A Balancing Act: Navigating Work and Life in Early Career

February 26, 2016
Daniel Kaplan, PhD
Assent to Superstardom!

Making a scholar-

- Start with several years of advanced training in highly technical skills;
- Add comprehensive knowledge in a subspecialty area;
- Constantly massage with directives about one view of success- Federal funding and tenure in a Research One university;
- Pepper with subtle hints about sacrifices, work ethics, hierarchy of institutional status, and PUBLICATION!
- Voila! A superstar is served.
The Real Challenge

A roadmap to greatness in academia has been handed to each of us. Academic mentors work to show us how to achieve academic success. But what about success in other areas of life?

• What are these other areas?
• Who are our life mentors?
• How and when should we prioritize our goals in both work and life?
• What sacrifices will be necessary in which areas to achieve our own personal vision of life success?
Not a balancing act, but a tug of war!

Career-
- Service
- Research
- Teaching
- Dissemination
- Committees
- Tenure & Promotion

All the other parts of your life-
- Health
- Family
- Love
- Growth
- Joy
- Friends
This time… It’s personal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Priorities: Everything Cannot Be of Equal Importance</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Influential Factors

For each of us, prioritization of what is important in life is influenced by:

- Personal values
- Gender
- Age
- Relationship status
- Culture
- Mobility
- Health and ability
- Family ties
- Social network

So the roadmap to success looks different for each person.
To find balance, first weigh all the parts.

Dan’s Personal Priorities*

- Fame: 1%
- Status: 5%
- Wealth: 20%
- Career: 40%
- Friends: 65%
- Joy: 80%
- Growth: 50%
- Love: 90%
- Family: 95%
- Health: 85%

*Actual magnitude of Dan’s priorities may vary based on time of year, health of children, proximity to dates of vacations, convenience of access to gym, marital harmony, and number of manuscript rejections per quarter.
Translating Priorities into Life

For me, long-range priorities are a happy and health family life filled with joy and love.

Career is a means to that end.

Superstardom is not one of my central drives in life.

Job success leads to job security and some personal satisfaction.

Quality and quantity of energy investments are not equal:

- 2 hours of loving play with my children at least 3 times per week translates into strong joyous relationships with the most important people in my life. So... very important!
- 2 hours of focused writing at least 3 times per week translates into gradual progress in manuscripts and grant development. Not a waste of time, but not worth protecting at the sacrifice of family time.
Translating Priorities into Life

**Impact of these realizations on my work:**

- Work with passion. Prioritize teaching.
- Collaborate to maximize productivity.
- Balance tasks to assure quality teaching, meaningful research, and sufficient scholarship to secure promotion.
- Be comfortable saying ‘No, not this time’, or ‘Yes, but with help.’
- Work at a school that allows balance.
- Do not expect to be described as “extraordinarily productive, the most brilliant scholar, a national leader, a game-changer, a research guru, such a prolific publisher.”
- Accept humble vision of career: “Dan is a good citizen of the school, a fine teacher, and a useful contributor to the profession.”
Translating Priorities into Life

**Impact on everything else:**

- See my kids everyday. Be an equal parent with my wife.
- Spend every evening with my wife, only working late in extreme “crunch time.”
- Weekend days can have small 1-2 hour work periods, but no more.
- Do not move away from extended family.
- Schedule routine visits with friends.
- Assure time every week for exercise, music, & nature.
- Live frugally, save, and plan.
- Accept grandiose vision of life: “Dan is a well-rounded, happy guy who has been brilliant in assuring a safe and loving family and a job he enjoys.”
But is it working?

• Embraced slow pace because first child born before PhD comprehensive exams, second child born at beginning of post-doc
  – Spent 6 years doing PhD
  – Worked a few part-time consultation jobs for income
  – Sought out 2-year post-doc fellowship before academic position
  – Wife and I each took care of kids 2.5 days/week, shared 1 day, and grandma had the other 1.5 days

• Over past 8 years, collaborated to publish 18 articles and 2 books, made 30 presentations, taught 14 courses and gave 13 guest lectures, got 3 research grants, and did a lot of service to my schools, professional societies, and academic community

• Not superstar performance, but definitely good enough to get a job and keep it. Meanwhile, happy healthy loving family success!!!
I am certainly not strong, smart, or savvy enough to pull this off.

One bright idea I had was to surround myself with people to keep me on track.

My wife is my partner, we make these decisions together, and I invite her to serve as enforcer and enabler as needed.

Extended family has been instrumental, and I am blessed to have their loving support. Moving away is simply not an option.

I need a constant pool of 2-3 research mentors, 1-2 career mentors, several peer mentors, and abundant life mentors.
People evolve. Priorities may shift, but not dramatically for most people.

Appraisal of priorities can be done through the lens of long-range goals.

Life-work balance looks different for each of us.

For me, all the richness of life will likely remain in the lead position, with work playing a supporting role.

Balance demands sacrifice, so choose carefully what you are willing to neglect.

We are gerontologists. When our clients look back on their lives, what are their most painful regrets? Mediocre publication rates, or lost opportunities to attend to the love of family, friends, and themselves?
Questions?

Supported by the GSA Innovation Fund

GSA

- The nation's oldest and largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to research, education, and practice in the field of aging.
  - 5,500+ interdisciplinary members around the world touching all facets of aging
- Mission
  - Promote multi- and interdisciplinary research in aging
  - Translate and disseminate research findings
  - Promote/advocate for education/awareness on aging across disciplines
  - Foster application of research into policy development
- To view past ESPO Professional Development webinars, along with other GSA webinars, visit geron.org/webinar.
- Email espo@geron.org for additional questions.

geron.org

#GeroLife

@geronsociety