

YOUNG ADULTS

Looking *IN,* Turning *OUT*

Were shyness
and introversion
limiting
my growth?



By Margaret Willden Willes

I've always been shy. As a child, I was much more comfortable coloring pictures of butterflies than inviting the neighbor girl over to play. When report cards rolled around, my teachers routinely mentioned one improvement that I could make: "She could speak up more in class," they kindly offered. Rather than cheer on the football team every Friday night with the rest of the teenage student body, I was perfectly pleased sitting at home watching period dramas with my family. And for most of my college career, I arrived early to class, sat at the edge of the lecture hall, and quietly slipped out at the end of class without saying a word to anyone. I was encapsulated in my own little bubble.

While my shyness was never debilitating, I was always acutely aware of it. Some mistook my reserved personality for boredom, annoyance, or even arrogance—and it was frustrating. From the sidelines I watched

those bubbly girls at stake dances and the gregarious students in class, wishing I could be outgoing like they were. Every extroverted person in my life seemed to be happier, more successful, more likable, and, in my mind, a better disciple of Christ. After all, how could I share my feelings about the gospel with others when I struggled even to strike up a conversation about the weather? In my heart, I knew I could still be happy, likable, and Christlike—regardless of facets of my personality that made it tough to turn outward. Still, I felt that my introverted demeanor was a weakness in and of itself.

Over the next few years, however, I discovered an unexpected sense of happiness and personal peace as I learned more about myself and what the Savior expects of me as a disciple.

Coming to Know Myself

When I arrived at college, I felt timid in a crowd of young adults who seemed to be able to do everything. In an effort to understand myself better, I began searching to know who I was in the Lord's eyes. I knew I needed to internalize the truth that I was among "the noble and great" whom the Lord sent to earth and

that He had big plans for me (see Abraham 3:22–23). He gave each of us specific talents and gifts so we can help others in our quest to become like Him (see D&C 46:11). I started studying my patriarchal blessing intently, dissecting each paragraph and pondering the meaning of each word. As I pored over the blessing, I was amazed at the gifts I could one day develop with the Lord's help—and the gifts that I realized I already possessed.

I began learning more about shyness and introversion. I realized shyness was an emotional response I could work to overcome. I tackled it step by step. I would accompany my roommate to a ward activity, visit the girls I was called to serve as a visiting teacher, or smile at acquaintances on campus.

I also began to understand introversion as a dimension of human personality. I prayed to know how the Lord sees me, and He opened my eyes to my personal strengths and weaknesses. I slowly realized that being introverted didn't make me bad—or good—but it was a part of what made me *me*. It didn't change Heavenly Father's love for me, and I shouldn't let it dictate how



much I loved myself. However, I also decided that I shouldn't use introversion (or my feelings of shyness) as an excuse. Heavenly Father wants me to find happiness and a sense of achievement through personal growth.

As I worked on learning to overcome my insecurities and focus on how I could help others with the talents that I had (rather than the ones I wished I had), a magical thing happened: the Lord was able to use me as I was *and* teach me how I could grow. I began to relate to people better. I found myself more easily talking in groups of people. I felt greater love for myself *and* others. I even began to enjoy leading class discussions as a Sunday School teacher in my YSA ward.

I discovered that with the Lord's help, I could continue to learn and progress if I wanted to. I had previously labeled my introverted personality a hindrance, but I was learning that it could be a conduit for serving and understanding others in a unique way. My eyes were opened to the magnificent promises that could be realized if I was willing to let the Lord

mold what He had to work with into what He knew I could become.

Coming to Know Him

In the process of coming to know myself, I also began to know my Savior better. His example is a powerful influence in helping us know what we can become and how it is done.

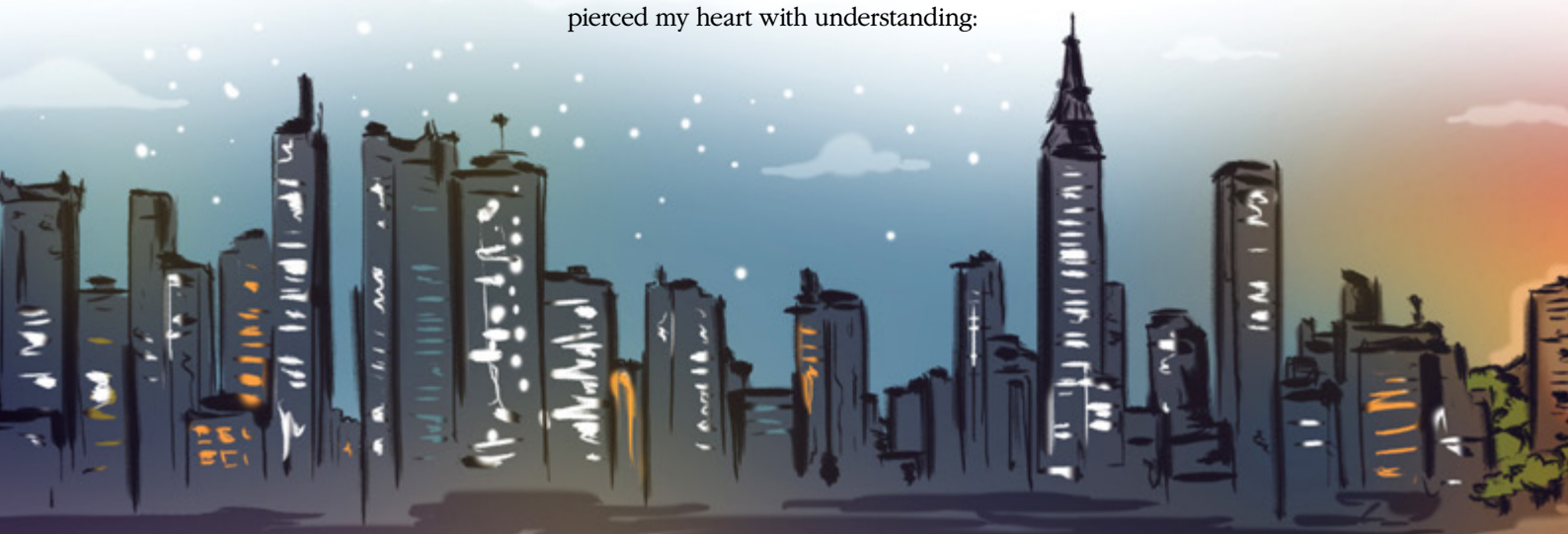
During my junior year of college, following months of pondering the words in my patriarchal blessing, I decided it was right to submit papers to serve a full-time mission. Amidst lingering feelings of concern over my shyness, I was called to serve in Tokyo, Japan. On the exterior, I tried to play it cool. *Missionaries are never scared, right?* But on the inside, I was petrified. How would I be able to approach strangers and share something so precious to me? I didn't even like asking the grocery store employee where I could find the string cheese.

One Sunday evening in the missionary training center, feeling extra small amidst hundreds of missionaries, I found myself watching a broadcast of a talk by Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. It was then that I heard the words that pierced my heart with understanding:

"Character is demonstrated by looking and reaching outward when the natural and instinctive response is to be self-absorbed and turn inward. If such a capacity is indeed the ultimate criterion of moral character, then the Savior of the world is the perfect example of such a consistent and charitable character. . . .

". . . Throughout His mortal ministry, and especially during the events leading up to and including the atoning sacrifice, the Savior of the world turned outward—when the natural man or woman in any of us would have been self-centered and focused inward."¹

This newfound revelation was like a lightning bolt from heaven. I realized that I loved the Savior enough to love others as He would—even when circumstances would make it reasonable to focus on myself. I could love, even if *how* I showed that love was different from how someone else might do it. It didn't matter if I was extroverted or introverted, had social superpowers or wasn't a "people person." I could find ways to turn outward even when I wanted to turn inward. I could do that.



There were still times as a missionary that I struggled to open my mouth and invite people on the street to church. I still sometimes doubted my ability to help a companion or investigator feel loved. But when my actions came from my love for the Savior and my desire for others to feel His love, suddenly anything was possible, and I felt peace knowing I was striving to follow His will. I repeatedly reminded myself that the true character of Christ is to turn outward, especially when it would be easy to give up, go home, and indulge in self-doubt. And that thought gave me strength.

Finding Peace

I still have to take a deep breath before I make phone calls, and truthfully, my face sometimes burns when I speak up at work or in Church meetings. But I'm at peace with it. It's okay to be uncomfortable at times. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and we all have room to grow.

I have changed in many ways, and some people are surprised that I was ever shy. I've also found peace with my need for being away from others sometimes. The Savior Himself went to the mountains alone to pray and ponder (see Matthew 14:23). But the

Savior's peace—and ours—doesn't come from being alone or not being alone. It comes from turning outward rather than turning inward—losing ourselves for His sake rather than saving ourselves (see Luke 9:24). It's not about trying to be like others; it's about trying to be like Him—an expectation that, with His help, is within my reach. ■

The principles in this article could benefit others who struggle with similar challenges. Some individuals may find they need the additional help of a professional counselor.

The author lives in New York, USA.

NOTE

1. David A. Bednar, "The Character of Christ" (Brigham Young University–Idaho religion symposium, Jan. 25, 2003), byui.edu.



BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

"Believe in yourself, and believe in [Heavenly Father]. Don't demean your worth or

denigrate your contribution. . . . You are unique; you are irreplaceable. The loss of even one voice diminishes every other singer in this great mortal choir of ours, including the loss of those who feel they are on the margins of society or the margins of the Church."

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Songs Sung and Unsung," *Ensign*, May 2017, 50.

