

# **Who Do You Think You Are?**

## The Enduring Mystery of Temperament

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One afternoon not long ago, my body mocked my pretensions, toppled my carefully constructed persona and forced me to see who I am.

I was lounging at the dining room table late on a Sunday afternoon, perusing the local newspaper and wearing my favorite home-alone attire—faded linen capris, a baggy yellow T-shirt and ancient bedroom slippers. I had a cup of ginger tea going; somewhere in the background, NPR's "American Routes" played a bluesy riff by John Prine. As far as I was concerned, life didn't get much better than this.

Just then, I heard slapping footsteps on the stairs leading up to our front porch. The screen door whined open. Voices. Muffled laughter. Youthful. Female. More than one.

The next thing I knew, I was on the second floor of our house, breathless, half-crouching in the hall. I had no sense of "going upstairs." I knew only that in one moment, I was loafing in the dining room and in the next I was on another floor, panting.

From my guard post at the top of the steps, I heard my daughter, Darrah, then 22, enter our front hall in the company of two other young

women, their speed-of-light discourse punctuated by raucous laughter. Now I recognized the other voices; they belonged to friends of my daughter whom I'd known since they were in the sixth grade. Both were warm, engaging young women who I'm sure would have liked to say hello to me.

But all of that occurred to me later. In that moment I knew only: I'm safe.

Noiselessly, I crept into my bedroom and closed the door. I attempted a few ordinary activities—gathering laundry, making the bed—that would allow me to feel like "myself" again. But my heart was still knocking. No amount of routine chore-doing could change what had just happened: I had just charged up the steps at lightning speed to escape my daughter's friends. *Look at you*, a voice inside me whispered. You're a grown woman with a husband and young adult daughter. You're a homeowner, a writer of books, an editor at a national magazine. You could not have just done this.

But it seemed that I had.

I had some partial glimmer of what was going on. Even as I fled the dining room, some part of me flashed on a tight huddle of preteen girls on a playground, giggling under the hard sunlight of noon recess. I saw myself approaching, heard the talk dissolve into whispers and then amp up into hooting laughter, whereupon, at some invisible signal, the girls turned and dashed away. It went on like this for four years—my persistent, helpless courting, their predictable, gleeful rejection. Now, decades later, I sprinted up the steps of my house and felt terror and grief rise up in my throat.

The truth is, I am no stranger to running. I've done it a number of times before, though until that afternoon, I'd generally made my getaways on a smaller, less dramatic scale. Whenever I'd beat a hasty retreat, usually from other people, my customary response was to turn on myself afterward

in shame and disgust. But this time, I didn't. Maybe the sheer extremity of my flight from the dining room—the raw, biological force of it—interrupted my usual descent into self-recrimination. The experience felt elemental, even cellular. I understood that I was not in control. I was filled with a sense of mystery, and then curiosity. What could make me do this?

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Well before I beat my retreat from a couple of benign 22-year-olds, I was aware of the reality of temperament. From earliest childhood, I'd been jumpy and vigilant, prone to register every rustle, tic and cough of my environment. I've long known, too, that I'm introverted, publicly chatty but privately solitude-loving, forever seeking rooms and gardens where I can be alone. Still, until my recent sprint to the second floor, I didn't think much about temperament, which is generally understood as a set of behavioral and emotional propensities that are inherited and enduring. Predispositions were all well and good, I believed, but they seemed to me mere background data, not nearly as influential or interesting as the drama of my childhood or my considerable efforts to remake myself since.

But now, I'm reconsidering. My experience on that Sunday afternoon has prompted me to look anew at temperament, especially the ways it may invisibly pilot our adult lives. Until recently, temperament has been largely the province of child psychologists, who have used the concept to help worried parents understand their implacably stormy, timid or "wild" child. But the field of temperament is dramatically enlarging in scope. The new science of behavioral molecular genetics, which seeks to identify genes associated with particular human traits, has lately exploded with reports

suggesting that our very cells may be imbued with tendencies toward extroversion or shyness or novelty-seeking or distractibility. At the same time that gene specialists are splicing and dicing DNA in search of predispositions, a Harvard psychology project has been quietly amassing longitudinal data on behavioral proclivities, tracking infants into young adulthood to tease out which aspects of temperament are mutable and which elements—like it or not—are ours to keep.

These multiple strands of investigation are beginning to shed new light on a question that has hounded psychotherapy for more than a century: What is the character of the relationship between nature and nurture, and what does it mean for the human project of change? As we come to understand more about the complex process of temperament development, therapists may be able to better help clients master one of life's trickiest balancing acts—making peace with one's inborn nature while simultaneously knocking against its boundaries, in search of a larger self.

### **An Untidy Science**

Throughout much of the history of psychotherapy, clinicians have viewed temperament with a jaundiced eye. Until the 1960s, the best-known theorist on the topic was still Galen, the second-century Greek physician who famously hypothesized that four bodily fluids—or "humours"—determined our lifelong dispositions. Based on the dissection of animals rather than direct observation of the human body, Galen asserted that blood activated the human spirit, black bile depressed it, yellow bile incited it toward anger, and phlegm rendered it sluggish. He concluded that an excess of any of these fluids created, respectively, a sanguine, melancholic, choleric, or phlegmatic temperament.

Even though Galen's theory was discredited in the 1600s by the standard-bearers of the scientific revolution, it remained the most celebrated theory of temperament in the U.S. for centuries afterward and still informs the widely-utilized Myers-Briggs personality inventory. Nonetheless, for some therapists, the notion of "humours" sloshing about our innards to produce our fundamental stance toward life has tinged the whole concept of temperament with a kind of woo-woo, quixotic quality.

Carl Jung injected a more serious note into the discourse with his nuanced theory of introversion and extroversion, qualities he described as both innate and co-existing in each individual, though unevenly developed. But this intriguing new perspective, introduced in the 1920s, had scant chance to take root. By the end of World War II, a nation horrified by Hitler's atrocities—justified on the grounds of inherited characteristics—began to turn increasingly to environmental explanations for human behavior. The burgeoning family therapy movement was a natural fit for this emerging belief system, as were new, nurture-centered approaches to education, criminal justice rehabilitation and other social programs. In the words of Temple University psychologist Jay Efran, a new era of "radical environmentalism" had been launched.

Not until the 1970s did the therapy field begin to take seriously the concept of innate predispositions. The wake-up call was sounded by New York psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, whose extensive studies of young children yielded nine distinct dimensions of childhood temperament—the tendency to approach or withdraw, adaptability to change and novelty, intensity of emotional expression, prevailing mood, distractibility level, frustration tolerance, sensory sensitivity, regularity of biological functions and physical activity level. Analyzing these

dimensions, Chess and Thomas grouped their young study subjects into one of three larger categories now familiar to most therapists: "easy," "difficult" and "slow to warm up." The researchers took pains to emphasize that each category encompassed perfectly normal variations in disposition, not continua of disorder. By unhooking biological proclivities from any notions of pathology or inferiority, Chess and Thomas took the first, critical steps toward legitimatizing the concept of temperament.

### **The Secret Lives of Babies**

Despite Chess and Thomas's precise and detailed typology, many therapists remained unconvinced that traits considered "temperamental" were actually inborn. Couldn't they simply be the outcome of certain early parenting styles? By the early 1980s, theories of infant attachment, social learning and family systems were in the ascendance, and temperament still carried a faint odor of biological bias. Into this nurture-focused field stepped a curious, observant researcher by the name of Jerome Kagan.

Kagan, then a professor of psychology at Harvard, had been studying infants in daycare to try to determine the impact of out-of-home care on babies' cognitive and emotional development. While observing these babies—some as young as three months old—he noticed that some were already timid or even avoidant, while others smiled and cooed in the presence of strangers. He recognized these differences as roughly correlating with Chess and Thomas's "slow-to-warm-up" and "easy" categories, as well as Jung's introverted/extroverted classifications. Gradually, Kagan's observations coalesced into a central question: If temperamental proclivities were showing up as early as three months, might they be innate, buried deep within our neurobiology?

Around this time, studies had begun to show that identical twins reared apart remained impressively alike in temperament, strongly suggesting a genetic component. But Kagan wasn't content with mere observation of individuals' temperamental tics. He wanted to probe deeper, into the subterranean regions of the brain, for evidence of innate proclivities. By seeking markers of distinctive brain states—specifically, variations in amygdala excitability in response to the unknown—he hoped to come closer to solving the predisposition puzzle. Within a few years, Kagan had embarked on a project with the potential to alter forever our understanding of human beings—a 20-year longitudinal study seeking to measure both the presence and persistence of temperament.

Kagan and his colleagues began in 1988 by videotaping 100 healthy four-month-olds as they reacted to a variety of unfamiliar sensory stimuli, including brightly-colored mobiles and taped voices of unknown adults. Then, Kagan took all 100 videos to a quiet room and began to roll them. The first several infants exhibited moderately varying levels of reactivity to the new stimuli—a little fretfulness here, a bit of cheerful babbling there.

Then, as he started to roll the 19th tape, Kagan sat up straighter in his chair. He watched as a baby girl reacted to the mere sight of the mobiles by arching her back, scrunching up her face in acute distress and bawling her tiny lungs out. A few videos later, Kagan watched another infant lie completely relaxed and apparently content during the entire battery of sensory stimuli. Not a peep, not a leg pump, not even a shadow of a frown.

Kagan knew he was onto something. These two babies exhibited behavior far outside the continuum of inhibited/uninhibited; they belonged in categories of their own. By the time Kagan had finished screening the 100 tapes, he'd seen a number of other babies who behaved like the two who'd

first caught his attention. After expanding the study to more than 400 four-month-olds and getting similar results, he categorized the easily upset babies as "high-reactive" and the very serene ones as "low-reactive."

Kagan and his team re-tested the children at ages 14 months, 21 months, four years and seven years, each time exposing them to unfamiliar or unexpected stimuli and observing their responses. At age four, nearly half of the originally high-reactive infants remained notably timid, spending much of a play session huddling close to their mothers, while only 10 percent of the originally low-reactive infants hung back. When the kids returned at age 7, many of those who'd started life as high-reactives continued to be shyer than the low-reactives and also more prone to anxiety, worrying about everything from monsters in the night to the possibility that a parent might die.

What do we make of these findings? They certainly suggest the staying power of infant temperament, at least through age 7. But they seem to equally demonstrate the sculpting power of a child's environment. After all, the fact that roughly half of the high-reactive group remained timid suggests that the other half had made some progress along the road to sociability. Kagan, who is now 79 and Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Harvard, readily acknowledges the role of the environment—family, peers, culture, chance events—in shaping and stretching early temperament. "From the first, my granddaughter was very shy," he says, by way of example. "But one day, when she was six, I took her for a walk and she said, suddenly, 'Grandpa, I'm going to walk ahead of you, so when I see people, I can't act shy.' Children know we live in a culture that doesn't reward timidity. Shy kids, especially, are always trying to move forward."



## **Life: A Danger Zone**

When I was five years old, my parents enrolled me in kindergarten, which I vaguely envisioned as a cheery place where my mother and I would play. I remember walking with her into a large, too-bright room vibrating with strange children in perpetual motion. Instinctively, I hung onto her. When she gently prodded me forward to introduce me to the cheerful teacher, I stared at my shoes. Mom put her arm around me, urged me to enjoy my morning and assured me she'd be back soon. Then she turned and walked out the door.

I froze into place: my feet might as well have been nailed to the linoleum floor. A few of the children approached, and then a few more, until I was completely encircled by strange five-year-olds who looked not a bit kind or welcoming. "Where'd you come from?" they demanded of this odd statue of a child. When I opened my mouth to speak, no words came out: my throat had seized up entirely.

"Where'd you come from?" they clamored over and over, circling me and looking increasingly annoyed. Finally, my instinct for survival momentarily subjugating my terror, I managed to croak, "New Jersey." The kids immediately began to peel off; I had succeeded in boring them. I hurled myself toward my benignly smiling teacher, who seemed entirely unaware of my close brush with oblivion. "I have to go home now," I whispered. "A little later," she chirped, herding me toward the other children. "Not later," I said. "Now."

Fortunately, I connected early on with another aspect of my high-reactive temperament--the part that loved to be alone. This wasn't just about relief from social overload; solitude made me truly happy. In an old photo

that sits on my desk, I am two years old, sitting behind our small, clapboard house in Cleveland, Ohio. Apparently, I've wandered away from the family group because I'm pictured entirely alone, nestled in grass and washed in sunlight, holding a Peter Rabbit picture book and smiling softly. Inside the house, I sought similar serene nooks: As a preschooler, I kept a regular appointment with a square of sunlight that appeared on our living room rug each afternoon. I can still remember the liquid pleasure that rippled through me as I curled up alone in that sun-warmed spot. "You're like a little cat," my mother often said, and she was right: Wherever there was warmth, light and solitude, I felt beckoned and soothed.

But those halcyon days of protected spaces were numbered. School was not only a rude awakening into a world of children more boisterous than I, but also my first opportunity to compare myself with lots of other kids. In the fourth grade, I became enamored of a dazzling circle of "popular girls"—the ones whose merciless faces appeared as I fled my dining room—and the more aggressively they rejected me, the more I despised the hideous shyness that seemed to consign me to perpetual outsider status. Why couldn't I be frothy and full of giggles, like them? By the time I was 10, I sometimes sat in my bedroom for hours, sunk what I called "sadness" because I had no other word for it.

### **The Birth of a Persona**

Back then, I had no idea that anyone else could possibly feel like me, much less *be* anything like me. But Kagan had a hunch that many pre-adolescents felt dogged by their timid, tense temperaments, especially internally. When his study subjects turned 11, they trooped back into his laboratory for yet another follow-up, this one augmenting observation and

interviews with a battery of biological measures. From the beginning, Kagan had suspected that the differences between high-reactive and low-reactive kids were partially due to distinctive, inherited neurochemical profiles in the amygdala, the early-warning system in the brain that he believed was activated in response to any unexpected or unfamiliar event, not only fearful ones.

Kagan theorized that in response to new stimuli, such as a roomful of strangers, the amygdala of the low-reactive person would produce the equivalent of a blinking yellow light, causing the individual to become more aware of the new crowd, but not alarmed by it. In many high-reactive people, by contrast, Kagan believed that an identical roomful of strangers would spur the amygdala to signal an imminent emergency. In fact, among Kagan's 11-year-old subjects, twice as many high-reactives as low-reactives displayed indirect markers of an excitable amygdala in response to a new situation, including a more reactive sympathetic nervous system, higher levels of muscle tension, and greater cortical arousal.

By the time the teens returned for their next follow-up, at age 15, most had maintained their level of biological reactivity. But now there was a new twist: many high-reactive adolescents no longer behaved in accordance with their bodily reactions. Many 15-year-olds who'd been high-reactive infants and who currently showed signs of an excitable amygdala now appeared relatively poised and tranquil in their conversations with unknown interviewers. Some were downright chatty. This development riveted Kagan: How could a person behave so calmly when his or her amygdala was in full-out alarm mode?

To try to unravel this enigma, Kagan invited the teens to talk about the felt experience that lay beneath their public sang-froid. In his 2006 book, *An*

*Argument for Mind*, he writes that many of the seemingly gregarious kids reported "a penetrating tension when they anticipated entering a crowd, meeting a stranger, traveling to a new place, rejection by a friend. A few high-reactive adolescents who appeared full of energy, spontaneity, and vivacity told the interviewer that they disliked being touched, had trouble sleeping before examinations, or experienced periods of profound sadness." Overall, these hyper-sensitive teens were more prone to bouts of anxiety and depression than their low-reactive counterparts.

Kagan understood that he was witnessing an important developmental event. These high-reactive children were now able to shift between what Jung called the "persona," or public face, and the "anima," an individual's private reality, where temperament abides. Kagan links this developmental shift to the growing capacity of the prefrontal cortex to manage the amygdala, which normally takes 15 to 18 years to occur. This neurobiological development helps to explain why, by mid- to late adolescence, many high-reactive teens are able to meet-and-greet with the best of them and still feel mortally shy, or take high-flying risks but feel terrified within. "An individual develops a persona over time," says Kagan. "But time doesn't change the anima."

As I think about Kagan's 15-year-olds, two things occur to me. One is that there are situations in which it can be enormously useful to be able to behave with elan no matter how miserably downtrodden one may feel—at a job interview, for example, or a first date with someone you like. My second thought is that in the wrong hands, a persona can be a dangerous thing. For some of us, the development of social graces (or some other wished-for behavior) may tempt us to imagine that we can shed our bothersome temperaments altogether and sail forth to realize a peculiarly American

dream—personal transformation.

### **Be All You Can Be—and Then Some**

With all my heart, I bought into this transformation fantasy. Granted, not all of it was fantasy: I was growing and changing, too. After spending one too many afternoons weeping into my bedspread over rejection by The Girls, some tiny ember of determination and self-regard began to flutter to life. I turned my energies toward gymnastics, which hurled me forward into a new experience of body confidence. At home, my mother listened to my sorrows and made me feel, in her presence, as though I were a genuinely interesting and entertaining person. By early adolescence, I'd gained enough savvy and self-regard to make other friends and get to know some cool boys. I cared a little less about The Girls, who responded by discovering—surprise!—that they really liked me.

At about this time my family moved cross-country, from New Jersey to San Diego; two years later, we flew back over the same landscape and touched down in suburban Philadelphia. These dislocations involved my attendance at three different high schools, where I learned that, with sufficient warm-up time, I was actually pretty good at making friends. Secretly, though, I longed for college. There I envisioned myself shedding the remainder of my despised cocoon of shyness and emerging triumphant, the fully-formed social butterfly I was meant to be. I entered the college-selection process with a kind of devil-may-care aplomb, envisioning myself an unflappable adventuress who could land anywhere and thrive.

When I did land, at a midwestern university of 6,000 students, I joined a prominent sorority and awaited metamorphosis. What I got were freshman mixers, where fraternity boys would bring me paper cups of beer and await

captivating conversation, preferably about them. I can still remember holding a foaming cup in my hand while casting about frantically for something entertaining to say, so discombobulated by this internal imperative that I failed to make even the simplest conversation. I didn't understand why I couldn't get the hang of mixing with strangers. When my sorority sisters noticed that I dated infrequently and began to treat me coolly, I felt myself falling into a familiar darkness.

At the time, I never considered that college, for me, might be a particularly harrowing transition. It didn't occur to me that during my previous moves around the country, I'd lived in the well-feathered nest of my family and that, more fundamentally, I was a shy, high-reactive person who found many new situations a frightening trial. Instead, in mid-sophomore year, I believed I'd hit on the source of my troubles: I'd chosen the wrong school! A new college would give me a new chance to become the vibrant, charming, confident person I really was. The year was 1968 and I transferred to Berkeley, where the student body was 27,000, the mood was tumultuous, and I knew not a soul.

In the fall, especially, the Berkeley campus is a magical place, lit by soft sunlight and framed by sage and honey-colored hills. On my first day of class, I picked up a copy of the student newspaper, *The Daily Californian*, and read an editorial that encouraged me to "make love to someone." If that didn't appeal, I could listen to Country Joe and the Fish jamming on the steps of Sproul Hall or join a campus political rally, pumping my fist toward the sky with the likes of Angela Davis and Eldridge Cleaver. The campus fairly vibrated with students, all hair and bright, raggedy clothes; the air around me crackled with the promise of fun, meaning and experience without borders. By turns, I felt giddy with possibility and stalked by dread.

I can see now, with perfect hindsight, that I was doing just fine at Berkeley. Over the next six months I made friends, did well in classes, and reported for the *Daily Cal*, for which I covered everything from campus belly dancing to the emergent Women's Liberation Front. But while my persona was operating competently, my insides were raw with misery. I could see only what I considered the return of my unacceptable shyness, nervousness and awkwardness. I seized on small things: how I stammered when introducing myself to the editor of the *Daily Cal*; how I froze, unable to respond, when the activist I'd begun to date sneered at what he called "my bourgeois essence." Where was the bold, self-assured flower girl who was supposed to blossom here?

I began to walk the campus with an excruciating sense of dissonance: Everything around me seemed to bloom and pulse; how, amidst such bounty, could I feel so shriveled? My housemate and friend, Marilyn, sat for hours with me at our kitchen table, trying to convey by her gentle presence that I was lovable and worthwhile. Her friendship kept me afloat, but just barely. Looking back, I suppose that any number of clinical diagnoses might have been affixed to me then--depression, social anxiety, adjustment disorder. But beneath everything, I believe that I was suffering from a failure to transform.

I left Berkeley before the year was out, tried once more the following fall, and left again after 3 months. By then, I understood that my attempted geographical cures had decisively failed and that I was, at bottom, a social defective who would never flourish anywhere. By now I'd seen two psychiatrists, each of whom pressed me to talk of early family dynamics but never suggested to me that in new situations, my body-mind might tend to spin into overdrive. Neither mentioned that someone with my particular bent toward life might do better at a smaller college. Instead, I returned home to

my parents in the Philadelphia suburbs, a dropout without prospects. I wondered if I could bear to stay alive.

### **Of Science and Soul**

At first glance, Jerome Kagan and my desperate, 21-year-old self wouldn't appear to share much common ground. He remains persuaded of the power of inborn temperament, the very part of me I wanted to excise from my being. His tracking of children's behavior and biology from infancy through mid-adolescence has persuaded him that we do, in fact, inherit distinctive neurobiological profiles that contribute to relatively enduring emotional and behavioral predispositions. When psychiatrist Carl Schwartz of the Massachusetts General Hospital recently looked at the brains of some of Kagan's subjects via functional MRIs, he found that those who'd been high-reactive infants, and were now young adults, still responded to unfamiliar scenarios with sharp upticks in amygdala activity. They didn't like novelty then, and they didn't like it now.

Kagan has not come to his convictions without struggle. In *An Argument for Mind*, he described his first reaction, some 40 years ago, to reading a prediction by Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA. Crick forecast that within the next few decades, brain neurochemistry would be found to wield a major influence on human behavior and its variations. "I wrote in the margin of that page, 'No!'" recalled Kagan. He noted that stubborn facts have forced him, "kicking and screaming," to revise his early notions of the overwhelming primacy of nurture in human development. "Temperament is never the whole story," he says now. "But if you don't take it into account, you won't understand what it is to be human."

In his efforts to show the biochemical roots of temperament, Kagan is



no longer a voice in the wilderness. In the last decade alone, behavioral DNA researchers have identified genes that boost the likelihood of being shy, optimistic, attracted to risk, gregarious, distraction-prone and several other temperamental qualities identified by Chess and Thomas nearly 50 years ago. Predictably, these investigations have been overblown by the media, with headlines touting the discovery of a "shyness gene," a "happiness gene," and various other slices of DNA that purportedly bless or doom one to a particular behavioral or emotional fate. Many people, both in and out of the therapy field, have responded with instinctive distrust, wondering whether this outpouring of behavioral genetics news heralds a return to biological determinism.

This scenario seems unlikely. Many genetic researchers have taken pains to explain that no gene causes a behavior or emotional state, but merely renders one more vulnerable to it. Furthermore, no single gene appears to boost susceptibility by much. The fundamental goal of behavioral molecular genetics "is not aimed at identifying the gene for a particular behavioral dimension," writes behavioral geneticist Kimberly Saudino in the June 2005 issue of *The Journal of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics*. Rather, the goal is "to identify many genes that each make a small contribution to variability in a particular trait."

Kagan's greatest hope, in fact, is that genetic and brain science will advance sufficiently to directly pinpoint the neurochemistry that causes high reactivity. With unusual candor for a scientist, he says, "For now, we have only theories. Maybe we'll find that out that the critical action is not in the amygdala, but in its projections—or somewhere else entirely. We could be surprised. Nature is unpredictable." He sounds intrigued, rather than frustrated, by the menu of possibilities.

What Kagan is certain of is that temperament is a complicated creature, at once plastic and persistent. Throughout the course of his study, most of his high-reactive youngsters became less timid and tense over time, while some of his low-reactive kids became quieter and more fearful. But the bottom line held: Only rarely did individuals fundamentally change their temperamental stripes. Almost no sociable infants became deeply introverted adolescents; conversely, only rarely did a tense, fussy infant metamorphose into a relaxed, ebullient teenager. Most adolescents retained at least some qualities of their original temperament, especially regarding what Kagan calls the "feeling tone" that bubbled beneath their public behavior.

Temperament, he believes, is a bit like birdsong. "Knowing that a bird is a finch rather than a meadowlark allows one to predict with great confidence the songs it will not sing," he writes in his 2004 book, *The Long Shadow of Temperament*, "but permits a far less certain prediction of the particular songs it will sing." Applied to humans, "if you're a shy, high-reactive person, you'll probably never be a politician, a test pilot, or the next Jay Leno." Similarly, if you're a low-reactive, sociable sort, chances are you won't become a solitary orchid grower. Beyond those broad limits, many doors swing open.

And that, finally, is where Kagan and my despondent, 21-year-old self find common ground. When I told him, recently, of the despair that had enveloped me in college when I understood that I could not escape my temperament, I asked Kagan if there was anything he might have said to me, back then, to offer a bit of hope.

"I would have told you that the world needs all kind of people," he said. "I would have encouraged you to find a life niche in which your temperament would be a good thing." He paused for a moment, thinking it

over. "Then I would have urged you to find a good therapist."

### **Skating on Paper**

By luck and effort, I found one. Margaret Temeles was an elegant, middle-aged psychiatrist who worked out of her front parlor, which she'd outfitted with a thick Persian rug, an analyst's couch and an atmosphere of profound calm and safety. Dr. Temeles wasted no time trying to convince me of my innate worth, which would have been a fool's errand. Instead, as I lay on her couch and regaled her with the latest evidence of my inconsequentiality, she sometimes pointed out that I was a "quite sensitive" person with a tendency to be "very hard" on myself.

I had actually never considered this before. Didn't everyone react as I did, absorbing small slights as though they held some awful, final truth about the self? Her perspective calmed me a little. Over the next three years Dr. Temeles walked the therapist's high wire, steadily communicating that I was entirely fine as I was while simultaneously nudging me past my reductionist views of myself. When I burst into her parlor one morning in a panic, reporting that my new boyfriend wanted the two of us to host a dinner party—how awful was that?—she was quiet for a moment, her hand perched thoughtfully on her chin. Finally, she said, "How about inviting just one person to dinner?"

I thought about it for a week and decided I could risk this foray into the realm of hostessing. We invited a pal of my boyfriend's named Bob, a ruffled, loquacious soul who wouldn't have cared if I'd served cold eggs and said ten words. The evening was a success, at least by Bob's standards, and I came away with a slightly altered view of myself. I had what it took to throw a dinner party. Okay, to co-throw a very small dinner party. No

matter: it was a kind of breakthrough.

The other person who taught me something about living with my temperament—while simultaneously pushing against its limits—was the new boyfriend himself. Dan radiated a kind of playful, calm confidence that made me wonder, at first, whether I wanted to be with Dan or simply *be* him. On one of our first dates, he took me skating, not on a regular pond but on a vast stretch of gray, congealed paper waste that he'd discovered at the edges of Valley Forge Park. Had I been the one to come across such a pit, I would have filed it under "disgusting" and never returned. But Dan had been intrigued by it. So, for a whole afternoon, we glided barefoot on a half-acre of paper waste, executing wobbly figure eights and spending considerable time afterward scrubbing the muck off our feet. The day was bizarre. It bore no resemblance to a date. I had a fabulous time.

A few months into our relationship, when I tentatively revealed to Dan that beneath my cheery facade I was horrendously shy and unsure of myself, he replied, "I know. So what?" Then he launched into an impromptu dance that he dubbed the "Confidence Strut," instructing me to follow. As Dan led me around the room in this high-stepping, ridiculous ritual of self-regard, I glimpsed something that lay beyond a life of whipping myself into shape. For just a moment, with the tiniest tilt in perspective, I looked at the whole impossible project of self-renovation and did the only thing that made sense—laughed at it.

Again and again, Dan showed me that life was more fun than frightening, and at some point I understood that I had a decision to make. If I threw my lot in with Dan, there would be more dinner parties to throw, his huge, extended family to negotiate, all manner of oddball expeditions and spontaneous socializing to carry out. It felt exhausting, scary, too much of

everything. On the other side of the balance sheet, I was wildly in love. The scale tipped precipitously, and I jumped.

What I leapt away from was not my own temperament—that was mine to keep—but from the self-castigating, life-sapping prison I had constructed of it. Committing to making a life with Dan was only the first event in a long, intertwined process of struggle and letting go; it would take years, even decades, to learn to truly care about myself. But I had skated on paper and danced the Confidence Strut, and had laughed helplessly through each of them. It was a start.

### **Holding Both**

"We are all," as Lord Byron put it, "differently organized." This is easy to see—a cursory glance at our own family members usually suffices—but it may be daunting to fully grasp. The effort to do so is now in high gear, as hundreds of investigations by psychologists, behavioral molecular geneticists and neuroscientists are bringing us closer to identifying just how temperament and life experience intermingle to shape a human being. Of course, these explorations will not tell us everything we want to know—not soon, and perhaps not ever. Temperament is an inherently messy business, rife with endlessly shifting and cross-cutting factors that defy crisp conclusions. As Nabokov said, "The greater the science, the deeper the sense of mystery."

Still, we know enough to get started. As individuals thrash about in their own temperamental thickets, therapists can serve as wilderness guides, following rough-cleared paths and pointing out elements of nature that are usually hidden from view. For clients who believe in the be-all of nurture—

my parents screwed me up, end of story—it might energize the therapy process a bit to speak out loud about temperament. When my own therapist did that, it marked the beginning of my capacity to forgive myself. To understand that there are things about me that cannot not be undone or transformed by any amount of psychic digging or repair work—that a part of me is simply pre-psychological—has come as a profound relief.

It's possible, of course, to make too much of inborn proclivities, and to shortchange other realms of self that develop in the push and pull of growing up. The crucible of daily living may, in time, spur the extrovert to more deeply listen, the risk-taker to take better care of herself, and the shy person to pick up social skills—or even to discover an unforeseen pleasure in conviviality. In my own experience, once I've passed through the "warm up" phase of friendship I find it surprisingly easy to relax with others, share goofy stories, dance with abandon and, upon occasion, even get up and entertain. (Suffice it to say that I know all the words to "Da Do Ron Ron.")

Both Jung and Kagan might call this my "persona," a term that I'm willing to embrace as long as it encompasses the quality of genuineness I experience when I enter this mode. My convivial self is not a mask; it feels as authentic, and as necessary, as my solitude-seeking core. Still, my gregarious side shows up only now and then, and resists any schedule. Sometimes I think I have the social equivalent of inhibited sexual desire: I don't often yearn to be with other people, but once I'm with them I'm readily energized and engaged—and often joyful.

Jung wrote even the most introverted or extroverted of us harbors the contrasting predisposition within us, a submerged self that is always yearning for expression. But Jung was a realist about temperament. He wrote that in each individual, extroversion and introversion "ought, in their

harmonious alteration, to give life a rhythm, but it seems to require a high degree of art to achieve such a rhythm." In short, we tend to revert to type. Jung concluded that for an individual to express his or her wholeness, "there remains only the more strenuous way forwards into higher consciousness."

So, that is the task. Now that I know that I'm temperamentally inclined to solitude tipping-toward-isolation, I try to be more awake to how I actually conduct my social life. On a recent evening, Dan was out of town and I was sitting alone on the couch in the living room, sipping tea and reading an amazing Richard Price novel. The phone rang. Rather than just ignoring it—my default response—I engaged in a mini-conversation in my head, a kind of speed-dating dialogue between two parts of myself. *Don't answer. No, get the phone. Alone, so comfy! Together, laughter.* That last image propelled me to the phone and the music of a friend's voice, which in turn, pushed me out of my cozy nest to do something fun.

Yet, I know in my soul that no amount of rewarding, even vital, human connection will ever silence the siren song of my temperament. Solitude, it beckons. Calm, warmth, squares of light. Inside me still lives the two-year-old who sits contentedly alone in her sunlit backyard, a Peter Rabbit book open in her hands. It's why, even now, when the phone rings and I'm deep in a novel, I may not even look up. The persistent jangle seems far-off, like street noise. What feels real right now is the velvety warmth of this old couch, the tea breathing steam at my elbow, and a story that absorbs and transports. In these moments, I have everything I need. I am smiling in the sunshine.

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*and Brothers.*



