

# Moving Toward Balance and Contentment

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The caption on the T-shirt caught my attention: "I am Woman... I am Invincible... I am Tired." Wherever I go, it seems that women are trying to do more and more while at the same time feeling less and less effective or satisfied. "There's not enough time in the day to get everything done" is our common lament as we attempt to juggle a variety of roles—mother, daughter, sister, wife, friend, employee, family chauffeur, church or community volunteer, and more. It seems that we long to achieve "balance" and contentment in our lives, yet generally this is always around the next corner—"after I finish this project" or "after the holidays" or "after the kids leave home" or after whatever the next thing is on our "to do" lists. We tend to have high expectations for ourselves, and we often push ourselves to meet all the expectations and needs of others as well. When we don't measure up, we may view this as our own inadequacy or inefficiency rather than question what or how much we are trying to achieve.

Without realizing it, many of us have succumbed to the myth that if we just work a little bit harder or a little more efficiently, we can "do it all" and do it all *well*. Somehow, many of us have confused living the "good life" with living a hectic life. The time has come for us to slow down, to listen to ourselves and each other, and to realize that we have been trying to do too much. The reality is that it is not possible to do everything, let alone do everything well. In fact, trying to do too much actually diminishes the depth and quality of our lives and our relationships. Let's be courageous enough to get off the fast track and to thoughtfully consider how we might move towards more balanced, purposeful, satisfying lives.

Obviously there are no simple, ready-made solutions that will work for everyone. In fact, much of the mystery, adventure, and creative journey of life comes out of each of us doing our *own* work to discover and to better define our worth, purpose, and goals. If you are tired of trying to be invincible and long to live a more balanced,

meaningful life, here are a few ideas to get you started.

**1. Celebrate choice and take time to choose wisely.** Women in America are fortunate to have so many options today, but one of the reasons that we get overwhelmed and overburdened is that we often don't take ourselves and our freedom to make choices seriously enough. At times we "go along with" what we think is expected or needed of us without taking time to carefully identify, evaluate or select our options.

We need to take more responsibility for our choices in life and to make choices that are congruent with our own values, beliefs, and goals. This means that we need to know who we are and what we value.

Set aside some time now to be still, to listen to God and to your own inner voice, and to reflect on those things that are really most important to you in this all-too-short life.

Now, be honest with yourself. Are you currently spending time on what is really important to you, or are you waiting to start living the life you want? A friend of mine is fond of saying: "Enjoy life *now* - there is no dress rehearsal!" Think about the "big picture"; what do you want to have experienced or accomplished five years, ten years, twenty-five years from now? How would you like to be remembered after you die? What are the "I wish I would have done" experiences—experiences of the heart and soul—that you will regret later if you do not take time now to do them? Take as much reflection time as you need to identify your core beliefs and values and to set specific goals which will incorporate and honor these. Then have the courage to stick to your plan and to say "yes" to those activities which support your life goals and "no" to those which do not.

**2. Make yourself a top priority.** "There are 24 hours in a day; how many belong to you?" All too often women invest their best time and energy in others and neglect their own needs and self-care. Surviving on "leftovers" leads to depletion and resentment, not to vitality and contentment. Selflessly taking care of others can be a convenient way to

avoid taking responsibility for our own lives. We need to explore and to challenge our reasons for not taking better care of ourselves and to learn to respect, honor, and love ourselves enough to make time for adequate sleep, exercise, healthy eating, fun, and relaxation. If you can't be good to yourself, you may have trouble letting in the good that the world has to offer you, and you may also end up with little to give back to the world. Find at least one hobby or outlet that rejuvenates you and resolve to do this on a regular basis. One of my favorite passions is cycling; I regularly treat myself to the refreshing sense of peace and appreciation of the natural world that this brings me.

**3. Learn to live in the present and to appreciate the small things in life.** Too many of us get stuck in the past or live for the future. We need to shift our focus to the "here and now" and to open up our senses to take in and to savor the present moment. Slow down. . . breathe deeply. . . become aware of your body's sensations. . . pay attention to your feelings. Let the child in you help you to remember how to laugh, dance, sing, play, and see with fresh eyes the beauty and the wonder of our everyday lives. Even during the toughest times in life, there will almost always be people or things for which we can be grateful, if we take the time to look.

**4. Simplify your lifestyle. Be willing to give up some things.** We need to accept that when we choose something, we generally have to let go of something else. Pursuing one's desire may mean postponing gratification of another. We need to realize that "more" is not necessarily better, and that "less" is not necessarily worse. In fact, too much of anything tends to diminish its value. Establishing priorities and setting limits on what we choose to do not only simplifies our lives, but also opens the door for us to better appreciate what we have. One of my favorite Chinese proverbs helps me to keep things in perspective: "He who knows he has enough is rich."

**5. Seek out the friendship, support, and wisdom of other women.** We have much in common as women, yet all too often we live in isolation, too busy or too afraid to reach out to each other. Over the