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01/01/2020 | Monthly Topic

The grace of an unbalanced life

by *Angela Denker*

I'm writing this article about balance at 7 p.m. on a Friday. The dishes are washed, the laundry is done, and my two boys, age 7 and 4, are downstairs playing basketball in the basement with their dad.


I'm not home anymore, though. Every time I sat down to write there, I got distracted by more work to do.

Still dressed in leggings, a workout top and glasses in lieu of mascara, I change my location to a coffee shop. Finally, I can embrace anonymity and relative quiet. During a busy week just 12 days before Christmas, I've been available to children, church, family and side work.

A better woman than me would write this article about vocation and balance about how her morning routine of meditation, yoga and matcha tea helps her face the world with a sense of perfect balance and alignment envied by all.

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As for me, I generally drag myself out of bed when I hear the pitter-patter of little boys' feet, sprinting toward my door.

"MOM! I'M HUNGRY!"

Balance, in my past seven years as a pastor and a mother, has always seemed to me to be both elusive and unrealistic. After all, balance assumes that the items you have to balance can all fit together on a scale, in a manageable amount, that can be moved back and forth in perfect harmony.

Balance, it seems to me, assumes that you can always hold a portion of yourself in reserve—that you can divide your identity into equal and piecemeal parts. Right now, I am 65 percent pastor and 35 percent mother.

Right now, I am 99 percent pastor and 1 percent mother.

Somehow I have to fit writer and wife and woman and, let's be honest, human being who needs to eat and sleep and be clothed in there somewhere, too.

Maybe what modern women need most today then is not balance at all, but rather permission to be occasionally unbalanced.

This New Year, the 20th anniversary of the New Millennium, in this article I want to give you that gift.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE UNBALANCED.

That's exactly what Jesus asked of those who would follow him: to deny all else, even family, and take up your cross. To go to unfamiliar places, to face ridicule and persecution, for the sake of a mission of love, forgiveness, justice and reconciliation.

Green Bay Packers coaching great Vince Lombardi said it this way: "Success demands singleness of purpose," which is fine if you're a White American man in the 1950s, whose wife does your laundry and makes your bed and irons your shirts.

For modern women and moms, singleness of purpose looks different.

I contend that singleness of purpose for women today looks like a purposeful lack of balance.

It looks like laundry stacked high when you're finishing up a big project at work. It looks like squatting on the floor next to your 4-year-old to build a puzzle when you're on deadline for work. It looks like meeting up with friends even though you have projects to do at home. It looks like racing to the hospital, to be with church members and loved ones, in spite of everything and everyone else who needs you.

It looks like stepping outside into the bliss of crisp air and a walk alone.

It looks like phone calls to friends who you haven't seen in years.

It looks like a cup of chai tea, a laptop, a Friday night in leggings on a December night 12 days before Christmas—and words that give permission to live.

Questions to ask yourself to create a perfect, balanced, unbalanced, purposeful life:

1. Put yourself on your list of priorities: What do you want and need as a human being?
2. Where is God calling you to put your energy? How does that differ from the pressures of the world and modern culture?
3. Who can you give permission to be unbalanced this year? How can you affirm others in a life that is purposeful, mission-centered, and occasionally unbalanced?

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving me permission to let go of the illusion of a balanced life and instead lean into being present with the ones I love. This year, give me a sense of purpose in my vocations as a leader, a mother and a child of God. Guide me to accept and love myself, even when I am unbalanced. In Jesus' name, I pray, Amen.

The Rev. Angela Denker is a former sportswriter turned Lutheran pastor, writer, speaker—and full-time mom of two little boys—based in Minneapolis. Denker is a contributor to various publications, including The Washington Post, Sports Illustrated, Red Letter Christians, and Living Lutheran. Her forthcoming book, Red State Christians: Meet the Voters who elected Donald Trump, was published by Fortress Press in 2019. Denker blogs at A Good Christian Woman ... Not that One, where she tries to share Jesus' love and refute the rumors about women, Christians, motherhood, and Jesus.



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01/01/2020 | Faith Reflections, Monthly topic





Risky transformation

by Angela T. Khabeb

A new calendar year often brings a fresh perspective with promises of a clean slate. We remember the past year and take inventory of successes and failures. We also look ahead with hope and anticipation of what will be. New Year's resolutions abound. Our promises create a lovely tapestry. We vow many things: to live in the moment, eat right, exercise more, learn to say "no," go back to school, quit smoking, bring back date night, write a book, travel more, finally start your own business and so on.

My personal favorite? Lose weight. Perhaps, I am not alone. Last year, I joined a weight loss program and enjoyed much success. I changed my eating habits and I lost 20 pounds in six weeks. It wasn't even that hard. (But I had a long way to go.) I started working out. Religiously I attended Zumba and spin classes. I was probably one of the heaviest women in the room. But I didn't care. This was my year!

Help for the journey

I was going to embrace a healthier lifestyle so I could be a better wife, mother and pastor. Wait a minute. What did I know about what it means to live a healthy lifestyle?

I quickly learned that I needed a lot of help to continue this life-changing journey. I enlisted guidance from a parishioner who had lost 70 pounds and kept it off for many years. Together we launched a fantastic new ministry: Mission SLIMpossible. Our support group met regularly. We motivated one another through sharing recipes, weight loss tips, encouragement and a healthy dose of good old-fashioned accountability.

I lost another 10 pounds. It was becoming more of a challenge to move that scale but I was determined. Then I lost five more pounds. "Wow," I thought to myself, "I might actually pull it off this time!"

Weight loss experts advise that once you've dropped two dress sizes, you should get rid of clothes that no longer fit. After all, goes the logic, you won't need them anymore. This suggestion seemed

simple enough. But to my surprise, putting it into practice scared me.

I went to my closet and took out every piece of clothing that was too big for me. I piled them on the chair in our bedroom. The clothes stayed there for several days. Finally, my husband volunteered to take them to the thrift store. Reluctantly, I agreed. I had no idea that I would feel so vulnerable.

Change is risky business

To serve as motivation for my weight loss, I went the extra mile and bought dresses in smaller sizes. That way, as my weight loss progressed, I would have something nice to wear. I continued my journey towards the new me and lost five more pounds. However, even with my 40-pound weight loss I had a BMI (Body Mass Index) of 41 and was still considered obese. Although I was facing an uphill battle, I felt like this time would be different. Right?

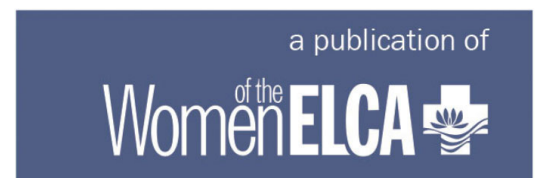
Wrong. I plateaued. No matter what I did, I could not lose another pound. I added yoga to my workout regimen but at the next weigh-in, the scale didn't budge. The weigh-in after that? I gained two pounds. Then the next weigh-in? I lost half of a pound. The next weigh-in? I gained three pounds.


To make a long story short, I never regained my momentum. Sadly, after a few short months, the 40 pounds that I fought so hard to lose were replaced by 60! The strange thing is that it was almost funny.

It was bad enough that I was fatter than ever, but now I was fat and naked because I gave away all of my larger sizes. I even got rid of my maternity clothes (thank goodness I discovered www.gwynniebee.com it's like Netflix for clothes).

The gift of hindsight

Fortunately, hindsight is the gift that keeps on giving. Looking back, I was under the false impression that I could attain my transformation by developing healthy eating habits and increasing physical activity. After all, this is what the experts tell us. But I was missing a major component of the transformation equation. All of my efforts were aimed at the outside—my physical body. I also needed to change my mind.





Yes, I changed my eating habits. But I had the same old negative self-talk running nonstop through my subconscious. Yes, I was working out consistently. But I had no mental picture of the new me I wanted to be—I couldn't even conceptualize it. Perhaps I was afraid to dream it.

The other day I asked myself, "Where did my success go?" I did achieve some success. I worked terribly hard to lose 40 pounds. Does failure negate success, like it never happened? And for that matter, where do our failures go?

Clay and the potter

In the book of Romans, Paul compares us to clay and God to a potter. Perhaps this is where our successes and failures meet—in God's hands.

Then God takes the many and varied experiences of our lives and uses them—the bitter and the sweet—to mold us, shape us, renew us and transform us. In God's hands, we are works of art still under construction.

Sometimes the promises we make to ourselves, our New Year's resolutions fall flat. But thanks be to God! We do not solely rely on our will power, faithfulness, or intellect. Ultimately our hope rests with our God who always keeps promises.

Discussion questions

1. Looking back at 2019, do you recall specific events that brought great joy or deep concern? How have these events shaped you?
2. Is there an area in your life that you struggle to change?
3. Do you plan to make New Year's resolutions? If so, please share what they are. If not, why not?

Closing prayer:

Creator God, you are the potter and we are the clay. Continue to shape us and mold us into your image. Embolden us to take risks so that we can break free from anything that keeps us from wholeness. Help us to remember that, with you, all things are possible. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Rev. Angela T. Khabeb serves at Holy Trinity in Minneapolis, Minn. She enjoys an active home life with an amazing husband, Benhi, and three wonderful children Konami, Khenna, and Khonni.

