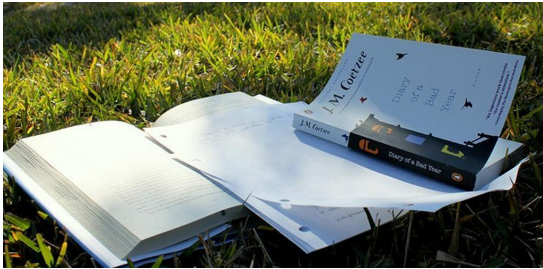


WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Get Away From it All: How a Personal Retreat Helped My Career

by [Natalie Jesionka](#)



Sometimes, even when you love your job, you just need a break.

For me, travel is my passion—but after returning to the U.S. after years of job-related jet-setting, going abroad just didn't hold the same wonder. In fact, something I once loved had become exhausting and difficult. Plus, travel led me to put off other projects: [building my travel magazine](#), [growing my young women's organization](#), and finishing my book about reporting and traveling.

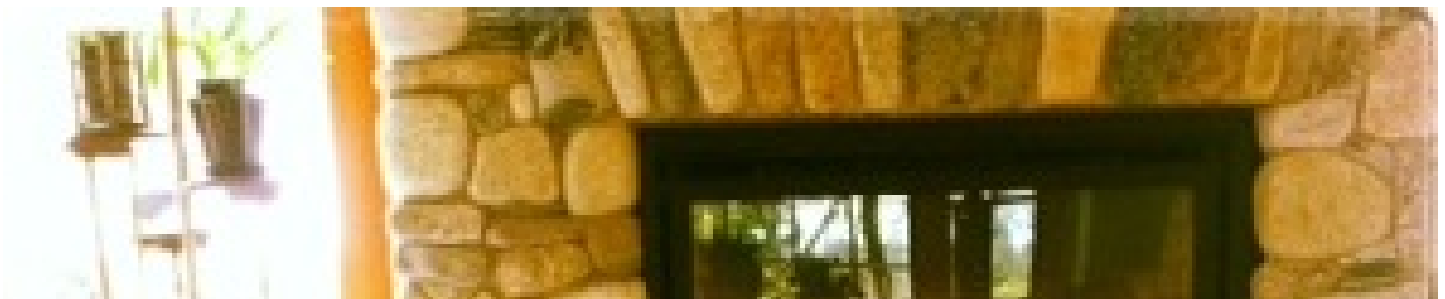
When I found myself stuck in an infinite loop of work-coffee-email, and couldn't stop to enjoy the activities I loved or pursue the other things I was passionate about—I knew I needed a change.

So, I finally decided to make some time for myself to tackle my personal projects. I applied for and received a grant from the generous women of the [Turkey Land Cove Foundation \(TLC\)](#), a retreat for motivated women to pursue their professional, educational, and artistic goals away from the distractions of daily life.

For two weeks, I settled in at the Foundation's tranquil retreat space on Martha's Vineyard, four miles from the nearest town and nestled down a dirt path in the woods. I turned off my phone, banned texting, and [went to the beach](#). And most importantly, I [worked on my projects and reflected on my life](#).

I'll admit, it wasn't easy to take this time away. But it was one of the most important things I've done for my career and for myself. Putting the brakes on travel, and on the rest of my life, helped me reflect on all the wonderful experiences I'd had, renewed my sense of curiosity and wonder about the world, and also made me seriously productive!

So whether it's for two weeks or just a quick weekend, I'd encourage anyone else to try it. With these five steps, you can [take time for yourself](#) and create your own solo retreat, anywhere in the world.





1. Establish a Safe Space

Even if you can't do a retreat like the TLC, you can always [create one in your home](#), do a house “swap,” or find another space that makes you feel completely at ease and relaxed.

Keep in mind that the environment you create should not only be relaxing, but should also guarantee you have no distractions (ringing phones) or obligations (chores or family members) other than being in that space.

2. Set a Schedule

When I first arrived at TLC, I was in a panic. What was I going to do for two weeks? I couldn't ever remember [being alone with my own thoughts for even a few hours](#)—let alone days on end.

I soon learned that the key was to set a schedule—but one that was simple, not jam-packed. I started with little things, like meditation, having tea by the water, biking, and yoga. After that, I found that I didn't need a schedule—I was able to get started on the work I'd been wanting to do with an amazing clarity and focus. The more I let go of [trying to squeeze to-dos into every minute of my day](#), the more quickly ideas came to me, and I was able to get real work done.

Consider some highlights of your perfect day. What would you really enjoy doing? What's absolutely necessary for you to get done? Identify what tools or extras would make the mandatory work easier to complete. Aromatherapy while you grade papers? A powerful

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I set loose goals for myself, like [writing at least two hours a day](#), being active, and brainstorming. I also planned out more tangible professional and personal goals—reaching out to a new agent, doing PR for my magazine, journaling, and gaining the strength to bike 20 miles to the beautiful clay cliffs

Set flexible goals, both ones that you know you can meet and ones that are a reach. You'll be surprised to see how organic the process of achieving your goals becomes—and you may even [identify new goals along the way](#). And if you don't accomplish a major goal one day, no sweat: You'll have several others you can check off your list.



nourishing food, and beautiful landscapes.

It sounds silly, but when we're constantly on the go, we really do take the world for granted. As you go through your retreat, make sure to enjoy the little things and take time to really reconnect with yourself and the simpler aspects of life, like your hobbies, (or just doing nothing at all).

5. Solitude is Hard, but Worthwhile

It may be hard to believe, but the time I spent at TLC was actually hard work. I had to let go of my apprehension about being alone and just take each day for what it was. But by doing so, I became self-reliant and thoughtful again. Not only was I achieving my goals, but [I was actually recharging](#).

During your retreat, try to understand where you've been and consider the impact you want to have in the world. Accept being alone with your thoughts. Take advantage of the time to regroup and refresh, so that when you get back to the real world, you'll be stronger than ever.

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Photos courtesy of [Monik Markus](#) and Natalie Jesionka.



Natalie Jesionka has researched and reported on human rights issues around the world. She lectures on human trafficking, gender and conflict, and human rights at Rutgers University. When she is not teaching, she is traveling and offering tips on how students and professionals can get the most out of their experiences abroad. She also encourages global exploration through her work as Editor of [Shatter the Looking Glass](#), an ethical travel magazine. Natalie is a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow and served as a 2010 Fulbright Scholar in Thailand.

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