

[How to Be a Hermit Without Pissing off Your Family](#) [1]

October 21, 2013 [Advice](#) [2]
[Distraction](#) [3]

Theme Essay by Martha Nichols

Short Answer: You Can't

The sociable people in my life have plenty of expectations, and they always will. But pretending to be a party animal or the very best volunteer at my son's school hasn't panned out well for me as a writer.

Welcome to my inner world. I *hate* being interrupted. When I'm working, I struggle to surface when I'm called to dinner—my husband rolling his eyes, saying to our boy, "Your mother is barely connected to this planet."

I'm not a raving narcissist or a loner who insists on withdrawing to a cave. But I am an introverted writer and editor, which means my existence as a mom and wife is one long skirmish with cognitive dissonance.

Just admitting this here feels subversive. Would-be hermits are a minority amid the sassy, garrulous extroverts of American culture. Yet, even if family duties inevitably demand my attention, I still grab moments for myself whenever I can.

I've found there's no magic solution to hermit longings beyond communicating clearly with family members: *I need time by myself. Please*. Sure, my husband and son grumble when I disappear with a laptop on a Saturday afternoon, but I've learned to tolerate their grumbling in order to avoid falling apart over lost socks, abandoned deadlines, the weekly shopping, and "Mom, I just threw up!"

Cheerfully taking on too many tasks is a lousy strategy for anyone. If you're also a would-be hermit, faking the Selfless Employee or Holiday Event Planner is a lost cause. There's not a simple correspondence between extroverted personalities and tolerance for multitasking, yet I do know this: When I juggle too many different tasks, it's like a Lollapalooza concert has overrun my brain.

It's not possible in one day to interview the Premier of Freedonia, produce an episode for your own YouTube channel, make a quiche lorraine with organic cheese for the breakfast potluck, and promote your bestselling e-book *How to Be an Extrovert If You Hate Everyone, Especially Happy People and Other Loudmouths*.

Even driving around between too many after-school activities will induce meltdown. Trust me.



[4]

The Loner's Guide to Family Living

The following checklist won't dispel all conflicts with the ones you love. But these tips will help keep you sane—and honest—and that's the place to start.

Sanity Check 1: Take Your Need for Solitude Seriously

If you insist on getting time alone to write, even just a few hours a week, most of the people who care about you will listen. If you don't insist, it won't happen. Period.

The toughest person to convince will be yourself, anyway. Women, in particular, struggle with feeling guilty about spending time on their own creative work rather than taking care of the people in their lives.

But it doesn't have to be an either/or proposition. Just keep telling yourself that. It's not *love vs. creativity*. It's *love + creativity = good mental health*.

For example: I'm not fond of camping, so last July, my husband and a family friend took our son to the Berkshires for an outdoor weekend. They got an adventure; I got a two-day writing retreat. We all came out ahead.

Sanity Check 2: Don't Pretend to Be a Multitasker

When it comes to requests to volunteer for kin and country, you don't have to sign up every time. Doing so won't get you a gold medal for citizenship or guarantee that your more extroverted peers will like you. (And even if Billy's glad-handing dad *does* roll his eyes when you squirm out of selling tickets for the Third-Grade Disco Dance, ask yourself why that matters.)

Remember that for would-be hermits, multitasking is a challenge akin to the Labors of Hercules. I often have to wrestle with different work projects and family obligations—and, yes, worthy volunteer activities at my son's school—but I quickly feel overwhelmed. If I'm not careful, multitasking saps me of every molecule of creativity. Plus, nothing gets done well when I feverishly do a little bit of everything.

The classic writer's routine is to write in the mornings, then to switch to other projects in the afternoon and social time in the evenings. While I do write in the mornings, my biggest hurdle is switching to anything else. Ever.

Instead, I think in terms of a weekly schedule—Monday I'll work on my novel, Tuesday I'll finish this article, Wednesday I'll focus on TW, and so on. (Even better: I'll devote this *week* to drafting an essay, next *week* to my novel.)

Deadline pressures can scuttle this approach, but when I stick to it, I'm more productive. I sleep better than on my multitasking days. Most important to my family, I don't snarl at them or doze off in the middle of their stories.



[5]

Sanity Check 3: Train Your Family Members

My husband is a genuine extrovert and multitasking warrior. This can be a good prod to an introvert like me. It also means frequent interruptions. Even our dinnertime conversations feel like twelve-dimensional chess with three players. My son is eleven years old, so he has an excuse (sort of) for barraging me with non sequiturs and jokes from *The Big Bang Theory*. My husband, well....

I almost titled this piece "People-Wrangling for Dummies."

When my son was a toddler, if I felt my inner equilibrium spinning apart, I'd tell him, "I need a quiet moment." I'd then retreat to another room (or another bench in the playground) and take deep breaths until I felt calmer. If my little boy was upset, I'd ask him to take a quiet moment, too. I'd sit with him as he cried, but if he began to argue or complain, I'd just say, "Shhhh. Be quiet now."

By this point, my family is well aware of my need for downtime and clarity. But lately, I've taken to very explicit forms of instruction. If I'm in the middle of something else and my tween launches into yet another, "Can I tell you about the episode when Sheldon..." I flip back, "No! I need to stay focused."

Or, if a conversation suddenly veers way off course, I tell him, "Finish what you were saying first, before changing the subject."

Note that such instructions work better with younger children than with spouses or teenagers. However, even there, at least you're being honest about who you are, and it's good training for yourself: *I'm a writer. I've got a deadline. I've got a RIGHT to stay focused. I don't care how many times he shouts, "Bazinga!"*

As for training friends and other relatives not to expect an instant response to every phone call, email, or text, that thorny topic requires an article in itself.

Sanity Check 4: Schedule Unstructured Time

Despite the fact that I love time alone, I like people. Sometimes, I even enjoy a good dinner party; I can be almost...vivacious.

The trick for me is not cramming our weekends with too many scheduled events in advance. With unstructured time, I

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feel more relaxed and not at the mercy of our calendar. I don't resent my writing time being trumped. These days, even my extroverted professor husband will sigh with bliss when I tell him, "We have nothing scheduled this weekend." The school year is a busy time for him, too.

Our policy is to schedule only one social event a weekend and very little except school events during the week. This avoids the headless-chicken scramble to fling dirty underwear into the washer on Sunday night. It also allows us to get together with friends on the spur of the moment, when the gregarious mood strikes.

Unstructured time on weekends isn't always possible, of course, and writing retreats on my own are even harder to arrange. But limited social scheduling is still one of my guiding principles. And it really helps with the last tip below.

Sanity Check 5: Compromise

Here's my dirty secret: When I'm writing, it's hard for me to focus on other people. It's not just about their needs hijacking my attention; my obsession with writing distracts me from them, too (let alone the sixth-grade potluck).

All the tips in the world won't save you from disappointing your spouses, children, and friends on occasion. Part of compromising involves accepting that you can't please everybody all the time, especially if you need time to write.

But you love these people, right? They also feed your heart and spirit. No more need be said, except to listen to them—and to compromise with grace.

Bazinga!

Art Information

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- ["Advice Without Boundaries"](#) [5] © Nina Paley; used with permission.



Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief at *Talking Writing*. She often fantasizes about being a Buddhist nun in a past life.

For more about protecting the quiet space within, see her Editor's Note for TW's Fall 2013 issue, ["The Reluctant Multitasker."](#) [6]

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