

Elisma de Villiers

Illustration
South Africa

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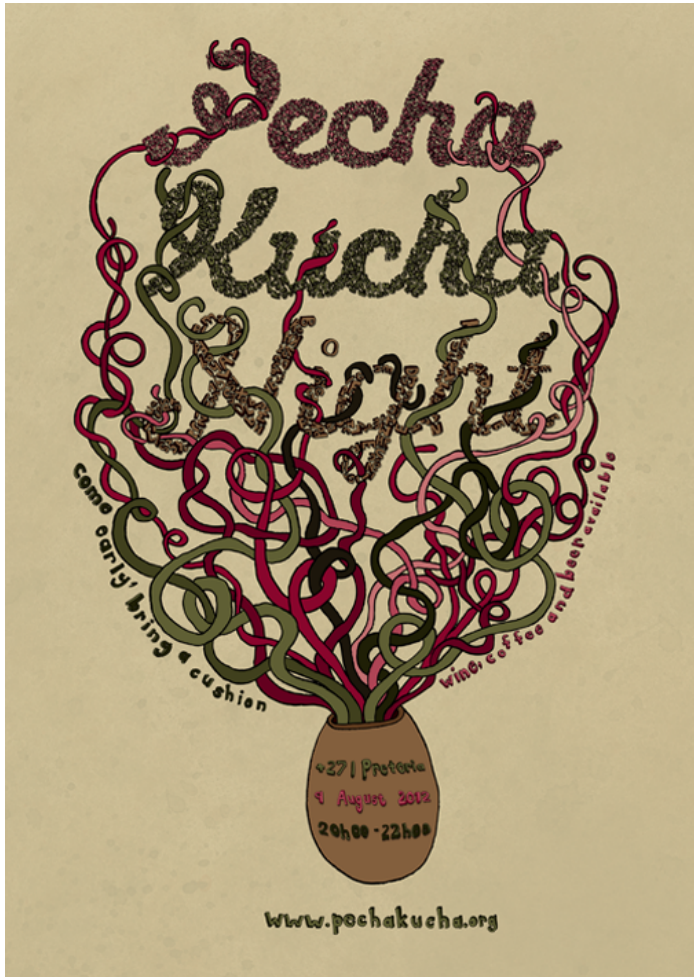
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It is in the bathroom of the American Embassy in Tokyo, and I can't leave. Somewhere in the elegant room beyond, the ambassador is holding his annual holiday party. Diplomats from around the world, U.S. military personnel and reporters are mingling, sipping Champagne and picking at hors d'oeuvres. As Time's Tokyo bureau chief, I should be there, smiling for Google+ among potential covers.

And yet I'm alone in an after-dinner, despite the actual nerves. I did just that. But still, I walk with stiff-backed straightness, a socially correct party by my best friend or a dead end I've confronted.

A few months of the same at a social event, however, have me exhausted. So now and then I retreat into the solitude of the bathroom, working the remote, tick, tick, until I've recovered enough to go back out there.

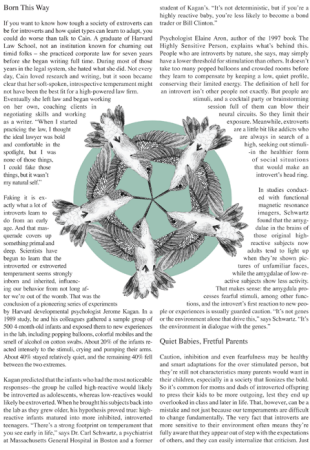
My name is Brian, and I'm an introvert. If this seems familiar to you, then chances are that you're one too. We're alone even if it sometimes feels that way. By some estimates 90% of all people fall on the introverted end of the temperament spectrum, but it takes some explaining to understand just what that label means. For one thing, introverted doesn't have to mean shy, though there is no denying that shyness is a form of anxiety characterized by inhibited behavior. It also implies a fear of social judgment that can be crippling. The people actively seek to avoid social situations, even ones they might want to take part in, because they may be inhibited by fear. Introverts, then, social situations become, Gertrude Stein-style, they simply want to be alone.

"Introverted people aren't bothered by social situations," says Louis Schwartz. "They just prefer not to engage." While extroverts draw energy from mingling with people, picture Brian Posner and himself in that old Bill Clinton working a tape for the introverts and such social interaction using. Simply being in a room and also that feeling, especially in America, head of the head and the head of the tailbone. From extroverts both social group having to cope plus others that encourage and meetings, it sometimes seems that the quality of your work has less to do with the volume of your voice.

And so if the world weren't slanted enough toward the extrovert, study after study has made sociability seem like a prerequisite for good health, right along with low cholesterol and frequent exercise. Very shy and introverted people have shown to succumb more rapidly to diseases like HIV and AIDS and to be at greater risk for depression than their extroverted counterparts. In schools, it's the better kids who get the attention from teachers, while quiet children can too easily disappear to the back of the classroom. "Our culture expects people to be outgoing and socially," says Christopher Lewis, an English professor at Northwestern University and the author of *Extroverts: How Natural Behavior Became a Sickness*. "It's the extroverted norm, and against that norm introverts stand out as seemingly problematic."

But that extroverted norm discounts the hidden benefits of the introverted temperament, for work, pleasure, relationships and society as a whole. Introverts may be able to do all their friends in a globe book, but those relationships, they tend to be deep and rewarding. Introverts are more curious and deliberate than extroverts, but that means they tend to think things through more thoroughly, which means they can often make creative decisions. Introverts are better at listening, which, after all, is easier to do if you are not talking, and that in turn can make them better business leaders, especially if their employees feel empowered to act on their own initiative. And simply by virtue of their ability to sit still and focus, introverts find it easier to spend long periods in solitary work, which turns out to be the best way to come up with a fresh idea or master a skill.

Introversion and extroversion aren't fixed categories, there's a personality spectrum, and many, when in a particular mood, fall in the gray between the two traits, but they are vital to our personality. Our tendency to be extroverted or introverted is as profound a part of our identity as our gender," says Brian Cohn, author of the new book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. "But there's a subtle bias against introverts, and it's preventing a wide range of talent and energy and happiness." It may be time for America to learn the forgotten rewards of sitting down and shutting up. "Introverted people aren't bothered by social situations," says Louis Schwartz.



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