



All In - How Women Entrepreneurs Can Think Bigger, Build Sustainable Businesses, and Change the World

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Chapter 7

Get Integrated

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

—Aristotle

It was a rare Saturday afternoon. There was no scheduled activity for the boys, and the house was quiet. This was highly unusual. Davis and Austin were nine and ten and had found new freedom in building forts, playing football, or playing video games with neighborhood friends without parental supervision. No work crisis was pressing me to seize the moment, and there was no guilt-producing backlog of household duties. My mind wasn't racing about the next ten things on the to-do list. Maybe I should pinch myself, I thought, just to make sure it was a real moment.

I took it in and wondered, maybe this is the beginning of a new season. Perhaps there will be more moments like it in the days to come. How will I take advantage of these moments? So many choices. I decided that a jog would be good for my mind, body, and soul. I laced up my tennis shoes and headed out the door, conscious of soaking in this beautiful Saturday afternoon.

We lived on a street that was a three-quarter mile circle, and I decided that two or three laps around the circle, followed by a peaceful walk would be delightful. I stretched a little and slowly took off. I'm not much of a runner, but this sounded fun. I got about three quarters of the way around the circle (a little over a half mile), and I thought I was going to die. No joke! My lungs burned, my legs hurt, and it was now way too hot. I couldn't will myself to move fast enough to actually run even if I wanted to. What was the matter with

me? The last time I did this, I thought, it was no problem. And I began to think back to the last time I exercised.

When was the last time? I tried to think. OMG! I was shocked when it hit me. Ten years ago. Yes, ten! It's sobering when you realize you haven't exercised in a decade. That was a defining moment for me.

Is this story proof that I was out of balance? Should it be? What is balance anyway? Why is it such a dominant term in our vernacular? Google 'balance,' and you'll turn up a host of titles, such as *Work-Life Balance: Can Women Really Have It All? or How I Created a Comfortable Work-Life Balance*. It's a popular topic, because everyone seeks it, but it's my belief that most of us don't have the right definition.

Life Balance Is a Myth

To have life balance is to have each area of life aligned, cooperating without incident at all times, taking no more than its allotted share on the scale to maintain harmony and thus balance. The probability of success is zero. Yet we keep chasing it and then feel like a failure, which begets guilt, stress, fear, a lack of confidence, and every negative emotion you can think of. There is something truly wrong when intelligent adults believe that we can align the unpredictable components of life with precision and keep them in constant balance. It's time to reexamine the idea of balance, as a society and as women.

Are you chasing a myth?

We do it, because it's the cultural norm, like cattle following the herd. How comfortable are you breaking from the norm and openly sharing that you are not aligned,

in harmony, or in balance? Would you be willing to admit that you are actually happier, more satisfied, and confident as a result of abandoning the illusory quest for balance?

Many of us desire to forge a new path, willing to gamble that the new and disruptive path will produce something better. Why are we seeking something better? Because the current zero-sum game is not working. However, the cultural pull to stay on the hamster wheel with the masses and keep a fast pace to nowhere is incredibly strong. The leap feels risky with real consequences, and you won't be normal. The pull to be just like everyone else keeps us striving to be perfect professionals, perfect parents, perfect partners—with exercise, a robust social life, date nights, me time, couple's vacations, nutritious meals each evening, professional involvement, community involvement, academic involvement, extracurricular involvement, and book clubs all perfectly scheduled and balanced. You know, the norm.

A scale must be perfectly still to hold its items in balance with no bumps, jolts, or sudden additions. It seems to me that the act of balancing, of keeping everything perfectly controlled and delicately placed to maintain harmony, prevents spontaneity. It removes chance, serendipitous happenings, new ideas, change, and the possibility of growth. It removes the stuff that brings joy to living. Great amounts of energy are employed, accomplishing no forward progress.

Peaks and Valleys

Real life is actually made of peaks and valleys. Life is constantly moving forward, and we are tasked with managing the roller coaster ride over those peaks and valleys at an enjoyable and sometimes exhilarating level.

It should be normal to give more attention to professional demands in one moment and personal demands in the next. We can't give everything equal amounts of our attention all of the time. We can't be singularly focused either. This is where the power of partnership delivers the support we need to keep the peaks hill-sized rather than mountain-sized and the valleys like meadows rather than deep crevices. I try to keep my roller coaster at a size that maximizes enjoyment at kiddie land with gentle curves and ups and downs that are just enough to keep it interesting. Of course, there have been times when it has grown to a Guinness Book of World Records fright machine that requires you to be at least five feet tall to ride (almost too tall for me). You know immediately when this occurs, as most of your partners hate this type of ride and want to make a beeline back to the kiddie-land coaster.

There is always an opportunity to break down the fright machine and rebuild. The ride is lifelong. Focus on the health of the integrated whole and the long-term journey, understanding that your priorities must be given the ability to change in weight over the seasons of a lifetime. Stressing a bad moment, day, week, or month as permanently detrimental is a mistake and the stress is misplaced. A bad decision, a short-term struggle to keep your priorities in order, a roller coaster with a few too many steep curves and forty-five-degree drops are the wake-up calls to reexamine and reprioritize. These are not reasons to throw in the towel on your calling.

[[COMP: Story Break]]

In the moonlighting days before committing to entrepreneurship full time, I hadn't formally established priorities. I was winging it in every area of life. We had a handful of marketing partners that were giving life to our entrepreneurial test and becoming a valuable sales

force. One afternoon around 5:45, the business phone rang. Our nanny was gone for the day, Bill was not yet home from work, six-month-old Austin was swinging happily, two-year-old Davis and I were playing on the kitchen floor with plastic spoons and Tupperware containers. I let the voicemail answer. It was a potential marketing partner. I was pulled to answer it. I couldn't. Davis was in a stage that required constant and close supervision. In a matter of three rings and a few seconds, I made the decision to hold Davis hostage on the kitchen island and answer the call. I knew he would think this was novel for a few minutes, and I knew he had enough awareness and fear not to attempt to climb down. I placed him on the five-foot island in the center of the kitchen, grabbed the phone off the wall a few feet away, and wrapped the cord around the corner into the laundry room.

Peeping around the corner every few seconds, I gambled that ten minutes of whining would be the worst of the situation. I was right. The potential partner turned out to be highly unethical and not worth my time or business. Although no real damage resulted from this bad decision, guilt over how I prioritized this moment has been with me for more than twenty years. Maybe I've been looking at this moment with misplaced negative emotion. Instead of remembering the perceived torture I inflicted on my son, maybe I should remember that this moment turned a valuable spotlight on the need for boundaries and comfortable separation of work and home life.

By the time the boys were in elementary school, we had grown to a team of almost ten. This allowed my responsibilities to grow to working *on* the business 50% of the time and *in* the business 50% of the time. That growth added a layer of additional flexibility. We decided to eliminate after-school childcare, and I shifted my schedule to end my day in the office with the afternoon bus schedule.

As perfect as this sounds, it was anything but. Client consultation or crisis regularly got in the way. For five years, I drove like a speeding bullet, hoping I would somehow get home before the bus came, to greet my bundles of joy with a smile and a snack. More than half the time I didn't make it. I'd pull into the driveway to see the boys climbing a tree, wrestling in the yard, or playing with the dog. Their backpacks would be tossed carelessly in the yard, and they would wave with tousled hair, rosy cheeks, and smiles on their faces. We had moved our family and business from Denver to Austin, and the weather was always good. This assuaged the guilt a little, but not much. I hid this horrific story from everyone. Austin shared recently that these days hold some of his best childhood memories. On those afternoons, for a few minutes, they were free—out from under the schedule and watchful eye of an adult. I wish I'd had the awareness to reexamine the mountain I'd made out of that molehill. I felt like a failure and felt as if I were out of balance. It turns out that wasn't the truth at all.

Carrie Hillen (the Amazing Eight) shared a similar story with a completely different perspective. She was taking her children, six and eight years old, to a large swim meet with one thousand people in attendance. As they approached the entry gates with the crowd, she received a client call she had been expecting. It was imperative that she take the call. Her children were familiar with the facility, and she instructed them to enter, find their team location, and begin getting ready for the first race. She remained outside while conducting the call. I asked how much guilt she felt about this decision. Her response: "None." When she finished the call and headed in to find her children, she saw parents leading, organizing, dressing, and shepherding their children's every move. She located her kids and saw two very young children acting independently, confidently, and as a team. By the time she got to

them, they'd found their location, organized their spot for the day, and were getting ready for the first race. They had seized a valuable opportunity, and she was very proud.

A momentary bad decision should never produce a lifetime of guilt. We need to stop allowing guilt to take over our minds and seep into our lives. Even the small things, the subconscious ways of life, deserve reexamining. Examine your thinking about balance and the things you feel guilty about. There just may be a more successful perspective waiting to be discovered.

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produce a lifetime of guilt.***

To navigate the peaks and valleys of life with confidence and gusto, you must be in the front car of the roller coaster at all times. There is no joy riding in the back. You are the creator and operator of this ride, so you must prioritize, choose carefully, and live out those priorities. Make deliberate choices and let go of those things that are not priorities that take up valuable time and energy. This is a critical message for every one of us. Our life circumstances differ, but we all face the challenges of establishing and integrating our priorities. You cannot have a twenty-car roller coaster. It cannot take the curves or climb the hills if it is too long and too heavy. I once had a friend who did not work ask me how I did it all. My immediate answer was, "I don't. The list of what I don't do is long, and the things left undone don't seem to really matter."

Even when you are integrating successfully and have the right priorities and strong partnerships to support the peaks and valleys, there are times when it is just too much. I have found that navigating these times with logic and self-awareness and without emotion can be achieved by *knowing* your priorities and *knowing* if you have the option to remove a

priority from the roller coaster for a while, or not. When you can't remove something, you will find yourself better prepared to tighten your seat belt and hold on for the ride. This is a much better position than being blind-sided.

One of these times in my own life comes to mind. The business hit its stride as we grew to a team nearing thirty. Revenue was fast approaching the coveted \$10 million mark, and investment in executive management and technology was opening new doors strategically. Davis and Austin were in the most active of their teenage years with AP courses, varsity baseball, student council, teen leadership, college visits, and active social lives. My dad was diagnosed with brain cancer and underwent an extensive surgery with a lengthy recovery. It was simply too much, and these were not priorities I could sideline. Bill got the short end of the stick. He got less of me as other priorities took his share. I guess you could say I had to move an important priority to the back of the coaster to get whipped around for a while. We recognized it, spoke to it, and focused on it as soon as was possible. This kept us integrated.

You must also have patience and trust in the joy of the full journey. The things that don't fit today are not lost forever. They are patiently waiting their turn. There is plenty of time for everything. Was I out of balance when I set out to exercise for the first time in ten years? I say no. I left exercise, me time, and regular date nights on the sideline for many years. I competed in my first sprint triathlon at the age of fifty. (I'm now hooked!) I am also learning to play golf, and, with the boys grown, every night can be date night. Life is long, and there is time for everything, so please eliminate the pressure to do everything at once.

The New Normal

Experts are now discussing the pitfalls of balance and ideas for defining a new normal, and it is a breath of fresh air. The National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) encourages women to feel comfortable making personal choices about the paths they choose to follow that create success. Instead of trying to live up to a perfect, unattainable ideal, women should find what's right for them at any given stage of life. Women business owners, more than men, tend to put self-imposed stress on themselves. NAWBO would like to see that change. Trying to live up to some external standard of a perfect work-life balance is the very thing that may prevent women from achieving it. They recommend three strategies:¹

1. Quit striving for fifty-fifty work-life balance. Life doesn't work that way.
2. Stop the perpetual to-do list and replace some of those moments with something simple and rejuvenating, like a cup of coffee.
3. Realize that you are not alone. We all worry about the same things.

Linda Addison, co-founder of The Center for Women in Law, shares my beliefs. She prefers to think of navigating the competing demands of career and family as a process of work-life integration. A great lawyer is still a great lawyer when she is watching her kid's soccer game, and a great mom is still a great mom when she is arguing before the court. In addition, the desire to achieve career success, without sacrificing fulfilling relationships, is not gender specific. Men also aspire to live integrated lives, to achieve success in their careers, and enjoy fulfilling relationships with family and friends. How each of us does that is as personal and unique as a fingerprint. If you seek both a rewarding career and a fulfilling personal life, you will have to make choices. Choosing between career and family is not one of them. Success comes when your family and your company feel they got what

they needed from you. Stop beating yourself up with the elusive quest for balance. How others manage their lives matters less than how you decide to negotiate your own challenges in finding ways to integrate your personal and professional life.²

Is It Time to Redefine Balance?

Amy Burkett (the Amazing Eight) has been doing it her way for thirty years. Realizing that the demands of work and home-life don't get easier as your children grow, she shifted her nanny's responsibilities from that of third parent to household manager. She got over the guilt of the expense and embraced the convenience it brought to her life. A very smart decision!

Carrie Hillen (the Amazing Eight) and her husband Jens have decided that her work schedule is too structured and client centric to allow availability for unexpected personal demands. So Jens leans out and is the go-to spouse and parent for everything unexpected. This helps them maintain their own kind of balance.

Tammy Kling (the Amazing Eight) is proof of successful, unique life integration. Her firm runs virtually, and her company has clients all over the world. She has integrated the advantages of unique clientele and locations into her life, homeschooling her sons, traveling, and even bringing them to client meetings at times—all with a focus on the world learnings she is exposed to in her professional life.

Unique fingerprints create successfully integrated lives. Each one of these entrepreneurs is an example that there's no one size fits all when it comes to balance. Comfort and joy come from identifying what balance means to you and then living it your way.

As a woman in business, a mother, and a wife for more than twenty-five years, my journey to successfully integrate the components of life has been dominated by choices outside our cultural norms. Most of the time there was no proven model, no example to follow, no expert in the field in work or home life. If we *felt* that the benefits to all involved outweighed the risks of breaking with the norm, then outside the norm we went. Although these choices definitely did not feel normal, they didn't feel abnormal either. I learned that if I was comfortable, then the unproven path was also the right path.

We waste a lot of energy stressing over being outside the norm, energy that could be making a difference creating new and better norms. How many women sit at these crossroads as they build lives that integrate career and family, paralyzed with stress and guilt over breaking with the norm? Most of us.

Very early in the journey, we broke with the norm of "multitasking is the key to life," realizing that integration does not mean allowing work to infiltrate home at will and vice versa. Do you regularly take business calls while you are at the grocery store or while picking up your children? Do you find yourself opening your laptop and digging into a work issue while watching TV with your partner? Some of this comes with the normal peaks and valleys of life. When it defines the pattern of your life, it is time to reexamine. Nothing gets your best when you are without boundaries. This was such a struggle for us, particularly for Bill, that we eliminated the home office by moving the desk and equipment to an open area in our home. If we had to work at home, the open area reminded us to be conscious of the time we were taking away from our home life. This decision also forced us to be realistic about times that required us to work for extended periods on a weekend, and we went to the office to be more productive. This created the healthy boundary we needed,

and it gave us a dose of reality on the value of minimizing work demands during family time.

We have also been outside the norm at home, and we are dedicated to the power of equality. My to-do list included buying groceries, cooking, managing the kids' schedules, overseeing homework, volunteering at school, participating in miscellaneous carpools, and co-parenting at all times. Bill's list was often longer: doing laundry, changing linens, washing dishes, bathing dogs, paying bills, taking out trash, managing all sports carpools, and co-parenting at all times. Davis and Austin had their lists, too: set and clear the table at evening meals, (I believe in breaking bread together, even if it is just sandwiches and sliced fruit), and do all of their own laundry and linens when they became teenagers. In the vain of complete transparency, Bill and I often hid our focus on equality, fearful of being labeled bitchy or wimpy. Please step out and shout your achievement of equality and the power it brings to an integrated life from the rooftops. The new normal needs to hear *your* voice!

Business Strategy 13: Integrate your life.

Don't balance it. Embrace that constant balance is a myth. Be comfortable breaking from the norm. Search for your normal that is rooted in the creation of healthy relationships, quality time, and meaningful forward progress. Welcome the peaks and valleys that comprise life and navigate them successfully by investing in priorities, boundaries, and partnerships. It is here that you will find the greatest fulfillment and contentment.

Gaining Perspective

Over the course of the full journey, the years that brought the greatest fulfillment, confidence, and contentment (feeling absolutely comfortable in my own skin) have been the years when the peaks and valleys felt meaningful not stressful. The priorities felt like the right ones and the right number, and the benefit created by these choices was long lasting. The parts of life were integrated in such a way that they produced a whole that was more than I could hope for, warts and all. The business success, our sons' success, and our individual success have never rivaled the feeling of the success produced by the integrated whole. It is a feeling of simply feeling good.

The value of the technology investment I keep referencing has touched every aspect of our lives. Household payroll and tax processes are just different enough that off-the-shelf software solutions did not allow us to deliver our unique talents as difference-making, which encouraged investment in custom technology from inception. Bill initially built our technology using the Microsoft suite of products and databases. It was very powerful in comparison to our competitors' offerings for a while. We knew the end of the road would come for our homegrown system, but we hung on as long as possible. Probably for too long.

One Friday evening while taking in the sunset and enjoying a beer on the back patio, Bill shared with great gravity that we'd miscalculated on how far we could stretch the life of our systems. His voice became soft, missing its usual confidence, as he looked directly into my eyes and said that he felt like the boy holding his finger in the dam, and he just didn't think he could do it anymore. I looked back at him, really looked at him. I realized that in our busy lives and with my confidence in his abilities, I had not really been *seeing* him. In this moment, I *saw* him. I saw a man in his mid-forties, potentially on his way to a heart attack. He was tired and drained with no end in sight. This was no longer a business

decision, this was a life decision. I've shared that we invested in the development of state-of-the-art technology for scale. More importantly, I reordered the cars on the integration roller coaster and dug in deep at Bill's side to do everything I could to alleviate the pressure on the dam during the project. Everything depended on it. The boys were in their early teenage years, and this decision required that I decrease the level of my involvement in their lives. We cannot do it all and must adjust our priorities, leaning on our partners. The boys had to become more independent. They did, and it was good for them. I have absolutely no guilt. Being there for Bill produced integration that brought meaning to every facet of our lives. It simply felt good.

Have you ever said that the quest for balance feels good? The quest to integrate certainly does. It is filled with the small steps that create giant leaps that compound throughout the journey of life. The work is never done, but it is some of the most satisfying work you may ever do.

