

# WHOLE-LIFE SYMMETRY™

## When Work-Life Balance Doesn't Work

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Driven to produce results and achieve personal objectives, many of us jettison every part of our lives except work. Thirty years of golf or travel or relaxation at the end may seem like a just reward for our efforts and sacrifices. On the other hand, some of us might derive all of our meaning from our work, so we run hard now in an effort to *avoid* decades of leisure. Are we designing our lives to feel overused and low performing in the work phase and useless in the second?

### “WE DON'T NEED BALANCE; WE NEED SYMMETRY.”

Balance is not the primary issue. We can try to be balanced – spending equal, predetermined amounts of time in each area of life – but still burn out if we have missed doing the right kinds of things at the right times. We don't need balance; we need *symmetry*. In a symmetrical life, no component is more or less important than it should be, there is a correct proportion of the moving parts, and there is harmony.

The very expression “work-life” highlights a major problem: by contrasting work with life, we miss the point that *work is part of life*. If we denigrate work as the enemy of life and see it as a necessary evil, burnout is inevitable. This view of work diminishes what should be a joyous part of life.

### “LEADERS WITH WHOLE-LIFE SYMMETRY AREN'T MANIACS FOR ONE THING. THEY ARE POLYMANIACS: DEDICATED TO EVERYTHING IN THEIR LIVES THAT HAS VALUE.”

Here is a counterintuitive truth: integrating work, rest, and other activities is both an ethical principle and a key to high performance throughout our lives. Too often, ethics and high performance are regarded as two distinct and largely unrelated subjects. But there is a deep and intimate connection between them. Ethics that draw on the best in leaders, people, teams, and organizations can provide a truly sustainable competitive advantage over those that lack a strong commitment to values. By doing *good*, we can do well. A life lived entirely for work or entirely for leisure overlooks responsibilities to our families and friends, our communities, people in need – even to our highest beliefs and purposes. Either extreme ultimately produces an unethical life and sub-optimal results.

Burnout is usually not the result of having to work hard or long or needing to juggle work and other responsibilities.

Burnout is more often the result of playing a role that robs us of our spiritual connection to work. Perhaps we feel no passion or interest in the work, or it doesn't fit into a larger vision for our lives and purposes. Maybe we can't see the connection between what we do and a greater organizational goal, or we can't contribute the kind of value that the organization expects. Even worse, some of us may deal with a constant tension between work and values or feel used by the organization or others.

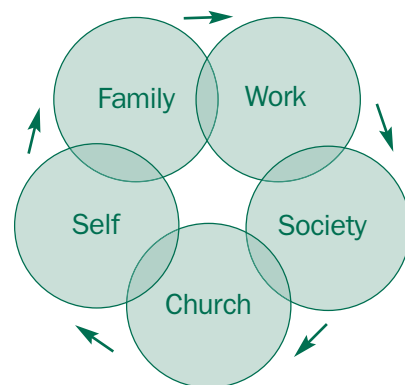
### Fluid Attention to All the Important Areas

There will always be demands and competing priorities that we have to manage wisely, both to do our jobs well and to ensure that the important non-work dimensions of our lives do not fail. The principle of *whole-life symmetry* calls us to keep these pieces in proportion. Living a symmetrical life is not gauged by a fixed or static list of priorities; rather, it is a fluid attention to all the important areas of life.

Not Static  
and Hierarchical:

Fluent and  
Interconnected:

- Family
- Work
- Society
- Church
- Self



Leaders with *whole-life symmetry* aren't maniacs for one thing. They are *polymaniacs*: dedicated to everything in their lives that has value. The key question is not, "What should my priority list look like the rest of my life?" but rather, "What should I be doing right now?" There will be times when work requires our undivided attention and times when our family or something else needs our complete focus. Leaders with *whole-life symmetry* won't let one thing take center stage and they won't let anything get neglected.

As tough as it is to be successful at work, being successful in the other areas of life can be at least as difficult. You can't demote or fire your kids. You can't trade them to another team or send them to a foreign office. You don't get paid to raise them, and you can't quit. Someone has said that parenting is a job, but if so, it's hard to imagine who would apply. Being a good parent (or partner, volunteer, or church worker) simply takes time, energy, commitment, and persistence. If we do these things badly, a day will come when all of the business success in the world won't make up for the failure.

Finding symmetry begins by establishing some guidelines and asking yourself several hard questions:

- **Travel** – Will this trip add value equal to or greater than the energy and time I expend? Do I travel for the right reasons or because I refuse to delegate, don't want to give up my visibility, or try to escape other responsibilities?
- **Meetings** – Do the meetings I attend create value or is my time being absorbed by largely useless sessions? Do I insist on clear objectives and points of action?
- **Reports and reviews** – Do the reports I receive allow me to add or create value or do they simply fill my mind with worthless data, give me information that really belongs to someone else, or satisfy my need to feel in the loop (or in control)?
- **Mail, e-mails, and voice mail** – Do I treat these as tools, or am I a victim to a parade of correspondence that has nothing to do with high performance?
- **Working on weekends and holidays** – Do I do this as an exception, when the current opportunity or challenge is so great that I must put my all into it? Or do I do it because I have frittered away my time during the week, have intruded on and micromanaged others, or am avoiding an unpleasant situation elsewhere?
- **Vacation** – Do I view vacation as a mini-sabbatical that will allow me to recharge, reclaim, and reinvent? Or is it just one more thing to do, a time that's mostly occupied by worrying about work (or actually working)?

**"HONORING THE SEASONS AND RHYTHMS OF LIFE WILL EXTEND (RATHER THAN REDUCE) EFFECTIVENESS – AND MAY EXTEND LIFE AS WELL."**

## Deliberate Stops

Even Type-A leaders can learn to stop working, both in a spiritual sense – by mentally letting go of their work and its results after they have done it well – and in a literal sense – by doing something else. Authentic leadership places heavy demands on the whole life of the leader. But honoring the seasons and rhythms of life will extend (rather than reduce) effectiveness – and may extend life as well.

It is crucial to mix regular rest with our work – and just as crucial to remain engaged while we rest. We need time for mental, emotional, and physical rest, as well as time for family and relaxation. We also need time for spiritual and social engagement, and time for community and service.

## Redefining Retirement

The principle of *whole-life symmetry* extends to years commonly reserved for "retirement." Retirement, as it is generally understood, leads to wasted wisdom and experience, the trivial expenditure of valuable lives, and elderly people who feel useless because they haven't done anything useful in a very long time.

Peter Drucker, known to many as the "father of management," was professionally active throughout his retirement years, and at the time of his death at age ninety-five, was in the middle of writing a thoughtful series for the *Wall Street Journal*.

At his death in his nineties, the great Spanish cellist and composer Pablo Casals was preparing to conduct a symphony he had just finished writing.

What you have been called to do in your life ought to grow and change, but never evaporate. The best life is one that is lived hard, worked hard, played hard, rested hard, and shared hard – from exciting start to fantastic finish.

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*James Lucas is a widely respected and provocative thinker, writer, and speaker.*

*This article is based on his latest ground-breaking book, High-Performance Ethics: 10 Timeless Principles for Next-Generation Leadership, with the foreword by Steve Forbes. Lucas offers keynotes, conferences, and consulting on this and other topics from his five previous cutting-edge books on leadership and cultural design. He founded Luman Consultants International in 1983, which from the start has been dedicated to building reality-based, passionate, thinking, pure-performance teams and organizations. Visit [www.JamesRLucas.com](http://www.JamesRLucas.com) for more information.*

