

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Balance or Blend

Learn to meld life passions together, rather than keeping them separate.

The spotlight shone on center court as The Amazing Sladek stacked chair after chair on a small platform. With each addition, the 64-year-old performer climbed higher. He balanced his weight carefully and when the apex was reached, performed a graceful hand stand much to the delight of my 10-year-old twins. As he finished the performance, they leaned over and suggested that maybe I could do that kind of work.

After getting past the hilarious vision of me wearing a bright red set of tights and a white silk shirt with billowing sleeves atop a stack of chairs, it occurred to me I've been trying to balance a stack of chairs most of my adult life. My guess is you, too, have felt the pressure of juggling multiple responsibilities, commitments and expectations all while wondering if that stack of chairs is going to come tumbling down. Conduct a Google search of the term "work-life balance," and you'll have conflicting ideas and advice without end. Clearly, we are not alone on the tightrope!

Perhaps it has always been a challenge to find the ability to balance family, profession, civic duty and all the rest. My generation overplayed professional focus, and I am certainly guilty of tying my identity to the accomplishments of work and career. However, as the

ensuing generations have strived to balance their lives with more focus on personal life, I don't sense the pressure has diminished. Why not? Perhaps balance is the wrong approach altogether.

Try this experiment: stand on one foot with your arms extended perpendicular to your body and with hands palm up. Notice the sensation, the slight waver, the small but nearly constant repositioning to stay balanced, and the fatigue that begins to creep in after a few minutes. Up the difficulty of the game by placing a book on one of your outstretched hands. Now add a book to the opposite hand and then another on the original. Finally, place one on top of your head.

Is the pressure to stay balanced even more difficult? Balance is uncomfortable as it requires perpetual repositioning while fighting to hold on to the illusion that life's dimensions can be perfectly positioned.

A better approach is to seek coherence by blending life's dimensions through an intentional process of integration wherein work, family, play and relationships are not seen as items to be stacked. When blending becomes the focus, we recognize that each of life's elements are important to the quality of life and that there is room for

doing meaningful work, deepening relationships, experiencing joy, pausing to be fully in moments of beauty and embracing times of play without the scorekeeping that tends to come with balancing one element against another.

My 10-year-old twins and I recently fenced a pasture — their first time on a fencing crew. Rather than seeing the experience as labor balanced with an offer of free time later in the day, I took the blended approach: learning new skills; pursuing a goal; stopping to watch a young buck; taking time to answer questions; enjoying a snack; and sharing stories of family, faith and friends.

To be sure, at the beginning of the project there was resistance. How long would this take? Why did we have to do this? But with patience, it wasn't long before the fence was only a vehicle for sharing life. Tucking them into bed following fencing days provided moments of contentment in acknowledging their contributions, laughing about some memory of the day and hearing their pride of ownership. When I see that fence, there is more than strands of wire, posts and staples — it's a blended memory of life experienced together. 

Editor's note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.