

## Finding the Center

Jonathan ran along the shaded trail, following the serpentine curves that wound around a nearby pond. A pair of mallards and several stately ibises guarded the water's edge, gazing at him hopefully; visitors frequently brought crusts of bread to feed the vigilant birds.

"Sorry, guys," Jonathan apologized with a thready whisper as he sprinted past. The muscles in his legs ached, and his breath came in ragged gasps; but he finished his workout with a punishing burst of speed that carried him back to the cross country team's meeting place near the Benton High School locker rooms. A handful of his teammates had already completed the practice course, but others still trailed behind.

Wiping his sweat-slicked face with his t-shirt, Jonathan bent over and inhaled deep breaths, nudging a rock with his foot. He startled a tiny black lizard that promptly escaped into the safe haven of a hedge. Glancing at his watch, Jonathan sighed and pushed himself upright—practice was over, but he had only twenty minutes to cool down and shower. Otherwise, he'd be late for the yearbook staff meeting, and he still had to study for a biology test and finish his art project. Sometimes his crammed schedule seemed barely manageable, a whirl of commitments and responsibilities encircling him, with each on the brink of spinning beyond his reach at any moment.

When he finally got home later that night, his little sister, Lindsey, ambushed him, clutching his hand as if she hadn't seen him for centuries. "Jonathan! Jonathan! Do you want to see the picture I painted of a flamingo?" She glowed with enthusiasm.

"Not now," Jonathan grumbled, tossing his backpack on a couch and shaking his hand free. "I haven't had a chance to eat dinner yet, and I have a huge exam to study for—I'm sure I'll have more time this weekend."

The light vanished from Lindsey's face, but Jonathan ignored her disappointed look and headed for the kitchen. A moment later, the telephone rang, and, of course, the call was for him. He had completely forgotten he was supposed to work on his presentation for the debate club with a teammate, and she was patiently waiting for him at the library. Jonathan threw together a peanut butter sandwich, avoiding his mother's advice about proper nutrition, and raced out the door again. His day had turned into another marathon, and the finish line seemed to stretch into tomorrow.

The next day, Jonathan's schedule included several unfinished assignments—like his clay project for art class. When classes ended for the day, he slipped into the art room, planning to throw a vase on the potter's wheel in the hope of finishing at least one thing before reporting for cross country practice.

Waving hello to Mr. Wharton, the art teacher, Jonathan took a ball of clay from a plastic bucket and began wedging the clay on a table, removing any air bubbles that could ruin the vase he planned to make. Then he sat down at the potter's wheel, plopping the clay onto a wooden disc in front of him. Wetting his hands, he stepped on the foot pedal, and it whirled to life, spinning the clay around.

Glancing at the clock, Jonathan cupped his hands around the clay, trying to center it in the middle of the wheel. The clay wobbled, and Jonathan impatiently pushed his thumb into the middle, opening a hole in the center, and began forming the sides. The uncooperative clay slumped to one side and collapsed into a misshapen pile.

"Jonathan," Mr. Wharton reminded him gently, "you're forgetting the most important step."

When you want to throw a vessel on the wheel, you have to take your time and center the clay first—then the sides will come up easily and the vessel will be strong and shapely.”

Jonathan nodded in frustration and stood up to wedge another ball of clay—he’d have to start over, but this time he’d pay more attention to the clay and less to the clock. With quiet determination, Jonathan sat down, cupping the clay between his hands as the wheel spun.



Thoughtfully, Jonathan studied the clay, watching the changes as his hands worked to center it on the wheel. Slowly, he coaxed the clay into a solid, shapely form, and concern slowly evaporated from his mind. Carefully, he pressed his thumb into the clay, and this time, the center of the vase opened smoothly as if he had a magic touch. Then the sides of the vase rose up between his hands, sturdy and smooth.

“Now that’s craftsmanship,” Mr. Wharton said.

“Thanks,” Jonathan nodded, and he felt a sudden sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that had eluded him for weeks. He began to realize that he needed to center his life, too, so that he could find his own strengths.

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When Jonathan walked through the door later that evening, Lindsey sat on the couch; her bottom lip caught between her teeth, earnestly holding back a torrent of requests as she watched her brother swing his backpack onto a chair.

Jonathan had spent the past hour in the library going over his schedule and paring it down. He’d decided to leave the yearbook staff for another year and concentrate on cross country and his classes. Already he felt less frustrated. “Why don’t you see if Mom has some bread crusts. I’ll take you to a pond where the ducks eat right from your hand,” Jonathan suggested. Lindsey’s eyes grew round with delight.

“You’re not teasing are you?” Lindsey asked, unsure if she could trust her brother’s proposal.

“No,” replied Jonathan with a grin, and Lindsey exploded off the couch with a squeal. There was a new lightness in his step as Lindsey grabbed his hand.



### IS YOUR SCHEDULE TOO BUSY?

Every person has different tolerance levels for activity and work. Look at the tips below to determine if your schedule fits you well.

- \* *You have ample time to complete school assignments and your grades have remained steady.*
- \* *You have time to spend with your family.*
- \* *You have time to socialize with friends and participate in enjoyable activities.*
- \* *You feel in control of your schedule, not stressed and worried most of the time.*
- \* *You are able to eat your meals on time.*
- \* *You are able to get the amount of sleep you need.*
- \* *You have some personal free time available each day that is not scheduled.*