

One New Book for the Preacher

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Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (Crown Publishers: New York, 2012).

I serve a quiet church. It's small, yes, very small. But we're also quiet, even Quaker-esque. Though we're a United Church of Christ congregation, I actually believe that quietude is one of our spiritual gifts.

My fondness, then, for quiet is likely what drew me to Susan Cain's book *Quiet*. And, though I'd hesitate to say that preachers everywhere should read it (that distinction I'd give to Walter Brueggemann's *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, a book that needs more to be read than to be boiled down to 1200 words in review), I will say that, since I first read *Quiet*, I've revisited many of Cain's points—and not only as an introvert or as pastor of a quiet church, but as a mainline Christian in America, where the church's Evangelical wing, this undoubtedly extroverted expression of the faith, increasingly seems to call the shots.

Cain's premise is that "our lives are shaped as profoundly by personality as by gender or race," and "the single most important aspect of personality...is where we fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum" (p.2). The central problem she sees is that, though introverts likely make up one-third to one-half of the population, we Americans (citizens as we are in the world's most extroverted nation) "make room for a remarkably narrow range of personality styles" (p. 3), living with an "Extrovert Ideal" ever in mind. One study found that talkative people were seen as, among other things, smarter and better looking!

Cain explains that, while all people need relationships and intimacy, the difference then between introverts and extroverts (categories that no one adheres to absolutely and always) is a matter of degree. Introverts prefer few and intimate relationships, require less outward stimulation than extroverts, and favor cooperative relatedness. Extroverts are more comfortable with conflict, but less with solitude. What introverts lack in quickness of action, they make up for with patience and persistence. Cain quotes introvert Albert Einstein: "It's not that I'm so smart. It's that I stay with problems longer" (p. 169).

Cain uses cultural historian Warren Susman's terminology to trace the rise of the Extrovert Ideal. He describes our collective pivot from a Culture of Character to the more recent Culture of Personality; this coincided with the age of industrialization and its "perfect storm of big business, urbanization, and mass immigration" (p. 21-22). Cain writes, "In the Culture of Character, the ideal self was serious, disciplined, and honorable. What counted was not so much the impression one made in public as how one behaved in private" (p. 21). In the Culture of Personality, notes Susman, "Every American was to become a performing self" (p. 21).

A word study Cain cites makes this plain. Early self-help guides emphasized "citizenship, duty, work, golden deeds, honor, reputation, morals, manners, [and] integrity." Later ones featured words like "magnetic, fascinating, stunning, attractive,

glowing, dominant, forceful, [and] energetic” (p. 23). But the pithiest illustration is this: Orison Swett Marden published a popular book in 1899 entitled *Character: the Grandest Thing in the World*, and another 22 years later entitled *Masterful Personality*. Naturally, our transformation was at some cost, which is a primary message of Cain’s writing: we went “from Character to Personality without realizing that we had sacrificed something meaningful along the way” (p. 33).

Cain visits three temples of the Culture of Personality: a Tony Robbins UPW (Unleash the Power Within) Seminar, the Harvard Business School campus, and the Saddleback Church. *JP* readers who read *Quiet* will likely find Cain’s knowledge of church culture(s) lacking, as she seems to accept the Evangelical movement as wholly representative of Christianity in contemporary America. (And they’ll be amused, if not offended, by her reliance on *Jesus Christ: Superstar* in asserting that “even the Western God is assertive, vocal, and dominant: his son Jesus is kind and tender, but also a charismatic, crowd-pleasing man of influence” [p. 189]. Apparently, there’s little critical distinction to be made between St. Mark or St. Luke and Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber!) Regardless, this is an enlightening frame for focusing on the Evangelical movement, and by contrast, its generally quieter sibling, the Mainline. I particularly appreciated the chance to reconsider the Mainline’s over-the-shoulder look at what the Evangelical church is up to, our mimicking their methods, and our even accepting their measure of what excellence in worship looks like.

Of course, you can hardly visit such temples of extroversion as these without falling under the spell of just how essential extroversion is for effective leadership. As to demystify our thinking, Cain sites a study done by Adam Grant, a professor at Wharton School of Business, who found that “extroverted leaders enhance group performance when employees are passive, but introverted leaders are more effective with proactive employees” (p. 56). Well, that was worth the price of the book for me! As pastors we are, after all, to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Yet we so frequently lament that our congregations are so passive that we’ve got to wake them up! The assumed remedy is to become bigger, louder, more colorful versions of ourselves and to make over our congregational leaders as well. (Hear now Krusty the Clown’s aggravating laugh.) But this may be absolutely wrong. Perhaps to awaken a passive church, the pastor and leaders should sit quietly and prayerfully wait.

Cain notes that following the economic crash of 2008, “it became fashionable to speculate whether we’d have been better off with more women and fewer men on Wall Street. But maybe we should also ask what might have happened with a few more introverts at the helm” (p. 162). She clearly believes that given the many and multivalent challenges we face—economically, ecologically, socially, etc.—recognizing what introverts bring to the table can only do us all a great and deep service.

I’ve heard that most mainline pastors are introverts. Although I haven’t the numbers to back this up, it resonates with my experience of colleagues—we are largely introverts who’ve learned to ape extroversion. And why not, given that congregations describing their ideal pastor often focus on such qualities as those in this week’s *Christian Century* classifieds: “energetic and innovative,” “insightful preaching [and] visionary leadership.” Forget that “insightful preaching” on a weekly basis demands hours of study and contemplation—activities largely done in solitude. Forget that another ad’s “outgoing” and “spiritual” might well be mutually exclusive. I wonder if these congregations know not only what they’re asking for, but also what they’re

foreclosing on.

Cain writes that left to their own devices, “introverts tend to sit around wondering about things, imagining things...while extroverts are more likely to focus on what’s happening around them. It’s as if extroverts are seeing ‘what is’ while their introverted peers are asking ‘what if’” (p. 168). This especially piqued my interest. To wonder, to imagine, to ask, “What if?” seem like essentially spiritual and religious activities. So, if they are the preferred purview of the introverts among us, I humbly (introvertedly) assert that the Church, if no one else, should be eager to include these among its membership and leadership.

If you don’t read *Quiet*, you might just buy a copy to leave lying around in your church fellowship hall. Then maybe some of your congregation’s members will pick it up, give it a read, and realize that you (introvert that you are!) are exactly the person they want and need in their pulpit.