THE POWER OF INTROVERTS

9 Best-Loved Stories by Susan Cain
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Dear Friends,

If you’ve seen my TED talk, you know that I had a grandfather, that my grandfather had an apartment, and that this apartment was my favorite place in the world when I was growing up — because it was filled with his gentle spirit and because it was filled with books.

Of all those books, I remember the ones my grandfather loved best — the essay collections. He appreciated the discursive, personal, sustained exploration of a single idea. He especially loved a British essayist named G.K. Chesterton.

“Oh, Chesterton!” he would exclaim. “Mamele (Yiddish for “little mother” — one of his favorite terms of endearment), his essays are so wonderful, you have no idea.”

I thought of my grandfather and his love of the essay as we put together this collection of blog posts for you. They’re not worthy of Chesterton, of course, and they’re not exactly essays (though that’s a form I plan to experiment with in the months to come), but they’re something close to that genre — each a limited yet directed exploration of a single idea.

I hope you like them; I hope they enhance your life in some modest way; and I’d love to hear what you think.

Thank you!
MANIFESTO

1. There’s a word for “people who are in their heads too much”: thinkers.

2. Our culture rightly admires risk-takers, but we need our “heed-takers” more than ever.

3. Solitude is a catalyst for innovation.

4. Texting is popular because in an overly extroverted society, everyone craves asynchronous, non-F2F communication.

5. We teach kids in group classrooms not because this is the best way to learn but because it’s cost-efficient, and what else would we do with the children while all the grown-ups are at work? If your child prefers to work autonomously and socialize one-on-one, there’s nothing wrong with her; she just happens not to fit the model.

6. The next generation of quiet kids can and should be raised to know their own strengths.

7. Sometimes it helps to be a pretend-extrovert. There’s always time to be quiet later.
8. But in the long run, staying true to your temperament is the key to finding work you love and work that matters.

9. Everyone shines, given the right lighting. For some, it’s a Broadway spotlight; for others, a lamplit desk.

10. Rule of thumb for networking events: one genuine new relationship is worth a fistful of business cards.

11. It’s OK to cross the street to avoid making small talk.

12. “Quiet leadership” is not an oxymoron.

13. The universal longing for heaven is not about immortality so much as the wish for a world in which everyone is always kind.

14. If the task of the first half of life is to put yourself out there, the task of the second half is to make sense of where you’ve been.

15. Love is essential, gregariousness is optional.

16. “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.” – Gandhi
QUIZ: ARE YOU AN INTROVERT OR AN EXTROVERT?

1. I prefer one-on-one conversations to group activities.
2. I often prefer to express myself in writing.
3. I enjoy solitude.
4. I seem to care about wealth, fame, and status less than my peers.
5. I dislike small talk, but I enjoy talking in-depth about topics that matter to me.
6. People tell me that I’m a good listener.
7. I’m not a big risk-taker.
8. I enjoy work that allows me to “dive in” with few interruptions.
9. I like to celebrate birthdays on a small scale, with only one or two close friends or family members.
10. People describe me as “soft-spoken” or “mellow.”
11. I prefer not to show or discuss my work with others until it’s finished.

12. I dislike conflict.

13. I do my best work on my own.


15. I feel drained after being out and about, even if I’ve enjoyed myself.

16. I often let calls go through to voice-mail.

17. If I had to choose, I’d prefer a weekend with absolutely nothing to do to one with things too many scheduled.

18. I don’t enjoy multi-tasking.

19. I can concentrate easily.

20. In classroom situations, I prefer lectures to seminars.
The more often you answered True, the more introverted you probably are. Lots of Falses suggests you’re an extrovert. If you had a roughly equal number of Trues and Falses, then you may be an “ambivert” — yes, there really is such a word.

Why does it matter where you fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum? Because introversion and extroversion are at the heart of human nature —

one scientist refers to them as “the north and south of temperament.”

And when you make life choices that are congruent with your temperament, you unleash vast stores of energy.

Conversely, when you spend too much time battling your own nature, the opposite happens: you deplete yourself. I’ve met too many people living lives that didn’t suit them — introverts with frenetic social schedules and extroverts with jobs that required them to sit in front of their computers for hours at a stretch. We all have to do things that don’t come naturally... some of the time. But it shouldn’t be all the time. It shouldn’t even be most of the time.
Bill Gates is quiet and bookish, but apparently unfazed by others’ opinions of him: he’s an introvert, but not shy.

Barbara Streisand has an outgoing, larger than life personality, who also battles with a paralyzing case of stage fright: she’s a shy extrovert.

Shyness and introversion are not the same thing. Shyness is the fear of negative judgment, and introversion is a preference for quiet, minimally stimulating environments. Some psychologists map the two tendencies on vertical and horizontal axes, with the introvert-extrovert spectrum on the horizontal axis and the anxious-stable spectrum on the vertical.

With this model, you end up with four quadrants of personality types: calm extroverts, anxious (or impulsive) extroverts, calm introverts, and anxious introverts.
Interestingly, this view of human nature is echoed in ancient Greece. The physicians Hippocrates and Galen famously proposed that our temperaments — and destinies — were a function of bodily fluids. Extra blood made people sanguine (calmly extroverted), yellow bile made them choleric (impulsively extroverted), phlegm made them phlegmatic (calmly introverted), and black bile made them melancholic (anxiously introverted).

**But if shyness and introversion are so different, why do we often link them, especially in the popular media?**

The most important answer is that there’s a shared bias in our society against both traits. The mental state of a shy extrovert sitting quietly in a business meeting may be very different from that of a calm introvert — the shy person is afraid to speak up, while the introvert is simply overstimulated — but to the outside world, the two appear to be the same, and neither type is welcome. Studies show that we rank fast and frequent talkers as more competent, likable, and even smarter than slow ones.
Gal en aside, poets and philosophers throughout history, like John Milton and Arthur Schopenhauer, have associated shyness with introversion. As the anthropologist C.A. Valentine once wrote,

“Western cultural traditions include a conception of individual variability which appears to be old, widespread, and persistent. In popular form this is the familiar notion of the man of action, practical man, realist, or sociable person as opposed to the thinker, dreamer, idealist, or shy individual. The most widely used labels associated with this tradition are the type designations extrovert and introvert.”

Were these sages flat out wrong? No. Psychologists have found that shyness and introversion do overlap (meaning that many shy people are introverted, and vice versa), though they debate to what degree. There are several reasons for this overlap. For one thing, some people are born with “high-reactive” temperaments that predispose them to both shyness and introversion. Also, a shy person may become more introverted over time; since social life is painful, she is motivated to discover the pleasures of solitude and other minimally social environments. And an introvert may become shy after continually receiving the message that there’s something wrong with him.
But shyness and introversion don’t overlap completely, or even predominantly. Some time ago, I published an op-ed in The New York Times on the value of these two characteristics. It touched a chord in a readership hungry for this message, and I received over a thousand heartfelt notes of thanks.

But some letter writers felt that the article conflated introversion with shyness and, as such, had misrepresented them. Though I did make a clear distinction in the piece between the two, these writers were correct that I moved on quickly, perhaps too quickly, to other subjects. I did this because of space constraints — if I had tried to explain everything I just outlined above (and even this post only scratches the surface of a highly complex topic), I would never have gotten to the real point: the importance of shyness and introversion in a society that disdains them.

Still, I understand why non-anxious introverts feel frustrated when people treat them as if they’re shy. It’s inherently annoying to be misunderstood, to be told that you’re something that you’re not. Anyone who has walked down the street deep in thought and been instructed by a stranger to smile — as if he were depressed, rather than mentally engaged — knows how maddening this is.
Also, shyness implies submissiveness. And in a competitive culture that reveres alpha dogs, one-downmanship is probably the most damning trait of all.

Yet this is where the shy and the introverted, for all their differences, have something profound in common. Neither type is perceived by society as alpha, and this gives both types the vision to see how alpha status is overrated and how our reverence for it blinds us to things that are good, smart, and wise.

For very different reasons, shy and introverted people might choose to spend their days in behind-the-scenes or “passive” pursuits like inventing, studying, or holding the hands of the dying. These are not alpha roles, but the people who play them are role models all the same.
In researching my book, *QUIET: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*, I met a scientist performing groundbreaking work on social anxiety disorder. A charming, articulate man, he confided to me that his interest in the field came from his own struggles with shyness. But he asked me not to use his name in my book. “Not everyone is as comfortable as you are exposing their true feelings,” he said.

“To which I could only say ha”

I am not a natural self-discloser at all. It took me 30 years to realize my childhood dream of becoming a writer, partly because I was afraid to write about personal things — yet these were the subjects I was drawn to.

Eventually, my drive to write grew stronger than my fear, and I’ve never looked back. I still envy friends who write about topics like science or politics. They can show up at dinner parties without everyone announcing: “Here comes the introvert!”
But you get used to it. And really, it’s a small price to pay for the freedom to say what you think.

I tell you all this because I hear often from people who burst with ideas but decline to share them because they dislike the spotlight. Maybe you fear others judging you and your work. Or you’re uncomfortable with self-promotion. Or perhaps you’re afraid of failure, or of success.

So many fears, so many ideas worth sharing. What to do? Here are seven ideas to help you power through these disabling emotions.

1. Know that you’re in good company.
People have always had to put themselves out there. We tend to think that in the good old days, no one had to self-promote the way we do today. True — but if they wanted to share, or lead, or create, they had to go public with their thoughts too.

And this has always been scary. Darwin waited THIRTY-FOUR years to publish his idea that humans evolved from monkeys. Scholars call this “Darwin’s Delay,” and many believe it was due to his fear that others would judge his heretical theory.
2. When it comes to social media, think self-expression, not self-promotion.
Blogging and tweeting, if practiced properly, feel more like a creative project than an exercise in self-disclosure even though, of course, they are both. They also don’t require the in-person social multitasking that many people find so exhausting.

3. Coffee will deliver you from self-doubt.
It gets you excited about new ideas and helps you ignore the chorus of judgers inside your head. It propels your thinking and helps you make connections between seemingly unrelated things. Hence, the saying that “a mathematician is a device for turning coffee into theorems.”

4. Train yourself to associate idea generation with pleasure.
I usually work at a cozy café table and indulge in a chocolate muffin. I would probably be five pounds lighter without this habit, but I don’t care. By now, I so associate writing and idea generation with pleasure that I love it even when I don’t have a café table handy.
5. Work alone (or “alone together” — for example, sitting by yourself in a coffee shop or library).

There’s a lot of nonsense floating around these days about how creativity is a fundamentally social act. Ignore this. Yes, creativity is social in the sense that we all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us; yes, we must share and advance ideas (that’s the whole point of this article); and yes, collaboration is a powerful and beautiful thing (think Lennon and McCartney, or the Madonna and child).

But for many people, the creative thinking process is a solo act. One of my all-time favorite quotes comes from William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*:

"The most misguided attempt at false collectivization is the current attempt to see the group as a creative vehicle… People very rarely think in groups; they talk together, they exchange information, they adjudicate, they make compromises. But they do not think; they do not create.”
6. Work at night when your cortisol levels are lower.
When I was a child at summer camp, I noticed a strange pattern. I was horribly homesick first thing in the morning, often waking up with a stomach ache. But as the day wore on, the homesickness faded. By nighttime, I was carefree and having a grand time.

Each night, I was sure I’d wake up the next morning feeling just as strong. But the homesickness always came back. Back then, I couldn’t explain this pattern, but I can now. Cortisol is a stress hormone, and it peaks in the morning and steadily dissipates throughout the day. For some of us, these peaks and falls are especially pronounced.

So while you probably think most clearly first thing in the morning, you may be at your least inhibited at night. I’ve noticed that interesting turns of phrase and associative leaps come to me much more easily in the evening hours. Indeed, creativity researchers believe that a relaxed brain, a brain that is not in the grip of anxiety or blocked by other psychological barriers, is a more creative brain.
7. Strengthen your backbone and, therefore, your confidence in small steps.
Get in the habit of asking yourself where you stand on various questions. When you have firm opinions or a strong sense of right or wrong on a given question, savor the feeling. It doesn’t matter what kind of question — it can be how to organize the dishwasher.

The point is to get used to the feeling of having a center and operating from it. Then, produce more consequential ideas from this same place. You’ll still have doubts, of course: “Does it make sense? Will people agree?” That’s normal. But you need to have confidence about the underlying purpose of your undertaking.
WHEN DOES SOCIALIZING MAKE YOU HAPPIER?

You’re standing at the checkout line at the grocery store, pondering tomorrow’s to-do list. The cashier greets you with a grin. You’re not in the mood to chit-chat, but out of politeness you do anyway — and feel curiously happy afterwards. A big smile plays across your face as you leave the store.

What just happened?

A famous study answers this question. Researcher William Fleeson and his colleagues tracked a group of people, every three hours for two weeks, recording how they’d been acting and feeling during each chunk of time. They found that those who’d acted “talkative” and “assertive” — even if they were introverts — were more likely to report feeling positive emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm.
EVERYONE FEELS HAPPIER WHEN THEY SOCIALIZE, CONCLUDED THE RESEARCHERS — INTROVERTS INCLUDED.

So should introverts force themselves to attend parties even when they’d rather stay home and read? That’s what people often take these findings to mean.

But this is too glib an interpretation. Here’s why.

Sure, socializing makes us feel good. Sometimes it’s worth it to push ourselves. We’re all social animals; on some level, love really is all you need.
But if the spike of happiness introverts get following that nice exchange with the grocery clerk is real, so are the feelings of exhaustion and over-stimulation that come with too much socializing.

Tolerance for stimulation is one of the biggest differences between introverts and extroverts. Extroverts simply need more stimulation — social and otherwise — than introverts do. Research suggests that acting falsely extroverted can lead to stress, burnout, and cardiovascular disease.

All of this seems to leave introverts in a tight spot: socializing makes us happy — but also over-stimulated and even anxious. This inner conflict sounds like a huge pain — a reason to curse the gods for having made you an introvert.

But it can also be a great gift.
Many introverts find ways to spend their time that are deeply fulfilling — and socially connected — but where there is no conflict.

Here are five of these ways:

1. **Read**: Marcel Proust once said that reading is “that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.” Books transcend time and place. They don’t even require reader and writer to be alive at the same time. Studies also suggest that reading fiction increases empathy and social skills.

2. **Enter a state of “flow” by doing work or a hobby that you love.** Flow is the transcendent state of being, identified by influential psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. You’re in flow when you feel totally engaged in an activity — whether long-distance swimming, song-writing, or ocean sailing. In a state of flow, you’re neither bored nor anxious, and you don’t question your own adequacy. Hours pass without your noticing. In flow, says Csikszentmihalyi, “a person could work around the clock for days on end, for no better reason than to keep on working.”
Flow is my five-year old playing with his Lego set, sometimes accompanied by his best friend, sometimes not — time seems to float by as he lies contentedly on his stomach, watching the wheels go ‘round. Flow is my 84-year-old father, a former medical school professor, sitting at his desk for hours reading medical journals.

When I was a kid and saw my father come home from a long day at work only to crack open those forbidding-looking papers, I worried that he worked too hard. Now I know that he was spending time the way he loved.

People in flow don’t tend to wear the broad smiles of enthusiasm that Fleeson’s research focused on. When you watch them in action, the words “joy” and “excitement” don’t come to mind. But the words “engagement,” “absorption,” and “curiosity” do.
3. **Keep an informal quota system of how many times per week/month/year you plan to go out to social events — and how often you get to stay home.** This way, you don’t feel guilty about declining those party invitations. When you do go out, hopefully you’ll have a good time and make a new friend you wouldn’t have met in your lamplit living room. The right party can be a delicious experience. But when you don’t enjoy yourself, you’re less likely to drive yourself crazy thinking you should’ve stayed in. Your night was what it was, and that’s fine.

4. **Have meaningful conversations.** Pleasant chit-chat with the grocery clerk notwithstanding, research suggests that the happiest people have twice as many substantive conversations, and engage in much less small talk, than the unhappiest. (The researchers were surprised by their findings, but if you’re an introvert, you’re probably not!)

5. **Shower time and affection on people you know and love** — people whose company is so dear and comfortable that you feel neither over-stimulated nor anxious in their presence. If you don’t cast your social net too wide, you’re more likely to cast it deep — which your friends and family will appreciate.

Yes, love is all you need. But love takes many forms.
Did you catch the news story about Natalie Munro, the high school English teacher from Pennsylvania who blogged her true feelings about her students? Apparently failing to comprehend the public nature of the Internet, she mused about the nasty things she wished she could write on her students’ report cards.

It was an abuse of trust and a blinkered use of the blogging medium. But that’s not what I want to focus on; others have already covered that very effectively.
I want to talk about Munro’s view of quiet and shy students. Here, according to one of her blog entries (since removed), is what she wished she could put on their report cards:

“A kid that has no personality.”

“She just sits there emotionless for an entire 90 minutes, staring into the abyss, never volunteering to speak or do anything.”

“Shy isn’t cute in 11th grade; it’s annoying. Must learn to advocate for himself instead of having Mommy do it.”

Munro seemed to have no understanding of how poor a fit the typical American high school can be for introverts — like an all-day cocktail party without any alcohol. She believed that these kids should suck it up and act like everyone else. And she was right, to a certain extent; we all need to fake it a little, extroverts too. I’ve met many introverted kids who are thriving and happy, and most of them have learned how to adopt an extroverted persona when need be.
But consider this question: Why do so many high-functioning people look back at high school as the worst time of their lives — and why do we accept this as normal?

As adults, we (hopefully) get to choose the careers, spouses, and social circles that suit us. Bill Gates and Bill Clinton thrive in very different work environments. But for schoolchildren, it’s one size fits all — and the size on offer is usually extra-extroverted.

One saving grace are the teachers who understand this — the teachers who connect with the kid in the back row thinking amazing thoughts that he’s uncomfortable sharing aloud with 25 classmates. I’ve spent a lot of time touring schools and observing classrooms, and I’ve met some great and sensitive teachers along the way. If you read through Munro’s blog, she’s clearly a Piece of Work — not representative of your typical teacher.

I also know how hard it is for teachers when students are reluctant to participate in class. Once I taught two back-to-back negotiation seminars — a Wednesday night class and a Thursday night class. The Wednesday night class discussions were always lively and animated. But in the Thursday night class, the participants stared at me as if I had two heads and wanted me to do all the talking.
This made my job so much harder and — on a day-to-day basis — less fulfilling. Some of those students wrote me letters when the class was done, expressing how deeply they’d enjoyed it. I was surprised each and every time; I’d assumed they hadn’t liked the class at all. So I have tremendous respect for teachers who work gracefully with their “Thursday night” students.

But I’m afraid that they are the exceptions; research suggests that the majority of our teachers believe that the “ideal student” is an extrovert. Which is extraordinary, when you consider how many of our greatest thinkers were introverts. Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, George Orwell, Steven Spielberg, Larry Page, J.K. Rowling: none of them would have made “ideal students.”

If I had one wish, it would be to reverse the stigma against introversion for children so that the next generation doesn’t grow up with the secret self-loathing that plagues so many introverted grown-ups today.
Not that long ago, I fervently recommended this groundbreaking Atlantic magazine article, in which author David Dobbs explains a bold new theory of genetics — that “most of us have genes that make us as hardy as dandelions: able to take root and survive almost anywhere. A few of us, however, are more like the orchid: fragile and fickle, but capable of blooming spectacularly if given greenhouse care.” Many introverted children appear to have orchid genes.

In response to the article, one thoughtful reader asked this question:

“How do we as sensitive people raise children who are sensitive to become orchids, without becoming hypervigilant about controlling every experience they encounter to ensure they are getting the love and support they need? I could see it leading to perfectionism and harsh self-judgement with regard to parenting skills.”
For those who missed it, Dobbs (author of the original article) posted his own answer to the question.

Here it is:

“The data supporting the idea that more sensitive, “vulnerable” people do worse than others do in bad conditions but *better* in good conditions is based mainly on studies of adverse conditions — and show repeatedly that the mere LACK of bad, really trying conditions is enough to let orchids fare better than others do.

In other words, they tend to thrive under even ‘pretty good’ conditions, and don’t require extraordinary care; you needn’t build the best, most carefully climate-controlled greenhouse ever made; a safe but stimulating environment will likely serve splendidly.

For parenting, this means doing the right thing most of the time, not all the time, and providing a good environment, not necessarily a great one, to make the most of a child’s high responsiveness to experience.

If that’s the case, then super-parenting isn’t needed. Bettelheim’s “good enough parenting” will do just fine.
I would add, regarding how to parent sensitive children, that if you’ve guarded against the most harsh experiences that can affect a child, it probably makes more sense to focus on providing lots of small, positive things than on being hypervigilant about protecting the child from every bump, insult, or troubling challenge. And anxious hypervigilance sends a message that the world is perhaps too dangerous to handle.

Small expressions of support and confidence and reassurance send the message that though the world can bring trouble, we’re almost always up for it, and will recover from all but — and sometimes even those too — the most serious setbacks or injuries or insults. I think the psychotherapeutic notion of ‘mirroring’ is handy to think of here. It’s the idea of reflecting to the child an attitude about how the world works. (It has another meaning too, reflecting an image of the child, but I’m concerned with this other.)

What’s good mirroring? Best example offered to me was, Your house burns down. All is lost, but no one hurt. Your stuff’s gone. You’re out sitting on the curb with the family watching the firefighters douse the last of the steaming rubble. And instead of freaking out, You put your arm around the kid and say, ‘It’s okay.’ Because it will [be].”
I love this advice. But I want to answer one more question you might be wondering about: What if your child is subject to harsh, really harsh, experiences outside your control?

I asked this question of Jay Belsky, a leading proponent of orchid theory, a psychology professor, and child care expert at the University of London. Using divorce as an example, he told me that even orchid children can withstand some adversity if it’s managed properly. Orchid kids will be disrupted more than others by divorce, he told me. “If the parents squabble a lot, and put their kid in the middle, then watch out — this is the kid who will succumb.” But if the divorcing parents get along, if they provide their child with the other psychological nutrients he needs, then even an orchid child can do just fine.

Indeed, the parents of high-reactive children are very lucky, Belsky told me. “The time and effort they invest will actually make a difference. Instead of seeing these kids as vulnerable to adversity, parents should see them as malleable — for worse, but also for better.”
I have a really complicated relationship to public speaking. The mere prospect of giving a lecture used to make me want to throw up. Literally. Once during law school, I got so nervous that I had to bolt for the restroom on the way to class. (I can’t believe I’m admitting this to the entire blogosphere.)

But I’ve come a long way since then. These days, much to my own astonishment, I have a career as a professional public speaker! It took me a while to get there. When I first started, I struggled a lot with following question: If public speaking requires brio and dynamism, and if I am naturally soft-spoken, then how can I be an effective speaker — and still be my authentic self?
So I tried to look for examples of low-key yet masterful speakers — and found the author Malcolm Gladwell. He dazzles sold-out crowds of London theatregoers, but if you watch him in action, for example here, he’s clearly an introvert, with a very calm and cerebral style. So I think he’s a great role model for people like me.

Then I came across this fascinating interview with Gladwell. “Speaking is not an act of extroversion,” he says. “People think it is. It has nothing to do with extroversion. It’s a performance, and many performers are hugely introverted.”

He goes on to say that when he speaks, he’s simply inhabiting a role, “a storytelling role that I don’t inhabit when I’m not on the stage. I’m not the chatty one at the dinner table or at parties. I don’t actually go to that many parties.”

Gladwell is also known to prepare every single word of his talk beforehand — every single word — even though they appear spontaneous. I think this is liberating — that it’s okay to pretend a little when you’re on stage. Who cares if you’re not a natural storyteller? You can craft your stories beforehand, practice them, and share them — for the brief moment that the spotlight is on you. Then you can step off stage and go right back to being yourself.

But in the meantime, you had the chance to change a whole audience full of hearts and minds. And there’s nothing more authentic than that.
Readers often ask me: “Is it possible for my personality to change over time? I seem to be getting more introverted as I get older.”

I’ve asked myself the same question. I was always an introvert, but my social needs used to be much more intense than they are today. When I was in high school, I talked on the phone five hours a night. In college, I thought briefly of becoming a professor but decided I couldn’t handle the amount of solitary time researching and writing would require. Today, in contrast, I’m horrible at returning friends’ phone calls because I dislike talking on the phone, and researching and writing are among my favorite activities.

On the extroverted side of the equation, we have my husband as Exhibit A. In many ways he is very, very extroverted. For example, I hardly ever address him by his real name. Instead I call him Gonzo, the nickname I gave him years ago in honor of the journalist Hunter S. Thompson’s “gonzo” style of throwing himself into the stories he reported on.
My Gonzo is the same way — he throws himself with great passion and charisma into just about everything he does, including parenting and husbanding. It’s impossible for Gonzo to be in the room without feeling the warmth of his presence. And I gather that when he was a very young man, he threw himself into his social life with similar energy. Today Gonzo is still the same person — no one would ever call him an introvert — but his attentions are directed in a decidedly more interior direction.

But all of this is anecdotal. According to research psychology, the answer to the question of whether personalities change over time is no, and yes.

Studies show that the personality of a 70-year-old can be predicted with remarkable accuracy from early adulthood on. Despite the variety of situations that we experience in a lifetime — all of them influencing who we are and how we grow — our core traits tend to remain constant. It’s not that our personalities don’t evolve — for example, many introverts report feeling more socially confident and graceful as they mature — but we tend to stick to predictable patterns.
If you were the tenth most introverted person in your high school class, your behavior may fluctuate over time, but you’ll probably still find yourself ranked around tenth at your fiftieth reunion.

But, at that class reunion, you’ll also notice that many of your classmates will be more introverted than you remember them in high school: quieter, more self-contained, less in need of excitement. They will also more emotionally stable, agreeable, and conscientious. All of these traits grow more pronounced with age, as if personalities are a kind of fine wine that mellows with age. Psychologists call this process “intrinsic maturation,” and they’ve found these same patterns of personality development in countries as diverse as Germany, the UK, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Turkey. Also in chimps and monkeys.

This makes evolutionary sense. High levels of extroversion probably help with mating, which is why most of us are at our most sociable during our teenage and young adult years. But when it comes to keeping marriages stable and raising children, having a restless desire to hit every party in town may be less useful than the urge to stay home and love the one you’re with. Also, a certain degree of introspection may help us age with equanimity. If the task of the first half of life is to put yourself out there, the task of the second half is to make sense of where you’ve been.
THANKS SO MUCH FOR READING THIS COLLECTION!

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