



Managing Martha

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Most of us are familiar with the story of how Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, enthralled with His stories while her sister Martha was busy preparing meals, cleaning up and probably changing the beds! Each did what she felt needed to be done; Mary, happily seizing the moment and Martha, dutifully meeting the practical needs of her guests. Have you ever felt that you somehow found your way into Martha's shoes? Have you resented the fact that some people never do 'their share of the work' or seem to 'get away with' all sorts of things that you wouldn't even consider doing or neglecting? Does it upset you that life is unfair? Do you sometimes think that you would like to 'just sail through life', like some people you know, without feeling guilty or responsible for others?

Well, in case you haven't yet accepted it, here's a reminder: the only part of the previous scenarios that you can actually do anything about, are the *resentment*, *upset* and *guilt* parts! We can't control what other people do or think or feel and we certainly can't control when the rain falls. Although we have little control over others or parts of our environment that impact our emotional well-being, we must consciously and deliberately choose how we respond to those people and conditions. If we can start this transformation by rearranging our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, then our actions soon follow.

Are you off Balance?

In chronically unsatisfactory situations, we tend to establish a Comfort Zone or mental state where we accept our lives as either 'doing what is needed' or reaching the best that can be achieved. We get stuck there because of the 'no guarantee' risk and the excessive mental energy required to move forward. We lose momentum to pursue a personal vision or goal and find it easier to experience and express regret and resentment. When we start to blame other people or conditions for our plight, we relinquish personal responsibility for, and *control over*, our lives.

Yes, we live in a flawed world and also work in a flawed system. Some aspects of our work culture encourage us to become out of balance with our needs. Exposure to an environment of multi-directional demands, decreased respect, 24-hour access and limited involvement in decision making can each

interfere with our mental and physical ability to care for ourselves. When our job interview moves to the extra-curricular topic of how much we are willing to give, we know the "right" answers. We make choices that may temporarily help the system but can be detrimental to our life balance. Eventually, we pay the personal cost in health, relationships and career.

Why Do We Accept Imbalance?

Most of us already acknowledge that we function in a less than healthy lifestyle pattern and environment, and we know that the choice to remain there is costing us.

To create change, it helps if we first understand *why* we choose to continue our unhealthy ways. If we explore our personal value system and standards we gain insight into the reasons for our choices. Here are a few examples: If we value work and high standards and for some tasks, have more confidence in our own competence than in that of others, then we are likely to take on more than we reasonably should. That feeling and subsequent behaviour isn't restricted to lesson plans and committee membership but spills over to folding towels and mowing the lawn!

If we feel rejected or undervalued, then we may accept, or even seek, extra work to satisfy our need to belong and be recognized.

If we see an injustice that is being ignored or neglected by others, our desire to "do the right thing" may lead us to yet another task. We prize our reputation of standing up to wrong or paying attention to details so, of course, we act!

One danger in the previous examples stems from our motivation and expectations. If we do the extra work but still aren't appreciated, accepted or rewarded and the injustice isn't corrected, we experience several emotional and physical consequences. Fatigue, exhaustion and illness are common physical reactions while anger, resentment, blame, disillusionment and resignation lead the way emotionally. We may have believed that if we initiated action, others would follow but when that didn't happen we had to make the choice to continue, or stop, doing all the extras.

Overcome Martha's Obsessions

Okay, now we know that picking up the slack for others can become our role in life, if we allow it. If that

isn't where we want to spend our time and energy, we need to take different action to get what we need and want for ourselves.

A first step is to *choose the right goals*. If we are to put our time, energy and any other resources into creating change, rather than doing all of those other meaningful 'make work' projects, our new goals should be worth the switch in focus and should be related to our priorities. To determine our top priorities, we can answer a few basic questions about our lives. What are the most important things in my life? What makes me feel happy? When do I feel most energized? What will be important five or ten years from now? What pleases me about my life and what would cause regrets?

Considering those questions will help us to fine tune the things that really matter to us. The next part of analyzing our focus is to calculate the time and energy that we spend on our priorities. We may be surprised at the proportion of our mental and physical resources that we actually waste on things which we claim to be unimportant to us. That's definitely an indicator that it is time to re-evaluate. When our stated priorities and our expenditure of resources are not aligned, we can be sure that we are dissatisfied with our lives!

Creating a satisfying life isn't as simple as following a few tips, nor is creating personal change a simple accomplishment. The process is complex, hard work and requires constant vigilance. Desired results can only be achieved if we seriously commit to the effort.

The next step is to *mentally rearrange our thoughts*. We need to reinterpret situations by clarifying our expectations and those of others, and by monitoring and revising our reactions. Like Martha, we may spend our time looking after details then complaining, while, like Mary, others enjoy the moment and avail of the fruits of our work without noticing our expense. Although we might object to it, that is nobody's issue but our own!

Why do we do that? Is it because: we like the extra work; we want to 'do the right thing'; things won't get done if we don't do them? We need to understand what drives us and, at some point in our lives, we need to determine whether or not we can afford to be Martha.

Who are the people who notice or benefit from our detailed input? What impact would it have if we sat and absorbed the ambience rather than tried to create a perfect setting? Those who notice, enjoy not having to do the work, but also know it is unfair to always expect that contribution from someone else. We can be respectful of others, show courtesy and provide support while still taking care of our own needs and protecting the pathway to achieving our goals. It is a matter of balance. This cognitive restructuring allows us to reinterpret motives and actions and redirect

energy to facilitate healthier decision-making.

To make things happen, our next step is to *verbalize our feelings and needs in the situation*. This gives us the opportunity to clarify our personal direction and let others know what we are willing to give, as well as, what we expect from them. Now, we can't plan on others doing what we expect, especially when it is contrary to what they have habitually done! However, by verbalizing our view, we can make informed decisions about how we proceed. If others state that they are unwilling to contribute as we wish, then we can legitimately re-evaluate our contribution. If others suddenly recognize the cost we have been paying and therefore want to adjust their expectations and the workload fairly, then our need to do the extra work is either eliminated or diminished.

Finally we *choose to act* on what we believe is our most reasonable and acceptable option. By making this choice, we decrease our resentment and increase personal pleasure or satisfaction because we have taken control. From this point forward any stress we experience comes from our own irrational choice to continue doing what isn't healthy for us. We are now acting in a way that we consciously choose, rather than a way that resulted from feeling pressured by external factors or historical influences. By overcoming the habits developed through past experiences and memories, we are given the opportunity to eliminate negative, limiting beliefs and actions. Rather than drain our present energy, we are now in a position to seek, attract, recognize and then avail of new opportunities to redirect our mental and physical energy.

Unpleasant things happen in our lives and we often find ourselves in challenging situations but we can still choose and plan how to react. Consider this example and create a mental image that can serve as a daily reminder of our ability to redirect our environment: if we use eaves trough and a rain barrel, we can control some part of where the rain falls and if we use the collected water, the result can be beneficial.

Can you afford to continue as you are?

At this start of a new school year, when you open new books, start new files and write your first lesson plans, use those things as reminders to also set new goals to support your personal well-being. Reflect on the impact of your choices on your health, energy, satisfaction and relationships. Your Quality of Life is certainly as important as your Quality of Teaching!

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