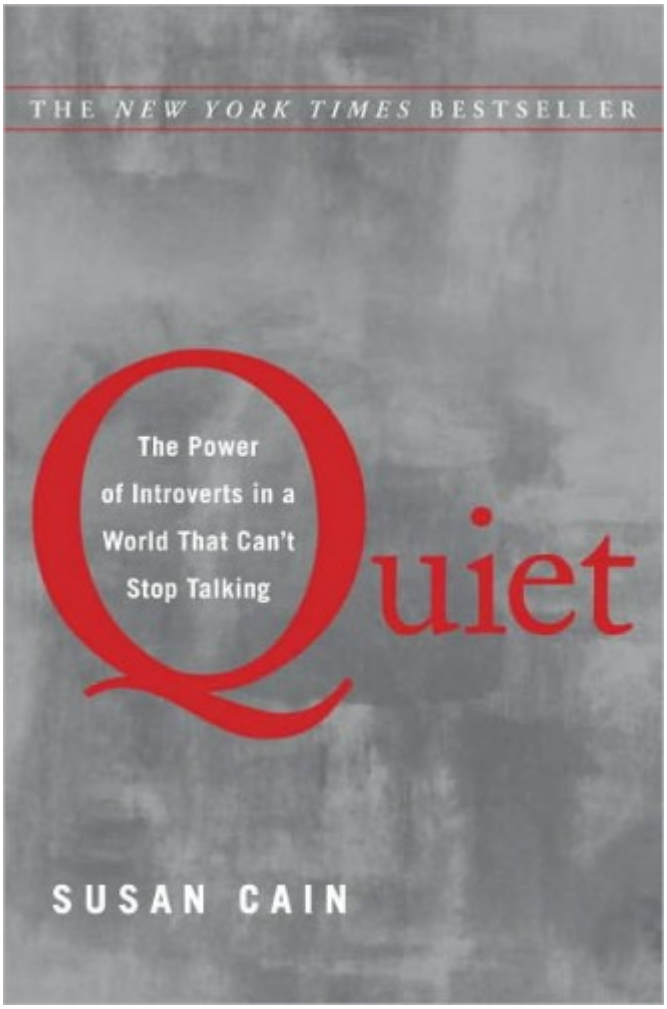
Introverts unite

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the December 12, 2012 issue

In Review



Quiet

by Susan Cain
Crown

In an astonishingly popular essay in the *Atlantic* a few years ago, Jonathan Rauch envisioned the dawning of an “introverts’ rights movement.” He mused, “We can only dream that someday, when our condition is more widely understood, when

perhaps an introverts' rights movement has blossomed and borne fruit, it will not be impolite to say 'I'm an introvert. You are a wonderful person and I like you. But now please shush.'"

If Rauch's brief article provided the manifesto for the movement as well as the slogan ("Please shush"), Susan Cain's book *Quiet* could be used as the intellectual argument behind it. She contends that introverts are both misunderstood and underappreciated. Cain finds that infuriating. If she were Howard Beale in the movie *Network*, she might be shouting out her window, "I'm quiet as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore"—except, as an introvert, she probably would not be shouting. The assertive subtitle of *Quiet* captures both the message and the tone of the book: *The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*.

Carl Jung popularized the terms *introvert* and *extravert* in his landmark 1921 book *Psychological Types*. The widely used Myers-Briggs personality test draws largely on that work, including the key duality of introvert and extravert. According to Jung, a human being's tendency toward introversion or extraversion is the central building block of personality. Generally speaking, introverts are drawn to the inner world of thought and feeling. Extraverts are more drawn to the external world of action and interaction.

Cain is quick to note that introversion is not to be confused with shyness: "Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating. Shyness is inherently painful; introversion is not."

It is not always easy to spot an introvert, at least at first, because (contrary to Cain's title) introverts are not always quiet, and they can be quite adept at social interaction. Introverts may enjoy the company of other people as much as extroverts do, but usually in smaller doses. (Although Jung and Myers-Briggs used *extravert* with an *a*, Cain chose to use the more common spelling.)

The key difference between introversion and extroversion has to do with what people find energizing. Introverts charge their batteries when alone and deplete that energy when interacting with others. For extroverts, it is the opposite: they charge their batteries by being with others, and that energy is used up when they are alone. It is easy to separate the introverts and extroverts on a church retreat. At the end of the day, the introverts, worn out by nonstop interaction with others, look exhausted

and head off to their rooms as soon as possible. The extroverts, all jazzed up by the stimulation of other people, feel a need to stay up just to wind down. And to talk, of course.

There are other distinguishing characteristics. Introverts tend to think before they speak; extroverts tend to think out loud. Introverts usually want to think things through before acting; extroverts prefer not to wait too long before acting. If an introvert's slogan is "Look before you leap," an extrovert likely will prefer Nike's slogan, "Just do it." In my experience, one litmus test that is exceedingly accurate is a person's response to small talk. An introvert finds small talk not only boring but excruciating. An extrovert does not mind making small talk and might even enjoy it.

Cain cites studies that indicate about one-third to one-half of Americans are introverts. As one might expect, there are cultural variations as well. The United States is among the most extroverted of nations, while Asian countries tend to have more introverts.

Cain is convinced that our culture is enthralled with the traits associated with extroversion. She calls it "the extrovert ideal—the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight." She cites studies that reveal that extroverts "are rated as smarter, better looking, more interesting, and more desirable as friends" than introverts are. By contrast, according to Cain, "introversion is a second-class personality trait, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology."

The contrast seems overdrawn to me. (Then again, perhaps that is because I am an extrovert—oppressors usually don't perceive accurately the experience of those they oppress.)

Drawing on the work of cultural historian Warren Susman, Cain traces the ascendancy of extroversion to the turn of the 20th century. Before that time individuals related to a smaller universe of people. Their business dealings were with people whom they knew and who knew them. In such a circumstance, first impressions were not nearly as important as how one comported oneself over time. It was, in Susman's phrase, a "culture of character."

With the rise of industrialization at the turn of the century, people had more interactions with strangers. Business relationships began to exist outside the local community. First impressions became important because often that was the only

opportunity to make a connection. Americans started to focus on how others perceived them—and not necessarily over time, but in the moment. It was a tectonic shift from a culture of character to a culture of personality. It was also a transition from a time when the traits of introverts were valued to a time when those same traits are undervalued.

According to Cain, the hegemony of extroversion is now complete. She visited several settings where the extrovert ideal is on full display. One such setting is Harvard Business School, a center of what she calls “the New Groupthink,” where collaboration is all the rage. Students are advised, “If you’re preparing alone for a class, then you’re doing it wrong. Nothing at HBS is intended to be done alone.” One of the students told her, “Socializing here is an extreme sport.”

In one hilarious passage, Cain tells of going to a Tony Robbins self-help seminar, “UNLEASH THE POWER WITHIN” (of course, all in caps), which is an introvert’s nightmare. Before Robbins appears, loud and peppy music saturates the arena. When Robbins takes the stage he exuberantly enjoins the throng to be exuberant and invites them to shout out “Yes!” to his affirmations. At another point he tells everyone to turn to a neighbor and to greet him or her in such a way that within five seconds that neighbor would decide to do business with you. Perhaps Robbins knew that the introverts in the audience might find that challenging, because he adds an incentive: imagine that, if you don’t, “everyone you care about will die like pigs in hell.” (The whole scenario sounds hellish to me—and that’s coming from an extrovert.)

In the end, these examples seem too extreme to help Cain make her case that extroversion is the ideal in our culture. If she had visited places where introversion is more the norm—for instance, a research lab or a convention of engineers—she might have come to some very different conclusions.

In any case, Cain is determined to bring down what she perceives to be the extrovert ideal. She marshals examples of introverts who have made important contributions: Albert Einstein, Steven Spielberg, J. K. Rowling, and so on (it is a long list). She frets about all of the credit the flashy Steve Jobs received for the success of Apple and doubts that Jobs would have succeeded were it not for his partnership with the introverted engineer Steve Wozniak.

Cain offers other examples of pairings of an introvert and an extrovert who were able to accomplish more because they brought their different traits to an enterprise: Moses and Aaron, Eleanor Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.

These pairs bring to mind another that Cain does not mention: Jesus and Paul. Although the two never met, they were a spectacularly generative pairing of an introvert and an extrovert in a shared endeavor. I am convinced that Jesus was an introvert. After all, he was a pastor who was always running away from his congregation. His ministry was characterized by intense engagement with people in alternation with time alone or with a few close friends. By contrast, clearly the garrulous Paul was an extrovert. Some of his letters have the quality of someone thinking out loud (see, for instance, 2 Corinthians 11). One can imagine Paul spending time alone only when he was thrown in jail, and even then he would be attempting to convert the person in the next cell with the incessancy of an extrovert.

So, yes, introverts and extroverts can collaborate fruitfully, and it might even be said that we need each other. Cain touches on this theme, gives the reader some examples and even a few suggestions, but for the most part she is less interested in being evenhanded than in pointing out the sterling qualities of introverts.

I began to keep a list. According to Cain, introverts are: deep thinkers, good listeners, creative, reflective, sensitive, empathic, endowed with highly developed consciences, able to delay gratification. So much for the perception that introverts suffer from low self-esteem. The list goes on until it begins to sound like Paul's lofty description of the characteristics of love enumerated in 1 Corinthians 13. It is enough to make any extrovert say, "I'll have what she's having."

I am willing to believe that extroverts commit adultery more often than introverts do (with other extroverts, apparently) and that extroverts get into more auto accidents and are more likely to murder. (Yes, Cain found studies to support all of these assertions.) But when she let's herself indulge in conjecture, her tendency for overreach is evident. At one point she suggests that the 2008 market crash might not have happened if a few more introverts had been at the helm. Although, as I say, I believe Jesus was an introvert, I do not believe that all introverts are saviors.

A number of introverts I know devoured this book because it articulates their own experience so well. For them, reading it was a "finally someone gets me" kind of

moment. I also imagine that many introverts will give the book as a gift to their extroverted friends and family members so they might learn more about how best to relate to an introvert. Cain is convinced that extroverts are largely clueless about how best to understand the introverts in their lives. *Quiet* is her attempt to clue us in.

We should not expect a sequel that explains extroverts to introverts any time soon. Cain, at least, thinks such a volume is unnecessary because introverts understand extroverts quite well already. After all, for an extrovert, the unnarrated life is not worth living. If you want to know what is going on with an extrovert, just wait a moment and he will tell you.

Ironically, this book is a decidedly prolix tribute to introversion. Cain could have achieved her goal in a book half this length. It is not the only irony associated with the book. In a recent article Cain observed, “Promoting my work requires doing the very thing my book questions: putting down my pen and picking up a microphone.”

Quiet reflects on church life only in passing, and then only on the happy-clappy style of worship that one would not expect an introvert to prefer. Nevertheless, there is much in the book that is helpful for those who want to help introverts and extroverts live together.

It is true that much of the life of the church I serve is geared toward the extroverts in our congregation—communal decision making in committees, worship that is chock-a-block with words, the buzzing fellowship hour after worship.

But not all aspects of our life together are like that. Sometimes, as an extrovert, I am expected to venture into territory more easily inhabited by an introvert. I am asked to sit still during a silent meditation (for me, the two most dreaded words in the English language are *silent retreat*). In an adult faith formation group I may be required to keep a journal (suppressing an urge to say, “Oh, please, can’t I just tell you what I am thinking?”). And I will walk the labyrinth in our chapel, even if only as an attempt to relate to those who find that practice meaningful.

A congregation benefits from having both introverts and extroverts, particularly if they understand each other—or, at least, understand enough to keep from driving each other nuts. The different clusters of character traits associated with introverts and extroverts are not to be moderated but to be drawn upon, much as spiritual gifts are, for the betterment of the community. If Paul were aware of the typology,

he might have reminded the Corinthians, “If all were extroverts, where would be the practice of careful listening? If all were introverts, who would greet the newcomers at the fellowship hour?” And Paul would still feel the need to conclude with the indispensable exhortation commending the still more excellent way of love.