

## An Unabashedly Bookish Introvert

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Women's Exchange, Winnetka IL

Without orthodoxy, there can be no heretics. And without single-minded social expectations, there can be no misfits. Maybe that's why Women's Exchange (WE) has become the place where I belong.

As a child, I felt terribly inadequate by comparison to talented and popular older siblings. And unlike all of them, I was often in trouble without understanding why. I'd ask an honest, reasonable question, and my classmates would laugh. The teacher would be furious, I would be baffled, and my parents would be called once again.

"I wasn't *trying* to be funny," I'd protest to my mother.

"Don't give me that!" she'd snap, and turn away.

When I was about ten, I overheard a neighbor talking about me to my father. I was coming down the stairs when I heard their voices so I stopped. I crouched, listening, at the turn of the stair.

"That smallest girl of yours, now," he said. "That one's fey. D'you know?"

"We know," my father replied. His voice sounded weary and resigned.

I didn't know what they meant—and "fey" wasn't in the dictionary that I checked later. This was clearly a serious matter, apparently decided against me. I was afraid to ask.

I remember once asking my father about something I'd heard in church. He was a mellow, courtly man, with very pale blue eyes and a narrow beaky nose softened by an easy smile. He had a gorgeous tenor voice, and he loved to sing. His rare anger mattered.

"Stop listening like that!" he demanded. "You listen more carefully than other people talk. Stop it!"

Stop listening. I backed off and left him alone, uncertain how one might stop listening but willing to try. I tried hiding novels behind my textbooks in school: *that* certainly didn't work. I thought adults were an unreasonable, inscrutable group. I didn't see why they were trusted to run things.

Decades later, after a manic gathering of our large and wildly extraverted Irish clan, my mother rehearsed her usual complaints about how quiet I had been.

"I was listening," I tried to explain. "Everybody was talking. Somebody has to listen!"

"Listening like that isn't friendly!" she insisted. "Every time I saw you, there you were, just standing there, saying nothing. Stop saying nothing!"

I'd have needed a chainsaw to get a word in edgewise. But by my thirties I knew better than to point out such facts. I had learned how to avoid at least certain kinds of trouble.

"Y'know, Mom," I ventured. "I'm an introvert." I'd just taken the Myers-Briggs test, and I scored off-scale for introversion and intuition (hence, in the Irish world, *fey*).

She slammed her hand on the table: "No child of mine is an introvert!"

I smiled helplessly. She fumed helplessly. We'd been at this for years. No wonder we both went gray at an early age.

The fact remains that I *am* an introvert. An unabashedly bookish introvert, in fact. From an early age I took refuge in reading from a world that baffled and defeated me at every turn. The world of the novel was enormously simpler than the real world. The world of a poem was simpler yet. (By third grade I had decided to be a poet when I grew up: poems were small, lovely, coherent things. I loved them. I vowed that one day I too would know how to make words do that.) Over the years I've gotten a bit more adept at social complexities, but I still find large amorphous groups quite intimidating.

And so I've never had many friends, or at least not as many as I've wanted. Writer's lives are by definition quite solitary. Once I left college, I had few opportunities to get to know people as individuals in any rich or significant way. There's all too much talk to which no one actually listens! As the years went by, the company of good books became less and less satisfying. I became acutely aware of what I was missing.

In my early forties I found myself both quite lonely and increasingly unhappy about that fact, especially after leaving a church in Evanston where I had been director of adult education. The new pastor said he had trouble working with women who looked as if they might question his authority. He decided, he said, to make me a volunteer. I

decided to resign. I wanted no part of fights like that with a man like him. But in walking out, I lost a community I loved. I no longer saw the women I had counted as friends. That hurt most of all: I had spent a lot of time listening to them.

But by chance, or so it seemed, I was invited to lead an Advent adult-ed program on Garrison Keillor at a Swedish Covenant church. Irish they were not: I'd never faced such a somber group. It was a battle. But Judy Geake was there. She sat in the back, on the right, next to Mary Shepherd. The two of them traded little comments behind their hands as I talked, and that worried me some. I was leery when they came up to talk to me afterwards. But Judy simply wanted to invite me to WE. Mary Shepherd said she'd come listen to me read from the phone book.

If I could, I'd have that comment framed and hung up next to my doctoral diploma. It was as if I'd been waiting all my life for the quality of welcome they offered that day.

Not long afterwards, still the hesitant stranger at WE, I found myself included in a lunch invitation simply because I was standing there in the hall. Just standing there. Not saying anything; just listening. It's hard to explain how much that first invitation meant to me—or how typical it is of what WE has provided to so many women. In the years since then I've met many women for whom WE has been a safe place to ask questions, a safe place to challenge all the expectations twining around our lives, a safe place to listen intently, waiting for the comfortable moment to speak up. Above all, perhaps, a place to find friends.

At WE my quirks were welcome because everyone seemed to be coming to terms with the quirkiest corners of her own soul. WE seemed full of unusual women, creatively offbeat women gingerly struggling—as I was still gingerly struggling—to come to terms with having needs and abilities, drives and doubts, that differed unduly from prevailing social norms. All of us had both questions and observations that other people in our lives had found quite disconcerting. Sharing these led to conversations and relationships that have been balm to my soul. What once made me "different" has now made me welcome. There's great grace in that symmetry.

My own writing has been deeply influenced by a brave group that suffered with me through manuscript chapters of a book I was writing on the conflict between careers

and personal life. We met for the first time on September 12, 2001, and I didn't realize until I tried to talk just how traumatized I was by events of the day before. Nothing I said made sense to me, much less to anyone else. What I should have done—but wasn't together enough to do—was say, "oh nuts to this: how are you? Let's just talk."

Despite that disastrous beginning, we worked together for an entire year: the book was published in November 2003 as *Selling Ourselves Short: Why We Struggle to Earn a Living and Have a Life*. Judy arranged for a book signing at the Bookstall. It was mobbed despite the pounding rain of a dark November night. I was ecstatic. That turnout was far more of a thrill than my interviews on Dateline or the Today show. I'd have burst into tears—if only I knew how! Between the support of my manuscript group and that SRO crowd at the Bookstall, I realized something crucial. I had somehow managed to be normal—or at least to have a wide streak of "normal"—despite living in a mostly crazy world. It's the WE world that has its head on straight: kindness, loyalty, courage, honesty, and laughter—even in the dark of a rainy November night.

Recognitions like that can only come in good company, and WE has repeatedly offered me good company. As a result, I now find myself imagining WE women as the key audience for anything I write. These are the faces and the souls that I summon when I sit at a keyboard. From this community I have learned that I do belong, and that I always have belonged, and that there have always been women exactly like us, standing around the edges, feeling out of place. But at WE we misfit together, and it's glorious. We've redefined "normal" for one another, redefined it in open, multidimensional ways.

As that blessed recognition sank in, I signed up for Life Planning, ready to take a good hard look at who I have become and what I want next to do with my life now that my kids are grown and gone. That led in turn to something I've dreamed about doing for years: I've started a small business leading writing workshops of my own. The university-level writing course, with all its red pens and its need for graded performances, too often fails to nurture and support the creative process. Students are assumed to learn best by learning from their mistakes, and so every mistake is red-lined. But that's not in fact how writers develop craft. We learn best from our successes, which are often quite subtle and very elusive. Listening for what works well in a piece—

intense, intentional, generous, intelligent listening—has extraordinary transformative power for writers, whether they are the author question or the readers.

Sometimes the most obvious things are hidden by the very fact that they are so obvious, whether in a piece of writing or in my life generally. Seeing the obvious things about one another is perhaps key to what is exchanged at Women's Exchange. We call one another by name, and everybody always wears a nametag.

All of us belong, and everyone is welcome at lunch. There are no misfits here.