

Personal Essay: Maintaining Identity
By Jennifer Banks

When I was pregnant with my oldest child, I began watching other mothers at different stages of life closely as motherhood was now suddenly very relevant to me. I found that many had lost themselves in motherhood—recent empty nesters wondering how to fill their days, young mothers with eyes glazed over, focused on survival, and mothers with their youngest child now entering elementary school. I saw a similar theme: motherhood seemed to be so all-consuming that, when given uninterrupted time, mothers were unsure of what to do with it. I made a pact with myself right then that I would not lose my identity when I became a mother.

While the concept of identity is somewhat nebulous and ever-evolving, the way to maintain it is more concrete. The word maintenance reminds me of keeping house. Just as it requires a tenacious, constant, intentional effort to maintain your home, the same is true for maintaining your identity. *Let's be clear though, we're not going to be able to maintain either perfectly, and I'm here for that! I am merely comparing the two for the sake of this essay.

I read through several "Home Maintenance Checklists" and found that the majority of tasks fit into the following four categories: Cleaning, Repairs, Replacements, Systems. The coordinating categories I came up with for maintaining identity are: Fulfillment, Self-Care, Hobbies, and Preventing Burnout.

Fulfillment

First and foremost, you have to know what fills you up. Many women are fulfilled solely by motherhood, which is fantastic because it's a built-in way to fill your cup. Other women are fulfilled by something alongside motherhood – employment, a non-profit, passion project, life-calling, etc. It's possible to love your children and not love motherhood. It's also possible to enjoy motherhood and something else at the same time. One size does not fit all. A lot of figuring out what fulfills you goes back to what you value as a human being. Is it family? Contribution? Stewardship? Career? For a list of values, see Brene Brown's *Dare to Lead* resource online.

Self-Care

I learned from Brenda Kradofer in the Empowered Wife Workshop™ that when her self-care is high, not a lot can bring her down. I feel this is true as well—when I'm taking care of myself and my needs (alongside my children's), not a lot can ruffle my feathers and life seems easier to tackle. Another quote that I love is, "Drink as you pour." I've found myself waiting to take care of me until after I've seen to the needs of my children, but oftentimes when I do that, I have nothing left to give to me. If we drink as we pour, we're guaranteed to get taken care of along the way. Laura Doyle, a relationship coach, recommends three self-care acts per day. These don't have to be huge and grandiose, as a little bit does go a long way! Brianna Wiest says that, "True self-care is not salt baths and chocolate cake, it is making the choice to build a life you don't need to regularly escape from."

Hobbies

Whether it's something you've always enjoyed or trying something new, hobbies bring the fun into life. The point is to engage in something just for the sake of the activity. As mothers, we jump at the opportunity to get our children involved in music lessons, sports, and other extracurricular activities, but do we do the same for ourselves? You're never too old to learn something new. As we pursue dreams and passions, it sets a great example to our children while also meeting our needs and desires. With all

things in life, there is still a balance, of course. If you are so involved with your hobbies that your children are becoming neglected, that would be an unhealthy amount of self-involvement.

Prevent Burnout

I teach preschool in my home twice a week, but I am primarily a stay-at-home mom. This doesn't stop me from taking my children to daycare one day each week. My husband and I also have regular date nights and I spend a night by myself every so often. I am involved in monthly book clubs, bunco game nights, and other occasional girls' nights out. For me, these provide the "break" I need to then come home and love my children without seeing them as a burden. Prentis Hemphill said, "Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously." Each person's version and volume of respite will vary, but it's crucial that you do have the help you need. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but the mother also needs that village to support her. It's important to know your limits, you get to decide how busy you are. Be sure the things you say "yes" to are indeed the things you want to fill your schedule.

Just as there are lists and lists of things you can work on to maintain your home, the lists are endless in ways you can be a better mother, wife, human, etc. What I have noticed is missing is a greater focus on self and identity. When this area is improved, it will spill over to all other areas of life. If you know who you are, you can bring that version into motherhood and make it even more beautiful.