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Searching for Small Spaces

Comfortable darkness encloses my body as the last sliver of light fades behind the cabinet door. The trapped air reeks of rotting leftovers mixed with a variety of cleaning supplies. I plug my nose and patiently wait. My ears sense the first squeals of excitement, dismay, and surprise. Someone has been found.

Hide-and-go-seek was always my favorite game to play, the reason being that I invariably won each round thanks to my acute awareness of the endless small spaces surrounding me. While my siblings would crouch behind a chair in the living room or hide behind the shoes in the closet, I always managed to find a tiny space seemingly too small for a human body and contort myself into it. Of course, my fellow hide-and-seekers did not look for the small spaces; their search always followed the standard route of hiding spots: first look under the bed, then behind the couch, then maybe behind a closet door... you get the point. So, I quietly crowned myself Queen Hide-and-Seeker, a most pretentious title.

Small spaces were my lifestyle. Everywhere I went, I was able to find a small space where I could regroup my thoughts and re-energize myself.

At home, my favorite small space was atop a colossal emerald pine tree situated in the center of the backyard. The day we moved to Connecticut, I fondly nicknamed her The Secret Hiding Place in honor of her confidential aura. I sought her confidences so often that my mom

lovingly worried that I was spending too much time alone, that I was “too introverted,” as if it were something I needed to overcome.

At recess, my small space was the tall yellow swing set near the side fence at the perimeter of the playground. Teachers worried I wasn’t interacting with the other kids enough. I was labeled “the quiet kid,” “the shy kid.”

At the chaotic end of the school day, while waiting for the bus, my small space was in a book — sometimes fiction, sometimes fantasy, sometimes nonfiction... it depended on the day. My teachers used this time to pull me aside, telling me to raise my hand more; I wasn’t contributing enough; my voice wasn’t loud enough; I wasn’t sharing my thoughts enough. What it all sounded like to me: I wasn’t enough.

In fifth grade, I finally worked up the guts to audition for the Simsbury Townwide Choir, a distinguished audition-based choir made up of fourth to sixth graders from all five elementary schools in the town. I entered the stuffy audition room with clammy hands and flushed cheeks, but a tenacious attitude. After giving my all at the conventional audition song, “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” I was informed by the music teacher, Mrs. Brown, that my voice was “too small.” Once again, I was reminded I was not enough. It stuck with me. Years later, when I got into the highest-level choir in my high school, I was absolutely shocked. It had to be a mistake. My voice was “too small.” How could there possibly be a space for me here?

Define introvert: “a shy, reticent person.” Or worse, “a person predominantly concerned with their own thoughts and feelings rather than with external things.” Thank you, Oxford English Dictionary, for that lovely definition of half the population. It’s good to know that just because I get my energy from time alone, I’m negatively regarded as being a self-absorbed narcissist.

This belittling attitude toward introverts has permeated our entire culture for far too long. The other day, I was reading the 1868 American novel *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott, when I stumbled upon a casual instance of this denigration of introversion. During a heartfelt conversation, the beloved heroine Jo condescendingly remarks to her young, introverted sister Beth, “that’s my girl; you do try to fight off your shyness, and I love you for it. Fighting faults isn’t easy, as I know” (Alcott, n.p.).¹ While Jo’s statement is well-intended, her attitude toward Beth’s introversion is clearly very patronizing; she sees Beth’s quiet demeanor as a fault she must overcome, rather than a trait which should be celebrated. Two hundred years later, this attitude is still ingrained in American society.

In the classroom, young extroverts are praised for their outspokenness and outward sociability while introverts are constantly reproached for being too quiet, for having too small a voice, for not being enough. Grading based on participation in large class discussions does not encourage thoughtfulness and respect for what others have to say. Extroverted personalities dominate the conversation, making the small space allotted to introverts even smaller. All throughout my life, I was led to believe that because I preferred a small space to think and observe, I was not enough.

In eighth grade, my mindset began to change. During a sweaty interlude between volleyball matches in gym class, a girl named Cece approached me. I never knew her that well, but she had been in a couple of my classes, and I’d always thought of her as being a kind and friendly classmate. She was the type of well-liked girl who seemed to be friends with everyone. On this particular day of gym class, we happened to be on the same volleyball team. While we stood on the sidelines waiting for the next match to begin, she walked to me and confidently

¹ No page number provided at the time of publication.

asserted, “You’re quiet. My mom always told me that I should make friends with quiet kids. She says they are usually the best listeners and the most thoughtful friends.” I had never thought about myself that way. I had always felt that the small space I occupied was not enough. But Cece’s short remark made me realize, my quiet manner didn’t make me socially inept or unworthy. While I may never be the loudest in the room, I will always be a good listener and will bring a thoughtful perspective to the conversation. Introversion is not something that needs to be overcome or justified; it is a quality that should be celebrated.

I thought back to the small spaces of my childhood.

My small space in The Secret Hiding Place did not limit me, contrary to what my mom had believed. For years, I’d climb this same tree nearly every day, not because I hated people and was solely concerned with my own thoughts and feelings, but because I felt like from atop, I could see the whole world, and because it was magical and harmonious and lovely. I found a friend in this tree; there was a sense of mutual listening and understanding. When I sat in my little nook of the tree observing, I felt no judgement. I wasn’t confined to the erroneous label as “the shy kid.” This small space allowed me to deeply appreciate so many beautiful simplicities – like the way the sun’s rays of light would peek through the needles of the tree, never failing to find a way to speak their truth. Or the way the squirrels mischievously chased each other up and down the oak trees, creating brand new routes throughout the woods. One of the many comforts of my childhood was knowing that my tree friend would warmly welcome me into a serene embrace whenever I needed it, and she did.

My small space on the swing set did not make me “antisocial.” I would have gladly conversed with my peers if I felt I had worthwhile things to say at that moment. But there were many days when letting my imagination get the best of me served as a better use of my time. On

the swing set, I became an unfettered seagull flying freely above the grassy ocean, the air ruffling my tangly blonde hair while the sun's rays softly touched my skin. I could see everything and think about everything without any limitations. When the whistle blew signifying the end of recess, I'd return to the classroom with a refreshed spirit and a positive perspective. I can't imagine not having this time to think and experience the world.

My small space in a book did not make me a reclusive egotist. While my rambunctious peers chaotically ran about the room, I did not feel as though I could positively contribute to the scene. So, I chose to immerse myself into the boundless worlds of words. JK Rowling, Lemony Snicket, and Laura Ingalls Wilder carved out paths where I learned perseverance, cleverness, courage, loyalty, and so much more. While I ventured through Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Klaus Baudelaire's love of words and books taught me the importance of knowledge, Violet Baudelaire's knack for creatively inventing demonstrated the value of resourcefulness, and Count Olaf's obsession with wealth opened my eyes to the absurdity of greed. Contrary to my peers' beliefs, I was not absorbed in myself. I was absorbed in the themes of our reality.

People seem to believe that we all need to be loud, that we all need to have an immediate resounding opinion, and that we must share it emphatically. We look at the people who occupy the most space, the people who speak the most and who speak the loudest. We frown upon individuals who take quiet time to reflect and recharge, classifying them as "antisocial" and "shy," rather than placing value on their thoughtful and reflective life approach. There are so many people who, with the help of their introverted personalities, have significantly bettered this world. Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein was a known introvert. He once commented that "the monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind." It was in his small space

of solitude that he was able to discover, invent, and contribute meaningfully to the world. It's difficult to even imagine how different our lives would be if people like Einstein did not seek out a quiet place to be their thoughtful selves.

While the space introverts occupy may sometimes be small, it is a valuable, thoughtful, and incredibly meaningful space. So, let's try taking a different route; rather than looking under the bed, let's look in between that small space between the pillow and the wall. Rather than looking behind the chair, how about we try picking up the cushion and looking underneath? Looking for those small spaces may unearth a new discovery. Let's try to prevent introverts from always being the last ones found in life's intricate game of Hide and Seek.

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