“That’s a very balanced plant.” Have you ever heard anyone say that? It sounds odd, doesn’t it? We enjoy plants for their beauty, for their uniqueness, for their fragrance, but rarely, if ever, for their balance. As organic beings, our lives share some similarities with plants. We are intended to grow, to blossom, and to give our unique gifts to the world around us. And yet, the main question I hear from medical students, residents and professionals as I speak and teach is, “How can I balance my life?”

It is unclear to me when and where this preoccupation with balance began. Just like demand for the latest must-have toy or electronic device, demand for balance seems to be growing exponentially. The more we hear others use the “b” word, the more anxious we feel about not having it ourselves. And yet I wonder … is “balance” really what we want? When they write our obituary, do we honestly hope they say, “She lived a balanced life”?

In my work with women in medicine, I have found that as they take time to reflect on what they want for their lives, they are describing congruence, something richer and more meaningful than balance. While balance focuses our attention on organizing our outer world of schedules and activities, congruence gets to the heart of the matter. Congruence is living from the inside out. Just like plants derive their beauty and lifeblood from the strength of their root system, our lives receive energy and direction from our internal root system. If your root system is healthy and strong, you will naturally grow and flourish.

So how do you cultivate a healthy root system? In my coaching practice, I have observed four main elements of this cultivation process. And in keeping with our gardening metaphor, I will discuss one element of the process in each season of 2007 as part of this quarterly feature article for women in medicine. This month, we start with knowing your DNA; future articles will discuss clarifying your values, dealing with disappointments, and finally, weeding out false beliefs.

**KNOW YOUR DNA**

For a plant to have any chance of flourishing, the gardener must understand what kind of plant it is so that s/he can plant it in the right kind of soil at the right time of year, give it the appropriate nourishment, etc. Similarly, we cannot expect to flourish if we have never taken the time to listen to the desires and dreams and natural abilities that are part of our unique DNA.
Nick Ishister, in his book *Who Do You Think You Are?*, describes the importance of discovering and unleashing your unique motivational drive and motivated abilities. Ishister defines motivational drive as the “why” for what you do and motivated abilities as the “how.” Women in medicine often tell me they have become so focused on just getting through the day that they have lost sight of these core parts of who they are. Amid multiple demands for their time and energy, their personal well-being and self-awareness becomes a last priority. Although understandable, this cycle ultimately produces exhaustion, depression and/or burnout.

If you find yourself going through the motions and hoping to just “make it through” your days, it is probably time to spend some time re-connecting with your DNA. Start by making a list of things you have done in your life that: a) came naturally to you; b) were enjoyable; and c) gave you a sense of satisfaction. Note that these should be things you have done, not just things that happened to you. Spend some time with a personal coach or a good friend talking about these experiences and examining where your current roles and responsibilities may be disconnected from your DNA and what needs to happen for you to re-connect and nourish your DNA.

Knowing your DNA is the first step in cultivating a strong root system so that your life is empowered from the inside out. Instead of scrambling to be what everyone around you wants you to be, you can freely give your natural and unique gifts. Beautiful.

*Debbie Smith, MA, is a career and personal development coach and the executive director of the Center for Women in Medicine in Nashville, a non-profit organization which provides resources and guidance for women in medical training and practice. She teaches an elective course at Vanderbilt Medical School for first- and second-year students about decision-making, and speaks at various women in medicine conferences around the country. Visit the Center for Women in Medicine Web site at www.cwmedicine.org.*

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