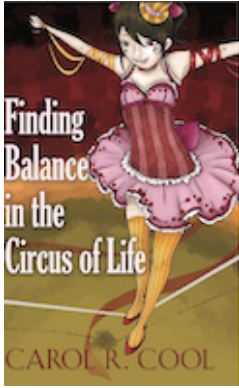


Finding
Balance
in the
Circus of Life

CAROL R. COOL



We all perform as part of life's circus. What circus character are you emulating? Are you the controlling ringmaster, the people-pleasing go-fer, or the adventure-seeking lion tamer? Or, maybe you're one of the other six characters many of us imitate.

Learn the five needs that motivate our choices in life, and uncover how they play a part in your circus performance. Is it possible you're in the wrong act as you try to meet these needs?

Allow the secrets of the tightrope walker to provide the way of balance in the circus of life. Discover the decisions and practices that will provide more balance to your days as you learn to live more intentionally. Identify your unique God-given shape that allows you to prioritize and even say, "No." Learn why rest is a vital part of a balanced life, and how to focus on what matters.

You are a unique person and your life can be lived with joy, purpose and, yes, even balance as you live out the principles that keep the tightrope walker up on the wire.

Finding Balance in the Circus of Life

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Praise for Finding Balance in the Circus of Life

“Finding Balance in the Circus of Life was very insightful and life changing for me. It helped me to better understand who I am and what my purpose is. I understand what needs I am trying to meet. The most valuable information I learned from Carol was to live intentionally and focused and not to compare myself to others.”

Dede Z. Denver, Pennsylvania

“Carol caused me to look at my role and characteristics when serving. She’s real and uses humor to biblically instruct. Brilliant.”

Meg N. Hatboro, Pennsylvania

“Finding Balance in the Circus of Life is practical and encourages women to maintain balance in their often ‘crazy’ lives. I especially liked the tightrope walker who reminds us to keep looking straight ahead and keep our eyes on Jesus. Using the circus to present this information is creative and enjoyable.”

Carol K. Hamburg, Pennsylvania

“Finding Balance in the Circus of Life helped me to focus on realizing each of us can’t do everything for everyone, and our job is not to please everyone. We should take our life one day at a time. We are all human, God has given us all talents; each one of these talents should be used physically and spiritually.”

Jackie F. Columbia, Pennsylvania

“I LOVE this book! Carol shares inspiration and insights from God’s Word as well as humorous anecdotes and examples from her own life and observations to show us how much each of us is valued and treasured by God. This book will make you think, make you laugh and, hopefully, make you want to embrace all that God has created you for!”

Cathy J. Carlisle, Pennsylvania

“Let’s face it. Life is indeed a ‘circus’ most days. And we all need help trying to figure out our roles in the daily routine as well as in the unexpected things that happen along the way. So thankful Carol helps us identify these roles and the characteristics that define them. At some time or another we’ve played them all. *Finding Balance in the Circus of Life* helped me gain perspective on the delicate tightrope we do walk to find balance—something I need to acknowledge every day—and more importantly, reminded me to keep my focus on the right things to maintain that balance.”

Margie M. Blandon, Pennsylvania

“Carol’s approach to life’s challenges is both humorous and relatable. I realize that at any point in time, even as a tightrope walker, I could lose my balance and fall! But even if I do fall, her message is clear that God is there to pick me up.”

Jennie W. Stevens, Pennsylvania

“As a pastor’s wife, I remember the lessons from *Finding Balance in the Circus of Life* often, especially when there seems no end to the needs of people in our church. It has shown me that I need to focus on one point and that is Jesus, because ‘where the eyes look the body moves.’ If I take my eyes off of Jesus I fill my life with so many nice things but not necessarily the most important. And then life gets out of balance and life gets crazy. I find that even when the wind is blowing and circumstances are difficult I won’t fall off the tightrope if I’m focused on Jesus.”

Carla S. Dixon, Illinois

**Finding Balance
in the
Circus of Life**

by

Carol R. Cool

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Introduction: Welcome to the Circus

“Life’s a circus.”

We’ve heard it. We’ve thought it. We’ve said it.

It’s always said with a sigh, and comes out in a rush. It’s become the descriptor of our lives. It conjures up the image of the old-fashioned circus. Within the big tent, different acts perform simultaneously in each of the three rings and, outside, barkers and hawkers entice you to take in a sideshow or try a new taste treat. Frenzied activity and sensory overload.

Most of us have a minimum of three rings of bustling activity operating in our lives every day. We have our home and family life. We have our work—paid or volunteer. And we have our church community.

What’s odd is our circumstances don’t seem to make any difference in how circus-like our lives are. Kids at home or an empty nest; working full-time, part-time, or not at all; strapped for cash or fairly flush; none of it changes the atmosphere. (Although, I’ll admit, sometimes a change in circumstances does allow for more sleep.)

Life-as-circus isn’t simply a product of our digital age. Bil Keane called his comic strip on domestic life *The Family Circus* at its debut in 1960—that “ideal” time period so many reminisce about. But today we believe we have more options to choose from, more hawkers begging for our time and attention.

This circus is especially chaotic because we often find ourselves orchestrating the circus while being expected to perform in all three

rings at once or, at least, in quick succession. We race from one sphere to the next, changing costumes, grabbing props, and attempting to catch our breath on the run. Then we're required to clean up the resulting mess. We're also bound by our relationships to serve as spectators of the performances of others, holding our breaths when the situation gets dangerous, cheering at all the right parts.

Our lives are different from an actual circus, and potentially more dangerous to our emotional, physical, and spiritual health, because this circus of life never ends. This is no two-hour show with time to kick back and unwind afterward. The action keeps on going, with or without us, until we drop exhausted into bed at night. Often we wake up, after too little rest, feeling overwhelmed, and jumpstart our day with caffeine and multitasking, irritated we're behind before we even begin.

Is this what Jesus meant when he promised us the abundant life in John 10:10? Some Bibles read "abundantly," but the NIV has translated it as "to the full." It's full all right, overfull even. We've got so many things going on, so many opportunities to choose from, so many responsibilities to take care of, so many shoulds and coulds and oughts and musts. But is this the "full" life Jesus promised?

Is there a way to have the abundant life—a life filled with "great plenty" where I'm "amply supplied" as Merriam Webster defines abundance—that I actually enjoy? It must be possible, or God wouldn't promise it. So how do I find the balance the definition implies?

I've never been a good one for maintaining balance. On my feet, or in my life. My days are often frantic, with too much crowded in, my mind and my heart racing. My friends know I buy Eddie Bauer Balance perfume because the only way I'm getting any balance in my life most days is if I can spray it on.

Rather than wishing for a time machine to transport me to the past—whether to the romanticized past of a Jane Austen novel or the glorious days of my childhood—I wonder what steps I can take to enjoy the circus I'm living in now.

As I began to think more about an actual circus, I found some performers I could identify with and some principles I could apply to

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bring more balance to my days and my life. What if part of my problem is I'm taking on the role of the wrong performer? Could a particular circus performer teach me what it means to live a balanced life? I believe so.

Thanks for joining me on the journey as we take a closer look at life's circus and God's prescription for balance.

Part One: What Kind of Performer Are You?

Have you ever taken a personality test? You know, the ones that fit you into one of four (or more) types of personalities. You might find you're a popular sanguine or a high D or the color orange or a pearl. The tests reveal your basic make-up and motivations. They show strengths and weaknesses and may tell you how to work better with others.

In the next three chapters, we are going to look at nine circus performers. Each one represents a way we might deal with our own circus of life. But they are not personalities; they are coping mechanisms. Any personality type can choose to take on one of these circus performer personas. It just might manifest itself differently.

For instance, the first performer we talk about is the ringmaster, who needs to control life. Sanguine personalities might control through their charm, while a choleric controls through her forcefulness. A melancholy uses his moodiness to control others, and a phlegmatic may choose to control through her stubbornness or lateness.

So we all—no matter our basic personality—can choose to deal with life through any of these performers' behaviors. Most of us regularly imitate one or more of the performers to manage our lives. But none of them are God's best for us. Let's take a look at why not.

Chapter 1: The Name-Brand Performers

Our first performers are those who get the name recognition, the up-front people who attract visitors to the circus. These are the people with power, the ones who get the most money and the most face time in the media. A name-brand performer can dictate the terms; she can choose the best performing venue and nicest accommodations. These are the positions many of us want. Even if we aren't naturally aligned to these performers, we might try to "fake it till we make it," because the rewards seem worth achieving. But when we live out our daily lives using the methods of one of these circus stars, it comes with unique problems.

The Ringmaster

The ringmaster runs the circus. The whip gets cracked to keep the show moving and the performers on task. A ringmaster needs to be in control—of everything. When we become ringmasters in our world, we feel the need to tell ourselves, and everyone else, what to do, how to do it, and when.

A ringmaster finds herself running every meeting she attends, whether she's officially in charge or not. Did you ever attend a conference or meeting where you were asked to break into small groups for discussion and your first assignment was choosing a leader?

I hate that task. So much time gets eaten up in dithering. “Let’s choose the person whose birthday is nearest to today,” someone says. Another counters, “Maybe we should choose by ballot.” The one into crafts chimes in: “I know, I’ll cut up slips of paper for all of us and put a gold star on one. Whoever draws the gold star will be the leader.”

By now, I’m losing control and so are other ringmaster types. “Enough already,” I shout, “We’re wasting time. I’ll be the leader. Now, can we just get on with the questions we’re supposed to discuss?” A ringmaster can’t stand the lack of control, the wasted time.

As ringmasters we work at keeping our spouses and kids in line, or our coworkers. It’s never an easy task. We want to make the whole circus run smoothly. We don’t want surprises, and we want everything handled efficiently and according to our specifications, our desires, our plans.

Ringmasters brook no discussion. It’s my way or the highway. After all, ringmasters know the best way to do everything. And seriously, ringmasters often are highly knowledgeable and efficient. They can see the big picture, everything going on in all the rings at once. But they get very frustrated when they can’t control all the outcomes.

Sarah, wife of the patriarch Abraham, is a classic ringmaster. God had promised to make Abraham a great nation (Genesis 12:2). He was 75 and childless at the time—not a great start. Several years later, God visits Abraham again in a vision. By this time, Abraham is assuming his servant will inherit his property (Genesis 15:2–4). But God confirms Abraham will have a son.

And then, still no baby.

Enter Sarah the ringmaster. Abraham is 85 now, getting a little old to be procreating. Sarah figures she needs to help God out. Her clever plan is to have Abraham sleep with her servant Hagar (Genesis 16:2). After all, she figures, God told Abraham the son would be “from your own body” (Genesis 15:4), but he hadn’t specifically mentioned Sarah. Maybe she wasn’t part of the plan, and God was just waiting for her to figure it out.

Abraham listens to his wife. I’m sure it was a classic case of “if Mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” But when Hagar gets

pregnant, Sarah still isn't happy. She can't control Hagar's attitude (Genesis 16:4), and things move from bad to worse. That baby, Ishmael, is the father of the Arab nations, nations still at war with Israel, the sons of Isaac. Isaac, God's promised son, didn't arrive until Abraham was 100.

Twenty-five years is a long time to wait for a promised baby, especially when the physical bits aren't working so well anymore. I understand Sarah's impatience. I've taken the ringmaster whip into my hands in much less time than 25 years.

The ringmaster, according to a Georgia Tech newsletter article, "has to shape the presentation, pace and personality of every performance while embodying the circus and the principles upon which Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey has based itself on for over 130 years."¹

When we think of the circus we call life, who should be shaping its "presentation, pace and personality"? What are the principles it should be built on? Am I capable enough to "embody" all life was created to be?

Years ago when the New Age movement was at its height, my husband Les had a t-shirt that said:

Even in this New Age, the truth remains crystal clear:

1. There is a God.
2. You're not him.

When we take on the role of ringmaster, we're trying to be God, to do his job. God should be the director of our circus, shaping its "presentation, pace and personality." He alone knows how life is meant to be lived, what he created it to be.

God doesn't want us directing our own lives or the lives of others. He wants the ringmaster position. Every Bible my parents ever gave me had Proverbs 3:5 and 6 inscribed inside the front cover. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

My understanding, my control, doesn't cut it. Each day I must surrender the bullhorn back into God's hands—letting him pry it away

if necessary—and acknowledge his instructions and plans. He sets a pace that doesn't leave me exhausted and breathless.

And my frustration level is much lower when I recognize I'm not

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responsible for the actions of others in the circus. God is their ringmaster as well. If they're not measuring up, it's up to God to straighten them out, not me. I only

need to be concerned with the way God wants me to live. I can find freedom in that, freedom from too much responsibility.

The Diva

There she sits, the woman in the glittery dress, riding bareback on a white stallion. All eyes are on her, marveling at her beauty. She waves a princess wave, preens a bit, draws the attention to herself. Oohs and aahs of appreciation may fill the arena as the spectators admire her sequined outfit and poise upon the horse. But too soon the elephants come clomping in or a mini car filled with clowns rolls by, and her moment in the spotlight is gone.

Divas need that spotlight. And they'll do whatever it takes to stay right in its beam.

Let's face it; many of us love being the center of attention. We may not be beauties, but we desire recognition as a star, whether for our brains, our sense of humor, our competency, our superior parenting skills, or our hard work. Are you someone who wants others to notice your efforts, to validate you with their applause? Do you live for that validation of your worth?

Actresses succumb to the allure of wanting their name up in lights on the theatre marquee, sometimes at all costs. Those marquees were nicknamed "electric tiaras" by theatre historian Ben Hall. He was referring to their shape and the flashing lights that glittered like diamonds. But I think it a fitting description of what they did for the performers whose names appeared in lights as well. The "electric tiara" crowned the theatre diva as worthy of accolades, attention, and adoration.

The problem is, attention is fleeting. A diva is only as good as her last show. As soon as she has an off day, the wolves circle, ready to pick her off. The fans move on to the next rising star. And it doesn't even take failure. Like the diva on the stallion, we can't hold the attention or applause of others forever. Something new, something louder, something funnier, will soon come behind us and draw their eyes away from us.

In Helen Fielding's book *Olivia Joules and the Overactive Imagination*, Olivia, the main character, has 16 rules for living. Number two is "No one is thinking about you. They're thinking about themselves; just like you." That explains why it's often so hard to remember the name of the person we've just been introduced to. We weren't thinking about them. We were thinking about what they might be thinking of us.

We're selfish creatures. All of us. It makes it hard for the diva to ever get enough attention. She's always trying one more stunt, one more push for perfection, to capture just a few more minutes of fame. But it never lasts.

The book of Acts doesn't tell us much about the life of Sapphira, but I'm willing to bet she was a diva. Sapphira and her husband Ananias see Barnabas sell some land and give the money to the fledgling church. You have to imagine people were pretty impressed by this generous gift. Barnabas was probably given all sorts of praise for his selfless act.

Sapphira and Ananias want in on the action (Acts 5). We don't know if their intentions were always warped or if they started out with a sincere desire to give generously. All we know is once they sold the property, they decided to keep some of the money for themselves. This wasn't a problem; all of it was theirs to begin with. What was wrong was they decided to pretend they were giving the church all the money from the sale. They wanted to appear as generous as Barnabas—with a bit less pain.

Here's where it gets interesting and I believe we see Diva Sapphira. Ananias comes alone to present the gift to the church. Sapphira doesn't show up until three hours later. Why? I think they figured they could

both get praised separately, twice the accolades, if they came at different times.

Now you might think the true diva would have gone first, taking Ananias's place. But I think Sapphira knew once Ananias presented their gift, people would go off and tell their friends. An even bigger crowd would be gathered by the time she arrived to get her glory.

**When we pursue the
glory meant for God,
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Maybe she got her bigger crowd, but Sapphira didn't get the glory she was after. She was getting the news

her husband had been struck dead because he'd agreed "to test the Spirit of the Lord" (Acts 5:9). And then Peter tells her she's going to die immediately as well. Not a great day for a diva.

God's ideal for us isn't the pursuit of personal glory. He created us wonderfully, but not so we can receive the glory. In Isaiah 42:8, he says, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another." We will never be satisfied when we're seeking glory for ourselves because glory doesn't belong to us.

When we pursue the glory meant for God, we end up desperate. We resemble the too-old former bombshell dressed in inappropriate clothing with make-up applied with a trowel. People are embarrassed by our neediness and turn away. And we get even less of the appropriate kind of attention.

We resent the person who's now the darling, the person the crowds admire and want to get close to. We get snarky, trying to bring her down. We trust no one and no one trusts us, and we're lonelier still.

God wants our lives to have purpose for his kingdom. As we fulfill that purpose we find satisfaction in being part of God's plan. It's a joy that doesn't rely on the attention or praise of others. It's the joy of knowing God is pleased with our actions and attitudes, and we're drawing attention to him and his kingdom. And best of all, we find ourselves as part of a community, working together for God's glory.

The Lion Tamer

“Lord of the Rings ... King of the Jungle ... The Golden Gladiator ... Caesar of the Circus!”² That’s how the program book for the 119th edition of “The Greatest Show On Earth” described Gunther Gebel-Williams, Ringling’s famous lion tamer. In 1968, Irvin Feld, then owner of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, bought the entire European circus Gebel-Williams worked in to get this extraordinary performer as part of his show.

We question the sanity of a lion tamer for his willingness to enter a cage with lions and tigers, to open a lion’s mouth and stick his head inside. Yet we can’t pull our eyes away. Gebel-Williams was said to have “captured the imagination of the American public with his dashing style and daring performances.”

It’s this daring that drives the lion tamer. They live for the excitement, the adrenaline rush. They need adventure. And lest life get too boring, they’re constantly adding another layer of danger. It was true for Gebel-Williams, according to the Ringling program book: “Each season [Gebel-Williams] created new and more sensational acts, each one topping the last.”

Having a love of adventure, like the lion tamer, can bring joy to our lives and open up new opportunities. I love traveling, discovering the tastes and vistas around the world. I love exploring new things, eating something I’ve never eaten before. But sometimes our hunger for adventure can put us in danger.

It might not be dangerous in the same way as when Gebel-Williams “brought together 15 leopards, three panthers and two pumas in the same cage [and then] lay down among them as they swarmed over his body.” That’s just nuts.

But our constant need for adventure can bring dissatisfaction with life as it is, even as it was meant to be.

When our daughter was growing up, we knew a woman I’ll call Collette, who had been divorced multiple times. Somewhere around the three-year mark of each marriage, Collette would declare her husband inadequate, unsuitable. She would leave him, but she always had another man waiting in the wings.

Our astute 15-year-old said one day, “Collette is in love with love, isn’t she?” Exactly. She loved the thrill, the adventure, of falling in love. When life evened out, when it got boring—with laundry to do and dishes to wash, with a fallible human being sitting on the sofa—she bailed. Off she went looking for the next thrill.

People who suffer from addictions to gambling or drugs or money or shopping are also lion-tamers. They’re always looking for the next high, all the while sure they can control the beast they’ve allowed into their lives. But often the beast turns on them, overpowering them, leaving them battered and broken or in debt.

Samson was a lion tamer—quite literally, according to Judges 14:5–6, where it tells us he met a lion and tore it apart with his bare hands. That lion was tamed permanently.

But he was also a figurative lion tamer. He pursued women who weren’t Israelites, against God’s commandments. He let those women play games with him, begging and wheedling to find out the secret of his strength. He kept at it even though he had to know Delilah was trying to destroy his strength because she put in place every ploy he said would make him weak (Judges 16). Maybe he believed he could control her. He seemed to think it was all a game, until a shave did him in. He’d provoked the Philistines through riddles and strange killings. But then he pursued one thrill too many and was defeated.

When we play with fire, we eventually get burned. If we walk too close to the mountain edge, one day our feet slip and we tumble to our deaths. For 13 years, performers Siegfried and Roy performed with white tigers and lions. They did more than 5,000 shows. But one day the thrill seeking brought a near-death experience. A tiger grabbed Roy by the neck and mauled him. He never fully recovered.

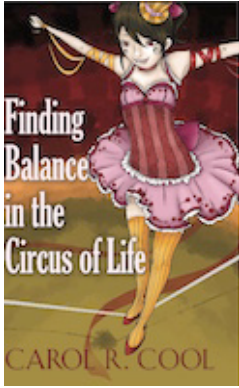
Often we don’t either when we pursue the thrill instead of God’s will. What we’re pursuing may not be wrong in and of itself. But how we pursue it can still be wrong. My travel bug can be harmful if it leads me into debt or to sacrifice responsibilities in pursuit of the next good meal or the most fascinating ruin. Envy creeps into my life and eats at my heart as I think of our friend Nathan who has visited all seven continents and manages regular trips abroad.

Paul warns against the subtle power of pursuing pleasure in Titus 3:3 (NASB), reminding us it should stay as part of our pre-Christ life. “For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy.” Instead he tells us in verse eight to “be careful to engage in good deeds.”

Living a life for Christ, filled with good deeds, is its own adventure. God provides amazing opportunities, some even fraught with danger. But it’s not foolish, as Paul calls the pursuit of pleasure in Titus. It’s adventure and danger with a goal bigger than the rush of adrenaline or the accolades of men. It’s an adventure that brings the joy of fulfilling the purpose God designed for us.

Questions for Contemplation or Discussion

1. How do you see yourself taking on the persona of one of these name-brand performers?
2. Why do you think it's so easy for you to perform in that act?
3. What benefits does that performance bring to your life?
4. What negative impact does that performance have on your life?
5. Do you think other people influence you to perform in a certain act?
6. Does being a Christian make you feel you should perform in one of these acts?
7. What guilt do you find in your life based on the act(s) you are (or are not) part of?



We all perform as part of life's circus. What circus character are you emulating? Are you the controlling ringmaster, the people-pleasing go-fer, or the adventure-seeking lion tamer? Or, maybe you're one of the other six characters many of us imitate.

Learn the five needs that motivate our choices in life, and uncover how they play a part in your circus performance. Is it possible you're in the wrong act as you try to meet these needs?

Allow the secrets of the tightrope walker to provide the way of balance in the circus of life. Discover the decisions and practices that will provide more balance to your days as you learn to live more intentionally. Identify your unique God-given shape that allows you to prioritize and even say, "No." Learn why rest is a vital part of a balanced life, and how to focus on what matters.

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