

Living According to Our Values: Striking a Balance

Goals

Dreams

Purpose

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We all possess a set of values that define who we are and how we'd like to live our lives. However, for many of us, there is a real disconnect between our values and our actions. Here are a few pieces of information to think about:

- Over the past thirty years, there has been a 33% decrease in families who regularly have dinner together.¹
- The average American over the age of 15 devotes 2.8 hours a day to watching television.²
- About 40 percent of American families spend more than they earn each year.³ However, a 2006 *American Values, Issues and Media*TM survey found that--by a considerable margin--Americans value leisure time more than wealth or a luxurious lifestyle.⁴

Why do we as a society have such a difficult time living according to our values? There are many reasons, but our actions can often be explained by three issues:

1. **Not Enough Time:** Most of us feel that we don't have enough time to accomplish all of the things we want to do. In reality, this just means that we try to do too much in our daily lives.
2. **Too Much "Stuff":** The accumulation of too many physical possessions is another phenomenon that prevents us from living according to our values.
3. **Feeling Disconnected:** More and more of us are losing touch with other people, as well as with the natural and spiritual world.

Not Enough Time

At one time or another, who hasn't experienced anxiousness, stress, or even depression because it seems impossible to get everything done? There's just not enough time in the day, or so it appears. In reality, we know that every one of us living today, as well as each one of our ancestors, has had the same amount of time to work with: 24 hours in a day and 365 days in a year. The reasons we're stressed and unsatisfied are that we try to stuff too many activities into the time we have, and that we often spend our time on things that are unnecessary, unproductive or unhealthy. Even our leisure

time can very easily be taken up by mindless activities rather than those activities we really love. Although there are a few things in life that we have to do to support ourselves and our families, in more areas than not we truly do have a choice about how we spend our time.

By the same token, we can choose how we spend and save money, as well as how our time and our money relate. For example, although we may not always have control over the number of hours each week we spend earning an income (although even here there is usually some flexibility), we can decide how much money we spend on our leisure-time activities. Here are a few other examples of choices we all can make:

- Which is more valuable to me: the free time I have now or the free time I'll have in the future (for example, in retirement)?
- How much do I spend on work-related expenses, like transportation costs, lunches, work clothes, child care, etc.?
- Knowing how many hours of work (after taxes and work-related expenses) it takes me to pay for an item, should I make that purchase?

Too Much "Stuff"

Our lives can also feel out of balance when we accumulate more and more possessions. We often purchase things that we don't truly need, and we may purchase them on credit. We do this for a variety of reasons: pervasive advertising; a desire to keep up with the neighbors by buying the latest and greatest products; or as a way to make ourselves feel better. We may even buy gifts for others because we feel we have no other way to connect with them.

Many of us also don't get rid of possessions that are no longer useful or valuable. As a result, we accumulate more and more items in our home and on our property. Although we should strive whenever possible to reuse and repair items that we already have rather than buying new things, we should also make sure that we don't just keep things for the wrong reasons.

Buying and saving things that don't provide us value or utility can put a strain on our wallets and cause us unneeded stress. Sometimes even small reductions in the amount of "stuff" we have can help us to focus on the things that are really important to us.

¹ Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2009).

³ U.S. Federal Reserve System. (2009).

⁴ Decision Analyst. (2006). *American Values, Issues and Media*TM survey.

Feeling Disconnected

With the time crunch we face and the growing number of possessions we accumulate, more and more of us are losing touch with the people around us. Whether it's our family, friends, church, clubs or other social networks, personal connections are another vital piece of a balanced life.

Some of us have limited contact with the outdoors, as well. We may work inside, commute long distances or spend a great deal of time watching television, using a computer or talking on the phone. As rural residents, we have a better opportunity than many other Americans to be outside and be connected to food, water, fresh air and other natural resources.

Making Meaningful Changes

Many things may be keeping you from living the way you want to live. So, what can you do about it? First, as all of us have different things that drive us, it's very important that you understand your own personal values and beliefs and the reasons you've developed them. Think about what truly matters to you in your life, and write those things down. Focus on the activities, things, places and people that bring you joy, but also think about activities you used to love to do but don't anymore, or things you've never done but would like to try.

Next, focus on the reasons why those things aren't as big a part of your life as you'd like them to be. Track the way you spend your time and money; how would you manage both of these resources differently? Think about all of your possessions; which ones are truly important to you and why do you have so many things that aren't important? Throughout your life, you've made a variety of connections; have you maintained those relationships?

Finally, make a written plan that details the changes you'd like to make in your life. Set priorities. Write down specific things that you want to do differently, and think both about the short-term (this week) and the long-term (over the next year). Remember, even small changes can bring about a huge improvement in your health, financial position and overall well-being.

Those of us in the modern world face a challenge. We want to take advantage of all of the new choices that are out there (activities, technology, media, other products) without giving up the things that we know, deep down, are most important: our friends, family and community; the outdoors; our spirituality; and our favorite activities. We can find balance in our lives if we remember our values and try to apply them every day.

Acknowledgments

Many of the ideas in this article were originally presented in *Living Sustainably: It's Your Choice*, a 2008 publication by the National Network of Sustainable Living Education and Oregon State University Extension.

Additional Resources

- *Are You Unconsciously Wasting Hours of Your Life?* <http://www.dumblittleman.com/2010/04/are-you-unconsciously-wasting-hours-of.html>
- *Controlling Spending.* http://www.extension.org/pages/Controlling_Spending
- De Graaf, J., et. al. (2005). *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. ISBN 1-5767-199-6.

- *Doing Things Together as a Family for Less.* http://www.extension.org/pages/Doing_Things_Together_as_a_Family_for_Less
- Domingues, J. and V. Robin. (1999). *Your Money or Your Life.* New York: Penguin. ISBN 0-670-84331-8.
- *eXtension Budget Calculator.* http://www.extension.org/share/FSA/budget_calculator.swf
- *Finding Frugality.* <http://www.findingfrugality.com>
- *How Much is Your Time Worth?* http://moneycentral.msn.com/personal-finance/calculators/Know_The_Value_Of_Your_Time_Calculator/home.aspx
- Louv, R. (2005). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder.* New York: Algonquin Books. ISBN 1-56512-391-3.
- *Making Your Time Less Money-Dense.* <http://www.thesimpledollar.com/2010/07/06/making-your-time-less-money-dense>
- O'Neill, B. (2004). *Small Steps to Health and Wealth.* *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues.* December, 9(3), 8 pages.
- *PowerPay.* <http://www.powerpay.org>
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster. ISBN 0-74-320304-6.
- Schor, J. (1998). *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need.* New York: Harper Perennial. ISBN 0-06-097758-2.
- *The Simple Living Network.* <http://www.simpleliving.net>
- *Small Steps to Health and Wealth.* <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/sshw>
- *The Sustainable Living Project.* <http://www.cof.orst.edu/cof/extended/sustain>
- *What Is More Important, Time or Money?* <http://www.thebestmoneyblog.com/what-is-more-important-time-or-money>
- *When Prices Rise: Living on Your Income.* http://www.extension.org/pages/When_Prices_Rise:_Living_on_Your_Income

