



# Finding the balance

FIVE OF OUR FAVOURITE CONTRIBUTORS SHARE THE WAY THAT THEY MANAGE TO FIND CALM IN THEIR HECTIC SCHEDULES

## LINDY SCHNEIDER

I used to think work-life balance was fundamentally impossible unless you only worked 3 ½ days a week, then I discovered freelancing. Being in control of when and how you work seems to me to be the penultimate answer to that elusive thing we call balance, and I feel incredibly lucky that writing found me as a way of recalibrating my notion of the common work week.

I love writing, and I love working but it is not the most important thing to me: that honour belongs to the word freedom. One of the greatest thieves of balance, and therefore my sense of freedom, is procrastination. If I start from the deep understanding that I have plenty of time to accomplish all I need to do, then only my procrastination can change how my week flows.

Over time a deconstructed work week has become my 'way to do things'. I conserve my energy and note when

things feel hard. I work when I feel flow and sometimes this is in the evening once my children are in bed because there are other things that take higher priority in the daytime. Working for myself I've realised that there are no 'on the job benefits' unless I give them to myself. That was a revelation and I am careful to work efficiently rather than slave over a page and to reward myself for completing tasks and projects.

Sometimes letting go and doing something else is the best path to creativity. Balance is greatly assisted by scheduling playtime and ensuring it happens! I am balanced when I have the discipline to do the work, but I am also balanced when I have the freedom to not do the work. Rest is also my dearest friend.

Over the years, I've changed my definition of what work is by being selective about what I write about – I look



for topics that make my heart lift and speak to a bigger mission. Knowing my values and working to my strengths has been made easier by living in the Yarra Valley. Being here, being able to work outside in such beauty, and being able to meet and write about the incredible talents of Yarra Valley people makes me happy and fulfilled.

Sustainable, meaningful work has been my key to creativity, freedom and space for rest—and that feels like balance.

## PENNY HARRISON

I'm pretty sure my five-year-old daughter has the hygge concept down pat. Let's face it, most children do. They're experts at finding magic in the little things – a rock on a rainy walk, a pile of autumn leaves, a hot chocolate, or a game with a loved one.

Writing for children allows me to spend time in that magical world on a regular basis. And, yet, I'm still the one so often hurrying my children along. You know the story: deadlines, snacks, washing, lunches, excursions, appointments, dinners, bed times, emails, work. It's no wonder the creative well often runs dry.

Balancing work and the daily mundane chores with creative expression certainly encourages greater wellbeing and contentment. But I find it's those quiet, in-between moments of life that truly recharge the soul and feed my creativity.

My new children's book, *The Art Garden*, (EK Books), illustrated by Penelope Pratley, explores this concept of creativity and the importance of finding our own artistic expression.

The main character, Sadie, finds happiness in noticing the little things in nature and wants to recreate the beauty she sees around her. But when she attempts to be a painter, like her best friend, she is frustrated and upset with her efforts. It's not until she sits quietly and looks at things from a different perspective that she makes a big discovery about herself and her own creativity.

I find creativity a soothing antidote to the busyness of life. But it too can become bogged down in the mire of expectation and comparison, as Sadie finds.

For me, like Sadie, it always comes back to nature. It's pottering in the garden, wandering the bush, or sitting and listening to the river that I feel the balance is restored.

Of course, finding or making the time for this remains the conundrum, especially on those cold, dreary days that so often bring people down.

Following the lead of children seems like the most sensible solution for embracing a little hygge. After all, perhaps all it takes is a brief moment to relish our hot chocolate, to stop and notice the wonder of something small, or to simply jump into a pile of autumn leaves.







for topics that make my heart lift and lead to a bigger mission. Knowing my values and wanting to my strengths has been made easier by living in the Lake Valley being able to work outside in with beauty and being able to meet and write about the incredible things Valley people makes me happy and fulfilled. Finally, meaningful work has been my key to freedom and space for rest and that feels

## VALLEY HORIZON

...of nature, the pace of life, most children do. They're little things - a look on a face, a smile, a hot chocolate, a... to spend time in that... And yet, I've still the... You know the... exciting, fun, and... work, it's... with... and... greater... it's a good deal in... and... my family.



## ANN ROBERTS

I'm not convinced asking me about work life balance is a good idea as currently - work is life for me and that is the balance. I have been hesitant in the past to separate the two things - as I like to approach my 'work' with an attitude of play and flow, and perhaps it is different when you work in a creative field - there is less separation between the two. My personal life often becomes my work. At the moment I am working on an independent sound art project which involves documenting experiences in my personal life and turning that into public art, so in this case the boundaries are definitely blurred.

I can become very focused and microscopic when knee deep in a project or even a design brief, and I tend to live and breathe it until it is completed. Then I will need blocks of downtime and inertia to recover and re form

ready for the next idea. I have never worked a nine to five routine. It's more fully 24/7 on and then fully off for me.

Balance is found somehow within that flow and I am much more into managing my energy than managing my time. This may mean that I will work a 12 or 14 hour day to meet a deadline. It may also mean that I will nap during the day when creative problem solving, or take long walks to mull over a design solution. It is a very feminine, non linear way of approaching work.

I have recently moved my studio out of our lounge room and into a co working space which I'm sure my four children will say has helped achieve more balance - especially for them. Having a clearer distinction between 'work' space and family space is a new experiment I am enjoying.





## KATE BAKER

There is also different kinds of 'work' for me, such as creative idea generation as opposed to implementation. Idea generation needs lots of playfulness and is not bound by regular time constraints. I always carry a notebook with me and also have one beside my bed because ideas can arrive at any time of the day or night. And I will often duck out of a dinner party or social event to write something down.

I also take a creative sabbatical at least once a year. This is some of the most important work I do. It involves travelling to a new location, putting myself outside of my familiar routine and seeing the world with fresh eyes. Last year I spent 10 days in Berlin, photographing typefaces, colour pallets and visiting galleries. I soak up everything visual and store it away for future use. Often a whole years worth of visual ideas will come out of this time.

Implementation is entirely different and involves a lot more self discipline and structure. In my graphic design studio I am much more methodical.

Balance has become a lot easier as my family has grown and my children are older and more independent. I am much more able to follow my own pace and flow with things, which is what works best for me and proves to have the most productive outcomes.

I've never been one for the usual notion of balance. I like to be fully involved in whatever I do and, no matter the job, I've always considered my work as something that is worthy of my full attention. More than that, I've had a life-log dread of the notion of clock-watching and what I perceive as endless repetition, so one of my ways of combatting that was to arrive early, leave late and to make the job as interesting as possible.

One of my first jobs was to deliver the local newspaper. My brother and I would wheel a cart around the streets delivering them. To get past any sense of boredom, I became fascinated by letterboxes, how easy or hard they were to access, whether they were beautiful or not, what they suggested about the people living on the other side of them. Later I worked in an insurance office, stuffing envelopes and sending out statements. I started creating systems to figure out how I could do it in a way that was efficient and interesting... it became a game of sorts. I've even turned washing up dishes in a cafe into an art and something I can feel proud of. I actually enjoy turning awful or boring jobs into something that has interest and value. This characteristic has helped me during my various careers as the motivation is apparent and so I've often be given additional opportunities and better jobs in the process. It also means I need to be really mindful where I put my attention.







It's hard for me to do a job in an unattached way. I tend to get too vested in the outcome and start thinking about ways to do whatever it is better, which can mean I get distracted from doing spending my time of those things which may in fact mean more to me. I can also put my hand up too frequently, volunteering. I really enjoy being able to contribute to the community where I can. I also need to guard and claim space for my own creativity.

This is why I left my corporate job when I decided I wanted photography was my true vocation and a key part of my purpose in life to fulfil. I find the creative process requires time and space to "be". Ideas need gentle space to percolate. A work environment full of "deliverables and objectives" requires clear focus and my experience is that I spent much of my off-duty "thought-time" considering the job and what needed to be done, how it could be done better, etc. I was very good at it, but the cost for me was too high. The option to work part-time didn't seem feasible – I felt my character wouldn't allow me to be involved part-time mentally, I'm too committed. I wanted to be able to totally dedicate myself to my chosen vocation. And so I did, a decision I am very grateful to have made.

For me today, balance is where I am doing work that is deeply meaningful to me, where I am connected to people I love, admire or find interesting, where I have space to connect into the precious realm of creative awareness and where I have fun in among those moments. I can easily become too busy and that impacts my ability to enter my creative space. I am learning I need to guard my time and space and to be really mindful of setting time aside for me, to sit quietly and walk quietly, to gently observe and to listen to the still small voice within me. This still small voice whispers ideas which, like seeds of a beautiful flower, usually need water and sun and a little protection from the severest elements to germinate, sprout and grow. Once the idea is strong enough, it can hold its own, and the time will come for intense focus of work. Like the tide, I find there is a time to draw in, a time to give out. Balance allows for the ebb and flow of life, all the while keeping front and centre the vision that, like a compass, holds the course of my life true.

(Above) Kate Baker, doing what she loves  
(Opposite page) Kate relaxing at home





## SOPHIE WHITWELL ON HYGGE LIVING

It is funny to write about the concept of life balance as a full time working mum of two, whilst sitting amongst the art installation that is my washing. Columns of clean clothes piled and folded that taunt me from my dining room table, unable to save me time in my busy day by walking itself to the appropriate cupboards and drawers.

Additionally, it's funny to consider balance, when, as I am writing, I'm also hitting the snooze button in my head to pause the reminders that pop up like calendar entries every few minutes. Just little snippets that say, "this needs collecting...", "don't forget after school...", "return email to important person...", "pull something healthy out for dinner (but don't forget youngest child is pescetarian this week)", "snooze..."

I hit the mental snooze button so I can stay on track, knowing it will pop up again until it is finally struck from my to-do list. The list - this living organism that expands and contracts daily. I work diligently so that by the time my head reaches the pillow the list is empty, ready, poised to refill overnight in a new order of priority, for a fresh day.

So, to be honest, I don't chase the allusive glory of work life balance. I have never really been a believer in this concept - particularly the "work life" kind. Often I would hear friends say, "I'm doing this because I'm after a work / life balance," or lifestyle commentators would talk about our need for work / life balance. When I think about the term 'balance,' it makes no sense to me. In my own experience, as I chased it, it wasn't in line with what I really wanted to achieve anyway. If you think of balance as a concept it is about rigidity. Picture a seesaw; in a tilted position it is out of balance. To be balanced, that seesaw needs to be straight, not tilting in favour of one direction or another. Still, and equally stretched in both directions.

How could this be what we are striving for? If balance is stillness, giving equally to all aspects of your life surely this is disproportionate to need or merit. Not all aspects of your life need you equally and not all are entitled to an equal share of your mental, emotional or physical input.

Surely as a Mum I can't equally give my housework what my children require, nor can I expect that there won't be



times that work's needs don't outweigh the needs of my friends. Or perhaps the concept of balance is defined not by equity in input, but by portioning out yourself in different amounts - creating an overall balance. Even so, we are still ignoring the fact that what is required from the different aspects of our lives, expands and contracts. We "lean in" and out, giving things space and commitment as they require it from us. Life moves with predictability that is punctuated by the unexpected. And we need to be flexible, adaptive.

It isn't balance that I am looking for it is the "inequitable distribution of me in the pursuit of living." Not as catchy as the tag line "Work Life Balance" maybe, but this is where I find my interpretation of balance.

I think one of the key components to this harmony is tangled in the philosophy, or concept of hygge. If all aspects of my life welcome each other in and are engaged, in simple and real ways, then perhaps there will not be balance but harmony. There it is! I am in the vigorous pursuit of harmony.

Living in line with this mind-set, in a practical sense, is a recent phenomenon for me. I had to make a conscious decision to make the changes I needed to improve how I felt in my daily life. In 2017, I decided I wanted to look at my life in a more harmonious and holistic way. I needed to renovate the way I had constructed my daily life to give space in some areas, and to refill and refuel others. I saw it as an opportunity to assess what each area of my life was asking of me.

In contrast to work life balance, I disrupted the status quo and looked for new and fulfilling ways to engage with my daily life and to live the whole of my life. I didn't just change one part. Each section of my life rippled on to impact the next, and the next. I wanted to construct something that would change with the needs of all aspects of my life. My work needed to be able to make way at times for my daughters, who needed to make way at times for my relationship with my husband; my housework - well, that needed to make way for all of them.

I had a privileged working life in a space that respected my family; it wasn't that work hadn't been understanding and supportive of these needs before, it was that I was rigid. I had gotten busy and forgotten that every inhale requires an exhale for your survival. My exhale, I decided, was that I would change the way I worked, and I started with the "when" component.

We are working in an amazing time, where the traditional career models are being interrupted and deconstructed. We have the opportunity to rethink traditional models of work and engagement. So, piece by piece, I am constructing a frame work that supports me as I age, and grow, and work.

My ambition is for my children to see me enjoying what I do and enjoying who I am. I want to be immersed in all aspects of my life, and I want to exhale and create space when it is needed.

I'm not there yet. I coach myself constantly and give myself reminders. After all I am a work in progress. ■

