THE BALANCED LIFE PROJECT

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Michael Livesey

Essay Competition Winner

Michael Livesey is a PhD researcher at the University of Sheffield. His PhD focusses on the Northern Ireland conflict during the 1970s: and especially the language that the British Government used to describe that conflict. Alongside his PhD, he works for one of the Sheffield MPs and teaches a module on twentieth century British politics to undergraduate students. Michael grew up in the Lay Community of St Benedict and has many fond memories of teenage retreats at Worth Abbey – including a healthy dose of amateur musical performances with partner-in-crime Ben Woodward!



How has the coronavirus pandemic allowed you to develop new or exisiting relationships?

What does it mean to lead a balanced life?

Several weeks ago, I was sat in a park in Sheffield: watching a boy learning to ride his bicycle. It's a vivid metaphor for balance. The father gives his son a push; the boy pedals furiously, but awkwardly – straddling the bike with trepidation, like some Texan on rodeo. After a short burst of forward power, the bike slows; the boy wobbles beyond the point of no return; and the whole ensemble comes crashing down.

Balance. That's what this boy is searching for. But until he finds it, the enterprise is doomed to repeated failure – as I bear witness, from my front row seat beneath the beech trees.

The missing ingredient in this loop of launch, lurch, and collapse is momentum. But, moving beyond the metaphor, it's hard to build momentum in the time of coronavirus. Plans are scrapped, projects fail. And, at its worst, lives and livelihoods are lost.

I can reflect on this personally, having begun a PhD in September. I'd heard a lot about the importance of 'hitting the ground running' in your first year of research. But my experience has been more akin to hitting the ground… aaand collapsing into a heap of confused anxiety. I just can't get going – without access to the archives, which are closed, or the prison where I was going to do fieldwork (the governor of which is preoccupied with more pressing concerns).

Alongside my PhD, I work part-time for a Member of Parliament. I joined his team at the end of February… As they say, timing is everything in politics! Naïvely, we assumed the coronavirus would be a passing storm. And, as the newbie, I was designated the team's official 'covid contact' – taking queries from the public about small business support, delayed hip operations, or keyworker status. Then came the lockdown. And our office was inundated with heart-breaking stories about businesses that had gone under, or parents unable to attend a child's funeral.

The months since then have been a spiral of faint hope, indistinct light at the end of the tunnel – followed by the crushing reality of the pandemic. I worked with one family who had just set up a tapas restaurant. Since the company was only months old, they were unable to provide the requisite evidence of past profitability in order to access financial support. The whole project was on the brink of failure. But then the lockdown eased. And, suddenly, the Eat Out scheme filled their bar with customers willing to order double and let the Government pick up the tab. Things were looking up, until the return of local restrictions. I heard the sad news this week that these constituents had been forced to close their business.

The whole thing feels hopeless. How can we build the forward momentum we need, when the present (let alone the future) is so uncertain?

And yet, sitting in the park watching the depressingly apposite scene of my boy with his bike, I was struck by another way of approaching this problem. The moments when the boy is in balance are the moments when he allows himself to rely on his father's support. When his forward momentum comes from another's hand.

It's a simple insight, but one which I hope touches a nerve in this essay question. In recent weeks, and unlike the boy on his bike, I have been learning to absorb my forward momentum from those around me. I'm learning that, unlike the lessons of Zen or (conversely) neoliberalism, my balance doesn't have to come from within. I can outsource it, to the people I care about.

When I say 'I'm learning', I mean that with an emphasis on the learn. Our world teaches us to be independent. I'm in charge of my finances, my PhD project, and my career. All my successes to date have been individual. I've earned my qualifications through my hard work; and I've spent my earnings buying things for myself. Even when part of a team, I'm encouraged (by superiors, peers, and myself) to focus on my performance and areas for my personal development. But this ethic isn't serving me particularly well currently. Because, whereas owning success feels great, owning failure can be very disheartening.

What does outsourcing my momentum to others look like, in practice? I'm not 100% sure. I don't have a ready formula for socialising balance. But I've tried a few things over the past eight months.

I have weekly calls via Zoom with my PhD colleagues. We've set up a film and reading club: someone recommends a film (for fun) and an article relating to their research (to maintain a semblance of professionalism). And, on a weekly basis, we discuss the film, and give our thoughts on the article. We're crowd-sourcing the reflections which we can build into our early research.

Also, like many others, I've enjoyed the obligatory virtual pub quizzes organised with friends. Before the pandemic, I had fallen out of touch with a number of important relationships. But now we're communing weekly. We don't have much to say (how many times can you regale people with tales of a newly cleaned bathroom, or amateur baking endeavours?). But we keep each other company. Our quiz questions started with general trivia. But now we're innovating: with funny recollections from past holidays, or embarrassing posts from our social media histories. The whole thing brings me energy. Who knew that house arrest could be a catalyst for rebuilding lost friendships?

Finally, family. My parents are making some big decisions about their future currently. Now that the chicks have flown the nest, they're facing new options: selling the house, flying to New Zealand, moving to the country. This week, we were all invited to a family Zoom to discuss our futures. In some ways, it felt strange. Personally, I'm not sure we would have done it if life was 'normal'. There would have been less to share, we wouldn't have been habituated to virtual discussion, and it would have been harder to find a time when everyone was available. But it was also wonderful to be part of a project to give our family, and my parents, some collective momentum. Some of us are facing financial vulnerabilities, or imbalances. Outsourcing those uncertain futures to the wider family was refreshing. And I think we'll be stronger as a result.

There's an additional point to make here. Learning to derive balance from others means learning to be vulnerable. I have to admit to my colleagues that I haven't read x significant work by Marx. I have to confess that I need financial support from my parents, and can't yet stand on my own two feet. These are difficult admissions to make. But in a world of failure, what does it matter?

Altogether, this is a very different kind of balance to that we've been taught. It's one that's less about 'me', and more about 'us'. It's less about the son learning to ride his bike; and more about the father who teaches him.

Maybe one day we'll return to a status quo ante: where local businesses can succeed without an MP's intervention, or where I can plumb the depths of Foucault's back-catalogue without a colleague to hold my hand. But maybe I'm picking up something important in the meantime. I need momentum to strike a balanced life. But that momentum doesn't have to come from me. In fact, oftentimes, it won't. I don't have to aspire to independence and self-sufficiency. In fact, I mean not to.