



Episode 7: Molly Ringwald: Hollywood's Introvert

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Podcast:

SUSAN: This is Quiet: The Power of Introverts. I'm Susan Cain. Hollywood, with its love of self-promotion, seems an unlikely place for a shy, introverted girl to find fame, but Molly Ringwald has never done things like other people. As the star of the John Hughes' hits *Pretty in Pink*, *16 Candles*, and *The Breakfast Club*, Molly made being a quiet teen not only acceptable – she made it cool.

And now she stars in another role that is far more demanding: parenting her own quiet kids. For today's episode, Molly Ringwald, actress, writer, and singer, sat down with us at Quiet Revolution's headquarters in New York's Hudson River Valley to talk about her experiences as a shy and introverted parent and performer.

MOLLY: I really do feel like most of the characters that I've played, particularly when I was younger, were introverts. A lot of people ask me why I think those movies touched so many

people, and I think it's really because of that. I think so many people related to those characters because that's the way that they felt.

SUSAN: Tell me, why do you think it is that either you were drawn to those roles, or people were casting you in those roles?

MOLLY: It's hard to say exactly why I was cast, because I didn't audition for the movies. John Hughes plucked my headshot, literally, out of a stack of photos. Never met me, but there was something in my face that he saw.

He actually wrote *16 Candles* while he was looking at my picture. John was also an introvert. He felt most comfortable by himself with no one around, just with his records, his computer, and I feel like he sort of met a kindred spirit in me. Not to get all woo woo here, but I feel like very often you can see an introvert in their eyes. You can see something that is going on. I actually think that a lot of actors are introverts.

SUSAN: Yes! And I want to ask you about this because I have heard this from so many actors and whenever I tell this to people, they're always shocked to hear it. How do those two things possibly go together, because you're *on* all the time?

MOLLY: I feel that acting, performing was an outlet for me because I feel like introverted people feel as much, if not more, than extroverted people, but because of the shyness and the anxiety, it's hard to get all of that creativity out. When I was younger, people didn't really say introverted. They just said shy.

So I was a really shy kid. The only time I didn't feel shy was when I was in front of a lot of people, and generally if there was a light barrier. If I didn't actually have to see the faces.

SUSAN: Ah, okay.

MOLLY: I knew they were there. I felt the energy of the crowd, but I didn't feel that shyness. My parents, sometimes, would want me to do a little concert, just in the living room, in front of five people. That, to me, was real torture. I felt like I couldn't really remember the lines. I fumbled. I felt awkward, because that, to me, it was too close.

And I think it was confusing for my parents, or for anyone who wanted me to do that, because how can you perform in front of thousands of people and yet be so uncomfortable in front of five people. I think that that's something that's a misconception that people continue to have around introverted people.

Also something that I've noticed over the years, I feel very comfortable in front of an audience in character, singing a song where I have lyrics. [Molly singing] But speaking would make me sick to my stomach. It's something that I'd had to do quite a bit of over the years, particularly when I took up music again and I started touring and performing. I really wanted to just sing the songs, and that was it.

SUSAN: Yeah. You have to do the patter between the songs.

MOLLY: Yeah. And I was told again and again that people are really coming to see you and to hear what you have to say, and it's part of the performance. I really had to get more comfortable with it, and I feel like it's a skill that I've learned and I continue to learn. It's something that doesn't come naturally to me.

SUSAN: I don't think it's an accident that you chose to spend time writing. I'm guessing that a lot of your acting comes out of your quieter or more shy or more reflective place. Can you tell us a little bit about what that's like for you?

MOLLY: Absolutely, I think everything that I'm attracted to as a writer is the same thing that I have always been attracted to in acting, which is character and why people do what they do. I don't think that I could have done any of that without my observational skills. I think as a kid I was always kind of looking around and mimicking people and reading faces and doing that thing that most writers and actors do. It's something that I recognize in my children as well, particularly our youngest girl. We have three kids in our family. A 12 year old and 6 year old twins. One really shy, and the other one completely extroverted. It's really interesting to see the two of them and how they interact together and how they interact with the world, and Adele, our little girl, she is shy. She is introverted, but she's so observant and so emotionally mature. Of all my kids, she's the one that walks into a room and can tell you what everyone is feeling. Where the tension is.

SUSAN: Yeah.

MOLLY: To me, it's like a super power.

SUSAN: I agree, and shyness is often correlated with all those traits because it's usually coming from a temperament that's just sensitive in general.

MOLLY: Yeah.

SUSAN: Sensitive to what other people think, it's also sensitive to just what is happening all around you and caring.

MOLLY: Yeah. For me it's beautiful to watch. However, when we go out into public and people, she's a beautiful little girl and has very sensitive eyes, so everyone wants to compliment her, and it's very hard for her to look at the person and to accept the compliment or to engage in conversation until she gets to know someone. She will just literally will not look at them and walk by, and even though I was a shy introverted kid, and even though I still feel those traits, I have that reflexive, "I'm a bad parent, I'm not teaching my child to have good manners."

SUSAN: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. So many parents feel this way, I hear this all the time. What do you do with Adele?

MOLLY: I usually make her acknowledge when somebody speaks to her I say, "You don't have to spend a long time with them. You don't have to shake hands or curtsy or do anything, but say thank you if it's a compliment." Then when we're away from it, I talk to her about it. "How did you feel when this person said this?" She just says, "I'm shy. I'm shy. I try mommy, I really try, I'm just so shy." In fact, I want to ask you about that. I've noticed you differentiate between shy and introverted. It seems to me you believe shy to be a derogatory word in a way?

SUSAN: Well, yes and no. I believe the word shy is used derogatorily in this culture, but I don't think of it as something negative.

MOLLY: Okay.

SUSAN: To me, it's important to understand what the difference is just so that you know what's going on inside the child's mind, but I actually love shyness. I think of shyness as a kind of civilizing force in a culture where everyone is otherwise too much about themselves and what they think. I think a shy person is inherently saying, "I care so much about what you think that I'm perhaps giving you a little bit too much power to ruin my day by thinking badly about me." But it comes from a place of respect for other people.

MOLLY: Yeah.

SUSAN: I think we could all use a little more of it, actually.

MOLLY: Yeah. I think so too.

SUSAN: To me, the one downside of children labeling themselves as shy is that they can then start to experience it as a fixed trait that it's just who they are and they're never going to overcome it. I wonder if you ever talk to her and say, "Oh, I used to feel that way, but now I really don't. I just gave myself a

push. It was hard at the beginning, and now I don't notice it.

MOLLY: I don't know that I have, but I think that it's a great idea. I think I have this thing where I try to do things that scare me. Deliberately. Because I feel like if I don't push myself to do it, I'll never do it because I find most things scary. Traveling I find scary. Meeting new people I find scary. Speaking in front of an audience, there's not a lot that I don't find scary.

It's funny because my husband felt like I wasn't scared of anything. We talked about this once and I said, "Are you kidding? I'm afraid of everything, but I do it." I think it's helped me over the years. I still feel like I have an introverted nature, but I've learned certain skills where I can sort of go in and out of it a little bit. Which is something that I wanted to ask you - do you feel like people can change their nature? Or do you feel that introverts can learn the skills and play the part?

SUSAN: It's a good question. I think it's much more the latter.

So, people do exactly what you're describing - they push themselves, they acquire all kinds of skills they wouldn't have had before. So, if you think of a shy child who is clinging to their mother's knee, you don't really see grown ups clinging to their parents knees, and that's because we learn over time to deal.

But I don't think the underlying nature changes, and that's what most people tell me when they're talking really honestly about their experiences. But, at the same time, you can acquire so many skills and so much greater a comfort level than you once had that it almost becomes a difference in kind, just because the skills can catapult you into a completely new place.

MOLLY: It's the same thing with our kids, particularly with our twins. I feel like it's important, no matter what your personality is, to sort of exercise the muscle that you're not as comfortable with.

SUSAN: I agree with that, and it's probably important for your more extroverted twin to exercise the muscle of not talking as much.

MOLLY: Yeah. We call him filibuster. That's actually his nickname because he just will talk and talk and talk and talk and talk. It's very charming and people are just automatically drawn to that because he just seems to be so comfortable. But it's important to have a balance too because sometimes he can miss what's going on. Just the other day Roman and Adele came home on the school bus and both Panio and I were in the city and somebody was meeting our children at the school bus, and our son got off of the bus, but his sister was still on the bus.

Susan: And he had no idea.

MOLLY: And he had no idea. His sister would never let that happen. Never. We thought, "It's your twin sister. How do you leave your twin on a bus?" It's not his job. He's 6 years old. It was really the bus driver who needed to stop the car and go and look for the sleeping child in back, but it was a real eye-opener to see the difference in these personalities.

SUSAN: That's actress, writer, and singer Molly Ringwald. Today, we're exploring the differences between introversion and shyness and hearing how these traits play out in Molly's life -- both as a parent and a public figure. When we return, we'll hear about Molly's extroverted introvert daughter, and how a Radiolab episode helped Molly become a better parent. That's ahead, but first a message from our sponsors:

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Podcast:

SUSAN: And we're back! I'm Susan Cain and this is Quiet: The Power of Introverts. Today, we're looking at the differences between shyness and introversion with acclaimed actor, writer, and singer Molly Ringwald.

Molly, who is both shy and introverted, is the mother of two introverted daughters, and one very extroverted son.

While some shy children are introverts, it's important to remember that not all introverts are shy. And Molly's older daughter, Mathilda, is a good example of that.

MOLLY: She's an iconoclast. She has a brilliant subversive sense of humor, which she's always had. From the time that she could talk she has a sense of humor that's sort of beyond her years, and a little bit of a mischievous streak, I think that she is ... I call her an extroverted introvert.

SUSAN: Yeah.

MOLLY: She has big opinions.

SUSAN: Right.

MOLLY: She likes to put those opinions out there, but she also really needs time by herself to recharge. If she doesn't get the time that she needs to recharge, it really affects her in a big way.

SUSAN: I was listening the other day to a story that you told at The Moth. But first, for people who don't know, the Moth is this venue where people get up on stage and tell a story. Any story.

[Audio from Molly's talk at The Moth]

MOLLY: I can tell you, I had never in my life been inside of a principal's office. Only in a movie in fact. There was a scene in a principal's office in *Pretty in Pink*. And, the same with my husband. We were both such goodie two-shoes.

MOLLY: It was one of those situations where at the beginning

of the year, the teacher didn't understand her, didn't understand her jokes. She was a little bit hysterical. And the more that happened the more Matilda sort of felt like there was something wrong, and the more Matilda acted out, the more I was called in to the principal's office, the more ... It just was this spiral of misunderstandings and miscommunications. Matilda kept getting more and more and more unhappy, to where I thought, "What am I going to do?" I started to take her everywhere to find out what was going on. I took her to a social skills class, which she found sort of insulting. She told me afterwards she really ... I said, "Why did you resist it so much?" She says, "Because I have social skills." Why did I have to go and learn these things that I already know? She never ever had trouble making friends, because she's funny and she's charismatic, and she has an interesting mind. I think kids were just very drawn to her, but she did have a certain amount of volatility if she didn't get the time that she needed on her own, so then kids would get a little bit gun shy. She also just felt this sort of vibration of something's going on and there's too many eyes on her, because that's what happens in public school, when anything's going on, suddenly everyone is watching you more than everyone else. And I think that kids feel that.

SUSAN: She was picking up the message that people thought there was something wrong with her.—

MOLLY: I felt like Alice going down the rabbit hole of what was the best thing to do for her. Part of me wanted to pull her out of the situation, pull her out of the school, but then I thought ... I didn't want her to feel like she couldn't grow and learn in a situation. What ended up working was I did an intervention. She was observed in class. From the person I spoke to, they said, "She's incredibly bored in this situation." I had this epiphany when we were driving somewhere together; I was listening to a podcast called RadioLab.

RADIOLAB SOUNDBITE: How exactly do you help an animal—this is an honest question—when it has to spend its entire life in a cage? Today on radio lab, zoo's are our topic...

MOLLY: They were interviewing somebody who was very instrumental in developing the first gorilla habitats in the United States. They used to put gorillas in concrete cages, basically, in zoos, and they were going out of their mind because they weren't in the habitat that was right for them. And as they were describing the gorilla going into the habitat for the first time, that was right for him, I was looking at Matilda listening in the rear view mirror, and she was mimicking everything that this gorilla was doing. She was feeling the air on her face. She was touching, she was imagining that she was touching the grass. I

had this ... a light went off in my head. I realized that I had to, if I couldn't take her out of this environment, I had to figure out a way to make this environment work for her.

RADIOLAB SOUNDBITE: He went as far as a creek and sat down. Then he looked up. We noticed he looked up for a long time. We looked up also. Clouds were blowing by at a fairly low altitude. Swallows flying by. Crows in the trees. Wind blowing. The trees were rustling. The grass was moving. You could see the hair on his face moving.

SUSAN: So that she would be in the right habitat?

MOLLY: Yeah. What ended up working for us was I had somebody come in, I had to clear it with the school, but I had somebody come in twice a week to pull her out of class and to read poetry and different bits of prose, and to write her own poetry. For two days out of the week, on the long days, she read different kinds of poetry. It was just one-on-one, and at the end of the year, there was a book that she had written that was published with her art and with her poetry.

SUSAN: Wow.

MOLLY: We only did that for a year. Then she built from there. She sort of, as her brain continued to develop, as she learned some of the skills that she needed to thrive, she just kept getting better and better until by the time she left the school, she ran for student council and won. This is a kid that had absolutely no... like her school spirit was absolutely crushed in the second grade. It's just been getting better and better every year.

SUSAN: I'm so struck that the fix for her wasn't social at all, it had nothing to do with that. The fix was going to write poetry and being engaged and stimulated.

MOLLY: It was really kind of being in a quiet space. She is somebody that, I feel like, has always been better one-on-one, which isn't surprising because I've always felt more confident one-on-one and same with her father. So, I think it worked for her.

SUSAN: You said that during this dark second grade year, that the school was actually suggesting that Matilda was a bully, and you knew she wasn't really a bully, but that was how she was being characterized. Can you talk about what that meant for you personally, to hear that word applied to your child?

MOLLY: Yes. Bully, I was bullied. I was genuinely bullied as a seventh grader. I had a girl who sort of picked me out of, I don't

know, I don't know how she noticed me, because I felt like I was shy and quiet and really didn't, didn't really talk that much, but she was an older girl and she picked me out and just basically terrorized me. She made life very uncomfortable for me. She was aggressive and threatening and just really frightening. Then I went on from there to play characters that were bullied, but also were strong and persevered. So, for me to have a child of mine who could be perceived as a bully, it just didn't make sense. I also don't think that it was true.

SUSAN: When you played those roles, these characters who were bullied but who successfully fought back, was that a kind of catharsis for you since you had had this experience in your own life but maybe hadn't been able to fight back?

MOLLY: Yeah. The part that comes to my mind the most is in *Pretty in Pink* where I have these mean girls that are sort of torturing me in class.

PRETTY IN PINK CLIP:

Where'd you get your clothes? Five and dime store?

Is there a problem, ladies?

No.

Andy, is there something going on between you and these ladies?

No, not that I'm aware of.

MOLLY: I remember even shooting that scene, how I could feel my cheeks getting redder and just the memory of that was so strong.

MORE PRETTY IN PINK CLIPS

MOLLY: It's a terrible feeling to be bullied in school. I think it's a terrible feeling to be bullied in life, because it's not like when school ends that goes away. I do feel like introverts can very often be bullied more than extroverts.

SUSAN: Yeah. I think they're often singled out because they're more quiet and more on their own.

MOLLY: Yeah. Well, I feel like Matilda is a little bit also like me in that she has all of this emotion and creativity inside of her, and her journey has been a lot about finding how to get that out. She has found that through art, through writing, that's been a big part of her self-expression. Also acting, she really looks up to me because I'm an actress and she's a little bit

frustrated that her parents won't let her be professional. But even though we don't want her to be a professional child actor, I really think that acting is a wonderful exercise for kids.

SUSAN: Yeah.

MOLLY: To help teach them social interaction, to help them to get that creativity out. I think it's incredibly helpful for anyone, for public speaking, for anything, I just don't want any of our children to be professional when they're kids.

SUSAN: Why is that, after you had your own experience as a child actor?

MOLLY: Because I think that statistically, putting your kids in show business, it just doesn't seem like the right thing to do. If you want to give your kids all of the advantages that they can have in life. My feeling is that talent doesn't go away and that learning other skills as a young person, along with acting, will only make you a better actor when you're older. I just don't feel like kids need to experience that business side of things, and the rejection. I feel like I'm a bit of an anomaly, but if you look at all of the child actors out there, there aren't that many of us that are able to continue on and to flourish as adult human beings.

SUSAN: What do you think it was that allowed you to be this anomaly?

MOLLY: Well, I actually think that being an introvert helped with that because I think very often extroverts crave other people and that stimulation that goes with fame, being invited to every party, being out all the time, not having any moments of self reflection. I feel like my introverted nature made me want to be more observant and made me want to get out of the limelight a little bit and become a more integrated human being.

SUSAN: Right.

MOLLY: I think that that sort of gave me a foundation and served me well in the long run.

SUSAN: Molly Ringwald. Thank you so so much.

MOLLY: Oh sure! It's really nice to talk to you.

SUSAN: You too.

And now it's time for some concrete tips, this time to help your shy child balance her temperament with the socially noisy world around her.

SUSAN: But first, if you're the parent of a quiet child ages 3 to 9 I'm so excited to tell you about a new online course we've created that I really think can change the way you parent your child. The course is beautiful and it includes all kinds of interactive features like, for example, a tool to help you decide when and when not to press your child out of her comfort zone. And scripts for how to advocate for your child with people who say he's too shy. You'll also have the chance to interact with other parents of quiet kids. To check out the course just visit learn.quietrev.com.

And now for today's tips:

1. Make sure your child knows the difference between feeling shy and *being* shy. Let them know that there's nothing wrong with feeling shy –that you've felt that way many times and so have many people. But also let them know that the feeling can go away. Share with your child things that also used to scare you -- maybe calling people on the phone, or saying hi to strangers -- that don't bother you anymore. Tell stories about how you pushed yourself out of your own fears. Your child needs to see you as a role model - - and to know you understand how they're feeling.

2. Do encourage your child to gain skills and competencies that she'll be proud of and enjoy – whether it's piano, basketball, learning another language, what have you. But don't push him to perform those skills if that's not his comfort zone. Some shy kids really do find themselves through drama and performance, and that's wonderful. But some want to excel without having to perform. And, others, like Molly Ringwald, are comfortable with certain types of performance and not with others. It's all OK and it's not actually that big of a deal as long as we don't turn it into one.

3. Brainstorm with your child techniques for handling shy feelings. If she feels awkward at a party, she could make herself busy by helping the host hand out cake; or find a friend that she feels comfortable with; or she could simply ride out the feeling until she begins to relax and warm up. Letting her know that these feelings are natural and can be withstood can go a long way with helping them ultimately disappear.

That's it for our show today.

Quiet: The Power of Introverts was produced by Kerrie Hillman

in partnership with Andy Bowers and Laura Mayer of Panoply. The episode was edited by Cristy Meiners, and mixed by Jason Gambrell. Our music was composed by Alexis Cuadrado. Special thanks to everyone at Quiet Revolution.

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I'm Susan Cain. Thanks for listening!

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