

Balancing Eggs

Rev. Lisa Doege

Mar. 21, 2010

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

I don't remember when or where or how I first learned about balancing eggs on the vernal equinox--the first day of spring. I do remember that I persisted through a couple false starts and then--it balanced! I was as amazed as Robert Walsh in this morning's first reading. Others in my family wanted to try it and soon we had two or three eggs balancing on the kitchen counter for the rest of the day. In time I too came to know that the eggs balancing on the first day of spring, while not really urban myth, is at best a partial truth. Eggs will balance anytime one has patience enough to set them up again and again until it happens and hands steady enough for the task. Lives are a different story.

Balance is, on the whole, considered a positive quality. Balancing the books and balancing our car wheels keep us safe and fiscally secure. Doctors, nutritionists and moms advocate a balanced diet. Civics professors teach us that checks and balances make for good government. We admire balance in athletes from figure skaters and alpine skiers to gymnasts and golfers. The high-wire acts and acrobats in the circus amaze us with their feats of balance. The wisest of the wise through the ages have preached balance at every turn, and so too do contemporary self-help gurus.

From Unitarian Universalist minister turned best selling author, Robert Fulghum: *Be aware of wonder. Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.*

From the late Thomas Merton, Trappist Monk and writer: *Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm and harmony.*

From Brigham Young, of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: *Life is best enjoyed when time periods are evenly divided between labor, sleep, and recreation...all people should spend one-third of their time in recreation which is rebuilding, voluntary activity, never idleness.*

From philosopher John Locke: *An excellent man, like precious metal, is in every way invariable; A villain, like the beams of a balance, is always varying, upwards and downwards.*

And from that fountain of wisdom and insight, Jennifer Lopez: *Beauty is only skin deep. I think what's really important is finding a balance of mind, body and spirit.*

Magazines, particularly those geared toward working mothers, offer five tips or seven strategies for balancing family and work, or home and office, or marriage and children in every issue. Balance sells. And it sells for a reason.

Americans have become a society of multi-taskers--though experts in the workings of the brain insist we don't really multi-task; we just think we do. We watch TV while we eat our meals. We listen to books on CD while we walk on the treadmill. We write e-mails or proofread reports while we talk on the telephone. We even send text messages while we drive. We go to school while working full time. We work two jobs while raising a family. We sign our kids up for sports and drama and scouting and camp and debate and marching band--and then drive them there--and there and there and there. And go to their games, plays, concerts and events. We go to church and the Sons of Norway and volunteer for the fire department or to drive meals on wheels.

How can we possibly heed Brigham Young's advice about dividing our lives evenly into work and play and rest when we have so many options and the lines between work and play and rest are all blurred?

And those are just the things we **do**. Throwing us further off balance is all that simply surrounds us much of the time--namely information and stimulation from every direction: blue tooth devices or ear buds in our ears; computers dinging or flashing or beeping every time a message comes in, CNN or ESPN or Oprah on in the airport, the doctor's office, the bar.

The prescription *moderation in all things* sounds so good, so desirable. The problem is, it doesn't work. For one thing, life just doesn't unfold that way. What better reminder of that than spring itself? The world is waking up and about to enter a frenzy of growth and activity after long months of sleep. Life comes at us, or to us, in ebbing and flowing waves. The rush of toddler years, when everything is new and to be explored as fast as our faltering feet can carry us. Go, do, go until we drop from exhaustion. Then long childhood years at the orderly pace of school days and vacation times. Another frenzied period of activity in young adulthood as we enter **the real world**, in search of our place, our mate, our life's work. Then, unbelievable, an even frenzied time when our own children enter the mix. And so on, until empty nests and retirement slow things down again.

For another thing, moderation in all things is quite frankly a boring approach to the wonders of life. Back in the stone ages of computer games, before the internet and CGI and X box, I used to play a game called Oregon Trail, on the teletype machine hooked into the mainframe. The object was to make it safely to Oregon from a starting point back East by making sound decisions. I learned pretty quickly that if, any time I was given the choice, I divided my available money evenly between ammunition, food, and livestock, I'd win every time. It was a sure bet. No one would starve. No one would be lost to an ambush. And the party would be well supplied for a new life once the destination was reached. A sure bet and boring as could be. What's the point in playing a game that is absolutely predictable? And what's the point in living a life that is absolutely balanced?

Some people in some fields are catching on to this. New ministers, for example, are taught that the eight hour day and the forty hour week are useless concepts in our line

of work. Ministry simply can't be contained in such a regular and balanced formula. We are taught to think instead of days being dividing into three units: morning, afternoon, and evening. We are encouraged to work no more than two units in a given day, and no more than eleven or twelve units out of twenty-one in a week. Our days and even our weeks may still be unbalanced in terms of periods of activity and inactivity but with this method of accounting we can hope to keep from burning out, destroying intimate relationships, and coming to resent the church.

The unit method is one anyone can adapt to fit his/her life. Take Fulghum's advice, for example, about learning, thinking, dancing, playing and working some each day. One might go mad trying to check each item off the list every day. But, if in the course of a week or month or a life time, one has danced and thought and learned and played and worked, in whatever ratio feels right and necessary, OK, then. Well done.

The writer James Baldwin counters all the calls for balance with this thought: *Action is a lack of balance. In order to act you must be somewhat insane. A reasonably sensible man is satisfied with thinking.*

Baldwin's words are truth not only at the level of action vs thinking, but also at the basic level of mechanics. We are more or less perfectly balanced standing still on two feet, but if we want to get anyway, we have to lift one foot off the ground and throw ourselves off balance.

Better for us the art of juggling than the art of perfect balance. I'm not a juggler myself, but if the poem (*This Trick for A.D., who taught me*, by Margaret Winchell Miller) is to be believed, non-jugglers like me have a misconception about the secret to the skill. We think it is about keeping lots of things in the air at once--balls, flaming torches, bowling pins, appointments, obligations, kids, partner, job. Rather, the poem tells us, it is about letting go and concentrating on one thing at a time.

The poet names that one thing "the thing that is falling". She says we must let go of the thing in our hand in order to concentrate always on the thing that is falling. That is an image, and an act of will, most of us recognize deep in our being. We let go the tasks and obligations we have in hand in order to catch those that are falling. It can be an exhausting and nerve-fraying way to live--moving from one crisis to the next, always tossing something away so we can catch what's falling.

But when the juggler does it, it is a beautiful, graceful dance. One that makes us hold our breath in anticipation of disaster, yes, but beautiful, graceful nonetheless.

I don't know anyone who has the time, the patience, and the steady hands to balance eggs on end day after day, or even once a year. But we all have the capacity for juggling. Not wildly, not recklessly, not even reactively. Rather with grace and beauty and confidence, knowing that, since we can't truly multi-task, we do well to concentrate as needed on one thing at a time, trusting that we will know when to free our hands, our minds, our hearts, our lives in order to catch the next falling object. Our juggling will not

have the regular pace and rhythm of the circus juggler. Some objects will seem to take much longer to fall than others. But unbalanced, lopsided, erratic juggling has a beauty all its own.

Happy spring! May this be the season you trade your eggs for juggling balls and revel in freedom from balance. Amen.