The Undervalued Potential of Introverts

When I was eight, I loved reading stories because they always let me escape into this world that was so much more exciting than mine. Being a newcomer was never easy, so when I moved to a new school in 3rd grade, I felt more comfortable with my books and was more introverted than I am now. After moving from one country to the next and being pressured to prove myself socially to a crowd of strangers countless times, I realized that I’m actually a balance between an introvert and an extrovert, something called an ambivert.

Now, this has happened to me many times before. The point is, every time I acted like an introvert or resorted to my books, I realized that being introverted and resorting to my books was not the “style of being.” Extroverts were labeled good. Introverts were labeled bad. And I always sensed this was not right. Later on, I realized neither are bad personality types, but I was raised under the idea that extroversion is better than introversion due to this bias in our society. This assumption brings the world at a loss because “when it comes to creativity and leadership we need our introverts doing what they do best.” Therefore, the potential and talent of introverts are widely undervalued and unrecognized.

One out of every three people you know is an introvert, one out of three. Introversion is often viewed as a handicap and has caused this belief that extroversion is the only way to be happy or successful from an early age. The terms ‘introvert and extrovert’ were first used by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. Introverts prefer lower stimulation environments with less action and noise, whereas extroverts crave social stimulation and gratification from others. Our schools, workplaces, and religious institutions are designed for extroverts. The 21st century has brought a new cultural mindset that the sources of creativity, productivity and leadership, come from social environments, and to succeed one must be “out there.” For example, look at a typical classroom in today’s schools. Students sit in clusters of desks facing each other and are expected to work together. Twenty years ago, the “Social Era of Learning” had started where students interact with others according to writer Jane Hart in 2009, who said that compared to older systems, education has become much more interactive & social. Nowadays, children who prefer to work alone are seen as loners or even worse, as social outcasts. Consequently, extroverts are more often chosen for a job rather than introverts, which brings me to my next point.

Many people believe that introverts cannot be good leaders. But actually introverted leaders sometimes deliver better outcomes than extroverts do, as they are more likely to let talented employees run with their ideas, rather than exerting their own force on projects. Introverted leaders also tend to be motivated not by ego or attention, but due to commitment to their larger goal. These characteristics were proven in 2011 by Dr. Adam Grant at the University of Pennsylvania. In fact, if you had to guess, what would you say Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, and Abraham Lincoln all have in common? They are all icons. All influential leaders. And all introverts. We all fall at different points on the “introvert/extrovert spectrum,” a scale psychologist’s use, but no one is completely 100% one or the other. Some people lean more or less towards one, or in a balance in the middle, for ambiverts like me.

Introverts need to be equally as acknowledged as extroverts! When psychologists Mihaly C. and Gregory Feist analyzed the lives of some of the most creative and productive people in history such as Picasso, van Gogh, Darwin, Einstein, J.K Rowling and Dr. Seuss in 2011, they found that the most creative people are usually introverts because they are comfortable spending time alone, and solitude is a critical ingredient to creativity. But recently we seem to have forgotten the importance of solitude according to author Susan Cain. Before the 20th century, humans lived in a “culture of character,” when the way you conducted yourself in terms of courtesy and integrity mattered. But after urbanization and more job opportunities, the question of how one could be noticed surfaced. Our culture was molded into a “culture of personality” which ignited an obsession with fame, bubbly entertainers, bold leadership and vivacious employees. How well you could approach people and first impressions became priorities to move up in the social and career ladder.

If all of this is true, why are we still wasting the energy of all the introverts present in our population? The value of introverts, quietness and solitary thinking needs to be promoted in our world so full of technological chaos and hectic schedules. The first step: teachers need to stop totally investing themselves into this new collaborative teaching, and acknowledge activities that are designed for both personalities, if they’ve not already done so. More solitary assignments should be given, and this will suit introverts with their preference for low stimulation. This will also suit extroverts because they need to be taught how to work alone in their world so filled with social stimulation. If we continue ignoring the ideas of introverts and close their doors of opportunity, we are only cutting off the world from potential Gandhis, Picassos, and Einsteins.

I am not the same introverted eight year old I used to be as I have adjusted to my environment. Society should stop undervaluing introverts! Introverts need to know that their personality type is not a bad thing. Everyone, especially extroverts, should once in a while tune out the sound, spend some time alone and find their passion, like mine is reading books. In a quiet way, you can shake up “a world that will never stop talking.”