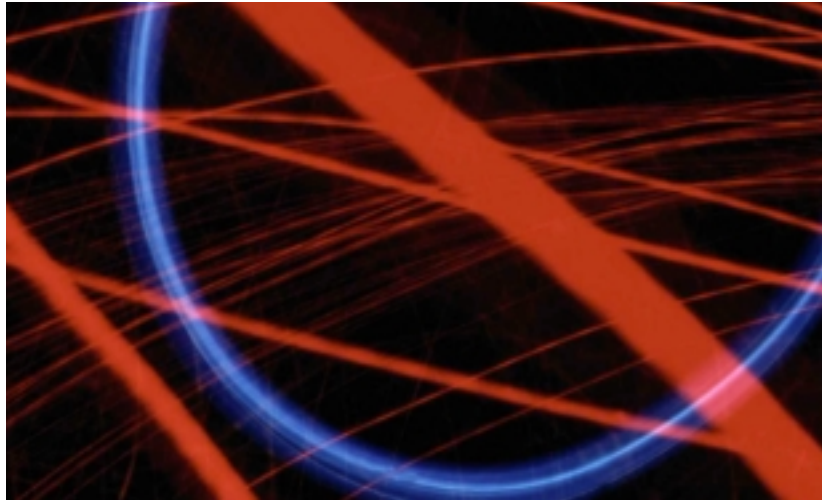




Balance Life with Advocacy



Living in an Unpredictable World

Finding balance in a life of unpredictability appears impossible. Essentially all we have is our energy, thoughts and attitude to guide our children through the sometimes rough and tumble world of advocacy. The gift and the challenge is be part of great social change and still focus on the life on one child - our child - and to do this without losing ourselves.

So many times through our journey as parents, we find ourselves straying from our sources of energy and inspiration. We poured out our hearts the current so swift as to let only the hardest give back to us. Often, we are left exhausted but celebrated martyrs. In the early years, our identities can easily become wrapped up in being the parent, just learning the system. Everything else in life becomes secondary to parenting a child with a disability. Of course, our intentions feel honorable, fighting the system seems heroic and being victimized by the

system can activate deep passion and purpose.

When it All Begins to Fall Apart

This tidy, yet challenging life soon begins to show signs of cracking. The ever-widening fissures separating us from our true selves, leaving us on one side of the chasm looking over at a reflection of ourselves we had hardly recognize. We persist in our efforts to be "wonder-mom" and "wonder-dad". Eventually, we feel something tapping on our shoulder trying to get your attention, as life seems to careen out of control. Like most, we only responded to the whack up side the head - getting sick, relationships fracture and life loosing its wonder. Everything just seems to get harder and harder, you end up doing less with more - not more with less!

The body gives out, energy dwindles down to the occasional drip and ultimately you have a choice to wither, survive or thrive. You find you have to let go, listen to you life and take the opportunity to do all of

this differently. What is a problem is now an opportunity in disguised as a problem or crisis. We have to begin to pull back from our lives and get perspective.

There is a point of realization that we could be more effective if we would just make some change. Where to start? The first place is to let go of is the attitude! As long as we see our children and ourselves as victims of the system, the system was more than willing to accommodate that perception. The universal law of attraction - like attracts like - giving us plenty of opportunities to fight and feel the victim.

Choosing Your Life

The first thing to do is to change your mind and change your world. Decide you are tired of fighting. Decide to have more fun in your life, live with more grace and ease. Decide to do things your way! How can you partner with the enemy? We need to get the systems attention and then we have to work with them, teach them and appreciate their challenges.

Some Tips to Make the Transition to Balance

- Have a vision for yourself and for your child.
- Know what your job as caretaker and advocate. You may not be able to get it all done yourself. Your job may be just to make sure it all gets done!
- Take time for yourself - at least one hour per day.
- Slow down in order to speed up.
- Develop some guiding principles that dictate how you will work for your child and how you will behave and the types of actions you are willing to take. I know I decided I was tired of being angry, it was poisoning me and all those around me. I now look for the good in people and develop that instead. I now know what you focus on grows. I realized that if I was only looking at the system and it's weaknesses, I was doing the same thing they were doing with my child. I also needed to become capacity focused.
- Strengthen your networks. Your Rolodex has all the important names you need and they know you by name. It's great when someone in the system is having a hard time learning a new way of educating your child and you can call someone who has some clout and they call to encourage that individual's professional growth. Usually, it happens much faster if the right people are in the know.
- Find other interests, sometimes the people you meet doing some thing totally unrelated to advocacy can be the greatest help.
- Continue to read outside the field, read for joy - for knowledge - for connection to your spirit. Whatever you do take time for yourself.
- Taking time for yourself may mean clearing out the clutter, learning how to say NO, and simplifying your life. I know I moved to the center of town so I could walk to everything and get exercise while going to the grocery store. It also gave my daughter a chance to be in the community without having to drive her everywhere. She also began to have a presence of her own in the community. I also took out all the carpet out of my house. I stained the cement of my high rise floor a pretty, golden color, waxed it and saved a thousand dollars a year in carpet cleaning bills.
- Leave empty space on your calendar. Life is unpredictable, plan for it! You can maneuver easier if you are not stacked up minute by minute.
- RELAX! No, really. Stress hurts you and your chances of being effective. Less than eight hours of sleep and the body begins to turn on itself and you will be headed for a health crisis. What good will you be then to your child?
- Laugh at least three times a day, and connect to friends and associates you will listen to you.
- Be careful not to commiserate through misery. Joy, celebration, inspiration better defines friendship.
- Start a gratitude journal. Some days, you may only be grateful for indoor plumbing. This really does work - what you focus on grows.
- Be creative with your work; find a way to live well. If you do you give permission for others to care for themselves. If you don't they will think there is no hope for them. If you think all this is hard, it will be! If you think it is an interesting part of life's journey that you will learn and grow from you will.
- Celebrate your success in a big way! Remember, have some fun.
- Get comfortable with change.
- There is no there - this is going to be a way of life!
- Enjoy the lessons learned, the people you will meet and the positive impact you have in your community.

Katherine Carol is author of *Tango: Dance of Self-Discovery* and a life and career coach and consultant. She has started a new parent-coaching program to assist parents in getting through the systems.



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Katherine Carol, Tango Consulting
1-888-706-0176
www.tangoresults.com
kcarol@starnetdial.net