

“FRANKLIN WAS A POLITICIAN, BUT ELEANOR SPOKE OUT OF CONSCIENCE”

Why Cool Is Overrated

A shy man no doubt dreads the notice of strangers, but can hardly be said to be afraid of them. He may be as bold as a hero in battle, and yet have no self-confidence about trifles in the presence of strangers.

—CHARLES DARWIN

Easter Sunday, 1939. The Lincoln Memorial. Marian Anderson, one of the most extraordinary singers of her generation, takes the stage, the statue of the sixteenth president rising up behind her. A regal woman with toffee-colored skin, she gazes at her audience of 75,000: men in brimmed hats, ladies in their Sunday best, a great sea of black and white faces. “My country ’tis of thee,” she begins, her voice soaring, each word pure and distinct. “Sweet land of liberty.” The crowd is rapt and tearful. They never thought this day would come to pass.

And it wouldn’t have, without Eleanor Roosevelt. Earlier that year, Anderson had planned to sing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., but the Daughters of the American Revolution, who owned the hall, rejected her because of her race. Eleanor Roosevelt, whose family had fought in the Revolution, resigned from the DAR, helped arrange for Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial—and ignited a national firestorm. Roosevelt was not the only one to protest, but she brought political clout to the issue, risking her own reputation in the process.

For Roosevelt, who seemed constitutionally unable to look away from other people’s troubles, such acts of social conscience were nothing unusual. But others appreciated how remarkable they were. “This was something unique,” recalled the African-American civil rights leader James

Farmer of Roosevelt's brave stand. "Franklin was a politician. He weighed the political consequences of every step that he took. He was a good politician, too. But Eleanor spoke out of conscience, and acted as a conscientious person. That was different."

It was a role she played throughout their life together: Franklin's adviser, Franklin's conscience. He may have chosen her for just this reason; in other ways they were such an unlikely pair.

They met when he was twenty. Franklin was her distant cousin, a sheltered Harvard senior from an upper-crust family. Eleanor was only nineteen, also from a moneyed clan, but she had chosen to immerse herself in the sufferings of the poor, despite her family's disapproval. As a volunteer at a settlement house on Manhattan's impoverished Lower East Side, she had met children who were forced to sew artificial flowers in windowless factories to the point of exhaustion. She took Franklin with her one day. He couldn't believe that human beings lived in such miserable conditions—or that a young woman of his own class had been the one to open his eyes to this side of America. He promptly fell in love with her.

But Eleanor wasn't the light, witty type he'd been expected to marry. Just the opposite: she was slow to laugh, bored by small talk, serious-minded, shy. Her mother, a fine-boned, vivacious aristocrat, had nicknamed her "Granny" because of her demeanor. Her father, the charming and popular younger brother of Theodore Roosevelt, doted on her when he saw her, but he was drunk most of the time, and died when Eleanor was nine. By the time Eleanor met Franklin, she couldn't believe that someone like *him* would be interested in *her*. Franklin was everything that she was not: bold and buoyant, with a wide, irrepressible grin, as easy with people as she was cautious. "He was young and gay and good looking," Eleanor recalled, "and I was shy and awkward and thrilled when he asked me to dance."

At the same time, many told Eleanor that Franklin wasn't good enough for her. Some saw him as a lightweight, a mediocre scholar, a frivolous man-about-town. And however poor Eleanor's own self-image, she did not lack for admirers who appreciated her gravitas. Some of her suitors wrote grudging letters of congratulations to Franklin when he won her hand. "I have more respect and admiration for Eleanor than any girl I have ever met," one letter-writer said. "You are mighty lucky. Your future wife is such as it is the privilege of few men to have," said another.

But public opinion was beside the point for Franklin and Eleanor. Each had strengths that the other craved—her empathy, his bravado. “E is an Angel,” Franklin wrote in his journal. When she accepted his marriage proposal in 1903, he proclaimed himself the happiest man alive. She responded with a flood of love letters. They were married in 1905 and went on to have six children.

Despite the excitement of their courtship, their differences caused trouble from the start. Eleanor craved intimacy and weighty conversations; he loved parties, flirting, and gossip. The man who would declare that he had nothing to fear but fear itself could not understand his wife’s struggles with shyness. When Franklin was appointed assistant secretary of the navy in 1913, the pace of his social life grew ever more frenzied and the settings more gilded—elite private clubs, his Harvard friends’ mansions. He caroused later and later into the night. Eleanor went home earlier and earlier.

In the meantime, Eleanor found herself with a full calendar of social duties. She was expected to pay visits to the wives of other Washington luminaries, leaving calling cards at their doors and holding open houses in her own home. She didn’t relish this role, so she hired a social secretary named Lucy Mercer to help her. Which seemed a good idea—until the summer of 1917, when Eleanor took the children to Maine for the summer, leaving Franklin behind in Washington with Mercer. The two began a lifelong affair. Lucy was just the kind of lively beauty Franklin had been expected to marry in the first place.

Eleanor found out about Franklin’s betrayal when she stumbled on a packet of love letters in his suitcase. She was devastated, but stayed in the marriage. And although they never rekindled the romantic side of their relationship, she and Franklin replaced it with something formidable: a union of his confidence with her conscience.



Fast-forward to our own time, where we’ll meet another woman of similar temperament, acting out of her own sense of conscience. Dr. Elaine Aron is a research psychologist who, since her first scientific publication in 1997, has singlehandedly reframed what Jerome Kagan and others call high

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reactivity (and sometimes “negativity” or “inhibition”). She calls it “sensitivity,” and along with her new name for the trait, she’s transformed and deepened our understanding of it.

When I hear that Aron will be the keynote speaker at an annual weekend gathering of “highly sensitive people” at Walker Creek Ranch in Marin County, California, I quickly buy plane tickets. Jacquelyn Strickland, a psychotherapist and the founder and host of the event, explains that she created these weekends so that sensitive people could benefit from being in one another’s presence. She sends me an agenda explaining that we’ll be sleeping in rooms designated for “napping, journaling, puttering, meditating, organizing, writing, and reflecting.”

“Please do socialize very quietly in your room (with consent of your roommate), or preferably in the group areas on walks and at mealtimes,” says the agenda. The conference is geared to people who enjoy meaningful discussions and sometimes “move a conversation to a deeper level, only to find out we are the only ones there.” There will be plenty of time for serious talk this weekend, we’re assured. But we’ll also be free to come and go as we please. Strickland knows that most of us will have weathered a lifetime of mandatory group activities, and she wants to show us a different model, if only for a few days.

Walker Creek Ranch sits on 1,741 acres of unspoiled Northern California wilderness. It offers hiking trails and wildlife and vast crystalline skies, but at its center is a cozy, barnlike conference center where about thirty of us gather on a Thursday afternoon in the middle of June. The Buckeye Lodge is outfitted with grey industrial carpets, large whiteboards, and picture windows overlooking sunny redwood forests. Alongside the usual piles of registration forms and name badges, there’s a flip chart where we’re asked to write our name and Myers-Briggs personality type. I scan the list. Everyone’s an introvert except for Strickland, who is warm, welcoming, and expressive. (According to Aron’s research, the majority, though not all, of sensitive people are introverts.)

The tables and chairs in the room are organized in a big square so that we can all sit and face one another. Strickland invites us—participation optional—to share what brought us here. A software engineer named Tom kicks off, describing with great passion his relief at learning that there was “a physiological basis for the trait of sensitivity. Here’s the research! This is

how I am! I don't have to try to meet anyone's expectations anymore. I don't need to feel apologetic or defensive in any way." With his long, narrow face, brown hair, and matching beard, Tom reminds me of Abraham Lincoln. He introduces his wife, who talks about how compatible she and Tom are, and how together they stumbled across Aron's work.

When it's my turn, I talk about how I've never been in a group environment in which I didn't feel obliged to present an unnaturally rah-rah version of myself. I say that I'm interested in the connection between introversion and sensitivity. Many people nod.

On Saturday morning, Dr. Aron appears in the Buckeye Lodge. She waits playfully behind an easel containing a flip chart while Strickland introduces her to the audience. Then she emerges smiling—ta-da!—from behind the easel, sensibly clad in a blazer, turtleneck, and corduroy skirt. She has short, feathery brown hair and warm, crinkly blue eyes that look as if they don't miss a thing. You can see immediately the dignified scholar Aron is today, as well as the awkward schoolgirl she must once have been. You can see, too, her respect for her audience.

Getting right down to business, she informs us that she has five different subtopics she can discuss, and asks us to raise our hands to vote for our first, second, and third choice of subjects. Then she performs, rapid-fire, an elaborate mathematical calculation from which she determines the three subtopics for which we've collectively voted. The crowd settles down amiably. It doesn't really matter which subtopics we've chosen; we know that Aron is here to talk about sensitivity, and that she's taking our preferences into consideration.

Some psychologists make their mark by doing unusual research experiments. Aron's contribution is to think differently, radically differently, about studies that others have done. When she was a girl, Aron was often told that she was "too sensitive for her own good." She had two hardy elder siblings and was the only child in her family who liked to daydream, and play inside, and whose feelings were easily hurt. As she grew older and ventured outside her family's orbit, she continued to notice things about herself that seemed different from the norm. She could drive alone for hours and never turn on the radio. She had strong, sometimes disturbing dreams at night. She was "strangely intense," and often beset by powerful emotions,

both positive and negative. She had trouble finding the sacred in the everyday; it seemed to be there only when she withdrew from the world.

Aron grew up, became a psychologist, and married a robust man who loved these qualities. To her husband, Art, Aron was creative, intuitive, and a deep thinker. She appreciated these things in herself, too, but saw them as “acceptable surface manifestations of a terrible, hidden flaw I had been aware of all my life.” She thought it was a miracle that Art loved her in spite of this flaw.

But when one of her fellow psychologists casually described Aron as “highly sensitive,” a lightbulb went on in her head. It was as if these two words described her mysterious failing, except that the psychologist hadn’t been referring to a flaw at all. It had been a neutral description.

Aron pondered this new insight, and then set out to research this trait called “sensitivity.” She came up mostly dry, so she pored over the vast literature on introversion, which seemed to be intimately related: Kagan’s work on high-reactive children, and the long line of experiments on the tendency of introverts to be more sensitive to social and sensory stimulation. These studies gave her glimpses of what she was looking for, but Aron thought that there was a missing piece in the emerging portrait of introverted people.

“The problem for scientists is that we try to observe behavior, and these are things that you cannot observe,” she explains. Scientists can easily report on the behavior of extroverts, who can often be found laughing, talking, or gesticulating. But “if a person is standing in the corner of a room, you can attribute about fifteen motivations to that person. But you don’t really know what’s going on inside.”

Yet inner behavior was still behavior, thought Aron, even if it was difficult to catalog. So what *is* the inner behavior of people whose most visible feature is that when you take them to a party they aren’t very pleased about it? She decided to find out.

First Aron interviewed thirty-nine people who described themselves as being either introverted or easily overwhelmed by stimulation. She asked them about the movies they liked, their first memories, relationships with parents, friendships, love lives, creative activities, philosophical and religious views. Based on these interviews, she created a voluminous questionnaire that she gave to several large groups of people. Then she

boiled their responses down to a constellation of twenty-seven attributes. She named the people who embodied these attributes “highly sensitive.”

Some of these twenty-seven attributes were familiar from Kagan and others’ work. For example, highly sensitive people tend to be keen observers who look before they leap. They arrange their lives in ways that limit surprises. They’re often sensitive to sights, sounds, smells, pain, coffee. They have difficulty when being observed (at work, say, or performing at a music recital) or judged for general worthiness (dating, job interviews).

But there were also new insights. The highly sensitive tend to be philosophical or spiritual in their orientation, rather than materialistic or hedonistic. They dislike small talk. They often describe themselves as creative or intuitive (just as Aron’s husband had described her). They dream vividly, and can often recall their dreams the next day. They love music, nature, art, physical beauty. They feel exceptionally strong emotions—sometimes acute bouts of joy, but also sorrow, melancholy, and fear.

Highly sensitive people also process information about their environments—both physical and emotional—unusually deeply. They tend to notice subtleties that others miss—another person’s shift in mood, say, or a lightbulb burning a touch too brightly.

Recently a group of scientists at Stony Brook University tested this finding by showing two pairs of photos (of a fence and some bales of hay) to eighteen people lying inside fMRI machines. In one pair the photos were noticeably different from each other, and in the other pair the difference was much more subtle. For each pair, the scientists asked whether the second photo was the same as the first. They found that sensitive people spent more time than others looking at the photos with the subtle differences. Their brains also showed more activity in regions that help to make associations between those images and other stored information. In other words, the sensitive people were processing the photos at a more elaborate level than their peers, reflecting more on those fenceposts and haystacks.

This study is very new, and its conclusions still need to be replicated and explored in other contexts. But it echoes Jerome Kagan’s findings that high-reactive first graders spend more time than other children comparing choices when they play matching games or reading unfamiliar words. And it suggests, says Jadzia Jagiellowicz, the lead scientist at Stony Brook, that

sensitive types think in an unusually complex fashion. It may also help explain why they're so bored by small talk. "If you're thinking in more complicated ways," she told me, "then talking about the weather or where you went for the holidays is not quite as interesting as talking about values or morality."

The other thing Aron found about sensitive people is that sometimes they're highly empathic. It's as if they have thinner boundaries separating them from other people's emotions and from the tragedies and cruelties of the world. They tend to have unusually strong consciences. They avoid violent movies and TV shows; they're acutely aware of the consequences of a lapse in their own behavior. In social settings they often focus on subjects like personal problems, which others consider "too heavy."

Aron realized that she was on to something big. Many of the characteristics of sensitive people that she'd identified—such as empathy and responsiveness to beauty—were believed by psychologists to be characteristic of other personality traits like "agreeableness" and "openness to experience." But Aron saw that they were also a fundamental part of sensitivity. Her findings implicitly challenged accepted tenets of personality psychology.

She started publishing her results in academic journals and books, and speaking publicly about her work. At first this was difficult. Audience members told her that her ideas were fascinating, but that her uncertain delivery was distracting. But Aron had a great desire to get her message out. She persevered, and learned to speak like the authority she was. By the time I saw her at Walker Creek Ranch, she was practiced, crisp, and sure. The only difference between her and your typical speaker was how conscientious she seemed about answering every last audience question. She lingered afterward with the group, even though, as an extreme introvert, she must have been itching to get home.

Aron's description of highly sensitive people sounds as if she's talking about Eleanor Roosevelt herself. Indeed, in the years since Aron first published her findings, scientists have found that when you put people whose genetic profiles have been tentatively associated with sensitivity and introversion (people with the gene variant of 5-HTTLPR that characterized the rhesus monkeys of [chapter 3](#)) inside an fMRI machine and show them pictures of scared faces, accident victims, mutilated bodies, and polluted

scenery, the amygdala—the part of the brain that plays such an important role in processing emotions—becomes strongly activated. Aron and a team of scientists have also found that when sensitive people see faces of people experiencing strong feelings, they have more activation than others do in areas of the brain associated with empathy and with trying to control strong emotions.

It's as if, like Eleanor Roosevelt, they can't help but feel what others feel.



In 1921, FDR contracted polio. It was a terrible blow, and he considered retiring to the country to live out his life as an invalid gentleman. But Eleanor kept his contacts with the Democratic Party alive while he recovered, even agreeing to address a party fund-raiser. She was terrified of public speaking, and not much good at it—she had a high-pitched voice and laughed nervously at all the wrong times. But she trained for the event and made her way through the speech.

After that, Eleanor was still unsure of herself, but she began working to fix the social problems she saw all around her. She became a champion of women's issues and forged alliances with other serious-minded people. By 1928, when FDR was elected governor of New York, she was the director of the Bureau of Women's Activities for the Democratic Party and one of the most influential women in American politics. She and Franklin were now a fully functioning partnership of his savoir faire and her social conscience. "I knew about social conditions, perhaps more than he did," Eleanor recalled with characteristic modesty. "But he knew about government and how you could use government to improve things. And I think we began to get an understanding of teamwork."

FDR was elected president in 1933. It was the height of the Depression, and Eleanor traveled the country—in a single three-month period she covered 40,000 miles—listening to ordinary people tell their hard-luck stories. People opened up to her in ways they didn't for other powerful figures. She became for Franklin the voice of the dispossessed. When she returned home from her trips, she often told him what she'd seen and pressed him to act. She helped orchestrate government programs for half-

starved miners in Appalachia. She urged FDR to include women and African-Americans in his programs to put people back to work. And she helped arrange for Marian Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial. “She kept at him on issues which he might, in the rush of things, have wanted to overlook,” the historian Geoff Ward has said. “She kept him to a high standard. Anyone who ever saw her lock eyes with him and say, ‘*Now Franklin, you should ...*’ never forgot it.”

The shy young woman who’d been terrified of public speaking grew to love public life. Eleanor Roosevelt became the first First Lady to hold a press conference, address a national convention, write a newspaper column, and appear on talk radio. Later in her career she served as a U.S. delegate to the United Nations, where she used her unusual brand of political skills and hard-won toughness to help win passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

She never did outgrow her vulnerability; all her life she suffered dark “Griselda moods,” as she called them (named for a princess in a medieval legend who withdrew into silence), and struggled to “develop skin as tough as rhinoceros hide.” “I think people who are shy remain shy always, but they learn how to overcome it,” she said. But it was perhaps this sensitivity that made it easy for her to relate to the disenfranchised, and conscientious enough to act on their behalf. FDR, elected at the start of the Depression, is remembered for his compassion. But it was Eleanor who made sure he knew how suffering Americans *felt*.



The connection between sensitivity and conscience has long been observed. Imagine the following experiment, performed by the developmental psychologist Grazyna Kochanska. A kind woman hands a toy to a toddler, explaining that the child should be very careful because it’s one of the woman’s favorites. The child solemnly nods assent and begins to play with the toy. Soon afterward, it breaks dramatically in two, having been rigged to do so.

The woman looks upset and cries, “Oh my!” Then she waits to see what the child does next.

Some children, it turns out, feel a lot more guilty about their (supposed) transgression than others. They look away, hug themselves, stammer out confessions, hide their faces. And it's the kids we might call the most sensitive, the most high-reactive, the ones who are likely to be introverts who feel the guiltiest. Being unusually sensitive to all experience, both positive and negative, they seem to feel both the sorrow of the woman whose toy is broken and the anxiety of having done something bad. (In case you're wondering, the woman in the experiments quickly returned to the room with the toy "fixed" and reassurances that the child had done nothing wrong.)

In our culture, guilt is a tainted word, but it's probably one of the building blocks of conscience. The anxiety these highly sensitive toddlers feel upon apparently breaking the toy gives them the motivation to avoid harming someone's plaything the next time. By age four, according to Kochanska, these same kids are less likely than their peers to cheat or break rules, *even when they think they can't be caught*. And by six or seven, they're more likely to be described by their parents as having high levels of moral traits such as empathy. They also have fewer behavioral problems in general.

"Functional, moderate guilt," writes Kochanska, "may promote future altruism, personal responsibility, adaptive behavior in school, and harmonious, competent, and prosocial relationships with parents, teachers, and friends." This is an especially important set of attributes at a time when a 2010 University of Michigan study shows that college students today are 40 percent less empathetic than they were thirty years ago, with much of the drop having occurred since 2000. (The study's authors speculate that the decline in empathy is related to the prevalence of social media, reality TV, and "hyper-competitiveness.")

Of course, having these traits doesn't mean that sensitive children are angels. They have selfish streaks like everyone else. Sometimes they act aloof and unfriendly. And when they're overwhelmed by negative emotions like shame or anxiety, says Aron, they can be positively oblivious of other people's needs.

But the same receptivity to experience that can make life difficult for the highly sensitive also builds their consciences. Aron tells of one sensitive teen who persuaded his mother to feed a homeless person he'd met in the

park, and of another eight-year-old who cried not only when *she* felt embarrassed, but also when her peers were teased.

We know this type of person well from literature, probably because so many writers are sensitive introverts themselves. He “had gone through life with one skin fewer than most men,” the novelist Eric Malpass writes of his quiet and cerebral protagonist, also an author, in the novel *The Long Long Dances*. “The troubles of others moved him more, as did also the teeming beauty of life: moved him, compelled him, to seize a pen and write about them. [He was moved by] walking in the hills, listening to a Schubert impromptu, watching nightly from his armchair the smashing of bone and flesh that made up so much of the nine o’clock news.”

The description of such characters as thin-skinned is meant metaphorically, but it turns out that it’s actually quite literal. Among the tests researchers use to measure personality traits are skin conductance tests, which record how much people sweat in response to noises, strong emotions, and other stimuli. High-reactive introverts sweat more; low-reactive extroverts sweat less. Their skin is literally “thicker,” more impervious to stimuli, cooler to the touch. In fact, according to some of the scientists I spoke to, this is where our notion of being socially “cool” comes from; the lower-reactive you are, the cooler your skin, the cooler you *are*. (Incidentally, sociopaths lie at the extreme end of this coolness barometer, with extremely low levels of arousal, skin conductance, and anxiety. There is some evidence that sociopaths have damaged amygdalae.)

Lie detectors (polygraphs) are partially skin conductance tests. They operate on the theory that lying causes anxiety, which triggers the skin to perspire imperceptibly. When I was in college, I applied for a summer job as a secretary at a large jewelry company. I had to take a lie detector test as part of the application process. The test was administered in a small, dingily lit room with linoleum floors, by a thin, cigarette-puffing man with pocked yellow skin. The man asked me a series of warm-up questions: my name, address, and so on, to establish my baseline level of skin conductance. Then the questions grew more probing and the examiner’s manner harsher. Had I been arrested? Had I ever shoplifted? Had I used cocaine? With this last question my interrogator peered at me intently. As it happens, I never *had* tried cocaine. But he seemed to think I had. The accusing look on his face

was the equivalent of the old policeman's trick where they tell the suspect that they have the damning evidence and there's no point denying it.

I knew the man was mistaken, but I still felt myself blush. And sure enough, the test came back showing I'd lied on the cocaine question. My skin is so thin, apparently, that it sweats in response to imaginary crimes!

We tend to think of coolness as a pose that you strike with a pair of sunglasses, a nonchalant attitude, and drink in hand. But maybe we didn't choose these social accessories at random. Maybe we've adopted dark glasses, relaxed body language, and alcohol as signifiers precisely because they camouflage signs of a nervous system on overdrive. Sunglasses prevent others from seeing our eyes dilate with surprise or fear; we know from Kagan's work that a relaxed torso is a hallmark of low reactivity; and alcohol removes our inhibitions and lowers our arousal levels. When you go to a football game and someone offers you a beer, says the personality psychologist Brian Little, "they're really saying hi, have a glass of extroversion."

Teenagers understand instinctively the physiology of cool. In Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep*, which explores the adolescent social rituals of boarding-school life with uncanny precision, the protagonist, Lee, is invited unexpectedly to the dorm room of Aspeth, the coolest girl in school. The first thing she notices is how physically stimulating Aspeth's world is. "From outside the door, I could hear pounding music," she observes. "White Christmas lights, currently turned on, were taped high up along all the walls, and on the north wall they'd hung an enormous orange and green tapestry.... I felt overstimulated and vaguely irritated. The room I shared with [my roommate] seemed so quiet and plain, our lives seemed so quiet and plain. Had Aspeth been born cool, I wondered, or had someone taught her, like an older sister or a cousin?"

Jock cultures sense the low-reactive physiology of cool, too. For the early U.S. astronauts, having a low heart rate, which is associated with low reactivity, was a status symbol. Lieutenant Colonel John Glenn, who became the first American to orbit the Earth and would later run for president, was admired by his comrades for his supercool pulse rate during liftoff (only 110 beats per minute).

But physical lack of cool may be more socially valuable than we think. That deep blush when a hard-bitten tester puts his face an inch from yours and asks if you've ever used cocaine turns out to be a kind of social glue. In a recent experiment, a team of psychologists led by Corine Dijk asked sixty-odd participants to read accounts of people who'd done something morally wrong, like driving away from a car crash, or something embarrassing, like spilling coffee on someone. The participants were shown photographs of the wrongdoers, who had one of four different facial expressions: shame or embarrassment (head and eyes down); shame/embarrassment plus a blush; neutral; or neutral with a blush. Then they were asked to rate how sympathetic and trustworthy the transgressors were.

It turned out that the offenders who blushed were judged a lot more positively than those who didn't. This was because the blush signified concern for others. As Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who specializes in positive emotions, put it to the *New York Times*, "A blush comes online in two or three seconds and says, 'I care; I know I violated the social contract.' "

In fact, the very thing that many high-reactives hate most about blushing—its uncontrollability—is what makes it so socially useful. "Because it is impossible to control the blush intentionally," Dijk speculates, blushing is an authentic sign of embarrassment. And embarrassment, according to Keltner, is a moral emotion. It shows humility, modesty, and a desire to avoid aggression and make peace. It's not about isolating the person who feels ashamed (which is how it sometimes feels to easy blushers), but about bringing people together.

Keltner has tracked the roots of human embarrassment and found that after many primates fight, they try to make up. They do this partly by making gestures of embarrassment of the kind we see in humans—looking away, which acknowledges wrongdoing and the intention to stop; lowering the head, which shrinks one's size; and pressing the lips together, a sign of inhibition. These gestures in humans have been called "acts of devotion," writes Keltner. Indeed, Keltner, who is trained in reading people's faces, has studied photos of moral heroes like Gandhi and the Dalai Lama and found that they feature just such controlled smiles and averted eyes.

In his book, *Born to Be Good*, Keltner even says that if he had to choose his mate by asking a single question at a speed-dating event, the question he

would choose is: “What was your last embarrassing experience?” Then he would watch very carefully for lip-presses, blushing, and averted eyes. “The elements of the embarrassment are fleeting statements the individual makes about his or her respect for the judgment of others,” he writes. “Embarrassment reveals how much the individual cares about the rules that bind us to one another.”

In other words, you want to make sure that your spouse cares what other people think. It’s better to mind too much than to mind too little.



No matter how great the benefits of blushing, the phenomenon of high sensitivity raises an obvious question. How did the highly sensitive manage to survive the harsh sorting-out process of evolution? If the bold and aggressive generally prevail (as it sometimes seems), why were the sensitive not selected out of the human population thousands of years ago, like tree frogs colored orange? For you may, like the protagonist of *The Long Long Dances*, be moved more deeply than the next person by the opening chords of a Schubert impromptu, and you may flinch more than others at the smashing of bone and flesh, and you may have been the sort of child who squirmed horribly when you thought you’d broken someone’s toy, but evolution doesn’t reward such things.

Or does it?

Elaine Aron has an idea about this. She believes that high sensitivity was not itself selected for, but rather the careful, reflective style that tends to accompany it. “The type that is ‘sensitive’ or ‘reactive’ would reflect a strategy of observing carefully before acting,” she writes, “thus avoiding dangers, failures, and wasted energy, which would require a nervous system specially designed to observe and detect subtle differences. It is a strategy of ‘betting on a sure thing’ or ‘looking before you leap.’ In contrast, the active strategy of the [other type] is to be first, without complete information and with the attendant risks—the strategy of ‘taking a long shot’ because the ‘early bird catches the worm’ and ‘opportunity only knocks once.’ ”

In truth, many people Aron considers sensitive have some of the twenty-seven attributes associated with the trait, but not all of them. Maybe they're sensitive to light and noise, but not to coffee or pain; maybe they're not sensitive to anything sensory, but they're deep thinkers with a rich inner life. Maybe they're not even introverts—only 70 percent of sensitive people are, according to Aron, while the other 30 percent are extroverts (although this group tends to report craving more downtime and solitude than your typical extrovert). This, speculates Aron, is because sensitivity arose as a by-product of survival strategy, and you need only some, not all, of the traits to pull off the strategy effectively.

There's a great deal of evidence for Aron's point of view. Evolutionary biologists once believed that every animal species evolved to fit an ecological niche, that there was one ideal set of behaviors for that niche, and that species members whose behavior deviated from that ideal would die off. But it turns out that it's not only humans that divide into those who "watch and wait" and others who "just do it." *More than a hundred* species in the animal kingdom are organized in roughly this way.

From fruit flies to house cats to mountain goats, from sunfish to bushbaby primates to Eurasian tit birds, scientists have discovered that approximately 20 percent of the members of many species are "slow to warm up," while the other 80 percent are "fast" types who venture forth boldly without noticing much of what's going on around them. (Intriguingly, the percentage of infants in Kagan's lab who were born high-reactive was also, you'll recall, about twenty.)

If "fast" and "slow" animals had parties, writes the evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, "some of the fasts would bore everyone with their loud conversation, while others would mutter into their beer that they don't get any respect. Slow animals are best described as shy, sensitive types. They don't assert themselves, but they are observant and notice things that are invisible to the bullies. They are the writers and artists at the party who have interesting conversations out of earshot of the bullies. They are the inventors who figure out new ways to behave, while the bullies steal their patents by copying their behavior."

Once in a while, a newspaper or TV program runs a story about animal personalities, casting shy behavior as unseemly and bold behavior as attractive and admirable. (*That's our kind of fruit fly!*) But Wilson, like

Aron, believes that both types of animals exist because they have radically different survival strategies, each of which pays off differently and at different times. This is what's known as the trade-off theory of evolution, in which a particular trait is neither all good nor all bad, but a mix of pros and cons whose survival value varies according to circumstance.

“Shy” animals forage less often and widely for food, conserving energy, sticking to the sidelines, and surviving when predators come calling. Bolder animals sally forth, swallowed regularly by those farther up the food chain but surviving when food is scarce and they need to assume more risk. When Wilson dropped metal traps into a pond full of pumpkinseed fish, an event he says must have seemed to the fish as unsettling as a flying saucer landing on Earth, the bold fish couldn't help but investigate—and rushed headlong into Wilson's traps. The shy fish hovered judiciously at the edge of the pond, making it impossible for Wilson to catch them.

On the other hand, after Wilson succeeded in trapping both types of fish with an elaborate netting system and carrying them back to his lab, the bold fish acclimated quickly to their new environment and started eating a full five days earlier than did their shy brethren. “There is no single best ... [animal] personality,” writes Wilson, “but rather a diversity of personalities maintained by natural selection.”

Another example of the trade-off theory of evolution is a species known as Trinidadian guppies. These guppies develop personalities—with astonishing speed, in evolutionary terms—to suit the microclimates in which they live. Their natural predators are pike. But some guppy neighborhoods, upstream of a waterfall for example, are pike-free. If you're a guppy who grew up in such a charmed locale, then chances are you have a bold and carefree personality well suited to *la dolce vita*. In contrast, if your guppy family came from a “bad neighborhood” downstream from the waterfall, where pike cruise the waterways menacingly, then you probably have a much more circumspect style, just right for avoiding the bad guys.

The interesting thing is that these differences are heritable, not learned, so that the offspring of bold guppies who move into bad neighborhoods inherit their parents' boldness—even though this puts them at a severe disadvantage compared to their vigilant peers. It doesn't take long for their genes to mutate, though, and descendants who manage to survive tend to be careful types. The same thing happens to vigilant guppies when the pike

suddenly disappear; it takes about twenty years for their descendants to evolve into fish who act as if they haven't a care in the world.



The trade-off theory seems to apply equally to humans. Scientists have found that nomads who inherited the form of a particular gene linked to extroversion (specifically, to novelty-seeking) are better nourished than those without this version of the gene. But in *settled* populations, people with this same gene form have *poorer* nutrition. The same traits that make a nomad fierce enough to hunt and to defend livestock against raiders may hinder more sedentary activities like farming, selling goods at the market, or focusing at school.

Or consider this trade-off: human extroverts have more sex partners than introverts do—a boon to any species wanting to reproduce itself—but they commit more adultery and divorce more frequently, which is not a good thing for the children of all those couplings. Extroverts exercise more, but introverts suffer fewer accidents and traumatic injuries. Extroverts enjoy wider networks of social support, but commit more crimes. As Jung speculated almost a century ago about the two types, “the one [extroversion] consists in a high rate of fertility, with low powers of defense and short duration of life for the single individual; the other [introversion] consists in equipping the individual with numerous means of self-preservation plus a low fertility rate.”

The trade-off theory may even apply to entire species. Among evolutionary biologists, who tend to subscribe to the vision of lone individuals hell-bent on reproducing their own DNA, the idea that species include individuals whose traits promote group survival is hotly debated and, not long ago, could practically get you kicked out of the academy. But this view is slowly gaining acceptance. Some scientists even speculate that the evolutionary basis for traits like sensitivity is heightened compassion for the suffering of other members of one's species, especially one's family.

But you don't have to go that far. As Aron explains, it makes sense that animal groups depend on their sensitive members for survival. “Suppose a herd of antelope ... has a few members who are constantly stopping their

grazing to use their keen senses to watch for predators,” she writes. “Herds with such sensitive, watchful individuals would survive better, and so continue to breed, and so continue to have some sensitive individuals born in the group.”

And why should it be any different for humans? We need our Eleanor Roosevelts as surely as grazing herds depend on their sensitive antelopes.

In addition to “shy” and “bold” animals, and to “fast” and “slow” ones, biologists sometimes speak of the “hawk” and “dove” members of a given species. Great tit birds, for example, some of whom are much more aggressive than others, often act like case studies in an international relations class. These birds feed on beech tree nuts, and in years when nuts are scarce, the hawkish female birds do better, just as you’d expect, because they’re quick to challenge nut-eating competitors to a duel. But in seasons when there are plenty of beech nuts to go around, the female “doves”—who, incidentally, tend to make more attentive mothers—do better than the “hawks,” because the hawks waste time and bodily health getting into fights for no good reason.

Male great tits, on the other hand, have the opposite pattern. This is because their main role in life is not to find food but to defend territory. In years when food is scarce, so many of their fellow tit birds die of hunger that there’s enough space for all. The hawkish males then fall into the same trap as their female comrades during nutty seasons—they brawl, squandering precious resources with each bloody battle. But in good years, when competition for nesting territory heats up, aggression pays for the hawkish male tit bird.



During times of war or fear—the human equivalent of a bad nut season for female tit birds—it might seem that what we need most are aggressive heroic types. But if our entire population consisted of warriors, there would be no one to notice, let alone battle, potentially deadly but far quieter threats like viral disease or climate change.

Consider Vice President Al Gore’s decades-long crusade to raise awareness of global warming. Gore is, by many accounts, an introvert. “If

you send an introvert into a reception or an event with a hundred other people he will emerge with less energy than he had going in,” says a former aide. “Gore needs a rest after an event.” Gore acknowledges that his skills are not conducive to stumping and speechmaking. “Most people in politics draw energy from backslapping and shaking hands and all that,” he has said. “I draw energy from discussing ideas.”

But combine that passion for thought with attention to subtlety—both common characteristics of introverts—and you get a very powerful mix. In 1968, when Gore was a college student at Harvard, he took a class with an influential oceanographer who presented early evidence linking the burning of fossil fuels with the greenhouse effect. Gore’s ears perked up.

He tried to tell others what he knew. But he found that people wouldn’t listen. It was as if they couldn’t hear the alarm bells that rang so loudly in his ears.

“When I went to Congress in the middle of the 1970s, I helped organize the first hearings on global warming,” he recalls in the Oscar-winning movie *An Inconvenient Truth*—a film whose most stirring action scenes involve the solitary figure of Gore wheeling his suitcase through a midnight airport. Gore seems genuinely puzzled that no one paid attention: “I actually thought and believed that the story would be compelling enough to cause a real sea change in the way Congress reacted to that issue. I thought they would be startled, too. And they weren’t.”

But if Gore had known then what we know now about Kagan’s research, and Aron’s, he might have been less surprised by his colleagues’ reactions. He might even have used his insight into personality psychology to get them to listen. Congress, he could have safely assumed, is made up of some of the least sensitive people in the country—people who, if they’d been kids in one of Kagan’s experiments, would have marched up to oddly attired clowns and strange ladies wearing gas masks without so much as a backward glance at their mothers. Remember Kagan’s introverted Tom and extroverted Ralph? Well, Congress is full of Ralphs—it was *designed* for people like Ralph. Most of the Toms of the world do not want to spend their days planning campaigns and schmoozing with lobbyists.

These Ralph-like Congressmen can be wonderful people—exuberant, fearless, persuasive—but they’re unlikely to feel alarmed by a photograph of a tiny crack in a distant glacier. They need more intense stimulation to

get them to listen. Which is why Gore finally got his message across when he teamed up with whiz-bang Hollywood types who could package his warning into the special-effects-laden show that became *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Gore also drew on his own strengths, using his natural focus and diligence to tirelessly promote the movie. He visited dozens of movie theaters across the country to meet with viewers, and gave innumerable TV and radio interviews. On the subject of global warming, Gore has a clarity of voice that eluded him as a politician. For Gore, immersing himself in a complicated scientific puzzle comes naturally. Focusing on a single passion rather than tap dancing from subject to subject comes naturally. Even talking to crowds comes naturally when the topic is climate change: Gore on global warming has an easy charisma and connection with audience members that eluded him as a political candidate. That's because this mission, for him, is not about politics or personality. It's about the call of his conscience. "It's about the survival of the planet," he says. "Nobody is going to care who won or lost any election when the earth is uninhabitable."

If you're a sensitive sort, then you may be in the habit of pretending to be more of a politician and less cautious or single-mindedly focused than you actually are. But in this chapter I'm asking you to rethink this view. Without people like you, we will, quite literally, drown.



Back here at Walker Creek Ranch and the gathering for sensitive people, the Extrovert Ideal and its primacy of cool is turned upside down. If "cool" is low reactivity that predisposes a person to boldness or nonchalance, then the crowd that has come to meet Elaine Aron is deeply uncool.

The atmosphere is startling simply because it's so unusual. It's something you might find at a yoga class or in a Buddhist monastery, except that here there's no unifying religion or worldview, only a shared temperament. It's easy to see this when Aron delivers her speech. She has long observed that when she speaks to groups of highly sensitive people the room is more hushed and respectful than would be usual in a public gathering place, and this is true throughout her presentation. But it carries over all weekend.

I've never heard so many "after you's" and "thank you's" as I do here. During meals, which are held at long communal tables in a summer-camp style, open-air cafeteria, people plunge hungrily into searching conversations. There's a lot of one-on-one discussion about intimate topics like childhood experiences and adult love lives, and social issues like health care and climate change; there's not much in the way of storytelling intended to entertain. People listen carefully to each other and respond thoughtfully; Aron has noted that sensitive people tend to speak softly because that's how they prefer others to communicate with them.

"In the rest of the world," observes Michelle, a web designer who leans forward as if bracing herself against an imaginary blast of wind, "you make a statement and people may or may not discuss it. Here you make a statement and someone says, 'What does that *mean*?' And if you ask that question of someone else, they actually answer."

It's not that there's no small talk, observes Strickland, the leader of the gathering. It's that it comes not at the beginning of conversations but at the end. In most settings, people use small talk as a way of relaxing into a new relationship, and only once they're comfortable do they connect more seriously. Sensitive people seem to do the reverse. They "enjoy small talk only after they've gone deep," says Strickland. "When sensitive people are in environments that nurture their authenticity, they laugh and chitchat just as much as anyone else."

On the first night we drift to our bedrooms, housed in a dormlike building. I brace myself instinctively: now's the time when I'll want to read or sleep, but will instead be called upon to have a pillow fight (summer camp) or play a loud and boring drinking game (college). But at Walker Creek Ranch, my roommate, a twenty-seven-year-old secretary with huge, doe-like eyes and the ambition to become an author, is happy to spend the evening writing peacefully in her journal. I do the same.

Of course, the weekend is not completely without tension. Some people are reserved to the point of appearing sullen. Sometimes the do-your-own-thing policy threatens to devolve into mutual loneliness as everyone goes their own separate ways. In fact, there is such a deficit of the social behavior we call "cool" that I begin thinking someone *should* be cracking jokes, stirring things up, handing out rum-and-Cokes. Shouldn't they?

The truth is, as much as I crave breathing room for sensitive types, I enjoy hail-fellows-well-met, too. I'm glad for the "cool" among us, and I miss them this weekend. I'm starting to speak so softly that I feel like I'm putting myself to sleep. I wonder if deep down the others feel this way, too.

Tom, the software engineer and Abraham Lincoln look-alike, tells me of a former girlfriend who was always throwing open the doors of her house to friends and strangers. She was adventurous in every way: she loved new food, new sexual experiences, new people. It didn't work out between them —Tom eventually craved the company of a partner who would focus more on their relationship and less on the outside world, and he's happily married now to just such a woman—but he's glad for the time with his ex-girlfriend.

As Tom talks, I think of how much I miss my husband, Ken, who's back home in New York and not a sensitive type either, far from it. Sometimes this is frustrating: if something moves me to tears of empathy or anxiety, he'll be touched, but grow impatient if I stay that way too long. But I also know that his tougher attitude is good for me, and I find his company endlessly delightful. I love his effortless charm. I love that he never runs out of interesting things to say. I love how he pours his heart and soul into everything he does, and everyone he loves, especially our family.

But most of all I love his way of expressing compassion. Ken may be aggressive, more aggressive in a week than I'll be in a lifetime, but he uses it on behalf of others. Before we met, he worked for the UN in war zones all over the world, where, among other things, he conducted prisoner-of-war and detainee release negotiations. He would march into fetid jails and face down camp commanders with machine guns strapped to their chests until they agreed to release young girls who'd committed no crime other than to be female and victims of rape. After many years on the job, he went home and wrote down what he'd witnessed, in books and articles that bristled with rage. He didn't write in the style of a sensitive person, and he made a lot of people angry. But he wrote like a person who cares, desperately.

I thought that Walker Creek Ranch would make me long for a world of the highly sensitive, a world in which everyone speaks softly and no one carries a big stick. But instead it reinforced my deeper yearning for balance. This balance, I think, is what Elaine Aron would say is our natural state of being, at least in Indo-European cultures like ours, which she observes have

long been divided into “warrior kings” and “priestly advisers,” into the executive branch and the judicial branch, into bold and easy FDRs and sensitive, conscientious Eleanor Roosevelts.

WHY DID WALL STREET CRASH AND WARREN BUFFETT PROSPER?

How Introverts and Extroverts Think (and Process Dopamine) Differently

Tocqueville saw that the life of constant action and decision which was entailed by the democratic and businesslike character of American life put a premium upon rough and ready habits of mind, quick decision, and the prompt seizure of opportunities—and that all this activity was not propitious for deliberation, elaboration, or precision in thought.

—RICHARD HOFSTADTER, IN *Anti-Intellectualism in America*

Just after 7:30 a.m. on December 11, 2008, the year of the great stock market crash, Dr. Janice Dorn's phone rang. The markets had opened on the East Coast to another session of carnage. Housing prices were plummeting, credit markets were frozen, and GM teetered on the brink of bankruptcy.

Dorn took the call from her bedroom, as she often does, wearing a headset and perched atop her green duvet. The room was decorated sparsely. The most colorful thing in it was Dorn herself, who, with her flowing red hair, ivory skin, and trim frame, looks like a mature version of Lady Godiva. Dorn has a PhD in neuroscience, with a specialty in brain anatomy. She's also an MD trained in psychiatry, an active trader in the gold futures market, and a "financial psychiatrist" who has counseled an estimated six hundred traders.

"Hi, Janice!" said the caller that morning, a confident-sounding man named Alan. "Do you have time to talk?"

Dr. Dorn did not have time. A day trader who prides herself on being in and out of trading positions every half hour, she was eager to start trading. But Dorn heard a desperate note in Alan's voice. She agreed to take the call.

Alan was a sixty-year-old midwesterner who struck Dorn as a salt-of-the-earth type, hardworking and loyal. He had the jovial and assertive manner of an extrovert, and he maintained his good cheer despite the story of

disaster he proceeded to tell. Alan and his wife had worked all their lives, and managed to sock away a million dollars for retirement. But four months earlier he'd gotten the idea that, despite having no experience in the markets, he should buy a hundred thousand dollars' worth of GM stock, based on reports that the U.S. government might bail out the auto industry. He was convinced it was a no-lose investment.

After his trade went through, the media reported that the bailout might not happen after all. The market sold off GM and the stock price fell. But Alan imagined the thrill of winning big. It felt so real he could taste it. He held firm. The stock fell again, and again, and kept dropping until finally Alan decided to sell, at a big loss.

There was worse to come. When the next news cycle suggested that the bailout would happen after all, Alan got excited all over again and invested another hundred thousand dollars, buying more stock at the lower price. But the same thing happened: the bailout started looking uncertain.

Alan "reasoned" (this word is in quotation marks because, according to Dorn, conscious reasoning had little to do with Alan's behavior) that the price couldn't go much lower. He held on, savoring the idea of how much fun he and his wife would have spending all the money he stood to make. Again the stock went lower. When finally it hit seven dollars per share, Alan sold. And bought yet again, in a flush of exhilaration, when he heard that the bailout might happen after all ...

By the time GM's stock price fell to two dollars a share, Alan had lost *seven hundred thousand dollars*, or 70 percent of his family nest egg.

He was devastated. He asked Dorn if she could help recoup his losses. She could not. "It's gone," she told him. "You are never going to make that money back."

He asked what he'd done wrong.

Dorn had many ideas about that. As an amateur, Alan shouldn't have been trading in the first place. And he'd risked far too much money; he should have limited his exposure to 5 percent of his net worth, or \$50,000. But the biggest problem may have been beyond Alan's control: Dorn believed he was experiencing an excess of something psychologists call *reward sensitivity*.

A reward-sensitive person is highly motivated to seek rewards—from a promotion to a lottery jackpot to an enjoyable evening out with friends.

Reward sensitivity motivates us to pursue goals like sex and money, social status and influence. It prompts us to climb ladders and reach for faraway branches in order to gather life's choicest fruits.

But sometimes we're *too* sensitive to rewards. Reward sensitivity on overdrive gets people into all kinds of trouble. We can get so excited by the prospect of juicy prizes, like winning big in the stock market, that we take outsized risks and ignore obvious warning signals.

Alan was presented with plenty of these signals, but was so animated by the prospect of winning big that he couldn't see them. Indeed, he fell into a classic pattern of reward sensitivity run amok: at exactly the moments when the warning signs suggested slowing down, *he sped up*—dumping money he couldn't afford to lose into a speculative series of trades.

Financial history is full of examples of players accelerating when they should be braking. Behavioral economists have long observed that executives buying companies can get so excited about beating out their competitors that they ignore signs that they're overpaying. This happens so frequently that it has a name: “deal fever,” followed by “the winner's curse.” The AOL–Time Warner merger, which wiped out \$200 billion of Time Warner shareholder value, is a classic example. There were plenty of warnings that AOL's stock, which was the currency for the merger, was wildly overvalued, yet Time Warner's directors approved the deal unanimously.

“I did it with as much or more excitement and enthusiasm as I did when I first made love some forty-two years ago,” exclaimed Ted Turner, one of those directors and the largest individual shareholder in the company. “TED TURNER: IT'S BETTER THAN SEX,” announced the *New York Post* the day after the deal was struck, a headline to which we'll return for its power to explain why smart people can sometimes be too reward-sensitive.



You may be wondering what all this has to do with introversion and extroversion. Don't we all get a little carried away sometimes?

The answer is yes, except that some of us do so more than others. Dorn has observed that her extroverted clients are more likely to be highly

reward-sensitive, while the introverts are more likely to pay attention to warning signals. They're more successful at regulating their feelings of desire or excitement. They protect themselves better from the downside. "My introvert traders are much more able to say, 'OK, Janice, I do feel these excited emotions coming up in me, but I understand that I can't act on them.' The introverts are much better at making a plan, staying with a plan, being very disciplined."

To understand why introverts and extroverts might react differently to the prospect of rewards, says Dorn, you have to know a little about brain structure. As we saw in [chapter 4](#), our limbic system, which we share with the most primitive mammals and which Dorn calls the "old brain," is emotional and instinctive. It comprises various structures, including the amygdala, and it's highly interconnected with the nucleus accumbens, sometimes called the brain's "pleasure center." We examined the anxious side of the old brain when we explored the role of the amygdala in high reactivity and introversion. Now we're about to see its greedy side.

The old brain, according to Dorn, is constantly telling us, "Yes, yes, yes! Eat more, drink more, have more sex, take lots of risk, go for all the gusto you can get, and above all, do not think!" The reward-seeking, pleasure-loving part of the old brain is what Dorn believes spurred Alan to treat his life savings like chips at the casino.

We also have a "new brain" called the neocortex, which evolved many thousands of years after the limbic system. The new brain is responsible for thinking, planning, language, and decision-making—some of the very faculties that make us human. Although the new brain also plays a significant role in our emotional lives, it's the seat of rationality. Its job, according to Dorn, includes saying, "No, no, no! Don't do that, because it's dangerous, makes no sense, and is not in your best interests, or those of your family, or of society."

So where was Alan's neocortex when he was chasing stock market gains?

The old brain and the new brain do work together, but not always efficiently. Sometimes they're actually in conflict, and then our decisions are a function of which one is sending out stronger signals. So when Alan's old brain sent its breathless messages up to his new brain, it probably responded as a neocortex should: it told his old brain to slow down. It said, *Watch out!* But it lost the ensuing tug-of-war.

We all have old brains, of course. But just as the amygdala of a high-reactive person is more sensitive than average to novelty, so do extroverts seem to be more susceptible than introverts to the reward-seeking cravings of the old brain. In fact, some scientists are starting to explore the idea that reward-sensitivity is not only an interesting feature of extroversion; it is what *makes* an extrovert an extrovert. Extroverts, in other words, are characterized by their tendency to seek rewards, from top dog status to sexual highs to cold cash. They've been found to have greater economic, political, and hedonistic ambitions than introverts; even their sociability is a function of reward-sensitivity, according to this view—extroverts socialize because human connection is inherently gratifying.

What underlies all this reward-seeking? The key seems to be positive emotion. Extroverts tend to experience more pleasure and excitement than introverts do—emotions that are activated, explains the psychologist Daniel Nettle in his illuminating book on personality, “in response to the pursuit or capture of some resource that is valued. Excitement builds towards the anticipated capture of that resource. Joy follows its capture.” Extroverts, in other words, often find themselves in an emotional state we might call “buzz”—a rush of energized, enthusiastic feelings. This is a sensation we all know and like, but not necessarily to the same degree or with the same frequency: extroverts seem to get an extra buzz from the pursuit and attainment of their goals.

The basis of buzz appears to be a high degree of activity in a network of structures in the brain—often called the “reward system”—including the orbitofrontal cortex, the nucleus accumbens, and the amygdala. The job of the reward system is to get us excited about potential goodies; fMRI experiments have shown that the system is activated by any number of possible delights, from anticipation of a squirt of Kool-Aid on the tongue, to money, to pictures of attractive people.

The neurons that transmit information in the reward network operate in part through a neurotransmitter—a chemical that carries information between brain cells—called dopamine. Dopamine is the “reward chemical” released in response to anticipated pleasures. The more responsive your brain is to dopamine, or the higher the level of dopamine you have available to release, some scientists believe, the more likely you are to go after rewards like sex, chocolate, money, and status. Stimulating mid-brain

dopamine activity in mice gets them to run around excitedly in an empty cage until they drop dead of starvation. Cocaine and heroin, which stimulate dopamine-releasing neurons in humans, make people euphoric.

Extroverts' dopamine pathways appear to be more active than those of introverts. Although the exact relationship between extroversion, dopamine, and the brain's reward system has not been conclusively established, early findings have been intriguing. In one experiment, Richard Depue, a neurobiologist at Cornell University, gave an amphetamine that activates the dopamine system to a group of introverts and extroverts, and found that the extroverts had a stronger response. Another study found that extroverts who win gambling games have more activity in the reward-sensitive regions of their brains than victorious introverts do. Still other research has shown that the medial orbitofrontal cortex, a key component of the brain's dopamine-driven reward system, is larger in extroverts than in introverts.

By contrast, introverts "have a smaller response" in the reward system, writes psychologist Nettle, "and so go less out of their way to follow up [reward] cues." They will, "like anyone, be drawn from time to time to sex, and parties, and status, but the kick they get will be relatively small, so they are not going to break a leg to get there." In short, introverts just don't buzz as easily.



In some ways, extroverts are lucky; buzz has a delightful champagne-bubble quality. It fires us up to work and play hard. It gives us the courage to take chances. Buzz also gets us to do things that would otherwise seem too difficult, like giving speeches. Imagine you work hard to prepare a talk on a subject you care about. You get your message across, and when you finish the audience rises to its feet, its clapping sustained and sincere. One person might leave the room feeling, "I'm glad I got my message across, but I'm also happy it's over; now I can get back to the rest of my life." Another person, more sensitive to buzz, might walk away feeling, "What a trip! Did you hear that applause? Did you see the expression on their faces when I made that life-changing point? This is *great!*"

But buzz also has considerable downsides. “Everyone assumes that it’s good to accentuate positive emotions, but that isn’t correct,” the psychology professor Richard Howard told me, pointing to the example of soccer victories that end in violence and property damage. “A lot of antisocial and self-defeating behavior results from people who amplify positive emotions.”

Another disadvantage of buzz may be its connection to risk—sometimes outsized risk. Buzz can cause us to ignore warning signs we should be heeding. When Ted Turner (who appears to be an extreme extrovert) compared the AOL–Time Warner deal to his first sexual experience, he may have been telling us that he was in the same buzzy state of mind as an adolescent who’s so excited about spending the night with his new girlfriend that he’s not thinking much about the consequences. This blindness to danger may explain why extroverts are more likely than introverts to be killed while driving, be hospitalized as a result of accident or injury, smoke, have risky sex, participate in high-risk sports, have affairs, and remarry. It also helps explain why extroverts are more prone than introverts to overconfidence—defined as greater confidence unmatched by greater ability. Buzz is JFK’s Camelot, but it’s also the Kennedy Curse.



This theory of extroversion is still young, and it is not absolute. We can’t say that all extroverts constantly crave rewards or that all introverts always brake for trouble. Still, the theory suggests that we should rethink the roles that introverts and extroverts play in their own lives, and in organizations. It suggests that when it comes time to make group decisions, extroverts would do well to listen to introverts—especially when they see problems ahead.

In the wake of the 2008 crash, a financial catastrophe caused in part by uncalculated risk-taking and blindness to threat, it became fashionable to speculate whether we’d have been better off with more women and fewer men—or less testosterone—on Wall Street. But maybe we should also ask what might have happened with a few more introverts at the helm—and a lot less dopamine.

Several studies answer this question implicitly. Kellogg School of Management Professor Camelia Kuhnen has found that the variation of a dopamine-regulating gene (DRD4) associated with a particularly thrill-seeking version of extroversion is a strong predictor of financial risk-taking. By contrast, people with a variant of a serotonin-regulating gene linked to introversion and sensitivity take 28 percent *less* financial risk than others. They have also been found to outperform their peers when playing gambling games calling for sophisticated decision-making. (When faced with a low probability of winning, people with this gene variant tend to be risk-averse; when they have a high probability of winning, they become relatively risk-seeking.) Another study, of sixty-four traders at an investment bank, found that the highest-performing traders tended to be emotionally stable introverts.

Introverts also seem to be better than extroverts at delaying gratification, a crucial life skill associated with everything from higher SAT scores and income to lower body mass index. In one study, scientists gave participants the choice of a small reward immediately (a gift certificate from Amazon) or a bigger gift certificate in two to four weeks. Objectively, the bigger reward in the near but not immediate future was the more desirable option. But many people went for the “I want it now” choice—and when they did, a brain scanner revealed that their reward network was activated. Those who held out for the larger reward two weeks hence showed more activity in the prefrontal cortex—the part of the new brain that talks us out of sending ill-considered e-mails and eating too much chocolate cake. (A similar study suggests that the former group tended to be extroverts and the latter group introverts.)

Back in the 1990s, when I was a junior associate at a Wall Street law firm, I found myself on a team of lawyers representing a bank considering buying a portfolio of subprime mortgage loans made by other lenders. My job was to perform due diligence—to review the documentation to see whether the loans had been made with the proper paperwork. Had the borrowers been notified of the interest rates they were slated to pay? That the rates would go up over time?

The papers turned out to be chock-full of irregularities. If I’d been in the bankers’ shoes, this would have made me nervous, very nervous. But when our legal team summarized the risks in a caution-filled conference call, the

bankers seemed utterly untroubled. They saw the potential profits of buying those loans at a discount, and they wanted to go ahead with the deal. Yet it was just this kind of risk-reward miscalculation that contributed to the failure of many banks during the Great Recession of 2008.

At about the same time I evaluated that portfolio of loans, I heard a story circulating on Wall Street about a competition among investment banks for a prestigious piece of business. Each of the major banks sent a squad of their top employees to pitch the client. Each team deployed the usual tools: spread sheets, “pitch books,” and PowerPoint presentations. But the winning team added its own piece of theatrics: they ran into the room wearing matching baseball caps and T-shirts emblazoned with the letters FUD, an acronym for *Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt*. In this case FUD had been crossed out with an emphatic red X; FUD was an unholy trinity. That team, the vanquishers of FUD, won the contest.

Disdain for FUD—and for the type of person who tends to experience it—is what helped cause the crash, says Boykin Curry, a managing director of the investment firm Eagle Capital, who had front-row seats to the 2008 meltdown. Too much power was concentrated in the hands of aggressive risk-takers. “For twenty years, the DNA of nearly every financial institution ... morphed dangerously,” he told *Newsweek* magazine at the height of the crash. “Each time someone at the table pressed for more leverage and more risk, the next few years proved them ‘right.’ These people were emboldened, they were promoted and they gained control of ever more capital. Meanwhile, anyone in power who hesitated, who argued for caution, was proved ‘wrong.’ The cautious types were increasingly intimidated, passed over for promotion. They lost their hold on capital. This happened every day in almost every financial institution, over and over, until we ended up with a very specific kind of person running things.”

Curry is a Harvard Business School grad and, with his wife, Celerie Kemble, a Palm Beach-born designer, a prominent fixture on New York political and social scenes. Which is to say that he would seem to be a card-carrying member of what he calls the “go-go aggressive” crowd, and an unlikely advocate for the importance of introverts. But one thing he’s not shy about is his thesis that it was forceful extroverts who caused the global financial crash.

“People with certain personality types got control of capital and institutions and power,” Curry told me. “And people who are congenitally more cautious and introverted and statistical in their thinking became discredited and pushed aside.”

Vincent Kaminski, a Rice University business school professor who once served as managing director of research for Enron, the company that famously filed for bankruptcy in 2001 as a result of reckless business practices, told the *Washington Post* a similar story of a business culture in which aggressive risk-takers enjoyed too high a status relative to cautious introverts. Kaminski, a soft-spoken and careful man, was one of the few heroes of the Enron scandal. He repeatedly tried to sound the alarm with senior management that the company had entered into business deals risky enough to threaten its survival. When the top brass wouldn’t listen, he refused to sign off on these dangerous transactions and ordered his team not to work on them. The company stripped him of his power to review company-wide deals.

“There have been some complaints, Vince, that you’re not helping people to do transactions,” the president of Enron told him, according to *Conspiracy of Fools*, a book about the Enron scandal. “Instead, you’re spending all your time acting like cops. We don’t need cops, Vince.”

But they did need them, and still do. When the credit crisis threatened the viability of some of Wall Street’s biggest banks in 2007, Kaminski saw the same thing happening all over again. “Let’s just say that all the demons of Enron have not been exorcised,” he told the *Post* in November of that year. The problem, he explained, was not only that many had failed to understand the risks the banks were taking. It was also that those who *did* understand were consistently ignored—in part because they had the wrong personality style: “Many times I have been sitting across the table from an energy trader and I would say, ‘Your portfolio will implode if this specific situation happens.’ And the trader would start yelling at me and telling me I’m an idiot, that such a situation would never happen. The problem is that, on one side, you have a rainmaker who is making lots of money for the company and is treated like a superstar, and on the other side you have an introverted nerd. So who do you think wins?”



But what exactly is the mechanism by which buzz clouds good judgment? How did Janice Dorn's client, Alan, dismiss the danger signs screaming that he might lose 70 percent of his life savings? What prompts some people to act as if FUD doesn't exist?

One answer comes from an intriguing line of research conducted by the University of Wisconsin psychologist Joseph Newman. Imagine that you've been invited to Newman's lab to participate in one of his studies. You're there to play a game: the more points you get, the more money you win. Twelve different numbers flash across a computer screen, one at a time, in no particular order. You're given a button, as if you were a game-show contestant, which you can press or not as each number appears. If you press the button for a "good" number, you win points; if you press for a "bad" number, you lose points; and if you don't press at all, nothing happens. Through trial and error you learn that four is a nice number and nine is not. So the next time the number nine flashes across your screen, you know not to press that button.

Except that sometimes people press the button for the bad numbers, even when they should know better. Extroverts, especially highly impulsive extroverts, are more likely than introverts to make this mistake. Why? Well, in the words of psychologists John Brebner and Chris Cooper, who have shown that extroverts think less and act faster on such tasks: introverts are "geared to inspect" and extroverts "geared to respond."

But the more interesting aspect of this puzzling behavior is not what the extroverts do *before* they've hit the wrong button, but what they do *after*. When introverts hit the number nine button and find they've lost a point, they slow down before moving on to the next number, as if to reflect on what went wrong. But extroverts not only fail to slow down, *they actually speed up*.

This seems strange; why would anyone do this? Newman explains that it makes perfect sense. If you focus on achieving your goals, as reward-sensitive extroverts do, you don't want anything to get in your way—neither naysayers nor the number nine. You speed up in an attempt to knock these roadblocks down.

Yet this is a crucially important misstep, because the longer you pause to process surprising or negative feedback, the more likely you are to learn from it. If you *force* extroverts to pause, says Newman, they'll do just as

well as introverts at the numbers game. But, left to their own devices, they don't stop. And so they don't learn to avoid the trouble staring them in the face. Newman says that this is exactly what might happen to extroverts like Ted Turner when bidding for a company on auction. "When a person bids up too high," he told me, "that's because they didn't inhibit a response they should have inhibited. They didn't consider information that should have been weighing on their decision."

Introverts, in contrast, are constitutionally programmed to downplay reward—to kill their buzz, you might say—and scan for problems. "As soon they get excited," says Newman, "they'll put the brakes on and think about peripheral issues that may be more important. Introverts seem to be specifically wired or trained so when they catch themselves getting excited and focused on a goal, their vigilance increases."

Introverts also tend to compare new information with their expectations, he says. They ask themselves, "Is this what I thought would happen? Is it how it should be?" And when the situation falls short of expectations, they form associations between the moment of disappointment (losing points) and whatever was going on in their environment at the time of the disappointment (hitting the number nine.) These associations let them make accurate predictions about how to react to warning signals in the future.



Introverts' disinclination to charge ahead is not only a hedge against risk; it also pays off on intellectual tasks. Here are some of the things we know about the relative performance of introverts and extroverts at complex problem-solving. Extroverts get better grades than introverts during elementary school, but introverts outperform extroverts in high school and college. At the university level, introversion predicts academic performance better than cognitive ability. One study tested 141 college students' knowledge of twenty different subjects, from art to astronomy to statistics, and found that introverts knew more than the extroverts about every single one of them. Introverts receive disproportionate numbers of graduate degrees, National Merit Scholarship finalist positions, and Phi Beta Kappa keys. They outperform extroverts on the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking

Appraisal test, an assessment of critical thinking widely used by businesses for hiring and promotion. They've been shown to excel at something psychologists call "insightful problem solving."

The question is: Why?

Introverts are not smarter than extroverts. According to IQ scores, the two types are equally intelligent. And on many kinds of tasks, particularly those performed under time or social pressure or involving multitasking, extroverts do better. Extroverts are better than introverts at handling information overload. Introverts' reflectiveness uses up a lot of cognitive capacity, according to Joseph Newman. On any given task, he says, "if we have 100 percent cognitive capacity, an introvert may have only 75 percent on task and 25 percent off task, whereas an extrovert may have 90 percent on task." This is because most tasks are goal-directed. Extroverts appear to allocate most of their cognitive capacity to the goal at hand, while introverts use up capacity by monitoring how the task is going.

But introverts seem to think more carefully than extroverts, as the psychologist Gerald Matthews describes in his work. Extroverts are more likely to take a quick-and-dirty approach to problem-solving, trading accuracy for speed, making increasing numbers of mistakes as they go, and abandoning ship altogether when the problem seems too difficult or frustrating. Introverts think before they act, digest information thoroughly, stay on task longer, give up less easily, and work more accurately. Introverts and extroverts also direct their attention differently: if you leave them to their own devices, the introverts tend to sit around wondering about things, imagining things, recalling events from their past, and making plans for the future. The extroverts are more likely to focus on what's happening around them. It's as if extroverts are seeing "what is" while their introverted peers are asking "what if."

Introverts' and extroverts' contrasting problem-solving styles have been observed in many different contexts. In one experiment, psychologists gave fifty people a difficult jigsaw puzzle to solve, and found that the extroverts were more likely than the introverts to quit midway. In another, Professor Richard Howard gave introverts and extroverts a complicated series of printed mazes, and found not only that the introverts tended to solve more mazes correctly, but also that they spent a much greater percentage of their allotted time inspecting the maze *before* entering it. A similar thing

happened when groups of introverts and extroverts were given the Raven Standard Progressive Matrices, an intelligence test that consists of five sets of problems of increasing difficulty. The extroverts tended to do better on the first two sets, presumably because of their ability to orient quickly to their goal. But on the three more difficult sets, where persistence pays, the introverts significantly outperformed them. By the final, most complicated set, the extroverts were much more likely than the introverts to abandon the task altogether.

Introverts sometimes outperform extroverts even on *social* tasks that require persistence. Wharton management professor Adam Grant (who conducted the leadership studies described in [chapter 2](#)) once studied the personality traits of effective call-center employees. Grant predicted that the extroverts would be better telemarketers, but it turned out that there was zero correlation between extroversion levels and cold-calling prowess.

“The extroverts would make these wonderful calls,” Grant told me, “but then a shiny object of some kind would cross their paths and they’d lose focus.” The introverts, in contrast, “would talk very quietly, but boom, boom, boom, they were making those calls. They were focused and determined.” The only extroverts to outperform them were those who also happened to be unusually high scorers for a separate personality trait measuring conscientiousness. Introvert persistence was more than a match for extrovert buzz, in other words, even at a task where social skills might be considered at a premium.

Persistence isn’t very glamorous. **If genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration, then as a culture we tend to lionize the one percent.** We love its flash and dazzle. But great power lies in the other ninety-nine percent.

“It’s not that I’m so smart,” said Einstein, who was a consummate introvert. “It’s that I stay with problems longer.”



None of this is to denigrate those who forge ahead quickly, or to blindly glorify the reflective and careful. The point is that we tend to overvalue

buzz and discount the risks of reward-sensitivity: we need to find a balance between action and reflection.

For example, if you were staffing an investment bank, management professor Kuhnen told me, you'd want to hire not only reward-sensitive types, who are likely to profit from bull markets, but also those who remain emotionally more neutral. You'd want to make sure that important corporate decisions reflect the input of both kinds of people, not just one type. And you'd want to know that individuals on all points of the reward-sensitivity spectrum understand their own emotional preferences and can temper them to match market conditions.

But it's not just employers who benefit from taking a closer look at their employees. We also need to take a closer look at ourselves. Understanding where we fall on the reward-sensitivity spectrum gives us the power to live our lives well.

If you're a buzz-prone extrovert, then you're lucky to enjoy lots of invigorating emotions. Make the most of them: build things, inspire others, think big. Start a company, launch a website, build an elaborate tree house for your kids. But also know that you're operating with an Achilles' heel that you must learn to protect. Train yourself to spend energy on what's truly meaningful to you instead of on activities that look like they'll deliver a quick buzz of money or status or excitement. Teach yourself to pause and reflect when warning signs appear that things aren't working out as you'd hoped. Learn from your mistakes. Seek out counterparts (from spouses to friends to business partners) who can help rein you in and compensate for your blind spots.

And when it comes time to invest, or to do anything that involves a sage balance of risk and reward, keep yourself in check. One good way to do this is to make sure that you're not surrounding yourself with images of reward at the crucial moment of decision. Kuhnen and Brian Knutson have found that men who are shown erotic pictures just before they gamble take more risks than those shown neutral images like desks and chairs. This is because anticipating rewards—*any* rewards, whether or not related to the subject at hand—excites our dopamine-driven reward networks and makes us act more rashly. (This may be the single best argument yet for banning pornography from workplaces.)

And if you're an introvert who's relatively immune to the excesses of reward sensitivity? At first blush, the research on dopamine and buzz seems to imply that extroverts, and extroverts alone, are happily motivated to work hard by the excitement they get from pursuing their goals. As an introvert, I was puzzled by this idea when I first came across it. It didn't reflect my own experience. I'm in love with my work and always have been. I wake up in the morning excited to get started. So what drives people like me?

One answer is that even if the reward-sensitivity theory of extroversion turns out to be correct, we can't say that all extroverts are always more sensitive to rewards and blasé about risk, or that all introverts are constantly unmoved by incentives and vigilant about threats. Since the days of Aristotle, philosophers have observed that these two modes—approaching things that appear to give pleasure and avoiding others that seem to cause pain—lie at the heart of all human activity. As a group, extroverts tend to be reward-seeking, but every human being has her own mix of approach and avoidance tendencies, and sometimes the combination differs depending on the situation. Indeed, many contemporary personality psychologists would say that threat-vigilance is more characteristic of a trait known as “neuroticism” than of introversion. The body's reward and threat systems also seem to work independently of each other, so that the same person can be generally sensitive, or insensitive, to both reward *and* threat.

If you want to determine whether you are reward-oriented, threat-oriented, or both, try asking yourself whether the following groups of statements are true of you.

If you are reward-oriented:

1. When I get something I want, I feel excited and energized.
2. When I want something, I usually go all out to get it.
3. When I see an opportunity for something I like, I get excited right away.
4. When good things happen to me, it affects me strongly.
5. I have very few fears compared to my friends.

If you are threat-oriented:

1. Criticism or scolding hurts me quite a bit.

2. I feel pretty worried or upset when I think or know somebody is angry at me.
3. If I think something unpleasant is going to happen, I usually get pretty “worked up.”
4. I feel worried when I think I have done poorly at something important.
5. I worry about making mistakes.

But I believe that another important explanation for introverts who love their work may come from a very different line of research by the influential psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on the state of being he calls “flow.” Flow is an optimal state in which you feel totally engaged in an activity—whether long-distance swimming or songwriting, sumo wrestling or sex. In a state of flow, you’re neither bored nor anxious, and you don’t question your own adequacy. Hours pass without your noticing.

The key to flow is to pursue an activity for its own sake, *not for the rewards it brings*. Although flow does not depend on being an introvert or an extrovert, many of the flow experiences that Csikszentmihalyi writes about are solitary pursuits that have nothing to do with reward-seeking: reading, tending an orchard, solo ocean cruising. Flow often occurs, he writes, in conditions in which people “become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself.”

In a sense, Csikszentmihalyi transcends Aristotle; he is telling us that there are some activities that are not about approach or avoidance, but about something deeper: the fulfillment that comes from absorption in an activity outside yourself. “Psychological theories usually assume that we are motivated either by the need to eliminate an unpleasant condition like hunger or fear,” Csikszentmihalyi writes, “or by the expectation of some future reward such as money, status, or prestige.” But in flow, “a person could work around the clock for days on end, for no better reason than to keep on working.”

If you’re an introvert, find your flow by using your gifts. You have the power of persistence, the tenacity to solve complex problems, and the clear-sightedness to avoid pitfalls that trip others up. You enjoy relative freedom from the temptations of superficial prizes like money and status. Indeed,

your biggest challenge may be to fully harness your strengths. You may be so busy trying to appear like a zestful, reward-sensitive extrovert that you undervalue your own talents, or feel underestimated by those around you. But when you're focused on a project that you care about, you probably find that your energy is boundless.

So stay true to your own nature. If you like to do things in a slow and steady way, don't let others make you feel as if you have to race. If you enjoy depth, don't force yourself to seek breadth. If you prefer single-tasking to multitasking, stick to your guns. Being relatively unmoved by rewards gives you the incalculable power to go your own way. It's up to you to use that independence to good effect.

Of course, that isn't always easy. While writing this chapter, I corresponded with Jack Welch, the former chairman of General Electric. He had just published a *BusinessWeek* online column called "Release Your Inner Extrovert," in which he called for introverts to act more extroverted on the job. I suggested that extroverts sometimes need to act more introverted, too, and shared with him some of the ideas you've just read about how Wall Street might have benefited from having more introverts at the helm. Welch was intrigued. But, he said, "the extroverts would argue that they never heard from the introverts."

Welch makes a fair point. Introverts need to trust their gut and share their ideas as powerfully as they can. This does not mean aping extroverts; ideas can be shared quietly, they can be communicated in writing, they can be packaged into highly produced lectures, they can be advanced by allies. The trick for introverts is to honor their own styles instead of allowing themselves to be swept up by prevailing norms. The story of the lead-up to the Great Recession of 2008 is peppered, alas, with careful types who took inappropriate risks, like the former chief executive of Citigroup, Chuck Prince, a former lawyer who made risky loans into a falling market because, he said, "as long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance."

"People who are initially cautious become more aggressive," observes Boykin Curry of this phenomenon. "They say, 'Hey, the more aggressive people are getting promoted and I'm not, so I'm going to be more aggressive too.' "



But stories of financial crises often contain subplots about people who famously (and profitably) saw them coming—and such tales tend to feature just the kinds of people who embrace FUD, or who like to close the blinds to their offices, insulate themselves from mass opinion and peer pressure, and focus in solitude. One of the few investors who managed to flourish during the crash of 2008 was Seth Klarman, president of a hedge fund called the Baupost Group. Klarman is known for consistently outperforming the market while steadfastly avoiding risk, and for keeping a significant percentage of his assets in cash. In the two years since the crash of 2008, when most investors were fleeing hedge funds in droves, Klarman almost doubled Baupost's assets under management to \$22 billion.

Klarman achieved this with an investment strategy based explicitly on FUD. "At Baupost, we are big fans of fear, and in investing, it is clearly better to be scared than sorry," he once wrote in a letter to investors. Klarman is a "world-class worrier," observes the *New York Times*, in a 2007 article called "Manager Frets Over the Market, But Still Outdoes It." He owns a racehorse called "Read the Footnotes."

During the years leading up to the 2008 crash, Klarman "was one of the few people to stick to a cautious and seemingly paranoid message," says Boykin Curry. "When everyone else was celebrating, he was probably storing cans of tuna in his basement, to prepare for the end of civilization. Then, when everyone else panicked, he started buying. It's not just analysis; it's his emotional makeup. The same wiring that helps Seth find opportunities that no one else sees can make him seem aloof or blunt. If you're the kind of person who frets every time the quarter is good, you may have trouble rising to the top of a corporate pyramid. Seth probably wouldn't have made it as a sales manager. But he is one of the great investors of our time."

Similarly, in his book on the run-up to the 2008 crash, *The Big Short*, Michael Lewis introduces three of the few people who were astute enough to forecast the coming disaster. One was a solitary hedge-fund manager named Michael Burry who describes himself as "happy in my own head" and who spent the years prior to the crash alone in his office in San Jose, California, combing through financial documents and developing his own contrarian views of market risk. The others were a pair of socially awkward investors named Charlie Ledley and Jamie Mai, whose entire investment

strategy was based on FUD: they placed bets that had limited downside, but would pay off handsomely if dramatic but unexpected changes occurred in the market. It was not an investment strategy so much as a life philosophy—a belief that most situations were not as stable as they appeared to be.

This “suited the two men’s personalities,” writes Lewis. “They never had to be sure of anything. Both were predisposed to feel that people, and by extension markets, were too certain about inherently uncertain things.” Even after being proven right with their 2006 and 2007 bets against the subprime mortgage market, and earning \$100 million in the process, “they actually spent time wondering how people who had been so sensationally right (i.e., they themselves) could preserve the capacity for diffidence and doubt and uncertainty that had enabled them to be right.”

Ledley and Mai understood the value of their constitutional diffidence, but others were so spooked by it that they gave up the chance to invest money with the two—in effect, sacrificing millions of dollars to their prejudice against FUD. “What’s amazing with Charlie Ledley,” says Boykin Curry, who knows him well, “is that here you had a brilliant investor who was exceedingly conservative. If you were concerned about risk, there was no one better to go to. But he was terrible at raising capital because he seemed so tentative about everything. Potential clients would walk out of Charlie’s office scared to give him money because they thought he lacked conviction. Meanwhile, they poured money into funds run by managers who exuded confidence and certainty. Of course, when the economy turned, the confident group lost half their clients’ money, while Charlie and Jamie made a fortune. Anyone who used conventional social cues to evaluate money managers was led to exactly the wrong conclusion.”



Another example, this one from the 2000 crash of the dot-com bubble, concerns a self-described introvert based in Omaha, Nebraska, where he’s well known for shutting himself inside his office for hours at a time.

Warren Buffett, the legendary investor and one of the wealthiest men in the world, has used exactly the attributes we’ve explored in this chapter—intellectual persistence, prudent thinking, and the ability to see and act on

warning signs—to make billions of dollars for himself and the shareholders in his company, Berkshire Hathaway. Buffett is known for thinking carefully when those around him lose their heads. “Success in investing doesn’t correlate with IQ,” he has said. “Once you have ordinary intelligence, what you need is the temperament to control the urges that get other people into trouble in investing.”

Every summer since 1983, the boutique investment bank Allen & Co. has hosted a weeklong conference in Sun Valley, Idaho. This isn’t just any conference. It’s an extravaganza, with lavish parties, river-rafting trips, ice-skating, mountain biking, fly fishing, horseback riding, and a fleet of babysitters to care for guests’ children. The hosts service the media industry, and past guest lists have included newspaper moguls, Hollywood celebrities, and Silicon Valley stars, with marquee names such as Tom Hanks, Candice Bergen, Barry Diller, Rupert Murdoch, Steve Jobs, Diane Sawyer, and Tom Brokaw.

In July 1999, according to Alice Schroeder’s excellent biography of Buffett, *The Snowball*, he was one of those guests. He had attended year after year with his entire family in tow, arriving by Gulfstream jet and staying with the other VIP attendees in a select group of condos overlooking the golf course. Buffett loved his annual vacation at Sun Valley, regarding it as a great place for his family to gather and for him to catch up with old friends.

But this year the mood was different. It was the height of the technology boom, and there were new faces at the table—the heads of technology companies that had grown rich and powerful almost overnight, and the venture capitalists who had fed them cash. These people were riding high. When the celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz showed up to shoot “the Media All-Star Team” for *Vanity Fair*, some of them lobbied to get in the photo. They were the future, they believed.

Buffett was decidedly not a part of this group. He was an old-school investor who didn’t get caught up in speculative frenzy around companies with unclear earnings prospects. Some dismissed him as a relic of the past. But Buffett was still powerful enough to give the keynote address on the final day of the conference.

He thought long and hard about that speech and spent weeks preparing for it. After warming up the crowd with a charmingly self-deprecating story

—Buffett used to dread public speaking until he took a Dale Carnegie course—he told the crowd, in painstaking, brilliantly analyzed detail, why the tech-fueled bull market wouldn’t last. Buffett had studied the data, noted the danger signals, and then paused and reflected on what they meant. It was the first public forecast he had made in thirty years.

The audience wasn’t thrilled, according to Schroeder. Buffett was raining on their parade. They gave him a standing ovation, but in private, many dismissed his ideas. “Good old Warren,” they said. “Smart man, but this time he missed the boat.”

Later that evening, the conference wrapped up with a glorious display of fireworks. As always, it had been a blazing success. But the most important aspect of the gathering—Warren Buffett alerting the crowd to the market’s warning signs—wouldn’t be revealed until the following year, when the dot-com bubble burst, just as he said it would.

Buffett takes pride not only in his track record, but also in following his own “inner scorecard.” He divides the world into people who focus on their own instincts and those who follow the herd. “I feel like I’m on my back,” says Buffett about his life as an investor, “and there’s the Sistine Chapel, and I’m painting away. I like it when people say, ‘Gee, that’s a pretty good-looking painting.’ But it’s my painting, and when somebody says, ‘Why don’t you use more red instead of blue?’ Good-bye. It’s my painting. And I don’t care what they sell it for. The painting itself will never be finished. That’s one of the great things about it.”

Part

Three

**DO ALL CULTURES HAVE AN
EXTROVERT IDEAL?**

8

SOFT POWER

Asian-Americans and the Extrovert Ideal

In a gentle way, you can shake the world.
—MAHATMA GANDHI

It's a sunny spring day in 2006, and Mike Wei, a seventeen-year-old Chinese-born senior at Lynbrook High School near Cupertino, California, is telling me about his experiences as an Asian-American student. Mike is dressed in sporty all-American attire of khakis, windbreaker, and baseball cap, but his sweet, serious face and wispy mustache give him the aura of a budding philosopher, and he speaks so softly that I have to lean forward to hear him.

"At school," says Mike, "I'm a lot more interested in listening to what the teacher says and being the good student, rather than the class clown or interacting with other kids in the class. If being outgoing, shouting, or acting out in class is gonna affect the education I receive, it's better if I go for education."

Mike relates this view matter-of-factly, but he seems to know how unusual it is by American standards. His attitude comes from his parents, he explains. "If I have a choice between doing something for myself, like going out with my friends, or staying home and studying, I think of my parents. That gives me the strength to keep studying. My father tells me that his job is computer programming, and my job is to study."

Mike's mother taught the same lesson by example. A former math teacher who worked as a maid when the family immigrated to North America, she memorized English vocabulary words while washing dishes. She is very quiet, says Mike, and very resolute. "It's really Chinese to

pursue your own education like that. My mother has the kind of strength that not everyone can see.”

By all indications, Mike has made his parents proud. His e-mail username is “A-student,” and he’s just won a coveted spot in Stanford University’s freshman class. He’s the kind of thoughtful, dedicated student that any community would be proud to call its own. And yet, according to an article called “The New White Flight” that ran in the *Wall Street Journal* just six months previously, white families are leaving Cupertino in droves, precisely because of kids like Mike. They are fleeing the sky-high test scores and awe-inspiring study habits of many Asian-American students. The article said that white parents feared that their kids couldn’t keep up academically. It quoted a student from a local high school: “If you were Asian, you had to confirm you were smart. If you were white, you had to prove it.”

But the article didn’t explore what lay behind this stellar academic performance. I was curious whether the town’s scholarly bent reflected a culture insulated from the worst excesses of the Extrovert Ideal—and if so, what that would feel like. I decided to visit and find out.

At first blush, Cupertino seems like the embodiment of the American Dream. Many first- and second-generation Asian immigrants live here and work at the local high-tech office parks. Apple Computer’s headquarters at 1 Infinite Loop is in town. Google’s Mountain View headquarters is just down the road. Meticulously maintained cars glide along the boulevards; the few pedestrians are crisply dressed in bright colors and cheerful whites. Unprepossessing ranch houses are pricey, but buyers think the cost is worth it to get their kids into the town’s famed public school system, with its ranks of Ivy-bound kids. Of the 615 students in the graduating class of 2010 at Cupertino’s Monta Vista High School (77 percent of whom are Asian-American, according to the school’s website, some of which is accessible in Chinese), 53 were National Merit Scholarship semifinalists. The average combined score of Monta Vista students who took the SAT in 2009 was 1916 out of 2400, 27 percent higher than the nationwide average.

Respected kids at Monta Vista High School are not necessarily athletic or vivacious, according to the students I meet here. Rather, they’re studious and sometimes quiet. “Being smart is actually admired, even if you’re weird,” a Korean-American high school sophomore named Chris tells me.

Chris describes the experience of his friend, whose family left to spend two years in a Tennessee town where few Asian-Americans lived. The friend enjoyed it, but suffered culture shock. In Tennessee “there were insanely smart people, but they were always by themselves. Here, the really smart people usually have a lot of friends, because they can help people out with their work.”

The library is to Cupertino what the mall or soccer field is to other towns: an unofficial center of village life. High school kids cheerfully refer to studying as “going nerding.” Football and cheerleading aren’t particularly respected activities. “Our football team sucks,” Chris says good-naturedly. Though the team’s recent stats are more impressive than Chris suggests, having a lousy football team seems to hold symbolic significance for him. “You couldn’t really even tell they’re football players,” he explains. “They don’t wear their jackets and travel in big groups. When one of my friends graduated, they played a video and my friend was like, ‘I can’t believe they’re showing football players and cheerleaders in this video.’ That’s not what drives this town.”

Ted Shinta, a teacher and adviser to the Robotics Team at Monta Vista High School, tells me something similar. “When I was in high school,” he says, “you were discouraged from voting in student elections unless you were wearing a varsity jacket. At most high schools you have a popular group that tyrannizes the others. But here the kids in that group don’t hold any power over the other students. The student body is too academically oriented for that.”

A local college counselor named Purvi Modi agrees. “Introversion is not looked down upon,” she tells me. “It is accepted. In some cases it is even highly respected and admired. It is cool to be a Master Chess Champion and play in the band.” There’s an introvert-extrovert spectrum here, as everywhere, but it’s as if the population is distributed a few extra degrees toward the introverted end of the scale. One young woman, a Chinese-American about to begin her freshman year at an elite East Coast college, noticed this phenomenon after meeting some of her future classmates online, and worries what the post-Cupertino future might hold. “I met a couple of people on Facebook,” she says, “and they’re just so different. I’m really quiet. I’m not that much of a partier or socializer, but everyone there

seems to be very social and stuff. It's just very different from my friends. I'm not even sure if I'm gonna *have* friends when I get there."

One of her Facebook correspondents lives in nearby Palo Alto, and I ask how she'll respond if that person invites her to get together over the summer.

"I probably wouldn't do it," she says. "It would be interesting to meet them and stuff, but my mom doesn't want me going out that much, because I have to study."

I'm struck by the young woman's sense of filial obligation, and its connection to prioritizing study over social life. But this is not unusual in Cupertino. Many Asian-American kids here tell me that they study all summer at their parents' request, even declining invitations to July birthday parties so they can get ahead on the following October's calculus curriculum.

"I think it's our culture," explains Tiffany Liao, a poised Swarthmore-bound high school senior whose parents are from Taiwan. "Study, do well, don't create waves. It's inbred in us to be more quiet. When I was a kid and would go to my parents' friends' house and didn't want to talk, I would bring a book. It was like this shield, and they would be like, 'She's so studious!' And that was praise."

It's hard to imagine other American moms and dads outside Cupertino smiling on a child who reads in public while everyone else is gathered around the barbecue. But parents schooled a generation ago in Asian countries were likely taught this quieter style as children. In many East Asian classrooms, the traditional curriculum emphasizes listening, writing, reading, and memorization. Talking is simply not a focus, and is even discouraged.

"The teaching back home is very different from here," says Hung Wei Chien, a Cupertino mom who came to the United States from Taiwan in 1979 to attend graduate school at UCLA. "There, you learn the subject, and they test you. At least when I grew up, they don't go off subject a lot, and they don't allow the students to ramble. If you stand up and talk nonsense, you'll be reprimanded."

Hung is one of the most jolly, extroverted people I've ever met, given to large, expansive gestures and frequent belly laughs. Dressed in running shorts, sneakers, and amber jewelry, she greets me with a bear hug and

drives us to a bakery for breakfast. We dig into our pastries, chatting companionably.

So it's telling that even Hung recalls her culture shock upon entering her first American-style classroom. She considered it rude to participate in class because she didn't want to waste her classmates' time. And sure enough, she says, laughing, "I was the quiet person there. At UCLA, the professor would start class, saying, 'Let's discuss!' I would look at my peers while they were talking nonsense, and the professors were so patient, just listening to everyone." She nods her head comically, mimicking the overly respectful professors.

"I remember being amazed. It was a linguistics class, and that's not even linguistics the students are talking about! I thought, 'Oh, in the U.S., as soon as you start talking, you're fine.' "

If Hung was bewildered by the American style of class participation, it's likely that her teachers were equally perplexed by her unwillingness to speak. A full twenty years after Hung moved to the United States, the *San Jose Mercury News* ran an article called "East, West Teaching Traditions Collide," exploring professors' dismay at the reluctance of Asian-born students like Hung to participate in California university classrooms. One professor noted a "deference barrier" created by Asian students' reverence for their teachers. Another vowed to make class participation part of the grade in order to prod Asian students to speak in class. "You're supposed to downgrade yourself in Chinese learning because other thinkers are so much greater than you," said a third. "This is a perennial problem in classes with predominantly Asian-American students."

The article generated a passionate reaction in the Asian-American community. Some said the universities were right that Asian students need to adapt to Western educational norms. "Asian-Americans have let people walk all over them because of their silence," posted a reader of the sardonically titled website ModelMinority.com. Others felt that Asian students shouldn't be forced to speak up and conform to the Western mode. "Perhaps instead of trying to change their ways, colleges can learn to listen to their sound of silence," wrote Heejung Kim, a Stanford University cultural psychologist, in a paper arguing that talking is not always a positive act.



How is it that Asians and Westerners can look at the exact same classroom interactions, and one group will label it “class participation” and the other “talking nonsense”? The *Journal of Research in Personality* has published an answer to this question in the form of a map of the world drawn by research psychologist Robert McCrae. McCrae’s map looks like something you’d see in a geography textbook, but it’s based, he says, “not on rainfall or population density, but on personality trait levels,” and its shadings of dark and light grays—dark for extroversion, light for introversion—reveal a picture that “is quite clear: Asia ... is introverted, Europe extroverted.” Had the map also included the United States, it would be colored dark gray. Americans are some of the most extroverted people on earth.

McCrae’s map might seem like a grand exercise in cultural stereotyping. To group entire continents by personality type is an act of gross generalization: you can find loud people in mainland China just as easily as in Atlanta, Georgia. Nor does the map account for subtleties of cultural difference within a country or region. People in Beijing have different styles from those in Shanghai, and both are different still from the citizens of Seoul or Tokyo. Similarly, describing Asians as a “model minority”—even when meant as a compliment—is just as confining and condescending as any description that reduces individuals to a set of perceived group characteristics. Perhaps it is also problematic to characterize Cupertino as an incubator for scholarly stand-outs, no matter how flattering this might sound to some.

But although I don’t want to encourage rigid national or ethnic typecasting, to avoid entirely the topic of cultural difference and introversion would be a shame: there are too many aspects of Asian cultural and personality styles that the rest of the world could and should learn from. Scholars have for decades studied cultural differences in personality type, especially between East and West, and especially the dimension of introversion-extroversion, the one pair of traits that psychologists, who agree on practically nothing when it comes to cataloging human personality, believe is salient and measurable all over the world.

Much of this research yields the same results as McCrae’s map. One study comparing eight- to ten-year-old children in Shanghai and southern

Ontario, Canada, for example, found that shy and sensitive children are shunned by their peers in Canada but make sought-after playmates in China, where they are also more likely than other children to be considered for leadership roles. Chinese children who are sensitive and reticent are said to be *dongshi* (understanding), a common term of praise.

Similarly, Chinese high school students tell researchers that they prefer friends who are “humble” and “altruistic,” “honest” and “hardworking,” while American high school students seek out the “cheerful,” “enthusiastic,” and “sociable.” “The contrast is striking,” writes Michael Harris Bond, a cross-cultural psychologist who focuses on China. “The Americans emphasize sociability and prize those attributes that make for easy, cheerful association. The Chinese emphasize deeper attributes, focusing on moral virtues and achievement.”

Another study asked Asian-Americans and European-Americans to think out loud while solving reasoning problems, and found that the Asians did much better when they were allowed to be quiet, compared to the Caucasians, who performed well when vocalizing their problem-solving.

These results would not surprise anyone familiar with traditional Asian attitudes to the spoken word: talk is for communicating need-to-know information; quiet and introspection are signs of deep thought and higher truth. Words are potentially dangerous weapons that reveal things better left unsaid. They hurt other people; they can get their speaker into trouble. Consider, for example, these proverbs from the East:

The wind howls, but the mountain remains still.

—JAPANESE PROVERB

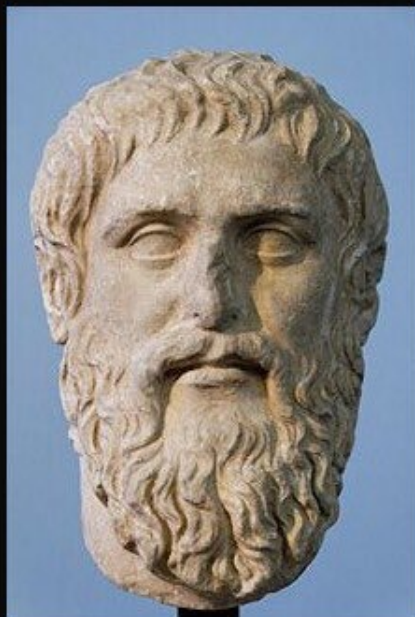
*Those who know do not speak.
Those who speak do not know.*

—LAO ZI, *The Way of Lao Zi*

Even though I make no special attempt to observe the discipline of silence, living alone automatically makes me refrain from the sins of speech.

—KAMO NO CHOMEI, 12th Century Japanese recluse

And compare them to proverbs from the West:



As empty vessels make the loudest sound, so they
that have the least wit are the greatest babblers.

(Plato)

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Silence is golden when you can't
think of a good answer.

— *Muhammad Ali* —

AZ QUOTES

Be a craftsman in speech that thou mayest be strong, for the strength of one is the tongue, and speech is mightier than all fighting.

—MAXIMS OF PTAHHOTEP, 2400 B.C.E.

Speech is civilization itself. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact—it is silence which isolates.

—THOMAS MANN, *The Magic Mountain*

The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

What lies behind these starkly different attitudes? One answer is the widespread reverence for education among Asians, particularly those from “Confucian belt” countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. To this day, some Chinese villages display statues of students who passed the grueling Ming dynasty-era *jīnshi* exam hundreds of years ago. It’s a lot easier to achieve that kind of distinction if—like some of the kids from Cupertino—you spend your summers studying.

Another explanation is group identity. Many Asian cultures are team-oriented, but not in the way that Westerners think of teams. Individuals in Asia see themselves as part of a greater whole—whether family, corporation, or community—and place tremendous value on harmony within their group. They often subordinate their own desires to the group’s interests, accepting their place in its hierarchy.

Western culture, by contrast, is organized around the individual. We see ourselves as self-contained units; our destiny is to express ourselves, to follow our bliss, to be free of undue restraint, to achieve the one thing that we, and we alone, were brought into this world to do. We may be gregarious, but we don’t submit to group will, or at least we don’t like to think we do. We love and respect our parents, but bridle at notions like filial piety, with their implications of subordination and restraint. When we get together with others, we do so as self-contained units having fun with, competing with, standing out from, jockeying for position with, and, yes, loving, other self-contained units. Even the Western God is assertive, vocal, and dominant; his son Jesus is kind and tender, but also a charismatic, crowd-pleasing man of influence (*Jesus Christ Superstar*).

It makes sense, then, that Westerners value boldness and verbal skill, traits that promote individuality, while Asians prize quiet, humility, and



醜陋的中國人

柏楊著



Individualistic Culture

- Personal-emphasized
- Views people as unique
- Encourages self-expression
- Emphasizes competitiveness

Collectivist Culture

- Social-emphasized
- Views people as part of a group
- Discourages self-expression
- Emphasizes group harmony

sensitivity, which foster group cohesion. If you live in a collective, then things will go a lot more smoothly if you behave with restraint, even submission.

This preference was vividly demonstrated in a recent fMRI study in which researchers showed seventeen Americans and seventeen Japanese pictures of men in dominance poses (arms crossed, muscles bulging, legs planted squarely on the ground) and subordinate positions (shoulders bent, hands interlocked protectively over groin, legs squeezed together tight). They found that the dominant pictures activated pleasure centers in the American brains, while the submissive pictures did the same for the Japanese.

From a Western perspective, it can be hard to see what's so attractive about submitting to the will of others. But what looks to a Westerner like subordination can seem like basic politeness to many Asians. Don Chen, the Chinese-American Harvard Business School student you met in [chapter 2](#), told me about the time he shared an apartment with a group of Asian friends plus his close Caucasian friend, a gentle, easygoing guy Don felt would fit right in.

Conflicts arose when the Caucasian friend noticed dishes piling up in the sink and asked his Asian roommates to do their fair share of the washing up. It wasn't an unreasonable complaint, says Don, and his friend thought he phrased his request politely and respectfully. But his Asian roommates saw it differently. To them, he came across as harsh and angry. An Asian in that situation, said Don, would be more careful with his tone of voice. He would phrase his displeasure in the form of a question, not a request or command. Or he might not bring it up at all. It wouldn't be worth upsetting the group over a few dirty dishes.

What looks to Westerners like Asian deference, in other words, is actually a deeply felt concern for the sensibilities of others. As the psychologist Harris Bond observes, "It is only those from an explicit tradition who would label [the Asian] mode of discourse 'self-effacement.'" Within this indirect tradition it might be labeled 'relationship honouring.' " And relationship honoring leads to social dynamics that can seem remarkable from a Western perspective.

It's because of relationship honoring, for example, that social anxiety disorder in Japan, known as *taijin kyofusho*, takes the form not of excessive

worry about embarrassing oneself, as it does in the United States, but of embarrassing *others*. It's because of relationship-honoring that Tibetan Buddhist monks find inner peace (and off-the-chart happiness levels, as measured in brain scans) by meditating quietly on compassion. And it's because of relationship-honoring that Hiroshima victims apologized to each other for surviving. "Their civility has been well documented but still stays the heart," writes the essayist Lydia Millet. " 'I am sorry,' said one of them, bowing, with the skin of his arms peeling off in strips. 'I regret I am still alive while your baby is not.' 'I am sorry,' another said earnestly, with lips swollen to the size of oranges, as he spoke to a child weeping beside her dead mother. 'I am so sorry that I was not taken instead.' "

Though Eastern relationship-honoring is admirable and beautiful, so is Western respect for individual freedom, self-expression, and personal destiny. The point is not that one is superior to the other, but that a profound difference in cultural values has a powerful impact on the personality styles favored by each culture. In the West, we subscribe to the Extrovert Ideal, while in much of Asia (at least before the Westernization of the past several decades), silence is golden. These contrasting outlooks affect the things we say when our roommates' dishes pile up in the sink—and the things we don't say in a university classroom.

Moreover, they tell us that the Extrovert Ideal is not as sacrosanct as we may have thought. So if, deep down, you've been thinking that it's only natural for the bold and sociable to dominate the reserved and sensitive, and that the Extrovert Ideal is innate to humanity, Robert McCrae's personality map suggests a different truth: that each way of being—quiet and talkative, careful and audacious, inhibited and unrestrained—is characteristic of its own mighty civilization.



Ironically, some of the people who have the most trouble holding on to this truth are Asian-American kids from Cupertino. Once they emerge from adolescence and leave the confines of their hometown, they find a world in which loudness and speaking out are the tickets to popularity and financial success. They come to live with a double-consciousness—part Asian and

part American—with each side calling the other into question. Mike Wei, the high school senior who told me he'd rather study than socialize, is a perfect example of this ambivalence. When we first met, he was a high school senior, still nestled in the Cupertino cocoon. "Because we put so much emphasis on education," Mike told me then, referring to Asians in general, "socializing is not a big part of our selves."

When I caught up with Mike the following autumn, in his freshman year at Stanford, only a twenty-minute drive from Cupertino but a world away demographically, he seemed unsettled. We met at an outdoor café, where we sat next to a coed group of athletes erupting regularly in laughter. Mike nodded at the athletes, all of whom were white. Caucasians, he said, seem to be "less afraid of other people thinking that what they said was too loud or too stupid." Mike was frustrated by the superficiality of dining-hall conversation, and by the "bullshitting" that often substituted for class participation in freshman seminars. He was spending his free time mostly with other Asians, partly because they had "the same level of outgoingness" he did. The non-Asians tended to make him feel as if he had to "be really hyped up or excited, even though that might not be true to who I am."

"My dorm has four Asians in it, out of fifty kids," he told me. "So I feel more comfortable around them. There's this one guy called Brian, and he's pretty quiet. I can tell he has that Asian quality where you're kind of shy, and I feel comfortable around him for that reason. I feel like I can be myself around him. I don't have to do something just to look cool, whereas around a big group of people that aren't Asian or are just really loud, I feel like I have to play a role."

Mike sounded dismissive of Western communication styles, but he admitted that he sometimes wished he could be noisy and uninhibited himself. "They're more comfortable with their own character," he said of his Caucasian classmates. Asians are "not uncomfortable with who they are, but are uncomfortable with *expressing* who they are. In a group, there's always that pressure to be outgoing. When they don't live up to it, you can see it in their faces."

Mike told me about a freshman icebreaking event he'd participated in, a scavenger hunt in San Francisco that was supposed to encourage students to step out of their comfort zones. Mike was the only Asian assigned to a rowdy group, some of whom streaked naked down a San Francisco street

and cross-dressed in a local department store during the hunt. One girl went to a Victoria's Secret display and stripped down to her underwear. As Mike recounted these details, I thought he was going to tell me that his group had been over the top, inappropriate. But he wasn't critical of the other students. He was critical of himself.

"When people do things like that, there's a moment where I feel uncomfortable with it. It shows my own limits. Sometimes I feel like they're better than I am."

Mike was getting similar messages from his professors. A few weeks after the orientation event, his freshman adviser—a professor at Stanford's medical school—invited a group of students to her house. Mike hoped to make a good impression, but he couldn't think of anything to say. The other students seemed to have no problem joking around and asking intelligent questions. "Mike, you were so loud today," the professor teased him when finally he said good-bye. "You just blew me away." He left her house feeling bad about himself. "People who don't talk are seen as weak or lacking," he concluded ruefully.

To be sure, these feelings were not totally new to Mike. He'd experienced glimmers of them back in high school. Cupertino may have an almost Confucian ethic of quiet, study, and relationship-honoring, but it's subject to the mores of the Extrovert Ideal all the same. At the local shopping center on a weekday afternoon, cocky Asian-American teenage guys with spiky haircuts call out to eye-rolling, wise-cracking girls in spaghetti-strap tank tops. On a Saturday morning at the library, some teens study intently in corners, but others congregate at boisterous tables. Few of the Asian-American kids I spoke to in Cupertino wanted to identify themselves with the word *introvert*, even if they effectively described themselves that way. While deeply committed to their parents' values, they seemed to divide the world into "traditional" Asians versus "Asian superstars." The traditionals keep their heads down and get their homework done. The superstars do well academically but also joke around in class, challenge their teachers, and get themselves noticed.

Many students deliberately try to be more outgoing than their parents, Mike told me. "They think their parents are too quiet and they try to overcompensate by being flauntingly outgoing." Some of the parents have started to shift their values too. "Asian parents are starting to see that it

doesn't pay to be quiet, so they encourage their kids to take speech and debate," Mike said. "Our speech and debate program was the second largest in California, to give kids exposure to speaking loudly and convincingly."

Still, when I first met Mike in Cupertino, his sense of himself and his values was pretty much intact. He knew that he wasn't one of the Asian superstars—he rated himself a 4 on a popularity scale of 1 to 10—but seemed comfortable in his own skin. "I'd rather hang out with people whose personalities are more genuine," he told me then, "and that tends to lead me toward more quiet people. It's hard to be gleeful when at the same time I'm trying to be wise."

Indeed, Mike was probably lucky to enjoy the Cupertino cocoon for as long as he did. Asian-American kids who grow up in more typical American communities often face the issues that Mike confronted as a Stanford freshman much earlier in their lives. One study comparing European-American and second-generation Chinese-American teens over a five-year period found that the Chinese-Americans were significantly more introverted than their American peers throughout adolescence—and paid the price with their self-esteem. While introverted Chinese-American twelve-year-olds felt perfectly fine about themselves—presumably because they still measured themselves according to their parents' traditional value systems—by the time they got to be seventeen and had been more exposed to America's Extrovert Ideal, their self-regard had taken a nosedive.



For Asian-American kids, the cost of failing to fit in is social unease. But as they grow up, they may pay the price with their paychecks. The journalist Nicholas Lemann once interviewed a group of Asian-Americans on the subject of meritocracy for his book *The Big Test*. "A sentiment that emerges consistently," he wrote, "is that meritocracy ends on graduation day, and that afterward, Asians start to fall behind because they don't have quite the right cultural style for getting ahead: too passive, not hail-fellow-well-met enough."

I met many professionals in Cupertino who were struggling with this issue. A well-heeled housewife confided that all the husbands in her social

circle had recently accepted jobs in China, and were now commuting between Cupertino and Shanghai, partly because their quiet styles prevented them from advancing locally. The American companies “think they can’t handle business,” she said, “because of presentation. In business, you have to put a lot of nonsense together and present it. My husband always just makes his point and that’s the end of it. When you look at big companies, almost none of the top executives are Asians. They hire someone who doesn’t know anything about the business, but maybe he can make a good presentation.”

A software engineer told me how overlooked he felt at work in comparison to other people, “especially people from European origin, who speak without thinking.” In China, he said, “If you’re quiet, you’re seen as being wise. It’s completely different here. Here people like to speak out. Even if they have an idea, not completely mature yet, people still speak out. If I could be better in communication, my work would be much more recognized. Even though my manager appreciates me, he still doesn’t know I have done work so wonderful.”

The engineer then confided that he had sought training in American-style extroversion from a Taiwanese-born communications professor named Preston Ni. At Foothill College, just outside Cupertino, Ni conducts daylong seminars called “Communication Success for Foreign-Born Professionals.” The class is advertised online through a local group called the Silicon Valley SpeakUp Association, whose mission is to “help foreign-born professionals to succeed in life through enhancement in soft skills.” (“Speak you [sic] mind!” reads the organization’s home page. “Together everyone achieve [sic] more at SVSpeakup.”)

Curious about what speaking one’s mind looks like from an Asian perspective, I signed up for the class and, a few Saturday mornings later, found myself sitting at a desk in a starkly modern classroom, the Northern California mountain sun streaming through its plate-glass windows. There were about fifteen students in all, many from Asian countries but some from Eastern Europe and South America, too.

Professor Ni, a friendly-looking man wearing a Western-style suit, a gold-colored tie with a Chinese drawing of a waterfall, and a shy smile, began the class with an overview of American business culture. In the United States, he warned, you need style as well as substance if you want to

get ahead. It may not be fair, and it might not be the best way of judging a person's contribution to the bottom line, "but if you don't have charisma you can be the most brilliant person in the world and you'll still be disrespected."

This is different from many other cultures, said Ni. When a Chinese Communist leader makes a speech, he reads it, not even from a teleprompter but from a paper. "If he's the leader, everyone has to listen."

Ni asked for volunteers and brought Raj, a twentysomething Indian software engineer at a Fortune 500 company, to the front of the room. Raj was dressed in the Silicon Valley uniform of casual button-down shirt and chinos, but his body language was defensive. He stood with his arms crossed protectively over his chest, scuffing at the ground with his hiking boots. Earlier that morning, when we'd gone around the room introducing ourselves, he'd told us, in a tremulous voice from his seat in the back row, that he wanted to learn "how to make more conversation" and "to be more open."

Professor Ni asked Raj to tell the class about his plans for the rest of the weekend.

"I'm going to dinner with a friend," replied Raj, looking fixedly at Ni, his voice barely audible, "and then perhaps tomorrow I'll go hiking."

Professor Ni asked him to try it again.

"I'm going to dinner with a friend," said Raj, "and then, *mumble, mumble, mumble*, I'll go hiking."

"My impression of you," Professor Ni told Raj gently, "is that I can give you a lot of work to do, but I don't have to pay much attention to you. Remember, in Silicon Valley, you can be the smartest, most capable person, but if you can't express yourself aside from showing your work, you'll be underappreciated. Many foreign-born professionals experience this; you're a glorified laborer instead of a leader."

The class nodded sympathetically.

"But there's a way to be yourself," continued Ni, "and to let more of you come out through your voice. Many Asians use only a narrow set of muscles when they speak. So we'll start with breathing."

With that, he directed Raj to lie on his back and vocalize the five American English vowels. "A ... E ... U ... O ... I ..." intoned Raj, his

voice floating up from the classroom floor. “A ... E ... U ... O ... I ... A ... E ... U ... O ... I ...”

Finally Professor Ni deemed Raj ready to stand up again.

“Now, what interesting things do you have planned for after class?” he asked, clapping his hands encouragingly.

“Tonight I’m going to a friend’s place for dinner, and tomorrow I’m going hiking with another friend.” Raj’s voice was louder than before, and the class applauded with gusto.

The professor himself is a role model for what can happen when you work at it. After class, I visited him in his office, and he told me how shy he’d been when he first came to the United States—how he put himself in situations, like summer camp and business school, where he could practice acting extroverted until it came more naturally. These days he has a successful consulting practice, with clients that include Yahoo!, Visa, and Microsoft, teaching some of the same skills he labored to acquire himself.

But when we began talking about Asian concepts of “soft power”—what Ni calls leadership “by water rather than by fire”—I started to see a side of him that was less impressed by Western styles of communication. “In Asian cultures,” Ni said, “there’s often a subtle way to get what you want. It’s not always aggressive, but it can be very determined and very skillful. In the end, much is achieved because of it. Aggressive power beats you up; soft power wins you over.”

I asked the professor for real-life examples of soft power, and his eyes shone as he told me of clients whose strength lay in their ideas and heart. Many of these people were organizers of employee groups—women’s groups, diversity groups—who had managed to rally people to their cause through conviction rather than dynamism. He also talked about groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving—clusters of people who change lives through the power not of their charisma but of their caring. Their communication skills are sufficient to convey their message, but their real strength comes from substance.

“In the long run,” said Ni, “if the idea is good, people shift. If the cause is just and you put heart into it, it’s almost a universal law: you will attract people who want to share your cause. Soft power is quiet persistence. The people I’m thinking of are very persistent in their day-to-day, person-to-person interactions. Eventually they build up a team.” Soft power, said Ni,

was wielded by people we've admired throughout history: Mother Teresa, the Buddha, Gandhi.

I was struck when Ni mentioned Gandhi. I had asked almost all the Cupertino high school students I met to name a leader they admired, and many had named Gandhi. What was it about him that inspired them so?



Gandhi was, according to his autobiography, a constitutionally shy and quiet man. As a child, he was afraid of everything: thieves, ghosts, snakes, the dark, and especially other people. He buried himself in books and ran home from school as soon as it was over, for fear of having to talk to anybody. Even as a young man, when he was elected to his first leadership position as a member of the Executive Committee of the Vegetarian Society, he attended every meeting, but was too shy to speak.

“You talk to me quite all right,” one of the members asked him, confused, “but why is it that you never open your lips at a committee meeting? You are a drone.” When a political struggle occurred on the committee, Gandhi had firm opinions, but was too scared to voice them. He wrote his thoughts down, intending to read them aloud at a meeting. But in the end he was too cowed even to do that.

Gandhi learned over time to manage his shyness, but he never really overcame it. He couldn't speak extemporaneously; he avoided making speeches whenever possible. Even in his later years, he wrote, “I do not think I could or would even be inclined to keep a meeting of friends engaged in talk.”

But with his shyness came his unique brand of strength—a form of restraint best understood by examining little known corners of Gandhi's life story. As a young man he decided to travel to England to study law, against the wishes of the leaders of his Modhi Bania subcaste. Caste members were forbidden to eat meat, and the leaders believed that vegetarianism was impossible in England. But Gandhi had already vowed to his beloved mother to abstain from meat, so he saw no danger in the trip. He said as much to the Sheth, the headman of the community.

“Will you disregard the orders of the caste?” demanded the Sheth.

“I am really helpless,” replied Gandhi. “I think the caste should not interfere in the matter.”

Boom! He was excommunicated—a judgment that remained in force even when he returned from England several years later with the promise of success that attended a young, English-speaking lawyer. The community was divided over how to handle him. One camp embraced him; the other cast him out. This meant that Gandhi was not allowed even to eat or drink at the homes of fellow subcaste members, including his own sister and his mother- and father-in-law.

Another man, Gandhi knew, would protest for readmission. But he couldn’t see the point. He knew that fighting would only generate retaliation. Instead he followed the Sheth’s wishes and kept at a distance, even from his own family. His sister and in-laws were prepared to host him at their homes in secret, but he turned them down.

The result of this compliance? The subcaste not only stopped bothering him, but its members—including those who had excommunicated him—helped in his later political work, without expecting anything in return. They treated him with affection and generosity. “It is my conviction,” Gandhi wrote later, “that all these good things are due to my non-resistance. Had I agitated for being admitted to the caste, had I attempted to divide it into more camps, had I provoked the castemen, they would surely have retaliated, and instead of steering clear of the storm, I should, on arrival from England, have found myself in a whirlpool of agitation.”

This pattern—the decision to accept what another man would challenge—occurred again and again in Gandhi’s life. As a young lawyer in South Africa, he applied for admission to the local bar. The Law Society didn’t want Indian members, and tried to thwart his application by requiring an original copy of a certificate that was on file in the Bombay High Court and therefore inaccessible. Gandhi was enraged; he knew well that the true reason for these barriers was discrimination. But he didn’t let his feelings show. Instead he negotiated patiently, until the Law Society agreed to accept an affidavit from a local dignitary.

The day arrived when he stood to take the oath, at which point the chief justice ordered him to take off his turban. Gandhi saw his true limitations then. He knew that resistance would be justified, but believed in picking his battles, so he took off his headgear. His friends were upset. They said he

was weak, that he should have stood up for his beliefs. But Gandhi felt that he had learned “to appreciate the beauty of compromise.”

If I told you these stories without mentioning Gandhi’s name and later achievements, you might view him as a deeply passive man. And in the West, passivity is a transgression. To be “passive,” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means to be “acted upon by an external agency.” It also means to be “submissive.” Gandhi himself ultimately rejected the phrase “passive resistance,” which he associated with weakness, preferring *satyagraha*, the term he coined to mean “firmness in pursuit of truth.”

But as the word *satyagraha* implies, Gandhi’s passivity was not weakness at all. It meant focusing on an ultimate goal and refusing to divert energy to unnecessary skirmishes along the way. Restraint, Gandhi believed, was one of his greatest assets. And it was born of his shyness:

I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. A thoughtless word hardly ever escaped my tongue or pen. Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of a votary of truth. We find so many people impatient to talk. All this talking can hardly be said to be of any benefit to the world. It is so much waste of time. My shyness has been in reality my shield and buckler. It has allowed me to grow. It has helped me in my discernment of truth.



Soft power is not limited to moral exemplars like Mahatma Gandhi. Consider, for example, the much-ballyhooed excellence of Asians in fields like math and science. Professor Ni defines soft power as “quiet persistence,” and this trait lies at the heart of academic excellence as surely as it does in Gandhi’s political triumphs. Quiet persistence requires sustained attention—in effect restraining one’s reactions to external stimuli.

The TIMSS exam (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) is a standardized math and science test given every four years to kids around the world. After each test, researchers slice and dice the results, comparing the performance of students from different countries; Asian countries such as Korea, Singapore, Japan, and Taiwan consistently rank at the top of the list. In 1995, for example, the first year the TIMSS was given, Korea, Singapore, and Japan had the world’s highest average middle-school

math scores and were among the top four worldwide in science. In 2007, when researchers measured how many students in a given country reached the Advanced International Benchmark—a kind of superstar status for math students—they found that most of the standouts were clustered in just a few Asian countries. About 40 percent of fourth graders in Singapore and Hong Kong reached or surpassed the Advanced Benchmark, and about 40 to 45 percent of eighth graders in Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore pulled it off. Worldwide, the median percentage of students reaching the Advanced Benchmark was only 5 percent at the fourth grade and 2 percent at the eighth grade.

How to explain these sensational performance gaps between Asia and the rest of the world? Consider this interesting wrinkle in the TIMSS exam. Students taking the test are also asked to answer a tedious series of questions about themselves, ranging from how much they enjoy science to whether there are enough books in their home to fill three or more bookcases. The questionnaire takes a long time to complete, and since it doesn't count toward the final grade, many students leave a lot of questions blank. You'd have to be pretty persistent to answer every single one. But it turns out, according to a study by education professor Erling Boe, that the nations whose students fill out more of the questionnaire also tend to have students who do well on the TIMSS test. In other words, excellent students seem not only to possess the cognitive ability to solve math and science problems, but also to have a useful personality characteristic: quiet persistence.

Other studies have also found unusual levels of persistence in even very young Asian children. For example, the cross-cultural psychologist Priscilla Blinco gave Japanese and American first graders an unsolvable puzzle to work on in solitude, without the help of other children or a teacher, and compared how long they tried before giving up. The Japanese children spent an average of 13.93 minutes on the puzzle before calling it quits, whereas the American kids spent only 9.47 minutes. Fewer than 27 percent of the American students persisted as long as the average Japanese student—and only 10 percent of the Japanese students gave up as quickly as the average American. Blinco attributes these results to the Japanese quality of persistence.

The quiet persistence shown by many Asians, and Asian-Americans, is not limited to the fields of math and science. Several years after my first trip to Cupertino, I caught up with Tiffany Liao, the Swarthmore-bound high school student whose parents had praised her so highly for loving to read, even in public, when she was a young girl. When we first met, Tiffany was a baby-faced seventeen-year-old on her way to college. She told me then that she was excited to travel to the East Coast and meet new people, but was also afraid of living in a place where no one else would drink bubble tea, the popular drink invented in Taiwan.

Now Tiffany was a worldly and sophisticated college senior. She had studied abroad in Spain. She signed her notes with a continental touch: “Abrazos, Tiffany.” In her Facebook picture, the childlike look was gone, replaced with a smile that was still soft and friendly but also knowing.

Tiffany was on her way to realizing her dream of becoming a journalist, having just been elected editor-in-chief of the college newspaper. She still described herself as shy—she feels a heat rush on her face when she first speaks in public or picks up the phone to call a stranger—but had become more comfortable speaking up. She believed that her “quiet traits,” as she called them, had *helped* her become editor-in-chief. For Tiffany, soft power meant listening attentively, taking thorough notes, and doing deep research on her interview subjects before meeting them face-to-face. “This process has contributed to my success as a journalist,” she wrote to me. Tiffany had come to embrace the power of quiet.



When I first met Mike Wei, the Stanford student who wished he was as uninhibited as his classmates, he said that there was no such thing as a quiet leader. “How can you let people know you have conviction if you’re quiet about it?” he asked. I reassured him that this wasn’t so, but Mike had so much quiet conviction about the inability of quiet people to convey conviction that deep down I’d wondered whether he had a point.

But that was before I heard Professor Ni talk about Asian-style soft power, before I read Gandhi on *satyagraha*, before I contemplated Tiffany’s

bright future as a journalist. Conviction is conviction, the kids from Cupertino taught me, at whatever decibel level it's expressed.