

## An MSW Student's Life: Summer 2009

Contributed by T.J. Rutherford

Balance. It seems elusive these days. When last semester's whirlwind of four classes, a 20-hour internship, and a 30-hour work week came to a screeching halt, I felt almost lost. I'd wake up wondering which bag I was packing (school or work) and to where I needed to run. When my "shift" at work was finished, I would gather up my things hurriedly to head off to...home. {mosgoogle right}

For about a week, I found myself in a little ball, tucked into the corner of the couch, watching mindless television and not wanting to "do" anything or "go" anywhere. Of course, I was doing things and going places. I just needed to unwind.

About the time I started to feel a semblance of my old self returning, summer school's accelerated semester began. I have two classes, each for approximately six hours, on Friday and Saturday mornings. I am still working a 30-hour work week, Monday-Thursday. This feels almost too easy after the previous semester's load. It's not easy, though. What would normally be taught in several months is condensed into six (6) weeks, and that means lots of reading, writing, and researching.

I needed to be honest with myself this summer. I was not in the mood for school. I wanted a break. I wanted to languish on the beach and hide out in coffee shops. I wanted to have assignment-free week nights to watch movies and hang out with my husband and friends.

That said, I am staying in summer school. I want to stay on track. It's perfectly normal to want to quit for a while. It's unacceptable for me to do so, however. What I know is that if I deny my feelings, they will persist. Once I admitted this to myself and my therapist, we started to work through it. I actually feel as if I am on the other side of it already, but I felt it was worth mentioning, in case it might help another student who feels the same way.

To graduate in May 2010 (less than a year!), I need to take two electives this summer, and then take four classes each semester in fall and spring. I will also have a year-long field practicum beginning in August. There is no way around it, so I am just going to walk through it.

My quest for balance begins today.

I need to incorporate self-care into this journey. I struggled last semester with fitting in time for me, and I need to do much better in fall and spring. I will do better! When we know better, we do better.

What can I do differently, knowing what I know after last semester's experiences? The foremost issue that needs to be addressed is that of working, going to school, and having a 24-hour internship. I can't do it all. I tried. Maybe some people can, but I will not. I am currently working out the details for changing that.

The next link that was missing last semester involved the spiritual aspect of daily living. Part of my well-being depends upon feeding my soul with prayer and meditation. While I fit it in, in tiny bites, this is not something that I can sacrifice. It is the most important aspect of life for me, so no matter what, I cannot put it on the back burner.

I did not get enough rest last semester. Although I know this is to be expected at times, and it is often the norm for graduate students, it became the rule rather than the exception for me. I stayed up late so often that it became difficult to go to sleep. After my doctor prescribed a sleep aid, I was able to sleep, but I began having horrifying nightmares, which led to a fear of sleeping. Never having had nightmares before, this was especially frightening. After about a week or two of that, I stopped using the sleep aid and made a decision to practice discipline. I created a sleep schedule. I am now going to bed at a reasonable hour most of the time, and I am getting enough sleep without the nightmares. When I can, I sleep in and enjoy extra rest. I am also trying to nap in the afternoons on the weekends. This is harder than I thought!

My dog and I did not do much walking last semester. She missed it more than I did, I am sure, and I missed it a lot. I have been sitting far too much and moving too little. Bodies don't like that! My goal is, at the least, to walk my dog around the neighborhood daily. On other days, I want to add a bike ride or a treadmill hike. Exercise is good for the brain, and when in school, my brain needs all the support it can get!

My diet could be worse; it could also be better. My blood sugar is a bit high, so I need to take in more vegetables and fruits and cut back on sugar, carbs, and meat. I can do this. I love vegetables.

Prior to going back to school, I was caffeine-free. I started drinking coffee again, and even though I do not drink a lot of it, a little bit goes a long way. I am weaning myself back off of it and reintroducing herbal tea into my system. I have to admit, I feel better already. Caffeine is a subtle foe. It lures me with its seductive, nutty aroma and kicks me in the butt come nighttime. With my sleep issues, the last thing I need to do is exacerbate things by adding this synthetic demon to my system. I am currently drinking half-caf, and hope to switch to decaf, and then ultimately no-caf. I can do it.

Perfectionism has become a dirty word for me. It drives me not to excellence but rather to self-betrayal. It causes me to go an extra five miles when an extra mile would suffice. It makes me lose my serenity and succumb to a type of madness that is preventable. By me. And me alone. Only I can stop the madness. This will be the toughest behavioral change for me. I honestly believe all the other shortcomings I've listed above feed off of this main character defect. They are like barnacles on the big ship named "Over Do." If I wasn't a perfectionist, I would be satisfied with my work, and stop, take a walk, make a big salad, ride my bike, and take naps. If I wasn't so hard on myself, I could play more and be a better wife and friend during these school years.

How will I know when it's time to "stop"? I will ask for guidance. I will pray to know. I will not ignore my body when it nudges me to get up and move. I will respond to my dog's pleading eyes and grab her leash. I will look into my husband's eyes when he talks to me, and I will listen.

My summer classes are very interesting. I am taking Mental Health and Law, Race, and Poverty. My professors appear quite passionate about teaching, and the subjects are important and often evocative. During this reprieve from an

internship, I plan to steadily incorporate my new behaviors into my life. I will continue to blog, so please check in with me often, and feel free to call me out if you see me reverting to the old ways that don't work.

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