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Being an introvert in an extrovert world

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Coming out as introvert

As I write this blog, I am sitting in Friends House, opposite Euston station. It is relaxing haven in the middle of a very noisy city. I'm in the café, and I'm still finding it a bit too loud for my liking- people are talking, the café workers are clanging cutlery, and the occasional motorbike can be heard from the main road. Let me be clear: I am not autistic; neither do I have social anxiety. I can only imagine what this experience would be like for people who are. I am simply an introvert, and as such I find that the 21st century world is often a noisy and stressful place. It is a world which often seems to be set up for extroverts.

It's slightly scary writing this blog and 'coming out' as an introvert in the public sphere. I'm worried that, as the National Coordinator of a charity, with a role which involves a lot of talking to people and networking, some may read this and wonder if I'm the right person for the job! However, that fear in itself proves to me that it is an important thing to write- if only to dispel myths about introverts and what they are or are not capable of doing.

One myth to dispel is that introverts can't be good at public speaking. Many introverts actually love public speaking and find it less stressful than small talk! One main difference between introverts and extroverts is how we recharge our batteries: introverts need to recharge by being alone, extroverts need to recharge by being with others. Ambiverts are a bit of both.

I have been on the road doing a 3-week speaking tour with the performance artist Peterson Toscano for my

other part-time job with Christian Peacemaker Teams. Before Peterson came over to the UK, I decided I had to speak to him about the fact that I'm an introvert. I was concerned that, if I didn't, the long journeys in the car with him could become excruciatingly stressful and tiring. When I told him, he said 'Me too! I'll bring some audio books we can listen to when we're tired of talking.'

One audio book he brought with him is called 'Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking', by Susan Cain. It contains psychological study, personal experience and personal research. The author visits 'extrovert' places like Harvard University and the US megachurches to investigate why people are expected to be so extrovert in these places, and she finds out how introverts survive- often by learning to appear extrovert.

Married to an extrovert

The audio book has been fascinating to listen to and has opened me up to a new understanding of myself. My wife, Ellie, tries to understand my introverted nature, but it's hard for her, as she is a complete extrovert and struggles in her own way with different things, like being alone for long periods of time while I'm on this tour, for example!

The book and also chatting to Peterson have helped me put my feelings into words in a much more helpful way for Ellie. I sent her a list of 'things which stress me out' and asked her to send me one back, so that we can understand one another better. This is what we came up with (below). It shows just how different we are and how incredible it is that we get on so well and have such a strong marriage- perhaps it's true that sometimes opposites attract!

RUTH

- Service stations, train stations- too much noise, too many people.
- Strangers on buses and trains trying to have a conversation with me
- Being with lots of people without a clearly defined role (like speaker or even washing-up duty)
- Loud background noises like music and TV, especially if I'm already feeling tired or stressed
- Being with people for prolonged periods of time (apart from a few close friends/family members)
- Having conversations on the phone in public where I can't get away, like on a train or bus

ELLIE

- Being on my own for prolonged periods of time
- Too much silence (except strangely in Quaker meeting!)
- Being inside for too long
- Not seeing a variety of people
- Not seeing friends and family
- I like all the things you hate basically! I like talking, talking, talking and new people!

Hidden introverts

You may read the above and see yourself in either one list or the other. There are also people in the middle and people at the extreme ends- it's a spectrum. In Susan Cain's book, she talks about how some people are

so introvert that they actually have social anxiety and find it hard to talk at all to other people. Of course, I'm not like that. It would be hard to do my job if I was. I'm like the vast majority of introverts: I'm a hidden introvert. I have learnt over the course of my life to appear like an extrovert in situations where it is necessary.

Many people assume, unless I tell them otherwise, that I am in fact an extrovert. Cain explains that the reason many introverts have become so adept at pretending is because we learnt early on that we often need to be extrovert in order to get on in life. We are also often genuinely interested in people- we're not faking that- but we are just tired out a lot more quickly by conversations and especially superficial chit chat.

Introverts have also developed throughout our lives. When I was a child of 4, I literally hid behind my mum. When I was 16, and in a school where I didn't have many friends (due to my Dad's job, we moved around a lot), I often preferred to be alone in the music rooms practicing at lunchtime rather than in the social spaces with other people. In fact, I hated most of my time spent in school because I was a shy introvert. Nowadays, I'm not shy, but I'm still an introvert, and there are still social situations which I find uncomfortable, for example team building exercises in work places where the focus is on enforced small talk with people who are not my close friends!

Inclusion and introverts

Introverts are not a marginalised or oppressed group, and there is no comparison to be made with the groups that are. Also, extroverts can sometimes feel awkward or stressed in certain situations in life (as shown by Ellie's list above). However, I have written this blog to foster more openness about introverts and to open up a conversation about the kinds of situations and places where *only* extroverts or *only* introverts are comfortable.

As inclusive churches and inclusive-minded people, it's important that we think about how comfortable different people feel in our spaces. What can we do to make our churches less overwhelming for those of us who prefer things a bit quieter and less socially demanding? How can we include both extroverts and introverts, not to mention autistic people or those with social anxiety? Trying to put our finger on how we include different types of people sometimes eludes us. Often, it's about trial and error, and I think it's *always* about communication- asking people how their experience of worship was, for example- perhaps on short questionnaires at the end.

Sometimes it's surprising the places that manage to make a comfortable space for both introverts and extroverts. Our Quaker meeting in Birmingham seems to suit both me (understandable) and Ellie (more surprising). Ellie says it's because she's still with people, trying to listen to God together. Also, there's time for coffee and chat afterwards! Perhaps that's one of the keys to including both introverts and extroverts: doing different things at different times and having multiple different spaces. By creating different types of space, we can give both introverts and extroverts the time and opportunity to recharge tired batteries.

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