

“Balance Point”
by Rev. Meghan C. Cefalu
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I don't know what you have going on tomorrow afternoon, but if planetary events are of interest to you, you may want to take notice at exactly 3:44 when our sun will be positioned directly over the earth's equator.

As far as I know there are no organized gatherings of people to celebrate in open fields and there will be nothing particularly intriguing to view in the sky. But maybe you are like me and there is something simple about knowing this is happening that makes you smile. It reaffirms your rooted-ness to the earth, and your interconnectedness to the life forms on the planet.

Here in the northern hemisphere the event signals the beginning of the season of Autumn. The term equinox means “equal night”. On the days of the spring and fall equinox, the Sun spends a nearly equal amount of time above and below the horizon at every location on Earth and night and day will be almost exactly the same length.

Given that our whole planet is experiencing this brief moment of solar equilibrium it seemed apropos to talk some about balance, especially our own sense of balance in our lives.

The image on the cover of today's order of service is the type of scale held in the hands of Lady Justice. Depicted in paintings and statues in our courthouses, the Roman goddess of justice is the personification of the moral force that underlies the legal system. Ideally, in the courtroom, equal weight is given to both sides and the resulting verdict is fair and balanced.

Just about any experience we can think of has extremes in either direction: light and dark, salty and bland, rich and poor. But bringing balance means more than equalizing the weight, intensity or proportion of two things.

Remember Goldilocks? When initially faced with two ursine extremes she preferred the third option that she always found to be “just right”.

Around twenty years ago some research hit the popular culture about the differences between the two hemispheres of the brain. The right brain, it was found, oversees creativity, intuition. While the left brain governs logic and all things linear. Most people, it was determined, have a predominant hemisphere from which they tend to operate the majority of the time.

Artsy, creative types who couldn't balance their checkbook to save their lives relished the idea that they were just “right-brained”. And those who could do triple digit long division in their heads, yet became weak in the knees at the idea of improvising on the clarinet, were just as happy to know they were considered more “left-brained”.

The research also told us that the most effective people used both sides fairly evenly. So while it is tempting to fold our arms complacently across our chests, feeling validated by our

new label, we should actually be seeking out activities that stimulate our brain's less dominant hemisphere.

There are some personality traits that have been deemed more feminine and others that people consider mainly masculine. In today's world there seems to be a shift where increasingly, men and women are seeking to cultivate and nurture the traits normally associated with the other gender. A well-rounded man is able to feel and express even his more vulnerable emotions and a well-rounded woman speaks her mind even when she knows her ideas may be unpopular.

Right brain/left brain and masculine/feminine are examples of balancing *two* opposing factors. It seems to me much more challenging to create and sustain equilibrium when there are a *variety* of aspects at play.

For example, trying to eat a balanced diet means choosing foods from all the different groups but not too much from any one. We all know what happens if we accidentally eat too much fruit, or too much cheese. Our digestive system revolts. We feel healthier when we practice moderation.

Then there is fiscal balance which on the large scale has hundreds of complicated factors. Here in California we're still waiting to get this year's budget passed through Sacramento. While our national economy is in serious, serious trouble. The US Treasury is scrambling to stabilize the effects of the housing market crash on Wall Street. Only time will tell if the proposed bail-out plan will work. (I'm clearly too right-brained to even begin to figure it all out.)

It is in the yoga studio that I have come to appreciate a very immediate and visceral experience of balance. There is one pose in particular that requires me to stretch my body with equal strength in opposite directions, forward and backward, while standing on one leg. The teacher says that if you stretch your arm forward more than you are kicking your leg back or vice versa you will fall out of the pose. She is quite right as I can attest.

Practicing this yoga posture has given me another valuable insight. Regaining my balance once it is lost is much more difficult than making slow and careful adjustments so that I maintain my steadiness from the beginning. It is much harder to try to pull my body back towards the center once I've started tilting too far in one direction. Yet I know from the few times I have been able to carefully spread the effort evenly in my body from the very beginning - I can stay there on one foot for the duration of the pose almost effortlessly.

I have to think this translates to other areas of life. When things get out of whack and we get pulled off-kilter in some area of our lives we have to expend a great deal more energy trying to compensate, to right ourselves.

It was in seminary where I first learned about traditional Eastern medicine. Unlike Western medicine which focuses on treating the symptoms of our dis-ease, these ancient Asian healing systems focus on restoring balance within the whole being.

This is a very condensed explanation of Chinese medicine: there is energy, called chi, that flows through everyone's body along various channels or meridians. The energy is thought to have two qualities: yin and yang. Yin represents the night, and the feminine while Yang represents day, and masculine. When a person's body has an excess or deficiency of either of the two types of energy the imbalance will eventually cause physical symptoms.

Our professor, Kyle, was the most grounded person I think I had ever met. He was an acupuncturist and Chinese medicine practitioner. Before I even knew what that meant I knew I liked Kyle. He seemed to exude loving-kindness. Just being around him made me feel more balanced.

At my first acupuncture appointment with Kyle he said my low energy and propensity for catching colds was due to the fact that my yang energy was extremely deficient. He put needles in my body along certain meridians and then when it was over he sent me home with some herbs to take.

I didn't really know what to expect from such a gentle treatment, but within a few days my energy level was higher than it had been in months and my mood had improved drastically.

The ancient Indian healing system of Ayurveda also sees physical symptoms as caused by an imbalance in the energies in the body and mind.

Deepak Chopra writes: "The guiding principle of Ayurveda is that the mind exerts the deepest influence on the body, and freedom from sickness depends on contacting our own awareness, bringing it into balance, and then extending that balance into the body."¹

Both of these systems use some combination of herbs, diet and bodywork to bring the whole mind/body system closer into balance which then gives the body a chance to naturally heal itself.

Most of us in the modern age have lives that are fairly complicated. There are a lot of elements involved. We need to keep ourselves financially afloat. Our bodies need regular feedings and exercise, sleep and for many of us, medication. Our homes and yards, cars and other belongings need to be maintained.

Because we are intelligent and curious beings we need the stimulation of new ideas and new experiences, art and music. Our sense of community calls us to civic and other volunteer duties. And because we are conscious, and we care, social injustice in our midst entreats us into action.

¹ Deepak Chopra. *Perfect Balance: Ayurvedic Nutrition for Mind, Body, and Soul*

But we also need time to play games and laugh with our families and friends. To share meals. To make love.

And we need time that is just our own to do the things that feed and nurture our souls. To express our creativity. Time to sense the thread of divinity, the life force sourced from the earth, that runs through us all, and out into the Universe.

I've found that for me, trying to stay in balance means more than juggling my responsibilities. It is also about managing my attention. I struggle with how much energy and time I will devote to things I do not have any power over, especially world news and politics. Sometimes I get overwhelmed and depressed and I have to disengage for a while.

Then after a few days I get curious again. It is a never-ending push and pull. I may never find the perfect balance where I can stay reasonably informed about the doings of my fellow human beings and remembering and celebrating the positive things in my immediate world.

All of the elements in our lives pull at us in a different direction. And wouldn't you know, as soon as we think we may have finally mastered the balance, something shifts in our life and we have to make adjustments to regain the symmetry all over again.

I'm beginning to think that maintaining balance will always be a bit of a struggle. And that this image I carry of perfect balance where everything is just right all at once happens rarely and only in fleeting moments.

Given that perfection is unachievable, I realize that this striving for balance is a spiritual practice about the effort more than the outcome. But it is definitely worth the effort because from what I can tell life is much more draining when we are out of balance.

I have a friend who spent some part of her early twenties addicted to drugs and alcohol and unemployed. We were talking about this sermon topic last week and she told me,

“You know, I would look at those people around me who had 9-5 jobs and I would think ‘that looks so hard’. I couldn't begin to imagine myself going to an office every day. But now that I am sober and have one of those 9-5 jobs I realize that my life was actually much harder back then. I spent so much of my time and energy scrambling around for money for food, drugs and rent.”

I also realize that no amount of balance will prevent one's life from tilting. Tragedies happen at random. If you and I are lucky we will grow old. And no matter how much balance we have created in our lives many of us will eventually get sick. But if we have practiced balance throughout our lives, when the time comes and we get knocked off our feet I have to think we will have an easier time righting ourselves once again.

I have no doubt that there have been moments in each of our lives of near-perfect balance.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment:

Call to mind a time when your life felt balanced. Maybe it was during your childhood, school days, or at some point in your earlier career or married life. It may have been only a week or two, or maybe it lasted longer. Perhaps you are living right this very minute at the most balanced point in your life to date.

This was a time of effortlessness. Where certain things seemed to come easily. Maybe you had some work that felt important but enough time to enjoy yourself. You had people around you who you loved and who loved you. Your laughter came very easily.

What was the predominant emotion you associate with this time in your life? What did it feel like in your body?

Open your eyes when you feel ready....

This is something I know is true: Joy is our natural state.

If you need proof, watch a baby who has just learned to smile, or listen to a schoolyard at recess. When our bodies, our lives are in balance joy flows naturally through us.

I think what happens is when we inevitably lose our balance and get pulled away from our center our memory of this natural joyfulness fades.

Striving for balance is an ongoing spiritual practice.

It is true that we need some kind of work in our lives to stimulate us and fill our need to contribute. And as this morning's reading mentioned, we need time to "stop and stare like sheep and cows"² too.

In our society just about everyone is overscheduled and over stimulated from the cradle to the grave. Infants and their parents gather for baby playgroups and retirement homes have social schedules that rival some sorority houses. So bringing our lives back into balance certainly does not mean adding more things.

Last year when I realized how out of balance my life had become I decided I needed to change a few things. I needed to start meditating, exercise regularly, spend more quality time with my husband and make reading a higher priority. The only problem with my new plan for balance was that I had not eliminated any of the things I was already doing.

It is hard for me to let go of accomplishing things. My ego gets so tied up with being recognized, and for doing things well. But like most spiritual practices, this is one about letting go.

² Reference to the reading earlier in the service.

So if you think of it, if you are not too busy, remember that tomorrow at 3:44 in the afternoon the entire planet will be perfectly balanced between night and day for just a moment.

And how is it with you?

You and I will know we are in balance when life begins to feel more effortless. When we are not stressed with the effort of holding everything together we will have more energy, more chi, available to us.

Most importantly, we will know when we are on the right track because we will feel joyful more and more often.

And in this state of grace we will come to sense the love - that some of us know as God - flowing freely through us and outward from our hearts and into the world.

May it be so. Amen