

Brigham Young University

Am I Shy?

Honors 320

Am I Shy?

This last semester, I had something happen to me that had never occurred during my previous two years as a college student. Most of the semester had been average. I had a mixture of interesting and boring classes, friendly and entertaining roommates, and delicious homecooked meals mingled with consecutive days of freezer food. When I met Michelle, she also didn't seem extremely out of the ordinary. Sure, she was far older than the rest of the class and already a grandmother. That wasn't the first time I'd had an older classmate, though. It turned out that we were in two of the same classes that semester, which also wasn't incredibly unusual. She spoke a lot in class, and I didn't, which was pretty normal. I didn't think anybody cared. I certainly didn't care about others' participation levels.

Apparently, she was bothered by mine.

One day, after our professor had mentioned me coming to his office hours for help with an assignment, Michelle stopped me as I was loading my Shakespeare textbooks into my backpack. I can't remember her exact words, but her message was clear. She thought that I had smart ideas and was shortchanging the class by staying silent. She wanted me to speak up and say something next time. In fact, she was so devoted to this new cause that she would pay me five dollars if I did it.

I laughingly agreed, thinking that it was just a joke. I could tell this story to my friends one day, and they would all laugh at how funny it was. I was wrong. The next time we had class together, and I left the room without saying a word, she pulled me aside and reminded me about our deal. I acquiesced again. This time I hoped that saying yes would get her to leave me alone. As I exited the classroom, I wondered how on earth I would possibly survive the rest of the

semester in this class of only twenty. For some reason, simply contributing a comment to our class discussions didn't seem like an easy or viable option.

Since I was a young child dressed in frilly dresses and hot pink pants, I have been criticized for my quietness by family members, peers, and teachers. Though I have made attempts to break away from this label, I find many of the typical characteristics of shyness—being quiet, feeling anxious around new people, not speaking up in large groups—difficult to break away from. After my semester with Michelle, I went home for Christmas and set various goals for the new semester. I planned to focus on becoming more confident and taking on leadership roles when I returned to school. In my bedroom in Ghana, it sounded possible to talk more at work, be outgoing at church, and participate in classroom discussions. When I came back to Provo UT, though, I faced a very different reality. At the end of my second day back on campus I already felt defeated. I hadn't spoken up once during any of my classes, I hadn't said a word during a training meeting at work, and I had retreated into my bedroom instead of having lengthy conversations with my roommates.

What's especially interesting about this is that, despite being incredibly quiet and reserved in most group settings, I still participated in other events where speaking up was necessary. One of my favorite things to do was help host poetry slams. In fact, I regularly volunteered to sit in the back of the room and greet people as they came in, answering any necessary questions. I went to a book signing and happily read part of an essay that I had published in front of a decently sized crowd. These don't seem like things that the typically shy person would do. So, what is actually going on here. Am I shy? Am I just too aloof to talk to people? What even does it mean to be shy, and can I change this part of my personality?

It turns out that it's incredibly difficult to pinpoint an accurate definition of shyness, though it's a topic scholars and laymen alike have wrestled with for decades. For example, in Pauline Woodruff Titus's 1948 self-help book on conquering shyness, she lists various questions readers could use to diagnose themselves. As I read through those, I found myself agreeing with many. Yes, I am "apt to walk with [my] head down and [my] eyes scarcely lifted" and "[my] self-consciousness [causes me] to play with [my] hair or fuss with something [I] have around [my] neck or keep [my] hands in fluttering motions" (Titus 21). In fact, after my grandmother permanently tied a string of beads around my wrist during my tween years, I would spend almost every conversation fiddling with the multi-colored beads. When it broke, I often found myself grabbing the wrist on my skin, yearning for that familiar form of comfort.

The American Psychological Association provides a more scientific definition. They define shyness as "the tendency to feel awkward, worried or tense during social encounters, especially with unfamiliar people." Additionally, they note a variety of physical symptoms. "Blushing." *Check*. "Sweating." *Check*. "A pounding heart or upset stomach." *Check*. "Worries about how others view them; and a tendency to withdraw from social interactions." *Check*. *Check*. *Check*.

My self-diagnosis has been confirmed by the leading psychological society. It's not just an excuse or a narrative inside my head. I am shy. Perhaps this is why several months ago, when my family had guests over, I was filled with such anxiousness that I withdrew to the only place I could be left alone: the kitchen cleaning closet. I stayed there until the guests went home.

But I digress.

Even psychological researchers who spend much of their career exploring this phenomenon struggle to define what exactly shyness is. In an article on the causes of shyness,

Schmidt and Tasker identify various schools of thought and conceptualizations of shyness. They distinguish between those who see it as biologically determined versus environmentally determined, and those who see it as an enduring quality of personality versus a psychological process. Basically, it all boils down to the familiar concepts of nature versus nurture. We can view shyness as something so predetermined it's found in the blueprint of our DNA, like eye color or the shape of your nose. Alternatively, we can see it as something we acquire later in life, like the skills of playing a musical instrument or the ability to speak a foreign language.

I'm not sure which school of thought I belong to yet. However, it would be foolish to start a road trip without a map or to begin telling a story without characters. For the sake of being able to write this essay, I'll tentatively define shyness as being quiet, uncomfortable, and averse to taking risks in social situations, especially unfamiliar ones. But that definition is subject to change.

Speaking of change and growth, the idea of shyness changing is especially interesting to me. Is shyness fixed, or is it malleable? The first hint that shyness might be an enduring quality is the fact that it's partially rooted in our DNA. Genetics are more important to having this personality trait than I expected. As I did my research, I found multiple books and articles that linked the two. Jennifer Oullette, a science writer, uses the story of her own adoption to explore the ways different forces, choices, and experiences shape us into unique individuals in her book *Me, Myself, and Why* (3). Like me, she tells herself and others that she is shy. Speaking of nature versus nurture, she writes that "Serotonin and Hamer's 'Prozac gene' also [play] a role in another trait associated with neuroticism: harm avoidance, which can also be linked to being shy or fearful . . . sampling the saliva of shyer children also revealed twice as high levels of the stress hormone cortisol" (100).

Elaborating on this, some researchers have found that a genetic polymorphism, 5-HTTLPR, could be linked with shyness. This means that there is a sequence in DNA, different from others, which may cause people to be shyer (Arbelle et al.). Essentially, lots of different hormones or aspects of genetic data can be linked with shyness, showing that it may be something that people like me are born with and not something we just pick up on the school playground.

Studies on babies are even more fascinating. Researchers can measure how they react to new situations and environments, with the idea that shy babies will react more negatively. There might be a direct relationship between a baby being more startled by noises and me being afraid to speak up in a 300 level English class. When exposed to new social experiences, we both retreat. This risk aversion might be linked to more than just our saliva. It could be related to the liquid home I spent months in before entering this world as a screaming infant. In other words, my mom.

Plomin and Daniels write about how research in the Colorado Adoption Project suggests that there is a correlation between biological mothers' level of shyness and that of their infants who are adopted by other families (70). Their studies on twins confirm this link and help to support the theory that shyness "may be more heritable than other personality traits" (64). Unfortunately, I don't have a twin to trade places with at school or compare my own personality to, and so it's impossible for me to test out this theory for myself.

As I was reading a book for an English class, though, I found something that on the surface seemed it would be the perfect case study because it mirrored these theories about a genetic basis for shyness. Karl Ove Knausgaard's lengthy work, *My Struggle*, is a six-volume piece of prose alternately characterized as either a memoir or a novel. Despite being laboriously

long and containing details about life's most boring moments, like changing diapers, the book has been a sensation in both Knausgaard's native Norway and worldwide. In it, he makes allusions to his own shyness and dislike of being around people multiple times. As a reader, I also noticed a striking resemblance between the way he describes himself and the descriptions of his eldest daughter, Vanja.

Near the beginning of volume 2, he introduces us to her personality by sharing that "shyness made its appearance when she was around seven months and manifested itself through her shutting her eyes as if asleep whenever a stranger approached" (20). This supports research suggesting that there is stability in children's shyness from infancy through childhood. For example, Schmidt and Tasker found that, "the notion some infants may have a predisposition towards shyness may have legitimacy" (33). It also makes sense because many shy adults, like me, lower our heads to the ground when in new social situations. Honestly, if it was still socially acceptable to pretend to be asleep to avoid interacting with strangers, I probably would.

Vanja's behavior becomes more interesting through the way Knausgaard goes on to reflect on how shyness may be a family trait. On the next page he wonders, "This was my way of relating to other people: how had she, only two and a half years old, managed to pick it up?" (21). The book is filled with other examples of how both of them share the same inhibited personality. At a birthday party, Karl is loath to converse with the other adults, and Vanja keeps avoiding the other children and wanting to go home. He admits that, "All my adult life I have kept a distance from other people, it has been my way of coping" (41). This view of shyness, rooted in genetics and biology, is comforting to me because it means that perhaps it's something I was born with and therefore is not my responsibility to change. It's just a part of who I am.

However, this view fails to account for nurture. Environmental factors and close proximity could be additional reasons why family members have similar levels of shyness. Additionally, as soon as I began to use this deterministic view of shyness to absolve myself of all responsibility, a conversation with my mom complicated that theory. I'd always known that she was far less afraid than me in new social situations, but I thought that maybe it was just because she had conquered her shyness, while for me it was too deeply embedded in my psyche.

Stories from my childhood changed that view. During our phone call she told me, "When you were really little, you were quite bold and outgoing." She went on to elaborate on how I enjoyed having guests over. I would try to impress them with cartwheels and small musical productions. According to her memories, I was once a child who was brave enough to calmly tell strangers my thoughts when they approached me, instead of hiding behind her legs. As I sit down to write this, I have a Proustian madeleine moment where I suddenly recall being a tiny first grader in Leiden and begging my dad to let me go outside with one of my school friends to hang out with some older kids in the neighborhood and play games. Maybe shyness isn't pre-determined.

Great. Now I knew that I couldn't blame my current quietness on my childhood disposition. Many caveats in research on shyness support this view. Schmidt and Tasker note, for example, that there are some infants who are predisposed towards shyness who end up not developing it. The reverse is also true. Plomin and Daniels acknowledge that though shyness is inheritable, family environment also plays a huge role in whether or not that becomes an important aspect of someone's personality (70-71).

Weirdly enough, I found more support for this theory than I would have liked to when I finally reached page 592 of Knausgaard's lengthy work. While I was reading, I was astonished to

find that Vanja had a change in personality that was almost the exact opposite of my own. On the one hand, my mother claims going to kindergarten in a language different from my mother tongue scarred me emotionally and was the turning point that made an outgoing baby shy. On the other hand, the more Vanja goes to school, the more outgoing she seems to be. Near the end of the volume, Knausgaard remarks that her shyness “had completely gone” (542). Teachers at her school even worry about her turning into a mean girl who bullies the other children. Vanja’s change in nature and my mother’s complaints about my first few months of school make me feel more responsible for my quietness. This brings me back to my Shakespeare class and leads me to wonder if maybe Michelle’s tactic, which seemed absurd and invasive at the time, was actually rooted in some logic.

Maybe I can change how shy I am. But, should I even want to? Schmidt and Tasker worry about “the recent movement within the medical community and society as a whole to view most aspects of shyness as pathological and needing to be treated medically” (30). My curiosity about that comment sent me to a 1999 *New York Times* article contrasting the effectiveness of pills versus therapy when it comes to shyness and related issues (Raghunathan). A reference in the article to Dr. Philip Zimbardo (of the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment) sent me down a rabbit hole to information on various clinics and other programs to combat shyness.

Readers can still access an old website for Zimbardo’s shyness clinic online. Apparently, nobody has changed its contents or format since 1996. The homepage states that its mission is to alleviate “the pain of shyness . . . by challenging maladaptive thoughts and beliefs, and learning new behaviors.” Another page boasts a list of services ranging from the \$350 diagnosis to \$100 long-term individual work to free Friday evening drop-ins (“The Shyness Clinic”). Though that information is slightly outdated, the project has morphed into current social fitness training

services led by Dr. Lynne Henderson, a psychologist who helped pioneer the earlier clinic. The current website lists similar services. These include an initial evaluation that costs \$220 for a fifty-minute session and groups that cost \$100 dollars (The Shyness Institute). Clearly, for some, convincing others to buy into the narrative that their shyness is a weakness is both lucrative and timeless. Shyness therapy continues to grow and is quite costly. Additionally, self-help books on the topic, such as Susan Cain's influential book (more on that later), sell incredibly well—this specific book was on the New York Times' Bestseller's List for over three years.

As I resurface for air, I remember that Schmidt and Tasker sent me down this rabbit hole, which reminds me that despite what the efforts of Zimbardo and others might indicate, not every scientist views shyness as a disease or disorder. There are good reasons not to. In modern, western societies, shy people have often been associated with empathy, good listening skills, and superb creativity.

For example, Knausgaard himself certainly is more creative and artistically inclined than the average person. He likely would not have been able to sit down to compose his 3600-page reflection on his life if socializing with other people was more enjoyable for him than retreating into his office to write. Other luminaries in a variety of fields may have been less successful if they were more talkative. These may potentially include Washington, Lincoln, Ford, Beethoven, Emerson, Nightingale, Barrett Browning, and Einstein (Titus). As the saying goes, "Empty barrels make the most noise." Perhaps channeling energy away from speaking and into other endeavors can be a good thing.

Both researchers and writers alike have looked into various other advantages of shyness which could explain why they are valued in some human circles. Titus's self-help book has a list of assets shy people have: the ability to make close, lifelong friends; vivid imagination; strong

intuition; being sympathetic, a good listener, and a warm admirer; being easily trusted; unlimited patience; will make a good public speaker if you are sold on your subject (25). Is this where the key to the paradox of my loving slam poetry but being afraid to speak up in class lies?

My roommate seemed to support this theory when I told her I was writing about shyness. She exclaimed that I wasn't shy; I just don't like talking. Perhaps this is why shyness is so often described as being risk averse. It's only when I am totally convinced about a topic that I'm willing to risk sharing my thoughts on it. This could also help to explain why it often takes me five minutes to craft and internally practice a 20-second long comment in class. If I go over my idea long enough to make it sound perfect and know that it will impress the professor, then it isn't as scary to raise my hand and speak.

Likewise, this perspective could also explain why I enjoy hosting gatherings at my home but hate going to parties elsewhere. At home, I control everything. Decisions about the food, entertainment, and sometimes even where people sit, are all left in my hands. As the host, people are more likely to turn to me to decide the topic of conversation. Controlling all of these variables helps to lower risk, though at the same time they may encourage people who don't know me well to think of me as a control freak or intimidating.

In her book about science and self-discovery, Oullete's description of herself as "a painfully shy, struggling young writer" who is seen by others as "cold, aloof, unfriendly" rang unexpectedly true (95). I was surprised to find something in common with a successful science writer besides enjoying putting words on the page. However, people often associate things like appearing aloof or unfriendly with shy people. Staying quiet, avoiding someone's gaze, having your arms crossed etc. could all be interpreted as cockiness rather than fear, depending on the eye of the beholder.

On the topic of cold, aloof, unfriendly things on page, there is perhaps no literary character more famous for both their aloofness and their warm heart than Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Whether it's Matthew MacFayden's puppy dog eyes or Colin Firth's famous stare as he climbs out of the river, generations of readers and moviegoers alike have cherished this beloved character. He's frequently mentioned as one of the most romantic fictional characters on popular women's websites. In a list about swoon-worthy literary heroes for *Hello Giggles*, Rachel Grate wrote that, "I may not win the prize for originality by naming Darcy, but in the 200 years since Austen wrote him, no author has yet reached his level of perfection."

Scientists also agree that he's the archetypal romantic lead. Some researchers even named a protein sex pheromone that made male mouse urine sexually attractive *Darcin* in his honor (BioMed Central). There's something wonderfully compelling about watching him reveal layer after layer (kind of like Shrek does) and grow closer to Lizzie. His quietness makes him a wonderful character, because the closer he gets to Lizzie, the more the audience finds out about and slowly also begins to fall in love with him. This may explain why a *Grazia* article rates dating him 2/5 near the start of the novel and 5/5 by the end.

After first watching the 2005 film adaptation with my sister many years ago, we spent some time afterwards puzzling out its title. Who was truly prideful, Lizzie or Darcy? We came to the conclusion that Lizzie was both prideful and full of prejudice, while Darcy was just a sweet, quiet man. Like Colin Firth, we believed that pride wasn't the essence of his personality, shyness was (Austen). It gave me hope that I would one day find someone to love me, since I completely understood the way his quietness made him initially come off as cold.

Though I related to Darcy, and later to Austen's Wentworth using a letter to confess his feelings to Anne in *Persuasion*, the more I delved deeper into the world of fiction, the more I wondered if perhaps I should relate more to characters such as Jane Bennett or Beth March. The problem, though, was that I didn't want to just be happily married or to die of tuberculosis. I felt like I related more to Beth's free-spirited sister Jo. I wanted to be the hero of my own story.

As I've grown older, I've thought more about the ways that gender seems to impact the way shyness is perceived. Women like Beth may be seen as sweet, and women like Jane may be seen as coy or devious. Other shy female characters are often overlooked or dismissed as the femme fatale. While I think there is an archetype of the brooding, romantic, simmering male poet (pioneered, of course, by Lord Byron in his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), I've often wondered if the same exists for girls? If there is a female Darcy, I have yet to encounter her in literature.

In the search for a female Darcy, I may find more success looking at what's outside of the books rather than written within. Many of the most famous women to have ever picked up a pen have been described as shy, from Emily Dickinson to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Formalist literary critics advocating for the death of the author would claim that these writers' personalities had no impact on their work. I disagree. As both a writer and a shy woman, I think that this trait can have huge impact on our art.

Emily Auerbach notes a link between Jane Austen's personality and the character of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. She suggests that the only way to understand Price, a shy young woman, is in the light of these lines by Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant — /Success in Circuit lies." Arguing that, like Dickinson, Austen conceals both her identity and her true message in her writing, Auerbach comes to the conclusion that Price's character arc is meant to illustrate "a quiet kind of courage that may go unnoticed." She notes that Austen also possessed a

kind of “quiet courage,” and her final idea, that Austen used literature to muster this courage to freely express her thoughts, is intriguing. Perhaps these women writers achieved such great literary success because of their shyness. Not being able to adequately express their thoughts out loud forced them to turn to other mediums and create some of the best writing known to man. Maybe this is why, as numerous scholars have noted, the novel has historically been and continues to be a female domain. Both in terms of output and input, women contribute the most to keeping narrative writing alive (Thomas-Corr). We believe that the stories we tell ourselves and others have some sort of power.

Psychologists, too, are fascinated by the ways in which socialization into different gender roles may affect the way that shyness manifests itself in children and adults. Sociologists and laymen alike have thought that shyness is more acceptable for girls than for boys because the latter are supposed to be aggressive and dominant. While girls like Beth are left to their own devices, the Darcys of the world have to assert their masculinity and character in other ways. This begs an interesting question. Would I be less shy if I had been born a boy?

A growing body of research suggests that shyness may be perceived and approached differently depending on the gender of the person with the personality trait (Doey 258). Multiple studies suggest that parents and peers both are more accepting of shyness in girls than in boys. The latter may be more likely to be ostracized by their peers. Shy boys may also experience more stress than shy girls because they feel they are failing to live up to society’s expectations of assertive, aggressive masculinity. And perhaps even songs about shy boys I listened to growing up, by singers as varied as Jordin Sparks and Katie Melua, wouldn’t have been necessary if we, as a culture, didn’t see something inherently wrong with quiet, risk-averse men.

Certainly, I think, at least some aspects of my life would be different if I had been born as a shy boy. How would I cope if instead of it being normal to sit in with my roommates, hoping for the cute boy in my history class to text me about going out for ice cream, I was in his shoes knowing that society expected me to make the first move? What would school dances have been like knowing that I had to take the first step because, as a tie-wearing man, that was the social norm? I'm not sure what the answer to those questions would be, and I'm not sure that I'd ever like to find out. Interestingly, I have asked more than one boy on a date in my lifetime, after doing the proper calculations to make sure there was low risk involved. This gives me hope that, perhaps, in some alternate dimension, the male version of me is confidently asking girls for their numbers and speaking up in class because he was socialized to believe this is normal.

Aside from gender, one's cultural background could also impact the way they or those around them view their shyness. When doing cross-cultural comparisons, psychologists and other researchers often use Japan as an example, mostly because many studies have found more people there report to be shy than in any other country. *Zimbardo* takes a slightly deterministic approach as he suggests that Japan is "the model of a shyness-generating society" (213). He lists many cultural values that he believes lead to this trait being inevitable: a sense of duty to others, deference to authority, self-effacement, personal responsibility, loyalty, and shame.

As someone who has lived on three different continents and been through two different education systems, I've seen firsthand evidence that gives this theory some validity. Growing up, I attended an American school, where individualism and creativity were valued. My teachers made it clear that shyness was not a desirable trait. My father frequently told me I was in the wrong school system. If I was in England, he told me, then teachers would care more about what I wrote in papers than how loudly and confidently I could yell an answer in class.

His theory was tested in Ghana. We moved there after I completed my junior year of high school. My new school had a British curriculum. Teachers valued academics over everything: athletics, musicality, or other creative pursuits. Though I flew under the radar for the first couple months, after our first report cards came out, I became one of the principal's favorite students. Unlike my earlier high school, the people who were praised during assembly were put up on a pedestal because of their propensity towards perfect grades and nothing else. This obviously had little to do with gender; I didn't stop being a girl when I moved continents. Rather, I often felt that the strong culture of respecting your elders, so different from some American professors who enjoy verbally sparring with students in the classroom, contributed to people praising quiet students. Teachers thought our silence made us respectful. Administrators valued seemingly respectful students more than those who loudly flaunted their knowledge.

Aside from extra creativity, being able to chase away unwanted conversations with our apparent aloofness, and being praised in certain cultures, there is also a school of thought that seeks to argue that shyness exists because of its evolutionary advantages. In her seminal work, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain provides a wonderful description of this. She writes about Wilson, a leading researcher in shyness in animals. He is known for his writing on the shy-bold continuum. Though this sounds like some weird futuristic, anthropomorphism, researchers have actually come up with multiple sensible ways of measuring animal's personalities.

In his studies of fish, for example, Wilson would expose them to new stimuli, much like psychologists did when studying infants. He would sometimes drop metal traps into a pond and then gauge the fishes' reactions to them. Bolder fish would immediately go investigate this new thing, while shyer fish would stay away from it. He notes some evolutionary advantages. Shyer

fish are less likely to be caught by fishers and can escape from predators easier, evidenced by the way they avoided his traps (Cain 147). Similarly, other researchers have found that there may be a trade-off between boldness and vigilance, noting that while shy female eastern kangaroos may forage less and therefore eat less, they are also more vigilant (Edwards et al). One method they used to study boldness was flight-initiation distance tests. Research assistants would stand about 10m away from a kangaroo who was eating. The researcher would slowly approach the kangaroo. When the animal finally moved away, the researchers would record the distance between the kangaroo and researcher (Edwards et al. 334). The idea was that a bolder kangaroo would allow the researcher to come closer to them than a shy kangaroo would. Bold kangaroos would have been at a disadvantage if the researcher was a predator, or harmful in some other way.

Weirdly enough, this does parallel some of the experiences I have had in my own life. I was always amazingly good at dodgeball, not because of any coordination or skill I had with throwing the ball, but because the boys in my gym class would always forget that I was there. When, inevitably, it came down to my skinny arm against the boy who played on multiple sports teams, I would often still win. This was not due to my quietness; it was because of my risk aversion. I would refuse to throw the ball in fear that it would miss its target. He would throw the ball confidently. I would catch it. Then he would be out, and my team would win, with very little effort on my part. If avoiding risks could help me in silly dodgeball games, imagine how much of an asset it is when there are more serious predators than boys with braces and too-short gym pants on.

Ultimately, though, like in every other area concerning shyness, research on it being an evolutionary asset is spotty. While some scientists see it as an asset, others see it as a liability.

One researcher whose work could help to explain this discrepancy is Niels Dingemanse. While studying *Parus major*, a type of bird, he noticed that “in certain years, very bold individuals would do well, but in other years, the more shy types would do well” (Ogden 534). To explain this, he came up with the theory of fluctuating selection. In short, whether shyness is a strength can change depending on the year and a variety of other factors. This is true for humans too. Being shy is great when it causes you to slip under the radar of an angry boss, or when you need to entertain yourself while being stuck home alone during a pandemic. It’s not so great when it causes you to scare your date away with your supposed aloofness, or prevents you from plucking up the courage to ask for directions when you’re lost and have a dead phone battery.

This brings me to the idea found in Ecclesiastes 3:1, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” Perhaps I should add, “a time to be bold, and a time to be shy; a time to be quiet, and a time to be loud” to the end of that quote. Perhaps I ought to learn from the examples of birds and fish whose personality can impact them in literal life or death situations. When there are fishermen or scuba divers approaching your school, that is not the time to be bold and adventurous. I don’t want to be poor Nemo, stuck in a glass cage with a malicious young owner. There are times to be Darcy, and there are days when it’s better to be his good-natured best friend Bingley instead. After all, both of them happily get the girl of their dreams. I should pick the right times to be cautious and observant, and the right times to be bold.

The more I’ve read about shyness, the more I’ve thought about my childhood experiences, my conversations with Michelle, and the little voice inside my head that tells me to “stand down” in unfamiliar situations instead of sharing a comment. I’ve begun to wonder if I’ve used the label of a “shy” person as a crutch that allows me to stay inside of my comfort zone. Certainly, while writing this essay, I’ve had moments where I think about speaking in class but

then decide that that would go against the narrative in which I am trying to portray of myself as a shy person. Maybe it's all just a self-fulfilling prophecy. Maybe I'm the protagonist in the wrong story. If my report card comments had focused on a different topic, if I'd read more novels about bold young female knights, if I hadn't encountered *Quiet* as a seventh grader and identified with Cain's struggles, would I see myself as shy?

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