Born to Create: High Sensitivity with Fire and Prose

In 1991, Dr. Elaine Aron discovered an innate personality trait called sensory processing sensitivity, also known as high sensitivity. Highly sensitive people (HSPs) make up roughly 20% of the population. That number is too high for the trait to be considered a disorder, but too low for it to be known by the majority of the population. It also points to the idea that if you're not a highly sensitive person, there's a good chance you're living with one, or know one.

In this lecture, I will discuss high sensitivity in the general population, but will focus mainly on the artist population, including of course, writers. I will weave a thread through the artistic journey I've taken, showing how the high sensitivity trait—that I didn't know I had—effected my journey, and how it can positively affect your's if you feel you might be an HSP.

According to Dr. Aron, a highly sensitive person's characteristics follow the acronym DOES, D-O-E-S, and they are:

- a tendency to process information more **deeply**—often accomplished by comparing past experiences to current situations;

- a tendency toward **overstimulation**, which results in **overarousal**. This is caused by the deep processing. And also by experiences such as public speaking, or when an HSP meets a respected stranger;

- stronger **emotional reactions** to both positive and negative experiences. And also a tendency—more than the average person—toward **empathy**; and

- an awareness of **subtleties** in their environment, such as nonverbal cues others don't realize they're giving off.

HSPs experience more emotions than non-HSPs because they also absorb the emotions of others.

HSPs become disturbed by the mistreatment of others, and likewise tend to be more aware of the suffering of others.

HSPs have strong intuitions, not because a non-HSP doesn't have an intuition, but because an HSP tends to pay more attention to theirs. This refers to the deep processing.

HSPs dislike violent movies and tv shows. They typically find that nature has an unusually healing effect on them. They also have rich inner lives. Their internal reflections are often very detailed; they tend to have vivid dreams.

Finally, HSPs exhibit high levels of creativity. Dr. Aron posits that "every sensitive person is unusually creative, even if it is going unexpressed or there is no particular, exceptional talent present."

Dr. Aron, herself an HSP, is a psychologist, and also a published novelist. She describes recently having been away from her creative side for so long she became exhausted, needing "to go back to what I was designed to do, and that is creative writing…"

Human traits do not continue to exist in society if they are not shown to be beneficial, so both HSPs and non-HSPs are necessary. Among many other things, non-HSPs perform functions that require non-attachment, such as those who work in hospice care. In that role they would have compassion, of course, but they would also have the ability not to become over aroused, whereas an HSP would likely need to retreat.

The trait of high sensitivity is genetic, found in a variation of a gene known to affect serotonin in the brain. A subsequent study also found the HSP scale is associated with ten variations on seven different dopamine-controlling genes (dopamine being necessary for transmission of information).

I spent most of my life knowing I was a creative person, but only found out five years ago I'm also a highly sensitive one. As a child I was extremely aware of my environment, and I was also always creating. With paper, pencils, and crayons, I made cards for my mother that professed my love for her, topped off with buttons and ribbons and bows I'll pull from bins—or even trashcans—at home, as if my middle rank, as fifth of her seven children, needed an extra shout-out, like, *Don't forget me! I'm here! Look what I made for you!*

My over-active imagination fueled my creativity. I recall dyeing my father's old hankies with coffee grounds, and using broken lipstick to make artwork pop. And when I was too old to make mushy cards for my mother, I turned to the origami-like folding of chewing gum wrappers by making chains, my longest seventy-seven feet. I carried that thing around in a shopping bag like it was a knitting project, an afghan that would keep me safe and warm.

In fifth grade, I began taking photos, fascinated at my ability to capture on film the emotions of those around me. I became somewhat of a family historian, documenting the lives of those I loved.

In seventh grade, I asked for piano lessons, but my father said they were too expensive. I called my friend Patti's teacher to ask just how much. She asked what kind of piano we had at home and when I told her we didn't have one, she said lessons wouldn't be possible. So, every Monday afternoon, Patti taught me the basics at the upright in her family room.

In high school I was known as a day dreamer, a ruminator. By then my parents were fighting a lot at home, usually about money, and as a sensitive person, it upset me very much. I looked inward for solutions. I examined details, poured over potential outcomes. Later I learned those are familiar aspects to the trait of high sensitivity.

When it came time for college, my father thought I was a good candidate for the local community college, despite the brother above me enrolled in 4-year university, and rumblings that the brother below me would be doing the same. I got an Associate's degree; I became a legal secretary.

Many HSPs describe growing up feeling there was something *wrong with them*. I was one of those. Almost every one of my experiences were intense, the good and the bad, but I never knew why. My feelings felt compounded, unprocessed layers stacked one on top of the other. Later I would seek help from numerous therapists in an attempt to sort my feelings out; on more than one occasion I begged for a diagnosis. One came back with ADD, another, seasonal affective disorder. It's common for HSPs to have other mental health diagnoses along with their high sensitivity, but it's also common for the trait of high sensitivity to be misdiagnosed.

Singer/Songwriter Alanis Morissette is a highly sensitive person. In the movie *Sensitive, The Untold Story*, she tells Dr. Aron she was alone in a world where she felt misunderstood. People didn't like her intense feelings, but they liked what those feelings produced. She tells Dr. Aron that if she had not come across her work on high sensitivity, she would continue to "feel like an insane person."

Morissette has sold more than seventy-five million records worldwide. She is the recipient of many awards, including seven Grammys. During one particularly difficult time for her, when her house was full of people and she had nowhere to retreat to—this before she knew she was an HSP—she hid in the closet in her bedroom and wrote the song *That I Would be Good.* It became a hit off her *Jagged Little Pill* album:

That I would be good, even if I did nothing …
That I would be good even when I am overwhelmed…

Bruce Springsteen is another highly sensitive artist who, in an interview with Terry Gross on NPR's Fresh Air, said his sensitive, gentle, dreamy nature irritated his father, but it's part of what had Springsteen himself realize he would make it as a musician. Despite their sensitive nature, HSPs are often tenacious, especially when it comes to creating. In his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*, Springsteen writes:

> *I come from a boardwalk town where almost everything is tinged with a bit of fraud. So am I. By twenty, no race-car-driving rebel, I was a guitar player on the streets of Asbury Park and already a member in good standing amongst those who "lie" in service of the truth ... artists with a small 'a.' But I held four clean aces. I had youth, almost a decade of hard-core bar band experience, a good group of homegrown musicians who were attuned to my performance style and a story to tell.*

Many of us sensitive creatives have a story to tell. The writer Pearl Buck, author of one of my favorite books, *The Good Earth*, and recipient of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize, described what it means to be a highly sensitive person:

> *The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create—so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency he is not really alive unless he is creating.*

This speaks to Dr. Aron's earlier quote about every sensitive person being unusually creative. She believes they are, but that not every HSP *is* creating, likely because their high sensitivity has gone unnoticed, that they

> may be so beaten down by life that the inward urgency that [Pearl] Buck says would normally keep them alive is simply too deadened, and [if the high sensitivity is realized] part of what you are doing is bringing it back to life.

My detail-oriented nature had me quite successful as a legal secretary. And the way I processed everything so deeply had me realizing something I hadn't learned growing up: that my thoughts and feelings had value. That I was smart, and that I was smart enough to figure out how to pursue other things that interested me. It was then I began listening to my own inward urgency, to my need to create.

I was living in a one-bedroom apartment in Philadelphia, working full time at a law firm during the day, when I signed up for a nighttime photography class. Then another. Not long after, I visited an art college, financial aid my first stop. It took five years of night school, but eventually I earned a bachelor's in design. Then I got married and we moved to the Pacific Northwest. I was happy I'd been able to unravel at least some of the tangled-up feelings inside, happy I realized that the need to create was at the core of who I was.

In Portland, Oregon, armed with my new college degree, I became developer of the women's line of apparel at Adidas. In that role I collaborated on designs and garment fittings, sourced fabric and trims, and communicated with liaison offices overseas. Once again, my detail-oriented nature helped me at work, as did my ability to pick up on subtleties around me. Tasks took me longer to complete, but it seemed I also had fewer mistakes. And despite the language barrier, I communicated well with my counterparts in Asia, reading between lines, unspoken

words I intuited, so much so that when I finally met with them, in person, in Thailand, Malaysia, and later, Singapore, it felt as though I was seeing old friends.

I loved my job at Adidas, but once we decided to start a family, I loved being a mother even more. Nothing was lost on me. No curled, soft pinkies went unnoticed. No enthusiasm for a second read of *Goodnight Moon* was too great.

I'd also begun feeling stifled in the corporate world. As a developer, I was the push and pull between the designer—who wanted to uphold her vision—and the marketer, who was answering to the client. With the high sensitivity I still didn't know I had, I read deeply into every one of their angst-ridden phone calls, their frustrations, and my own.

So, shortly after my first son was born, I became a stay-at-home mom. Then three years in, still loving my role as mother, but also beginning to feel the urge to create again, I started a small decorative pillow business out of our house. I had only a few clients, but they were as passionate as me about the unique creations I dreamed up, and sewed up, for their homes.

A few years after that, my husband gifted me with a six-week glassblowing class. It included Saturday afternoons alone for six straight weeks while our three small kids stayed home with him.

Up to that point I'd dabbled in paint, mosaic, photography, and clothing and pillow design. But glass was something entirely different.

The feelings that bubbled to the surface that first day were entirely new. As if glass was a medium that spoke to all of me: my need to create, alongside my packed insides, and everything I wore on my sleeves. I recall walking out the door of that first class euphoric, sliding behind the wheel of my car, sweaty and exhausted and happy as happy could ever be. Then, as I rubbed dirty hands off on dirty jeans, I heard my voice out loud: *Holy fucking shit! That was*

unbelievable! They were my own emotions as well as the ones I soaked up from those of the other artists around me—for better or worse—which made the process even more intense. If their piece crashed to the ground it was as if it was my piece too. If it was pulled from the rod successfully, my heart soared with theirs.

When I blow glass, I am inside the primal nature of it. I am swept up by the heat, the danger, the pace that must be adhered to. All of my senses are engaged, and heightened, by a fiery passion that gets ignited when I take sand and turn it into a solid form. A heightened awareness is necessary as I go through *every* step: the planning as I sift colored frit through my fingers, or run my hand across dozens of colored rods stacked neatly on shelves—ones I can melt then stretch over a piece when solid color is desired. And when I place the gloves on and the doors of the furnace are opened, when the intensity of the heat hits my face and my body but still I must go closer, to dip the blow pipe in for the first gather of molten glass. My eyes burn, already there's sweat. Then the decision of which tool to use first, the attempt at my first bubble, how hard I have to force the air down the pipe, how fast. When I get it, it's a triumph. Then I shape. I gather again. I sit with tools again. I go to the marver for color. I must keep moving. And I cannot stop spinning. Cannot stop thinking, receiving signals. Must constantly plot next moves, make next moves. Troubleshoot when things go wrong.

I learned early on the need for constant spinning as I stood with a rod resting horizontally on a narrow stand, and yes, I was spinning, but not fast enough, a piece I'd gathered and blown and opened up to a plate that was fixed at its other end. Then from the far side of the room I heard my teacher yell, *Faster! You're gonna loose it!* and when I quickly looked from him and back, my 15" plate was folding in half like a taco shell. Immediately I lifted the rod off the support and draped it downward, swaying it side to side like a pendulum as I spun, faster now, to

open the piece back up, to keep it from collapsing altogether. My plate, unplanned and suddenly, would now be a fluted bowl. But at least it had been saved. Not all of them are saved.

Back when I took that first class, when I sat in the car and caught my breath and finally turned the car on, I drove home, walked in the door, looked across to my husband, and told him he'd likely be sorry, because I was hooked.

Blowing glass is a release for me. It's my magma exploding. The intensity of my layers finding a way out.

Lisa Riley, LMFT and Creativity Coach, speaks about the intensity of a highly sensitive person's pent-up feelings:

> Along with the process of creating, there is perhaps the opportunity to exorcise out the thing that has accumulated and taken hold internally. Once externalized, a highly sensitive person can finally make sense of the chaos, opening space toward escaping the overwhelming world they battle every day.

It is a battle, until it's not. As Morissette says, being an HSP sets us up to thrive in certain environments, although as she also says, we have unique challenges in others. But our creativity is one of the areas where we can thrive. Where we can turn our intensity toward our art, as Morissette so clearly does in the writing of her songs, and in her performances. The drama, we can use it. The curiosity we possess, it's more than grist for the mill.

It was 2017—fourteen years after I started blowing glass—and I was at the Omega Institute in Reinbeck, New York. I'd travelled there for a three-day workshop, and after a brief conversation with Marianne Williamson at the end, was waiting in line to pay for a journal and

yoga mat at the book shop. I was still high in the clouds from my chat with Marianne, whom I'd been following for years and whose book, *A Return to Love,* I return to, often.

As I stood in line, something pulled my attention to the shelf behind me, and as I turned, somehow the only book I saw in the sea of many, was *The Highly Sensitive Person, How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You*, by Elaine N. Aron, Ph.D.

Given my talk with Marianne, I *was* feeling overwhelmed in that moment, although in a good way, but still something pulled me out of line. I picked the book up and headed to a corner to check it out. Within minutes I felt my heartrate increase, so much so I wondered if the woman standing next to me could hear it, could see the thumping through my shirt.

The words I was reading shocked me, as did the fact I'd never heard about this thing called high sensitivity. What the book was describing, essentially, was me.

In the first few pages, I learned that an HSP's brain shows increased activation in the insula, the part of the brain that makes sense of emotions, of bodily positions, of outer events. Inside and out, *I'm* hyper aware of everything, and always have been. I also learned that mirror neurons for HSPs, which help with knowing others' intentions and how they're feeling, are especially active, as is an HSPs ability to pick up on subtleties—many that others don't even know they're giving off. I'd often felt this was my superpower, but I also knew it was exhausting.

Exhaustion often has a highly sensitive person retreating, or conversely, acting out, often with strong emotions. Overstimulation is something we have to watch out for.

Caroline Hurtut is an artist, writer, coach, and creative consultant, who is also an HSP. She believes that if you are a writer who's an HSP, it *is* your superpower, and explains why in a series of five points:

1. Profound empathy makes an HSP feel others' feelings, including those of their character(s).

2. Sharpened senses help create powerful descriptions and scenes in an HSP's writing.

3. An HSP's rich inner world helps create rich written worlds.

4. An HSP's amazing intuition and insight is useful in creating relationships between characters (both good and bad ones).

5. An HSP writer's genuine sincerity and emotions can help get to the core of their story and in turn, resonate with their readers.

Author Susan Vreeland described trips to the library with her father as a child, where she was introduced to the power of words, including the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson. Sadly, Vreeland died in 2017 at the age of 71, but given Aron's descriptions of the trait of highly sensitive people, Vreeland was likely one. She had said: "I was a too-sensitive child, unable to distinguish between truth and fiction, prone to nightmares, gouged by cruelty."

She also described a rich inner world, a love of art and books and a need to express that love. In 2014, she told the San Diego Union-Tribune:

> Writers have to be observant. Every nuance, every inflection in a voice, the quality of air even—they all get mixed up in this soup of the story developing in our minds. We can't ignore these little intuitions, because sometimes that's where you find treasures."

The Union-Tribune also tells us that one of Vreeland's guiding quotes came from the writer Henry James: "Try to be a person on whom nothing is lost."

That quote, for better or worse, sums up a highly sensitive person. It speaks to the busy, creative inner world we experience, but it also speaks to the overstimulation, the exhaustion that

can sometimes plague a highly sensitive person when nothing—and I mean nothing—is lost on them.

HSP writer Kim Hooper says that her emotional vividness is likely what led her to be a writer in the first place: “I felt so much and I needed a way to express all of it. I learned from a very young age that talking about what I felt just led to being called ‘too sensitive.’ So, I wrote.”

A year before I found Dr. Aron’s book at Omega, I’d begun work on a memoir about some unusual birth experiences I had, ones that rocked me to my emotional core. At the time, I was working as a photographer and blowing glass only occasionally, because we’d moved back to Pennsylvania and the closest glass studio was an hour away. My three kids were busy young teens who were playing sports and going to proms. Glassblowing was harder to get to, so writing became my new love on the side.

I believe my experience with glassblowing helped bring my words to light. It helped show me how to transfer my passion for the fire in the glory hole, to my computer screen, to the pen in my hand and the paper in front of me. My work with glass allowed me to take the chaos inside of me, then construct and carry out a plan on how to gather, extract, heat, roll, and shape my experiences into words on a page. Of all the mediums I’d worked in, glass allowed me to be most emotive. Until writing came along.

Things morph and change with glass, plans get upended with a plate becoming a bowl, just as a flash piece can become a longer story, a prose poem might morph into a haiku. And words expand too, the air I breathe into them allowing the creation of metaphors and scenes that encourage the reader to breathe with me. To take a breath, hold our breath, expand our views. Maybe I can even change their mind, and my own.

In a January, 2021 online article at Better Marketing (www.BetterMarketing.pub), Kevin Lee talks about how glassblowing can inspire a writer in their craft. He starts out by talking about an alluring aspect of glassblowing that I find undeniable:

> There's a tipping point that once passed is irreversible. There is a fine line between pushing the limits of what is possible and respecting the danger of going too far. The artists involved manage this balance with grace and finesse.
>
> It takes courage to work in such a physically intimidating environment. It's the kind of courage some of us can only embody metaphorically.

Lee goes on to talk about the connection between our ancestral history of using both fire, and the written word, to design and to create. He talks about how both fire *and* words can devastate, how they can both lift people up or bring them down. How they can convey messages, elicit emotions.

And yes, it takes courage to work in such a physically intimidating environment as glassblowing, but I have also witnessed the courage of writers I've come to admire. I've sat and listened to words poured out onto a page, beating hearts on paper laid bare for all to see. What is more courageous than that?

During my graduate program in writing, I did my critical thesis on form in memoir, exploring how and why different forms and structures are utilized in memoir. Lee tells us that like words, glass assumes many forms. When heated, it's malleable, ready to be shaped and molded. It can be expanded upon or blown to great proportions. And when placed in an annealer—the furnace that gradually cools down a newly created piece of blown glass—the glass piece assumes it's final form, becomes fixed in its expression. Just like when words are shaped

and placed into a form, they become fixed in their expression. On their own, words mean very little. But, Lee tells us, "arranged intentionally…the expression is achieved through a combination of technique and concept." He tells us that technique could be a "well-constructed sentence, a clever turn of phrase, or an apt description." And that with concept, you can "challenge existing norms and shatter expectations."

I thought it important to mention in this lecture that some believe empathy and high sensitivity are one and the same, but there is a difference. In *The Art of Empathy,* Karla McLaren, M.Ed., tells us empathy

> helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.

I mentioned various HSP characteristics earlier, and while an HSP can also be an empath—and often they are—they might not be. A notable difference between the two is that an HSP's overwhelm kicks in before an empath's does. And another difference, as reported by Andre Sólo in the online site, The Highly Sensitive Refuge (www.highlysensitiverefuge.com), is an HSP is "more sensitive to *all* sensory input, not just emotions." Here I think of the attention a writer must pay to *every one* of their senses while writing, in order to construct rich prose, in order to create effective metaphors.

Some also attach introversion to high sensitivity. Dr. Aron's research has shown that 70% of HSPs are introverts but 30% are social extraverts—although these extraverts do reflect considerably on their experiences, and therefore need more downtime than other extraverts do.

Whether we are introverts or extraverts, Dr. Aron tells us almost all studies of the personalities of prominent artists list sensitivity as central. But she does caution us by saying:

> The difficulty, I believe, is that normally we artists work alone, refining our craft and our subtle creative vision. But withdrawal of any kind increases sensitivity—that is part of why one withdraws. So we [HSPs] are extrasensitive when the time comes to show our work, perform it, explain it, sell it, read reviews of it, and accept rejection or acclaim. Then there's the sense of loss and confusion when a major work is done or a performance is over. The stream of ideas surging up from the unconscious no longer has an outlet. Artists are more skilled at encouraging and expressing that force than understanding its sources or its impact if acted upon.

Once I finally understood why, at times, I felt so different from others, understood that my deep processing, awareness of subtleties, and the countless other aspects of my personality—good and bad—were part of a personality *trait*, and not the *diagnosis* I'd been looking for, I was able to embrace it, especially in terms of my art.

It made sense now, why I was often moved to tears when picking up a piece of my glass art at the studio days after I made it, after it sat gradually cooling in the annealer for its allotted time and I could finally hold it in my bare hands. Finally, I could take in the shape and form of the piece that had been rushed away from me by another's gloved hands. In a sense, I am meeting the piece for the first time. I am experiencing the colors I chose in conjunction with the form I either chose, or that the piece was forced to take. I am drinking in the colors, whether one solid color or several I melded together, maybe blocked or striated or swirled. I am recalling whether the shape and the color had been planned or it was something I did on the fly. And whichever it was, I see whether it turned out the way I wanted—the way I envisioned—or it turned out nothing like it at all. Either way: I always, always, see beauty there.

Writing feels the same. The intense pressure while creating is not there, but the intensity of meaning is. As a highly sensitive person, *all* of my senses are engaged, and heightened, no matter what I'm writing. And with writing this is key. It's where metaphor springs from. From the sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel of the things that we experience. And just as I'd mentioned earlier about glass, about the intensity of the heat when it hits my body but still I must go closer, that's writing too. We dig and dig and we mustn't stop until we get at the core of what it is we're trying to say. What it is that lies beneath. What is the real, true meaning of it all?

Many times I've come back to the page, to a draft I put down that morning, or the day or week before, and been moved to tears. At my own words! When it first happened I wondered how it was even possible. But it is, time and again. And whether it's a piece I had swirling in my head for a while, or one I'd created that was based on notes I'd jotted down about something I wanted to explore, or, as happened yesterday, when I sat looking at a blank screen and felt no inspiration to write at all. In that moment, I did what I typically do in that situation. I look to all of you. For inspiration. I pick up a book. Yesterday, it was prose poetry, a form that's grabbed my interest lately. I read *Bath* by Amy Lowell, a piece I've read before. A piece I come back to fairly often because in it I see the sublime. I see the blocks and swirls and striations. I see layers of meaning and nuance and some that might mean nothing at all. And yesterday in particular, it moved me even further. So when I read it, I then read it again. And saw that this time, the first line, it did something it hadn't done before. It got inside me. Ignited something. Nineteen simple words that when melded and shaped together, by Lowell, they moved me deeply: *The day is fresh-washed and fair, and there is a smell of tulips and narcissus in the air.* Despite being in the midst of a complicated time in my life, I was able to see—and appreciate—the simplicity of this poem in a whole different way. Even in the midst of complication, this taught me that simplicity

is possible. And can be beautiful. And so right then and there, *I* began a poem. A simple piece, about a ritual as simple as a bath. My own piece, of course.

As an HSP, when my senses are engaged, and heightened, I can pull from them, from the sights and sounds and touch of whatever it is I'm working on. I can dive deep, slant, and rhyme. And if I do need inspiration, just like with glass, there are tools. There are other writers, and books, and prompts. And it's my personality trait I've learned to take advantage of, that helps me move through it all.

Since Dr. Aron's first book on high sensitivity was published, she's written six other books on the subject, working alongside a trove of researchers—in both the United States and abroad—in order to advance our understanding of the trait. At www.hsperson.com, there's a test you can take to find out if *you* are a highly sensitive person.

And if you are—congratulations! It's all it's cracked up to be.

And if you're not—but you're here—you now know what an HSP is made of. You likely learned more about your own sensitivity, and how you can use *it*—and your other art mediums—to richly enhance your words.