

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I love my wife dearly, but she is extremely high maintenance, and can't stand it when I do anything that doesn't include her. I have a demanding job and spend all the rest of my time with her and our two daughters. About two months ago, I took a painting workshop while my wife and daughters were out of town visiting her mother. Because of my work schedule, I couldn't leave when they had to, so I ended up with an unexpected, free Saturday afternoon. I took the painting workshop and rediscovered my old passion for art. I told my wife I wanted to sign up for a watercolor class at a local college (it meets one night a week for three hours). My wife became enraged when I told her I wanted to take the class. She called me "selfish" and said that I only think of myself. Do you think my request for one evening a week to pursue my own interests is selfish?

-- William

Dear William,

I do not think you are at all selfish to want some time to pursue your passions and personal interests. Quite the contrary, I think you are wise to find balance between your responsibilities to your family, your work, and your own personal growth. Taking a class for one evening a week does not strike me as excessive at all. It's not as though you want to imitate Gauguin, who ditched his responsibilities and took off to Tahiti to paint full time.

Nothing hurts quite like being called "selfish" – it conjures up an image of a greedy, narcissistic, withholding person. Who wants to be like that? But, in the Western mystical tradition, the concept of "illuminated selfishness" gives us a way of looking at "selfishness" in a new light. In this way of thinking, we recognize that we are like a well; a well that will go dry if the water in it is not replenished. A dry well is of no help to anyone.

We have a psychological and spiritual responsibility to ourselves, and to those we love -- to take care of our own needs while balancing our responsibilities to our families and our work.

It sounds to me like you and your wife need to have a conversation about the expectation each of you has for your relationship. Being married and having a family doesn't mean that we cease to be individuals. In fact, people who are fulfilled and following their passions are happier and more vibrant in all of their relationships and endeavors. You'll be an even better husband, father, and worker when your life is enriched by the satisfying experience of expressing your creativity and following your heart's desire to paint.

Here are the steps I would take if I were you:

1. Have a conversation with your wife and express just how important this class is to you. Assure her that you will encourage her to pursue her interests as well. For

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- example, if she loves to play bridge, offer to make dinner and take care of the kids on the night she plays with her friends. But regardless of what she wants to do for herself, be gentle but firm in letting her know that you *will* be taking this class. If you don't register for the class because she "won't let you," you will come to resent her and resentment is not good for your marriage (or any relationship, for that matter).
2. When/if your wife begins to be supportive of your painting, tell her just how much her support means to you. Reinforce her for any efforts to encourage (or at least not discourage) your hobby.
 3. Share your feelings about art and your class with her. Talk about what you are learning and show her your paintings if you feel comfortable with that. In other words, let your painting pastime be something that brings you together, not drives you apart. Perhaps your interest in art is something that could be shared as a family. Taking your family to museums or art galleries will broaden everyone's horizons, can be a fun family time, and gives your whole family a chance to learn more about your love of art.
 4. Make sure that the time you spend with your wife and family is quality time – not just quantity time. Be particularly aware of time commitments you have made to them. There may be many times when you become lost in your painting – the kind of flow that happens when we are actively and creatively engaged. Don't "forget" to pick up your daughters from soccer practice or a date with your wife because you can't tear yourself away from your artistic work. Be really mindful of the need to balance all these important aspects of your life.

William, also think about what you mean when you describe your wife as "high maintenance." Those words, and the fact that your wife became "enraged" at the thought of your taking an evening for yourself, raise big red flags for me. I can't help but wonder if there are other issues in your marriage that need to be addressed. Is your wife controlling? Is the time you spend with her truly quality time? Are there other problems in your marriage that are being projected onto this conflict about the art class? It would be a good idea to reflect on these questions and take some action (such as marriage counseling), if this painting class is just the tip of an iceberg of other, larger issues.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949 *Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D. is a writer, personal coach, motivational speaker, clinical psychologist and producer/host of the "HeartWaves" radio program (WVOD-FM, 99.1 at 12:40 weekdays).*

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