

**Keep Life in Balance:  
A Devoted Father Juggles His Way Up Mount Everest**

Donald W. Mitchell

What does your work week look like? If you are like most people, you have a demanding job that takes more than 40 hours before counting your commuting time.

How do you spend the rest of your time? Chances are you are more than a little tired when you get home. If you are a parent, your children need lots of attention and support before they go to bed.

How much waking time do you spend alone with your spouse? You may mostly see one another alone after the kids are in bed.

Now, how about time you spend just for yourself? Surely you have hobbies, things you want to learn, places you want to explore, and friends you want to be with? Many people find this time is often even more squeezed than the time they spend with their families.

You probably also have spiritual practices you maintain, whether by attending a house of worship, through prayer, or in meditation. Do you fit time in for those practices on a daily basis?

You can't let your body go. You also need exercise. Sure, chores help a little, but you may also need time for going to the gym or taking walks. Without enough sleep, you accomplish less and feel irritable; I'm sure you make rest a priority.

Let's consider a new complication: Your career progress would be better with more education. You would do a better job at work, gain promotions faster, and earn greater rewards and recognition. How in the world do you fit that in?

There's an old story about filling a jar. A teacher put some small pebbles in the jar and asked students how to get more into the jar. They couldn't think of anything other than reorganizing the pebbles. The teacher then put sand into the jar which filled in the space around the pebbles. Again, students were asked what they could do to put more in the jar. They again couldn't

think of anything else. Finally, the teacher poured water into the jar: Now, it was completely full!

This story provides a metaphor for how to squeeze more into a busy life: Let new activities flow flexibly around existing commitments like work, family, spiritual practices, and personal regeneration . . . much like the sand and water flowed around the stones in the teacher's class.

That sounds great, doesn't it? But how does it work in practice? Let's look at one mid-life MBA student who found a way to do it all.

Andy Baxter is a man who has always found a way to get done what needed to be done. He mixed work and education after high school in Scotland to qualify as an engineering manager without spending residential time at a university.

One day, he decided to move from his native land to the opposite side of the world, Australia. He had no job waiting there but felt confident he would make his way Down Under.

Instead of working in the semiconductor industry (for which he was well trained), Mr. Baxter moved into confectionary manufacturing by taking an engineering job with Cadbury Schweppes. The new work brought challenges he was unprepared for, and his employer encouraged (and paid for) more education. This time, Mr. Baxter began to accumulate credits through distance learning towards an MBA degree and earned a certificate that represented finishing one-third of that degree.

Fatherhood changed his outlook. Mr. Baxter was blessed with a terrific son, Hamish (then aged four), with whom he wanted to spend as much time as possible. Here's how Mr. Baxter described his feelings about Hamish:

“Hamish is the love of my life and somebody who I regard as not only my son but also my best friend.”

The MBA program had inflexible deadlines for completing the courses, and meeting those deadlines began to eat into his precious time with Hamish. It wasn't possible to meet his student commitments in less than 12 hours a week. Mr. Baxter also found his job becoming more demanding, and his health began to suffer.

One of Mr. Baxter's life goals is to visit Mount Everest . . . not to climb it, but to see the lower base camps, get a sense of what the climbing challenge is like, and enjoy the grandeur of the surroundings. At this point in his life, earning an MBA began to feel like climbing Mount Everest solo without enough gear.

Unprepared for such an arduous journey, even if his employer would pick up the tuition charges, he stopped for a bit. Within a few months, he had put his schedule back in balance and began looking for ways to start climbing the MBA-degree mountain again.

This time his focus was on finding a way to fit MBA studies around the most important priorities in his life. Mr. Baxter was delighted to find an online university that provided great flexibility in completing courses. In addition, he was delighted to find that the university expected him to write papers that applied what he was learning to his work. In this way, he could gain more benefits from his studies than memorizing a lot of facts for an exam: The papers would allow him to use ideas from experts in their fields and put those ideas to get use within his workplace.

It all sounded good, but he wondered if his employer would pay for such a program. He was concerned because Cadbury Schweppes had previously worked closely with another university. After reviewing his proposal and seeing its obvious benefits for the company, there was no problem in gaining their support.

Mr. Baxter enrolled at Rushmore University and found that the flexibility to adjust how much time he spent each day on his studies was marvelous. Soon, he was spending more time with Hamish and enjoying activities that he had been missing during the other MBA program.

“I was able to not only watch but participate in things like his swimming lessons and music. I did not notice it until I was able to dedicate more time, but I could tell a distinct difference in our closeness when I was able to do ‘daddy’ things with him.”

Just before he graduated, Mr. Baxter wrote these words to reflect on how his MBA interacted with his fathering:

“I want to leave my last words to my son Hamish. I have now climbed my Everest, only surpassed when I watched you take your first breath. I only hope I did not climb my Everest to the detriment of my role of being your father in your first few years of life. If it makes you feel any better, I have chuckled when I have found your scribbles and drawings in my study notes, and found the biscuit crumbs in my textbooks over the passed five years!”

Sometimes those who use company money for education find their bosses dissatisfied with what they learned. Mr. Baxter had no problems in that regard.

What’s ahead for Mr. Baxter? He wants to learn how to juggle. I suspect he’ll find that easy to do after all the juggling he did to climb the MBA Mount Everest.

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