

TEXT 1

Susan Cain's *Quiet* Argues for the Power of Introverts

My neighbor, a leadership development consultant who regularly helps people improve themselves through personality tests like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, once told me I was the most introverted person he'd ever met. I took this as a compliment. Who wouldn't? The introverts who are the subject of Susan Cain's new book, *Quiet*, don't experience their inwardness in quite so self-congratulatory a way.

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Too often denigrated and frequently overlooked in a society that's held in thrall to an "Extrovert Ideal — the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha and comfortable in the spotlight," Cain's introverts are overwhelmed by the social demands thrust upon them. They're also underwhelmed by the example set by the voluble, socially successful go-getters in their midst who "speak without thinking," in the words of a Chinese software engineer whom Cain encounters in Cupertino, Calif., the majority Asian-American enclave that she suggests is the introversion capital of the United States.

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Though some fake it well enough to make it, going along to get along in a country that rewards the out-going, something precious, the author says, is lost in this masquerade. Unchecked extroversion — a

personality trait Cain ties to ebullience, excitability, dominance, risk-taking, thick skin, boldness and a tendency toward quick thinking and thoughtless action — has actually, she argues, come to pose a real menace of late. The outsize reward-seeking tendencies of the hopelessly outer-directed helped bring us the bank meltdown of 2008 as well as disasters like Enron, she claims. With our economy now in ruins, Cain writes, it's time to establish "a greater balance of power" between those who rush to speak and do and those who sit back and think. Introverts — who, according to Cain, can count among their many virtues the fact that "they're relatively immune to the lures of wealth and fame" — must learn to "embrace the power of quiet." And extroverts should learn to sit down and shut up.

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Jonathan Rauch, a contributing editor at National Journal, tapped into the inherent humor of this contradiction some years ago, when he wrote a much-read meditation in The Atlantic on introversion. Rauch dreamed about the dawning of an "Introverts' Rights movement," the slogan of which might someday be "Please shush." He got the tone just right: "Remember, someone you know, respect and interact with every day is an introvert, and you are probably driving this person nuts."

[p] "Quiet," a long and ploddingly earnest book, would have greatly benefited from

some of this levity. (4)

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Her interest in writing on the subject, she relates, stemmed from her own agonizing difficulties with public speaking — an aversion to putting herself "out there," which made Harvard Law School such a trial that she once threw up on the way to class. Her Cupertino "introverts" (who, I think, are probably better understood as sharing a cultural background rather than a near-universal personality trait) feel unappreciated, undervalued, resentful of their extroverted (and non-Asian) fellow students and colleagues who noisily "talk nonsense," as a Taiwanese-born Cupertino woman puts it, and still get ahead. [...]

Cain, who left a career in corporate law and consulting for a quieter life of writing at home with her family, is at her best on the subject of children. Her accounts of introverted kids misunderstood and mishandled by their parents should give pause, for she rightly notes that introversion in children (often incorrectly viewed as shyness) is in some ways threatening to the adults around them. Indeed, in an age when kids are increasingly herded into classroom "pods" for group work, Cain's insights into the stresses of nonstop socializing for some children are welcome; her advice that parents should choose to view their introverted offspring's social style with understanding rather than fear is well worth hearing.

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For one thing, her definition of introversion — a temperamental inner-directedness first identified as a core personality trait by Carl Jung in 1921 — widens constantly; by the end of the book, it has expanded to include all who are “reflective, cerebral, bookish, unassuming, sensitive, thoughtful, serious, contemplative, subtle, introspective, inner-directed, gentle, calm, modest, solitude-seeking, shy, risk-averse, thin-skinned.” This widening of the definition makes introversion so broad a category, including, basically, all that is wise and good, that it’s largely meaningless, except as yet another vehicle for promoting

self-esteem: “a very empowering lens through which to view your personality,” as Cain puts it. [p] Another problem with Cain’s argument is her assumption that most introverts are actually suffering in their self-esteem. (6)
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Had she spent more time in other sorts of places, among other types of people — in research laboratories, for example, or among economists rather than businessmen and -women — she would undoubtedly have discovered a world of introverts quite contented with who they are, and who feel that the world has been good to them.

[p] The need to dress up any exploration of a social or psychological phenomenon in go-go language, making interesting observations or reflections the basis for something like a new social movement (“Introverts of the World, Unite!” as The Atlantic headlined a follow-up interview with Rauch), is particularly American, and can be as noisily grating as the compulsory extroversion Cain deplores. “Quiet” is full of gratuitous sloganeering: “Love is essential; gregariousness is optional.” “The secret to life is to put yourself in the right lighting.” Such writing offsets Cain’s serious research rather badly. A more quiet argument would have been much more effective.

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TEXT 2

Quiet. The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking by Susan Cain – review

When you're at a party, do you suddenly feel the desperate urge to escape somewhere quiet such as a toilet cubicle and just sit there? Until I read *Quiet*, I thought it was just me. I'd see other partygoers grow increasingly effervescent as the night wore on and wonder why I felt so compelled to go home. I put it down to perhaps there not being enough iron in my diet. But it's not just me. It's a trait shared by introverts the world over. We feel this way because our brains are sensitive to overstimulation. I am genuinely astonished by this news. In fact, I read much of Susan Cain's book shaking my head in wonder and thinking: "So that's why I'm like that! It's because I'm an introvert! Now it's fine for me to turn down party invitations. I never have to go to another party again!"

Cain is an introvert. [...] She's an introvert in a world that, she argues, excessively and misguidedly respects extroverts. We make them our bosses and our political leaders. We foolishly admire their self-help books, such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Before the industrial revolution, she writes, American self-help books extolled character. Nowadays it's personality. We introverts attempt to emulate extroverts, and the stress of not being "true to ourselves" can

make us physically and mentally ill.

At the Harvard Business School, socialising is "an extreme sport". Extroverts are more likely to get book deals and art exhibitions than their introverted counterparts. Cain had to persuade a publisher she could conquer her stage fright and promote herself at book festivals before they agreed to take her on. In America, extroverted parents have been known to send their introverted children to psychiatrists to have their introversion "treated" out of them. We think extroverts are great because they're charismatic and chatty and self-assured, but in fact they're comparatively narcissistic and unthoughtful and we're committing a grave error structuring our society around their garrulous blah.

Most egregiously, we form our workplaces around the extrovert ideal. I like her nightmare descriptions of open-plan offices where group brainstorming sessions descend on the startled introvert like flash-storms. Group-think favours the dominant extrovert. The loudest, most socially confident and quickest on their feet win the day, whereas the contemplative and quietly well-informed tend not to get a word in. School classrooms are increasingly designed to reflect this flawed environment. Children sit in pods facing each other and are rewarded for being outgoing rather than original. "You Can't Ask a Teacher for Help Unless

Everyone in Your Group Has the Same Question" read a sign in one New York classroom she visited. All this even though Gandhi and Rosa Parks and Steve Wozniak and JK Rowling and Eleanor Roosevelt have described themselves as introverts, at their best when solitary.

I finished *Quiet* a month ago and I can't get it out of my head. It is in many ways an important book – so persuasive and timely and heartfelt it should inevitably effect change in schools and offices. It's also a genius idea to write a book that tells introverts – a vast proportion of the reading public – how awesome and undervalued we are. I'm not surprised it shot straight to the top of the New York Times bestsellers list.

Cain says we're "especially empathic". We think in an "unusually complex fashion". We prefer discussing "values and morality" to small talk about the weather. We "desire peace". We're "modest". The introvert child is an "orchid – who wilts easily", is prone to "depression, anxiety and shyness, but under the right conditions can grow strong and magnificent".

When I get to this part I think: Yes! We *are* like orchids! With good parenting we *can* become "exceedingly kind, conscientious and successful at the things that matter to us". Then I feel embarrassed that I derived pleasure from being compared to an orchid and I

realise that sometimes Cain succumbs to the kind of narcissistic rhetoric she eschews in extroverts.

And there's a bigger nagging thought I couldn't shake throughout the book. It began during the preface, in which Cain prints an "Are You an Introvert?" checklist. She lists 20 statements. The more we answer "true" the more

introverted we are. At the bottom of the quiz she mentions: "If you found yourself with a roughly equal number of true and false answers, then you may be an ambivert – yes, there really is such a word."

I do the test. I answer "true" to exactly half the questions. [...] However, ambiverts don't get another mention in the book.

Even for a writer like Cain, who is mostly admirably unafraid of grey areas, we ambiverts are too grey. Her thesis – built on the assumption that almost everyone in the world can be squeezed into one of two boxes – may topple if it turns out that loads of us are essentially ambiverts. I suspect there are a lot of ambiverts out there.