

## Are you losing your SELF in your relationships?

By Gail Wanman Holstein

**Lisa** was going to be a potter. She took a job that wouldn't tie her down, got an apartment, and joined a studio. Her artist buddies provided inspiration and laughter. However, Lisa soon found it a challenge just to keep her car running and pay the rent. Another job on the side ate into studio and class time. She became frustrated, wondering if she'd ever achieve the degree of skill she needed.

Then she fell in love. He had a great job, took her places she'd never be able to afford on her own, and asked her to quit her jobs and be his wife. Giddy with joy and wrapped up in learning about his world, Lisa decided to leave her ceramics on the shelf—for a while, anyway.

Now—fast forward five years—Lisa has become comfortable with her larger operating budget. She dresses well and has decorated their home with great taste. Because her husband's style is to entertain business associates at home, she puts effort into their dinner parties and orchestrates memorable evenings.

She's lost touch with the artists, but she hardly notices. Her friends are the wives of her husband's colleagues. She could afford to build her own studio now, and her husband has no objection to her returning to her “hobby,” but Lisa wonders why she should bother. She can buy better ceramics than she could ever make. Handling clay is dirty, time consuming, and hell on fingernails. What would be the point?

Still, there are those times, usually after some mild disagreement with her husband, when Lisa wonders: what if I had taken the other path? What have I given up? Why do I think it's too late now?

**Anna** vowed to be a more attentive parent than hers had been. She became that parent so appreciated by elementary school teachers, the one who is interested in her children's education and has time to help out in the classroom. Through her children, Anna felt she was getting a shot at the love and fun she never had as a child.

Her husband was the “quiet” member of the household. He had plenty of interests: fishing, wood turning, the boat in the driveway. The spare room and garage were filled with tackle, catalogues, marine supplies, blocks of wood to be turned, tools, pulleys, waders. He rarely entered the world of Anna and the kids—unless, heaven help them, somebody misplaced or broke one of his things. At those times the kids would cower in their rooms while Anna talked him down from his rage. Though Anna spent a lot of time scolding and picking up after the children, she gave up on ever getting her husband to deal with his own messes. It was easier just to put his things into “his” room and shut the door.

Weekends were dedicated to soccer games, school plays, birthday parties, and other activities that required coordination and shared driving. On an occasional Saturday when Anna's husband took the kids somewhere without her, Anna collapsed at home. When they returned, however, she expected a minute-by-minute account of their day.

Now the kids are older, more independent, out of the house more. Anna senses their growing resistance to her interest in them, their need for privacy. Though they are still Anna's main source of pride and entertainment, they have outgrown her. Her husband, as always, is busy with his own

activities. But when Anna floats the idea of signing up for a class, she faces a barrage of protests. They don't want to lose the services she provides.

Anna is lonely. Moreover, she's discontented, though she's not sure why. It's not "empty nest" syndrome. The nest isn't empty—but Anna is.

**Lisa and Anna (both fictional) are self-censoring women.** They have given up their desires to serve their relationships. Anna, in fact, denies that she ever had desires of her own. Like Lisa, she feels she doesn't have the right to complain. Besides, who's listening?

Are Lisa and Anna's stories familiar to you?

**Are you losing your SELF in your relationships? Here are some signs to watch for:**

- You've taken over your husband's obligations to his birth family. You shop for their gifts, putting care into your purchases. You call his mother as often as you do your own.
- You don't see your friends anymore. Meanwhile, you're seeing more of his associates from work.
- His projects are all over the house or have taken over "your" room.
- You often cancel your plans to accommodate his.
- You don't agree with how he disciplines the kids, but you go along, because you believe parents should be united.
- You once wanted to paint, or act in community theater, or write a novel; now those ambitions seem long ago, as if they belonged to someone else.
- You don't "own" any anger. It all belongs to him, or them.
- You ask his opinion before buying something for yourself.
- There's money available for what he wants, but you hesitate to mention things you'd like to have.
- You tell him every detail of your evening out with friends.
- You've let skills and abilities you were once proud of become rusty. You don't want to outshine him in any area.
- You can't quite put a finger on the source of your discontentment.

### **Some ideas for reclaiming your self:**

**Don't announce your intentions.** If you do, you'll likely meet resistance. Your loved ones will find creative ways to keep you where you are. Instead, move quietly but with determination.

**Be still.** Carve out fifteen minutes a day to do nothing. Call it meditation, call it "taking a break," call it "napping." But make it sacrosanct and don't allow interruptions. If possible, do it at a regular time so your people become used to it; if not possible, give them advance warning. Say "Is there anything you need from me before I start my quiet time?"

You are planting a flag. If you respect your time, they will.

At first, your mind may race. Your quiet time may be "wasted" on processing anger, reviewing hurt, making mental lists. Allow this. Then gently bring your thoughts to a central image of stillness—whatever that may be for you. You will do nothing else for those fifteen minutes, so you might as well accept them as a gift. When you finish, you'll be fresher, and your day will fall into place more easily.

You can use your quiet time to think. Perhaps you can begin to trace the route that brought you here—for example, your relationship with your parents. Don't be afraid of your thoughts; nobody else has to know them. They may lead you to deeper understandings.

**Take baby steps.** Take the initiative in planning your next weekend's activities. If you're going to do something as a family, include something for you as well. This does not mean taking the kids to the mall. As with your quiet time, the occasion may be small, but it should be yours.

**Re-establish contact with someone you used to enjoy.** Make a date to meet, or if that's not possible, be in touch frequently by phone or email. You don't want to use your friend as a "therapist," but merely to provide another perspective on your life. Keep it light. Let your friend make you happy.

**Buy something you want.** Don't ask his opinion or permission. It may be trivial, luxurious, practical, cheap, or expensive, depending on your financial situation. The point is to make a decision for yourself.

**Find someone who can help sort out your feelings.** How about a minister, wise friend, or women's group? How about calling your local hotline? Many women are embarrassed to contact women's centers, believing they are for women with "real" problems. But check them out: most have advocates or counselors, sworn to secrecy, who can help you acknowledge and talk through your issues.

**What about that class you wanted to take?** What's really keeping you from signing up? During your quiet time, can you think of a way around those barriers?

**You may enjoy keeping a journal.** Again, for nobody but you. List changes you want to make. Note every accomplishment, no matter how small. Check your progress every couple of weeks. Acknowledge major and minor triumphs. If you blow it occasionally, don't knock yourself around; just note the lapse and move on.

**Remember, your objective is to change.** Change rarely occurs without discomfort. Only you can decide if the change you want is worth the challenge. Be prepared for a backlash from your people.

**The golden rule:**

Do unto yourself as you would do unto others. Give yourself—your wishes, your thoughts, your time—as much respect as you would give to anyone else.

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