



1

How I Got Rhythm

I've got rhythm; I've got music . . . who could ask for anything more?

GEORGE AND IRA GERSHWIN

As an approach to life, “balance” never made sense to me. Intuitively, I knew something was wrong with it, but I could not put my finger on it. What alternative could there be to the goal of a balanced life?

Friends justly accuse me of being “type A times ten.” I like to drive hard and fast, and I’m focused on achieving results. Inevitably, though, I get too many plates spinning, and some crash to the ground. Busyness has been a constant feature of my life. Countless times, well-meaning people have told me I need to “get my life in balance.” But what does that mean?

Honestly, I tried to picture what a balanced life would look

Your Life in Rhythm

like for me, but I couldn’t do it. The lack of a clear description bothered me. No one could give me a good definition of a balanced life—it was assumed to be obvious. But in my mind at least, it was one big question mark.

Were they telling me to slow down? to quit working so hard? to achieve less?

“Balance” sounded to me like something in the middle—an attempt to be average. It reminded me of when I was a kid, playing with my friend Don Mickle at Churchill Way Park. He and I enjoyed playing on the green wooden seesaw. We would get on opposite ends, and one of us would scoot toward the middle until we balanced perfectly in midair. For a moment, if we had it just right, the seesaw would hang suspended in space. But if one of us shifted, even just a little bit, the heavier end would come slamming down onto the hard asphalt.

So, is that the model for a balanced life—a seesaw? If so, there could be a lot of sore rear ends, because few people are able to keep their seesaws precisely balanced on the fulcrum.

Every time I heard about living a balanced life, I thought, *There has to be a better way to live. Isn’t there a different model for a well-lived life?*

As a student of Jesus’ teachings, I wondered what he had to say on the matter. After all, churchgoing people seemed es-

In reading the Bible cover to cover, I found no instruction to balance my life.

pecially keen on maintaining a balanced life. But in reading the Bible cover to cover, I found no instruction to balance my life. Moreover, Jesus’ life does not seem to have been bal-

anced at all. He says to take up our crosses and lose our lives. Sacrifice and balance don’t blend well. If anything, Jesus encourages radical lives, not balanced ones.

Still, for years I felt guilty that I was not leading a balanced life. There were times when maybe for a short while I thought I might be close to achieving balance, but there were plenty of other times when I had to burn the midnight oil for extended periods, times when my life was anything but balanced.

Even though I could not buy into the ideal of a “balanced life,” it seemed so universally apparent to everyone else that I thought maybe I just wasn’t getting it. My stress increased because I knew I was not living the life I was “supposed” to live, and worse, I wasn’t convinced that balance was a good goal in the first place.

Over the years, I’ve cycled through success and leadership books on how to have a more effective life. I’ve used the latest time-management tools: my schedule has been in Day-Timer and 7 *Habits* notebooks, Palms, BlackBerrys, and Outlook software. The books have good points and the systems are helpful, but something was still missing.

A Eureka Moment

A number of years ago, when I was speaking at a leadership conference in New Zealand, I had a eureka moment. Everyone in the room felt overly busy, overly stressed, and overly guilty about not doing everything they thought they should be doing (just like most other people I talk to). A few were close to burnout. In the middle of an open-ended question-and-answer session, someone asked about work/life balance.

As I was answering the questions and drawing concepts on the whiteboard, I had what can only be described as a sudden flash of insight: *Rhythm. Rhythm is a better model than balance.*

I’m not sure exactly how the idea was generated. We were

talking about the need for rest and for sabbaticals, but we were also talking about starting new organizations, which requires intense effort. I may have been drawing waves, giving me the idea of the ups and downs of life, when those insights somehow merged and I realized that different seasons of life call for dif-

Different seasons of life call for different kinds of living.

ferent kinds of living. It’s not that rest and intensity are to be held in balance at the *same* time but rather that they’re to be in rhythm *over* time.

The New Zealanders responded so positively to the idea of rhythm that it surprised me.

Weeks later, my friend Rowland Forman, who had hosted the New Zealand conference, told me that “rhythm” was the leaders’ major takeaway. They encouraged me to put the ideas into print. Well, the ideas were not even developed at that point; they were just a flash of insight that had instantly resonated with everyone.

Back in the States, I started working with the idea of rhythm, trying to flesh it out to see if it could possibly replace balance as a fundamental metaphor for a well-ordered

Balance is an inherently stagnant concept, built on preserving a certain tension between fixed objects.

life. I soon found that it was a deep and rich concept that was more than adequate as a governing paradigm. The more I thought about rhythm, the more places I saw it already functioning in my life and in the world

around me. It seemed so obvious that I wondered why someone hadn’t hit on this before.

Balance is an inherently stagnant concept, built on preserving a certain tension between fixed objects. Rhythm, on the other hand, *moves*. It happens in time. It’s active, just like our

lives, which are not uniform or constant but are always moving and changing.

To develop the concept, I initially didn't have to look any further than my own body. I put my hand on my chest and felt my heart beating in rhythm. I listened to the natural rhythm of my breathing: inhale and exhale. I knew from science classes in my growing-up years that our bodies are filled with natural rhythms. Brain waves, for example, are not supposed to be flat. In fact, that would be a bad sign. We want oscillation: up and down.

Again, it seemed so obvious. Human bodies are rhythmic, and so is life.

An Amazing Scientific Discovery

A few quick Internet searches uncovered a scientific field I had not been aware of: chronobiology, the study of life in time. Over the past several decades, scientists across dozens of disciplines have been discovering the power of rhythm in nature as well as in human bodies. Several major universities (including my alma mater, the University of Texas) now have chronobiology labs, and chronobiology is becoming a fairly common field of study. I was fascinated by what I read, and I began to realize that this is a deep, paradigm-shifting insight for science.

My thoughts ran to the implications for ordinary human life. In our modern world, technological advances—everything from industrialization to hybridization to the lightbulb to high-speed air travel to the Internet—have obscured our intuitive harmony with nature's rhythms.

Sunrise and sunset once bounded our daily lives. Now when it gets dark, we just turn on the lights and keep doing what

In our modern world, technological advances have obscured our intuitive harmony with nature's rhythms.

we're doing. We don't have to rely on animals, with their natural rhythms and limitations, or on the natural growing seasons of plants. The kinds of foods we ate once varied by season. Now we eat grapes from California in the summer and grapes from Chile in the winter. And anything else we want can probably be ordered somewhere online, 24/7/365.

In premodern cultures, ordinary people in every part of the world followed the rhythms established by the sun and the moon in relation to the earth. In our day and age, we've lost touch with life's natural rhythms. What has happened to us?

As a pastor, I have seen personal tragedy and triumph up close. I've cheered the restoration of broken lives and cried over the destruction of once-vibrant relationships. I've watched people wasting their lives and overloading their schedules. Too many of my friends are stressed out and guilt ridden, living in self-perceived failure because they can't seem to achieve the mythic goal of a balanced life. Some have imploded into

If everything around us functions according to natural rhythms, why don't we in our everyday lives?

full-blown burnout. The others keep scurrying along, making the best of things.

I began to wonder: If everything around us functions according

to natural rhythms, why don't we in our everyday lives? What if the myth of "balance" is part of the problem? What if we're aiming at the wrong target?

Early Attempts at Living Rhythmically

At first, I began to apply my early ideas of rhythmic living to my marriage. Tamara and I looked at our patterns of relating to each other in each of nature's cycles. We asked ourselves, *What could we do on a daily and weekly basis to renew and*

enrich our marriage? And then, *What about monthly, quarterly, and yearly?*

From there, we explored how similar patterns might work in parenting and in our personal spiritual devotions. The results were quite powerful, and I've since extended this exploration into my counseling and consulting with other people in various, very different, life situations. Rhythm is now working for them, too.

Along the way, I've made mistakes. With my particular personality, I tend to overanalyze and overorganize what is really a simple, profound principle. Rhythmic living

Rhythmic living is what humans were doing before they ever learned to write an alphabet or build a village.

is what humans were doing before they ever learned to write an alphabet or build a village. My temptation is to build a system out of it, to chart it and graph it. That can be done—in fact, I personally find it quite helpful—but the beauty of rhythm is that it is fundamental to how we are made to live. The key is to realign ourselves as rhythmic beings in a rhythmic world, not to make up and impose some artificial system.

My wife hates charts and graphs. Even though she loves the idea of rhythm, she thought I was off my rocker trying to map out our lives. She warned me that I was going to spend my whole life planning it and never live it. Tamara and I are wired very differently. And yet we both have benefited from living rhythmically, even though our approaches to rhythm are not at all similar.

Further Discoveries

As I continued to read about rhythm, I ran across Gail Sheehy's pioneering research into adult life stages, which she chronicled

in two classic books, *Passages* (1976) and *New Passages* (1995). Though Sheehy doesn't explicitly develop the concept of rhythm, her writing about life stages opened my eyes to how we need to think rhythmically about where we are in life. For example, our lives have a certain rhythm when we're single, but that changes when we get married, have kids, launch our kids from the nest, and ultimately retire and grow old. It seems obvious, yes, but we typically ignore the rhythmic realities of our lives.

In William Doherty's groundbreaking book *The Intentional Family*, I discovered the power of rituals for preserving and enhancing harmonious rhythms in families and marriages. Be-

Because rituals are intrinsically rhythmic, they can easily be aligned with the natural rhythms that structure our world.

cause rituals are intrinsically rhythmic, they can easily be aligned with the natural rhythms that structure our world.

Elite athletes understand rhythm.

They have figured out the power of interval training, which "mixes bouts of work and rest in timed intervals."¹ In *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz show the brilliance of *oscillation*, "the rhythmic, wavelike movement between activity and rest."² In their words, "Oscillation . . . represents the fundamental pulse of life."³ Oscillation works physically, mentally, and spiritually. Loehr and Schwartz's insight helped me understand in another way how rhythm is superior to balance as the fundamental metaphor for a well-lived life. "Healthy patterns of activity and rest lie at the heart of our capacity for full engagement, maximum performance, and sustained health."⁴ Full engagement comes from oscillating between high performance and personal renewal.

Early Responses

Early on, I presented these ideas to the all-female staff of a large Mom’s-Day-Out program—primarily young women with little children, some working part-time, some single, some married, some divorced, some in other relationships. They quickly agreed that excess stress, busyness, and guilt were major concerns in their lives. They also agreed that trying to achieve balance in their lives had failed to really help them. And they immediately embraced the concept of rhythm. They said it gave them freedom, releasing them from the burdensome expectations they had placed on themselves to try to live an idealistic, balanced life. Subsequently, the program director, Molly Ducote, sent me a note that said, “As a single mom, especially, I know that this book is going to make a difference. . . . Just the small speech you gave my staff changed their lives.”

Moving Forward

I’ll be honest: I don’t have this rhythm approach fully figured out. So far, I’ve experimented enough to feel its transforming power, and I’ve seen it work in several key areas of my own life and the life of my family. But it’s still in its early stages. Perhaps you and others will develop the concept of a rhythmic life in places and dimensions I’ve not yet imagined. I have already seen that rhythm is a highly generative idea that touches many spheres of life.

I invite you to join me in exploring your life in rhythm. As more of us seek to live rhythmically, together we will recover what we’ve lost in our inane attempts to achieve balance, and we’ll find new ways to live in harmony with our rhythmic world.

This is a powerful shift—one you will suspect you had in mind all along but had not yet put into words. I encourage you to stop asking, “Is my life in balance?” and start asking, “Am I in a good rhythm?”

Stop asking, “Is my life in balance?” and start asking, “Am I in a good rhythm?”
