

# *Law and the Balanced Life: Are They Compatible?*

Stephen H. Sulmeyer, J.D., Ph.D.  
Marin County Bar Association  
November 2, 2007

Having a balanced life requires that we find an inner refuge within the hurricane of daily life, impregnable to the events of both our outer and inner worlds. It's not about making room for exercise, or a date night once a week with your spouse, although that can be part of it. Meaningful balance is about creating a refuge within ourselves of peace, solace, relaxation, and deep meaningfulness, where we get to be truly ourselves, to truly relax, to feel supported and nurtured and safe. It is the place inside where we know without doubt, "here I cannot be harmed." True balance is about freedom from domination by external and internal events—not only our cases and clients, our deadlines and task-lists and billable hours, but also our self-doubts, our fears, and the attacks of our inner critic. The problem is that we tend to be consumed by our focus on particular inner or outer events (or both), and often end up feeling under siege or overwhelmed. The inner abode is a constant, living reminder that we are more than a puppet reacting to events; that we are not actually in danger; that we are never truly disconnected from the inner peace that is the source of our strength and well-being. Balance doesn't mean dissociating from the inner and outer forces that assail us, but rather transcending them and their effects on us. We all yearn for this freedom, not because we all seek escape necessarily, but because the self-mastery this freedom requires is part of our provenance as mature human beings.

What this implies is that the only meaningful way to have a balanced life is to address our fundamental need to grow as human beings. That is, balance requires that we accept life's invitation to grow up into the mature human beings we are capable of being. This invitation, this urge to grow, is present in all living things. In Sanskrit it is referred to as *moksha*, in Western psychology it has been called the drive toward individuation or self-actualization. It is the natural, evolutionary drive that impels the acorn to become an oak tree, and that impels the individual human being to develop in a way that best expresses the natural predilections and uniqueness of that individual. Only by following the call to growth that emerges from the depths of our being can we find balance. The alternative is stagnation, arrested development, a state of meaninglessness, malaise, emptiness, deadness—however well or poorly we might try to hide such a state from ourselves.

For many of us, the challenge presented by the individuation drive has to do with making the leap from our adolescent self to our adult self. To grossly oversimplify the situation, most of us have personalities that are in essence a series of maturational accretions layered on top of a foundation that was set in place in high school and college. Many of us are, in other words, seasoned adolescents masquerading as adults—and many of us feel that way, at least some of the time. This adolescent self contains within it unexamined dynamics from our earliest years, including what I call the *deficient self* and the *compensatory self*. The deficient self is who we secretly fear and believe ourselves to be: little, scared, weak, stupid, mean, bad, unlovable. The compensatory self is who we try to convince ourselves and others that we really are: self-

confident, likable, loving, strong, smart, capable. Some are more successful than others at creating a workable compensatory self. Those of us at this seminar are presumably among the more successful: we succeeded at creating a working compensatory self that has carried us far, even though many of us are painfully aware of our deficient self tugging at our sleeves (or worse).

The problem is that the individuation drive does not allow us to rest on our laurels. It puts the fire under our feet and says, “you *must* grow, or die.” It can create the feeling inside of, “the way I’m living my life just isn’t working anymore,” or a vague sense of discontentment, or that something vital is missing, or of wondering “is this all there is?” How this often plays out is that life presents us with situations in which the old ways of being no longer work. The stresses of greater job responsibility, of being a husband or a wife, of being a parent, of being a leader, show us the ever-broadening cracks in the outmoded foundation. Or it might be that we accomplish everything our culture or our families say is worth achieving, and yet we still feel incomplete, or phony, or unfulfilled. Some people quit jobs or switch careers, some have affairs, many start drinking too much—but none of these ultimately makes a difference. The call is to turn inward, to grow, and to grow in a particular way: to come home from self-alienation.

When we are identified with the compensatory self we are inevitably split off and alienated from other vital parts of the psyche. In our teens and twenties this isn’t so much of an issue, because early adulthood is all about finding an identity we can be comfortable with and that can allow us to find our way in the world. But by midlife the alienation from unconscious yet terribly important parts of ourselves tends to become unbearably painful. There are good reasons for this. For one thing, when we act from the adolescent self, we are constantly defending against feeling hurt: hurt by our spouse, upstaged by a partner, chastised by a judge, humiliated in front of a client—afraid of being hurt in all the myriad ways we were hurt as a child. When we act in this automatic way, we are unconsciously believing and reinforcing certain ideas about ourselves: I am small, I am weak, I am unlovable, I can’t handle being hurt, I don’t have what it takes to stand up to daddy/mommy—i.e., we are still believing ourselves to be the deficient identity. To actually allow ourselves to feel and to *be* our deficient self—to confront it, to question it, to know it—is intolerable to most of us, and consequently we have to continually strive to keep these terrifying feelings below the surface of consciousness, resulting in a state of arrested development. The self-doubt and psychic pain engendered by this way of being inevitably becomes increasingly intolerable.

In addition, other unconscious elements of the psyche add to the upping of the ante as they struggle to gain our attention and ultimately to become integrated into consciousness. Jung spoke of the need to integrate not only our *shadow* (roughly corresponding to what I’m calling the deficient self), but also the *anima* or *animus* (the feminine principle within the male and the male principle within the female, respectively), and the *Self* (the mysterious wholeness that lies at the center of each person). Jung also spoke of the need to achieve balance in the form of exercising what he called the *inferior function*, i.e., the mode of functioning that we are least comfortable with (e.g., for thinking types it might be our feeling function/emotional intelligence

or our sensate function/body intelligence).

Integrating these elements into our conscious life not only brings a sense of wholeness, but also provides support that we need in order to overcome the inertia created by our defenses against hurt, fear, shame and loneliness. For example, integration of the *anima* allows a man to have the compassion and nurturing (and the strength that these provide) that he needs to confront his fear and his solitude, and to be able to let go of his infantilized relationship to his internalized mother. Integration of the *animus* permits a woman to have the focus and will that she needs to overcome cultural and familial prohibitions (and their attendant shame and fear of exile) on being fully in her power, on being who she truly is. The wholeness that arises from integrating the split-off parts of ourselves gives us the strength to stand on our own two feet in the face of our terror and aloneness. As Einstein was quoted as saying, “I now bask in that solitude that was so painful to me in my youth.”

So how do we do this? How do we create this inner sanctuary and engage in meaningful self-growth? First, it’s important to recognize that one of the great challenges that all people on the path of growth face, but particularly lawyers, trained as we are as problem-solvers, is how to embrace the journey of inner growth without making it one more thing on our endless to-do list. If you treat your need for balance as one more problem to be solved, you’ll just be given another problem. As Einstein said, no problem can be solved from the mindset that created it. In other words, what’s needed is to move away from, to *disidentify* with, the problem-solver we have taken ourselves to be all this time, and allow some other, hitherto unknown part of ourselves to arise. All spiritual traditions and all psychotherapeutic modalities of which I am aware speak to this: maturity is about dying to who we have been and being re-born to something greater than that former self.

Warning number two: it’s important to recognize that one of the challenges or obstacles to creating the inner citadel is that it requires us to move away from the familiar and into the unknown—and that stirs up loss and terror. Moving away from our habitual way of being is a process of separation, and this is often experienced as a movement away from the warm, cozy, secure hearth that is home, what we have taken to be most dear. It takes a great deal of support to stay on the path that leads to balance. That support can come in a wide variety of forms, including books, psychotherapy, spirituality, a support group, a daily practice of some kind, a martial art like aikido, and so forth. Support can provide the perseverance and the patience that are absolutely needed to stay the course.

Okay, what does this look like in practice? In the most practical of senses, it starts with commitment. Our irrevocable, unassailable commitment to our path of growth, and the earnestness with which we follow that path, is the fuel that propels us on the journey. Simply making the commitment and taking the first step will result in a huge and noticeable change. (See “*The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*” at the end of this handout.) This commitment means that loving the truth exactly how it actually is is more important than feeling good. It means practicing ruthless self-honesty. It means meeting the disowned and frightening parts of

ourselves with courage and compassion, in a spirit of anthropological discovery. The greatest obstacle on this path is our tendency to deceive ourselves as to who we really are.

But the form this commitment is expressed in depends entirely on the individual. There are no instruction manuals or by-the-numbers guide books for this. There are countless paths to wholeness, and each person has to choose the path that best suits him or her (or, to be more accurate, each person has to allow him or herself to be chosen by a particular path). What all true paths have in common is some form of inquiry into the truth. No room for dogma here. It's all about finding out your truth for yourself, and then living it. Such inquiry often involves questions like: Who am I really? Is it really true that I'm small and weak? Do I really need to be scared and anxious about this? For lawyers I suspect part of the inquiry involves asking questions like: why did I become a lawyer in the first place? Why am I practicing now? Is my legal practice really serving my growth as a human being? If not, could it? How? Regardless of specifics, it's all about creating the place within you that is imperturbable, where you cannot be blackmailed by your childish fears, or by the expectations or judgments of others, where you can be true to your true self no matter what the reactions may be from within or without.

In creating the inner Shangri-La it's helpful to have small practices that you can do throughout the day that are quick enough that you won't feel like they're interfering with your ability to get your work done. One example is what I call the "thirty-second vacation." Try making a firm commitment to do the following: when you find yourself feeling anxious or overwhelmed, immediately stop what you're doing and for thirty seconds be silent, turn off your discursive mind, and just *be* instead of doing. Even a thirty second break from identification with the overwhelmed self can be enough to break the spell. Another practice: when you're feeling anxious or overwhelmed, stop what you're doing and ask yourself: who am I taking myself to be in this moment? What am I truly afraid of in this moment? What is my true motivation for (fill in the blank, e.g., wanting to dash off that nasty letter to opposing counsel, retreating from a confrontation, etc.)? Is that really who I am and how I want to be? If I were truly being myself, how would I handle this? If this seems too heady an approach, there are plenty of non-verbal paths to true self-knowledge, including art, music, movement, devotional prayer, and service to others.

To conclude: balance isn't a destination. It's a moment-by-moment creation. It's a verb, not a noun. Real balance is about finding sanctuary, over and over and over again, from our self-doubts and our fears until we are able to be our true self more often than not. It's also, ultimately, about how we find our higher self, the inner stillness that is the source of our strength, our peace, our very being. In the end, finding our true self is the only way meaningful balance, and true happiness, can be attained.

THE SCOTTISH HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION  
By W.H. MURRAY

Until one is committed,  
there is hesitancy,  
the chance to draw back,  
always ineffectiveness.  
Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation)  
there is one elementary truth,  
the ignorance of which kills countless ideas  
and splendid plans:  
That the moment one definitely commits oneself,  
then Providence moves too.  
All sort of things occur to help one  
that would never otherwise have occurred.  
A whole stream of events issues from the decision,  
raising in one's favor  
all manner of unforeseen incidents  
and meetings and material assistance,  
which no man could have dreamed  
would have come his way.  
I have learned a deep respect  
for one of Goethe's couplets:  
"Whatever you can do,  
or dream you can,  
begin it.  
Boldness has genius,  
power and magic in it."