

THE MYTH OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

The Culture of Personality, a Hundred Years Later

Society is itself an education in the extrovert values, and rarely has there been a society that has preached them so hard. No man is an island, but how John Donne would writhe to hear how often, and for what reasons, the thought is so tiresomely repeated.

— WILLIAM WHYTE

Salesmanship as a Virtue: Live with Tony Robbins

“Are you excited?” cries a young woman named Stacy as I hand her my registration forms. Her honeyed voice rises into one big exclamation point. I nod and smile as brightly as I can. Across the lobby of the Atlanta Convention Center, I hear people shrieking.

“What’s that noise?” I ask.

“They’re getting everyone pumped up to go inside!” Stacy enthuses. “That’s part of the whole UPW experience.” She hands me a purple spiral binder and a laminated nametag to wear around my neck. UNLEASH THE POWER WITHIN, proclaims the binder in big block letters. Welcome to Tony Robbins’s entry-level seminar.

I’ve paid \$895 in exchange, according to the promotional materials, for learning how to be more energetic, gain momentum in my life, and conquer my fears. But the truth is that I’m not here to unleash the power

within me (though I'm always happy to pick up a few pointers); I'm here because this seminar is the first stop on my journey to understand the Extrovert Ideal.

I've seen Tony Robbins's infomercials—he claims that there's always one airing at any given moment—and he strikes me as one of the more extroverted people on earth. But he's not just any extrovert. He's the king of self-help, with a client roster that has included President Clinton, Tiger Woods, Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, Princess Diana, Mikhail Gorbachev, Mother Teresa, Serena Williams, Donna Karan—and 50 million other people. And the self-help industry, into which hundreds of thousands of Americans pour their hearts, souls, and some \$11 billion a year, by definition reveals our conception of the ideal self, the one we aspire to become if only we follow the seven principles of this and the three laws of that. I want to know what this ideal self looks like.

Stacy asks if I've brought my meals with me. It seems a strange question: Who carries supper with them from New York City to Atlanta? She explains that I'll want to refuel at my seat; for the next four days, Friday through Monday, we'll be working fifteen hours a day, 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., with only one short afternoon break. Tony will be onstage *the entire time* and I won't want to miss a moment.

I look around the lobby. Other people seem to have come prepared—they're strolling toward the hall, cheerfully lugging grocery bags stuffed with PowerBars, bananas, and corn chips. I pick up a couple of bruised apples from the snack bar and make my way to the auditorium. Greeters wearing UPW T-shirts and ecstatic smiles line the entrance, springing up and down, fists pumping. You can't get inside without slapping them five. I know, because I try.

Inside the vast hall, a phalanx of dancers is warming up the crowd to the Billy Idol song "Mony Mony," amplified by a world-class sound system, magnified on giant Megatron screens flanking the stage. They move in sync like backup dancers in a Britney Spears video, but are dressed like middle managers. The lead performer is a fortysomething balding fellow wearing a white button-down shirt, conservative tie, rolled-up sleeves, and a great-to-meet-you smile. The message seems to be that we can all learn to be this exuberant when we get to work every morning.

Indeed, the dance moves are simple enough for us to imitate at our

seats: jump and clap twice; clap to the left; clap to the right. When the song changes to “Gimme Some Lovin’,” many in the audience climb atop their metal folding chairs, where they continue to whoop and clap. I stand somewhat peevishly with arms crossed until I decide that there’s nothing to be done but join in and hop up and down along with my seatmates.

Eventually the moment we’ve all been waiting for arrives: Tony Robbins bounds onstage. Already gigantic at six feet seven inches, he looks a hundred feet tall on the Megatron screen. He’s movie-star handsome, with a head of thick brown hair, a Pepsodent smile, and impossibly defined cheekbones. EXPERIENCE TONY ROBBINS LIVE! the seminar advertisement had promised, and now here he is, dancing with the euphoric crowd.

It’s about fifty degrees in the hall, but Tony is wearing a short-sleeved polo shirt and shorts. Many in the audience have brought blankets with them, having somehow known that the auditorium would be kept refrigerator-cold, presumably to accommodate Tony’s high-octane metabolism. It would take another Ice Age to cool this man off. He’s leaping and beaming and manag-ing, somehow, to make eye contact with all 3,800 of us. The greeters jump rapturously in the aisles. Tony opens his arms wide, embracing us all. If Jesus returned to Earth and made his first stop at the Atlanta Convention Center, it would be hard to imagine a more jubilant reception.

This is true even in the back row where I’m sitting with others who spent only \$895 for “general admission,” as opposed to \$2,500 for a “Diamond Premiere Membership,” which gets you a seat up front, as close to Tony as possible. When I bought my ticket over the phone, the account rep advised me that the people in the front rows—where “you’re looking directly at Tony for sure” instead of relying on the Megatron—are generally “more successful in life.” “Those are the people who have more energy,” she advised. “Those are the people who are screaming.” I have no way of judging how successful the people next to me are, but they certainly seem thrilled to be here. At the sight of Tony, exquisitely stage-lit to set off his expressive face, they cry out and pour into the aisles rock-concert style.

Soon enough, I join them. I’ve always loved to dance, and I have to

admit that gyrating en masse to Top 40 classics is an excellent way to pass the time. Unleashed power comes from high energy, according to Tony, and I can see his point. No wonder people travel from far and wide to see him in person (there's a lovely young woman from Ukraine sitting—no, leaping—next to me with a delighted smile). I really must start doing aerobics again when I get back to New York, I decide.



When the music finally stops, Tony addresses us in a raspy voice, half Muppet, half bedroom-sexy, introducing his theory of “Practical Psychology.” The gist of it is that knowledge is useless until it's coupled with action. He has a seductive, fast-talking delivery that Willy Loman would have sighed over. Demonstrating practical psychology in action, Tony instructs us to find a partner and to greet each other as if we feel inferior and scared of social rejection. I team up with a construction worker from downtown Atlanta, and we extend tentative handshakes, looking bashfully at the ground as the song “I Want You to Want Me” plays in the background.

Then Tony calls out a series of artfully phrased questions:

“Was your breath full or shallow?”

“SHALLOW!” yells the audience in unison.

“Did you hesitate or go straight toward them?”

“HESITATE!”

“Was there tension in your body or were you relaxed?”

“TENSION!”

Tony asks us to repeat the exercise, but this time to greet our partners as if the impression we make in the first three to five seconds determines whether they'll do business with us. If they don't, “everyone you care about will die like pigs in hell.”

I'm startled by Tony's emphasis on business success—this is a seminar about personal power, not sales. Then I remember that Tony is not only a life coach but also a businessman extraordinaire; he started his career in sales and today serves as chairman of seven privately held companies.

BusinessWeek once estimated his income at \$80 million a year. Now he seems to be trying, with all the force of his mighty personality, to impart his salesman's touch. He wants us not only to feel great but to radiate waves of energy, not just to be liked, but to be *well* liked; he wants us to know how to sell ourselves. I've already been advised by the Anthony Robbins Companies, via a personalized forty-five-page report generated by an online personality test that I took in preparation for this weekend, that "Susan" should work on her tendency to tell, not sell, her ideas. (The report was written in the third person, as if it was to be reviewed by some imaginary manager evaluating my people skills.)

The audience divides into pairs again, enthusiastically introducing themselves and pumping their partners' hands. When we're finished, the questions repeat.

"Did that feel better, yes or no?"

"YES!"

"Did you use your body differently, yes or no?"

"YES!"

"Did you use more muscles in your face, yes or no?"

"YES!"

"Did you move straight toward them, yes or no?"

"YES!"

This exercise seems designed to show how our physiological state influences our behavior and emotions, but it also suggests that salesmanship governs even the most neutral interactions. It implies that every encounter is a high-stakes game in which we win or lose the other person's favor. It urges us to meet social fear in as extroverted a manner as possible. We must be vibrant and confident, we must not seem hesitant, we must smile so that our interlocutors will smile upon us. Taking these steps will make us feel good—and the better we feel, the better we can sell ourselves.

Tony seems the perfect person to demonstrate such skills. He strikes me as having a "hyperthymic" temperament—a kind of extroversion-on-steroids characterized, in the words of one psychiatrist, by "exuberant, upbeat, overenergetic, and overconfident lifelong traits" that have been recognized as an asset in business, especially sales. People with these traits often make wonderful company, as Tony does onstage.

But what if you admire the hyperthymic among us, but also like your calm and thoughtful self? What if you love knowledge for its own sake, not necessarily as a blueprint to action? What if you wish there were more, not fewer, reflective types in the world?

Tony seems to have anticipated such questions. “But I’m not an extrovert, you say!” he told us at the start of the seminar. “So? You don’t have to be an extrovert to feel alive!”

True enough. But it seems, according to Tony, that you’d better act like one if you don’t want to flub the sales call and watch your family die like pigs in hell.



The evening culminates with the Firewalk, one of the flagship moments of the UPW seminar, in which we’re challenged to walk across a ten-foot bed of coals without burning our feet. Many people attend UPW because they’ve heard about the Firewalk and want to try it themselves. The idea is to propel yourself into such a fearless state of mind that you can withstand even 1,200-degree heat.

Leading up to that moment, we spend hours practicing Tony’s techniques—exercises, dance moves, visualizations. I notice that people in the audience are starting to mimic Tony’s every movement and facial expression, including his signature gesture of pumping his arm as if he were pitching a baseball. The evening crescendoes until finally, just before midnight, we march to the parking lot in a torchlit procession, nearly four thousand strong, chanting YES! YES! YES! to the thump of a tribal beat. This seems to electrify my fellow UPWers, but to me this drum-accompanied chant—YES! Ba-da-da-da, YES! Dum-dum-dum-DUM, YES! Ba-da-da-da—sounds like the sort of thing a Roman general would stage to announce his arrival in the city he’s about to sack. The greeters who manned the gates to the auditorium earlier in the day with high fives and bright smiles have morphed into gatekeepers of the Firewalk, arms beckoning toward the bridge of flames.

As best I can tell, a successful Firewalk depends not so much on your

state of mind as on how thick the soles of your feet happen to be, so I watch from a safe distance. But I seem to be the only one hanging back. Most of the UPWers make it across, whooping as they go.

“I did it!” they cry when they get to the other side of the firepit. “I did it!”

They’ve entered a Tony Robbins state of mind. But what exactly does this consist of?

It is, first and foremost, a superior mind—the antidote to Alfred Adler’s inferiority complex. Tony uses the word *power* rather than *superior* (we’re too sophisticated nowadays to frame our quests for self-improvement in terms of naked social positioning, the way we did at the dawn of the Culture of Personality), but everything about him is an exercise in superiority, from the way he occasionally addresses the audience as “girls and boys,” to the stories he tells about his big houses and powerful friends, to the way he towers—literally—over the crowd. His superhuman physical size is an important part of his brand; the title of his best-selling book, *Awaken the Giant Within*, says it all.

His intellect is impressive, too. Though he believes university educations are overrated (because they don’t teach you about your emotions and your body, he says) and has been slow to write his next book (because no one reads anymore, according to Tony), he’s managed to assimilate the work of academic psychologists and package it into one hell of a show, with genuine insights the audience can make their own.

Part of Tony’s genius lies in the unstated promise that he’ll let the audience share his own journey from inferiority to superiority. He wasn’t always so grand, he tells us. As a kid, he was a shrimp. Before he got in shape, he was overweight. And before he lived in a castle in Del Mar, California, he rented an apartment so small that he kept his dishes in the bathtub. The implication is that we can *all* get over whatever’s keeping us down, that even introverts can learn to walk on coals while belting out a lusty YES.

The second part of the Tony state of mind is good-heartedness. He wouldn’t inspire so many people if he didn’t make them feel that he truly cared about unleashing the power within each of them. When Tony’s onstage, you get the sense that he’s singing, dancing, and emoting with every ounce of his energy and heart. There are moments, when the

crowd is on its feet, singing and dancing in unison, that you can't help but love him, the way many people loved Barack Obama with a kind of shocked delight when they first heard him talk about transcending red and blue. At one point, Tony talks about the different needs people have—for love, certainty, variety, and so on. He is motivated by love, he tells us, and we believe him.

But there's also this: throughout the seminar, he constantly tries to "upsell" us. He and his sales team use the UPW event, whose attendees have already paid a goodly sum, to market multi-day seminars with even more alluring names and stiffer price tags: Date with Destiny, about \$5,000; Mastery University, about \$10,000; and the Platinum Partnership, which, for a cool \$45,000 a year, buys you and eleven other Platinum Partners the right to go on exotic vacations with Tony.

During the afternoon break, Tony lingers onstage with his blond and sweetly beautiful wife, Sage, gazing into her eyes, caressing her hair, murmuring into her ear. I'm happily married, but right now Ken is in New York and I'm here in Atlanta, and even I feel lonely as I watch this spectacle. What would it be like if I were single or unhappily partnered? It would "arouse an eager want" in me, just as Dale Carnegie advised salesmen to do with their prospects so many years ago. And sure enough, when the break is over, a lengthy video comes on the mega-screen, pitching Tony's relationship-building seminar.

In another brilliantly conceived segment, Tony devotes part of the seminar to explaining the financial and emotional benefits of surrounding oneself with the right "peer group"—after which a staffer begins a sales pitch for the \$45,000 Platinum program. Those who purchase one of the twelve spots will join the "ultimate peer group," we are told—the "cream of the crop," the "elite of the elite of the elite."

I can't help but wonder why none of the other UPWers seem to mind, or even to notice, these upselling techniques. By now many of them have shopping bags at their feet, full of stuff they bought out in the lobby—DVDs, books, even eight-by-ten glossies of Tony himself, ready for framing.

But the thing about Tony—and what draws people to buy his products—is that like any good salesman, he *believes* in what he's pitching. He apparently sees no contradiction between wanting the best for

people and wanting to live in a mansion. He persuades us that he's using his sales skills not only for personal gain but also to help as many of us as he can reach. Indeed, one very thoughtful introvert I know, a successful salesman who gives sales training seminars of his own, swears that Tony Robbins not only improved his business but also made him a better person. When he started attending events like UPW, he says, he focused on who he wanted to become, and now, when he delivers his own seminars, he is that person. "Tony gives me energy," he says, "and now I can create energy for other people when I'm onstage."



At the onset of the Culture of Personality, we were urged to develop an extroverted personality for frankly selfish reasons—as a way of outshining the crowd in a newly anonymous and competitive society. But nowadays we tend to think that becoming more extroverted not only makes us more successful, but also makes us better people. We see salesmanship as a way of sharing one's gifts with the world.

This is why Tony's zeal to sell to and be adulated by thousands of people at once is seen not as narcissism or hucksterism, but as leadership of the highest order. If Abraham Lincoln was the embodiment of virtue during the Culture of Character, then Tony Robbins is his counterpart during the Culture of Personality. Indeed, when Tony mentions that he once thought of running for president of the United States, the audience erupts in loud cheers.

But does it always make sense to equate leadership with hyperextroversion? To find out, I visited Harvard Business School, an institution that prides itself on its ability to identify and train some of the most prominent business and political leaders of our time.

The Myth of Charismatic Leadership: Harvard Business School and Beyond

The first thing I notice about the Harvard Business School campus is the way people walk. No one ambles, strolls, or lingers. They stride, full of forward momentum. It's crisp and autumnal the week I visit, and the students' bodies seem to vibrate with September electricity as they advance across campus. When they cross each other's paths they don't merely nod—they exchange animated greetings, inquiring about this one's summer with J. P. Morgan or that one's trek in the Himalayas.

They behave the same way inside the social hothouse of the Spangler Center, the sumptuously decorated student center. Spangler has floor-to-ceiling silk curtains in sea-foam green, rich leather sofas, giant Samsung high-definition TVs silently broadcasting campus news, and soaring ceilings festooned with high-wattage chandeliers. The tables and sofas are clustered mostly on the perimeter of the room, forming a brightly lit center catwalk down which the students breezily parade, seemingly unaware that all eyes are on them. I admire their nonchalance.

The students are even better turned out than their surroundings, if such a thing is possible. No one is more than five pounds overweight or has bad skin or wears odd accessories. The women are a cross between Head Cheerleader and Most Likely to Succeed. They wear fitted jeans, filmy blouses, and high-heeled peekaboo-toed shoes that make a pleasing clickety-clack on Spangler's polished wood floors. Some parade like fashion models, except that they're social and beaming instead of aloof and impassive. The men are clean-cut and athletic; they look like people who expect to be in charge, but in a friendly, Eagle Scout sort of way. I have the feeling that if you asked one of them for driving directions, he'd greet you with a can-do smile and throw himself into the task of helping you to your destination—whether or not he knew the way.

I sit down next to a couple of students who are in the middle of planning a road trip—HBS students are forever coordinating pub crawls and parties, or describing an extreme-travel junket they've just come back from. When they ask what brings me to campus, I say that I'm conducting interviews for a book about introversion and extroversion. I don't tell them that a friend of mine, himself an HBS grad, once called the place

the “Spiritual Capital of Extroversion.” But it turns out that I don’t *have* to tell them.

“Good luck finding an introvert around here,” says one.

“This school is predicated on extroversion,” adds the other. “Your grades and social status depend on it. It’s just the norm here. Everyone around you is speaking up and being social and going out.”

“Isn’t there anyone on the quieter side?” I ask.

They look at me curiously.

“I couldn’t tell you,” says the first student dismissively.



Harvard Business School is not, by any measure, an ordinary place. Founded in 1908, just when Dale Carnegie hit the road as a traveling salesman and only three years before he taught his first class in public speaking, the school sees itself as “educating leaders who make a difference in the world.” President George W. Bush is a graduate, as are an impressive collection of World Bank presidents, U.S. Treasury secretaries, New York City mayors, CEOs of companies like General Electric, Goldman Sachs, Procter & Gamble, and, more notoriously, Jeffrey Skilling, the villain of the Enron scandal. Between 2004 and 2006, 20 percent of the top three executives at the Fortune 500 companies were HBS grads.

HBS grads likely have influenced your life in ways you’re not aware of. They have decided who should go to war and when; they have resolved the fate of Detroit’s auto industry; they play leading roles in just about every crisis to shake Wall Street, Main Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue. If you work in corporate America, there’s a good chance that Harvard Business School grads have shaped your everyday life, too, weighing in on how much privacy you need in your workspace, how many team-building sessions you need to attend per year, and whether creativity is best achieved through brainstorming or solitude. Given the scope of their influence, it’s worth taking a look at who enrolls here—and what they value by the time they graduate.

The student who wishes me luck in finding an introvert at HBS no doubt believes that there are none to be found. But clearly he doesn't know his first-year classmate Don Chen. I first meet Don in Spangler, where he's seated only a few couches away from the road-trip planners. He comes across as a typical HBS student, tall, with gracious manners, prominent cheekbones, a winsome smile, and a fashionably choppy, surfer-dude haircut. He'd like to find a job in private equity when he graduates. But talk to Don for a while and you'll notice that his voice is softer than those of his classmates, his head ever so slightly cocked, his grin a little tentative. Don is "a bitter introvert," as he cheerfully puts it—bitter because the more time he spends at HBS, the more convinced he becomes that he'd better change his ways.

Don likes having a lot of time to himself, but that's not much of an option at HBS. His day begins early in the morning, when he meets for an hour and a half with his "Learning Team"—a pre-assigned study group in which participation is mandatory (students at HBS practically go to the bathroom in teams). He spends the rest of the morning in class, where ninety students sit together in a wood-paneled, U-shaped amphitheater with stadium seating. The professor usually kicks off by directing a student to describe the case study of the day, which is based on a real-life business scenario—say, a CEO who's considering changing her company's salary structure. The figure at the heart of the case study, in this case the CEO, is referred to as the "protagonist." *If you were the protagonist*, the professor asks—and soon you will be, is the implication—*what would you do?*

The essence of the HBS education is that leaders have to act confidently and make decisions in the face of incomplete information. The teaching method plays with an age-old question: If you don't have all the facts—and often you won't—should you wait to act until you've collected as much data as possible? Or, by hesitating, do you risk losing others' trust and your own momentum? The answer isn't obvious. If you speak firmly on the basis of bad information, you can lead your people into disaster. But if you exude uncertainty, then morale suffers, funders won't invest, and your organization can collapse.

The HBS teaching method implicitly comes down on the side of

certainty. The CEO may not know the best way forward, but she has to act anyway. The HBS students, in turn, are expected to opine. Ideally, the student who was just cold-called has already discussed the case study with his Learning Team, so he's ready to hold forth on the protagonist's best moves. After he finishes, the professor encourages other students to offer their own views. Half of the students' grade, and a much larger percentage of their social status, is based on whether they throw themselves into this fray. If a student talks often and forcefully, then he's a player; if he doesn't, he's on the margins.

Many of the students adapt easily to this system. But not Don. He has trouble elbowing his way into class discussions; in some classes he barely speaks at all. He prefers to contribute only when he believes he has something insightful to add, or honest-to-God disagrees with someone. This sounds reasonable, but Don feels as if he should be more comfortable talking just so he can fill up his share of available airtime.

Don's HBS friends, who tend to be thoughtful, reflective types like him, spend a lot of time talking about talking in class. How much class participation is too much? How little is too little? When does publicly disagreeing with a classmate constitute healthy debate, and when does it seem competitive and judgmental? One of Don's friends is worried because her professor sent around an e-mail saying that anyone with real-world experience on the day's case study should let him know in advance. She's sure that the professor's announcement was an effort to limit stupid remarks like the one she made in class last week. Another worries that he's not loud enough. "I just have a naturally soft voice," he says, "so when my voice sounds normal to others, I feel like I'm shouting. I have to work on it."

The school also tries hard to turn quiet students into talkers. The professors have their own "Learning Teams," in which they egg each other on with techniques to draw out reticent students. When students fail to speak up in class, it's seen not only as their own deficit but also as their professor's. "If someone doesn't speak by the end of the semester, it's problematic," Professor Michel Anteby told me. "It means I didn't do a good job."

The school even hosts live informational sessions and web pages on

how to be a good class participator. Don's friends earnestly reel off the tips they remember best.

"Speak with conviction. Even if you believe something only fifty-five percent, say it as if you believe it a hundred percent."

"If you're preparing alone for class, then you're doing it wrong. Nothing at HBS is intended to be done alone."

"Don't think about the perfect answer. It's better to get out there and say something than to never get your voice in."

The school newspaper, *The Harbus*, also dispenses advice, featuring articles with titles like "How to Think and Speak Well—On the Spot!," "Developing Your Stage Presence," and "Arrogant or Simply Confident?"

These imperatives extend beyond the classroom. After class, most people eat lunch at the Spangler dining hall, which one grad describes as "more like high school than high school." And every day, Don wrestles with himself. Should he go back to his apartment and recharge over a quiet lunch, as he longs to do, or join his classmates? Even if he forces himself to go to Spangler, it's not as if the social pressure will end there. As the day wears on, there will be more such dilemmas. Attend the late-afternoon happy hours? Head out for a late, rowdy evening? Students at HBS go out in big groups several nights a week, says Don. Participation isn't mandatory, but it feels as if it is to those who don't thrive on group activities.

"Socializing here is an extreme sport," one of Don's friends tells me. "People go out *all the time*. If you don't go out one night, the next day people will ask, 'Where were you?' I go out at night like it's my job." Don has noticed that the people who organize social events—happy hours, dinners, drinking fests—are at the top of the social hierarchy. "The professors tell us that our classmates are the people who will go to our weddings," says Don. "If you leave HBS without having built an extensive social network, it's like you failed your HBS experience."

By the time Don falls into bed at night, he's exhausted. And sometimes he wonders why, exactly, he should have to work so hard at being outgoing. Don is Chinese-American, and recently he worked a summer job in China. He was struck by how different the social norms were, and how much more comfortable he felt. In China there was

more emphasis on listening, on asking questions rather than holding forth, on putting others' needs first. In the United States, he feels, conversation is about how effective you are at turning your experiences into stories, whereas a Chinese person might be concerned with taking up too much of the other person's time with inconsequential information.

"That summer, I said to myself, 'Now I know why these are my people,'" he says.

But that was China, this is Cambridge, Massachusetts. And if one judges HBS by how well it prepares students for the "real world," it seems to be doing an excellent job. After all, Don Chen will graduate into a business culture in which verbal fluency and sociability are the two most important predictors of success, according to a Stanford Business School study. It's a world in which a middle manager at GE once told me that "people here don't even want to meet with you if you don't have a PowerPoint and a 'pitch' for them. Even if you're just making a recommendation to your colleague, you can't sit down in someone's office and tell them what you think. You have to make a presentation, with pros and cons and a 'takeaway box.'"

Unless they're self-employed or able to telecommute, many adults work in offices where they must take care to glide down the corridors greeting their colleagues warmly and confidently. "The business world," says a 2006 article from the Wharton Program for Working Professionals, "is filled with office environments similar to one described by an Atlanta area corporate trainer: 'Here everyone knows that it's important to be an extrovert and troublesome to be an introvert. So people work real hard at looking like extroverts, whether that's comfortable or not. It's like making sure you drink the same single-malt scotch the CEO drinks and that you work out at the right health club.'"

Even businesses that employ many artists, designers, and other imaginative types often display a preference for extroversion. "We want to attract creative people," the director of human resources at a major media company told me. When I asked what she meant by "creative," she answered without missing a beat. "You have to be outgoing, fun, and jazzed up to work here."

Contemporary ads aimed at businesspeople would give the Williams

Luxury Shaving Cream ads of yesteryear a run for their money. One line of TV commercials that ran on CNBC, the cable business channel, featured an office worker losing out on a plum assignment.

BOSS TO TED AND ALICE. Ted, I'm sending Alice to the sales conference because she thinks faster on her feet than you.

TED. (speechless) . . .

BOSS. So, Alice, we'll send you on Thursday—

TED. She does not!

Other ads explicitly sell their products as extroversion-enhancers. In 2000, Amtrak encouraged travelers to “DEPART FROM YOUR INHIBITIONS.” Nike became a prominent brand partly on the strength of its “Just Do It” campaign. And in 1999 and 2000, a series of ads for the psychotropic drug Paxil promised to cure the extreme shyness known as “social anxiety disorder” by offering Cinderella stories of personality transformation. One Paxil ad showed a well-dressed executive shaking hands over a business deal. “I can taste success,” read the caption. Another showed what happens without the drug: a businessman alone in his office, his forehead resting dejectedly on a clenched fist. “I should have joined in more often,” it read.



Yet even at Harvard Business School there are signs that something might be wrong with a leadership style that values quick and assertive answers over quiet, slow decision-making.

Every autumn the incoming class participates in an elaborate role-playing game called the Subarctic Survival Situation. “It is approximately 2:30 p.m., October 5,” the students are told, “and you have just crash-landed in a float plane on the east shore of Laura Lake in the subarctic region of the northern Quebec-Newfoundland border.” The students are divided into small groups and asked to imagine that their group has salvaged fifteen items from the plane—a compass, sleeping bag, axe,

and so on. Then they're told to rank them in order of importance to the group's survival. First the students rank the items individually; then they do so as a team. Next they score those rankings against an expert's to see how well they did. Finally they watch a videotape of their team's discussions to see what went right—or wrong.

The point of the exercise is to teach group synergy. Successful synergy means a higher ranking for the team than for its individual members. The group fails when any of its members has a better ranking than the overall team. And failure is exactly what can happen when students prize assertiveness too highly.

One of Don's classmates was in a group lucky to include a young man with extensive experience in the northern backwoods. He had a lot of good ideas about how to rank the fifteen salvaged items. But his group didn't listen, because he expressed his views too quietly.

"Our action plan hinged on what the most vocal people suggested," recalls the classmate. "When the less vocal people put out ideas, those ideas were discarded. The ideas that were rejected would have kept us alive and out of trouble, but they were dismissed because of the conviction with which the more vocal people suggested their ideas. Afterwards they played us back the videotape, and it was so embarrassing."

The Subarctic Survival Situation may sound like a harmless game played inside the ivory tower, but if you think of meetings you've attended, you can probably recall a time—plenty of times—when the opinion of the most dynamic or talkative person prevailed to the detriment of all. Perhaps it was a low-stakes situation—your PTA, say, deciding whether to meet on Monday or Tuesday nights. But maybe it was important: an emergency meeting of Enron's top brass, considering whether or not to disclose questionable accounting practices. (See chapter 7 for more on Enron.) Or a jury deliberating whether or not to send a single mother to jail.

I discussed the Subarctic Survival Situation with HBS professor Quinn Mills, an expert on leadership styles. Mills is a courteous man dressed, on the day we met, in a pinstriped suit and yellow polka-dot tie. He has a sonorous voice, and uses it skillfully. The HBS method "presumes that leaders should be vocal," he told me flat out, "and in my view that's part of reality."

But Mills also pointed to the common phenomenon known as the “winner’s curse,” in which two companies bid competitively to acquire a third, until the price climbs so high that it becomes less an economic activity than a war of egos. The winning bidders will be damned if they’ll let their opponents get the prize, so they buy the target company at an inflated price. “It tends to be the assertive people who carry the day in these kinds of things,” says Mills. “You see this all the time. People ask, ‘How did this happen, how did we pay so much?’ Usually it’s said that they were carried away by the situation, but that’s not right. Usually they’re carried away by people who are assertive and domineering. The risk with our students is that they’re very good at getting their way. But that doesn’t mean they’re going the *right* way.”

If we assume that quiet and loud people have roughly the same number of good (and bad) ideas, then we should worry if the louder and more forceful people always carry the day. This would mean that an awful lot of bad ideas prevail while good ones get squashed. Yet studies in group dynamics suggest that this is exactly what happens. We perceive talkers as smarter than quiet types—even though grade-point averages and SAT and intelligence test scores reveal this perception to be inaccurate. In one experiment in which two strangers met over the phone, those who spoke more were considered more intelligent, better looking, and more likable. We also see talkers as leaders. The more a person talks, the more other group members direct their attention to him, which means that he becomes increasingly powerful as a meeting goes on. It also helps to speak fast; we rate quick talkers as more capable and appealing than slow talkers.

All of this would be fine if more talking were correlated with greater insight, but research suggests that there’s no such link. In one study, groups of college students were asked to solve math problems together and then to rate one another’s intelligence and judgment. The students who spoke first and most often were consistently given the highest ratings, even though their suggestions (and math SAT scores) were no better than those of the less talkative students. These same students were given similarly high ratings for their creativity and analytical powers during a separate exercise to develop a business strategy for a start-up company.

A well-known study out of UC Berkeley by organizational behavior professor Philip Tetlock found that television pundits—that is, people who earn their livings by holding forth confidently on the basis of limited information—make worse predictions about political and economic trends than they would by random chance. And the very worst prognosticators tend to be the most famous and the most confident—the very ones who would be considered natural leaders in an HBS classroom.

The U.S. Army has a name for a similar phenomenon: “the Bus to Abilene.” “Any army officer can tell you what that means,” Colonel (Ret.) Stephen J. Gerras, a professor of behavioral sciences at the U.S. Army War College, told *Yale Alumni Magazine* in 2008. “It’s about a family sitting on a porch in Texas on a hot summer day, and somebody says, ‘I’m bored. Why don’t we go to Abilene?’ When they get to Abilene, somebody says, ‘You know, I didn’t really want to go.’ And the next person says, ‘I didn’t want to go—I thought you wanted to go,’ and so on. Whenever you’re in an army group and somebody says, ‘I think we’re all getting on the bus to Abilene here,’ that is a red flag. You can stop a conversation with it. It is a very powerful artifact of our culture.”

The “Bus to Abilene” anecdote reveals our tendency to follow those who initiate action—any action. We are similarly inclined to empower dynamic speakers. One highly successful venture capitalist who is regularly pitched by young entrepreneurs told me how frustrated he is by his colleagues’ failure to distinguish between good presentation skills and true leadership ability. “I worry that there are people who are put in positions of authority because they’re good talkers, but they don’t have good ideas,” he said. “It’s so easy to confuse schmoozing ability with talent. Someone seems like a good presenter, easy to get along with, and those traits are rewarded. Well, why is that? They’re valuable traits, but we put too much of a premium on presenting and not enough on substance and critical thinking.”

In his book *Iconoclast*, the neuroeconomist Gregory Berns explores what happens when companies rely too heavily on presentation skills to weed out good ideas from nonstarters. He describes a software company called Rite-Solutions that successfully asks employees to share ideas through an online “idea market,” as a way of focusing on substance rather than style. Joe Marino, president of Rite-Solutions, and Jim Lavoie, CEO

of the company, created this system as a reaction to problems they'd experienced elsewhere. "In my old company," Lavoie told Berns, "if you had a great idea, we would tell you, 'OK, we'll make an appointment for you to address the murder board'"—a group of people charged with vetting new ideas. Marino described what happened next:

Some technical guy comes in with a good idea. Of course questions are asked of that person that they don't know. Like, "How big's the market? What's your marketing approach? What's your business plan for this? What's the product going to cost?" It's embarrassing. Most people can't answer those kinds of questions. The people who made it through these boards were not the people with the best ideas. *They were the best presenters.*

Contrary to the Harvard Business School model of vocal leadership, the ranks of effective CEOs turn out to be filled with introverts, including Charles Schwab; Bill Gates; Brenda Barnes, CEO of Sara Lee; and James Copeland, former CEO of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu. "Among the most effective leaders I have encountered and worked with in half a century," the management guru Peter Drucker has written, "some locked themselves into their office and others were ultra-gregarious. Some were quick and impulsive, while others studied the situation and took forever to come to a decision. . . . The one and only personality trait the effective ones I have encountered did have in common was something they did *not* have: they had little or no 'charisma' and little use either for the term or what it signifies." Supporting Drucker's claim, Brigham Young University management professor Bradley Agle studied the CEOs of 128 major companies and found that those considered charismatic by their top executives had bigger salaries but not better corporate performance.

We tend to overestimate how outgoing leaders need to be. "Most leading in a corporation is done in small meetings and it's done at a distance, through written and video communications," Professor Mills told me. "It's not done in front of big groups. You have to be able to do some of that; you can't be a leader of a corporation and walk into a room full of analysts and turn white with fear and leave. But you don't have to

do a whole lot of it. I've known a lot of leaders of corporations who are highly introspective and who really have to make themselves work to do the public stuff."

Mills points to Lou Gerstner, the legendary chairman of IBM. "He went to school here," he says. "I don't know how he'd characterize himself. He has to give big speeches, and he does, and he looks calm. But my sense is that he's dramatically more comfortable in small groups. Many of these guys are, actually. Not all of them. But an awful lot of them."

Indeed, according to a famous study by the influential management theorist Jim Collins, many of the best-performing companies of the late twentieth century were run by what he calls "Level 5 Leaders." These exceptional CEOs were known not for their flash or charisma but for extreme humility coupled with intense professional will. In his influential book *Good to Great*, Collins tells the story of Darwin Smith, who in his twenty years as head of Kimberly-Clark turned it into the leading paper company in the world and generated stock returns more than four times higher than the market average.

Smith was a shy and mild-mannered man who wore J.C. Penney suits and nerdy black-rimmed glasses, and spent his vacations puttering around his Wisconsin farm by himself. Asked by a *Wall Street Journal* reporter to describe his management style, Smith stared back for an uncomfortably long time and answered with a single word: "Eccentric." But his soft demeanor concealed a fierce resolve. Soon after being appointed CEO, Smith made a dramatic decision to sell the mills that produced the company's core business of coated paper and invest instead in the consumer-paper-products industry, which he believed had better economics and a brighter future. Everyone said this was a huge mistake, and Wall Street downgraded Kimberly-Clark's stock. But Smith, unmoved by the crowd, did what he thought was right. As a result, the company grew stronger and soon outpaced its rivals. Asked later about his strategy, Smith replied that he never stopped trying to become qualified for the job.

Collins hadn't set out to make a point about quiet leadership. When he started his research, all he wanted to know was what characteristics made a company outperform its competition. He selected eleven stand-out companies to research in depth. Initially he ignored the question of

leadership altogether, because he wanted to avoid simplistic answers. But when he analyzed what the highest-performing companies had in common, the nature of their CEOs jumped out at him. *Every single one of them was led by an unassuming man like Darwin Smith.* Those who worked with these leaders tended to describe them with the following words: quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated.

The lesson, says Collins, is clear. We don't need giant personalities to transform companies. We need leaders who build not their own egos but the institutions they run.



So what do introverted leaders do differently from—and sometimes better than—extroverts?

One answer comes from the work of Wharton management professor Adam Grant, who has spent considerable time consulting with Fortune 500 executives and military leaders—from Google to the U.S. Army and Navy. When we first spoke, Grant was teaching at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, where he'd become convinced that the existing research, which showed a correlation between extroversion and leadership, didn't tell the whole story.

Grant told me about a wing commander in the U.S. Air Force—one rank below general, in command of thousands of people, charged with protecting a high-security missile base—who was one of the most classically introverted people, as well as one of the finest leaders, Grant had ever met. This man lost focus when he interacted too much with people, so he carved out time for thinking and recharging. He spoke quietly, without much variation in his vocal inflections or facial expressions. He was more interested in listening and gathering information than in asserting his opinion or dominating a conversation.

He was also widely admired; when he spoke, everyone listened. This was not necessarily remarkable—if you're at the top of the military hierarchy, people are supposed to listen to you. But in the case of this

commander, says Grant, people respected not just his formal authority, but also the way he led: by supporting his employees' efforts to take the initiative. He gave subordinates input into key decisions, implementing the ideas that made sense, while making it clear that he had the final authority. He wasn't concerned with getting credit or even with being in charge; he simply assigned work to those who could perform it best. This meant delegating some of his most interesting, meaningful, and important tasks—work that other leaders would have kept for themselves.

Why did the research not reflect the talents of people like the wing commander? Grant thought he knew what the problem was. First, when he looked closely at the existing studies on personality and leadership, he found that the correlation between extroversion and leadership was modest. Second, these studies were often based on people's perceptions of who made a good leader, as opposed to actual results. And personal opinions are often a simple reflection of cultural bias.

But most intriguing to Grant was that the existing research didn't differentiate among the various kinds of situations a leader might face. It might be that certain organizations or contexts were better suited to introverted leadership styles, he thought, and others to extroverted approaches, but the studies didn't make such distinctions.

Grant had a theory about which kinds of circumstances would call for introverted leadership. His hypothesis was that extroverted leaders enhance group performance when employees are passive, but that introverted leaders are more effective with proactive employees. To test his idea, he and two colleagues, professors Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School and David Hofman of the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina, carried out a pair of studies of their own.

In the first study, Grant and his colleagues analyzed data from one of the five biggest pizza chains in the United States. They discovered that the weekly profits of the stores managed by extroverts were 16 percent higher than the profits of those led by introverts—but only when the employees were passive types who tended to do their job *without exercising initiative*. Introverted leaders had the exact opposite results. When they worked with employees who actively tried to improve work procedures, their stores outperformed those led by extroverts by more than 14 percent.

In the second study, Grant's team divided 163 college students into competing teams charged with folding as many T-shirts as possible in ten minutes. Unbeknownst to the participants, each team included two actors. In some teams, the two actors acted passively, following the leader's instructions. In other teams, one of the actors said, "I wonder if there's a more efficient way to do this." The other actor replied that he had a friend from Japan who had a faster way to fold shirts. "It might take a minute or two to teach you," the actor told the leader, "but do we want to try it?"

The results were striking. The introverted leaders were 20 percent more likely to follow the suggestion—and their teams had 24 percent better results than the teams of the extroverted leaders. When the followers were not proactive, though—when they simply did as the leader instructed without suggesting their own shirt-folding methods—the teams led by extroverts outperformed those led by the introverts by 22 percent.

Why did these leaders' effectiveness turn on whether their employees were passive or proactive? Grant says it makes sense that introverts are uniquely good at leading initiative-takers. Because of their inclination to listen to others and lack of interest in dominating social situations, introverts are more likely to hear and implement suggestions. Having benefited from the talents of their followers, they are then likely to motivate them to be even more proactive. Introverted leaders create a virtuous circle of proactivity, in other words. In the T-shirt-folding study, the team members reported perceiving the introverted leaders as more open and receptive to their ideas, which motivated them to work harder and to fold more shirts.

Extroverts, on the other hand, can be so intent on putting their own stamp on events that they risk losing others' good ideas along the way and allowing workers to lapse into passivity. "Often the leaders end up doing a lot of the talking," says Francesca Gino, "and not listening to any of the ideas that the followers are trying to provide." But with their natural ability to inspire, extroverted leaders are better at getting results from more passive workers.

This line of research is still in its infancy. But under the auspices of Grant—an especially proactive fellow himself—it may grow quickly. (One of his colleagues has described Grant as the kind of person who "can make things happen twenty-eight minutes before they're scheduled

to begin.”) Grant is especially excited about the implications of these findings because proactive employees who take advantage of opportunities in a fast-moving, 24/7 business environment, without waiting for a leader to tell them what to do, are increasingly vital to organizational success. To understand how to maximize these employees’ contributions is an important tool for all leaders. It’s also important for companies to groom listeners as well as talkers for leadership roles.

The popular press, says Grant, is full of suggestions that introverted leaders practice their public speaking skills and smile more. But Grant’s research suggests that in at least one important regard—encouraging employees to take initiative—introverted leaders would do well to go on doing what they do naturally. Extroverted leaders, on the other hand, “may wish to adopt a more reserved, quiet style,” Grant writes. They may want to learn to sit down so that others might stand up.

Which is just what a woman named Rosa Parks did naturally.



For years before the day in December 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, she worked behind the scenes for the NAACP, even receiving training in nonviolent resistance. Many things had inspired her political commitment. The time the Ku Klux Klan marched in front of her childhood house. The time her brother, a private in the U.S. Army who’d saved the lives of white soldiers, came home from World War II only to be spat upon. The time a black eighteen-year-old delivery boy was framed for rape and sent to the electric chair. Parks organized NAACP records, kept track of membership payments, read to little kids in her neighborhood. She was diligent and honorable, but no one thought of her as a leader. Parks, it seemed, was more of a foot soldier.

Not many people know that twelve years before her showdown with the Montgomery bus driver, she’d had another encounter with the same man, possibly on the very same bus. It was a November afternoon in

1943, and Parks had entered through the front door of the bus because the back was too crowded. The driver, a well-known bigot named James Blake, told her to use the rear and started to push her off the bus. Parks asked him not to touch her. She would leave on her own, she said quietly. "Get off my bus," Blake sputtered in response.

Parks complied, but not before deliberately dropping her purse on her way out and sitting on a "white" seat as she picked it up. "Intuitively, she had engaged in an act of passive resistance, a precept named by Leo Tolstoy and embraced by Mahatma Gandhi," writes the historian Douglas Brinkley in a wonderful biography of Parks. It was more than a decade before King popularized the idea of nonviolence and long before Parks's own training in civil disobedience, but, Brinkley writes, "such principles were a perfect match for her own personality."

Parks was so disgusted by Blake that she refused to ride his bus for the next twelve years. On the day she finally did, the day that turned her into the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement," she got back on that bus, according to Brinkley, only out of sheer absentmindedness.

Parks's actions that day were brave and singular, but it was in the legal fallout that her quiet strength truly shone. Local civil rights leaders sought her out as a test case to challenge the city's bus laws, pressing her to file a lawsuit. This was no small decision. Parks had a sickly mother who depended on her; to sue would mean losing her job and her husband's. It would mean running the very real risk of being lynched from "the tallest telephone pole in town," as her husband and mother put it. "Rosa, the white folks will kill you," pleaded her husband. "It was one thing to be arrested for an isolated bus incident," writes Brinkley; "it was quite another, as historian Taylor Branch would put it, to 'reenter that forbidden zone by choice.'"

But because of her nature, Parks was the perfect plaintiff. Not only because she was a devout Christian, not only because she was an upstanding citizen, but also because she was gentle. "They've messed with the wrong one now!" the boycotters would declare as they traipsed miles to work and school. The phrase became a rallying cry. Its power lay in how paradoxical it was. Usually such a phrase implies that you've messed with a local heavy, with some bullying giant. But it was Parks's quiet strength that made her unassailable. "The slogan served as a reminder

that the woman who had inspired the boycott was the sort of soft-spoken martyr God would not abandon,” writes Brinkley.

Parks took her time coming to a decision, but ultimately agreed to sue. She also lent her presence at a rally held on the evening of her trial, the night when a young Martin Luther King Jr., the head of the brand-new Montgomery Improvement Association, roused all of Montgomery’s black community to boycott the buses. “Since it had to happen,” King told the crowd, “I’m happy it happened to a person like Rosa Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. Nobody can doubt the height of her character. Mrs. Parks is unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there.”

Later that year Parks agreed to go on a fund-raising speaking tour with King and other civil rights leaders. She suffered insomnia, ulcers, and homesickness along the way. She met her idol, Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote of their encounter in her newspaper column: “She is a very quiet, gentle person and it is difficult to imagine how she ever could take such a positive and independent stand.” When the boycott finally ended, over a year later, the buses integrated by decree of the Supreme Court, Parks was overlooked by the press. The *New York Times* ran two front-page stories that celebrated King but didn’t mention her. Other papers photographed the boycott leaders sitting in front of buses, but Parks was not invited to sit for these pictures. She didn’t mind. On the day the buses were integrated, she preferred to stay home and take care of her mother.



Parks’s story is a vivid reminder that we have been graced with limelight-avoiding leaders throughout history. Moses, for example, was not, according to some interpretations of his story, the brash, talkative type who would organize road trips and hold forth in a classroom at Harvard Business School. On the contrary, by today’s standards he was dreadfully timid. He spoke with a stutter and considered himself inarticulate. The book of Numbers describes him as “very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.”

When God first appeared to him in the form of a burning bush, Moses was employed as a shepherd by his father-in-law; he wasn't even ambitious enough to own his own sheep. And when God revealed to Moses his role as liberator of the Jews, did Moses leap at the opportunity? Send someone else to do it, he said. "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" he pleaded. "I have never been eloquent. I am slow of speech and tongue."

It was only when God paired him up with his extroverted brother Aaron that Moses agreed to take on the assignment. Moses would be the speechwriter, the behind-the-scenes guy, the Cyrano de Bergerac; Aaron would be the public face of the operation. "It will be as if he were your mouth," said God, "and as if you were God to him."

Complemented by Aaron, Moses led the Jews from Egypt, provided for them in the desert for the next forty years, and brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai. And he did all this using strengths that are classically associated with introversion: climbing a mountain in search of wisdom and writing down carefully, on two stone tablets, everything he learned there.

We tend to write Moses' true personality out of the Exodus story. (Cecil B. DeMille's classic, *The Ten Commandments*, portrays him as a swashbuckling figure who does all the talking, with no help from Aaron.) We don't ask why God chose as his prophet a stutterer with a public speaking phobia. But we should. The book of Exodus is short on explication, but its stories suggest that introversion plays yin to the yang of extroversion; that the medium is not always the message; and that people followed Moses because his words were thoughtful, not because he spoke them well.



If Parks spoke through her actions, and if Moses spoke through his brother Aaron, today another type of introverted leader speaks using the Internet.

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell explores the

influence of “Connectors”—people who have a “special gift for bringing the world together” and “an instinctive and natural gift for making social connections.” He describes a “classic Connector” named Roger Horchow, a charming and successful businessman and backer of Broadway hits such as *Les Misérables*, who “collects people the same way others collect stamps.” “If you sat next to Roger Horchow on a plane ride across the Atlantic,” writes Gladwell, “he would start talking as the plane taxied to the runway, you would be laughing by the time the seatbelt sign was turned off, and when you landed at the other end you’d wonder where the time went.”

We generally think of Connectors in just the way that Gladwell describes Horchow: chatty, outgoing, spellbinding even. But consider for a moment a modest, cerebral man named Craig Newmark. Short, balding, and bespectacled, Newmark was a systems engineer for seventeen years at IBM. Before that, he had consuming interests in dinosaurs, chess, and physics. If you sat next to him on a plane, he’d probably keep his nose buried in a book.

Yet Newmark also happens to be the founder and majority owner of Craigslist, the eponymous website that—well—connects people with each other. As of May 28, 2011, Craigslist was the seventh-largest English language website in the world. Its users in over 700 cities in seventy countries find jobs, dates, and even kidney donors on Newmark’s site. They join singing groups. They read one another’s haikus. They confess their affairs. Newmark describes the site not as a business but as a public commons.

“Connecting people to fix the world over time is the deepest spiritual value you can have,” Newmark has said. After Hurricane Katrina, Craigslist helped stranded families find new homes. During the New York City transit strike of 2005, Craigslist was the go-to place for ride-share listings. “Yet another crisis, and Craigslist commands the community,” wrote one blogger about Craigslist’s role in the strike. “How come Craig organically can touch lives on so many personal levels—and Craig’s users can touch each other’s lives on so many levels?”

Here’s one answer: social media has made new forms of leadership possible for scores of people who don’t fit the Harvard Business School mold.

On August 10, 2008, Guy Kawasaki, the best-selling author, speaker, serial entrepreneur, and Silicon Valley legend, tweeted, “You may find this hard to believe, but I am an introvert. I have a ‘role’ to play, but I fundamentally am a loner.” Kawasaki’s tweet set the world of social media buzzing. “At the time,” wrote one blogger, “Guy’s avatar featured him wearing a pink boa from a large party he threw at his house. Guy Kawasaki an introvert? Does not compute.”

On August 15, 2008, Pete Cashmore, the founder of Mashable, the online guide to social media, weighed in. “Wouldn’t it be a great irony,” he asked, “if the leading proponents of the ‘it’s about people’ mantra weren’t so enamored with meeting large groups of people in real life? Perhaps social media affords us the control we lack in real life socializing: the screen as a barrier between us and the world.” Then Cashmore outed himself. “Throw me firmly in the ‘introverts’ camp with Guy,” he posted.

Studies have shown that, indeed, introverts are more likely than extroverts to express intimate facts about themselves online that their family and friends would be surprised to read, to say that they can express the “real me” online, and to spend more time in certain kinds of online discussions. They welcome the chance to communicate digitally. The same person who would never raise his hand in a lecture hall of two hundred people might blog to two thousand, or two million, without thinking twice. The same person who finds it difficult to introduce himself to strangers might establish a presence online and *then* extend these relationships into the real world.



What would have happened if the Subarctic Survival Situation had been conducted online, with the benefit of all the voices in the room—the Rosa Parkses and the Craig Newmarks and the Darwin Smiths? What if it had been a group of proactive castaways led by an introvert with a gift for calmly encouraging them to contribute? What if there had been an introvert and an extrovert sharing the helm, like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.? Might they have reached the right result?

It's impossible to say. No one has ever run these studies, as far as I know—which is a shame. It's understandable that the HBS model of leadership places such a high premium on confidence and quick decision-making. If assertive people tend to get their way, then it's a useful skill for leaders whose work depends on influencing others. Decisiveness inspires confidence, while wavering (or even appearing to waver) can threaten morale.

But one can take these truths too far; in some circumstances quiet, modest styles of leadership may be equally or more effective. As I left the HBS campus, I stopped by a display of notable *Wall Street Journal* cartoons in the Baker Library lobby. One showed a haggard executive looking at a chart of steeply falling profits.

"It's all because of Fradkin," the executive tells his colleague. "He has terrible business sense but great leadership skills, and everyone is following him down the road to ruin."

Does God Love Introverts? An Evangelical's Dilemma

If Harvard Business School is an East Coast enclave for the global elite, my next stop was an institution that's much the opposite. It sits on a sprawling, 120-acre campus in the former desert and current exurb of Lake Forest, California. Unlike Harvard Business School, it admits anyone who wants to join. Families stroll the palm-tree-lined plazas and walkways in good-natured clumps. Children frolic in man-made streams and waterfalls. Staff wave amiably as they cruise by in golf carts. Wear whatever you want: sneakers and flip-flops are perfectly fine. This campus is presided over not by nattily attired professors wielding words like *protagonist* and *case method*, but by a benign Santa Claus-like figure in a Hawaiian shirt and sandy-haired goatee.

With an average weekly attendance of 22,000 and counting, Saddleback Church is one of the largest and most influential evangelical churches in the nation. Its leader is Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, one of the best-selling books of all time, and the man who delivered the invocation at President Obama's inauguration. Saddleback

doesn't cater to world-famous leaders the way HBS does, but it plays no less mighty a role in society. Evangelical leaders have the ear of presidents; dominate thousands of hours of TV time; and run multimillion-dollar businesses, with the most prominent boasting their own production companies, recording studios, and distribution deals with media giants like Time Warner.

Saddleback also has one more thing in common with Harvard Business School: its debt to—and propagation of—the Culture of Personality.

It's a Sunday morning in August 2006, and I'm standing at the center of a dense hub of sidewalks on Saddleback's campus. I consult a signpost, the kind you see at Walt Disney World, with cheerful arrows pointing every which way: Worship Center, Plaza Room, Terrace Café, Beach Café. A nearby poster features a beaming young man in bright red polo shirt and sneakers: "Looking for a new direction? Give traffic ministry a try!"

I'm searching for the open-air bookstore, where I'll be meeting Adam McHugh, a local evangelical pastor with whom I've been corresponding. McHugh is an avowed introvert, and we've been having a cross-country conversation about what it feels like to be a quiet and cerebral type in the evangelical movement—especially as a leader. Like HBS, evangelical churches often make extroversion a prerequisite for leadership, sometimes explicitly. "The priest must be . . . an extrovert who enthusiastically engages members and newcomers, a team player," reads an ad for a position as associate rector of a 1,400-member parish. A senior priest at another church confesses online that he has advised parishes recruiting a new rector to ask what his or her Myers-Briggs score is. "If the first letter isn't an 'E' [for extrovert]," he tells them, "think twice . . . I'm sure our Lord was [an extrovert]."

McHugh doesn't fit this description. He discovered his introversion as a junior at Claremont McKenna College, when he realized he was getting up early in the morning just to savor time alone with a steaming cup of coffee. He enjoyed parties, but found himself leaving early. "Other people would get louder and louder, and I would get quieter and quieter," he told me. He took a Myers-Briggs personality test and found out that there was a word, *introvert*, that described the type of person who likes to spend time as he did.

At first McHugh felt good about carving out more time for himself. But then he got active in evangelicalism and began to feel guilty about all that solitude. He even believed that God disapproved of his choices and, by extension, of him.

“The evangelical culture ties together faithfulness with extroversion,” McHugh explained. “The emphasis is on community, on participating in more and more programs and events, on meeting more and more people. It’s a constant tension for many introverts that they’re not living that out. And in a religious world, there’s more at stake when you feel that tension. It doesn’t feel like ‘I’m not doing as well as I’d like.’ It feels like ‘God isn’t pleased with me.’”

From outside the evangelical community, this seems an astonishing confession. Since when is solitude one of the Seven Deadly Sins? But to a fellow evangelical, McHugh’s sense of spiritual failure would make perfect sense. Contemporary evangelicalism says that every person you fail to meet and proselytize is another soul you might have saved. It also emphasizes building community among confirmed believers, with many churches encouraging (or even requiring) their members to join extracurricular groups organized around every conceivable subject—cooking, real-estate investing, skateboarding. So every social event McHugh left early, every morning he spent alone, every group he failed to join, meant wasted chances to connect with others.

But, ironically, if there was one thing McHugh knew, it was that he *wasn’t* alone. He looked around and saw a vast number of people in the evangelical community who felt just as conflicted as he did. He became ordained as a Presbyterian minister and worked with a team of student leaders at Claremont College, many of whom were introverts. The team became a kind of laboratory for experimenting with introverted forms of leadership and ministry. They focused on one-on-one and small group interactions rather than on large groups, and McHugh helped the students find rhythms in their lives that allowed them to claim the solitude they needed and enjoyed, and to have social energy left over for leading others. He urged them to find the courage to speak up and take risks in meeting new people.

A few years later, when social media exploded and evangelical bloggers started posting about their experiences, written evidence of the

schism between introverts and extroverts within the evangelical church finally emerged. One blogger wrote about his “cry from the heart wondering *how* to fit in as an introvert in a church that prides itself on extroverted evangelism. There are probably quite a few [of you] out there who are put on guilt trips each time [you] get a personal evangelism push at church. There’s a place in God’s kingdom for sensitive, reflective types. It’s not easy to claim, but it’s there.” Another wrote about his simple desire “to serve the Lord but not serve on a parish committee. In a universal church, there should be room for the un-gregarious.”

McHugh added his own voice to this chorus, first with a blog calling for greater emphasis on religious practices of solitude and contemplation, and later with a book called *Introverts in the Church: Finding Our Place in an Extroverted Culture*. He argues that evangelism means listening as well as talking, that evangelical churches should incorporate silence and mystery into religious worship, and that they should make room for introverted leaders who might be able to demonstrate a quieter path to God. After all, hasn’t prayer always been about contemplation as well as community? Religious leaders from Jesus to Buddha, as well as the lesser-known saints, monks, shamans, and prophets, have always gone off alone to experience the revelations they later shared with the rest of us.



When finally I find my way to the bookstore, McHugh is waiting with a serene expression on his face. He’s in his early thirties, tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in jeans, a black polo shirt, and black flip-flops. With his short brown hair, reddish goatee, and sideburns, McHugh looks like a typical Gen Xer, but he speaks in the soothing, considered tones of a college professor. McHugh doesn’t preach or worship at Saddleback, but we’ve chosen to meet here because it’s such an important symbol of evangelical culture.

Since services are just about to start, there’s little time to chat. Saddleback offers six different “worship venues,” each housed in its own

building or tent and set to its own beat: Worship Center, Traditional, OverDrive Rock, Gospel, Family, and something called Ohana Island Style Worship. We head to the main Worship Center, where Pastor Warren is about to preach. With its sky-high ceiling crisscrossed with klieg lights, the auditorium looks like a rock concert venue, save for the unobtrusive wooden cross hanging on the side of the room.

A man named Skip is warming up the congregation with a song. The lyrics are broadcast on five Jumbotron screens, interspersed with photos of shimmering lakes and Caribbean sunsets. Miked-up tech guys sit on a thronelike dais at the center of the room, training their video cameras on the audience. The cameras linger on a teenage girl—long, silky blond hair, electric smile, and shining blue eyes—who’s singing her heart out. I can’t help but think of Tony Robbins’s “Unleash the Power Within” seminar. Did Tony base his program on megachurches like Saddleback, I wonder, or is it the other way around?

“Good morning, everybody!” beams Skip, then urges us to greet those seated near us. Most people oblige with wide smiles and glad hands, including McHugh, but there’s a hint of strain beneath his smile.

Pastor Warren takes the stage. He’s wearing a short-sleeved polo shirt and his famous goatee. Today’s sermon will be based on the book of Jeremiah, he tells us. “It would be foolish to start a business without a business plan,” Warren says, “but most people have no life plan. If you’re a business leader, you need to read the book of Jeremiah over and over, because he was a genius CEO.” There are no Bibles at our seats, only pencils and note cards, with the key points from the sermon preprinted, and blanks to fill in as Warren goes along.

Like Tony Robbins, Pastor Warren seems truly well-meaning; he’s created this vast Saddleback ecosystem out of nothing, and he’s done good works around the world. But at the same time I can see how hard it must be, inside this world of Luau worship and Jumbotron prayer, for Saddleback’s introverts to feel good about themselves. As the service wears on, I feel the same sense of alienation that McHugh has described. Events like this don’t give me the sense of oneness others seem to enjoy; it’s always been private occasions that make me feel connected to the joys and sorrows of the world, often in the form of communion with writers and musicians I’ll never meet in person. Proust called these moments

of unity between writer and reader “that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.” His use of religious language was surely no accident.

McHugh, as if reading my mind, turns to me when the service is over. “Everything in the service involved communication,” he says with gentle exasperation. “Greeting people, the lengthy sermon, the singing. There was no emphasis on quiet, liturgy, ritual, things that give you space for contemplation.”

McHugh’s discomfort is all the more poignant because he genuinely admires Saddleback and all that it stands for. “Saddleback is doing amazing things around the world and in its own community,” he says. “It’s a friendly, hospitable place that genuinely seeks to connect with newcomers. That’s an impressive mission given how colossal the church is, and how easy it would be for people to remain completely disconnected from others. Greeters, the informal atmosphere, meeting people around you—these are all motivated by good desires.”

Yet McHugh finds practices like the mandatory smile-and-good-morning at the start of the service to be painful—and though he personally is willing to endure it, even sees the value in it, he worries about how many other introverts will not.

“It sets up an extroverted atmosphere that can be difficult for introverts like me,” he explains. “Sometimes I feel like I’m going through the motions. The outward enthusiasm and passion that seems to be part and parcel of Saddleback’s culture doesn’t feel natural. Not that introverts can’t be eager and enthusiastic, but we’re not as overtly expressive as extroverts. At a place like Saddleback, you can start questioning your own experience of God. Is it really as strong as that of other people who look the part of the devout believer?”

Evangelicalism has taken the Extrovert Ideal to its logical extreme, McHugh is telling us. If you don’t love Jesus out loud, then it must not be real love. It’s not enough to forge your own spiritual connection to the divine; *it must be displayed publicly*. Is it any wonder that introverts like Pastor McHugh start to question their own hearts?

It’s brave of McHugh, whose spiritual and professional calling depends on his connection to God, to confess his self-doubt. He does so because he wants to spare others the inner conflict he has struggled with,

and because he loves evangelicalism and wants it to grow by learning from the introverts in its midst.

But he knows that meaningful change will come slowly to a religious culture that sees extroversion not only as a personality trait but also as an indicator of virtue. Righteous behavior is not so much the good we do behind closed doors when no one is there to praise us; it is what we “put out into the world.” Just as Tony Robbins’s aggressive upselling is OK with his fans because spreading helpful ideas is part of being a good person, and just as HBS expects its students to be talkers because this is seen as a prerequisite of leadership, so have many evangelicals come to associate godliness with sociability.