

Balancing Acts

Written by Jack Sparacino
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I've been thinking more lately about balance. Like when I dropped into a popular Beaufort store whose courtly grandfather clock seems to stand guard against the back wall.

If you've ever peered into a clock you know how complex the mechanisms are and that the key to them working properly lies in many close tolerance interfaces and lots of precise balancing. And no wonder: a typical grandfather clock has about 350 parts.

Peiping, 1945: *"The greatest number of vehicles one saw were rickshaws. These had a convertible top and were mounted on two wheels much like large bicycle wheels. The rickshaw coolie placed himself between the shafts of the vehicle and, holding onto these, pulled it along. These vehicles were very well balanced and lightweight and had springs beneath the seat, and brass lamps on each side. Some rickshaws were quite pretty, decorated with silver and highly polished all over."*
E.B. Sledge, **China Marine** (2002, Oxford University Press)

Balance is a many-splendored thing. In addition to mechanical balance we have balanced checkbooks. And balanced nutrition, which I think means remembering to toss a scoop of Breyers vanilla ice cream on your homemade pecan pie. And of course there's governmental balance — America's founding fathers deliberately set up three branches of government to support and complement each other: the executive, judicial, and legislative. If one branch dominates, the republic's ideals and operational effectiveness suffer. News outlets go nuts.

Then we have psychological balance, which includes having one's priorities in order and maintaining a sense of right and wrong. Martin Shkreli, the former hedge fund manager and CEO of Turing Pharmaceutical, set off balance alarms when he increased the price of life-saving AIDS drug, Daraprim.

The jump was astounding, menacing and rapid— from \$13.50 to \$750

per pill overnight after he bought the rights to the drug. If justice involves restoring balance in

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social interaction, the world can anticipate that Mr. Shkreli is in for some serious rebalancing (clock cleaning?) as he was subsequently arrested for securities fraud. His arrest is reportedly not related to that price increase, nor is his removal as Turing CEO and his being sued by the biotech company's board. But you can practically hear the world cheering his comeuppance. Fair is fair.

As we juke and pivot our way through life, balancing helps to smooth if not define the complex, frequently stressful journey. Each age has its own special challenges, often offset by peaking personal strengths and assets. The beauty industry flaunts its own special bias. As one insider observed, "You take away the fun after forty and you'll end up looking like Madonna, the only woman I can think of who manages to have the sinewy body of a python paired with the face of a puff adder." A recent survey by *Allure* magazine indicates that women are perceived as most attractive at 30, men at 34.

For athletes, the youth premium is transparent: peak performance is rarely seen after age 35 and for some sports such as gymnastics, Olympic dominance is often demonstrated during competitors' teens. It seems that mathematicians frequently make their most important contributions at young ages, perhaps akin to chess masters. Surveys suggest that overall, the best age is perceived to be about 35. Respondents 18-24 are inclined to say 27 while seniors—those over 65—lean toward seeing 44 as the ideal. If we're talking wealth, older people often have had time to accumulate larger fortunes though far too many seniors (some 36%) live almost entirely on Social Security benefits.

As an undergraduate at Syracuse University, I was lucky enough to enroll in a course taught by rising star Howard Taylor. He assigned his book, "Balance in Small Groups," which discussed the dynamics of human beings preferring a world in which their relationships, attitudes and values are internally consistent and relatively stable over time. 'My friend's friend is mine too'—that sort of thing. It occurred to me recently that in a sense, he was talking about an intellectual cousin of the second law of thermodynamics. Seriously. The second law suggests that all natural processes create entropy, i.e., lack of order and predictability and ultimately lead to disorder. Taylor was basically looking at the other side of the second law coin.

I was in my early twenties when in Taylor's class. Talk about balance . . . and coins . . . most of us barely had two nickels to rub together back then and continuing into grad school, so we often had to split the cost of a six-pack of beer. But basically we felt indestructible. I could sustain 12-16 hours of daily study, bench press 220 pounds, play competitive racquetball, and ride my bike to school 15 miles a day, often in miserable weather. One Thanksgiving back then I put away six pieces of pie after dinner – equal parts pumpkin, apple and mince – and (barely) lived

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to tell about it. There's that balanced nutrition again, right?

Twenty years later I was riding pretty high, relatively speaking. My career was progressing enjoyably and we lived in a lovely rambling home with a rolling lawn featuring Jane's gorgeous rose gardens in Newtown, CT. I could—and often had to—walk many miles at work, since meetings were spread out across the sprawling helicopter company. And my average day included 4-5 meetings. Sometimes visitors needed a plant tour that involved me. Yes, my feet had collapsed by day's end but a few ibuprofen later with some couch time and I was good to go. Weekends were pleasantly active, a nice balance of parenting, lawn and garden work, and errands around town. We had some apple trees and in the fall spent hours harvesting baskets of Rome beauties and then making gallons of applesauce for the freezer. One weekend I was painting the house, lost my balance and fell hard off the ladder. Big face-down crash, oil based stain in my eyes and up my nose. Like being hit by a (smelly) bus. But again, ibuprofen to the rescue and then back to work on Monday morning without even calling a doctor. Balanced stupidity.

Fast forward another twenty years. Arthritis, creeping up for years, changed my lifestyle. Sports are out of bounds now, errands need stricter limits and more planning. But to navigate through a grocery or other large store, I use one of those handy electric carts. Heated car seats that I'd ignored for decades now provide welcome relief. Another offsetting amenity is our new HVAC's touch screen thermostat. Back in Newtown, we heated the house with coal for several years. It's just as filthy and laborious as you think. Today, I just set the temperature and humidity, tap in a schedule, and walk away. Okay, make that limp away.

Balance, so much seems to hinge on balance. We take it for granted sometimes but it quietly defines our world and journey through life. We can't turn back the clock, grandfather or otherwise, but it's nice to know when all those gears, springs, rivets and screws are in balance. Just don't turn on the news – or climb a rickety ladder with a can of paint around your neck – and mess it all up.