

## *Balance in Life*

RONALD BROUGH

As my oldest son, Ryan, was a little more than halfway through his studies on this campus, he and I started what was to become a family tradition of attending Tuesday devotionals and forums together each week. Afterward I would treat him to lunch so that we could discuss what we had learned. This gave me an opportunity to observe how things were going in his life. This tradition has continued with each of our children. Our youngest child, Robyn, asked me a question as we exited the Marriott Center last fall semester: “Dad, when are you going to speak in a devotional?”

My reply was simple and to the point: “I’ll likely never be asked because of all the other qualified people they have to choose from.”

This experience reminded me of a comment I made to my wife, Ralene, soon after we were married and were living in Texas. I told her that we would likely never live near her parents, who lived here in Utah County. Based upon my choice to be a musician, the likelihood of living anywhere in the Intermountain West seemed remote. An unexpected phone call came while I was teaching at Indiana State University, and the invitation to come and join the faculty on this campus was extended. It has proven to be a wonderful blessing for our family and an opportunity for my own personal

growth and service. The lesson learned? Never say never!

As a percussionist, I play a number of different instruments in a myriad of musical styles. I have colleagues who specialize on certain instruments, but my motto has always been “If you shake, scrape, or hit it, I play it.” Performing on marimba, vibraphone, and crotales with the Utah Symphony, timpani with Ballet West, a drum set on a jazz gig, or African hand drums in a recording session for a Tahitian Noni infomercial allows me the variety I thrive on. There is seldom, if ever, a time when I feel like I’m in a rut. With that variety comes the challenge of finding time to know what instrument to practice and in what musical style.

Keeping balance in my percussion-playing life has always been a challenge. As a young, new faculty member here, I often traveled up to Salt Lake City to rehearse or perform with a variety of groups. Frequently I would rush home after a busy day on campus only to ask Ralene to pack me a sandwich while I changed

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*Ronald Brough was a professor of music at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 11 December 2007.*

clothes or loaded some percussion equipment into my truck. My son Ryan—who was then only 10 years old—observed the way my life was going and waited for the perfect opportunity to teach his dad a very important lesson. That moment came one day when I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. He responded, “I don’t know exactly what career I want, but I know what I *don’t* want to be—a musician.” I was stunned. He then recounted my multiple refueling sessions, with me hurrying home only to leave again for another engagement.

I reflected upon what he said and was reminded of an experience from my own childhood when I watched the Ed Sullivan variety show on television. Now a variety show was as popular then as reality TV is today. Along with acts like the Beatles, comedians, singers, and tap dancers, there was a performer who would frequently appear on this show whose act consisted of an array of long wooden poles upon which he would carefully place ceramic plates. With a deft hand he would spin each plate while some silly “oompah” music played in the background. As he spun his fifth or sixth plate, inevitably plate number two or three would start to wobble, and he would have to hurry back to increase their spin before they crashed to the floor. It was a riveting display of skill, timing, and speed. Viewers across the nation watched eagerly to see if he could spin all of the plates on every wobbling dowel.

As you are turning in projects, papers, and preparing for finals, perhaps you feel like you are trying to keep too many plates spinning. Our challenge is often deciding how many plates to try to spin and for how long. In 1987 Elder M. Russell Ballard was recovering from a serious illness and felt prompted to speak in April general conference on “Keeping Life’s Demands in Balance” (*Ensign*, May 1987, 13–16). In that address he offered eight suggestions, which I have paraphrased:

1. Think about your life and set your priorities.
2. Set short-term goals that you can reach.
3. Budget wisely and prepare for financial challenges.
4. Stay close to your spouse, children, family, and friends.
5. Study the scriptures.
6. Find time for sufficient rest, relaxation, and exercise.
7. Hold weekly family home evenings.
8. Pray as individuals and as families.

If we view each of these suggestions as an essential pole upon which we need to spin a plate, our ability to deal with the challenges of life will improve.

### **Set Your Priorities**

Think about your life and set your priorities. As a young freshman on this campus, I knew I wanted to do something with music. Throughout my childhood my parents arranged for private music lessons, purchased instruments, and provided me the opportunity to attend schools and summer camps that gave me wonderful musical experiences. When I announced to them sometime during my senior year in high school that I wanted to pursue music for a career, they were suddenly less than enthusiastic. Both of my parents were trained musicians, although my father worked as a corporate executive professionally. They had met each other through music—he was a violinist, and she was his accompanist on piano. When they expressed their “nonsupport” in my choice to make music my career, I was even more determined to succeed. I spent many hours thinking deeply about what I wanted to accomplish in my life. Choosing a major was never a problem for me, but deciding on a career path was something that took years of reflection and refinement. Making slight alterations to basic guiding principles is not a problem. The refining process of one’s career choice is a method

that allows you to tweak your goals through your efforts and hard work.

### **Set Short-Term Goals**

Whether you feel your priorities are already set or still in process, our next plate that must be spinning on a regular basis is the habit of setting short-term goals. Without goals it will be difficult for those priorities to become a reality, and we begin the process of living life in “coasting mode.” Time passes each of us by whether we are accomplishing much with that time or not. Life on this earth is a precious gift. The process of setting, achieving, and reviewing our goals is a lifelong process. Reviewing what we have or have not accomplished helps us to reevaluate whether the goal we set was realistic or helpful. Having the courage to make changes and then pursue what we desire with the right attitude can make a big difference in our ability to succeed.

As you travel home at the conclusion of finals for the Christmas holiday, you might consider taking the time to evaluate your experiences this semester. What went well? What would you do differently? You could even set new goals to make next semester or the next important step in your life more rewarding.

The Church teaches us the importance of this process in Primary as our preteens fulfill the requirements in the *Faith in God* booklets. The same is true of our Young Men and Young Women programs, where you meet with a member of your bishopric to review your accomplishments in your *Personal Progress* or *Duty to God* booklet. You can continue to utilize some of these same concepts and principles in your adult life. How grateful I am for parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and my patriarchal blessing. Each were valuable resources for me in making crucial choices in my life.

### **Budget Wisely**

Another important plate to spin well has to do with how we deal with our finances. As the

husband in a newly married couple, I assumed the role of chief financial officer in our family. After three months my patient wife sat me down and helped me see that the direction I was taking us wasn't faring too well. Ralene had a degree in personal finance, and my creative, musical concepts of how to spend, save, and invest simply weren't working—largely because the last two elements (saving and investing) were missing from my financial formula! Fortunately I was willing to listen and learn. Each Sunday evening we would sit at the kitchen table to view financial ledger sheets she had prepared. When I started doing freelance work while going to school full-time, our income fluctuated from month to month. She was always able to demonstrate on those ledger sheets how the money I had projected we would earn the next month was already spent. Those were depressing meetings for me. I felt as if I was working hard for little or no gain. With time I was able to learn how to handle my spending habits. I made it a point to always pay the Lord as well as myself while also paying our bills.

### **Closeness**

Our relationships with those we love is another essential plate that needs our attention. As our children were growing up, Ralene and I realized that my time at home was too rare an occasion. Since she grew up on a dairy farm, we also felt that working side by side with our children was an important part of their education and training. Eventually the idea was born to start a family band. The university steel band that I had formed years ago had met with a great deal of success. There seemed to be a never-ending supply of requests for off-campus performances, and often these came during the summer months when students were home and away from campus. We came up with the idea of a family steel band knowing that we would receive engagements because of the interest demonstrated by the university group.

Instruments were purchased, and we began to rehearse. One of our earliest performances was to play poolside at a country club. It was a three-hour job, and we could only play 10 tunes. I knew we weren't ready to accept such a long engagement but took the job anyway because I felt that my children weren't putting enough effort into their personal practice or at our rehearsals. By playing this job they would learn just how much more they needed to prepare.

The appointed evening arrived. We set up our instruments and tried to look our professional best. We played all 10 of our tunes and took a break. That took up the first hour, and we hadn't had any real musical crisis. We played them again—this time in a different order—and took another break. We were into our final hour of the job. I called a certain tune—"Yellow Bird," a calypso that Harry Belafonte had made famous many years ago. I was just about to count off the tune when one of the guests at the party came up to me and asked, "You're not going to play 'Yellow Bird' again, are you?"

"No sir," I replied, quickly calling another tune and hoping that he was well on the other side of the pool before we even thought of playing "Yellow Bird" again. Needless to say, we learned a great deal from that experience and have since learned from many other opportunities performing at conventions, arts festivals, performing arts tours, and even performing with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in the Conference Center.

The band went through several transformations as children grew into and out of the band. Ryan now works as a scientist in Salt Lake City, Regan performs with the Army Blues Jazz Big Band in Washington, D.C., and Roger is serving a mission in South Korea. With only Robyn remaining at home, we tried to keep the family band going by hiring some of my colleagues and musical heroes. They are great musicians, and it was a thrill to have them in the band.

At the end of one of our performances, my wife looked at me and said, "This isn't fun anymore. It feels like work." I knew what she meant. Although these newcomers to our band were great musicians, the band had become something more than an ensemble. Our relationship as a family was a part of what made the music happen. We decided that evening to disband the family band.

This experience reminds me of an important scripture: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Our family band served many purposes. It helped our children save for their missions, learn how to work together, develop their self-esteem, and have fun—all while providing a service to others. But this is a plate I no longer spin in my life, and I can channel those energies elsewhere.

### **Study the Scriptures**

Regular study of the scriptures as a family and as individuals has always been a part of our family culture. When our two youngest children, Roger and Robyn, were still preschool age, we each took a turn reading a verse. It was painful to listen to these two read an entire verse of scripture. I would cringe when they had a longer verse to read, but we kept at it. They eventually became great readers, and we learned to better understand the scriptures together.

When Robyn was a senior in high school and the only one left at home, she came to me and said, "Dad, why do we still need to read the scriptures together as a family? You know I love the scriptures, and, according to Elder Eyring, that is the purpose of family scripture study."

I went and found the *Ensign* and read the article. Sure enough, Elder Henry B. Eyring had said:

*It's important to read the scriptures together in a way that lets your children know you include them*

*because you love them. However, reading together may break down during the teenage years. Teens may say, "I'd rather read on my own." My encouragement to families in that situation is to see that as victory, not defeat. Your child may be saying, "I'm getting something when I'm alone that I don't get when we're all here together." Take that as a wonderful sign that scripture study is beginning to take hold in your teen's heart. The main purpose is to fall in love with the scriptures and feast upon them, whether we are alone or together. ["A Discussion on Scripture Study," *Ensign*, July 2005, 25]*

Wow! I had to really alter my thinking. Robyn *did* love the scriptures and read them every night before retiring to bed. And yet I didn't want to give up that experience because it brought a great spirit into our home. What could we do differently as a family to make our time together more effective for her as well as for us? We counseled together and learned that she wanted help with memorizing her scripture mastery scriptures that year in seminary. She also wanted to read the *Preach My Gospel* manual that was newly published. We did both. She continued reading scriptures her way in her personal study, and we all learned the scripture mastery scriptures and studied the *Preach My Gospel* manual together. It was a wonderful experience for all three of us—even though I am a terrible memorizer.

### **Find Time to Relax**

Since my career has also been my favorite hobby, I usually have difficulty taking time off from music-making to exercise, relax, and simply recreate. Often our first family vacations consisted of brief camping trips or visits with family. Too many times I considered tours with musical groups as vacations. It took years for my family to convince me that we needed to just "get away" and have time together without work-related distractions. It has been a conscious effort for me to now plan a family vacation where work is not involved. The

memories made and the experiences learned have become priceless. I shudder to think of the opportunities missed when I was so busy spinning unnecessary "music-making plates" in lieu of spending time relaxing with my wife and children.

### **Family Home Evening**

Another family activity we were fairly consistent with was weekly family home evenings. Our Church leaders have taught us over and over again the importance of this weekly event and the ways that it can strengthen us and help us both individually and collectively. I am very grateful for a wife who took every opportunity to teach principles to our children. She didn't wait for Monday night to teach them. When a question was asked, it was a teaching opportunity. When there was a disagreement, it was a teaching opportunity. My father was the first to point this out to me. When he was visiting our home, he took me aside and asked if I had noticed how Ralene had just instructed one of our children. I am sure he asked that question knowing full well that I wasn't even remotely aware of what she had just done.

Growing a garden was an important part of our children's upbringing. We always included the children in planting, weeding, and harvesting. One lesson that I learned early one Saturday morning from my wife had to do with weeding the garden. The night before we had had a rehearsal with our family band and were working on a new musical number. Ralene had had some difficulty in making her part fit with the rest of the band. She was a bit anxious and would rush some of the rhythmic figures, and it just didn't groove. We stopped to talk about the problem. Many of the children offered their suggestions to help her, but each time we played that part of the tune, she continued to rush. I didn't realize how frustrating this was for her until I asked her a simple question while pulling weeds the next morning in the garden. "Is this a plant or

a weed?" I asked, looking at an array of green sprouts.

She stared at me wide-eyed and replied, "You can't tell, can you?"

My response was, "I wouldn't have asked if I knew which of these to pull and which to leave planted."

Then came the teaching moment. "Now you know how I felt last night in rehearsal."

Looking down at the ground, I had no idea which of those little green things to leave in the soil. What a great way to help me understand how she must have felt the night before, doing her best to play her notes but not knowing what to do differently to "make it groove."

### Prayer

Elder Ballard's final suggestion for us to keep our balance in this world and in the eternal scheme of things is prayer. As a bishop, when I interview youth, I am amazed at how many young people are faithful at saying their personal prayers at night but seldom pray in the morning. When I ask why they choose not to pray in the morning, the excuses vary, but most center on the fact that they get up too late and simply don't have the time. My next question to them is, "When you sin and make mistakes, isn't it more frequently from the time you wake up until you retire at night, or do those things occur more often from the time you fall asleep until you get up in the morning?" They are quick at getting my point.

We need our prayers just as much, if not more, at the start of our day. I can recall periods in my life when I was less consistent with morning personal prayers compared to evening prayers. Inevitably I was asking Heavenly Father in those evening prayers for forgiveness for my many mistakes and shortcomings. When I took the time in the morning to gather my thoughts, plan my day, and pray for His help and guidance, my evening prayers were frequently filled with thanksgiving for the good things that had transpired.

Family prayer is a great way to teach principles and feel love for those with whom we live. There is nothing sweeter than for me to hear my companion pray in my behalf. Hopefully she has similar feelings when I pray for her in our family prayers. Our good neighbor LaDawn Jacob often makes the statement that leaving the house without family prayer is like leaving the house naked.

Prayer is a tool to help us commune with our Father in Heaven. It is also the vehicle He can use to reveal His will to us.

President Spencer W. Kimball's words are direct, but worth our personal reflection:

*Do you get answers to your prayers? If not, perhaps you did not pay the price. Do you offer a few trite words and worn-out phrases, or do you talk intimately to the Lord? Do you pray occasionally when you should be praying regularly, often, constantly? Do you offer pennies to pay heavy debts when you should give dollars to erase that obligation?*

*When you pray, do you just speak, or do you also listen? Your Savior said, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20.) . . .*

*. . . The Lord stands knocking. He never retreats. But he will never force himself upon us. If we ever move apart, it is we who move and not the Lord. And should we ever fail to get an answer to our prayers, we must look into our lives for a reason. ["Prayer," *New Era*, March 1978, 17]*

In many of the examples shared today, you may have noticed that frequently I was the one making adjustments. It wasn't enjoyable to admit my lack of financial prowess and to attend those budget meetings with my wife, nor was it always easy or fun trying to make music with my family in our first few attempts to rehearse and perform. The gentle rebuke by my young son regarding his career preference, "caving in" to my daughter's desire to

memorize scripture mastery scriptures, and pulling weeds in the garden were perhaps uncomfortable situations at first glance that proved to be great blessings in my life, not spineless acts of trying to please. These experiences were shared not to boast, brag, or indict. They were shared because all of us need to make changes.

We can make changes for the better. We fought for that right in the premortal existence. The ability to make choices is what allows us to “come unto Christ,” as Moroni so eloquently stated at the conclusion of the Book of Mormon (Moroni 10:30, 32). There are times when we must push forward and not give in, but there are also times when we need to reconsider and alter our direction or approach.

This quote by Elder Neal A. Maxwell has been very helpful to me:

*I am going to preach a hard doctrine to you now. The submission of one's will is really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God's altar. It is a hard doctrine, but it is true. The many other things we give to God, however nice that may be of us, are actually things He has already given us, and He has loaned them to us. But when we begin to submit ourselves by letting our wills be swallowed up in God's will, then we are really giving something to Him. And that hard doctrine lies at the center of discipleship. There is a part of us that is ultimately sovereign, the mind and heart, where we really do decide which way to go and what to do. And when we submit to His will, then we've really given Him the one final thing He asks of us. And the other things are not very, very important. It is the only possession we have that we can give, and there is no lessening of our agency as a result. Instead, what we see is a flowering of our talents and more and more surges of joy. [“Insights from My Life,” *Ensign*, August 2000, 9]*

Whether we choose to use all eight suggestions offered by Elder Ballard or follow the advice of any number of experts in the field of “life balance,” the important thing to remember is that those of us with the gift of the Holy Ghost need to utilize that gift. Having the gift of the Holy Ghost bestowed upon us is one thing. Having the *influence* of the Holy Ghost in our lives is another. Submitting our personal will to that of our Father in Heaven allows us to receive much-needed inspiration and revelation. We don't have to be an apostle, Relief Society president, or elders quorum president to have that influence in our lives.

Elder Robert D. Hales reinforced this concept as he spoke to us in our last general conference:

*As faithful children, youth, parents, teachers, and leaders, we may receive personal revelation more frequently than we realize. The more we receive and acknowledge personal revelation, the more our testimonies grow. As a bishop, my testimony grew each time I received revelation to extend callings to ward members. That testimony has been strengthened each time I witness General Authorities and officers, Area Seventies, and stake presidents called or given new assignments. More importantly, I am strengthened by the personal revelations I receive in my role as a son of God, a husband, and a father. I am so thankful for the guidance and direction of the Spirit in our home as we seek for direction in family matters. [“Personal Revelation: The Teachings and Examples of the Prophets,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 88]*

Each of us has the ability to receive the direction we need to achieve a balanced life. My hope and prayer is that we will do what we need to do to have the influence of our Father in Heaven in our lives. As we do our part, I testify that He will do His part to bring us eternal life and joy. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

