

Preface

A Balanced Life is about ice skating. And about life. And about how life, like ice, can throw you for a loop, leave you flat on your back and wondering if you'll ever stand up again, let alone skate.

I first imagined writing this book when I was in my fifties and had been pursuing skating as a serious hobby for a decade. Because I have no obvious talent for skating, I imagined writing a book with an ironic, self-deprecating tone — Oh, the ridiculousness of someone my age spending so much effort on a sport and having so little to show for it. And, of course, such a book would have a countercurrent subtext designed to elicit admiration — “Look me . . . I’m a wife, a mother . . . plus, I’m in my fifties! Wow, what a woman!”

And then everything crashed. A series of devastating, successive losses, followed a deceptively smooth patch of time, first destabilized my world and then fooled me into thinking it had righted itself until I came to the chasm that split my life into a before and an after. My best friend, my life-partner, my husband, died. And left me teetering on the edge of sanity, wondering how I was going to regain my balance.

And so this memoir became a serious examination of why I skate, what I have learned from a sport for which I have no natural ability, and what insights skating has given me. And underlying all these was the most important question of all: Where has all the time gone? My childhood, my twenties, I can account for, but much of my thirties, forties, fifties and sixties, four whole decades of the only life I’ll ever have, seem to have passed without any markers except loss. And with so much taken away, where’s time’s accumulation to make me feel whole? And, given time’s finitude, were all the hours I spent on the ice wasted? Would I have been a better mother, wife, sister or daughter if I had spent them otherwise?

As a consequence of these questions, writing *A Balanced Life* became a journey of self-assessment, beginning with my mother's own reminiscences of skating, when as teenager she'd get off her job on a factory assembly line and go skate on a swampy pond under the moonlight. It continues through my childhood, when I received an unexpected gift of second-hand skates and on to my teenaged years and my early marriage, which transpired amid the great social upheavals of the sixties and seventies.

All that time, I skated — some winters only a handful of times, others more so, until I gave my skating lessons as a fortieth birthday present.

Despite all that time, I was only ever a marginal dilettante. Skating has a term, “commit to the ice,” referring to the point of no return where a skater has transferred all her energy into a move she must execute no matter how disastrously, because the thrust of her momentum can't be reversed. But, in another sense “commit to the ice” means the time and discipline necessary for minimal proficiency. I've never done that. To me, skating was always peripheral to whatever else was going on in my life, like my marriage, motherhood, and my career. Nor is skating part of my identity — I'm always careful to say “I skate” — never “I'm a skater.” To my mind “skater” is a title that must be earned. It must be attained by mastering footwork, and jumps and spins. And even at my best, I could do none of those. Now, in my early seventies, those skills fade to a fainter shade of wishfulness every time I put on my skates.

Nevertheless, skating has been a constant in my life for many years, and its attendant elements have provided a useful framework for examining other aspects of my life. Balance, physicality, as well as injuries to the body and spirit have provided metaphors for writing this book, just as skating itself provided temporary relief as I endured bitter losses.

In closing, I wish to express my gratitude to the many superior skaters who have tolerated my being on the ice with them. This interloper in a realm where you clearly have dominion apologizes for all those times you pulled up short, swerved out of my way, or simply slowed down. Similarly, to the friends I have made through skating and the other friends who offered valuable guidance during this project's initial stages, I give my profound thanks. You sustained me in more ways than you can imagine.

While some of the incidents I've chosen to write about may seem harsh, it is not my intention to disparage anyone. Everyone on these pages, at some point in my life, helped me up when I was down, extended a hand, restored my balance, and renewed my faith in myself to move ahead. Writing this book has been a purgative undertaking — pulling up old memories and examining them under the light of adulthood had helped me reevaluate their worth. I also came to understand the girl I used to be much better. And I'm grateful for that part of her I still carry — I sense her quickening within me whenever I lace up my skates, step onto the ice and glide away.