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Balance and Baking

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Balance and Baking

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Dr. Riskin for encouraging me to write this piece.

I have discovered my love for baking and learned how baking has shaped my life as a person and a medical student. Baking puts me in a somewhat meditative state that is grounding and makes me feel connected to the world at large and to my needs.

The following text is a personal perspective of how engaging in a hobby with passion can help you find balance and peace.

ARTIST STATEMENT: IDARABASI E. AKPAN

A decorative graphic consisting of several parallel white lines of varying lengths, slanted diagonally from the bottom right towards the top right, set against the red background.

When I started cooking, I was only six years old. I remember waking up on Sunday morning to the smell of fish pies my mother was baking for the Sunday gathering. She was a great baker. The aroma of an amalgamation of butter, flour, and salt is unparalleled even to this day. However, the Sunday morning pies and the permeating aroma of vanilla essence never piqued my interest enough to become a baker.

Unlike stovetop cooking, baking is quite unforgiving. You only know about a forgotten ingredients such as a raising agent when your cake comes out like a boiled pancake, or that forgotten pinch of salt when your bread comes out flavorless and uneatable. I like being able to modify and control a process, so the idea of setting something in the oven and having no control terrified me.

This was the case until I was 18 years old. My college roommate Natasja loved to bake. She was a Biomedical Engineering major but still would make time to bake for fun. It was common for her to leave cookies in the common room for her roommates regularly and waking up to a surprise batch of baked goods in the morning really set the tone for the day!

I realized that Natasja was baking not just for the love of the process, but for the love of those around her. That was when I thought to myself, "Maybe I'll try this baking thing." Natasja and I literally have baked hundreds of cookies for our friends and I have been a dedicated home baker for over five years.

It would be an understatement to say that the art of baking has shaped me in many ways. I am going to focus on the role it plays in helping maintain balance in my life.

BALANCE **AND** BAKING

Balance is being pulled in several directions and not any single force wins. At the moment, I am being pulled by studying, being a good daughter, a growing Christian, working on my private and social life, and loving myself (which baking plays a huge role in).

Baking is not just something that I do for the love of the results (e.g. cake), but the process is almost spiritual in the sense that it is literally meditative. I focus on the several moving parts of a recipe– the ingredients at the right temperature, the right measurements brought together with the right techniques, and if that was not enough, pay attention to the right timing. Focusing on all these elements keeps my brain engaged just enough to remove my mind from the other things that have been stressful.

I have to admit that I do not always notice or appreciate those moments of serenity, but when I do, I am grateful to have them. I am grateful to have found something that makes me remember that I am a person.

I Am A Person.

The image features a solid red background. In the bottom right corner, there are several white, parallel diagonal lines of varying lengths and thicknesses, creating a sense of movement and depth.

Most days, my life is kind of repetitive-mundane and even robotic. I have to do what I have to do, not what I want to do. When I'm mixing my cake batter I notice just how still I have become and connected to my immediate surroundings. I feel grounded. It puts LIFE in perspective for me. During these moments, I really feel like a person with valid needs and wants. When I say that baking has really shaped me as a person, I mean it. It has even shaped my physical mind, not just my spiritual mind.

I remember the first time that I had a real failure in the kitchen. My mother had given me a "full proof" recipe for her world-class vanilla cake. I would never think of myself as half as good a baker as my mother, but I tried to make this cake because it is something I look forward to whenever I spend time with her. However, I soon realized that it was not as full proof as she told me.

She is a African baker and she does not measure ANYTHING. She honestly believes that "a handful" is as precise of a measurement as any baker needs. Pulling out the cake from the oven and seeing it sunken in the middle, bubbling over the sides of the pan, my heart broke. I did not expect it to hurt that much emotionally or physically, but now I understand why it did.

I was trying to bake something that contained all my love and to watch it fail seemed unfair. I did not bake for a good long time. Even when I bake now, there is still that little feeling of concern whenever I put something into the oven that it might fail even if I do everything right. So, I watch my baking process like a hawk.



This fear of failing reaches farther than the kitchen but permeates my life. Since the start of my medical career in college, many times, I have feared that I would fail. I felt the worst scenario would be that I gave my career “my all” and would not get to where I wanted to be in life. I was afraid that the end result I would receive at the end of my hard work would be like that sunken cake—unfair and undesirable. I have failed many times as a baker, but those little failures have given me the opportunity to practice and to try again.

For instance, I have never successfully gotten a good batch of meringue in the first try (to put things in perspective, each batch of meringue buttercream takes about 40 minutes to make). Failure has trained me to act on bakers' instinct, to trust myself, to keep on going in the face of uncertainty. Now, when I put something into the oven, letting go of any control, I am not afraid of the fear. I welcome it. It keeps me engaged in the process, it tells me that I care, and it reminds me how far I have come. **I let this thought process inform my mindset as a student physician.**

I would suggest when you are seeking balance, you do not need to do something that is as significant as baking is to me. You just need to engage in something that is fun and meaningful to you. Just doing something that you like—no matter what it is—will make you feel grounded and significant because when you take care of yourself you recognize that your needs are valid and that they deserve attention.

It will make you feel loved and all-round *just dandy*. And if you have not found the activities that you can pour into your Balance Bucket, I want to encourage you to try different things. Go fishing. Call people out on dating apps (like, “Really Jerome, you work at Subway. Is that Corvette really yours? *smirking emoji*”). Go skydiving. Do whatever you want! You could even start here with this recipe:

Whole Wheat Pancakes (technically not baking, but whatever)

Yield: Really depends on how big your pancakes are, but it usually feeds two people.

Timing: 35 minutes (probably).

Ingredients: Salt, 1 cup of whole wheat flour (can be substituted for white flour), $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking powder, $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp baking soda, 2 tbs cane sugar, $\frac{1}{4}$ tbs vanilla, 1 egg. Some room temp water on the side. About 1 cup of milk. (I suggest using buttermilk .) 2 tbs butter/margarine.

BALANCE IN BAKING RECIPE



- ▶ **Equipment:**
 - Measuring spoons and cups. One set for dry and one set for wet ingredients if you want a golden star.
 - Flat pan
 - Spoon/Spatula to mix
 - Whisk
 - Spatula to flip



Directions:

1) Preheat the pan on low to medium heat for about 15 minutes so that the pan reaches a stable temperature and you get uniformity in your pancakes.

2) Melt the butter in the microwave.

3) Add the flour, a pinch or two of salt, baking powder, baking soda and sugar to a bowl. Mix with a whisk.

4) Make a well in the middle and add the egg and vanilla. Mix with a whisk.

5) Add a splash of milk. Keep mixing and adding milk until you get a pourable consistency. Go with your gut. If it's too loose, you just make crêpes which are also delicious. Congratulations!

On the other hand, if the batter is too thick, you can always add water/milk a little bit at a time to thin it out as needed. However, do this at the very end after you add the butter because the butter will loosen up the batter.

6) Add the melted butter and mix (preferably with a spatula) and let the batter rest for about ten minutes.

7) Pour about a quarter cup of the batter into the heated pan. Because the batter had been laced with so much butter at the end, the pan does not need to be buttered before cooking the pancakes.

ENJOY!

- ▶ I am a first year medical student and when I decided to attend the vigorous training in medical school that I knew would turn me into a good physician I was worried that along the way, I would forget the initial reason I wanted to be a physician. I thought I might be absorbed into an already existing way of doing things and I would lose my creativity and that is essential for me. I count on my creativity to enable me to develop plans for much needed changes to the health-care system.
- ▶ Now, I prioritize doing the things that keep me creative. I sing and write and take pictures. I try to keep my mind open for inspiration because I believe that I will not only be a knowledgeable physician, but a creative one. Thanks to Dr. Riskin for encouraging me to write this piece.

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