

Nigel Marsh: How to make work-life balance work

What I thought I would do is I would start with a simple request. I'd like all of you to pause for a moment, you wretched weaklings, and take stock of your miserable existence. (Laughter)

Now that was the advice that St. Benedict gave his rather startled followers in the fifth century. It was the advice that I decided to follow myself when I turned 40. Up until that moment, I had been that classic corporate warrior -- I was eating too much, I was drinking too much, I was working too hard and I was neglecting the family. And I decided that I would try and turn my life around. In particular, I decided I would try to address the thorny issue of work-life balance. So I stepped back from the workforce, and I spent a year at home with my wife and four young children. But all I learned about work-life balance from that year was that I found it quite easy to balance work and life when I didn't have any work. (Laughter) Not a very useful skill, especially when the money runs out.

So I went back to work, and I've spent these seven years since struggling with, studying and writing about work-life balance. And I have four observations I'd like to share with you today. The first is: if society's to make any progress on this issue, we need an honest debate. But the trouble is so many people talk so much rubbish about work-life balance. All the discussions about flexi-time or dress-down Fridays or paternity leave only serve to mask the core issue, which is that certain job and career choices are fundamentally incompatible with being meaningfully engaged on a day-to-day basis with a young family. Now the first step in solving any problem is acknowledging the reality of the situation you're in. And the reality of the society that we're in is there are thousands and thousands of people out there leading lives of quiet, screaming desperation, where they work long, hard hours at jobs they hate to enable them to buy things they don't need to impress people they don't like. (Laughter)(Applause) It's my contention that going to work on Friday in jeans and [a] T-shirt isn't really getting to the nub of the issue. (Laughter)

The second observation I'd like to make is we need to face the truth that governments and corporations aren't going to solve this issue for us. We should stop looking outside. It's up to us as individuals to take control and responsibility for the type of lives that we want to lead. If you don't design your life, someone else will design it for you, and you may just not like their idea of balance. It's particularly important -- this isn't on the World Wide Web, is it? I'm about to get fired -- it's particularly important that you never put the quality of your life in the hands of a commercial corporation. Now I'm not talking here just about the bad companies -- the "abattoirs of the human soul," as I call them. (Laughter) I'm talking about all companies. Because commercial companies are inherently designed to get as much out of you [as] they can get away with. It's in their nature; it's in their DNA; it's what they do -- even the good, well-intentioned companies. On the one hand, putting childcare facilities in the workplace is wonderful and enlightened. On the other hand, it's a nightmare -- it just means you spend more time at the bloody office. We have to be responsible for setting and enforcing the boundaries that we want in our life.

The third observation is we have to be careful with the time frame that we choose upon which to judge our balance. Before I went back to work after my year at home, I sat down and I wrote out a detailed, step-by-step description of the ideal balanced day that I aspired to. And it went like this: wake up well rested after a good night's sleep. Have sex. Walk the dog. Have breakfast with my wife and children. Have sex again. (Laughter) Drive the kids to school on the way to the office. Do three hours' work. Play a sport with a friend at lunchtime. Do another three hours' work. Meet some mates in the pub for an early evening drink. Drive home for dinner with my wife and kids. Meditate for half an hour. Have sex. Walk the dog. Have sex again. Go to bed. (Applause) How often do you think I have that day? (Laughter) We need to be realistic. You can't do it all in one day. We need to elongate the time frame upon which we judge the balance in our life, but we need to elongate it without falling into the trap of the "I'll have a life when I retire, when my kids have left home, when my wife has divorced me, my health is failing, I've got no mates or interests left." (Laughter) A day is too short; "after I retire" is too long. There's got to be a middle way.

A fourth observation: We need to approach balance in a balanced way. A friend came to see me last year -- and she doesn't mind me telling this story -- a friend came to see me last year and said, "Nigel, I've read your book. And I realize that my life is completely out of balance. It's totally dominated by work. I work 10 hours a day; I commute two hours a day. All of my relationships have failed. There's nothing in my life apart from my work. So I've decided to get a grip and sort it out. So I joined a gym." (Laughter) Now I don't mean to mock, but being a fit 10-hour-a-day office rat isn't more balanced; it's more fit. (Laughter) Lovely though physical exercise may be, there are other parts to life -- there's the intellectual side; there's the emotional side; there's the spiritual side. And to be balanced, I believe we have to attend to all of those areas -- not just do 50 stomach crunches.

Now that can be daunting. Because people say, "Bloody hell mate, I haven't got time to get fit. You want me to go to church and call my mother." And I understand. I truly understand how that can be daunting. But an incident that happened a couple of years ago gave me a new perspective. My wife, who is somewhere in the audience today, called me up at the office and said, "Nigel, you need to pick our youngest son" -- Harry -- "up from school." Because she had to be somewhere else with the other three children for that evening. So I left work an hour early that afternoon and picked Harry up at the school gates. We walked down to the local park, messed around on the swings, played some silly games. I then walked him up the hill to the local cafe, and we shared a pizza for two, then walked down the hill to our home, and I gave him his bath and put him in his Batman pajamas. I then read him a chapter of Roald Dahl's "James and the Giant Peach." I then put him to bed, tucked him in, gave him a kiss on his forehead and said, "Goodnight, mate," and walked out of his bedroom. As I was walking out of his bedroom, he said, "Dad?" I went, "Yes, mate?" He went, "Dad, this has been the best day of my life, ever." I hadn't done anything, hadn't taken him to Disney World or bought him a Playstation.

Now my point is the small things matter. Being more balanced **doesn't mean dramatic upheaval in your life.** With the smallest investment in the right places, you can radically transform the quality of your relationships and the quality of your life. Moreover, I think, it can transform society. Because if enough people do it, we can change society's

definition of success away from the moronically simplistic notion that the person with the most money when he dies wins, to a more thoughtful and balanced definition of what a life well lived looks like. And that, I think, is an idea worth spreading.
(Applause)