

Michael Milburn

Say Anything

When Susan Cain's book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* came out in 2012, I found two copies among my Christmas gifts that year. It didn't surprise me to be thought of in connection with this topic, taciturnity being my most noticeable and, to me, least desirable trait. And even though Cain presents quietness as a virtue and quiet people as more productive, influential, and alluring than extroverts, that doesn't diminish my envy of the latter, to whom I have always attributed more charisma and confidence than I possess. My sensitivity was such that it embarrassed me to be seen reading the book, like a ninety-eight pound weakling spotted with a guide to channeling his inner Hulk.

Cain did get me thinking about what makes people quiet, both powerfully and not, and once I started coming up with reasons—inarticulateness, intelligence, insecurity, attentiveness, concentration, stupidity, disapproval, shyness, contempt—it was hard to stop. With so many possibilities it's no wonder that we tend to find quiet people mysterious, and guess at what their uncommunicativeness conveys. At 6'5" I exhibit a strong silent type exterior, often taken for aloofness, but in social situations am invariably reproaching myself for not joining in. Standing speechless as people converse around me, I often feel—and feel like I look—too tongue-tied to take part. The larger the group and

more extemporaneous my words, the less coherent I sound and more likely to see baffled nods in response, which increases my reluctance to risk speaking again.

The psychology gets so tricky that I lose track of what I actually have or want to say. I love listening, but listening also relieves me of thinking I should be talking; at parties, I indulge blowhards to stave off silences that will need to be filled. With friends I sometimes worry that I've dominated a conversation only to hear later how quiet I was. My current job as a middle school English teacher demands more talk than anything else I do, but my students describe me—not unkindly—as terse. The classroom has always been a complicated place for me, my quietness never more of a curse than when I was a student. One high school religion teacher grew so frustrated by our seminar's nonparticipants that he threatened to fail anyone who did not speak before the period's end. Looking back, I wonder why he didn't see it as his job to include us. I'd have loved to be prompted, thankful not to have to fight my way into the garrulous scrum. I try to call on my students so predictably that no one stands out as silent.

Not all of them welcome this, and the issue of class participation continues to bedevil me. At a dinner recently I sat next to the father of Jake, one of my brightest former students. I had commented on Jake's reserve in two end-of-term evaluations, during my conference with his parents, and in my recommendation letter for the prep school he currently attended. The gist of these mentions was that his A minus could rise to an A if he would speak up more. According to his father, Jake was feeling the same pressure in high school, and I predicted that the issue would dog him throughout college. I didn't intend this as a criticism, but Jake's father sounded defensive as he reminded me of his son's natural soft-spokenness and passion for reading and music. He seemed

exasperated that Jake would be penalized for a trait that had nothing to do with his aptitude. I agreed, but reiterated that it was difficult to give a silent student an A in English, and that teachers would increasingly use class participation as a criterion for grading before his education was done.

I'm ambivalent about this practice. Even as passive students frustrate me when I am trying to lead a discussion, I empathize with them. My sister recently sent me some papers she had come across while emptying our childhood home, among them a sheaf of evaluations written by my tenth grade English teacher:

Michael's written work has been very good, but he is still hesitant to contribute in class. I have spoken to him about this and he replies that he is simply a quiet person.

Michael must learn to speak up in class particularly when he is having trouble keeping up with the new material....It is very difficult for his teachers to know exactly where his problems lie if he is totally silent.

In English class Michael continued to be extremely quiet. He would offer little to the class unless called upon. His final average was close to honors, but his lack of classroom participation hurt the end result.

Re-reading these it occurred to me that every report card I ever received lamented my quietness, and every one I have ever written has praised or prodded students according to the frequency of their contributions. None of these assessments went so far as to imply a personality defect or warn of future unhappiness; rather, they affirmed my tenth grade teacher's view:

I have reminded Michael that the success of the class depends on the discussions, and without communication the class would be tedious and uninteresting.

In those days I believed that speaking in class did little to further one's education. As a teacher, I would qualify this. My students do learn by formulating answers to the questions about books that I pose. In addition to any knowledge they might acquire from me or their classmates, they get practice articulating and supporting their opinions, and addressing the opinions of others. These skills transfer to the arguments they will make in their essays. Debating with their peers also benefits them socially. Maybe my current awkwardness in group settings can be traced to when I held back while everyone else was improving his or her verbal facility.

Most teachers feel so strongly about oral expression both as a necessary skill and as a sustainer of discussions that they factor it into their course grade. Twenty years ago, before my first semester teaching college composition, my colleagues recommended that I count class participation for twenty per cent and print that percentage in bold on my syllabus. They explained that some college students are so grade-motivated, risk-averse, and energy-conserving that all but the congenital blabbermouths will just sit and listen if they can get away with it.

As the semester progressed, I could always tell when kids were trying to protect their twenty per cent. They listened carefully, looking for a good time to interject. Then they raised their hands—no interrupting like their more verbal counterparts—and their comments were relevant and succinct. I liked hearing from them; as I struggled to rein in the monologists and draw out the mutes, these selective talkers convinced me that all students could and should speak periodically. Maybe if the twenty per cent rule had existed in my day I'd have spoken up more, though I hardly lack for motivation. I squirm in my silence, aware that I'm not, as my mother used to scold me, pulling my oar.

One of my students this year reminds me of me back then. I know I should see him the way I saw myself, as no less personable and active of mind than the talkative types, just inhibited. But his quietness places a drag on the class, hinting at disinterest, disapproval. Called on, he responds in monosyllables, hands in hoodie pockets, eyes on his desk. I resent the energy needed to animate him and want to remind him that there are non-verbal ways of staying involved, “participatory ways of saying nothing” in the writer Heidi Julavits’s words. At social gatherings, I fear my own deadening effect so much I try to compensate through attentiveness—nodding, lobbing questions to keep an anecdote afloat. Not that quiet kids are wasting their own time—some refer to class discussions in their essays or seek me out after the bell to pursue a point they heard. One on one, they query and debate comfortably, and I tell them that I’d love to hear more in class. I’m not sure where to go from there: I respect and identify with their personality, but as a teacher I need them to talk.

Sometimes my cajoling produces results. At my suggestion, a student will try raising his hand once, then twice per class, at first to ask a factual question and eventually to comment. The result is mutually rewarding—the speaker hones a useful skill and scores participation points, and the introduction of a new voice into the familiar mix adds variety. But natural quietness responds only so much to coaxing and grade penalties. A few kids refuse to strategize, having resolved never to speak. One such student, a college junior, was impeccably prompt, never absent, took careful notes sitting next to me instead of hiding in the back row, and turned in first-rate essays that confirmed that she had done the reading. After one class I explained the benefits of participation and proposed that she volunteer for my opening question, usually a softball like “Could someone summarize

last night's story?" She murmured that she was a reserved person, and that was the last time I heard her voice that term.

I envied her ability to just sit by; in her place, I'd be thinking of pertinent remarks to add and fuming when idiocies went unchallenged. When it came time to calculate her grade, however, I welcomed the twenty per cent deduction. Her acceptance of her silence struck me as presumptuous—what if all the students followed her lead? Her grade of "B" conveyed that despite her six excellent essays and grasp of the readings her performance was lacking. And yet six excellent essays and a grasp of the readings sound like reasonable qualifications for an "A" in a writing class, particularly as her deficit was caused by personality rather than incompetence or laziness. Recalling my own indignation at being penalized, I felt hypocritical for lowering her grade. If she had come to me waving her stellar essays in protest, I'd have felt confident in my stance (and glad that I had printed the twenty per cent rule so prominently on the syllabus), but no more convinced of its rightness than when I spoke to Jake's dad.

Even as I keep trying to rouse my students to speech, I've given up on myself—at dinner parties, faculty meetings, any gathering larger than a few family members or friends. Some people call my quietness refreshing, but I can't blame others for thinking what my exasperated high school teacher wrote. One fellow dinner guest muttered to me, "Boy, you're the life of the party, aren't you?" Not that I aspire to command a room, but it wounded me to hear this, as if I want to be seen—and heard—differently from the way I am. Yet given that I find big talkers exhausting and quiet types worth working to know, why would I crave a quality I dislike over one that I envy? Why I can't accept my nature? The only answer I come up with is that the blankness I exhibit is not me, but me muted,

curbed. That's why I felt so ambivalent about Cain's book—whatever insights it holds for taciturn people sound aimed at, well, taciturn people, the kind who don't have or want more words.

Long after that guest made his comment, it occurred to me that he had no idea what I was thinking at the dinner table, whether I wanted to speak but couldn't find an entry, or felt outmatched by more eloquent or long-winded companions. Was I berating myself for not doing more to help the evening run smoothly (I was; I always am), or did I, as he seemed to think, simply not care? Quiet people project an inscrutability that can be more off-putting than their lack of words. As a teacher, I tend to read negativity in a blank expression rather than the interest or attentiveness that it might conceal. No doubt this has to do with insecurity—mine, not the quiet person's.

The faculty meetings that I attend give rise to the same participation dynamics as the classes I have taken and taught: dominators dominate, deliberators deliberate, and unassertive types either hunt for an opening in the chatter or shut down. It took me until graduate school to realize how much the size of a class affected my comfort. Addressing a crowd rather than a few individuals turns conversation into public speaking for me; no longer can I make eye contact with each listener, register each reaction. In graduate seminars of five or six students I spoke freely, engaged with my professor and peers, occasionally even held myself back. That's my natural public personality, not the tentativeness I exhibit before audiences of a dozen or more.

A group's make-up matters as much as its size. At meetings, I can tell from looking around the room which pontificating colleagues will keep me from seeking the floor. In 2016, a week after Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia died, his colleague

Clarence Thomas spoke from the bench for the first time in ten years. The *New York Times* speculated that the loquacious Scalia's absence liberated Thomas. I could relate, having felt cowed in the presence of my voluble, opinionated father, though that inhibition persists long after his death. Thomas attributes his silence to feelings of inferiority dating back to his Yale Law School days and a belief that his fellow justices badger lawyers to the point of rudeness. Though either of these reasons may be valid, they remind me of my own efforts to justify not speaking when expected to. I bet Thomas would love to hold forth as jauntily as Scalia, but that may just be me projecting my fantasy onto him.

Thomas's detractors blame his passivity on a weak intellect; he's out of his depth and knows it. As a young teacher I accepted the fallacy that talking equaled knowledge whereas silence equaled incomprehension or boredom. In middle school, allowing students time to think through their answers also makes for sluggish discussions. Picture a student, Brian, challenging a classmate's comment. "I'm not sure I agree with that," Brian says, and the teacher says, "OK, Brian, what's your view?" Brian ponders as the rest of the class waits. One or two other hands go up, then one or two more. The initial commenter raises hers again, hoping to elaborate her point before it can be refuted. By now multiple hands are waving and the teacher is resisting the impulse to make a "hurry up" gesture at Brian, even though he's a dream student, one who thinks before he speaks, chooses his words carefully, and elevates the discourse by responding to a comment rather than expelling a lot of unprocessed blather.

Most of my classes have an even mix of frequent and selective and non-talkers, with a few deliberators like Brian, though the Brians volunteer less often as they observe

their effect on momentum. My current middle schoolers produce the most active and inclusive classes because most have been together since kindergarten and are comfortable with each other. Their poise makes me feel sheepish about my persistent reticence. Unlike pop quizzes and cafeteria cliques, public speaking does not cease to be a torment when one leaves school. Thinking back on all the pressure to participate that I have endured and applied over the years, I'm not sure if it has made me or my students more forthcoming or confident, or just self-conscious.

So much of quietness in school or society comes down to individual nature. Why not let people be themselves and treat them accordingly? For someone like me, more bottled up than lost for words, encouragement helps as long as it stops short of criticism, scolding me to behave in a way that I can't. My college student, the one so accepting of her nature, graduated ten years ago. I wonder if her reserve continues to handicap her or if she gravitated toward a field that tolerates or even prizes it. If she chose a solitary one—artist, scholar, computer programmer—improving her class participation would have proved no more useful than that other skill exclusive to academic success, standardized test-taking. Except that even these loners have to interact with others, explain or advocate for their work. It's hard not to conclude that competence combined with verbal fluency is preferable to competence alone.

Often when I'm quiet in company I count contributors, checking them off as they chime in, until—usually—I'm the only one who hasn't talked at all. Isolated again, I feel there's something wrong with me, that the normal thing is to take part, and not doing so is selfish, passive aggressive, rude. As the conversation circles, punctuated by interruptions, digressions, threads picked up and handed off, I wonder if my presence

even matters, and if others wonder too. If they do, I don't get it. For all my ambivalence about my role, I no sooner imagine a roomful of talkers than I want the wallflowers back, bearing their inscrutable looks. "The silent are as voluble as those who speak," Julavits writes, interpreting a companion's silence "as encouragement to display, for his appreciation and scrutiny, the more typically hidden parts of myself." Maybe that's what Susan Cain means by an introvert's power—take the quiet out of a group and the mystery goes too, the life of the party.