

“Balancing Work, Life and Creativity - Lessons from Artists”

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After more than 30 years of working with artists as a psychologist, I am convinced that their lives and creative work can lift up important concepts about well-being. Lessons about how to find and sustain a healthy balance in work and personal life, perhaps the most fundamental aspect of well-being, can come from many sources, of course. To some extent, that the lessons I share today come from artists simply reflects that these are the people I’ve spent the most time observing and working with.

I also believe that there are commonalities between well-being and creativity that the work of artists illustrate in a distinctive way. What I share with you melds these two topics, and comes from the literature of psychology, creativity and the arts, as well as from personal perspectives of the artists I have worked with - dancers, writers, film directors, opera singers and many others.

My lifelong adventures with creative people began in 1976 with a lecture I gave on the psychology of acting for the Screen Actors Guild at the American Film Institute. Since then I’ve worked with thousands of artists all over the world, emphasizing principles of psychology to help creative people reach their artistic potential, and to lead healthier lives.

The teacher has also been the student, and I have learned a great deal professionally and personally from the artists I've worked with. Knowledge and expertise are always tentative, to be edited and transformed constantly. Thus I invite you all to take a journey with me today, into what is a work in progress, despite - and because of - all the years I’ve spent in the arts. Or as the great American actress Helen Hayes once put it: "It's what you learn after you know it all that really counts."

Balance and Well-Being First, a little about the subject of “balance,” which as the title of this conference suggests, is at the core of how most people think about well-being. Western science makes it clear that delicate balances, of temperature, chemicals and electricity, are what makes life possible. The Eastern spiritual traditions all speak about the importance of balance for the health of the body as well as the spirit. Particularly for artists, achieving well-being in life and in one’s creative work means balancing opposites like “inspiration and discipline” and “freedom and control.”

Well-being involves a dynamic process, always filled with tension and contradictions. Learning to live peaceably with those tensions is a key to well-being. As G.K. Chesterton said: “In everything that yields gracefully there must be resistance. Bows are beautiful when they bend only because they seek to remain rigid.” Interestingly enough, I first encountered these words when Igor Stravinsky quoted them in an essay about the art of composition.

Artists can provide some unique lessons in this regard, because they so often express their personal balancing act in their creative work, so that it is more readily available for all to see. That is part of the societal value of art, in fact.

Moreover, artists tend to manifest the contradictions of this balancing act more intensely. As the great creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, now here at Claremont, says: "If I had to express in one word what makes their personalities different from others, it would be complexity. By this I mean that they show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes - instead of being an individual, each of them is a multitude. Like the color white that includes all of the hues in the spectrum, they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves." Walt Whitman put it more assertively:

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself.
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

Lessons from Artists About Well-Being I'm not going to talk about how artists *depict* well-being, through painting, music, sculpture, novels or film. That's a fascinating path in itself, but it is not the path for today. Instead I'm going to present ten "lessons" about how to maintain a good level of personal well-being, and at the same time foster creativity, taken from the science of psychology and from my own work with artists.

Incidentally, as one of several psychologists speaking to this conference, I also should acknowledge that the profession of psychology itself represents a "balance between wet and dry." Psychology is the only helping profession in which professional training includes *both* practice and science. Most doctoral programs in clinical psychology train one to be a research scientist as well as to be a practitioner. That dual perspective, of intuition and evidence, also is an important part of understanding well-being and creativity, in my experience.

* **Lesson 1 - Signs** - *Paying attention to signs that life is coming into or out of balance helps maintain well-being.*

"Balance" is by definition a dynamic process, not a steady state. The work of artists can be difficult and highly absorbing, as can everyday circumstances of life, so subjective awareness of whether life's in or out of balance often slips away. When that awareness increases, it can re-frame a person's overall sense of well-being very suddenly and intensely, with the drama of what's called in perceptual psychology a "figure-ground reversal." Once aware, adjustments can be made as part of both everyday living and the work process.

Artists often see these signs first in their creative work, both because it draws on their inner lives, and because creativity requires a certain degree of emotional openness. Sometimes the sign that life is out of balance comes in the form of a creative block, which I'll discuss more later. Exploring the block can reveal some source of imbalance in life which had previously escaped conscious attention - a difficult relationship, an unfolding depression, an overall increase in external sources of stress in the person's life. At other times the sign shows up in the work itself, in themes or images that

turn out to be symbolic of issues that are throwing life out of balance and therefore affecting the artist's overall sense of well-being.

Artists I've worked with often have engineered personal habits that help them be alert for such signs, through a daily practice of contemplation, interactions with trusted work colleagues or intimates, or examining patterns in their work and what they mean as "temperature gauges" of their overall well-being. With a more finely tuned apparatus for sensing these energies and balances, artists can develop a kind of "Distant Early Warning" system in their work for troubles emerging in their personal lives, or in the business part of their worklives. This may enable them to take some corrective action, or at least to take these inner conditions into account in setting pace and priorities in their work.

Sometimes a signal comes from outside. For example, I was asked by Academy Award show director Gil Cates, when he was president of the Directors Guild of America, the union for film directors, to teach a stress management class for film directors because of a warning sign that had come to the DGA about its entire membership. When they changed health insurance providers in the early 1980s, an actuarial analysis for the new insurer revealed that members of the DGA were dying significantly younger, on average, than people in the general population. As they looked into why this might be so, one of the likely causes that emerged was poorly managed stress, in a very high-stress occupation where well-being is often impaired!

Signs also can come that indicate an increase in well-being and creative force, and these may also be quite dramatic. Tchaikovsky described these moments in his composing: "The germ of a future composition comes suddenly and unexpectedly. If the soul is ready it takes root with extraordinary force and rapidity, shoots up through the earth, puts forth branches and leaves, and finally, blooms."

My work with artists, and research that began with Charles Garfield's studies more than 30 years ago about the work habits of "peak performers" in the arts and in other walks of life, makes it clear that signs of increased well-being and heightened creativity spur highly creative people to action. Artists often rush to the studio or the computer and push their work ahead while the "psychic atmosphere" is most salubrious. Anyone who's ever lived with an artist is aware of this - previously-scheduled activities of living are often thrown aside because the "atmosphere" is right for creative work.

** Lesson 2 - Strategy - Personalized strategies for handling the challenges of life and work help to maintain well-being.*

If they are successful over time, even the most spontaneous of artists, in my experience, have evolved distinctive strategies that help them get through the challenges of life and their creative work. For some, they may have identified a help-mate, often a spouse, to keep their life in order beyond the studio, so to speak. Others have only a strategy that kicks in if there's a crisis, embodied in the old concept from the theatre, "always have go-to-hell money."

Some are more comprehensive in their strategies. For instance, I worked with a film director the year after he had barely survived writing and directing the big summer hit film in America. To prepare for his next film, he needed a "survival system" to help him maintain both creative

productivity and personal well-being during the lonely work of writing the script, the much more external pressures of being on location and in the studio, and then in the mad crush of activities involved in promoting the film. We worked out a plan that included physical exercise, nutrition, meditation, and pre-planned time with his family that actually got booked on his daily schedule. Not every artist is as organized as this director became, but the notion that well-being takes planning is common, particularly among artists who have had long periods of productive creative work.

Strategies also can be stimulated by the organizations in which artists work. Last year, I made a number of trips to Seattle, working with Pacific Northwest Ballet as they went through the challenging process of changing artistic directors after 28 years. Stress management training for the dancers and staff was part of this, as well as help for the trustees, so they could see how much else was changing in the world of classical ballet at the same time as they were making big changes. Enlightened business organizations that have artists on staff often have special resources to help them with planning and strategizing, like Hallmark Card's Creative Resource Center in Kansas City.

** Lesson 3 - Risk - Maintaining well-being requires managing risks in life and at work.*

Risk is necessary for a well-balanced life, particularly one involved with creative process, but risks need to be consciously taken and well-managed. Out-of-control risk-taking can lead to chaos and psychic or physical injury, even if it produces creative results. As Harriett Fulbright, a great arts leader and widow of the Senator who established the Fullbright fellowships, said: "Art means risk taking and playfulness - a sense of fun about discovery is what brings all this together."

Let's look at the art of dance as an example. Professional dancing has significant injury risk - about the same as for contact professional sports such as football, according to recent research at the University of Washington. Studies also show that injury is more likely under stress and fatigue; poor nutrition reduces bone density and increases injury risk. Substance abuse can dull the senses to risk, as Gelsey Kirkland made poignantly clear in her autobiography, *Dancing on My Grave*. A recent University of Utah study showed that ankle injuries often are not treated aggressively enough, and can disable the dancer as a result - one injury can sideline a dancer for months or end a career.

As a result, dancers, especially those who have relatively long careers, develop many strategies for managing the risks of performance. They are careful to warm up before dancing, they pay attention to nutrition and other elements of healthy living that reduce risk of injury. Dance companies often have personal and group counseling for dancers to learn how to manage these risks.

** Lesson 4 - Self-Awareness - Self-awareness nurtures the balance important to well-being,*

In order to do artistic work you have to look at yourself. And this means willingness to look at some painful, often denied areas of self, where self-esteem is shakiest - how we respond to fear, how we respond to stress, how long-ago experiences shape our emotional life and behavior today. Artists learn to encourage self-awareness through journaling, dialogue with other artists and many other means. The results both help their creative work and their overall well-being. As Joseph Campbell said: "Dig where you stumble - that's where the treasure is."

Self-awareness also facilitates bringing personal identity directly into work and life - another part of the balancing act in which creative people constantly engage. In her biography of Pablo Picasso, Ariana Huffington found this extraordinary quote in his papers: "What is necessary is to speak about a man as though painting him. The more you put yourself in it, the more you remain yourself, the closer you get to truth. To try to remain anonymous, out of hatred or respect, is to do the very worst - to try to disappear. You've got to be there, to have courage; only then can you become interesting and bring forth something."

** Lesson 5 - Flow - Being positively and healthily absorbed in work contributes to well-being.*

Artists have always talked about being happily "caught up in their work," but in recent years scientific study of the creative process has concentrated on an affective state called "flow," where artists report themselves as totally absorbed by work, entering an altered state in which the rest of life recedes into the background. Much of our insight on flow comes from the pioneering work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, as reported in his book of the same name.

The paradox about flow is that artists are rarely conscious of this state while they are experiencing it. But afterwards they report both that they were exhilarated and that they felt their best work comes under such circumstances, and in fact that their most treasured moments of life are spent in the state of flow - a kind of zenith of the subjective feeling of well-being, even though reported after the fact!

In research on flow, it is clear that artists will exert great effort, and even tolerate physical or psychological pain, to get to this state. This is why creative people continue to engage in their work despite frustration or privation, and why they set continually higher goals for themselves - the young master wants to perform the most difficult pieces, the old master wants to try different interpretations of familiar works, to reach once again that state of total absorption.

Thus, painter Gregory Gillespie says that when he paints he feels "super-alert," that there is an altered awareness in his addressing his work. And flow is an experience of well-being and creative productivity that does not seem to be affected much by age. Just as one example, years ago in a radio interview the chair of the music department at Juilliard talked about walking past Rosina Lhevinne's apartment on her way to work, and hearing the great pianist and teacher playing scales at 95, getting ready for a concert performance. A later interview with Lhevinne confirmed that even after all those decades of performing, she felt healthily and totally absorbed in her work at the piano.

Harvard creativity researcher Teresa Amabile also talks about the importance of intrinsic motivation in creative work. Creative solutions to problems occur more often when individuals engage in activity for its sheer pleasure than when they do so for possible external rewards - contrary to behavior theory and classic experiments in other realms of psychology.

In my work with artists, I have found this intrinsic motivation to be a primary component of the artist's sense of personal well-being - the great actress Bette Davis said that in the end, the only thing one can depend on in life is work. Former Feld Ballet dancer Buffy Miller summarizes it well: "Dancing engages your body, mind and spirit in such a complete way that it's thoroughly exhausting and thrilling. It uses your whole self - that's what I love about it."

*** Lesson 6 - Feeling - Embracing feelings, both positive and negative, is essential to well-being.**

At the heart of the creative process is emotion, and artists' access to emotions is fundamental to their work. It is also a truism from psychology - for artists and for all people - that a fundamental part of psychic health, of the most general kind of well-being, is the ability to embrace one's feelings, if nothing else so as not to waste great life energy defending against them. Artists simply manifest this more directly in their work.

This of course has led to some interesting cultural beliefs about what is necessary to be a successful artist. The notion that one needs to "suffer" to be an artist, accepted by many artists as well as by the larger society, turns out not to be true, according to both many decades of research on this subject as well as my 30 years of work with artists. Artists use painful, sad experiences they have as part of the creative process. But research and my own observations suggest that successful artists do not for the most part seek out suffering. Rather, they accept what has happened to them, in ways that sustain their sense of well-being, and that free their energies for the hard work of creativity. This approach is similar to what Steven Hayes, developer of acceptance and commitment therapy, speaks about as the necessity for psychological health of embracing negative feelings, rather than trying to explain them or rise above them.

This analysis pertains to another cultural myth, also accepted by many artists, that "all artists are crazy." My classmate, psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison, has written persuasively in *Touched with Fire* about bipolar illness she sees in certain types of creative people, such as poets. But the bulk of research on this topic shows that artists as a general group in society are no more psychologically disturbed than the population at large - which is to say, some are crazy, but most are not!

And the creativity researcher Frank Barron, in *Creators on Creating*, says that where psychopathology is concerned, "a little goes a long way." Modest levels of bipolar symptoms, what is referred to technically as hypomania, may indeed facilitate creative energy - this is also a main conclusion of Jamison's research, by the way. But when more intense pathology is involved, the creative spirit is maintained *despite* these pathologies, not because of them. Leonard Woolf said of his wife Virginia that the platform of her creativity, her great and intense feelings, was also the platform of her illness - and ultimately of her destruction.

This is not to say that creative success doesn't involve certain compromises. In *Creating Minds*, Howard Gardner talks about the Faustian Bargain he feels highly creative individuals strike to sustain their gift. At a mechanical level this has to be true, because creative productivity requires great effort and dedication. But it is more than that - artists are filled with superstition and a willingness to move away from the things of the flesh and the earth, and of ordinary community, in order to enter a special relationship with creativity.

Just to give two examples from Gardner's analysis: Picasso swore to stop painting if his sister recovered from a critical illness - when she died he decided to devote his life to painting. TS Eliot was celibate and in a miserable marriage for many years. Interestingly enough, he married again after his divorce, and while he became much happier but also much less productive, by his estimate and that of his biographers.

*** Lesson 7 - Contemplation** - *Periods of contemplation are essential to well-being.*

In his book *The Courage to Create*, Rollo May talks about alternating between the mountaintop and the market place as a fundamental part of the lives of artists. Contemplation, often involving retreat from everyday life, is for many artists essential to well-being and to creativity. The power of contemplation is affirmed by the Eastern spiritual traditions as well. In particular, the part of creative work known as “incubation” requires being away from the world, even from the direct creative activity - Saul Bellow talked about the necessity of having “dream space,” the contemplative time for incubation. And Einstein put it more humorously: “Art and science are two of the greatest forms of escape from reality that humans have devised.”

*** Lesson 8 - Environment** - *Physical environment can help nourish well-being.*

In 1988, I coordinated a conference for the Center for Creative Leadership on creative environments - whose participants included Joe Jujhaz, dean of architecture at Colorado State University, and a variety of people from science and the arts. We looked at case examples of environments that support the well-being and creativity of a wide range of creative individuals, including Calty Design, the automobile design lab of Toyota here in the U.S., and the Salk Institute in La Jolla, where balance is imparted in part by architect Louis Kahn’s inspired idea of setting each office so that there is a space for one scientist to have two desks - one facing the ocean view and one a blank wall.

Artists colonies, such as MacDowell, Yaddo, Katsbaan and Bellagio, also are good examples of physical environments that foster creative productivity, and according to those who’ve stayed in them, an overall sense of well-being. Composer Jane Brockman talks about walking into her cottage at MacDowell, where the battered piano in the corner had been used by Copland and Bernstein. She felt an immediate surge of creative energy. Painter Betty Tompkins said “I figure one day at MacDowell is the equivalent of three days at home. It is very intense.”

The American painter Don Bachardy has worked for decades in a Santa Monica studio where the inspiration is both from the ocean and from the spirit of his late partner, writer Christopher Isherwood. When you sit for him you can feel this, as was captured in film-maker Terry Sander’s recent documentary, *The Eyes of Don Bachardy*. Parenthetically, Don is right now on an adventure in which he won’t be painting in a familiar environment - he’s in Europe, doing a second set of commissioned portraits of Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt and their adopted children!

*** Lesson 9 - Stress** - *Stress can negatively affect well-being if it is poorly managed.*

Some stress is inevitable and even needed for artistic success. The key is how much and how stress is handled. For artists and for everyone, we’re all wired to take on a considerable amount of stress. Dr. Hans Selye, the Canadian physician who is the father of modern scientific study of stress, once said “people with no stress are called dead.” So, as with everything else is a matter of balance.

Over the last 30 years, one of my main themes in working with artists has been to inspire them to learn more about how to pro-actively manage the stresses of life and work. There are many ways to do this. Meditation and journal writing, physical exercise and good nutrition are among the “gold standards” for having the resilience and coping mechanisms needed to deal with stress.

Poorly managed stress also can result in problems with the creative process itself, such as creative blocks. In a recent *New Yorker* article on writers block by Joan Acocella, possible sources of blocks were discussed, such as the great early success and praise experienced by Scott Fitzgerald and Dashiell Hammett, and unresolved unconscious problems, such as those of E.M. Forster about his sexual identity. Blocks certainly can interfere with well-being in addition to stopping creative work. The painter and psychoanalyst Desy Gerard talks about how simple steps, such as taking a break from the work to do something else, or forcing a start to the creative process - putting a splotch of paint in the middle of the canvas and starting to work - can help artists get back to work, and increase well-being at the same time.

** Lesson 10 - Success - Success itself can challenge well-being.*

Paradoxically, success in creative work or in any area of life can bring about significant stress. They include the stress of having too many choices, of people trying to take advantage of you, of higher internal or external expectations, of fear that you'll be revealed as having no talent (the so-called "imposter phenomenon"), of getting ever more tired and burned out.

And overall well-being is certainly affected by the stresses of success. There are many stories of highly successful people leading miserable lives. Successful creative people need to design their own individualized plans for dealing with the stressful by-products of success, both internal and external. I have worked on such plans both with highly successful people and with those on the brink of success, helping them figure out how their lives need to change once they become successful, and acknowledging that success brings its own pressures which they need to deal with. For example, one Las Vegas headliner I worked with still had his wife handling all his finances after he started making millions of dollars a year. The strain on her almost broke up their marriage, and created stress for them both that was alleviated by hiring a business manager!

Conclusion Finally, as analytic as I've been in presenting these 10 lessons, understanding and taking action related to both creativity and well-being depends on intuition as much as on science and conventional knowing. What I've shared with you comes as much from my own subjective observations, and from the feelings and thoughts of artists, as from any scientific process. But I believe in the value of lifting up these lessons, as said by physicist Fred Alan Wolf in the film *What the Bleep Do We Know?:* "Asking yourself these deeper questions opens up new ways of being in the world. It brings in a breath of fresh air. It makes life more joyful. The real trick to life is not to be in the know, but to be in the mystery."