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Taste: Work and Life -- and Blogging the Balance

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"There's no such thing as **work-life** balance." That's what former General Electric chief executive Jack Welch recently told the Society for Human Resource Management at its annual conference. "There are **work-life** choices," he said, "and you make them, and they have consequences." Mr. Welch's comments reverberated across the Web as women (and men) argued over whether it was possible to rise to a high level in corporate America and take time off to have a family.

The challenge of the finding the **work-life** balance -- sorry, of making "**work-life** choices" -- is now an official cultural preoccupation, the subject of regular Web sites, blogs and newspaper columns. It is a part of the political debate, too. In his profile of Sonia Sotomayor this week -- titled "The Way We Live Now" -- columnist David Brooks fretted about whether Ms. Sotomayor's marriage ended because of her long hours at the office. And of course it was a matter of national import, not so long ago, whether Sarah Palin could really raise five children and hold down a job.

Like most "national conversations," this one is noisy, repetitious, occasionally inane and often instructive. The Web site InsideHigherEd hosts a blog called "Mama PhD" in which a group of mother-professors discuss how they fit their job-tasks in with their family-demands. Here is a recent post: "We leave for a six-week stay in England next Monday. In between now and then I have to finish my annual review, write a book review, hold a workshop on a novel for YA [young adult] librarians, convene a committee meeting and pack. I think I have a couple of personal appointments in there as well -- haircut? Dermatologist? . . . We keep a big desk blotter sized calendar on a bulletin board near the kitchen for family events. That works pretty well. . . . Then there are my personal calendars -- and yes that is a plural."

An outsider, particularly a male one, seeing so much personal detail about someone he does not know, might reasonably wonder: "Who cares?" There's a reason that such streams of consciousness were once reserved for women chatting over cups of coffee. But apparently enough people care about these blow-by-blow descriptions of working-parents' lives that dozens of similar Web sites are kept alive and busy. This self-chronicling would be exhibitionism if the details weren't so boring. It is probably better understood as a form of hyper-self-consciousness -- mixed with worry, martyrdom, pride and moral instruction.

Recently Slate spun off its "Double-X" blog into a Web site. Contributor Emily Bazelon wrote a story about couples where one member is unemployed. Such couples are, she said, "handling what's called the second shift -- the **work** we do at either end of the day to keep our kids and our homes running." She told her readers, for example, that "Robert" and his wife "are now dividing the chores 'pretty evenly.' He does the day-to-day 'maintenance around the house, like dishes and picking up. She still does all the grocery shopping, and she usually does the laundry.' They still have a twice-a-week housekeeper -- a boon to domestic peace if you can afford it. Robert's wife still cooks. But he's learning."

Lisa Belkin is probably the pioneer in this field of the-way-we-live-now introspection. The author of "**Life's Work**: Confessions of an Unbalanced Mom," Ms. Belkin used to have a weekly column in the New York Times Style section where we learned the details of her "juggle." She now runs the paper's "Motherlode" blog. Michelle Slatalla has taken over Ms. Belkin's slot with a similar column called "Wife/Mother/Worker/Spy." Here is the beginning of her stay-at-home vacation. "On Day 1, I went into Clem's bedroom at 8 a.m. 'Rise and shine,' I said. 'It's time to start staycation!' . . . I decided to wait for her downstairs, where I took a quick call from an editor, read a little e-mail, scheduled a conference call for later in the week and finished revising the last chapter of a book manuscript."

It should be said that The Wall Street Journal has gotten into this **work-life** analysis as well with The Juggle, a blog (with many contributors) devoted to covering "the choices and trade-offs people make as they juggle **work** and family." All manner of topics get discussed there: e.g., the conflicting ideas, between husband and

wife, about what a clean house is; the importance of a parent insisting on certain things (sunscreen, seatbelts) even if it is difficult to do so; and the challenge of finding time to accomplish personal tasks -- like going to doctors' appointments.

The impulse behind all such blogs and sites is not a bad one, of course. The entries often begin or end with writers wondering whether they are doing all they can to be good parents. The diary-like postings are the occasion of self-reflection: Am I spending enough time with my family? Is my marriage suffering from all of this juggling?

At times it is hard not to think that the "**work-life** balance" is like the Loch Ness monster -- there are lots of sightings but no one has ever found it, and no one ever will. More important: Is it possible that so much agonizing and discussing may make **life** harder rather than easier? In short, is it possible to lose your balance, so to speak, by overthinking the **work-life** balance?

In May, two researchers published a paper called "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness." Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, both of the Wharton School, found that over the past 35 years, as the income and education levels of women have risen, as they've been "freed from domestic drudgery" and as they have taken "unprecedented control over fertility," they've also grown unhappier. Some commentators blamed feminism, others the overwhelming range of choices that modern **life** offers up. Both theories could be right, but I would add the possibility that we are all spending too much time examining ordinary **life** -- even as we are living it.

An acquaintance of mine once sent out an email to a half-dozen female writer friends. She wanted to know about the division of labor in our homes, between husband and wife. No fewer than 10,000 words were spilled in the responses, including many complaints. No sooner was the exchange over than two of the correspondents mentioned their desire to write an article about what this exchange revealed. I'd suggest we all talk about it over coffee, but who has the time?

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