



LIFE LESSONS

The power
of the **introvert**

**“IN A
GENTLE WAY
YOU CAN
SHAKE THE
WORLD.”**

— Gandhi


WORDS BY
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We can hear the verbal jackhammers everywhere. Political activists tub-thumping and catcalling. Opinion makers grandstanding and hectoring. The cyber highways of social media roaring with the sound and the fury of relentless self-promotion.

It's tempting to try to emulate this because, in a culture that celebrates, nay, inflicts extroversion on us, who could imagine that real power might lie elsewhere, with those who hunger to be alone, who relish meaningful connections, who think before speaking, and who prefer to observe before blundering in?

“If you are an introvert,” writes Aletheia Luna, author of *Quiet Strength: Embracing, Empowering and Honoring Yourself as an Introvert*, “you thrive in the inner sanctuary of the mind, heart and spirit, but shrink in the external world of noise, drama and chaos.”

This is where I now prefer to dwell after years of being a “closet introvert”, believing that if I declined a dinner invitation for a good book, or ate alone in a restaurant, these must be telltale signs of abject failure. Like you, I too was raised in a culture that rewards the most sociable and outgoing (read: loudest) person in the room.

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page. It shows a close-up of a desk or table. A large, white, conical lampshade is in the upper left, casting a warm glow. Below it, a framed photograph of a group of people is leaning against the wall. In the foreground, a black rotary telephone is partially visible. The background is slightly out of focus, showing patterned curtains.

If you'd rather be at
home reading a book
than at a party, you're
probably an introvert.

Perhaps it's time for a rethink. As American lawyer-turned writer Susan Cain puts it in her best-selling book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*: "We live with a value system that I call the Extrovert Ideal – the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight.

"Introversion – along with its cousins sensitivity, seriousness and shyness – is now a second-class personality trait, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology. Introverts living under the Extrovert Ideal are like women in a man's world, discounted because of a trait that goes to the core of who they are. Extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style, but we've turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform."

Many years ago I took the Myers Briggs test, a questionnaire designed to indicate psychological preferences about the ways people perceive the world and make decisions. I was curious to know where I landed on the spectrum of introversion and extroversion and, much to the astonishment of friends I was found to be an introvert, although just barely. "That's impossible," was one friend's reaction. "Look at all the people you have in your life." "Look at your job as a journalist," said another. "Look at how you disarm others. There's no way you're an introvert."

Except I was and still am, especially when judged by the true psychological meaning of the word, as opposed to its use in everyday language. An extrovert gets nourishment from action, from people, from making things happen. She often feels better, understands a problem more keenly, when she thinks out loud. She's comfortable in groups, but may pause too briefly before leaping into the unknown.

True, some of this applied to me, but it was clear I leaned more towards introversion. The introvert lives a good part of his life inside his head. He prefers time alone or with one or two people with whom he's most comfortable. He pauses to reflect deeply because ideas often seem more like the real deal than reality itself.

I didn't think much about this introversion-extroversion divide – the so-called "north and south of temperament" – until my marriage dissolved seven years ago and I moved into a cottage in rural NSW to live on my own for the first time in 23 years. It was a revelation. And not just because the grief and sense of loss were at times crushing but, rather, because eventually I came to relish my solitude.

I began sitting for hours on the verandah staring at the trees. I began listening more closely to the riotous sound of birds at dawn. I began cooking for myself, chopping wood for winter, reading poetry, playing guitar and singing love songs in pale imitation of my musical heroes. I took to reading books of all descriptions – hell, I even wrote one myself – and in the process I came to understand how much power and solace one can derive from solitude.

"THE SECRET TO LIFE IS TO PUT YOURSELF IN THE RIGHT LIGHTING. FOR SOME, IT'S A BROADWAY SPOTLIGHT; FOR OTHERS, A LAMPLIT DESK."

– SUSAN CAIN

"Solitude matters," writes Susan Cain, "and for some people, it's the air they breathe." And yet, as Cain points out, many studies highlight the extent to which talkative people are rated as "smarter, more interesting and more desirable" than introverts, not to mention the "velocity of speech" which is seen as a marker of greater competence and attractiveness.

"But we make a grave mistake," Cain continues, "to embrace the Extrovert Ideal so unthinkingly. Some of our greatest ideas, art and inventions – from the theory of evolution to Van Gogh's sunflowers to

the personal computer – came from quiet and cerebral people who knew how to tune into their inner worlds and the treasures to be found there."

So here's a thought. Let's start celebrating the self-confessed introverts – people like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, author J.K. Rowling, American billionaire investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett, comedian Amy Schumer and the rest of us who don't feel the need to say everything out loud. For, as Michaela Chung wryly observes in *The Irresistible Introvert*: "Introverts are world economists in a society suffering from verbal diarrhoea."

Many introverts don't know this, but they are often the most powerful people in the room. Through their silences, their non verbal cues, their comfort in their own company, they are able to draw others in with a quiet and irresistible magnetism. In a compulsively noisy world this is a blessed thing, not just because it allows introverts to be at home in their true nature, but because it instils confidence in the next generation of reflective men and women, who won't try to be different from who they are.

They will grow up understanding that the inner life is as rich and varied as all the realms of the external world. They will see that solitude is a stimulus for innovation and self-replenishment, that quiet leadership is not a contradiction in terms, that silence is only frightening to those who can't shut up and that it's OK to cross the street to avoid small talk.

"The secret to life," writes Susan Cain, "is to put yourself in the right lighting. For some, it's a Broadway spotlight; for others, a lamplit desk."

So here's to those sitting at their lamplit desks, because as Mahatma Gandhi once observed: "In a gentle way you can shake the world." **J**

IN DEFENCE OF INTROVERTS

Before dismissing introverts as just shy or antisocial, consider some of the advantages they bring to the table:

- 1 -

They're great to talk to because they really listen and rarely interrupt.

- 2 -

Not lovers of small talk, introverts prefer in-depth conversations, often on serious subjects others won't touch.

- 3 -

Because they prefer a few intimate friends to a wide circle of acquaintances, they're incredibly loyal.

- 4 -

They tend to be more introspective, reflective, self-aware and empathetic.

- 5 -

They bring balance to the world. If extroverts are the "doers" and introverts are the "thinkers", we need both!