



LAURIE HELGOE Ph.D.

INTROVERT POWER

Why Your Inner Life is
Your Hidden Strength

PRAISE FOR

INTROVERT POWER

"This is such a good book! Laurie Helgoe has created an important guide to embracing one's inner life and claiming it as a rich source of power, creativity, and connectedness. Through concise yet pithy examples and exercises, she shows how to celebrate introversion and support yourself to thrive—shamelessly!"

—Camille Maurine, author of *Meditation Secrets for Women* and *Meditation 24/7*, creator of the "Moving Theater" process

"Laurie Helgoe's *Introvert Power* is a long overdue look at the power of introversion. We shouldn't think something is wrong with us if we shun the sometimes chaotic life of an extrovert. Many of the great intellectual, artistic, philosophical, and religious thinkers were introverts. Introversion can connect us to the source of our Being so we may remain grounded as we work in the world. If you have introvert inclinations and are doubting yourself, this is a must read. Or if you know someone who exhibits introvert symptoms, read this book before calling the shrink."

—Bhante Yogavacara Rahula, author of *One Night's Shelter: An Autobiography of an American Buddhist Monk*

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WHY YOUR
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HIDDEN STRENGTH

Laurie Helgoe, PhD



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To Catherine, midwife to my introversion, ten years ago today.

To Barron, The One, twenty-five years into the best decision we've made.

Believe nothing.

No matter where you read it,

Or who said it,

Even if I have said it,

Unless it agrees with your own reason

And your own common sense.

—Buddha

INTROVERT

POWER

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Introduction

If you haven't been to a mosh pit, you've probably seen one in movies. A mob of people are crowded together, body to body, dancing and slamming into each other, usually at a live music club or concert. Occasionally, someone dives into the pit from the stage and "surfs" on the upraised arms of the crowd. The challenge of "moshing" is to work your way as close as possible to the band and to avoid getting trampled. Security guards keep watch in case such a thing happens, but any mosher will tell you that the pit is dangerous.

I've come to see the mosh pit as an apt description of American society—and of my childhood home. I was number nine out of ten bright, creative, and mostly LOUD kids. My dad, an eccentric genius, had wall-sized speakers in the living room that blared out classical music. When the family sang together, we sang five-part harmonies of the uncompromising Handel's *Messiah*. On Christmas Eve, we had a talent show and family service, and later tore into our presents all at once, paper and ribbons flying everywhere and voices crisscrossing the room shouting out "thank you!" and "just what I wanted!" These are happy memories, because there was a part for each of us. But instead of ripping paper and shouting, I sat in my corner with my pile of gifts and handled each as a treasure, slowly and carefully opening them, preserving the paper and lingering in the delight of discovery. I was meditating in the mosh pit.

However, when there were no gifts to open and everyone was competing for airtime, I felt invisible and became over-stimulated and anxious. My anxiety was not about the pressure to socialize; there were more than enough bodies to take care of that. I became anxious because I couldn't *think*, and without my own mind, I felt like I was disintegrating. My solution was to retreat to my room and write. In my solitude I could regain contact with myself and become solid again.

I had a rich imagination; I wrote science fiction and developed secret codes with my little sister and a neighbor girl. Though the mosh pit was stressful, I knew that retreating was an option.

I lost this freedom when I entered school.

In first grade, I got scolded for hiding out in the bathroom with a couple of girls during recess. We were sprawled out on the floor, quietly engaged in the subversive practice of—yes, coloring. That was when I learned that my desire for quiet and solitude was bad.

I adapted. Years later, as a PhD candidate in clinical psychology, I didn't tell anyone that I was intimidated by the prospect of sitting in the room with a stranger. I wanted to be *under* the surface—not to have to get there through social exchange. Again, I adapted, found success as a psychologist, and had practiced for almost ten years when I first admitted to my analyst (and *myself*) how taxing that "social exchange," particularly with new clients, had been for me. This was the first time I had acknowledged the simple truth: I am an introvert.

My confession of introversion allowed me to rediscover the treasured self I had buried when I first stepped on the school bus. My analysis provided me the time and space I had craved, and I entered a personal renaissance. I took my first-ever personal retreat, letting my husband and little boys handle things while I indulged in the privacy of a remote B&B in the woods. I began a prolific period of writing, learned to craft candles, discovered poetry, and, for the first time, saw a world beyond the constrictions of my profession. Predictably, as I came alive, people around me—even my closest family members—got worried. What if I relinquished my hard-earned career to sell candles on the a

fair circuit? What kind of crazy ideas was I getting from my analyst? It hurts when the self you most value becomes a source of worry. But once you tap into that self, the worry won't stop you.

What kept me going was the energy I discovered. For the first time since my carefree childhood days, I experienced *flow*. When I took my solitary walks, I felt I could walk forever, basking in the ample space for thought and imagination. I discovered the sky and drew on its vastness as a source of comfort.

The world opened to me during these walks, and I began to envision new possibilities for my life. The image of a piano keyboard came to my mind, and I recognized that I had only learned one note—I was an expert on that note, but there were so many more to discover. The sky reminded me that there was so much more than the limited corner of the world I had come to know. I was filled with desire, and that desire led me to new notes and new places.

I was transported by the power of introversion.

Since that opening, I have experienced the glamour of being a model, savored the power of holding an audience captive as a stage actor, wrote and directed mixed-media performances, accompanied my son on an Amazon expedition, and, most satisfying of all, realized my desire to become an author.

Here's a well-kept secret: Introversion is not defined by lack. Introversion, when embraced, is a wellspring of riches. It took me years to acknowledge this simple reality, to claim my home, and to value all it offers.

Perhaps you also feel most at home within. But you've probably also felt the pull to abandon that home—to set up house in the world of social interactions. Even if you only enjoy an occasional visit inside yourself, you may struggle to justify such an indulgence. Because extroversion lines up so well with American values, we introverts often deprive ourselves of what we most enjoy and thrive on. So for all of you who draw energy from inside, behind, underneath, or away from it all, welcome home.

AMERICA THE EXTROVERTED

There's a lot to love about America—freedom, the melting pot of diversity, individualism—so attractive concepts, especially to an introvert. In fact, the introverts were probably the first to feel crowded in England and to daydream about all the space they would find in the New World. Peace and Quiet!

Fast-forward to the new millennium—and it has been a fast trip forward—in which we are more likely to associate America with office space than with "spacious skies." We have become an outward and upward society, conquering, building, competing, buying out, improving—extroverting. The squeaky wheels get greased, the ones who snooze lose, the best team wins, and the winner takes all.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

Introversion is an inward orientation to life, and extroversion (alternatively spelled extraversion) is an outward orientation. Though you probably use both introversion and extroversion, one of the orientations usually feels more like home—more comfortable, more interesting and more energizing—than the other. Introverts prefer introversion; we tend to gain energy by reflecting and expend energy when interacting. Extroverts have the opposite preference; they tend to gain energy by interacting and expend energy while reflecting.

In this culture of competition, it is no wonder that those of us who prefer introversion feel anxious. We are expected to "think on our feet," but we think best when we're still. We're pressured to join an

keep up, when we'd rather follow an inner guide. And with the ever-multiplying multimedia—from pop-up ads on the Internet to phones that can reach us *everywhere*—the competition finds us where we live. Even the sacred introvert haven, the dark movie theatre, is now being invaded by *commercials!*

When introverts sense invasion, we instinctively shut down to protect our inner resources. But in doing so, we lose access to ourselves. From this defensive position, we may feel that our only options are to practice extroversion, go underground, or go crazy.

Could it be that there's another alternative? Perhaps we could draw on our personal and communal strengths to *assert* introversion in our culture. Sound like a paradox? Yes—as paradoxical as meditating in a mosh pit.

INTROVERSION FOR ALL

According to the introverted psychiatrist Carl G. Jung, introversion and extroversion are two opposing forces within an individual. Jung was the first to identify these personality attitudes, one "characterized by orientation in life through subjective psychic contents" (introversion) and the other "by concentration of interest on the external object" (extroversion). Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Cook Briggs, who developed the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, built on the idea that introverts prefer to focus on their own inner world, whereas extroverts prefer to focus on the outer world. But as the concepts of introversion and extroversion gained popularity, they began to lose their dynamic roots. We tend to see ourselves as introverted OR extroverted, rather than as a creatively evolving combination of the two.

It is this dynamism that makes introversion relevant to all of us. Whether the scale tips in the introverted direction and you call yourself an introvert, or you load up on the side of E, every one of us has some capacity for introversion. When a culture devalues these qualities, we are all reduced.

The way personal growth is supposed to progress, according to Jung, is that we first develop what comes naturally—introversion or extroversion. This specialization works well until later life, when the individual gets bored and wants to expand his or her range. But what happens when the introvert is discouraged or, worse, prohibited from practicing her specialty?

The introvert may adapt, but she walks around with a nagging sense of homelessness. She won't need to wait until midlife to become bored—she's bored already! It's hard enough to be in a career that doesn't fit, but for many introverts, the *life* doesn't fit.

For these introverts, what is needed is *not* a move toward extroversion, but as a friend of mine put it, an opportunity to "melt into introversion." This book is not about finding balance—we are really tired of doing that! Besides, finding balance assumes that we have been *allowed* to be fully introverted. We have not. This book is about embracing the power of introversion. It's about indulging, melting into, drinking in, immersing ourselves in the joy, the genius, and the power of what we naturally are—and not just on the occasional retreat, but in the living of our lives. Ironically, balance will only come to us if we forget about extroversion for awhile, and balance will only come to our society when we see and respect the introversion in all of us.

THE BIG LIE

Thanks to Jung and his successors, we have the tools to understand these qualities. We have a personality test to measure introversion and extroversion. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) has generated a vast amount of research on introversion and extroversion. Popular literature has emerged to explain how each of us can understand our personality preferences and use them to our

advantage. But lies about introversion are so imbedded in the fabric of our culture that even the literature geared toward correcting misconceptions inadvertently promotes them.

The biggest lie is that introverts are in the minority, making up one-fourth or one-third of the population, depending on what you've read. Any introvert who has done a quick web search attempting to find some company, has probably run across and even quoted these figures. But not only are these figures floating around the Web, they are also repeatedly quoted in the self-help books many of us use as resources.

When I started my research for this book, I wanted to know where these statistics came from. I wanted to find the research that the books were quoting. So I went to the source: the *MBTI Manual* (2003), a regularly-updated compendium for the research on introversion, extroversion, and the other personality dimensions measured by the MBTI. But what I found was quite different.

The first large-scale population study of the MBTI revealed that introverts make up a good half (50.7 percent) of the population (and if you want to split hairs, we seem to be in the *majority*). The study, the largest to date, was conducted in 1998. A more recent population study, reported in the *MBTI Step II Manual*, puts introverts a little further into the majority: 57 percent, compared to 43 percent extroverts.

It took me much longer to find the source of the claim that introverts make up only a third of the population. Isabel Myers made this estimate when the MBTI was being developed—prior to 1962!

How can we be so far off?

As much as research shows the contrary, the belief that introverts are in the minority has stuck. After all, in America, extroversion is *what we value*. And we see what we value. So we see extroverts everywhere, and we no longer notice the introverts everywhere. Sometimes we even miss the introverts looking back at us in the mirror. We might tell ourselves that *introverts are naturally less visible than extroverts*. This lie is as insidious and damaging as the lie about our numbers. Perhaps a better way to put it is that we are less *seen* in America. Go to Japan, for example, and, despite the massive population, an introverted businessperson is more likely to be noticed than a "fast talker."

In America, we think of introverts as withdrawn loners, quiet and scared. We readily diagnose a preference for looking inward as stemming from depression, anxiety, or antisocial tendencies. We don't know what introversion really is, and we interact with introverts all day without realizing it.

We've got it all wrong.

REVIVING YOUR INTROVERSION

From a young age, most of us are taught the value of social skills. We learn how to introduce ourselves, how to smile and be polite. We are told to be friendly and make friends. These are all useful abilities to develop. But how many of us are taught the value of solitude skills? How many of us are taught to protect our boundaries, to foster imagination, to be alone? How many of us are encouraged to withdraw from social activity and nurture the life of the mind?

This book is here to provide that missing training and support. We'll examine how introversion may have gotten away from you, and how to get it back. We'll deconstruct the extroversion assumption and see how it manifests in everyday conversations, judgments, and ideas about work and play. As you are freed to reclaim your preference, you will be amazed at the power you feel. Life will flow in a way you hadn't thought was possible. You may find yourself asking: "Is this okay?" "Can things be this easy?"

As this transformation occurs at the individual level—this simple reclaiming of your home—you notice your world changing. I think you're going to like it.

Welcome.

WHAT'S INSIDE *Introvert Power* provides an

Introvert Power provides an alternative to the extroversion training you've been receiving all your life. As unnatural as extroversion has felt to introverts, we've gotten used to it. Rather than putting a thick coat of introversion over layers of extroverted thinking, *Introvert Power* asks you to strip down your thinking first and then dip into your true colors. The book is divided into five parts, each essential to our retraining and best experienced in sequence.

In Part One, *Antisocial, Weird, or Displaced?* we take on—and take apart—the beliefs we've adopted about introversion, along with our culturally determined assumptions about what is healthy. We look at mistaken associations between introversion and mental illness, and confront our society's taboo against solitude. You'll meet two introvert styles, represented by Shadow Dwellers and Accessible Introverts, and learn how these styles have developed in the context of an alienating society. Then we start looking at what's real: our numbers, our influence on current trends, and the economic power we exert. Finally, we look at societies that favor introversion and what we can learn from them.

Part Two, *The Introvert's Wish List*, is the melting into introversion section. In these chapters, we indulge in our wishes for private space, time to think, routine retreats, passionate observation, and real intimacy. Though the process may feel like a guilty indulgence, we'll see why such pleasures are in fact essential to introverts and healing to society as a whole.

In Part Three, *Standing Still in a Loud World*, we move into the areas that have become defined by extroversion and look at how to bring an introvert tempo into the mix. You'll learn how to create space in conversations and how to just say no to parties—or how to hang out, introvert-style. We deal with work and the people who interrupt us. We sort out how to be there for the people we love while remaining loyal to ourselves.

And we confront the downside of introversion, and how to know when we need a window out.

The final section, *Outing the Introvert*, takes us one step further, from introvert restoration to introvert renaissance. We take ownership of our society, educating rather than apologizing, acting with introvert integrity rather than conformity or indifference, and expressing, in our own way, the richness within us. We consider when extroversion is natural for us and, fully rooted in introversion, we relinquish the defensive stance that once restricted our freedom. We begin to meditate in the most intimate pit and, as we do, the pit transforms into a house of meditation; the extroverted slamming no longer pushes us off balance, and the rhythms of introversion and extroversion complement each other in a new dance.

INTROVERT VOICES

My voice will always be limited in capturing your private experience, so I supplement my words here with the voices of a diverse group of introverts. I polled the introverts in my world, as well as subscribers to my website, www.wakingdesire.com (see also, www.introvertpower.com). A group of voices emerged: a college student from Puerto Rico who makes films in her spare time; a minister with a generative mind and minimalist lifestyle; a high school sophomore who obtains permission to doodle in her classes; a professional comedian; a sampling of accountants, artists, government

employees, musicians, conservationists, health professionals, and writers. These contributors welcomed the opportunity to *write* their thoughts—extroverted techniques were not used in the making of this book—and struck me with their honesty and insight. Many appreciated being asked. The voices of introverted heroes—literary, historical, popular, and lesser known—also enrich the pages ahead.

Regardless of how many introvert perspectives I can provide, however, it is your voice that I hope to inspire.

Part I:

Antisocial, Weird,
or Displaced?

Chapter 1: The

Mistaken Identity

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greater accomplishment.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

"He's thin and white...if he's tall he's got bad posture."

"Not particularly attractive, ungainly, with skin problems—would be first underweight and the (later in life) overweight." "Nerdy."

"Geeky."

"Conservative style, neutral colors."

These are some descriptions of what an introvert looks like. What is alarming is that the descriptions all come from introverts! When the same people describe themselves, the picture changes:

"My physical appearance is...exotic. Light green-blue slanted eyes and high cheekbones."

"Natural blonde."

"I'm overweight, tanned skin, big, round, and dark brown eyes."

"Somewhat tall, reasonably attractive considering age."

"Brown curly hair—I look like I'm from another country."

What stood out to me as I polled these people was the sterile and colorless quality of the archetypal introvert, contrasted by the colorized descriptions of the self-identified introverts. The stereotypical introvert is often seen as introvert by default when, in fact, introversion is defined as a *preference*. Introverts generally prefer a rich inner life to an expansive social life; we would rather talk intimately with a close friend than share stories with a group; and we prefer to develop our ideas internally rather than interactively.

So how have we jumped from these preferences to images of a cowering, reclusive weirdo? In Chang commented, "Whatever is not commonly seen is condemned as alien." We have lost our eyes for introversion. As we discussed in the introduction, introverts make up *more than half* of the population, yet we assume that introverts are an occasional deviation—the geeks in the shadows.

Introversion, by definition, is not readily seen. Introverts keep their best stuff inside—that is, until it is ready. And this drives extroverts crazy! The explanation for the introvert's behavior—and *there must be an explanation for this behavior, say the extroverts*—is that he or she is antisocial, out of touch, or simply a snob.

Because introverts are trickier to read, it is easy to project our fears and negative biases onto their preference. And it's not just extroverts who do this. As my informal poll revealed, we often make similar assumptions about other introverts, and—most troubling of all—about ourselves! One of the introverts I polled is a striking beauty. She described her physical appearance as "OK." Another very attractive introvert described herself as "the status quo." These downplayed descriptions may reflect

tendency to focus less on externals, but we also tend to downplay our very personalities—the style we *prefer*. For example, do you ever jokingly or apologetically admit to being antisocial, or view yourself as boring in relation to your chatty associates? Do you beat yourself up for not joining in? Do you worry that something is wrong with you; that you're missing out; that who you are naturally is a problem needing correction?

Your nature is not the problem. The problem is that you have become *alienated* from your nature—from your power source. As Isabel Briggs Myers discussed in her book, *Gifts Differing*, "The best adjusted people are the 'psychologically patriotic,' who are glad to be what they are." For introverts this means, "Their loyalty goes to their own inner principle and derives from it a secure and unshakable orientation to life."

But we *have* been shaken. To reclaim the power of introversion, we must first deconstruct the assumptions we make about who we are.

I wondered if I was perhaps anti-social, or maybe even flawed.

—Suzanne, Oregon

THE OPPOSITE OF SOCIAL IS NOT ANTISOCIAL

Of all the assumptions made about introverts, the idea that we are *antisocial* is the most ridiculous. The term "antisocial" actually refers to sociopathy (or antisocial personality disorder), a condition in which a person lacks a social conscience. This has nothing to do with introversion. Introverts are often deeply concerned about the human condition; they just tend to look within for answers. Ironically, the classic sociopath is quite charming and socially engaging, but lacks the *inner* capacity to feel empathy and guilt.

This is a great example of how our vision tricks us. An introvert deep in thought will *look* self-absorbed, whether he's thinking about world hunger or working out how to hack into someone's bank account. An engaging extrovert will *look* friendly, whether he really cares about your day or is trying to pick your pocket. Therapists are reluctant to apply the diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder until there is clear evidence for it, because it is a serious problem with a poor prognosis. Enjoying your own company does not warrant any diagnosis, but this one is especially cruel.

But are we just talking semantics here? When we use "antisocial" in this way, we really mean not social, or *asocial*—the correct term for someone who does not like to interact with people. So would it be fair to say that introverts are asocial?

Wrong again.

THE OPPOSITE OF SOCIAL IS NOT INTROVERTED

An introvert may *feel* asocial when pressured to go to a party that doesn't interest her. But for her, the event does not promise meaningful interaction. In fact, she knows that the party will leave her feeling *more* alone and alienated. Her social preference may be to stay home and reflect on a conversation with a friend, call that friend, and come to an understanding that is meaningful to her. Or she might indulge in the words of a favorite author, feeling a deep connection with a person she has never met. From the perspective of a partygoer, this introvert may appear to be asocial, when, in fact, the introvert is interacting in a much different way.

Q: What would you like extroverts to understand about you?

A: That we are social, too. It [socializing] just takes energy away from us and we need to recharge after a certain amount of time. Our need to retreat is not a statement about them or our relationship with them.

—Lisa, North Carolina

Because the introvert is oriented to the inner world, she "takes to heart" something a good friend says and needs time to reflect before responding. This can happen during a relaxed talk, but, for the introvert, the understanding deepens during the time *between* conversations. If we think of each person as having a finite amount of interpersonal space, an extrovert is more like a hotel—able to accommodate a large number of interactions that come and go. Note that I said *interactions*, not people. Extroverts are often able to accommodate more people as well, but because extroverts wrap up interactions *in the* interaction, even a close friend may check in and check out as needed. An introvert may have the same square footage, but each meaningful interaction is reserved in its own luxury suite awaiting the follow-up interaction. Bookings are more limited. A related assumption about introverts is that we are socially incompetent. Are you starting to see a pattern? Assumptions about introversion usually link the preference with some kind of *lack* or disorder. So let's get this one over with too. Just as extroverts can have poor social skills (think of the raucous, obnoxious socializer), introverts can be socially savvy. Introverts often choose "people professions" as their life work.

I have been wrong too many times to assume that an outgoing social leader is an extrovert. The introverted leader may check out for refueling and relish alone time after work, but be quite "on there" in her public role. Stories abound of high-profile introverts who chill out to read a book, watch golf on TV, or take a walk.

So, being an introvert does not mean you're antisocial, asocial, or socially inept. It does mean that you are oriented to ideas—whether those ideas involve you with people or not. It means that you prefer spacious interactions with fewer people. And it means that, when you converse, you are more interested in sharing ideas than in talking about people and what they're doing. In a conversation with someone sharing gossip, the introvert's eyes glaze over and his brow furrows as he tries to comprehend how this conversation could interest anyone. This is not because the introvert is morally superior—he just doesn't *get it*. As we've discussed, introverts are energized and excited by ideas. Simply talking about people, what they do and who they know, is noise for the introvert. He'll be looking between the lines for some meaning, and this can be hard work! Before long, he'll be looking for a way out of the conversation.

But when an introvert is hanging out with a friend, sharing ideas, he is in his element. The conversation is "mind to mind" rather than "mouth to mouth." Extroverts share ideas too, but the ideas are secondary to the interaction, and develop *between* the two people as they talk. The focal point is external. For introverts, the focal point is internal, with each participant bringing the other inside and working things out there. A good conversation leaves an introvert feeling more connected, but also personally richer.

Understanding the *location* of interactions puts introverts back on the map. Extroverts understandably need more face-to-face time, because that's where the interaction is located. Introverts need more *between* time—between words in a conversation and between conversations—because the interaction is located within.

WE ARE NOT SNOBS

While this is an assumption some introverts like—being a snob is better than being *impaired*—

ultimately hurts us. Think of a group of Extrovert Moms gathered together at a Little League game excitedly chatting and enjoying the action.

In comes Introvert Mom who, after a full day of work, wants nothing more than to savor the game—all by herself. She sits off a bit from everyone else, stretching her feet onto the bleacher bench, and may even have a book to indulge in as the team warms up. She might enjoy watching the people around her, but she has no energy to interact.

What are the Extrovert Moms thinking? Because they are oriented to people, they will likely assume that Introvert Mom is, too—which means they see Introvert Mom as not liking people (which we know now as asocial) or being a "snob," thinking she's too good for the Extrovert Moms. Most likely, Introvert Mom *is not thinking about them at all!* She is just doing something she likes to do.

The snob assumption is an extrovert personalization of the introvert's behavior: she's not just doing something for herself; she's *dissing us*. This misunderstanding may lead to gossip and suspicious looks. If Introvert Mom feels this hostile energy, she may become defensive and further withdraw to protect herself, only confirming to the Extrovert Moms that she is indeed a snob.

An introvert who regards herself as a snob, and looks down on extroverts as superficial or shallow, *loses*, rather than gains, strength. This is because her focus moves outward, away from her power source. Though she may think she is being unkind to the extroverts around her, she is actually being very unkind to herself. The snob myth perpetuates the idea that her introversion is a snub of those around her, rather than something she enjoys and values.

WE ARE DIFFERENT—DIFFERENT FROM EXTROVERTS

Introverts are drawn to worlds more exotic or complex than what is immediately available. Whether we like hanging out in fantasy, spiritual contemplation, mental investigation, artistic creation, or wilderness exploration, we may seem different, out of touch, or just weird. Out of touch? *Yes*—really not wanting to be touched or otherwise intruded on at the moment. Weird? Only to people who want to be touched or otherwise intrude on us.

We are different from the other 43 percent of the population, but that's as much as we can say about introverts being abnormal. Yet, there is a long and stubborn association between introversion and mental illness. Though the MBTI describes preferences in healthy terms, some personality tests use the term "introversion" to describe problematic symptoms. The idea of extroversion as normal—and introversion as abnormal—is so prevalent in our culture that it has seeped into our mental health system.

There are a number of reasons for this association that have little to do with the actual mental health of the individual. First, introverts are higher users of mental health services. Why? They like looking inside! For many introverts, therapy is attractive and exciting. They are not afraid of what they'll find—they're already familiar with the territory.

Secondly, extroverts often incorrectly assume that introverts are suffering. Introverts *internalize* problems; we like to take things inside and work on them there. Extroverts prefer to *externalize* and deal with problems interactively. Because of this difference, introverts may seem psychologically burdened, while extroverts spread the burden around and seem healthier—from an *extrovert's* standpoint. But note that I said introverts *like* to take problems inside. Sure, an introvert can overdo it, but so can the extrovert who feels compelled to express every unresolved thought or emotion. The former gets depressed or anxious and goes to depressed or anxious therapy; the latter sends *others* to therapy.

Finally, introverts can become the carriers of family and societal problems. Family systems theory talks about the *identified patient* as the family member who carries the pathology that the rest of the family denies. The alcoholic parent and the volatile marriage are not addressed, but the introverted child who takes it all inside becomes "ill" and goes to therapy. Taking on the pathology of others is a huge risk for introverts and one we will address in later chapters. As a therapist myself, I find that it is often the healthiest family member who enters therapy, because he is willing to look at the limitations of his own reality and risk change.

But now it seems that adults like me, particularly single women who much prefer family surroundings and one-on-one communications with people, are encouraged to work on our "issues," our social anxiety, and to get "out there" and learn the artful skill of making idle conversation with strangers. But why? In order to mingle well at parties.

—Suzanne, day job: outreach worker for a public defender team; passions: all things introverted but "first and foremost" reading

THE ABANDONMENT OF THE INTERNAL

Though introverts may be more curious about psychology, psychology has become less curious about our inner lives. In the early 1900s, American practitioners were looking for more objective measures of mental health, and the new trend of radical behaviorism met the need. Suddenly, instead of focusing on what was hidden—the purview of psychoanalysis—behaviorism dismissed anything that could not be observed. All we needed to know was what goes in (stimulus) and what happens (response). So, the therapist's focus shifted from the client's disclosures of feeling to an external measure, such as the number of times she smiles during the session. (This is an actual example from my graduate training.)

Consider how this plays out for the introverted client. She acknowledges feeling burdened and seeks help. She is readily diagnosed for her internal focus, but then the tables turn: she is deprived of the opportunity to seek inner solutions. Her "cure" involves shifting her focus to external realities—using her least developed capacity.

Though radical behaviorism has gradually given way to cognitive-behaviorism, which does acknowledge inner processes, the value of external over internal has remained. And insurance companies loved the idea. Physicians, as well as therapists, are no longer paid to be curious about what's inside and to search for a cause—we are rewarded for finding the shortest path between symptoms and solution, and if we don't get it right, the attitude is "they can always come back and you can try something else."

So, if we've decided that what's inside is out of the picture, introverts will look inferior. The introvert's strong suit is inside. There, he is comfortable, confident, and content. By contrast, the extrovert "inside" might not look so good—he becomes anxious and awkward when he's not out doing something or talking to someone. But who cares? Just as we don't see the strength of the introvert, we don't notice the weakness of the extrovert. What's inside is locked away in the black box.

From the outside, the introvert may not look so good, and we *do* care about this. If a child stays quiet in the context of extroverted friends, or even prefers time alone, a parent may worry and even send her to therapy. She might be thrilled—she'll finally get to talk about the stuff she cares about and without interruption! But if the therapist concludes that the child has a social phobia, the treatment of choice is to increasingly *expose* her to the situations she fears. This behavioral treatment is effective for treating phobias — if that is truly the problem. If it's not the problem, and the child just likes hanging out inside better than chatting, she'll have a problem soon. Her "illness" now will be

an internalized self-reproach: "Why don't I enjoy this like everyone else?" The otherwise carefree child learns that something is wrong with her. She not only is pulled away from her home, she is supposed to *like it*. Now she is anxious and unhappy, confirming the suspicion that she has a problem.

Under normal conditions, the introvert places less value on what is outside, and puts less energy there. Briggs Myers described this outside self as the Aide to a General:

The introvert's General is inside the tent, working on matters of top priority. The Aide is outside, fending off interruptions...If people do not realize that there is a General in the tent who outranks the Aide they have met, they may easily assume that the Aide is in sole charge. This is a regrettable mistake. It leads not only to an underestimation of the introvert's abilities but also to an incomplete understanding of his wishes, plans, and point of view. The only source for such information is the General.

Though the metaphor of a General may or may not fit your tastes, it is an image of power. Whether your tent is a busy laboratory or a vast library, a creative studio or spiritual sanctuary, your inner world is the place where the action is, where your heart starts pumping, and your potential expands. And like the General in the tent, we can move the world. But first, we need to recognize that someone is there.

WE ARE INTROVERTS

What constitutes an introvert is quite simple. We are a vastly diverse group of people who prefer to look at life from the inside out. We gain energy and power through inner reflection, and get more excited by ideas than by external activities. When we converse, we listen well and expect others to do the same. We think first and talk later. Writing appeals to us because we can express ourselves without intrusion, and we often prefer communicating this way. Even our brains look different than those of extroverts.

In 1967, psychologist Hans Eysenck published his "arousal theory" of introversion and extroversion, which predicted that introverts would have higher levels of cortical arousal than extroverts. In other words, introvert brains would be more stimulated on an ongoing basis; extrovert brains would be quieter. This would explain why introverts pull away from environmental stimuli while extroverts seek out more.

To test the theory, researchers have looked at various measures of mental stimulation, such as blood flow and electrical activity, in the brains of introverts and extroverts. The consistent finding was that, as predicted, introvert brains were busier than extrovert brains. After summarizing this research, the writers of the 2003 *MBTI Manual* concluded: "Introverts appear to do their best thinking in anticipation rather than on the spot; it *now seems clear* [emphasis mine] that this is because their minds are so naturally abuzz with activity that they need to shut out external distractions in order to prepare their ideas." So it is impossible to fully and fairly understand introversion without looking inside. We aren't just going *away*, we're going *toward* something. Extroverts may have more going on socially, but we've got more going on upstairs.

The simple preference for inner life, when honored, opens the introvert to a richness and complexity that is highly personal and is indeed *personality* with the exclamation point! Instead of defining—diagnosing—introversion from the outside, let's look at a description by a man who mined the depths of inner life, Carl Jung:

For him self-communings are a pleasure. His own world is a safe harbour, a carefully tended and walled-in garden, closed to the public and hidden from prying eyes. His own company is the best

He feels at home in his world, where the only changes are made by himself. His best work is done ~~with his own resources, on his own initiative, and in his own way...~~ His retreat into himself is not a final renunciation of the world, but a search for quietude, where alone it is possible for him to make his contribution to the life of the community.

I am rarely bored alone; I am often bored in groups and crowds.

—Don, Minnesota

As much as introverts may be misunderstood or devalued, people are drawn to the richness we conceal and enjoy the products we create in our "tents." The reclusive songwriter entertains through the computer audio system developed by introverts. Voices of introverts speak through books so varied we can be entertained by just looking at the titles in a bookstore. Introverts make us think and ask questions. We fall silent as the quiet person in the room reveals wisdom from his inner reservoir.

Introverts, it is time for us to claim our space, our time, and our vitality. If the rest of you want what we've got, welcome! But don't come over—*get an inner life!* We Are Introverts, and we are going home.

Chapter 2:

Alone Is Not a Four-Letter Word

The great omission in American life is solitude; not loneliness, for this is an alienation that thrives most in the midst of crowds, but that zone of time and space, free from the outside pressures, which is the incubator of the spirit.

—Marya Mann

You're headed home on a Friday evening. Exhausted from a week of interacting, performing, and responding to others, you relish the prospect of time alone, cuddling up or stretching, reading or pattering—inhabiting the silent space. You stop at the bookstore and run into an acquaintance who asks what you are doing tonight. You tell her, and she looks worried. You take in the look of worry and start to wonder if there is something wrong with you. Everyone else seems to want to go out.

Let's say your self-doubt prompts you to go out, and you stop by a party that a friend is hosting. Your friends are surprised and happy to see you, validating your choice. But soon into the greeting you feel as if you've left something behind. You start regretting the choice "everyone else encouraged. Feeling the "alienation that thrives most in the midst of crowds," you long to be alone, free to think your own thoughts and move to your own rhythm. But you haven't been here long enough to leave; you feel trapped.

This "alienation of association" is widespread in our culture, but it has no diagnostic label. Regardless of how dead we feel in a crowd, we cling to the uniquely American assumption that associating is good and necessary and solitude is suspect. Let's imagine the above scenario going the opposite way:

When you stop by the bookstore, you tell the acquaintance you are going to a party. She looks worried, and expresses concern about all you'll miss. She comments, "You've been waiting all week for some time to yourself; why would you compromise that?" If you've been spending a lot of time with people, she might express concern that you are avoiding time alone and suggest that you might be depressed.

While such a response is unlikely, it's a comment an introvert would appreciate. For an introvert interacting in a group setting *does* mean missing out. Where there is too much input, the introvert misses his mind, his subjectivity, his freedom, his very potential. The high-stimulus social environment, the "where it's at on a Friday night," this apparent "more," becomes a prison to the introvert. He can't wait to be free—to get out and away from the noise, the talk, the interference with his inner process. Yet, the discrepancy between his mood and his surroundings may lead to self-criticism, the hallmark of depression.

Solitude is not rejection, isolation, depression, or a sign of spiritual desolation.

—Don, Unitarian Universalist minister and avid baseball fan

It would be wise to be concerned about the introvert who is deprived of solitude. Is she neglecting herself due to depression? Is she falling victim to guilt and self-reproach? Does she feel cut off from

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