



CARPE MOMENTUM

By Sharon Browning¹

My life is not this steeply sloping hour, in which you see me hurrying.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

My late husband, Jim Lafferty, was a legal services lawyer *par excellence*. He was also a devoted and dedicated Dad, passionate activist, and possessor of a legendary belly laugh. Almost nine years ago, while out riding his bike for exercise and pleasure, Jim stopped to watch a minor league ball game from the sidelines, collapsed and died within five minutes. He was forty-nine.



Life is short. This cliché is also a statement of fact. Even if we live to be ninety, our time to explore this earth and all its wonders is very, very brief. But far from being a morbid and depressing cautionary tale, this article is intended to be an invitation to live with joy and passion, to be fully, extravagantly alive, consciously savoring and celebrating the experience of being human. This is how Jim lived his life; it was relatively short, but incredibly full and whole.

Jim was a great example of someone whose rich life benefited not only himself, but those around him, and ultimately, the world. This is what a balanced life looks like. We and those around us suffer when our lives are unreflective and harried, and arguably, so does our world. Each of us have contributions to make, activities and perspectives that are essential for our joy and for the well-being of others, our way of Being, some unique way of contributing to the Common Good. But if we do not take time to breathe, to reflect, to become conscious of the precious moments of our lives, we can miss our cues, becoming frustrated, burned out, bitter, cynical, exhausted, ineffective, or simply too busy and preoccupied to even think clearly. We harbor a vague, gnawing sense of dissatisfaction.

I would like to think that public interest lawyers are

a step ahead on this. Our professional endeavors often spring from deeply held values that can provide fuel for the frustrating, sometimes grueling, labor for justice. This work can be personally fulfilling, deeply satisfying and rewarding. But as with any group of humans, even in these ranks there are workaholics, frenzied people always pressed for time, or those guilt-ridden by longings to take a break, to play more, or simply to be still. Spending time with family or friends competes against the relentless urgency of other broken lives: How can I enjoy time at the beach when my client is sleeping under a bridge?

Well, news flash. We are not in control of much. If we look carefully at the events in our lives, we see that the only thing we have any control over is this moment. THIS one. Everything could change in the next five seconds. So it behooves us to be quite intentional about how we spend the moments and minutes of our lives. Our life in its entirety after all, is only an accumulation of moments, and we do have unfettered choice and therefore influence over how those are spent. NOW is the only time that we can be fully alive: joy, love, grief, anger, the savoring of all that our senses open to us, all

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of our deepest human experiences are mere abstractions until we step fully into the experience NOW. Most of us, however, spend only a tiny fraction of life actually living it. We are more often preoccupied with our To Do lists, future plans, thoughts of what has been, or worries and anxieties about all the “what if” scenarios our fertile imaginations conjure. We are rarely here at all.

The multiple factors militating against our ability to be present in our own lives are familiar, major

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among them the acceleration of the pace of life, in part resulting from technological changes that enable accessibility 24–7. We are aware but numbed to our slow enslavement by devices intended to free us for more leisure and other pursuits. Midnight e-mails, phone calls and messages checking or reporting on work details at odd hours, all are symptoms of the erosion of personal time and space. Though useful, the technology is seductive and insidious: when are we not “on”? When do we pause to reflect on who we are, what we are doing, where we are going? To dream? The work is never done, so never are we. Electronic media fill up any space left in our waking hours. Our failure to pause and reflect results in a lack of consciousness, insight, and deliberate choice: by default, we choose to let the technology lead us.

Balance for us and those around us flows effortlessly only when we gain clarity about our values, our Selves, and our priorities. Who are we? What are our gifts? Why are we here?

The resulting crisis has spawned an entire industry devoted to meeting our need to be less busy: we are inundated with products designed to help us relax either before, during, or after our crazed and overloaded days. There has been a proliferation of articles and workshops on Work/Life Balance, as if work and life are two separate things. Often, the suggestions for how to achieve balance or manage the stress have the ring of self-absorption. The *New York Times* recently reported such innovations in law firms as “happiness committees” which are charged with providing candy and milkshakes to work-weary lawyers. Others are throwing huge monetary bonuses at attorneys to make the stress and mess more palatable.

But we are hungry for more.

Several years ago, I attended a training for attorney supervisors and administrators. Participants were given cards naming core values, asked to claim their own and then arrange them according to those most relied upon at work or in other life contexts. Very few people identified a seamless integration of their values; most

had one set of values for work, another for the rest of life. Yet is not wholeness the goal, an integration of our core values into everything we do? As singer-songwriter Charlie King musically observed decades ago, “Our life is more than our work, and our work is more than our jobs.”

The balance we seek is not achieved by a mere re-allocation of our time. Although work itself can become the convenient excuse for avoiding family and personal tensions and difficulties, conversely, families can become the focus of so much energy and indulgence that we raise children who feel entitled to much more than their fair share of just about everything. We can even make exercise and self-care a compulsive and stressful undertaking.

Balance for us and those around us flows effortlessly only when we gain clarity about our values, our Selves, and our priorities. Who are we? What are our gifts? Why are we here? The first hurdle is becoming and staying conscious of and deeply connected to who we are. The second is being consistent in living out what we believe. If justice is a core value, then we must seek it in our most intimate relationships as much as we do in advocating for clients. If we strive to be loving, then how do we love our clients? Our co-workers? Our Selves? How do we allow the goodness that we hold to flow through us and out into the world, all the time? How does this perspective dictate how and with whom we spend our time?

Being awake to our own lives is a major challenge, especially amidst the crush of contemporary culture and expectations. The costs of our failure to cultivate consciousness and intentionality are enormous. In addition to the obvious exhaustion and burnout, there are: the loss of creativity, frustration, dissatisfaction, unhappy interpersonal relationships, loss of joy, or the absence of it from our lives.

There is a link between the increased frenzy of our own lives and our communal loss of concern for the common good. The rush of each day’s events creates a bubble of self-absorption that insulates us from creative connection with others. As much as any other work environment, the hectic pace of legal services offices can be toxic to wholeness; we can become so caught up in the day to day stress that we lose our capacity for wonder, for awe, for the in-breaking of insight and fresh perspective that might get us thinking about issues and events in new and inspired ways. We do not listen deeply to others because we are not even listening to ourselves.

This is the deeper dimension in the work/life bal-

ance issue. Our own health and the well-being of our intimates are dependent upon the living of whole, unfrenzied, fulfilling lives. But so is the health and well-being of the world in which we live. This planet and her peoples are in desperate need of the energies and talents of people who know who they are, what their gifts are, and desire to offer them to the world for their own joy and the good of all. We are of the earth, intricately interconnected and interdependent with all life, not separate except by our own mental constructs. And Aristotle's wise formulation of wholeness is apt here: "Where your talents and the needs of the world cross, there lies your vocation."

It is essential that we develop discernment tools that enable us to be sufficiently aware minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, of who we are and what we are about. So here is a suggestion: take the time to develop a daily habit of reflection. Start with five minutes; you will almost immediately crave ten, then insist on twenty, and before you know it, you'll need a full forty-five minutes twice a day just to process the wonder that is your life and presence on the planet. A simple and revelatory practice is to spend those five minutes reflecting on what you have experienced in the past twelve or twenty-four hours. Four guiding questions: What, if anything, inspired you? Surprised you? Made you emotional or evoked your compassion? Challenged you, made you resistant? Simply paying careful attention to the flow and dynamism of our own life can provide us with profound insight and guidance.

I urge all of us to re-commit to living an examined life, a life lived with clear intention and goodness. It is worth the time taken to look at our own habits and circumstances and to make some conscious choices

about how we are spending whatever precious seconds we have.

Amazingly, there have been many hidden gifts in the living out of my own losses. But the most significant and transformative one thus far is the freeing awareness of the significance and sacredness of every second. I invite all of you to benefit from my circumstances. Anxiety about what might happen, or regret about what did or might have been, is a waste of time; it is rare that the things we worry about actually come to pass, and we cannot change the past. We can, however, embrace the present, and consciously choose life, and love, justice, and wholeness, right now. So *Carpe Momentum!* With Joy. With Gusto. With Passion. With excitement about what miracles our collective energies might unleash. It is a wonderful world, and we have only a short time to revel in and be part of its magnificence. Do it NOW. For your own good and the good of all the world.

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