Everyone in our family loves music. Some are more talented than others, but we all really like to sing and play diverse instruments. The other day I had just come home from a hectic day at work and wanted some peace. I opened the door and was overwhelmed by a loud cacophony of sound. Abby boisterously fiddled away in the laundry room. Aaron blared out jazz on the trumpet in his bedroom. Hannah enthusiastically bowed her way through a beginning cello book in the living room. And dear Emily turned up the volume on our electric piano as she raced through a hymn, “God Speed the Right.” The dissonance was ear-splitting and added pain to my headache.

A few days later I had a different experience. The children joined several others in our living room to sing and play Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus.” This time Abby’s violin was sweet and beautiful. I enjoyed Hannah’s tenor line on the cello. Instead of playing the piano, Emily sang alto. And as Aaron’s trumpet punctuated “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords,” I could not hold back the tears as I attempted to sing, “And He shall reign forever and ever.”

The two experiences were opposites. I know that the total dissonance of the “family band” will not be an everyday experience, any more than the inspiring joy of listening to my children sing and play the “Hallelujah Chorus” will happen every day. But seeking some balanced point between cacophony and beautiful worship in bringing music to our home seems like settling for mediocrity. After all, the dissonance of daily practice results in the harmony and beauty of our concerted efforts. “Seeking balance” just isn’t the right metaphor.

So it is with work and family. For many years,
“balance” has been the predominant work-family metaphor. As we struggle to juggle our jobs and our home lives, we think of ourselves “walking a tightrope” and involved in a “balancing act.” We often feel “out-of-balance” and, like the first example given above, sense dissonance in competing aspects of life. We grapple with whether to work late on an important project or leave early to attend a daughter’s softball game. We agonize about whether to postpone a family vacation because a business deal is looming. With a “balance” metaphor, work is the irreconcilable nemesis of family life.

Maybe there’s a better way to think about this. Stewart Friedman has come up with a fresh idea. In an intriguing Harvard Business Review article, “Work and Life: The End of the Zero Sum Game,” he and two colleagues maintain that work and family life are actually complementary, not competing priorities. Success at work often contributes to success in one’s family and vice versa. Similarly, practicing a musical instrument contributes to successful performance, which motivates further practice and leads to greater achievement.

Instead of “balance,” perhaps a metaphor of “harmony” would more richly capture what individuals do to manage the demands of their work and families effectively. It’s empowering to think of ourselves as the composers, lyricists, orchestrators, and performers of our lives. It may give us inspiration to find a “Hallelujah Chorus” experience where we bring together many challenging aspects into a great symphony of life.

Using the harmony metaphor, work and family questions are not necessarily, “How can I limit my work time so that I can balance my family life?” or “How can I get out of the house more so I can have more time at work?” Other, more helpful questions come to mind, like: “What am I learning at work that can help me have a better family?” or “Are there possibilities for overlapping work and family time in harmony?” Let me share seven practical thoughts about harmonizing work and family life.

1. Create energy—crescendo with vigor
   
   Recent research indicates that it is the depletion of energy as much as the time spent at work that explains the dissonance between work and family. When you feel like your job is sapping your energy, you have little vigor left for your family. The assumption that by simply cutting back hours you will create more harmony is erroneous.
   
   One suggestion to increase your energy without cutting hours is to make a list of all the things you do at work that either drain or energize you. To create more work/family harmony, see if you can arrange to do the energizing things right before you go home. For example, if clearing your e-mail box or getting the next workday organized helps you to feel in control and ready to get started next time without delays, that may be the thing that energizes you and allows you to go home without worrying about work. Then you will carry more energy to your family.
   
   You might also use commuting time for renewal rather than depletion. Instead of tuning the radio to news, sports, and commercials, listen to inspirational books, music, or scriptures on tape. After the incessant tapping or pounding staccato of many jobs, we often need a peaceful, melodic adagio for renewal before walking in the door at home.

2. Carpe Diem—seize quality time
   
   All time is not created equal. In our life’s symphony there are times when work should back off and let family take the melody, and vice
versa. Many involved parents strive to increase the quality of the time they spend with their children. One father found that when kids walked in the door from school they were most willing to interact. Early afternoon was also low energy time for him at work. He found that if he left the office for home a couple of afternoons a week, he could miss rush hour, take a half-hour break with his children, and then finish up his workday at home.

Bedtime can also be high-quality time. Few kids really want to go to sleep and so they will let their parents read to them or tell them stories or sing them songs for as long as they want. The tender interaction with a parent as they fall asleep may stay with them throughout the night.

3. Do two things at once—use shadow time harmoniously

In time-use research there is a concept called “shadow” time. Shadow time captures the time spent in a secondary activity that is occurring simultaneously with a primary activity. Using the idea of shadow time, there are many opportunities for work and family activities to overlap without dissonance. For example, I recently brought my 12-year-old daughter Hannah to my university office for the morning. While I engaged in my primary activity of writing a boring scholarly article, she enthusiastically organized all the books in my office library. Every few minutes we interacted briefly, and then at noon I took her out to lunch. Using shadow time, I got a full morning’s work done and made a memory with my daughter at the same time.

The same concept applies to running errands at home. For example, when you need to go to the store, one way to promote harmony is to take a child along with you. While doing your primary activity of shopping, shadow time can help you connect with a child one-on-one while you travel to and from your destination. At the store you can teach your child how to comparison-shop. In our home we have modified a famous credit-card slogan to say, “Never leave home without them.”

4. Focus on one thing—unison

Notwithstanding shadow time, there are other instances when it is better to set firm boundaries and not let work’s basso profundo overpower the gentle melodies of family life. In my experience, keeping the Sabbath day holy is a key to focused harmony. Bob Egan, an IBM executive, told my work and family class that he made a promise never to work on Sunday, and he never has. He said it feels good to tell his children, “Sunday is a special day, a day different than other days of the week. Daddy doesn’t go to work on Sunday.”

Family vacation may be another time for muting work completely. In today’s wireless world of laptops, palm pilots, and pagers it is easy to let work bring dissonance to the delicate tunes of vacation renewal. A few years ago I took my wife and three of our children to enjoy the Big Island of Hawaii for an eight-day vacation. I brought my laptop with the thought that I could log on a few minutes each day and keep up with my e-mail. However, the few minutes turned into a few hours.
each day. It seemed that even when playing with the kids in the surf I would be thinking about a work project or seething inside at my manager’s latest insensitivity. On the second day of vacation, my boss firmly demanded (via e-mail) that I join an important 9:00 a.m. conference call the next morning. After replying that I would attend, I realized that the 9:00 a.m. call in New York would be 3:00 a.m. Kona time. Sitting in on that tense conference call in the wee hours of the morning, as the sound of the surf resonated in the background, I reached my limit. I asked myself, “What am I doing? I’m supposed to be on vacation!” So after the call I locked up the laptop, put away the calling card, and crawled back into bed. I made a resolution that from then on I would throw off my “electronic leash” whenever I went on vacation.

There are other daily and weekly times when it is best to disconnect from work entirely. Some families have a devotional time dedicated to daily spiritual renewal through prayer and reading the scriptures. Some set aside an evening for a family activity and don’t allow anything to interrupt this weekly opportunity.

5. Be flexible in when and where you work

Recent research indicates that those with flexibility and control in when and where they do their work are much better able to find harmony between their work and family life. Given the same number of work hours, these flexible workers report both higher productivity and greater harmony in their family lives.

Sharing my own experience with telecommuting might be instructive. For thirteen years I struggled to juggle a demanding IBM career with the needs of my family. In 1990 I started working from my home office, instead of an IBM facility. The difference in my life was immediate. Instantly I gained an hour a day because I did not have to drive to and from work. Instead of dragging into work and needing to unwind after a “fast-lane” commute, I could roll out of bed early with an exciting idea and immediately key it into the laptop. Later I could get the kids up for family devotional and breakfast. Because I was working from home I could listen for baby Amanda while my wife Juanita went to aerobics, shopping, or ran errands. When Abigail had the lead in the fourth-grade play, I could be there on the front row at 11:00 a.m. When work got frustrating, I could put Emily in the jogging stroller and go for an invigorating run. The dissonance would dissipate and I could return to work refreshed. I usually took about 30 minutes off work mid-afternoon to visit with the kids when they came home from school. Jeffrey and I would often play a 10-minute game of one-on-one basketball.

On the work side I found myself more focused, energized, and productive. Without the interruptions of co-workers I was able to deliver higher quality products in less time. The arrangement worked so well that soon four of my colleagues were working from home with similar results. Within four years more than 25,000 IBM employees were working in what became known as the “virtual office.”

6. Make your sleep peaceful—largo

What you do the last 30 minutes before retiring often determines how restful your sleep will be and how much in harmony you will feel in the morning. One father tells the story of
when he was leading a high-profile work project with an incredible workload. He would go to sleep only when he was utterly exhausted. Then it seemed he was wrestling with images of his problems even in his dreams. If he woke up in the middle of the night his mind would start whirring and it would be difficult to go back to sleep. His life was dissonant and its tempo out of control.

Then he started taking a break to put his kids to bed with prayers, stories, and songs. It felt peaceful to do so. Even though it was only 9:00 p.m. he often would fall fast asleep and rest peacefully. It was not uncommon for him to get up at 4:00 a.m. and be rested and productive. Both his work and his kids were better off.

7. Simplify your life—compose a modest melody

Voluntary simplicity—deliberately choosing to accumulate fewer possessions and engage in fewer activities—is a key to finding harmony in a busy life. With fewer voices in the score, it is easier to produce harmony. We live in a materialistic society where we acquire many gadgets and toys. These things have a high cost in time as well as money. When we have too much, we run the risk of obscuring the simple but powerful life melody we hope to compose. One easy way to moderate materialism is to stay out of debt. My father always told me, “There are two kinds of people in the world: those that pay interest and those that understand interest.” He taught me, “Pay 10 percent to the Lord, 10 percent to your own savings plan, and live on the rest.” Buy less, do less, and do fewer things at the same time. Look for a way to compose a life of modest means and focused time.

In summary, if we use harmony for our metaphor instead of balance, it may be more possible to compose a magnificent symphony of life where we find peace and shout “Hallelujah.” Instead of “struggling at juggling,” maybe we can seek for harmony as we both provide for and nurture our families.

E. Jeffrey Hill, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Marriage, Family, and Human Development at Brigham Young University.

References:
4. E. Jeffrey Hill, “Take a Vacation and Make it a Real One,” Deseret News C03 (February 10, 2000).
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