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BORN TO BE MILD

Eleanor Brown examines the role of introverts in a world full of selfies and overwhelming stimulation.

By Eleanor Brown

SHAUN CLEARY

A group of friends and I were meeting for lunch at a local restaurant. Near our table, two televisions were tuned to a sports channel, the volume low.

We were the only customers, and we weren't there to watch television. I walked over and turned them off.

"Televisions in restaurants are so annoying," I explained when I returned to the table.

My friend Charity looked at me as though I were slightly crazy.

"I just tune them out," she said.

I looked at her as though she were slightly crazy.

"How?" I asked.

Introverts in an Extroverted World

Over the next few months, I found myself wondering about this exchange periodically. I find noise—televisions or talk radio in waiting rooms, one-sided cell-phone conversations, noisy restaurants—distracting to the point of being infuriating. But the restaurant televisions hadn't bothered Charity at all.

What made us so different?

It wasn't until I was reading Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (Random House, 2012) that I found an answer. Our personalities—specifically our natural tendency toward introversion or extroversion—influence the way we handle the world around us.

If you've noticed the flood of articles, blog posts, and social-media lists including 25 Frustrating Things About Being an Extrovert and The Top Ten Myths About Introverts, you can thank Cain, whose *New York Times* bestselling book unleashed a flood of conversation about those traits.

Cain's core ideas in *Quiet* are twofold. First, she suggests Western (especially American) culture has, relatively recently, developed what she terms an "extrovert ideal" we all feel pressure to follow. Second, she says the unquestioned ubiquity of that model is not serving us: in personal and political life, in schools and business, and in creative pursuits.

Instead, she argues, we need to build a world in which the unique talents of both introverts and extroverts are appreciated and used to their greatest ability.

ARE YOU AN INTROVERT OR AN EXTROVERT?

Q: How important to you is time alone?

Q: Which recharges you: a night out with your friends or a night in with your partner?

Q: Would you find more value in a group discussion or a one-on-one conversation?

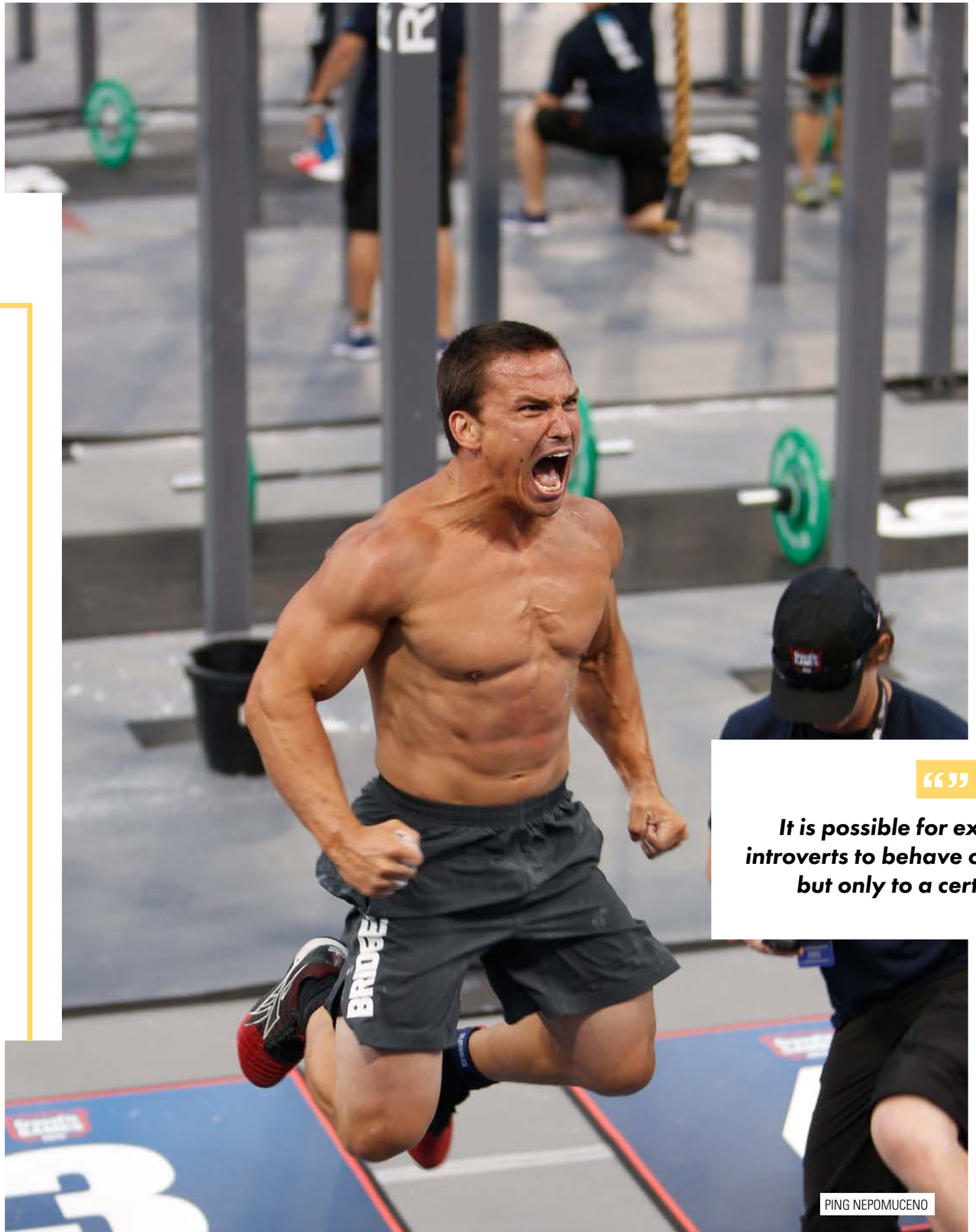
Q: How do you feel after public speaking?

Q: Which helps you process your thoughts: talking about them or thinking about them?

Introverts: Tend to find the most value in smaller group interactions and alone time.

Extroverts: Are energized and motivated by larger groups and talking issues through.

Take Susan Cain's Quiet Quiz here.



PING NEPOMUCENO

What Is an Introvert?

Cain defines the core difference between the two personality types this way: "Introverts and extroverts differ in the level of stimulation they need to function well."

This explains, then, why Charity was so confused by my inability to tune out the televisions during our lunch and why I was so confused by her lack of concern. We are wired completely differently in terms of our tolerance for stimulation in our environment: She functions best when there is a great deal, and I am better off when there is much less.

But Cain herself points out there is no single type of extrovert or introvert. There are extroverts who love to spend large amounts of time reading and introverts who are successful public figures. We often look for the wrong signs in interpreting people's behavior.

Introversion, for instance, is not the same thing as shyness. "Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating," Cain clarifies.

Another trait often confused or conflated with introversion is a lack of social skills, but again, that is not necessarily the case. Introverts, especially introverted children, often spend a great deal of time observing people's interactions, a habit which can make them excellent readers of emotion and communication.

It is possible for extroverts and introverts to behave out of character, but only to a certain extent. Cain calls this "the 'rubber band theory' of personality." She says we "can stretch ourselves, but only so much." Our attempts to take on a different role—for an extrovert to behave in an introverted manner or vice versa—are most successful in service of something we are passionate about.

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The best way to think about extroverts and introverts is to consider the issue of how we deal with stimulation. A speaker who greets the audience individually after a talk and then invites a group out for a drink to continue the conversation is likely an extrovert, but a speaker who leaves the stage and hurries home to a blissfully quiet house is likely an introvert. There is no difference in their skill as speaker, only in how expending energy in that way affects each of them.

And both were probably born that way.

Born Looking Inward

It seems to be nature, not nurture, that starts us down the road toward extroversion or introversion. Jerome Kagan, the head of the Laboratory for Child Development at Harvard University, theorized that infants who reacted strongly to new stimuli would grow up to be introverts.

Kagan's experiments centered on a part of the brain called the amygdala, part of the "emotional brain" that determines how we respond to sensory input. His research proved his hypothesis: Infants with more excitable amygdalas "would wiggle and howl when shown unfamiliar objects." Kagan called these children "high-reactives."

These highly reactive children were not necessarily scared. They were simply very aware of the world around them.

Children who reacted less strongly to changes in their environment had less excitable nervous systems. These "low-reactives" noticed the unfamiliar objects but were not disturbed by them. These children were more likely to grow into extroverts, which, given what we now understand about an extrovert's tolerance for stimulation, makes sense.

This biological basis can be traced through the choices we make during our lives.

A high-reactive introvert might have chosen to participate in an individual sport such as cross-country running in high school, and he or she might have selected writing as a career. These choices are attractive to an introvert because they allow a great deal of control over the amount of environmental stimulation.

A low-reactive extrovert, on the other hand, might have chosen to play a team sport such as soccer in high school, and he or she might have taken jobs in sales because of the excitement provided by a constantly changing environment and unpredictable interactions with different people.

Cain reports that research like Kagan's consistently shows "introversion and extroversion, like other major personality traits … , are about 40 to 50 percent heritable."

And introversion is common: Cain says from one-third to one-half of Americans are introverts.

So why do we talk more about the Kardashians than Kirkegaard? Why is the National Basketball Association more popular than the National Book Awards? Why do we insist a quiet, bookish child must "come out of her shell"?

Why don't we celebrate introversion?

RUBY WOLFF

> ***Why do we talk more about the Kardashians than Kirkegaard?***

The Extrovert Ideal

We weren't always an extroverted people. Cultural historian Warren Susman argues that, until the beginning of the 20th century, the American zeitgeist was a "Culture of Character," emphasizing easily practicable virtues: morality, courtesy, integrity.

But the dawn of the new Industrial Age and its attendant changes—the glorification of industry and the "self-made man," the broadening business circles bringing us into contact with new people—also brought about a shift in the kind of person we admired.

We became a "Culture of Personality," Susman explains, revering not the thoughtful or dutiful but the charismatic and charming. We became a culture of salespeople and entertainers.

And our fascination with big personalities and our drive to emulate them have not abated. If anything, we have careened wildly into a race to see who can be the most extroverted, the busiest, the most outgoing.

Think of the seemingly inexhaustible number of people willing to appear on a seemingly inexhaustible number of reality shows. And our fascination with the celebrity and attention social media grants all of us turns us into extroverts, and often extreme extroverts. We all have something public to say—typically immediately and without thought—about every topic we encounter.

Sophia Dembling, author of *The Introvert's Way*, points out that social media has turned even the process of grief into a performance. Take, for instance, the tendency to become publically distraught about the deaths of celebrities we did not know, or even our own "private losses, which we announce with tearstained Facebook pages inviting all our 'friends' to share our sorrow."

Our behavior demonstrates how the Culture of Personality has changed the ideals we hold and pursue.

Extroversion as an individual personality trait is a wonderful thing. The world needs extroverts. We need them at parties to keep the conversation going, we need them on stage to entertain us, we need them in diplomatic offices to build bridges between nations. We need negotiators and salespeople and powerful personalities to bring us together over conference tables and dinner tables.

But Cain thinks we have fallen so deeply in love with the idea of extroversion that we have decided it is the cure for all our ills, even when it clearly is not.

The Beer Test

Consider, for example, current politics. Today's U.S. Congress, Cain points out, is made for extroverts, people who want to spend their days talking and meeting with lobbyists and other lawmakers, who enjoy public speaking and are energized by being around other people. And because politics has become a full-time career, politicians are concerned with electability, otherwise known as likeability, which we tend to judge on the basis of extrovert traits.

One of these examples is the "beer test," which seems to rear its ugly head every presidential election: Which candidate would we most want to have a beer with? This is, of course, a completely irrelevant question (and an unlikely scenario), but it reveals how far the Extrovert Ideal has spread.

Shouldn't the question be who is the most thoughtful, the most experienced, the most likely to get us through the good times and the bad? Shouldn't we want someone brilliant? Smarter and more contemplative than the rest of us put together? Sure, likeability should

be a consideration for a position requiring so much diplomacy, but shouldn't it be only one item on the list of things we consider?

But because we are prisoners of the Extrovert Ideal, that beer question comes around every election, and we, as a nation, seriously spend time considering it.

Reading Cain's thoughts on politics, I was reminded of the 1992 presidential election, in which independent candidate Ross Perot selected Navy Vice Adm. James Stockdale as his vice-presidential candidate.

Stockdale held a master's degree from Stanford University and was a highly decorated veteran and Medal of Honor recipient who had spent seven-and-a-half years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. But his poor performance during a televised debate against more camera-ready opponents Dan Quayle and Al Gore made him a national punchline instead of a serious candidate.

But we were, again, evaluating him on the wrong criteria. We weren't considering his ideas, his character, his resume. We were judging him as a performer—only one part of the job he sought. And he failed, in our eyes, because, as comedian Dennis Miller said, "he committed the one unpardonable sin in our culture: he was bad on television."

And therein lies the problem with the Extrovert Ideal. We are so sure extroversion is the best measuring stick that we use it in situations in which it has little to no bearing.

The Extrovert Ideal at Work

Because the Western world has become so focused on extroversion, we have begun to think of introversion as a personality flaw, as something to be cured.

On one hand, if our culture stresses the importance of first impressions, if we make decisions about who to hire based on job interviews, and if we require people to make public presentations, we need to produce people with the right skills—thus the stress in schools on group work and cooperative learning, on class discussion and participation, on presentations and performance.

On the other hand, many of the decisions we have made and the strategies we have developed because of our love of extroversion are not, in fact, effective at all, Cain argues. For example, group brainstorming, a technique adored from the classroom to the boardroom, is actually a poor method for generating ideas, and "performance gets worse as group size increases."

We are so sure extroversion is the best measuring stick that we use it in situations in which it has little to no bearing.

The rage for open-plan offices—tearing down the cubicle walls as an active metaphor for improving communication and collaboration—contributes to a decline in productivity. Committee decision-making leads to the acceptance of not the best ideas but those expressed most vociferously.

It's not that there is no point in collaboration. But when we elevate it to such a lofty status, assuming without thought that it is the best way to achieve the best possible outcome, we have lost something.

In contrast, Cain presents research demonstrating the value of a more introverted process of invention and collaboration. Instead of gathering people together to generate ideas and make decisions, Cain praises the value of asynchronous, "passive forms of collaboration like email, instant messaging, and online chat tools."

What's the difference? The slower pace of the conversation and having to articulate ideas through writing forces us into a more contemplative and thoughtful state.

In addition, the impact of personal charisma is reduced, and ideas can be considered on their merits, not on the enthusiasm or talent of the presenter. To be fair, it could be argued that though the bias toward a more enthusiastic speaker is removed, it is replaced by a bias toward a more eloquent writer.

Despite our preference for group work, we often are visited by our greatest genius when we are on our own.

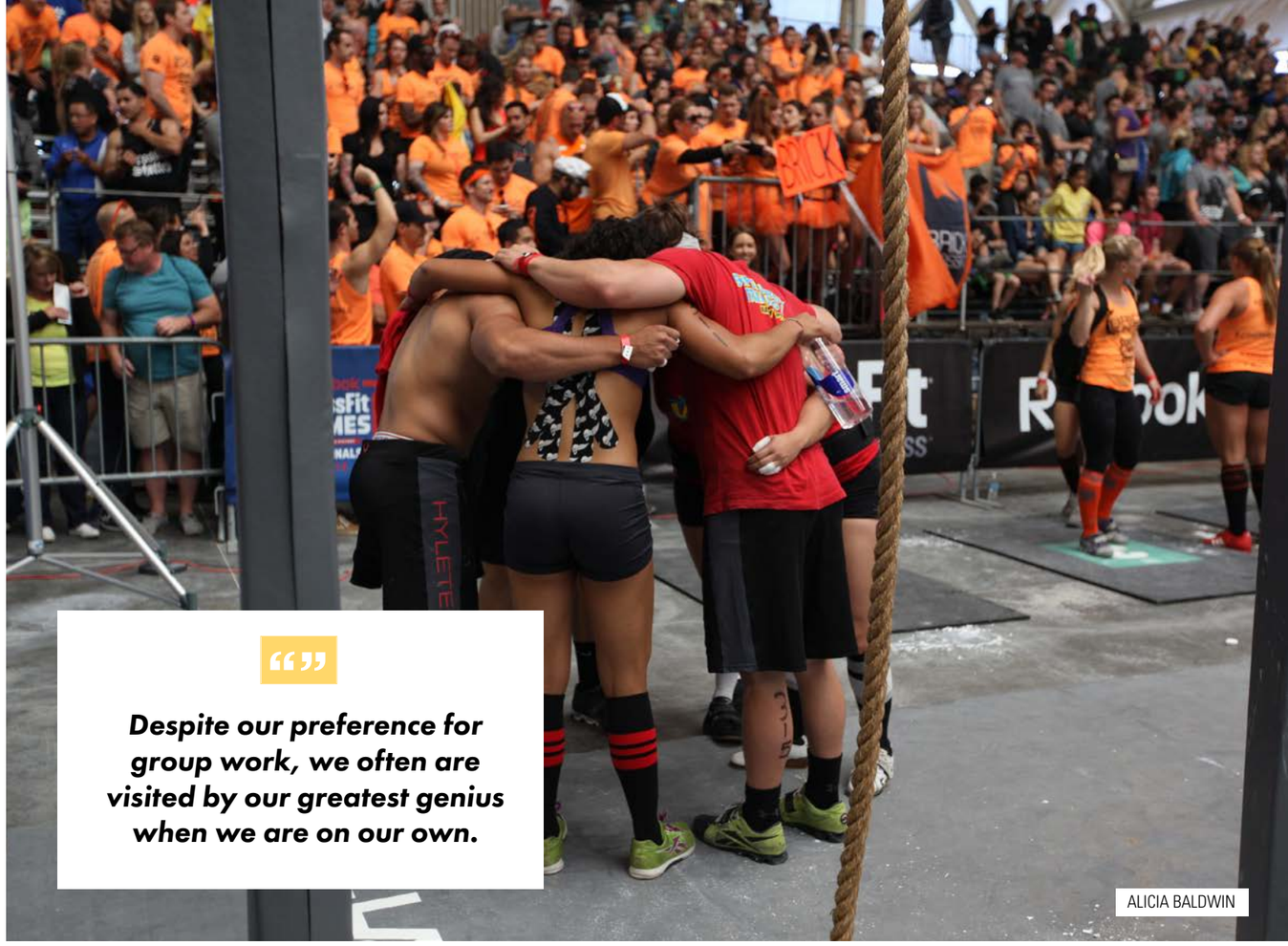
Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Inc., is an example of the kind of creativity that can grow from quiet, independent work. In his biography, he notes the importance of time spent in thoughtful, practical solitude.

"I don't believe anything really revolutionary has been invented by community," he wrote.

Introverts as Leaders

According to Cain, our inability "to distinguish between good presentation skills and true leadership ability" has led us to automatically look for a big personality to lead us, even in places where a quieter, more thoughtful approach might be a boon.

Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School of business, has proposed the idea that introverts would be better leaders in certain cases. His research argues that, given a group of relatively passive workers, an extroverted leader would be very successful, exciting



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ALICIA BALDWIN

EXCERPTS FROM MANIFESTO

BY SUSAN CAIN

1

There's a word for "people who are in their heads too much": thinkers.

2

Our culture rightly admires risk-takers, but we need our "heed-takers" more than ever.

3

Solitude is a catalyst for innovation.

Read the complete list at thepowerofintroverts.com.

and encouraging his or her staff to reach their goals. However, a group of employees more interested in taking initiative might be better off with an introverted leader, one less interested in the impact he or she personally makes and more receptive to employee-driven suggestions.

Instead of making assumptions about the best type of leaders (charismatic) and the best processes for groups to follow (brainstorming), research such as Grant's indicates we might be better off looking at each individual group of people and each situation. Members of a group composed largely of introverts might be ill-suited for daily meetings but might thrive when asked to deliver that same information via email, which would give them time to consider and formulate opinions and suggestions without the stress of oral presentation. But a group of extroverted employees might starve for stimulation if they were all ordered to telecommute.

Minister Adam McHugh talks about the Extrovert Ideal in his evangelical faith in his book *Introverts in the Church*. While charismatic ministers may make excellent preachers, what about the contemplative listening skills required by pastoral counseling, he wonders? In a celebratory, enthusiastic religious service, how can we also make space for individual meditation and private connection with the divine?

In other words, don't we need both introverts and extroverts?

Living in Harmony

There is much information in *Quiet* that could be read as critical of extroversion.

Because the power of introversion is rarely discussed, it would be easy to read the book that way, especially for an introvert delighted to find validation—at last!

The real point of Cain's work is not to disparage extroverts but to consider the idea that we have been neglecting the contributions introverts can make and the aspects of introversion we can learn from.

Research has demonstrated no difference between the intelligence of introverts or extroverts, but they do perform quite differently on tasks. For instance, in timed exercises or ones requiring multitasking, extroverts perform better. But if the exercise requires patience and persistence, introverts are more likely to succeed. Knowing our talents can lead us to greater success.

And we have something to learn from each other. Extroverts must become better at listening to good ideas presented with less polish or through introverted channels such as writing. But introverts must also learn to value their own ideas and to share them effectively, even in traditionally extroverted ways.

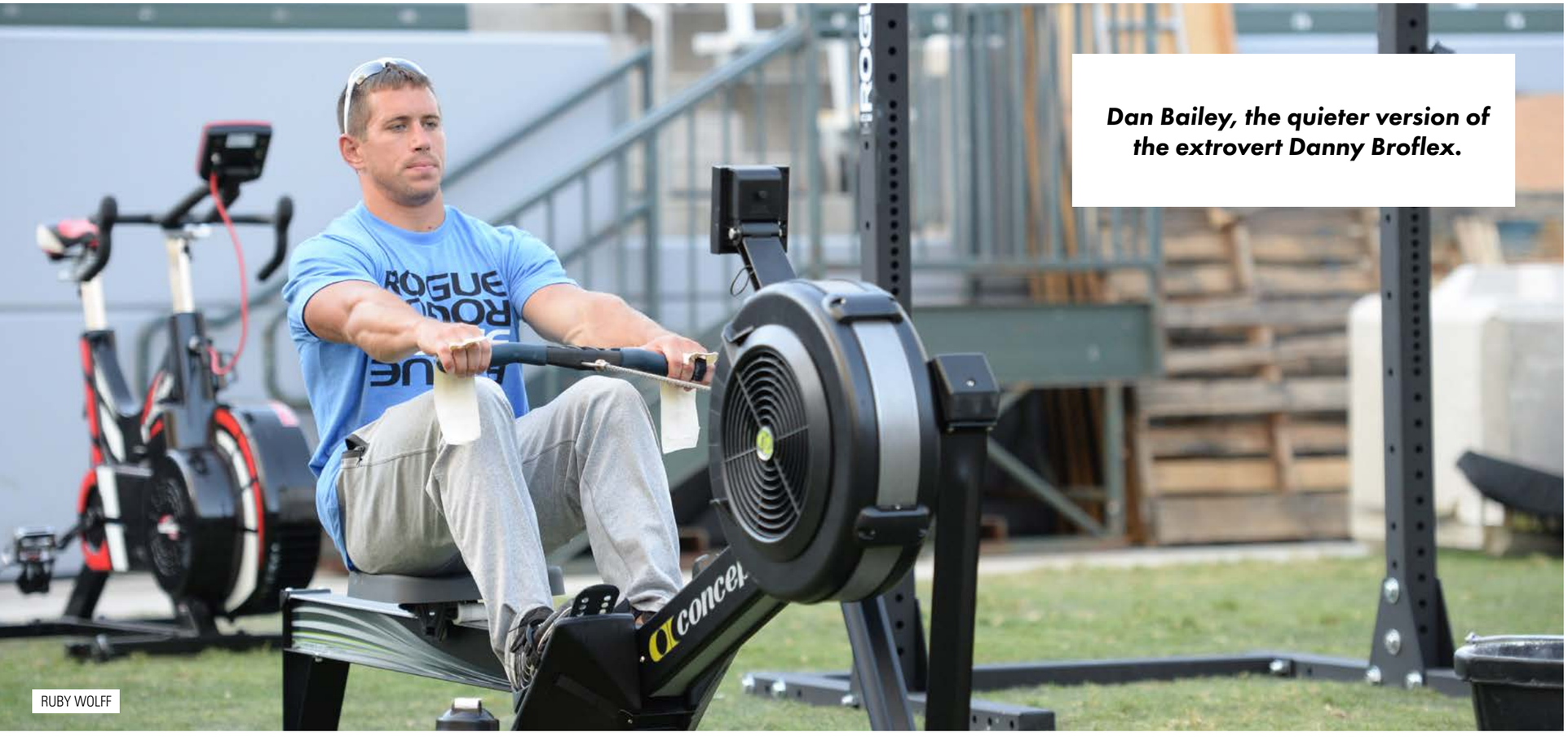
One of the great strengths of introverts, Cain argues, is "soft power." Rather than an aggressive battle for control, soft power is "quiet persistence," a way of asserting oneself or one's ideas by using those natural introverted skills of patience, conviction and tenacity.

It is worth being aware, too, of the needs and desires of our opposites. Extroverts must understand an introvert's need for silence, as introverts must support an extrovert's requirement for stimulation.

Teachers and bosses must make space for introverts to process silently and individually, without judgment, and for extroverts to work together, to act and decide with quickness and energy. But there must also be cognizance of what is gained and lost by each method.

And we must recognize our need for each other. As part of her research, Cain went to a retreat targeted at introverts. She had expected the experience to be peaceful, filled with people who understood her need for quiet and calm. But she also found herself missing what she thought of as the natural balance between introverts and extroverts.

"I thought (the retreat) would make me long for … a world in which everyone speaks softly and no one carries a big stick. But instead it reinforced my deeper yearning for balance."



RUBY WOLFF

Dan Bailey, the quieter version of the extrovert Danny Broflex.

ADDITIONAL READING

How to Win Friends and Influence People, Dale Carnegie

Introverts in the Church: Finding Our Place in an Extroverted Culture, Adam McHugh

The Introvert's Way: Living a Quiet Life in a Noisy World, Sophia Dembling

To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others, Daniel H. Pink

Quiet Kids: Help Your Introverted Child Succeed in an Extroverted World, Christine Fonseca.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Eleanor Brown is the **New York Times** and international bestselling author of the novel **The Weird Sisters**, and of the fitness inspiration book **WOD Motivation**. She has been doing CrossFit for two-and-a-half years and trains at CrossFit Modig in Highlands Ranch, Colo.*