

EVERYONE'S DIFFERENT





'What sets you apart can sometimes feel like a burden and it's not. And a lot of the time, it's what makes you great.'

Emma Stone, actor

Being quiet does not always mean being shy; being quiet just means being quiet. Being quiet also doesn't mean you have nothing to say. In fact, a lot of quiet people have proven that you don't have to be loud to be heard.

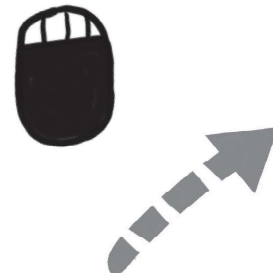
On 20 August 2018, a fifteen-year-old girl in Sweden decided she wasn't going to go to school but she was going to go on strike. For years, she had watched documentaries and read articles about how humans have been causing climate change that is destroying life on our planet. Learning about this climate crisis had thrown Greta into a depression. She stopped going to school. Not only was she anxious about what was being done to the planet, she was learning to cope with a number of conditions that could make life tough.

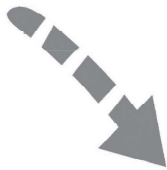
It wasn't until she opened up to her parents about her worries and got them to go vegan that she realised that by talking to people she could get them to change their behaviours.

So Greta painted a sign that read 'School strike for climate'* and held it, alone, outside the government building in her home country of Sweden. She decided she would continue her protest for three weeks, until parliament started up again. It wasn't long before reporters were coming by to take photographs of the young girl sitting alone outside the most important building in the country.

By the end of the three weeks, Greta Thunberg's name would be known across the globe. It made a huge change to what she was used to. In Greta's words, she'd been 'the invisible girl in the back who doesn't say anything'; now the whole world was hanging on her every word.

* Actually, it was written in Swedish so it said 'Skolstrejk för Klimatet.'





She still doesn't speak much, partly because of a condition called selective mutism, which means she only speaks when she thinks it's necessary. Greta also has Asperger's Syndrome, so her brain operates differently to the way many other people's do. This, she says, has been her superpower. It not only gave her the ability to focus on a single subject, but it gave her the ability to speak bluntly and truthfully about it too. As Greta says:



**'IT MAKES ME SEE THE WORLD
DIFFERENTLY ...**

**I see through lies more easily.
I don't like compromising.**

**TO BE DIFFERENT IS
NOT A WEAKNESS.**

**It's a strength in many ways
because you stand out
from the crowd.'**







Another part of Greta's power comes from embodying qualities that a lot of quiet or introverted kids have in common:

SHE COULD LISTEN
AND ABSORB
INFORMATION.


SHE COULD THINK,
DEEPLY AND
INTELLIGENTLY.

Because of her ability to think and spend time with herself, Greta managed to discover her own personal passion early on - it just turned out to be fighting for the environment. This was the issue she decided she would dedicate her time to. This was the cause that would see her voyaging across the Atlantic on a tiny sailing ship to address a summit of the some of the most important people on earth.



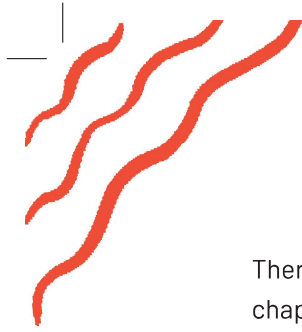
And Greta was able to be such a positive force in the world not despite being quiet, but because she was quiet and thoughtful and knowledgeable and all of those things that come from spending a lot of time in your own head. Her nature had made her sensitive to what was going on in the world, and once she saw this, she knew she had to do something to fight against it.

We all need to locate our strengths and find out ways of using them to achieve the things we care about. Some kids, like Greta, are lucky enough to find the things they really care about early on in life. For others, it might not be until well into adulthood before they discover what it is that is closest to their hearts. But you'll get there far quicker if you embrace who you are, rather than trying to become something you're not.

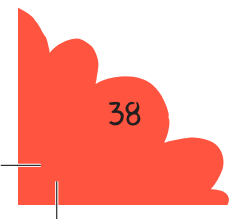
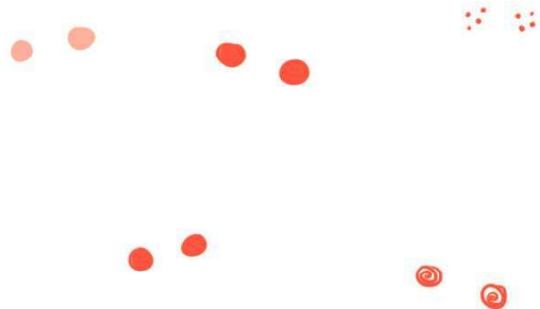


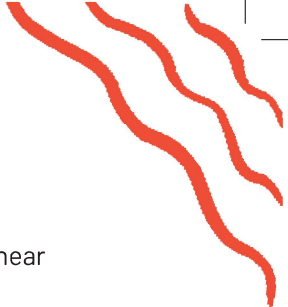
I WANT TO TELL YOU A PRETTY STUPID STORY ABOUT HOW I DID A VERY BAD JOB OF THIS ...

When I was young, I was certain that I wanted to be a famous actor or singer or actor and singer. This may have had something to do with wanting a big house. It may have also had something to do with wanting people to like me. Everyone loved famous actors and singers, I reasoned. So if I became one, everyone would love me too.



There was bad news. You might remember this from the last chapter, but I was pretty shy. I didn't like performing in front of people at all. I was also pretty terrible at it. My singing was especially atrocious. I managed to sneak my way onto the school choir but I knew I was bad. I could hear it. So I would purposely sing as quietly as possible, in every practice and recital. It became a sort of game where I had to move my lips as much as possible while making sure almost no sound at all came out of them. Sometimes I failed at the game and the choirmaster would hear my out-of-tune bawling amongst all the angelic voices.





'Stop,' he'd say, cutting through the air with his baton. 'I want to hear the sopranos on their own repeat that last bit.'

(I was a soprano. Sopranos are, in boys' choirs, the highest pitched voices.)

In those moments, I was sure to keep any sound at all from coming out of my mouth. Once though, I failed, and he realised that the sound was coming from me. Rather than say anything, the choirmaster winced, and moved swiftly on. I ate an entire packet of chocolate chip cookies after that rehearsal.

Needless to say, choir made me miserable. Acting club made me miserable. Public performances made me particularly miserable. I felt sick before, I felt sick during, and I felt sick afterwards. Eventually, I quit them all with a sigh of relief.

TRUST YOUR GUT!

Learn to listen to your body, not just your brain. Quiet people can sometimes think too much, which can lead to feeling anxious. I felt sick when I even thought about going to choir, but my brain would say, wait! If you quit choir, how will you become a famous singer? I was never in ten thousand years going to become a famous singer, and if I had, it wouldn't have made me happy in the slightest. Sometimes we just need to trust our gut instincts.


With acting and singing over with, I had more time on my hands to do what made me happy: snuggling up in my room after school and reading. Maybe it was because of

“And **C**an **E**veryone **T**ry **Y**elling **L**ots **O**f **C**ats **H**ide **O**n **L**ittle **I**slands **N**ear **E**ngland”

being released in my brain, I don't know. Whatever the reason, my parents didn't think books were a very healthy pursuit. They certainly weren't going to give me money to buy them. There were wonderful libraries, of course, in school and outside of it, but what I wanted most of all was to sit surrounded by walls of my own books. If I could sit surrounded by books, I knew I would feel safe.

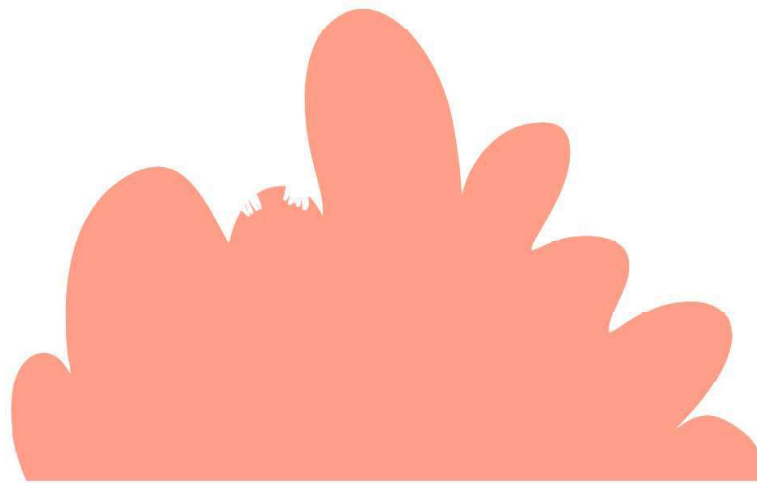


There is nothing unhealthy about books. Sure, you need some sun and some exercise to be healthy, but reading can also work wonders. According to the charity The Reading Agency, learning to read for fun when you're young can have more of an impact on how your life goes than whether you grow up in a rich family or a poor family. Books can also encourage your brain development, and help you to do well in other subjects and learn about people, places and cultures you might not otherwise have come across. One study has even shown that adults who read the *Harry Potter* books when they were children have kinder attitudes towards refugees, immigrants and members of the LGBTQI community.



To raise money for books, I got three paper rounds: one before school, one after school and one on Sundays. That last one was the worst because you had to carry around massive, super-heavy papers filled with magazines that no one ever reads.

Paper rounds were not the ideal job for me. When you're delivering their papers, people very often try to talk to you. As you can imagine, this was not a part of the job that I enjoyed. One woman on my morning route was particularly chatty. She lived in a house surrounded by Christmas-tree-like bushes. Whenever I saw her silhouette moving towards the door, I would quickly hide behind her car or slot myself in between the bushes. This never, ever worked. Why not? Because I'd just delivered her paper and my bike was lying on her drive.



'I can see you!' she'd say. 'What are you doing?'

I'd hop back on my bike and hurriedly cycle away.



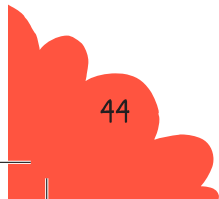
Anyway, with the money from the paper rounds, I'd go to the fetes and fairs and jumble sales of different schools in the area, wait until they were almost over, and buy up huge boxes of books the tired parents didn't want to lug home, for as little money as possible. This meant that I couldn't afford to be very choosy. I ended up with shelves filled with books on topics as random as how to tell apart the trees of North America, which foods the Tudors ate, and how one man trekked to Antarctica but lost six of his toes along the way.

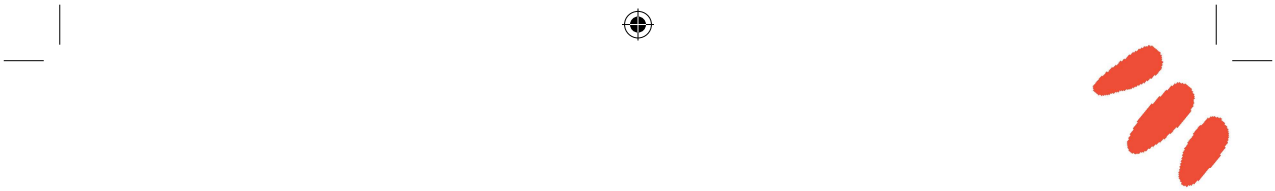


Hey! Come back!!



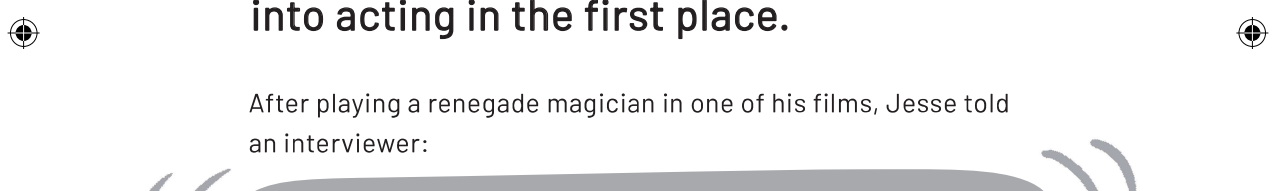
All of that reading didn't turn out to be a complete waste of time, because I eventually found out a way of using this passion to achieve something. But we'll get to that later on.





So performing didn't turn out to be my particular talent, but that doesn't mean shyness has to keep you off a stage. Contrary to what you might think, shyness can actually be quite useful when it comes to performing. There are some people who can harness their shyness like an energy. If you're uncomfortable in your own skin, doesn't it make sense that you would jump at the chance to spend a little time in someone else's? The opportunity to really become someone else might come as a welcome relief.

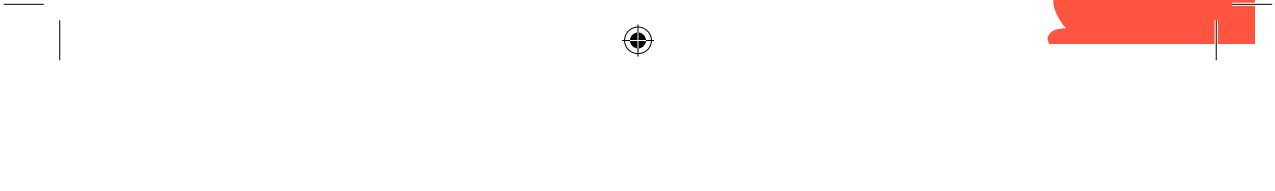
Actors including Daniel Radcliffe, Keira Knightley and Jesse Eisenberg have all talked about how shy they are in real life and why this was the thing that led them into acting in the first place.



After playing a renegade magician in one of his films, Jesse told an interviewer:

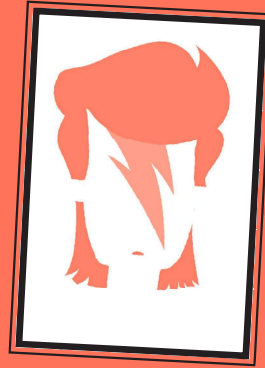
'I LIKE PLAYING BAD GUYS OR DIFFICULT CHARACTERS ... IN MY LIFE I'M A SHY, QUIET PERSON AND I GREW UP WITH NO SOCIAL LIFE. IT'S A GREAT OUTLET TO PLAY THESE CHARACTERS.'

It's not hard to see why acting might help boost self-confidence too. For me, one of the most terrifying parts of talking to other people was not knowing which words to say to them. You don't have to worry about any of that when you're performing a play, as the lines are already written for you. All you have to do is memorise what Romeo is going to say to Juliet. By acting, you get to practice socialising, without the hardest parts. In fact, there is even a saying amongst actors that 'acting is the shy man's revenge'.



THE INCREDIBLE SHAPESHIFTER

**HAVE YOU EVER HEARD
OF A SINGER NAMED
DAVID BOWIE?**




If you haven't, I'm sure your parents have. If they haven't, you may want to consider the possibility that they're aliens.

In the 1950s, David was a small boy with extraordinary talents. He was also painfully shy, which at first was an obstacle for expressing himself through music and art. To get around this, David created a number of fabulous characters that he could perform as instead of himself. As he explains:

'As an adolescent, I was painfully shy, withdrawn. I didn't really have the nerve to sing my songs on stage, and nobody else was doing them. I decided to do them in disguise so that I didn't have to actually go through the humiliation of going on stage and being myself.'

David's first character was named Ziggy Stardust. He had a shock of bright red hair, a lightning bolt painted across his face, and a wardrobe of skin-tight Lycra jumpsuits. Ziggy was a rock star alien who had come to earth to bring us messages from beings on other planets.




Then came Aladdin Sane, a much darker, sadder character, who came out of the alien Ziggy venturing to America. Aladdin still wore a lightning bolt across his face but it was now joined by a tear.


After him came the Thin White Duke, a troubled man with white hair, who dressed in waistcoats and ties. Alongside his music, David also found himself playing various characters in films and plays, like Jareth the evil Goblin King in *Labyrinth*, or the lead role in a west-end production of *The Elephant Man*.

These characters made David famous across the world. In 2015, a new species of African Butterfly was even named after Ziggy Stardust because of its distinctive markings. Ziggy Stardust became so popular that a group of Belgian astronomers even put together a constellation of stars that looked like his lightning bolt.

If he hadn't been shy, David never would have come up Ziggy, or Aladdin, or the Thin White Duke. What was crucial was working with his talents, finding a way of using what he had to create something unique and marvellous.

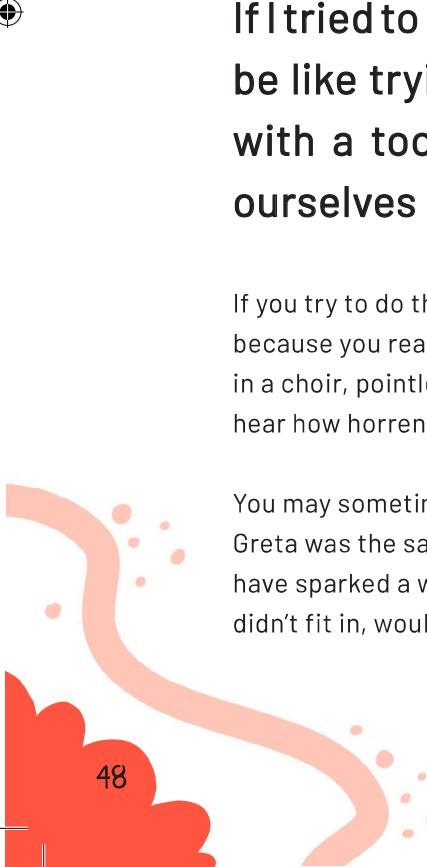
David Bowie used lots of different names throughout his life. Each one allowed him to become someone different. Using pseudonyms and stage names like this is very common, not just amongst musicians, but with writers, artists, comedians, sportspeople, designers, and activists too. Lady Gaga's real name is Stefani Germanotta. Vin Diesel is Mark Sinclair. And when J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* books, wanted to write crime novels, she did so under the name Robert Galbraith.





We can't compare ourselves to others because we all have different things to offer. If we find ourselves trying to copy what others are doing, we're going to fail. And if we spend our lives wishing we were like other people, we're not going to be very happy either.



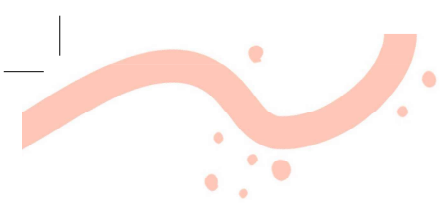
As a writer, I'm more than guilty of this. Often, I'll read a book and think, this is too good, I could never write something like that. And of course I couldn't write something like that, because I'm not J.K. Rowling or Dr Seuss or Phillip Pullman or Jessica Townsend. I couldn't write their books for the same reason that I couldn't give speeches the way Greta does or write heart-breaking songs like David did. I don't have their personal experiences, their personal passions, or their personal abilities.





If I tried to do what any of them do, it would be like trying to put a wardrobe together with a toothbrush. We have to listen to ourselves and follow our own paths.

If you try to do things because you think you should, rather than because you really want to, you might end up standing awkwardly in a choir, pointlessly moving your lips and hoping nobody can hear how horrendous the squeaks you're emitting are.

You may sometimes feel out of place. This is no bad thing. If Greta was the same as every other kid in her school, would she have sparked a worldwide revolution? If David hadn't felt like he didn't fit in, would he have created the magical personas that



made him famous? And if J.K. Rowling hadn't been an introvert, would she have managed to create an entire world of wizards in her head?



If you're reading this book, chances are you are a little different. Good, I'm glad. I hope you can embrace it. The key to success will be in learning exactly what your differences are and figuring out the best ways to make them count. We have to work out which tools we're in possession of, then we can decide what we'll use them to build.

If you're quiet, remember that you can think and you can work and you can listen, in ways that louder people may never do.

If you're shy, remember that you're looking at the world differently to everyone else, and this difference can be an energy in itself.