



## Having it “All”...Fact, Fiction, or Fantasy

In my 20s and early 30s it seemed that lunch with my girlfriend’s resembled a scene from Sex and the City – nonstop analysis and au pining about the pursuit of the elusive Mr. Right. Now in my early 40s, it’s amazing how much the conversation has shifted although everyone seems to have the same struggle – how to manage the nonstop juggling act of career, family, personal goals...indeed the discussion inevitably turns to the question of “*Can we really have it all???*” It seems to be the lingering question in the back of everyone’s mind 24/7 like a persistent nagging migraine. For me, I’ve come to the conclusion that the “answer” lies ultimately in questioning the question. “*Why do we want to have it all in the first place?*”

I can’t help but think that having it “all” may be a very American concept. I was struck years ago by a documentary about an Asian fishing village that had somehow retained an amazingly simplistic (some would say primitive) culture. Within this culture they explained that the language had no translation for the word “want” because within their culture there was no concept of “want”. They said that you either “have” or “don’t have”, but you don’t “want”. I was blown away!!! My immediate thought was that in many ways we’ve built an entire society based on the concept of want! We either want money, things, affection, achievements, successes...the list goes on and on. I think that this cultural distinction is so important when we consider this age old question of can you really have it “all”? In my mind the answer lies in how you define “all”. In my case I could say that I have it “all” if I were PTA President, continuing to build a successful training company, happily married and constantly attending to my relationship, actively mothering two preschoolers, lunching with new clients constantly, mentoring at my alma mater business school, vacationing regularly with my family, having drinks with friends after work, training for/running half marathons to stay in shape, and reading Harvard Business Review and the Economist in my spare time ☺ But, is that even close to realistic? I don’t think so. Indeed, I question whether “all” should even be the goal. I think that the best analogy is an all you can eat buffet. Instead of going in with the goal of eating all 78 items on the buffet, doesn’t it make a lot more sense to pick the 6 items that you’re most excited about and truly enjoy those? I call this “satisfaction with plenty”. Indeed, I think that we do ourselves a disservice when we define “success” or “our all” as an insane list of roles, jobs, responsibilities that we can never prioritize simultaneously. Somehow, I suspect that in other cultures, they indeed feel that they have it all. Their “all” is just much less...actually doable ☺ As a result, I no longer talk about “having it all” and instead I’ve adopted a “satisfaction with plenty” philosophy as I feel that terminology to be more accurate, realistic, and sane.

I’m the first to acknowledge that I don’t have all the answers. I don’t know that anyone does, but I have embraced a few principles and specific practices that have not only brought comfort but actual day to day relief from the madness...at least for me.



### **Learning #1 – Don’t Fight It...Instead Embrace Tradeoffs**

In economics I learned the concept of “opportunity cost” – The **cost** of an alternative that must be forgone in order to pursue a certain action. For example, if you spend \$100 on a pair of shoes, they not only cost you \$100 but also the opportunity to spend that \$100 on something else. You’ve given up that opportunity with the purchase of the shoes. This concept also applies to time. If you spend an hour watching reality television, you’ve not only spent an hour of your time watching TV; you’ve also lost an hour of possibly playing with your kids, meeting with a client, sleeping, etc. Obviously, we’re constantly making choices throughout the day, month, year about how to invest our time and energy, and we need to not just accept but embrace the reality that oftentimes when we choose A, we are saying “no” to B. Unlike money, time is truly a finite resource and everyone is allotted precisely the same amount. Therefore, just as we would never tear up a \$20 bill, we should not be passive or unconscious about how we allocate our time and energy. Embracing tradeoffs means that instead of whining and becoming flustered that we can’t be three places at once or prioritize several goals equally, we should make a conscious tradeoff and in that process focus on what we’re getting instead of what we’re sacrificing. These trade offs can seem big or small. An example of a small tradeoff for me involved my increased intensity workouts as I tried to lose baby weight. After leaving the gym drenched a few days, I quickly realized that I could either have the body I wanted or the well manicured hair I loved. I chose the body and wore buns and pony tails a lot that summer. More importantly, I focused on how great it felt to get back to my pre pregnancy body – instead of focusing on the not so great hair. Larger tradeoffs might be delaying graduate school to pursue an international opportunity at work. Instead of dreading that we’re “giving up” or “not getting” something, the only real way forward in my opinion is to intently focus on what you’re getting instead of what you’re “giving up”.

### **Learning #2 - Forget Multitasking and Seek True Win Win Opportunities Instead**

As many demands as I have throughout the day, I completely understand the seductive lure of multitasking. Instead of getting one thing done, I can do two or three in the same time, right???? Not really in my experience. Admittedly, there are certainly times when I can complete a couple mundane tasks simultaneously, and I would never delude myself into thinking that I would ever completely eliminate multitasking. However, I’ve come to realize that when I “multitask” my way through life, the risks/costs often outweigh the benefits. First, with my attention diverted, I’m oftentimes simply not as effective or efficient. Typically quality suffers (sometimes requiring rework), stress levels increase, and I tend to be less efficient because my attention is constantly shifting and I’m not able to develop that strong momentum that puts you in the zone to really push through a task. More frustrating is the fact that if you’re distracted while interacting with others, it simply sends the message that they’re not important enough to require our full attention. Whether it’s texting while lunching with a friend or trying to send an email while you’re “playing” with your kids at the park, the multitasking diminishes the experience – you’re not fully there...and they know it! At the end of the day most of us would much rather have a handful of truly great experiences where we were truly present instead of lots of interactions that are a bit of a fog. Instead of multitasking, I’ve learned to look for true win win opportunities. These are



activities that satisfy more than one interest simultaneously (but not distracting from or minimizing either). For example, if I value exercise and staying connected to friends, I might plan a weekly hike with a girlfriend. Likewise, going to a French movie for date night allows me to spend quality time with my husband and also help me improve my French. There are true win win opportunities all around if we just look for them!

### **Learning #3 – Schedule Time for What Matters Most**

As a trainer and consultant, I see that one of the biggest mistakes that so many people make is that they're so busy running through their day that they don't actually schedule time for the things that are most important to them. Instead, they race around checking off lots of tasks (many lesser important) feeling a sense of "artificial accomplishment" because they may have completed a lot (quantity), but they're still scratching their head wondering why they haven't taken a family vacation with their extended family as they had been planning to since their kids were young or why they haven't had an "alone trip" with their spouse in years or even why they never seemed to learn a second language even though they always intended to. Clearly, real life won't afford most of us the luxury of ignoring all the pesky, mundane to do's that pervade our day to day, but that's no excuse for not scheduling our priorities (as much as we can anyway). I learned this "trick" years ago, and it's amazing how your week becomes sprinkled with lots of activities that really matter because I scheduled them instead of just assuming I'd get around to it magically one day when I had extra time (hint – that day never comes ☺). This tip also applies to more practical tasks – like cleaning your office, refreshing your wardrobe, finding a new pediatrician. Every year around tax time I seemed to be filing an extension mostly because I could never seem to get all my records (electronic and hardcopy) ready to provide to the accountant on time. I knew I that I needed to input a year's worth of Quickbooks entries and gather business and personal receipts and other records. It would be a mound of work, and crazily I just assumed that as I neared my accountant's due date, I would just "get it done" somehow. Then, it hit me like a bolt of lightning, why didn't I actually schedule time to do it??? When you don't schedule the activities that are most important to us, they usually don't get done. Sad, but true.

I'm not sure if there will ever be a firm, decisive answer to the "*can we have it all*" conundrum, but for me, I've made small changes that have had a huge impact. Maybe I don't really have it "*all*", but it sure feels like it ☺

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