

BALANCE: The Buck Starts Here

Does anyone ever complain? If you do, it implies that you know something should be better than it is. So what are you doing about it? Probably not much? What's the sense of that?! Look at your options, you could change it; leave it; or be quiet about it and don't allow it to bother you again. The bottom line is that you can choose what to do.

Who has heard of the cliché, the buck stops here? Well, that is from a sign on U.S. President Harry S. Truman's desk. It meant that, as President of the United States, he was ultimately responsible for everything. By the same token, Allah has created us with many abilities, and we are also absolutely responsible for our choices. That is not to say that we control everything, of course, but we do have the gift of choice, so I say, "The Buck Starts Here!"

While we know that we have the wherewithal to make decisions, why do we often persist in not doing what can improve our lives? Why do we sometimes not take the risk to change things? For many people, it is based in Fear. Sometimes, only when the situation becomes unbearable, do we get motivated to break through in spite of fear. We need a significant discomfort level to propel us toward less unbalance. So we should do something to create an improvement or bail out! We are each responsible for our choices, and we can try to create or design our perfect life.

It is not always the things we do that can cause our discontent; sometimes our inaction causes us misery. Not paying the bills on time, being late on license or registration renewals, those darn emissions tests on our vehicles, not keeping regular dental or physical exams, dry cleaning piled up and you need that particular garment today, school registrations and supplies, library book due dates, vacation plans, and finally the RSVP on invitations. Who hasn't slipped?!

Why don't we act on certain things on time? Doesn't life have so many demands? Doesn't it seem like we are getting busier and busier? It is a phenomenon of our culture. We have new terms like "information overload" and "panic attack" that we intuitively understand and they need no explanation. We seek help to manage our time, exercise daily, de-clutter, and get more organized; so who has time to bond or stop and smell the roses?

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For years, the word has popped into my head when I have felt that I'm on the verge of overload. As a mom of four (3 teenagers now) and as an assistant principal of the largest Islamic school in North America, I have plenty on my plate. And I love my dear husband for putting up with loads of complaining as I juggled a lot while teaching five classes with three "preps" and earned my masters degree in teaching. *Alhamdulillah*, mission accomplished; and nothing

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these days seem as bad as then. But as tough as that time was, I am gratified that I have learned so much and that if given the choice, I'd do it again. It was worth it!

So I had to be convinced that dropping my kids at home immediately after school and racing to college to eat a can of sardines for dinner, praying in a vacant classroom before starting classes that went from 4:30 till 10:00 p.m. was my idea of a good plan! That ownership was the critical factor, and now on some of my hectic days—and there are plenty—I recall that this is part of Allah's plan. I choose to interpret certain details of my life to imply that Allah wants me in Islamic Education development. That is my personal definition of who I am and what I want my legacy to be. What's yours?

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BE DEFINED—know what your goals are. What will be your legacy? How do you begin to design your life? Reflect on what times of your life were the happiest. What were you doing? What were your dreams? Sometimes we've had to trade our hopes and desires for something else. Did a parent change your plans? Were you forced to consider something "practical?" Many people really don't know what they want, and without a clear vision they will only get what someone else wants for them...usually that is *very little!*

"*Whatever*" is not an option if you want an extraordinary life. Give some thought to the roles you play. Are you a son or daughter? Are you a spouse? What role do you play in your profession? Are you an athlete, an artist, a writer, an actor, a linguist, an inventor? What do you do each day that qualifies you as such? What can you do each day to refine your roles?

For everything in your life, you need to be a bit pragmatic; realize that just wishing does not equal doing. You must organize specific steps toward reaching your goals. Then have the discipline to implement them.

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ACCOUNTING FOR TIME TRAPS—For each very important role you play, plan the specific goals and timelines for their accomplishment. Weed out unnecessary time wasters: too much e-mail, mail, news, and ineffective or non-scheduled interruptions. Create scheduled times and intersperse some personal time with work time throughout the day. Reprogram people's expectations of you and respect your own schedule. This can be the hardest challenge for those of us who serve, but it is critical for our avoidance of burnout. Pay attention to your low energy/high energy times and work with them.

If you really want to explore the ultimate in time redesign concepts, read *The 4-Hour Work Week* by Timothy Ferriss. He has outsourced his e-mail

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screening, paying bills, and a ton of tasks to a virtual assistant working for him overseas while he travels the world finding new adventures. Wouldn't it be great to break the time wasters, so we can focus on the more meaningful aspects of our lives?

Consider the 80/20 Principle of the Pareto Law. A 19th century economist, Vilfredo Pareto, discovered a strange pattern, which seems to apply to many things today. He found consistently that in many businesses 80% of revenue came from only 20% of the customer base. The realization we take from this is that much of what we do is just not productive even though we may be very busy.

My work can be brutally intense at times and it seems that the faster I run, the more stuff comes flying at me. When I sense this is happening, I know it's time to take stock of my energy reserves relative to the situation. With awareness, the 80% of low return on time and energy investment activities we do can be re-conceptualized.

Do we seem to be too busy because we allow unimportant things to become our business? Can we focus on the more vital 20% of activities that really make strides in effective performance? Determine what wastes your time, what bothers you and saps your energy and ability to do greater things. Delegate, re-schedule to a different time of your day, month, or year, or just drop it if it really doesn't matter in the end. Then create your schedule of habits and get used to giving yourself daily review time. That is a discipline you can tag onto the fajr habits you already have.

Honestly, designing lifestyle and practicing necessary disciplines is not easy to achieve in a blink of an eye. We are often creatures of habit and it takes a deliberate effort to consistently re-evaluate how we choose to use our time. More often than not, we'll fall off course; but keep in mind that if practiced, new habits and expectations take root over time. So never give up, and enjoy the fruits of accomplishment because they'll fortify future endeavors. If nothing ever happens except that you get to enjoy a little more time with your family, or if you can seem a little more rested, isn't it a precious gain? Plan your day the night before or in the morning, and reflect each day if you could have done something to make it better. Did you get bogged down unnecessarily? Give yourself the courtesy of feedback so you can improve the management of YOU, because that is the only person you can really control.

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LOVE TO DO SOMETHING AND ALLOW YOURSELF TO DO IT—Do you love your work? Do you at least love aspects of it? Can you do something to educate yourself or develop more skills so you are better at your profession? If you do, you may like it more!

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Outside of work, what do you enjoy? Is there something that you think of as “play?” Do more of it, and it will make you youthful. Positive people will be attracted to the “winner” in you, and they can become your network of supportive allies. They can fuel you in new ideas, grow your network, and open your dreams. All it takes is some vision, vigilance in how you spend your time, and giving yourself a chance to have fun. Love what you do.

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ALLAH RELIEVES STRESS—Refer to Islam for the essentials of balance. Just as our minds and bodies need sustenance, our spirituality is a very important component in our quest for peace and fulfillment.

(3:14-15): Men are tempted by the lure of women and offspring, of hoarded treasures of gold and silver, of splendid horses, cattle, and plantations. These are the comforts of this life, but far better is the return to Allah.

Say: ‘Shall I tell of better things than these, with which the righteous shall be rewarded by their Lord? Theirs shall be gardens watered by running streams, where they shall dwell forever: wives freed from impurity, and grace from Allah.’ Allah is watching over His servants.

(51:56): I only created mankind and the jinn that they might worship me.

(2:268-269):And God cares for all and He knows all things. He grants wisdom to whom He pleases; and he to whom wisdom is granted receives indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding.

Quranic references by Allam Yusuf Ali, Mahmud Y. Zayid, and Muhammad Asad in *Commandments by God in the Quran*, compiled by Ch. Nazar Mohammad (Lahore, Pakistan) The Message Publications, (1st ed. 1991), New York

Also, being mindful of the many potential supplications is an excellent practice. The frequent requests for forgiveness was a well-known preparation for cleansing the heart and mind of the Prophet, SAW. Our study of his most successful habits should inform our own design for living.

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NO! SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO CALL THE SHOTS TO KEEP YOUR PLAN ON TRACK—I’d read once that if you don’t drive your car, someone else will be sure to drive it for you. Metaphor, of course! But it is so true that if you do not plan your day, someone else will keep it real busy...and not so productive for your interests...it’ll be for theirs. People will intrude on every spare second you own, if you cannot learn the value of sometimes putting the brakes on their requests. Saying “No” does not have to be ungracious or ill-mannered. Simply accommodate your plans first, and give what you wish to others when you can.

Often, people will resist you at first, because they are used to you readily complying to their expectations. You’ll have to be patient and creative to wear

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them off needing you so much, but everyone's balance will be improved as a result. A case in point, could be your family's requests. Children and spouses can bind our heartstrings into knots when we try to please them all at our own expense. It's OK sometimes, but when it sabotages your own needs and commitments, it becomes maladaptive. Claim your rights assertively, and progressively cultivate their own independence. It's the greatest gift you could give them because it will fill their self-esteem and teach them new skills.

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CREATE A MEANS OF EXPRESSION—What do you do to have a “voice?” Historically, we have noted that mankind has painted pictures and done many things to give expression to his existence. In fact, we characterize higher civilizations with refining education and including art, literature, architecture, etc. So what do you do to extend your personality outside of your self? It should be something that brings you joy and the time just flies when you do it. Is it something you do alone, or is it something you share? When you analyze it, you should find that it reflects who you are deep inside. What you did as a kid may still be the activities you favor to do today. Indulge them to the best of your ability as long as they bring you satisfaction.

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EDUCATING AND TRAINING LIKE MENTORS TO EMULATE—Many years I have noted who excels in areas of interest to me. I take stock and consider myself a student of success, and the education is always ongoing. It is one of those things that inspire me. Not one person has “it all,” but I have come to appreciate the need for investing in my education. Seminars, books, interviews and discussions with friends have brought great returns on my time and money spent. Growing in skill and intellect is rich with benefits and I respect people who do it. As Muslims, we are encouraged to learn “from the cradle to the grave,” and it is sound advice. Find the people you aspire to acquire as associates in your quest. Invest in further resources and courses to benefit not just yourselves, but the people you affect. Opportunity will open when you're primed to receive it, and it could bring many pleasant new avenues for you to enjoy the privilege of choice.

As we began with the suggestion that you can design your life for a richer, more balanced approach to living, I encourage you to reflect on your definition of your life, your legacy, your responsibility to live the best life you can; and always be mindful of Allah's graces and gifts to enjoy and employ as you deepen your wisdom. *InshaAllah*, wisdom will prevail as we work to improve education for all.

If I can be of assistance in any way, please feel free to contact me at my most wonderful Islamic school in the world, Islamic Foundation School, in Villa Park, Illinois at slabadi@ifsvp.org. Happy reflections and wishes for success.

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