’s going on maternity leave in 10 weeks time.”

“So your mum’s actually missing two day’s pay. That’s quite a good example of what happens when work-life balance comes unstuck, don’t you think?”

She looked a little offended. “You sound like dad now – he’s always getting dramatic about the high cost of earning a living. But it normally all works perfectly ... it’s only when something comes up, or someone gets sick that it’s **mission impossible**⁴. Sal’s a really good manager. Vince says she’s got everything organised down to the last detail.”

“Who’ll collect Peter after after-school-care?”

“Mum and Sal were wondering if you would.”

Her mobile rang. “Yeah. Cool. At my mum’s friend’s house ... I’ve been here hours. When? No, I can’t tonight. Mum’s got uni and dad’s working late and I have to mind my nephew until my sister picks him up. Hang on. I’ll ask Caroline if she can come over and look after him.”

She shot me a glance and saw the answer on my face. “No, she can’t. Maybe some other time. See ya.”

She stood up. “Thanks for the tea, um, I didn’t mean to put you on the spot about minding Peter. You wouldn’t mind listening to it again, would you?”

Good advice

By the time she had gone, following a second and third practice of her speech and more cups of tea, it was dark and the Sogyal Rinpoche idea had gone too. But I did remember the Eleanor Roosevelt quote.

“One thing life has taught me: if you are interested, you never have to look for new interests. They come to you. When you are genuinely interested in one thing, it will always lead to something else.” – Eleanor Roosevelt

It was stored away in my head with other snippets of solicited and unsolicited good advice for life and work, sometimes delivered shyly, diffidently or serendipitously as throwaway lines from people whose judgment I trusted. Whether dropped casually into a conversation or thoughtfully explained, most were remembered because they were well-timed. “Have fun along the way; the years go by quickly,” someone had said. “Persist, persevere, try hard and never give up,” said another. “Hold despair in contempt – keep going.” “Learn to say ‘no’.” As time passes, and you prove yourself, many more people will ask you to do many more things. Remaining active and involved is vital – but know that each time you say ‘yes’ to something you may be effectively saying ‘no’ to another opportunity to enjoy using your time and skills.” “Look after yourself; pace yourself – avoid burnout – don’t take it all, or yourself, too seriously.” “Collaborate with people because you enjoy working with them, rather than because of a shared interest in a topic.” “Set realistic goals and expectations for yourself and for the people you serve.” “Avoid toxic relationships.” “Time your deadlines so that all your projects don’t finish at once. Have several projects at various stages of progress.” “Study, work, mentor, teach and write in areas you are passionate about, and give yourself time to think.” “Value today.” “Listen.” “Share.”

Roosevelt’s observation is the one that has helped the most. Recognising whether the opportunities, openings, challenges and invitations that arise hold the promise of abiding interest is an ability that can be fostered. It comes down to asking questions like, “Am I flattered to be asked, or am I really enthusiastic about this chance?” “Am I tempted to do this just because it might look good on the CV, or is it something that will whet my curiosity and keep me motivated?” Continually “refreshing” our careers, following interests and developing new ones, keeps us excited about the tasks at hand. By not focusing too much on the extrinsic rewards, and appreciating and nurturing the intrinsic incentives of interest, motivation and challenge that work has to offer we may come close to achieving balance.

Links

1. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/people/c.hakim@lse.ac.uk/experts.htm>
2. <http://www.theage.com.au/news/Reviews/The-War-Over-Work/2005/05/27/1117129898877.html>
3. <http://www.employersforwork-lifebalance.org.uk/work/definition.htm>
4. <http://www.theage.com.au/news/business/work-and-home-balance--its-mission-impossible/2007/02/16/1171405443406.html>

Webwords 30 is at <http://speech-language-therapy.com/webwords30.htm> with live links to featured resources.