

Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

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Russ Joseph, Northwestern University



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Agenda

- Introductions
- Importance of grad-school/life balance
- Self reflection
- Sources of imbalance
- Some suggestions to achieve balance
- Self reflection recap



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Melanie Moses, U. of New Mexico

- Professor, Computer Science & Biology
 - External Faculty, Santa Fe Institute
 - PI, Project VolCAN
 - PI, SIMCoV Project
 - Co-PI, AI research institute planning grants w/ SFI & UVT
 - Director, Swarmathon & NM CSforAll
 - Co-PI, UNM ADVANCE program
-
- PhD in Biology, U. of New Mexico
 - BS in Symbolic Systems (Agent based modeling and AI)
 - Computer Security Research (6 years)
 - Switched to Biology (after 1 year courses & internship)



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Melanie in Grad School

- 2000-2004 explored new ideas & New Mexico
 - Good Times!
 - Research: I loved the intellectual freedom of grad school & interdisciplinary science
 - Fun: hiking, skiing, lab parties
 - Community: Young Women United
- 2005, had my son 3 months before dissertation defense
 - no sleep, no time, lots of stress
- I was CLUELESS about academic jobs and pathways. A postdoc was a paycheck.
- Asst, Assoc, Full Professor...and then came COVID

Balance == work + fun + family + me ($\frac{3}{4}$ isn't bad!)



Russ Joseph, Northwestern Univ

From: St. Thomas, USVI

Education:

BS Carnegie Mellon

PhD Princeton

Now: Associate Professor, Northwestern

Research:

Computer Architecture (Power/Reliability Aware Systems)

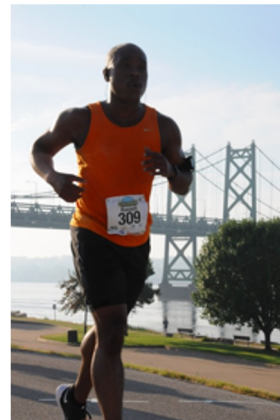
Family:

Lovely Wife and Two Troublemaker Girls (10 and 7)

Fun:

Running (Ten Marathons in Ten States)

Golf



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Russ in Grad School

- Got married after first year
 - Wife worked full time in corporate America
 - Pressure to solve two body problem after grad school...
 - Didn't have kids until much later in life
- Far from home in many senses
 - Geographic distance/climate, sure...
 - But missing connections to culture
- Internships (2x IBM Research, Agere (Bell Labs))

Balance==Finding Time + Space For Growth



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Why personal life is essential for successful graduate studies?



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Top Reasons

- People with meaningful lives outside grad school have
 - Higher risk tolerance
 - Support networks and self-esteem
 - Brain rejuvenation
 - Required for creative brain work
 - Good citizenship
 - Both outside and in grad school setting
 - Broad skills
 - People skills, unexpected idea cross fertilization
 - Perspective
 - Long term thinking, combat narrow-mindedness



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Self-Reflection



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How do we define “balanced life”?

- No single answer; different people have different perspectives
- In general terms: ensuring your interests and priorities in life are properly tended to
- Definition changes for each individual throughout the years
- Healthy in one’s priority areas (e.g., family, spirituality, health, work)



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Is your life in balance?

- **Rate yourself: 1-imbalance, 5-well balanced**
- **When do you feel most in-balance and out-of-balance?**
- **List**
 - **Three things that trigger you to go out of balance.**
 - Three non-academic activities you enjoy the most.
 - Five things that are most important to you.



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Sources of Imbalance



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Identify external sources of imbalance

- **Academic demands**

- Courses: advanced topics, new skills required, ...
- Research: open-ended questions, creativity, vague definitions of quality, pressure to publish, no obvious finishing line, ...
- Work Relationships: (co-)advisor, lab-mates, collaborators, ...
- Logistics: focus on course work or start research earlier, choosing/ changing advisor, ...
- Desire to do service for your community

- **Personal life**

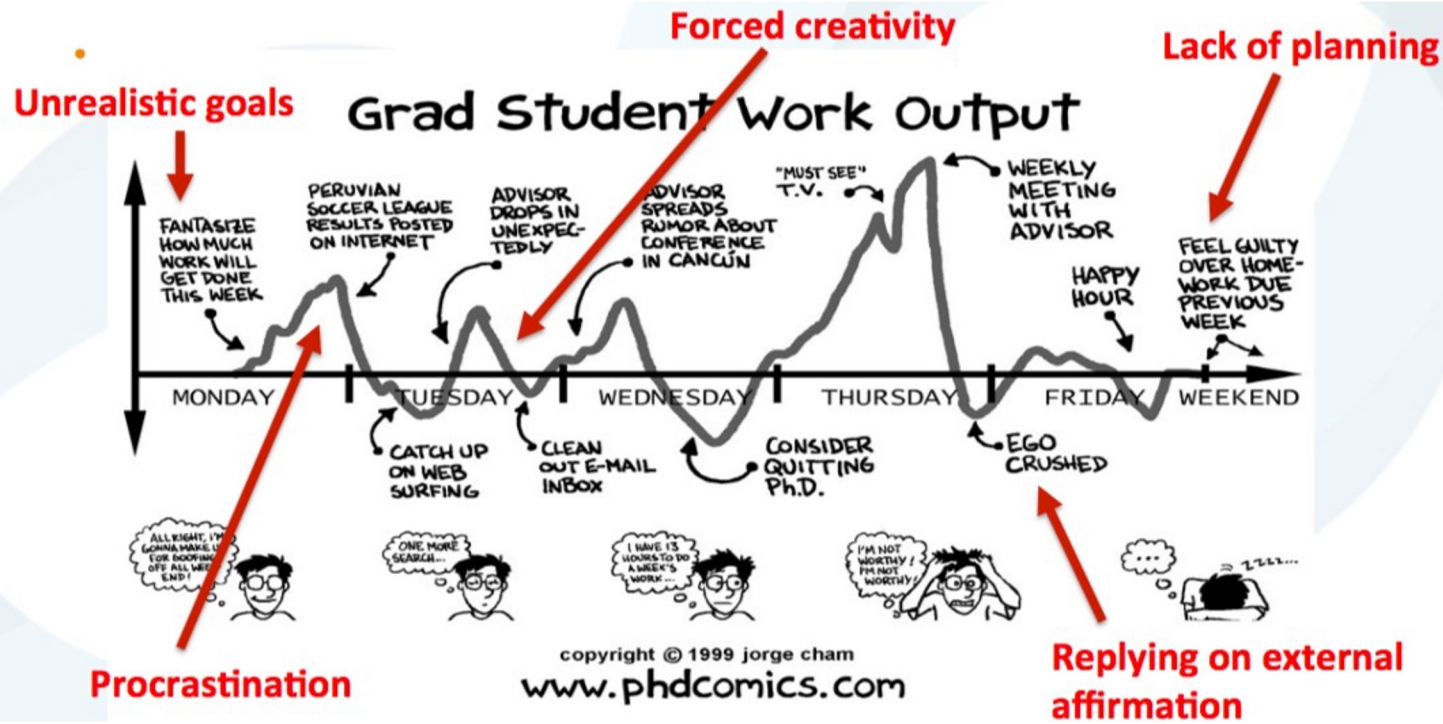
- People in our lives: partners, parents, children, friends, ...
- Life commitments & Health issues
- Finances as graduate student
- Logistics: caring for loved ones, home, transportation
- Homesickness



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Identify the internal sources of imbalance



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Tips to balance work-life



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Tip1: Time Management

Barriers

- Unstructured nature of research, and long delayed rewards
- Enduring myth of work-aholism being correlated with success
- Solution: Practical and Philosophical (Reject the Myth!)

Time management helps a lot!

Some potential solutions

- Find personal “best time” in the day, block it (find your best work style)
- Block one day or hours-per-day for grad-work only (no email/social media)
- Schedule “activities”
- Schedule fixed hours for “stuff”, be ok with that
- Reward yourself
- Read books, find one that “fits” your nature



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Tip 2: Trade-offs

- **Admit it: we cannot do it all, we cannot have it all**
- **Trade-offs**
 - Between goals and expectations
 - Between ambitions and reality
 - Between what you want to do, what others want you to do and what you can do
- **Saying “NO” is a valid choice you can make**
 - Take time to decide
 - Consider trade-offs
 - Avoid guilt-driven decisions
 - Have a “NO” buddy, someone who helps you prioritize & say NO when appropriate
- **Accept and adjust to imbalance**



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Tip 3: Boost self-confidence

- **Admit that**

- We can succeed in the long term, but may fail on some things on the way
- Some insecurity is normal
- We exist in a society that has a certain social normal
- We are being evaluated by others--peer review is hard!

- **But we can**

- Enjoy and be proud of our successes, even small ones
- Think positively, always, even in difficult times
- Extract confidence from within, exhibit it
- Seek out support, when needed

*For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*
- Amanda Gorman, Jan 20, 2021



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Tip 4: Make time for yourself

- **Why?**

- Creative and highly technical work is hard on our minds and bodies
- Burn-out is a real thing that effects creative and talented people

- **Brain rejuvenation**

- What do you like most? What do you love?
- Happiness is strongly correlated with “small” things
- Schedule “rejuvenation”(gym, concert tickets, community service, friends, weekends)
- Take time off!



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Tip 5: Get Organized

- Use productivity software

Tip 6: Ask for help when you need it

- Why?
 - You know why



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Self-Reflection Re-Cap



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Self reflection : Activity

- Re-evaluate your goals
- Recognize the importance of stress triggers

Do This Now

- Identify three activities you can do to reduce stress
- Identify steps you will take to improve balance



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