

## Living With Shyness

Throughout most of my life (sixty one years now) I've lived in a world where someone who was solitary by nature – someone on the shyness/autism spectrum – lived a pretty solitary life. Oh, in my case I did go out into the social world, with some success too. But surrounded by people there I remained very much alone, with ideas about my own nature that I kept to myself.

Recently, with the introduction of computers and the internet, people like began to communicate with each other on websites around the world. Each time I look at one of the sites where this is happening, I'm impressed, for this is something historic.

It has come a bit too late for me – when I was young I might have joined in, but after a lifetime in the social arena I've had a bit too much of people. The best I can do is be an interested spectator.

But on those websites I see young people struggling with problems that I resolved, in my own fashion, long ago – the main one being: How does a shy person without social skills enter the social world? Every time I read another version of this anguished question, whether the problem is about friendship, work, or romantic love, I remember how impossible those things once looked to me. Because of that, I have to say this:

Shyness is found throughout nature. Almost all wild animals are shy, predators as well as prey. Your shyness isn't just a facet of your character, just some abstract difference that makes you a poor fit with social humans. It is a living breathing creature, a psychic animal that, like a wild deer, takes flight whenever people approach.

Those of us who successfully enter society do it by tying that deer up, or putting it in a cage. We immobilize it first in order that we can 'socialize'. That's how I managed to work as an insurance adjuster and accident investigator for over thirty years.

Yes, that's what I did for a long time. Except that, unlike those who lock it away and forget it, I kept that deer with me and tried to look after it. All

through my life I remained conscious of it beside me, an unwilling and unhappy accomplice to the unnatural life I was living. But when I turned fifty, watching it one day huddled dejectedly in its corner, I realized how much it had suffered and I resolved that, in the years that were left, it was going to know freedom.

So I began to experiment – every now and then I untied it.

Of course it ran away every time. More and more often I declined invitations to go for a drink after work. I found ways not to be where other people were going to be. I began to eat in restaurants alone, drink moderately on my own (trust me, it's safer than drinking with any group), take vacations on my own, etc.

My shyness was back.

Now when I needed my old detachment it wasn't always there. If a beautiful woman spoke to me, my mind would fall into confusion. I would have trouble perceiving her words and I would be unable to reply, just the way it was when I was a young man.

But out of this new state of things came a remarkable new energy – along with, after a seven year writing odyssey, a book - *The Birdcatcher*.

My deer and I have since come to a compromise. Understanding our need for a regular income, and knowing that it will only be restricted temporarily, it lets me put the leash back on when I have to deal with the social world. In return, I keep social contacts to a minimum.

Do you see what I'm getting at? When you're accommodating yourself to the social world, you should never abandon that deer – never forget who you really are. Though this will produce complications for you, in the long run you will be better off because you will retain more of your real self.

Now, I can hear the objections to this. – 'Learn to accept your shyness? What kind of advice is that?' – Well, let me tell you, you are not going to turn yourselves into extroverts. Extroverts are more unlike you than you think. They possess social skills that come from deep down in their genes, skills that are unconscious and invisible, that you can't fully learn, or even imitate.

You are like an unknown piece that has appeared inexplicably on a chess board. Fine, find out what the rooks and bishops and knights are up to, if you can - the poor pawns too – find out as much as you can about how they operate, but don't for a moment think you can be one of them.

You are something else. Believe me, you puzzle social people as much as they puzzle you. Find out how you can move on that board, in your own way, and stick to it.

You do have advantages. You know how to keep thoughts to yourself. You can keep secrets. Did you know that that intimidates social people? In those situations where only you know what you are thinking you have a powerful advantage. That's most common in work/business, but it can come into play where love is at stake too.

So, if you can learn to do that – keep your feet firmly on your own turf in the midst of the kaleidoscopic merry-go-round of the social world, trust me, you will be happier. You will be lonely sometimes, but you will receive more respect from the extroverts than those people who try to hide their shyness (in their contradictory way, extroverts admire silent, confident men and women – don't ask me to explain it).

And so, when you're in the social arena, playing its games according to its rules, you can still be yourself. When someone asks you why you're so quiet, you can reply - politely and with humor, but without any apology - 'Because that's who I am.' Sometimes when you do that, often at the most unexpected moments, you will receive an unexpected reward.

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