

Scenes from an Introverted Childhood

By Kelly O’Laughlin

While rummaging through dusty old boxes at my parents’ house, I recently unearthed a report card from a catechism class I attended when I was about 6 years old. I had perfect marks on everything, except a C in “oral participation.” In the comments, the teacher had written, “Kelly is a very quiet and enjoyable girl to have in class.”

This made me chuckle. Here, in my hand, was evidence that my introversion was apparent before I was even in double digits.

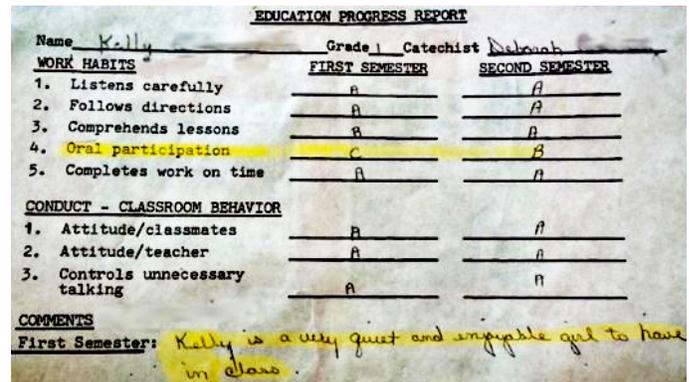
Six-year-old Kelly was told: “speak up,” “go play with the other kids,” “get your head out of your book,” and “don’t be shy.” But she wasn’t shy. She just needed time to process her thoughts before sharing them publicly.

Little Kelly, like many kids even nowadays, had no idea she was an introvert. She was trying to understand the social constructs forming around her and figure out how they might mesh with what she felt on the inside. Sometimes they didn’t mesh. She wanted to listen, observe, and do her work quietly and alone. She usually knew the answers to questions but didn’t feel the need to yell them out. She didn’t understand why talking was so valued in the classroom.

Chimanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Americanah* wrote:

[Class participation] merely made students talk and talk, class time wasted on obvious words, hollow words, sometimes meaningless words. It had to be that Americans were taught, from elementary school, to always say something in class, no matter what.

Class participation is learning how to play the game. A quiet child, like me, learned that she had to sometimes speak up to get a good grade. Maybe that was a beneficial lesson after all; as an introvert and Highly Sensitive Person, I do a lot of “playing the game” as an adult too. I’ve learned how to make small talk even though I dislike it. I’ve learned that



EDUCATION PROGRESS REPORT		
Name	Grade	Catechist
Kelly	1	Deborah
WORK HABITS	FIRST SEMESTER	SECOND SEMESTER
1. Listens carefully	A	A
2. Follows directions	A	A
3. Comprehends lessons	A	A
4. Oral participation	C	A
5. Completes work on time	A	A
CONDUCT - CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR		
1. Attitude/classmates	A	A
2. Attitude/teacher	A	A
3. Controls unnecessary talking	A	A
COMMENTS	First Semester: Kelly is a very quiet and enjoyable girl to have in class.	

sometimes I have to attend parties and gatherings when I’d rather stay home. I sometimes must push myself to be more outgoing even when I feel worn out so I can fulfill social and professional obligations.

I remember, in fifth grade, I asked the teacher if I could stay inside and read during recess. I sat alone in the classroom, surrounded by empty desks, blissfully reading while the other kids played outside. It was a break from the pressure and stimulation of being around other people. I faintly recall my teacher calling me a “little introvert” although I didn’t know what that meant yet. True story!

At the time, I didn’t think what I was doing was that weird. I thought all the other kids were weird.

I recall a class field trip to a roller skating rink in sixth grade. I didn’t want to go; I felt I’d have to endure the same social stresses of recess, but on wheels. My mom gave me a note asking the teacher if I could skip the trip and stay at school. I spent all day in the counselor’s office, reading books about ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics (which I was obsessed with). I recall other teachers who wandered into the office asking why I was there and me telling them I wanted to stay in and read instead of going to the roller rink. I got some weird looks!

Lest these stories lead you to believe I simply disliked physical activity: I played a lot of sports from a young age, especially basketball and softball. When I entered high school—and sports got more serious—my basketball career came to an end. Easily overstimulated and lacking confidence, I simply didn't have the personality for it.

I remember my basketball coach saying that players should always think I want the ball.

I never wanted the ball.

There is so much going on in a basketball game; it's overwhelming. I wasn't good at making quick decisions, and I analyzed and second-guessed everything. It's not that I couldn't physically perform like the other girls—I feared that I would make the wrong moves and disappoint my teammates and coach. Tennis eventually became my sport of choice; I found it exhilarating and graceful.

I find it enlightening (and entertaining) to reflect on my childhood introversion as an adult. It's like uncovering clues that reveal who I'd become as a grown-up.

Children often don't have the knowledge or awareness to realize they are introverts, and that it's an acceptable way to be. Kids who are given space to accept their introverted temperaments can have more confidence, better self-esteem, and feel freer to explore their interests and passions. They don't have to feel bad about the way they are or wish they were different.

One of my favorite memories as a young child was playing in my mom's rose garden in the front yard. She'd leave the hose running on the dirt surrounding the plants, and I'd use sticks and pebbles to carve tiny rivers and build dams, redirecting the water. I could do that for hours, just me and my thoughts. And I couldn't have been happier.

Although not knowing I was an introvert caused occasional growing pains in my youth, today I appreciate my fondness for calmness and solitude.



Kelly O'Laughlin's work is driven by an endless curiosity combined with the desire to inform and entertain others. Her mission is to spread understanding and acceptance of high sensitivity and introversion in a way that is relatable, honest, and meaningful. She does this through her blog [A Highly Sensitive Person's Life](#) and the [Highly Sensitive Person Podcast](#), which was ranked in the top 100 podcasts on iTunes. She is the author of [A Highly Sensitive Person's Life: Stories & advice for those who experience the world intensely](#). Kelly is a freelance writer based in Southern California. You can find her at [@hissensitivelife](#).

