



## The Rest of Her Life

By Mary Lou Quinlan

Her high-stress job was eating her alive. She had no downtime at all. Then MARY LOU QUINLAN took a five-week vacation. She had no idea she was about to reinvent her life. A recovering workaholic explains it all to you.

I've always been a Type A, hard-working girl, from babysitter to candy striper to part-time bank teller during my college years. My parents taught me that I could do anything and be anything I wanted to be. The good news: I believed them. The bad news: I expected to earn gold stars in everything. Moving to New York for my marriage and a career in advertising and marketing ratcheted up the pressure.

With my high-energy, can do style, I created extra assignments and tougher deadlines—a perfect match for a fast-paced industry. I turned on the office lights many mornings and made friends with the late night cleaning crew (kind of a class nerd turned office lunatic). After 15 years of hard work, I became CEO of a large New York ad agency with big-time, demanding clients.

My title came with a price- my life. Family vacations shrank to long weekends punctuated by frequent voice-mail checks. I was still the perfect-attendance girl, thanks to good health, but more because I refused to miss a day. I suppose I was guarding a mythical permanent record that couldn't withstand a single bad mark. At night, I'd crash, dead asleep until I'd bolt upright at 2 A.M. to scribble ideas and leave voice messages for my associates. I thought that showed how committed I was. (Looking back on it now, I imagine that "committed" was what they wanted to have done to me.)

I also harbored a secret scheme for getting some rest. I fantasized that I'd be hit by a car. Not a life-threatening accident, just a broken ankle or leg, enough to get me into a cast and off my feet, and off-limits to everybody's demands. Then one workday, a real car accident sent me to the hospital on a stretcher. Two broken ribs should have been scary enough. But far scarier was my reaction: Strapped to a gurney in the ER, I grabbed my husband's cell phone to freak out with apologies for being late for a presentation. .

By 1998, midsize agencies like ours were being squeezed out, and the emotional overload took a great toll. Like many women, I was empathetic to everyone's problems but my own. Finally, a concerned friend suggested I needed some serious downtime. That obvious insight had never occurred to me, but I was so exhausted and at my wit's end that I turned a mental corner.

I decided to ask for five weeks, and I was so intent on taking them that I was prepared to quit if my boss- the head of our parent company- said no. I put together a “while I’m away” plan that, in Type A fashion, included nine client events that I would still attend. “Give me your pen,” he said. He drew a line through the entire list. “Make this the most selfish time of your life.”

My 45<sup>th</sup> birthday was day one. For the next five weeks, I went cold turkey: no calls, no correspondence, no meetings, nothing. What I loved best were the pages and pages of blankness on my calendar. I was so used to seeing my days chopped into half-hour slots, each minute clogged with someone else’s agenda. Instead I’d wake up and ask, “What do I want to do today?” and fill my un-agenda with fun or rest or people I love. I admit that for the first two days, I checked my office voice mail. Then I just let go.

I learned what it felt like to sip a cup of coffee while the sun shown in my apartment. I wandered around my Greenwich Village neighborhood. I watched my high school girlfriend teach poetry to her class of 8 year olds. I dated my husband. I went to Latin dance lessons, had lunch with friends, decaf-ed myself, and took naps. I became reacquainted with the girl I once was and the woman I had become.

And I was able to think about what I really wanted to do next. I’d always been fascinated by women consumers, and I started to visualize a business that would help companies understand them better.

At the end of the five weeks, I said two words I had never said in my life: *I quit*. It wasn’t what my boss was hoping to hear, but he was intrigued enough by my concept to invite me to start up the venture within the framework of my agency’s parent company, a real financial boost. Best of all, I could created the business to fit my time and my goals and still have room for a life.

That was five years ago. I didn’t turn from a type A to a type zzz. Many days I work just as hard as I did at the agency. The difference is that I’m doing things I love, and I protect my rest stops. I work out regularly. I don’t do the late-night shifts anymore. Weekends are weekends. And my family comes first.

Many women tell me that they can’t take a break because they have children or money worries or feel vulnerable in their jobs. But I think that the real reason is that we resist being selfish. Perhaps we unconsciously make the list of “should’s” so long that our turn never comes; we’re afraid of what the quiet hours might reveal to us.

If you are postponing your own time off, answer these questions: When did you last feel really happy about the day ahead of you? If you picture yourself six months from now living the exact same schedule, how do you feel? If you’ve been at this pace for ten years or more and can project working another 20 or 30 years, isn’t there one little window of time that you could carve out as your own?

I believe that it's time that women gave themselves permission to rest. Perhaps we can begin a movement together. Here's what I can tell you: From day one of my sabbatical, I felt this incredible lightness. I enjoyed the first good night's sleep I'd had in years- but not the last. It's your turn.

-----  
Mary Lou Quinlan is the founder of a marketing company, Just Ask a Woman and the author of a book by the same name. Her next book, due out in 2005, will tell women's stories about taking time off to reclaim and reframe their lives.