

The Introvert: October 20, 2014

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5112 Longwood Dr.
Durham, NC, 27713-8010

Home: (919)-401-2047
e-mail: jmack@austintek.com

Present this as if I'm Garrison Keillor; confident, happy.
Pauses are good.

This piece is at least partially inspired by the book "Black Like Me" by John Howard Griffin, which I read in high school (likely in 1961 when it came out or shortly thereafter). In 1959, the author, a white man, used methoxsalen to darken his skin, allowing him to pass as a black man in the deep south of USA. The book describes his experiences as a black man. Not having any way to find out about methoxsalen, I had assumed that it was an artifice and that the book was fiction. It's only recently, with wikipedia that I find the book is non-fiction.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Like_Me

Thanks for suggestions, to Anoo and her class on public speaking at the Arts Center, Carrboro, NC.

About 2yrs ago I read the book "Quiet: The Power of Introverts" by Susan Cain. It was there that I discovered I was an introvert. Until then I thought there was something wrong with me that I didn't want to slap people on the back at business meetings, and that I could work for months without direction. Although I'd heard the words "extrovert" and "introvert", I didn't understand the concepts and didn't see them as relevant to my life. The limit to my understanding was that everything about being an extrovert was good and everything about being an introvert was bad. Now that I know what these words mean, I see that I'd only ever thought of myself as a failed extrovert.

It's a measure of the oppression of introverts that not once in the decades of trying to figure out how the world works, did I never read, nor did anyone ever say to me "Joe: the reason you're the way you are is because you're an introvert. You're supposed to be this way."

For this piece, I'll use Paul Graham's definition of an introvert
(<http://www.paulgraham.com/nerds.html>);

a person, who by the time they've reached high school, has found more interesting things to do with their life than to be popular.

For about a month now, I've been finishing the coding on the last 100k lines of a multiyear coding project. I've been living on doritoes, cream cheese and coffee. It's easy to get absorbed in the work. Often the only indication I get of time passing is when I look up to think, only to realise I have to use the bathroom, urgently.

Often I work around the clock. I've seen many sunrises. When you step out into the yard and look up, you see the sky turn from black to the deepest blue, as the stars go out

one by one. Sometimes you see Mercury or Venus. Over the weeks, you see them swing out slowly from behind the glare of the bright Sun, into the deep blue night sky where they brighten daily, picking up speed as they approach us, becoming crescents like the moon, then racing back in front of the face of the bright sun and a few days later, emerging in the evening twilight. As you stand there in the early morning, gradually the sky brightens, becoming red in the east, while all around you, the birds start their dawn chorus. Where the red of the horizon meets the deep blue of the night sky, a band of white appears, the only time of day you can see white sky. Without the sun to heat up the earth, often the air is completely still. If you're near water, it can be as flat as glass. When the sky is clear, the red disk of the sun will rise through the horizon, heralding the new day. It's my favourite time of day.

I keep track of my friends by e-mail. I'm keeping a special lookout for e-mail from Rosamond. Rosamond likes cats and one of her cats, Cyclops, is old and is expected to die soon. Cyclops was a rescue cat and as you might guess from her name, didn't have a great start in life, Rosamond is the type of person that would take Cyclops in over any other cat. In the time I've known her, Rosamond has had plenty of cats die, but it never gets any easier for her when the next one goes. I'm expecting e-mail from Rosamond any time now and I'll be calling to console her about Cyclops.

For relaxation I do something completely different from work. I'm usually reading a couple of books at a time and I pick up the one that best matches my mood. Currently I'm enjoying a book on the comparative grammar of the slavic languages.

Till the middle of this last burst of coding, life hadn't varied much day-to-day. Then one day I woke up feeling quite different. I recognised the problem instantly. It was the very worst thing that could happen to anyone like me. It's probably the worst thing that could happen to anyone at all. I was changing into an extrovert.

Already, I didn't care about people's feelings.

I couldn't have cared less about the meaning of life.

I just wanted to hang out with exciting people like myself and party like there was no tomorrow.

I raced outside and started walking down Franklin St. Although the process had only just begun, I was startled to find that everyone already recognised the new me. By lunchtime, I'd been invited to 3 parties and found myself with more new friends than there were people living in this town. Perfect strangers were stopping me in the street, to chat cheerily, as if we'd known each other all our lives. I'd had two separate lunches, on the same day mind you, with two groups of people, none of who I'd even met before. We talked about TV shows, MTV, celebrities, and sports, none of which I could have cared less about the day before. Then we talked about all the fabulous restaurants and watering holes in town. It was fascinating.

I hadn't watched TV since 6th grade, when I discovered the Encyclopedia Britannica. I got a set for xmas. I would go to school and tell my best friend Albert what I'd read the night before. Then, after school, Albert would come around to my place and we'd both read it. Later Albert got his own set and each day at school, we'd talk about what we'd read the night before. By the time I left high school, I'd read the whole encyclopedia twice; many of the articles I'd read dozens of times.

But that day, I bought People magazine to catch up on the world. I read about Celine Dion's husband's health crisis. I read the heartbreaking new details of Robin William's final days. I read the latest on the futile efforts of my rivals to gain the affections of Scarlett

Johannson. How could I have ever missed out on all of this? It's so much more exciting than the Encyclopedia. Uptill now, if I wanted to know anything about Scarlett Johannson, I'd just look up wikipedia. Did you know that Scarlett Johannson is pregnant? Well extroverts know all these sort of things.

By now I would normally have read 100pages of my book on slavic languages. But there it was, mid-afternoon, with two lunches inside me, and I hadn't touched even one of my books yet.

I bought a smart phone. I found out about Facebook. All my new friends were there.

I had my hair coloured red and green, I bought a 10-button black silk shirt from Wintersilks and wore a heavy gold chain around my neck and matching bracelets on my wrists. I bought skinny jeans and a pair of fine handmade italian leather shoes by Santoni. I rolled down the windows and honked at my new friends, as I drove down Franklin Street. They all waved back or gave me the thumbs up.

I initially found it quite disconcerting that none of my new friends knew their Briggs-Myer type indicators. Most of them had never heard of MBTI. Was this weird or what? It was like asking them if they were male or female and they didn't know. It didn't take long before I didn't care either. We were all extroverts. We don't care about Briggs-Myer; that's for introverts.

After my two lunches and with my new clothes and my new hair colour, I started walking down Franklin St again, carrying a Billabong jacket over my shoulder. Soon enough I met a woman. We started talking. Normally when you meet someone new, it takes months to figure out where they fit into your life. Just the normal stuff you know; can you relate, share your feelings, do you trust each other? With a new person, checking each other out is hard work. You have to take one step at a time and be prepared to take a step back if it isn't working. Well not that day. We hit it off straight away and a few minutes later, she'd invited me home.

It was the middle of the afternoon. I hadn't completely changed over yet, so I thought I was being invited back for dinner. On the way, I bought some baklava for desert and some flowers for her house. I drove up in my Prius, and parked in her driveway, behind a red Mercedes convertible with its top down. I thought we'd probably sit outside and chat or go for a walk for the rest of the afternoon. We could look for birds.

Nope, that wasn't on her mind at all. An hour later I was being shooed out the front door, while she stepped and snapped herself into her spandex, so she could go to the gym.

The baklava was still on the kitchen table; I put it in her fridge. The flowers were still in the kitchen sink; I couldn't find a vase in the cupboards anywhere. I left the flowers wilting in the sink.

About an hour later, I remembered to look at Facebook, to find a message from her, sent minutes after I'd left, along with requests to be friends from about 40 people I'd never heard of. Her message said "That was fun. Let's get together again. Call first OK? Ciao!". Well OK. What can I say? Should I bring a different desert next time? Maybe she doesn't like baklava, but was too sensitive to tell me to my face and didn't want to hurt my feelings. I wonder next time if I should bring a vase as well. Would that be indelicate?

I was still learning about my smart phone, and was delighted when I found it was getting my e-mail. Cyclops had died. Normally I would have called Rosamond back straight away and listened to her cry about Cyclops, how Cyclops was the best cat ever, and she was going to miss Cyclops and she liked the way Cyclops purred.

But Rosamond's house is infested with cats. Cats only live so long after all. No point in being sentimental about just another cat. I've listened to Rosamond crying about dead cats since we were in college. Cyclops' purring was more like a rattle than a purr, at least towards the end.

Instead of calling her up, I e-mailed her. It told her to watch an episode of the Simpsons or Family Guy. That would cheer her up better than me listening to her. I knew she'd have a replacement cat in a week and pretty soon she'd have forgotten about old Cyclops. Why should I listen to Rosamond crying about a cat, when I could be reading People magazine and learning about the Diva Cup or getting guidance from luminaries like Charlie Sheen?

All my new bffs had the strangest jobs.

Bernie was a manager. Well Bernie, I said, slapping him on the back, what do you manage? People apparently. But as we all know, people don't need to be managed. We know what to do; we don't need to be told. If we don't know, we go figure it out or find someone to show us.

I slapped Bernie on the back again. If you're an expert in the field Bernie, why aren't you in there helping with the work? It turns out Bernie doesn't know anything about the work at all; he's a manager and doesn't need to know anything about the work. His job is managing and writing vision statements.

Cara does HR. What's that? She finds people to fill jobs. So is Cara an expert in the field? No, she just hires people based on keywords in resumes and interviews. She knows nothing about the work at all.

Katies does advertising. What's that? It's her job to induce people to buy the advertiser's products. OK, is Katie an expert in the product? No, she knows nothing about them at all. Well does she make the products? No. She advertises other people's products. Her business doesn't have any of their own.

Initially it was strange having bffs who didn't know anything about the business they were in. However it was such fun being with them that pretty soon I couldn't have cared less what they knew.

By the next day, my personality had totally changed over. Now I was going to parties all the time. I would have about 200 of my closest friends over, almost every night. I didn't sleep much. I read only People magazine and spent all day on Facebook. I'd forgotten about my book on slavic languages. The house was full of people day and night, all talking flat out. Now I had three 84" TVs in the living room all running 24hrs a day; sports, movies, commentary, sitcoms. It was a full sensory onslaught. It gave me a thrill just to be in the room. I couldn't keep track of all the friends I had, but it was a roller coaster ride trying.

Early in the morning at one of these parties, I stepped outside. I looked up. The sky was turning deep blue and the stars were starting to go out one by one. I hadn't seen a sunrise for almost a week now. Mercury and Venus were clearly visible. The sky brightened and the eastern horizon turned red. All around me, the birds started the dawn chorus. I started to remember who I was. I went inside, to call everyone out to watch the sunrise. No-one was interested. They were all crashed out on the floor. The only sound was the blaring of the three 84" TVs. I turned them off. No-one noticed. I put the empty bottles in the trash and cleaned up the house.

Over the next couple of hours people roused themselves and thanked me for the great party. "See you tonight?" they said. "Sorry, I'll be doing something else." They were a bit puzzled, but cheerily went on their way without further reflection.

I called Rosamond. She lept at me over the phone.

"Where have you been? Someone has hacked your e-mail account. I got a stupid message from some asshole, telling me to go watch the Simpsons. I haven't been able to contact you for a week. Are you OK?"

"Yes I'm fine. Sorry about the e-mail. I expect the problem will be fixed today. I got your message about Cyclops. Are you OK?"

"It was awful. I cried for a day over her. I wish you'd been around to talk to. I still miss her, but it's not so bad now. I got another cat. It was hard picking out a kitten when I was missing Cyclops. I just wanted Cyclops back. He's a rescue kitten. He has the same red tabby colouring as Cyclops. He's adorable. I call him Hercules."
