

To our students

Finding balance

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R*equiem aeternam dona eis, Domine . . .* It is 8:46 A.M., September 11, 2002, and we have begun singing Mozart's great *Requiem*, one of nearly 200 choruses from 28 countries singing in the Rolling Requiem. This is a particularly emotional moment, important to me for two reasons. First, of course, it has been one year since that overwhelmingly tragic day, and anniversaries have a way of releasing emotions and musings. But also, as we lift our 90 voices to join thousands of others around the world, the Rolling Requiem reminds me of the great interconnectedness humanity shares through music.

This performance heralds the start of my fourth year as a tenor in a choral group. Before that, I'd never sung with a group before. As a kid, I took the requisite classical piano lessons (for which I am forever grateful), and later I sang alone in the car or in my bachelor apartment. Still, I have always loved music: its rhythm, its melodies and harmonies, its tones and chords, its expressivity. As old as humankind, music expresses the human condition. Growing up, I used to have a "song for the day," a melody that popped into my head early in the morning and stayed with me all day long. Almost every day as an intern, I came home from work and played the piano. But caring for patients tends to soak up time. Clinical clerks and especially interns begin a transformation away from a well-rounded, extracurricular-minded lifestyle. As these and other responsibilities grow, personal interests drop by the wayside. Life becomes all about work and, later, family. Please don't get

me wrong—I love both. But about four years ago, my wife and I, the parents of two young children, decided that we needed to do something for ourselves. She suggested that I join a local choral group.

Up until then, I had been doing that academician's dance: the "triple threat" of patient care, teaching, and research. Add to this the struggle to maintain any semblance of family life, and one has what Scott Epstein calls the "quadruple threat."¹ I asked Janet where I would find the time, told her how it would take away from time spent with the family, but she felt it was important for our sanity. How wise she was! I now look forward each week to the camaraderie of other singers and, above all, to the beauty, and the reach, of the music. The music has touched not only me, but has extended itself to my family and to my work.

Replying to the "quadruple threat" concept, I espoused the importance of being good to oneself—upping the ante to the "quintuple threat."² This is not, I emphasize again, a license to assume self-importance, arrogance, or isolationism. I try hard not to ignore the other components of my life and, even more, have rediscovered forgotten pursuits that help me be interesting and interested in what is around me. Is work important? Sure. Are family and "quality time" important? Absolutely. But fostering personal interests—music, sports, reading, history, physics, ham radio, whatever—keeps my eyes open to the world around me and fulfills me, and I am a better person for my family and for my patients. Doing something solely for myself allows a little time and opportunity for self-reflection in the frenetic life that we all lead. Perhaps more than any other activity outside of my family, music provides me with balance. These days, I again carry a "song for the day," to which I often walk in step.



Erica Aitken

To paraphrase football great Gale Sayers,* “Work is first, my family is second, and I am third”—the mantra of the academic physician. It will always be a difficult balancing act, and each one of us has to decide what’s important in our lives. But having tried the “quint,” I believe I am a better “quad” for it. Many physicians treat themselves “third”—or last. But it isn’t about who’s first or third. Everyone wins when one’s body and soul are healthy.

*Gale Sayers played football for the Chicago Bears from 1965 to 1971, and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His autobiography, *I Am Third*,³ was made into the popular television movie *Brian’s Song*. The book’s title is taken from his maxim, “The Lord is first, my friends are second, and I am third.”

References

1. Epstein SK. How to be a quadruple threat. *Pharos* Fall 1999; 62: 42–43.
2. Phoon CK. The quintuple threat. *Pharos* Summer 2000; 63: 61.
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