

The Problem with “Work-Life Balance”

Category: Finding Balance

written by Elizabeth A. Fleming | March 16, 2023

I wish the word “balance” made me think about about gaining proprioception, philosophical arguments or seeking inner peace. But I am a mother, so the only kind of balance there is any room for me to consider is how I share my energy with the people who depend on me.

The problem with work-life balance is that the term implies there is a dichotomy, a scale where individual needs are dropped on one side or the other. Backpacks need packing. Emails need answering. Bruised knees need bandaging. Charts need closing. I imagine I am the fulcrum of the scale, tipping back and forth as each need is neatly stacked.

The reality is so often different, and instead I am tugged and stretched in every direction, each need making me feel a little less steady. My four-year-old wakes me before the sun with vomit on his pajamas. A medical student emails me, frantic about a failed exam. The school principal calls because of a fight on the playground. I peel the sock off a patient who is scheduled for a routine follow up and find two dusky purple toes. On those days, the pull is relentless in every direction all at once.

On those days, I focus on doing the thing in front of me, caring for the person in front of me, because if I let myself feel the pull, I might shatter. I know eventually the needs will untangle. I know eventually there will be a quiet moment. And, as I write this at my kitchen table, I hear my son’s feet tumbling down the hall, coming to ask to be tucked in for bed.

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