Introvert, extrovert

My experience – Since I was studying in primary school, I’m quite and always speak softly. My family doesn’t like my sister and I to be so noisy. My father is fierce at that time. Even if I cry, he will be angry and shout at me to let me quite. My secondary school friends told me, I didn’t respond to them when they talk with me. Seems who I can only communicate with is my best friend, shinyi. Yes, I’m such an introvert.

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All the time I got the message, “Why are you so shy? Why are so quiet? Why are you so introverted?” Just like it was not necessarily the right way to go that I should be trying to pass as more of an extrovert. But the more I tried, the more I sensed deep down that I was wrong and that introverts were pretty excellent just as they were.

Many introverts denied their intuition and made self-negating choices. It’s our loss for sure, but it’s also our communities’ loss. And at the risk of sounding grandiose, it is the world loss. Because when it comes to creativity and to leadership, we needs introverts doing what they do best. A third to a half of the population are introverts. So that’s one out of every two or three people. All of them subject to this bias that this is pretty deep and real in our society. We all internalize it from a very early age without even having a language for what we’re doing.

Now, to see the bias clearly, you need to understand what introversion is. It’s different from being shy. Shyness is about fear of social judgment. Introversion is more about how do you respond to stimulation, include social stimulation. So extroverts really crave large amounts of stimulation, whereas introverts feel at their most alive and their most switched-on and their most capable when that’re in quieter, more low-key environments, not all the time – these things aren’t absolute – but a lot of the time. So the key then to maximize our talents is for us all to put ourselves in the zone of stimulation that is right for us. But now here’s where the bias comes in.

Our most important institutions, our schools and our workplaces, they are designed mostly for extroverts and for extroverts’ need for lots of stimulation. And also we have this belief system right now that I call the new groupthink, which holds that all creativity and all productivity comes from a very oddly gregarious place.

So if you picture the typical classroom nowadays: When I was going to school, we sat in rows, doing our work autonomously. But nowadays, it’s having pods of desks in the classroom. Kids are working in countless group assignments. Even in subjects like math and creative writing which you think would depend on solo flights of thought, kids are now expected to act as committee members. And for the kids who prefer to go off by themselves or just to work alone, those kids are seen as outliers often or, worse, as problem cases. And the vast majority of teachers’ reports believing that the ideal student is an extrovert as opposed to an introvert. Even though introverts actually get better grades and are more knowledgeable, according to research.

And when it comes to leadership, introverts are routinely passed over for leadership positions, even though introverts tend to be very careful, much less likely to take outsize risks which is something we might all favor nowadays. An interesting research by Adam Grant at the Wharton School has found that introverted leaders often deliver better outcomes than extroverts do because when they are managing proactive teammates, they’re much more likely to let those teammates run with their ideas. Whereas an extrovert can, quite unwittingly, get so excited about things that they’re putting their own stamp on things, and other people’s ideas might not as easily then bubble up to the surface.

Now in fact, some of our transformative leaders in history have been introverts. I’ll give you some examples, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Gandhi, all these peopled described themselves as quiet and soft-spoken and even shy. And they all took the spotlight, even though every bone in their bodies was telling them not to. And this turns out to have a special power all its own, because people could feel that these leaders were at the helm not because they enjoyed directing others and not out of the pleasure of being looked at, they were there because they had no choice, because they were driven to do what they thought was right.

Now I think at this point it’s important for me to say that I actually love extroverts. Most of my best friends are extroverts. We all fall at different points, along the introvert/ extrovert spectrum. Even Carl Jung, the psychologist who first popularized these terms said that there’s no such thing as a pure introvert or a pure extrovert. He said that such a man would be in a lunatic asylum if he existed at all. And some people fall smack in the middle of the introvert/extrovert spectrum and we call these people ambiverts. I often think that they have the best of all words. But many of us do recognize ourselves as one type or the other.

And what I’m saying is that culturally, we need a much better balance. We need more of a yin and yang between these two types. This is especially important when it comes to creativity and to productivity, because when psychologists look at the lives of most creative people, what they find are, people who are very good at exchanging ideas and advancing ideas, but also have a serious streak of introversion in them. And this is because solitude, is a crucial ingredient often to creativity.

So Darwin, he took long walks alone in the woods and emphatically turned down dinner-party invitations. Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, he dreamed up many of his amazing creations in a lonely bell tower office that he had, in the back of his house in La Jolla, California. And he was actually afraid to meet the young children who read his books for fear they were expecting him this kind of jolly Santa Claus-like figure, and would be disappointed with his more reserved persona. Steve Wozniak invented the first Apple computer, sitting alone in his cubicle in Hewlett-Packard where he was working at the time. And he says that he never would have become such an expert in the first place had he not been too introverted to leave the house when he was growing up.

Now, of course, this doesn’t mean that we should all stop collaborating, and case in point is, Steve Wozniak famously coming together with Steve Jobs to start Apple Computer. But it does mean that solitude matters, and that for some people it is the air that they breathe. In fact, we have known for centuries about transcendent power of solitude. It’s only recently that we’ve strangely begun to forget it.

If you look at the insights of contemporary psychology, it turns out that we can’t even be in a group of people without instinctively mirroring, mimicking their opinions. Even about seemingly personal and visceral things like who you’re attracted to, you will start aping the beliefs of the people around you without even realizing that that’s what you’re doing. And groups famously follow the opinions of the most dominant or charismatic person in the room even though there’s zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas. So you might be following the person with the best ideas but you might not. And do you really want to leave it up to chance? Much better for everybody to go off by themselves generate their own ideas, freed from the distortions of group dynamics, and then come together as a team to talk them through in a well-managed environment and take it from there.

Now if all this is true, then why are we getting it so wrong? Why are we setting up our schools this way? And why are we making these introverts feel so guilty about wanting to just go off by themselves some of the time? One answer lies deep in our cultural history. Our culture has always favored the man of action over the “man” of contemplation.

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But in early days, we lived in what historians call a culture of character where we still, at that point, valued people for their inner selves and their moral rectitude. They featured role models like Abraham Lincoln who was praised for being modest and unassuming. Ralph Waldo Emerson called him “A man who does not offend by superiority”.

But then we hit the 20th century and we entered a new culture that historians call the culture of personality. What happened is we had evolved an agricultural economy to a world of big business. And so suddenly people are moving from small towns to the cities. And instead of working alongside people they’ve known all their lives, now they are having to prove themselves in a crowd of strangers.

So, quite understandably, qualities like magnetism and charisma suddenly come to seem really important. So that’s the world we’re living in today. That’s our cultural inheritance. Now none of this is to say that social skills are unimportant and I’m also not calling for the abolishing of teamwork at all. The problems that we are facing today in fields like science and in economics are so vast and so complex that we are going to need armies of people coming together to solve them working together. But I am saying that the more freedom that we give introverts to be themselves, the more likely that they are to come up with their own unique solutions to these problems.

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Extrovert – open your suitcase and have a look.

Introvert – world needs you and it needs the things you carry.

So I wish you the best of all possible journeys and the courage to speak softly. Thank you.