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Celebrating Differences—Part II
Introverts and Extraverts
By Kenneth A. Sprang

*Find the person who will love you because of your differences
and not in spite of them and you have found a lover for life.*

--Leo Buscaglia

In the last issue, I introduced the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and suggested that it is a valuable tool for relationships. As you will recall, the MBTI measures personality type and temperament, determining whether one is Extraverted (E) or Introverted (I), Intuitive (N) or Sensing (S), Thinking (T) or Feeling (F), and Perceiving (P) or Judging (J).

Understanding our type and that of our partner (or prospective partner) provides a valuable tool for us to be able to celebrate and honor our differences, rather than letting them divide us. Although there are a lot of exceptions to the old adage that “opposites attract,” there is some basis for that observation in type theory.

This attraction of “opposites” complements Imago theory as well, since because of our socialization certain parts of our personality develop while other parts may be suppressed. In seeking a partner, we unconsciously look for our “lost self.” For example, Introverts are often attracted to Extraverts.

Introverts are not unsocial. However, they may prefer a quiet evening with a few close friends to a party with dozens of people. Extraverts, on the other hand, thrive on being with people. Introverts find Extraverts easy to connect with, for they will often take the lead, make plans, and carry on conversation with great ease. Of course, sometimes characteristics that attract us become the very characteristics that later irritate us.

Carol and I encountered this phenomenon from the beginning of our relationship. Carol is an Introvert. She really likes people and connects with them richly and deeply. However, like most Introverts, she can also be overwhelmed. I, on the other hand, am an Extravert—not the “life of the party” kind, but I am energized by people. I sometimes joke about needing a “people fix.”

Carol fell in love with my easy ability to engage in conversation and to take the lead in many things. However, our differences posed challenges, too. For example, Carol had a well-established ritual of getting up each morning and sitting quietly with her coffee, reflecting and “centering” before she began each day. When we were dating she was sharing an apartment with an old friend who was a strong Extravert. Carol recalls how she once sternly announced to her friend “Libby, get out of my morning,” when the roommate sought to engage in conversation during Carol’s quiet time alone. I, too, had to learn to be quiet and “stay out of her morning” during that reflective time.

My son Todd is also an Introvert. He is a software developer and can happily while away hours and hours at his computer developing complex software. At large family gatherings, Todd often finds it necessary to “escape” for a bit to take a nap or find some quiet space to recharge. Being around crowds can be really tiring for a strong Introvert.

Much as I have had to learn to give Todd space and be aware of his need for occasional quiet and solitude, I have had to learn to honor Carol’s Introversion. In contrast to Todd, Carol usually does okay with groups (maybe it is conditioning in a 40 plus person energetic Italian

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family). The challenge for us has been more about sharing thoughts.

Introverts think a lot, as much or more than Extraverts. However, Extraverts often think aloud, whereas Introverts may have more difficulty converting their thoughts and mental images to words.

Her Introversion is, of course, part of Carol's richness as a person. So I have had to learn to stretch and remember to *invite* her to share her thoughts with me and also to respect her need for occasional solitude. In addition, I have learned that sometimes if I ask her an important question or there is an important issue at hand, she may need time to process and think about it before discussing it. Likewise, she stretches to tell me how she is feeling and what she is thinking. She also has learned to accept that my thinking aloud and similar traits are an integral part of me.

If we are unaware of these differences, they can get in the way of relationships. The Extravert may think that the Introvert is anti-social, or that she simply has no significant thoughts. Likewise, the Introvert may perceive the Extravert as filled with idle chatter or highly self-centered. Neither of these conclusions would be accurate, of course.

Consider whether you are an Extravert (about 75% of the population is thought to be Extraverted) or an Introvert. If you are uncertain, ask whether you are more energized by people (Extravert) or whether you need quiet or alone time to recharge (Introvert). If your partner is different, either because he or she is the opposite of you or because your partner is the same but different in degree, recognize that this characteristic is an integral part of your partner's being. By understanding that you each have your own way of engaging the world, and that Extraverts and Introverts each bring separate gifts to the relationship, you can both learn to honor and celebrate differences, rather than letting the differences divide and irritate you.

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