



Elizabeth Spiers [Follow](#)

Founder, The Insurrection. Publisher, There Is Only R.
yesterday · 10 min read

Confessions of a “Cold” Woman

Screw Vivaciousness.



Hillary Clinton speaks to the Press Corp on the airport tarmac in front of her campaign plane before flying off on a day of campaigning in White Plains, New York on Thursday September 8, 2016. Photo by Melina Mara — The Washington Post/Getty Images

Yesterday the chairman of the Republican Party complained that Hillary Clinton, the first female Presidential candidate in the history of the United States, needed to smile more. Reince Priebus, notably, did not offer the same criticism of his own party’s candidate—who employed roughly the same ratio of smiling during Wednesday night’s Commander in Chief forum as Clinton did, but had no discernible appearance of being female, and therein lies the difference.

I suppose that Priebus could have topped the cliché somehow: maybe criticizing her hemlines if she weren’t such a pantsuit aficionado, or telling her she belonged in the kitchen, or just coming right out with it and calling her a bitch. But telling a Presidential candidate that she should be projecting cheerfulness while talking about military policy, terrorist threats, and wartime engagements abroad is as preposterous as the prospect of Clinton

actually laughing and bubbling her way through that discussion would be disturbing. If that's the vein in which he gives women foreign policy advice, you can almost imagine him telling her she'd get along better with Vladimir Putin if she put on a bit more makeup and showed a little leg.

Because the reality is, Priebus thinks Clinton should be smiling not because it's what the President of the United States should be doing in that context, but it's what women should be doing perpetually.

And Clinton is aware of this. She knows that her failure to meet this expectation leads some people to assert that she seems "cold", and she addressed it a bit in a [some posts on the Humans of New York Facebook page](#):

"I know that I can be perceived as aloof or cold or unemotional. But I had to learn as a young woman to control my emotions. And that's a hard path to walk."

The hard path she's talking about is distinctly paradoxical: what is expected of the Platonically Good Woman is directly at odds with the qualities that are typically identified with successful men: emotional control, courage of one's convictions, a willingness to defy conventions in order to innovate. And there is always downside to conforming to the Platonically Good archetype. For example:

You are expected to be demonstrative emotionally because it's a marker of femininity (but you will be punished for being too emotional and having no self control if you are). You are expected to be warm and sensitive (but you will be perceived as vulnerable and by extension, weak, if you are—because these are "soft" traits). You are expected to be liked by everyone (but being liked by everyone will often mean avoiding controversy, strong opinions—or opinions at all—and never publicly disagreeing with anyone). You are expected to be the communicator and the nurturer, whose primary function is to get everyone on the same page, often at your own expense (but you will be perceived as a serial compromiser with no backbone if you do that). You are supposed to be decisive (but if you are, you will be punished for not getting enough input from other people, or being arrogant for not second-guessing yourself). You are supposed to be upbeat and bubbly (but if you are, people will think your bubbly-ness is a function of your airheaded-ness). And so on.

. . .

Personally, I'm incapable of doing some of these things. I could wear a dress made of Alka Seltzer in a swimming pool and no one would describe me as

“effervescent”. The emoticon that best represents a strong emotional reaction from me is 😐. My humor skews deadpan and one of my closest friends described me in an essay about our friendship for the late *More* magazine thusly:

She is all head, I am all heart. Her creativity moves in a linear fashion; mine is a splatter painting. She runs businesses, speaks Arabic, starts websites, calculates tips. All those activities are foreign to me. Aside from being brunettes of the same age, we couldn't be more different. As a child, when she fought with her mother, she would win arguments by saying, "You're being illogical."

(Small fact-check: I never won an argument with that, but it did infuriate my mom, which was admittedly sometimes the intended effect. We get along well, but sometimes I think my parents were expecting that they'd get a princess-y girl-child who was sweet and liked pretty things and playing house when they adopted me, and instead they got a miniature Mr. Spock who wanted a microscope for Christmas and unlimited trips to the library. To their credit, they rolled with it, mostly.)

I also tend to be quiet, especially in groups. This isn't because I lack opinions or things to say (I make a portion of my living writing op-eds) but because I'm listening or just observing and don't feel the need to constantly interject. I'm fine being a beta talker in a group conversation. I've been told that this sometimes makes people who don't know me think I'm silently judging them. (I am also sometimes a bit shy when I don't know people. It is not malicious or judgmental.)

There a million different reasons why someone might be quiet in this scenario and I suspect that quiet men are not generally accused of quietly judging people when they choose not to speak.

. . .

On a Myers Briggs test, I'm an INTJ—the “Architect” archetype. Wikipedia notes, “Women of this personality type are especially rare, forming just 0.8% of the population.” (Wikipedia also says Hillary Clinton is “believed to be” an INTJ, but I'd imagine that's more a function of crowdsourced armchair psychology than leaked Myers Briggs results, and to be fair, Wikipedia is not exactly an unimpeachable information source anyway.)

I also have some reservations about the validity of Myers Briggs tests, but apparently that is also just the sort of thing you'd expect from an INTJ, given that INTJs

“apply (often ruthlessly) the criterion ‘Does it work?’ to everything from their own research efforts to the prevailing social norms. This in turn produces an unusual independence of mind, freeing the INTJ from the constraints of authority, convention, or sentiment for its own sake.”

Or, say, the constraints of a maudlin attachment to a possibly outdated personality assessment tool that may not even be accurate.

But this certainly resonates and reminds me of a certain Presidential candidate:

“Perhaps the most fundamental problem, however, is that INTJs really want people to make sense.”

This is a particularly vexing problem when your opponent is Donald Trump.

Also characteristic of INTJs: “They tend to be pragmatic, logical, and creative. They have a low tolerance for spin or rampant emotionalism. They are not generally susceptible to catchphrases and do not readily accept authority based on tradition, rank, or title.”

(A thought experiment: when a person is described as pragmatic and logical with a low tolerance for emotionalism and a natural distrust of authority, do you assume that person is male or female?)

. . .

I do not always conform to the usual notions of *How A Woman Should Live and Be in the World*, and sometimes I pay for it. When I became the second female and youngest editor in chief of the *New York Observer*, one of the first stories that came out about it called me aloof and arrogant, because I had not been warm enough or demonstrative enough to an anonymous colleague at *New York Magazine* nearly a decade before. A tech reporter once drunkenly yelled at me for a solid twenty minutes because I did not express enough enthusiasm upon meeting him and he determined, not knowing a thing about me personally, that this was because I thought I was “too good” to have a conversation with him. (The irony is that I tried to, but he kept talking over me.) I once got berated in a performance review for not saying hi to all of my colleagues when I came in to the office every morning, even though I’d never seen a male manager do that, and it had nothing to do with my actual job or our agreed-upon performance metrics.

This is all, of course, epic bullshit. But if there's a silver lining, it's that when these things happen, they're a screening mechanism of sorts for sexist idiots.

I also console myself with the belief that in the longer term, the sexist idiots tend to sabotage their own performance with those same biases. They treat women badly and do not have female allies as a result. They don't recognize female talent and get bested by competitors who do. They view women as intellectually and fundamentally inferior and get blindsided by women who outperform them. When they're not being destructive to women, they are unwittingly being destructive to themselves.

I've also discovered that you don't have to be liked by everybody everywhere to succeed professionally or be happy personally. And that's fortuitous, because it's impossible. If you don't care what anyone thinks at all, that's another extreme, and you may be a sociopath, but there's a happy medium. For the most part, you'll probably be fairly happy and fulfilled on the likability front if the people *you* personally like and respect reciprocate.

Hillary Clinton knows this. She tries to be persuasive but doesn't waste energy trying to convert the conspiracy theorists, the people who think she's inherently inferior because she's a woman and argue as much, or the people who think that she's secretly controlled by her husband.

She also knows that if she behaved even a fraction of the way Donald Trump does publicly, traits that people view as an appropriate display of passion or patriotism would be viewed as unhinged behavior if she did the same thing. In the Facebook post, she wrote:

"I've learned that I can't be quite so passionate in my presentation. I love to wave my arms, but apparently that's a little bit scary to people. And I can't yell too much. It comes across as 'too loud' or 'too shrill' or 'too this' or 'too that.'

But she is also a pragmatist and is okay living without those things if it gets the job done. I am personally a bit sad that she does, because I'd like to see her pound the table to emphasize a point, occasionally, and I enjoy it when she's truly appalled by something (as she was by Donald Trump's statement that Putin is a better leader than the sitting American President) and can't hide her disdain. And I think she should be able to get angry without being called a bitch.

If she chooses not to, she shouldn't be derided as cold or unemotional. If emotional control and reserve are positive characteristics for men, there's no reason why they shouldn't be viewed the same way for women. (I've heard men described approvingly as "stoic," but never a woman. I've also never

heard a woman described as “the strong silent type”, even though I know many strong women who are also reserved.)

. . .

Several years ago, when I was running Dealbreaker, a Wall Street site I started, I moderated a panel at Wharton for and about women who worked in finance. The panel consisted of female partners at four bulge bracket banks. At the end, we conducted a Q & A, and a business school student asked for any last minute advice for women who were entering the field.

“If you do your job well, someone is always going to call you a bitch, eventually,” one partner offered. She explained that it sometimes offends men when women do well—they find it threatening, or just can’t wrap their heads around the notion of women as peers—and they will assume that those women did something wrong or behaved like assholes to achieve their success. “It’s just going to happen,” she said. “Ignore it.” Being called a bitch is not the worst thing that can happen to you, she continued, and it doesn’t mean you are one. It’s just a word that people use when women do things they don’t like.

Another partner offered: “put yourself as close to revenue as possible.” It’s a quantitative measure, she said. No one can argue that you’re doing a bad job for cultural reasons (e.g., someone thinks you’re a bitch) if you’re bringing in money and outperforming your peers. Revenue is an objective metric. Cold and unemotional.

. . .

When I was in my early twenties, I was dumped by a guy I was dating because he said he felt like he needed to be with someone more “high energy”. My internal reaction was WTF, but on the surface, it was probably 😞. I tried to tease out what he meant by “high energy” and it turns out he meant vivacious. Bubbly. I wondered for a while if all men wanted high-energy, bubbly, vivacious women, and if that meant I would be alone forever, being reserved and deadpan and analytical, perhaps in a studio apartment full of cats. I wondered if I should just learn to be more demonstrative, throw my head back when I laughed, burst into group conversations, loquacious and cheery. Pretend that everything was exciting! Wonderful! Interesting! That I was never bored, or anxious, or just plain ambivalent. Could I even do it? Could I pretend to be every Julia Roberts character, ever?

No, I could not.

So I decided to own it. I began writing online and said what I wanted to say when I wanted to say it and not how or when I was expected to as a Platonically Good Woman. It allowed me to be myself and get comfortable with what that meant.

I met a guy who was not in the market for a bubbly woman, and we got married and had a kid. (We do, however, live in an apartment, and it does in fact contain a cat.) I post baby photos of our son on Instagram at an alarming rate, and sometimes friends tell me that this surprises them because they didn't peg me for the type. Like, it would make sense if I were posting Baby's Aggregate Quantitative Metrics, but cute photos are so sentimental. They are warm and soft and imply maternal love, which is an odd look on Ol' Robot Spiers. I get it, and I'm not offended by it. I joke that they hurt my feeling.

Singular.