

Christa & Dirk Lüling
Sharing the Burden

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The Gifting of
Highly Sensitive Burden Bearers



TEAM.F

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Our high sensitivity is like a precision tool that performs impressively when it comes to perception and creative output. But unfortunately, it is a tool that we have received without an instruction manual and that we try to understand by trial and error.

Georg Parlow

Zart besaitet [Highly Sensitive]

Foreword

With this book on highly sensitive burden bearers Dirk and Christa Lüling have written one of those books so helpful that as I read it kept thinking, "... ought to read this, and I've got to get this in the hands of ..."

It would be life saving for many who are merely highly sensitive, let alone the highly sensitive burden bearers, both of whom usually don't understand why they feel what they do and suffer accordingly. Readers will find themselves exclaiming: "That's me!" And: "Why didn't I see that before? It would have saved so much trouble." And then: "Thank God. I tried the prayers and they worked. I feel so much better. It's so good to understand myself. Now I know, why I've been so different from everybody else. And it's such a relief to know I'm not so different after all – there's lots like me, and we all have the same problems."

Best of all, Dirk and Christa show how burden bearing is a wondrous gift of the Lord, and how it is to be used in ministry and in intercessory prayer. Rightly understood and employed as an art of laying down one's life in service to others (Galatians 6:2), burden bearing becomes one of the highest and most valuable ministries one can enter. Living it as a lifestyle breaks us out of self-centered selfishness into the christlike virtue of living to bless others, unmindful of self.

Whoever reads this book will not only become one who lives for others, he will burn with holy desire to help other sensitive types, and even those not so sensitive, to understand and come into freedom from the pain and hurt so many needlessly suffer

(the not-so-sensitive also suffer, especially if living with a super-sensitive type!). It is so good to be free from confusion, and much better, to be able to set others free.

Whatever the cost, get the book. It's life transforming.

John Sandford

Author and Co-founder of Elijah House Ministry

Foreword to the English version

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Gal. 6:2 “... for each one should carry his own load.” Gal. 6:5

How did you feel when you read these two verses? Did the first one make you feel guilty, the second one seem cold and heartless? If so, you may be a burden bearer, and you may be on the threshold of a very important discovery.

We burden bearers have a special gift, and our heavenly Father, the Gift Giver, encourages us to use it: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” Romans 12:15 What a blessing it is to sense God’s Spirit moving through us to help someone feel less alone and misunderstood; to not just talk to her but to feel with her. To carry some of his emotional burden when it is just too heavy for him to bear alone.

But people with this gift of extreme empathy – highly sensitive burden bearers, as Christa and Dirk Lüling call us – are often misunderstood, not only by the majority in cultures used to praising the “go-getter”, but by ourselves, steeped as we are in the thought patterns of those who have other special gifts. It’s no wonder the literal translation of the original German title of this book is *Burden Bearing – the Misunderstood Gift*.

And we are in danger – from self-pity, burnout, resentment, lack of self-esteem. We desperately need to learn when and how to protect ourselves from the emotions our nervous systems don’t

automatically screen out. And we need healing from the hurt that not only others but also we ourselves have inflicted on us. We need to be understood and appreciated – but firstly and most importantly, we need to understand and appreciate ourselves.

The original German version of this book has been a best-seller on the Christian book market since it appeared in 2007. Many people have learned to understand, accept and appreciate themselves, often for the first time. It has been my privilege to not only read it, but to study it as I have translated it. The knowledge, empathy, tips and prayers contained in this little book have made an immense difference in how I see myself and interact with others. I've been told that many of us prefer the blessing found in helping others to the risk involved in allowing ourselves to be helped, no matter how desperate our need. It is my prayer that you open your heart as you read this precious book, place your trust in your heavenly Father and let Him heal, convict, comfort and encourage you to be all He has made you to be.

Patricia Cress

Introduction

During a car trip several years ago, we decided to listen to a taped teaching by John Sandford, an influential Christian counselor, lecturer and author, entitled “Healing for the Wounded Burden Bearer.” At first, we hadn’t known what to expect from a lecture with that title, but the more we listened, the more fascinated we became. Suddenly, light was being shed on an important part of our lives that had often caused us problems. Christa felt that finally someone had found a way to understand her and describe her personality, and when she prayed along with the prayer at the end, she immediately felt relieved. Later, we were helped very much by personal conversations with John Sandford in which he explained in more detail the gift of burden bearing. Ever since, we have come back again and again to this topic, discovering new aspects of it every time. Whenever Christa teaches on it in our Team.F Counseling School, the response is overwhelming. More than 80% of the students fit into this personality description and feel like they are being understood and described. They are relieved to finally be able to understand what they sense and how they react, and see many past hurtful experiences in a new light.

John and Paula Sandford are considered pioneers in the area of inner healing. In the 90’s, they often spoke at our seminars. Their seminars, books and friendship provided invaluable input for not only our lives, but also the counseling aspect of the Christian family ministry group we founded called Team.F. This valuable beginning was expanded and complemented last year when we came across Elaine Aron’s book *The Highly Sensitive Person* and Georg Parlow’s German book *Zart Besaitet* [Highly Sensitive],

both of which provide a detailed description of the highly sensitive personality. The abundance of information about highly sensitive people that we found in these books and on the Internet confirmed what we had experienced and observed.

Many highly sensitive people are emotional burden-bearers; of these, many have very wounded souls. It is primarily for these people that we have written this book. We have only described the characteristics of highly sensitive people in as much detail as is necessary to provide a basic understanding of the personality of a burden bearer. So it could happen that you don't see yourself in the description of a highly sensitive person, but do see yourself reflected in our discussions of burden bearing or the healing of wounded souls.

There is a great need for information on this topic because, according to Elaine Aron, about one-fifth of all people are highly sensitive. They have very delicate sensibilities and a wonderful gift. Unfortunately, some of them never find their niche in our competitive society because they don't function the way most people do. With their perceptions, reactions and values, they often feel misunderstood and "different." Unfortunately, they are often confirmed in this by judgmental reactions from those around them. Because of things that have happened to them in the past, many are plagued by self-doubt and insecurity. More than a few have seemingly random emotional or even physical pain, and some are easily emotionally or intellectually confused due to perception overload. In order to enter into or reclaim a joyful life, they need to be freed from the yoke of their unconscious burdens and healed of the painful experiences in their past. If they can also learn to protect themselves from too many perceptions, they can handle their gift very constructively in everyday life. Our society needs highly sensitive people! They deserve to be seen and respected for what they are and given a place appropriate for them.

This book is based to a large extent on our own experiences and observations, coupled with friends' stories. Our hearts' desire is to open our readers' eyes and hearts to understand not only

this almost entirely unknown and neglected topic, but even more importantly, the highly sensitive people themselves. Please feel free to send us your feedback and/or tell us your story; we are convinced that there is so much more to this issue than we have yet discovered. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our friends who have shed light on this area and enriched this book by telling their stories. To protect them and their families, we have changed their names.

Much of this book is about Christa and her experiences, so when the first-person form is used without explanation, Christa is telling her personal story.

Christa and Dirk Lüling

Characteristics of a Highly Sensitive Person

General Traits

Several years ago, we attended a large Christian conference. We were exhausted from the demands of our everyday life and were longing to be spiritually refreshed. The teachings offered refreshment for our minds and the worship refreshment for our souls and spirits – the atmosphere was wonderful! My husband was having the time of his life talking with all kinds of people, but I sat there amid 5,000 or more people and sank deeper and deeper into my seat. After a while, I couldn't take any more and said to him, "Dirk, I have to get out of here! I can't stand it! Being here isn't helping me at all; I'm feeling worse and worse!" Back then, I had no idea what was happening to me. I figured I was just a high-strung loser. It wasn't until two years later, while listening to John Sandford's teaching "Healing for Wounded Burden Bearers," that I finally understood this confusing event. Over and over again, I found myself saying, "NOW I get it!" as I realized that I was totally normal: a normal highly sensitive person with a strong tendency to "bear burdens." Because of my temperament and gifting, I had been not only perceiving, but also soaking up like a sponge, all of the unspoken needs, distress and problems (burdens) of the people around me at the conference. Back then, I was helpless, not knowing how to protect myself from, or rid

myself of, this senseless suffering. So I not only suffered, but also made it worse by negatively judging myself, my perceptions and my reaction. I felt so wrong and out of place!

Today, I know that I'm not the only one who struggles with these kinds of perceptions and feelings. There are many like me, but most of us are hesitant to share our feelings and perceptions openly. We know by experience that our way of seeing and feeling things will probably be different from that of the "normal" majority, and we will probably be misunderstood if we talk about it. Imagine the huge relief it was for me to finally be able to open up about these things, to realize that my burden bearing is a gift and to accept the fact that I am highly sensitive!

Over the years, I've noticed other typical characteristics of this gift in myself. When I'm in a large group of people, I often feel confused or have trouble focusing on one thought. I can often tell how a person is doing simply by looking at his or her face; not a word needs to be spoken. People often tell me their problems, pouring their hearts out to me. In counseling sessions, I can clearly sense what a person is feeling and instinctively know how to give the appropriate response. And I sometimes suddenly feel pain, tension or even the symptoms of an illness for no apparent reason. These sensations often disappear just as suddenly as they appear. I have learned that these are all normal experiences that I share with many other highly sensitive people.

This high sensitivity is the basis for intuition, imagination, creativity, inventiveness, empathetic communication, and very finely tuned perceptions. Many people are sensitive to a certain degree, but highly sensitive people are so marked by these characteristics that they can be considered gifted. Elaine Aron, who has done extensive research on the phenomenon, says that 15–20% of the population consists of people who are significantly more sensitive than others due to their neurological constitution. By the way, this percentage also occurs in many mammals, among which high sensitivity can also be observed. Experts say that there is a marked difference between these highly sensitive 20% and the next

group, which can be referred to as “sensitive.” This measurable difference – which is due to a particular neurological characteristic of the brain – confirms that high sensitivity is a special ability or gift, i.e. either you have it or you don’t. In this sense, it is similar to a gifting in music, art or mathematics.

In her important pioneering work *The Highly Sensitive Person*, Elaine Aron uses the term “highly sensitive person” for such people. John and Paula Sandford do not use this term, but long before Elaine Aron’s book was published, they described a certain category of highly sensitive people, calling them “burden bearers.” The Sandfords chose this term because they noticed that not only they themselves, but also many others that they knew, had the ability to clearly perceive the inner condition and burdens of others and carry these burdens as if they were their own, without having made a conscious decision to do so. In the course of this book, we will make a distinction between the general characteristics of high sensitivity, which we will briefly introduce in the first part, and the special qualities of “highly sensitive burden bearers,” into which we will delve more deeply afterwards. For the sake of simplicity, we will use the abbreviation HSP(s) for (a) highly sensitive person(s) and HSB(s) for (a) highly sensitive burden bearer(s).

High sensitivity expresses itself in various ways, just one of which is burden bearing. It is found in technical, artistic and musical fields and other professions that demand exact perception, acute observational abilities, intuition, creativity and/or tact and sensitivity in dealing with people. Many poets, thinkers, researchers, artists, musicians, philosophers, pastors, doctors, legal experts, and not a few Nobel prize winners are HSPs. Let us say it once again: not all highly sensitive people are burden bearers. Burden bearing is only one of many expressions of high sensitivity. In many cultures, highly sensitive people are greatly esteemed as advisors and counselors. Studies have indicated that in Japan, China and – interestingly enough – Sweden, sensitivity is more highly prized than in other countries. The Sandfords, who travel a lot, report that there is a great deal of knowledge and awareness

of this gift among “primitive” peoples, although most people in our rationalistic culture have never heard of it. In China, highly sensitive children are honored, but in our Western societies, they often have a hard time of it. In our culture, the term “sensitive” tends to be interpreted negatively. It makes us think of people who cannot control their emotions and are thus not up to the task of everyday life. This makes it hard for HSPs to find their place in our competitive, profit-oriented society. But their gift is desperately needed to balance out society’s one-sidedness.

Elaine Aron explains how these differences interact by explaining that, although the early Indo-Germanic culture was a successful, expanding and aggressive society that tended to dominate other cultures it encountered, “The most long-lasting, happy Indo-European cultures have always used two classes to govern themselves – the warrior-kings balanced by their royal or priestly advisors.” Comparing the warrior-king class to the President/army and the “priest-judge-advisor class” to the Supreme Court, Aron continues that the latter “is a more thoughtful group, often acting to check the impulses of the warrior-kings ... They have the foresight, for example, to look out for the well-being of those common folks on whom the society depends, those who grow the food and raise the children ... [They try] to direct the wonderful, expansive energy of their society away from aggression and domination.” (See Aron, pp. 17–18). This power-sharing is anchored in the constitutions of our Western democracies, guaranteeing their stability.

High sensitivity has found an appropriate place in the institutions of our country, and highly sensitive persons are very successful in many professions. There are niches in which they feel very comfortable and can develop well. But in everyday life, surrounded by the majority of the population, in preschools, schools and many workplaces, HSPs do not quite seem to fit into our culture. Many HSPs see their gift as something that puts them out of step with their surroundings, and they would be glad to be rid of it. They try as hard as they can to keep up with others and do as they do. But this is belying their uniqueness and the wonderful gift that they have received from

God. They can instead be grateful for their good intuition that protects them and others from making both small and serious mistakes. When HSBs learn to understand their gift and calling correctly, they become highly valued employees and faithful friends. As Christians, they can develop an enviably intimate relationship to Jesus and draw from God's wisdom more easily than others.

When tested for their giftings, most HSPs find that they are strong in the areas of mercy, service, giving and counseling, because they are empathetic and always trying to make others' lives easier. Many highly sensitive people work as counselors or in children's or youth ministry, and they often take up helping professions or jobs where they can act as specialists with a keen and delicate sense of perception. But a test of gifting can also point to "prophecy" or "gift of knowledge," since it is easy for HSPs to sense others' emotions, problems or tensions in groups and organizations. We are convinced that many prophetically gifted Christians are highly sensitive. But they need guidance and help so that their gift can develop in a healthy way. We will return to this topic in more detail later. It is amazing and significant that even as children, many highly sensitive people, even in a non-Christian environment, have a deep longing for God and an inner sureness that there is "someone there" who will hear their prayers. For them, the invisible world of angels and demons is a reality.

It is obvious that burden bearing is a commonly occurring type of high sensitivity. When we at Team.F hold a training course for Christian counselors, it is not at all unusual for 70–90% of those participating to consider themselves highly sensitive. Many highly sensitive persons can be characterized more or less strongly as burden bearers. But whether their burden bearing has a great or minor effect on their lives, the chances are that they have never been helped to understand how to deal appropriately with the problems of the world and the emotional needs of other people, which to them seem indistinguishable from their own. Not only that, but they have probably also been judged for their gift and considered by others – and even themselves – to be overly nerv-

ous and strange in some way. Most HSBs have problems with self-acceptance and try to ignore or hide their gift. To always be aware of other people and their moods really is a burden for those who do not know how to deal with this awareness. If you are a HSB, it is imperative that you know how to bear others' burdens without feeling undue pressure or even experiencing emotional damage. But first you need to accept this gift and understand how it works. You will also need to be healed of your own emotional wounds. Only then can you learn to correctly deal with your gift in everyday life. If you don't, you will be in danger of becoming emotionally or physically overloaded.

Jesus set the perfect example of how to deal with this gift. He had an extremely sensitive spirit. He served with His gift and He carried people's burdens. But He also knew how to shield Himself, sometimes sending people away in no uncertain terms. He was not after success in the form of fame, reputation or numbers of people He helped, and He didn't allow Himself to be dictated to by others' expectations, but withdrew to be alone to have undisturbed communion with God and to regenerate.

Before we go any further, we would like to make a distinction. Approximately 70% of HSB are born with this gift. Others have had emotional wounds or traumatic experiences during childhood that put them in a constant state of alarm, so that their reactions are overly sensitive. Their learned high sensitivity is their "early warning system," to warn and protect them from being wounded again. According to Elaine Aron, the other 30% are in this second group. However, it is not unusual to find a combination of both factors in HSBs. If you are one such HSB, you will find out that the more you work through your emotional wounds, the less your reactions will be overly sensitive. You will be able to live in a relaxed way in relationships and learn to appreciate the positive aspects of your innate high sensitivity. We will discuss this more in Chapter 4.

As a help in determining whether high sensitivity is innate, Elaine Aron has developed the questionnaire below (see www.hsperson.com).

Answer the questions as spontaneously as possible. Answer “yes” if the statement applies to you at least somewhat and “no” if it hardly applies to you or doesn’t apply to you at all. If you are not sure, ask someone who knows you well.

Questionnaire

- I am easily overwhelmed by strong sensory input.
- I seem to be aware of subtleties in my environment.
- Other people’s moods affect me.
- I tend to be very sensitive to pain.
- I find myself needing to withdraw during busy days into bed or into a darkened room or any place where I can have some privacy and relief from stimulation.
- I am particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine.
- I am easily overwhelmed by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or sirens close by.
- I have a rich, complex inner life.
- I am made uncomfortable by loud noises.
- I am deeply moved by the arts or music.
- My nervous system sometimes feels so frazzled that I just have to go off by myself.
- I am conscientious.
- I startle easily.
- I get rattled when I have a lot to do in a short amount of time.
- When people are uncomfortable in a physical environment, I tend to know what needs to be done to make it more comfortable (like changing the lighting or the seating).
- I am annoyed when people try to get me to do too many things at once.

- I try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things.
- I make a point to avoid violent movies and TV shows.
- I become unpleasantly aroused when a lot is going on around me.
- Being very hungry creates a strong reaction in me, disrupting my concentration or mood.
- Changes in my life shake me up.
- I notice and enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds and works of art.
- I find it unpleasant to have a lot going on at once.
- I make it a high priority to arrange my life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations.
- I am bothered by intense stimuli, like loud noises or chaotic scenes.
- When I must compete or be observed while performing a task, I become so nervous or shaky that I do much worse than I would otherwise.
- When I was a child, my parents or teachers seemed to see me as sensitive or shy.

You are probably a highly sensitive person if you answered “yes” more than 14 times, but also if fewer statements applied to you, but those that applied did so strongly. This list shows the areas of life which reflect your high sensitivity. All of the traits mentioned can be stronger or weaker or not even present at all. And there are other characteristics that some HSPs have. Our five children are all sensitive, and three are highly sensitive. They have a lot in common, but with various emphases. Most HSPs seem to be introverted, quiet people who seem to others to be shy, but it would be a mistake to equate shyness with high sensitivity. In

general, it is easier to notice high sensitivity in introverted people than in extroverts who have more energy and need less rest. But it is especially important for just such extroverted highly sensitive people to discover and accept their high sensitivity.

Examples from Everyday Life

HSPs are usually not able to quickly understand and deal with intense impressions and then go right back to business as usual. They not only hear one message, but also pick up on so much other information that it can take days or even weeks for them to figure out and deal with a confusing event such as a friend's remark or joke, an emotional encounter or a statement made in a work setting. Their thoughts keep being drawn back to this one thing and they aren't always sure how much importance to attach to it. A HSP can, and often must, ruminate on these incidents like a cow chewing its cud, working through each aspect of the various levels of meaning he or she has sensed until the event as a whole can be understood and let go. After exciting or emotional staff meetings at Team.F, I often need a lot of time and many conversations to help me work through what has happened, while my husband has often already checked that item off of his daily to-do list and moved on to the next one.

HSPs need much more time to work through occurrences or information for two reasons. First, they automatically collect much more "data" than others and need time to search through their inner "data banks" for similar events they have experienced. Second, they feel a strong sense of responsibility for correctly assessing situations that call up emotions in them, so they feel a need to examine them more thoroughly. If something important interrupts their ruminations, some aspects are put into "interim storage" to be worked on later. But if HSPs accumulate too many unprocessed occurrences, they have to work "overtime." They start to feel tired and then exhausted for no obvious reason. Those who are not highly sensitive, and who have long since dealt with the occurrence and forgotten it, can't understand this way of dealing with life, and their responses show it.

HSPs are usually good observers with a keen and accurate sense of what is important. Because of their strong perceptiveness, HSPs take in more information than others do, can put two and two together more readily and are fantastic when their intuition is coupled with good common sense. Some, although not all, are literally flooded with creative ideas. Lively, intense dreams are a fact of life for many HSPs.

HSPs have a lower stimulation tolerance threshold than other people. It is striking how quickly they can become overstimulated. Their increased sensitivity for details is due to physical factors: weaker perception filters and a substantially more sensitive nervous system. There are regions of the brain that act as filters and decide which perceptions from the senses are allowed access to the cerebrum – and thus to the conscious mind – and which are not. Every single second, our sense organs take in immense quantities of information, but only a tiny fraction of this flood of information reaches our conscious mind. Most of these “reports” are not relevant at the time, so they are blocked unless the “reporters” are strong. HSPs probably have either weaker filters or a different way of evaluating stimuli. They are constantly taking in more impressions than others do, so it is no wonder that they are more quickly overwhelmed by too much information. Background noise such as street noise, background music, quiet conversation or even simply a ticking clock can be extremely annoying for HSPs, since it is difficult if not impossible for them to filter out this irrelevant information. These constant irritations in everyday life get on their nerves.

Many HSPs react strongly to loud or sudden noises. I’m easily startled, so I make an irresistible target for practical jokers – they can’t resist the sure reward of hearing me scream. HSPs hate loud music. Many HSPs can remember hating the sound of the vacuum cleaner or the hair dryer, not to mention a blender or a drill, when they were small. For many years, one of our children had a fear of the big trucks that made a lot of noise as they drove by. The noise in a classroom is often unbearable for HSP children; it reduces

their ability to concentrate and learn. They are also bothered by “scratchy” clothing. Please listen to your HSP child when he or she tells you that something hurts or is scratchy; parents who think a child will “get used to it” or “toughen up” will only end up hurting the child. Some HSPs are also sensitive to cold or drafts; it is a typical trait of HSPs to be the first one in a room to feel cold.

It is normal for HSPs to react differently to medications than others do. Many medications that are generally well tolerated cause problems with a HSP’s stomach or blood pressure. I am often among the few who suffer from the rare side effects of medications. For example, the normal tranquilizer shots before surgery that make others sleepy have the opposite effect on me. Now that I know this, I can tell the doctors ahead of time. Some HSPs only need half of the usual dosage of some pain killers. It is crucial that HSPs find out which medications they do not tolerate well and talk to their doctors about the significance of their high sensitivity. Many HSPs are also more sensitive to pain, especially headaches and toothaches. Some HSPs hate to be strongly touched or grasped: it simply hurts them. Or they can’t deal well with hunger because they experience it as a pain in their stomach.

In general, HSPs are marked by a strong need for harmony in interpersonal relationships. Quarrels, especially among family members, are emotional catastrophes for all HSPs; they avoid them at all costs. For HSPs, quarrelling with a near and dear person means losing the emotional security that they so urgently need in their lives. So they would rather swallow their pride and endure injustice than start a fight. But this is not always the wisest course of action; it is impossible to develop a healthy personality if we don’t express or can’t stand up for ourselves. We all have to learn that it is possible to set limits and resolve conflicts without destroying a relationship or wounding someone’s soul. It is important for HSPs to set appropriate boundaries for their children. This doesn’t damage the children; on the contrary, it gives them inner security.

Many HSPs perceive it as too loud or as “yelling” when their life partners express their opinion in a firm manner. This happens

especially when they are already exhausted or if they are tense because a certain topic means a lot to them. We have heard the story of a young lady who needed three tries to pass her driver's license test, even though she knew and could do everything perfectly. She was so sensitive that she fell apart as soon as the driving instructor gave instructions in an unemotional (as she saw it, "cold") tone of voice or the atmosphere in the car was tense due to the tester's presence. Some HSP's actually become speechless in new or challenging situations. Even if they are well-prepared, they are simply not capable of standing up for their opinion or giving a speech. Their heads are simply empty; everything they wanted to say has evaporated. This can be very embarrassing, especially in test situations. There is a nice story to this effect about St. Francis of Assisi, who was definitely a HSB. Once he was to speak before the pope and the cardinals. He had worked up his sermon and learned it by heart. But when he stood before these mighty churchmen, he couldn't get a single word out. How did he deal with this embarrassing situation? One of his biographers writes: "Francis admitted this freely to the assembled authorities and called upon the grace of the Holy Spirit. And suddenly, out of his mouth streamed such powerful words that he was able to move the souls of the high and mighty men, and everyone was convinced that it was not he who spoke, but the Spirit of the Lord." (source unknown)

I can identify with St. Francis of Assisi because I have often experienced just such situations. My work with Team.F demands that I give lectures. I do enjoy doing this, and can speak freely, but I always have to work out my lecture in detail beforehand, and be totally sure of exactly what I want to say. Key sentences I even write out word for word. I know that the impressions that flood in on me during the lecture can confuse and disable me. I have to be sure that the exact wording of my speech is available so that I can hold onto it in case I am blocked by my strong feelings and perceptions. But when I have jumped that hurdle and gotten used to a group, I can speak freely and clearly. Since I can sense

exactly what is going on inside my listeners, I can sometimes insert spontaneous thoughts that I hadn't planned on presenting. I find that this often touches their hearts.

High sensitivity can also reveal itself in a sharp eye or sense of smell. HSPs can enjoy art or the beauty of nature and are disturbed when colors or pieces of clothing don't match each other. They can also detect the smallest traces of scents. They love particular perfumes, and their food must have just the right amount of seasoning, and can't have a trace of a burned smell or taste. If their noses do not like something, they have an allergic or sometimes nauseous reaction. I can smell it if our garbage can hasn't been emptied for a while or oil for frying is not quite fresh. I lose my appetite and feel nauseous. I also react to unfamiliar chemicals, or to stuffy rooms or the smallest trace of the smell of smoke on clothes.

Dealing with Overstimulation

As we have said, high sensitivity comes from a certain neurological characteristic of the brain. One way of looking at it is that the brain function called "information filter" is less strong. Another explanation is that HSPs' sensitive nervous system works like a large radar screen. The result is that HSPs experience all information or external stimuli as if through an amplifier. Noises, sounds, pictures and colors, harmonies and disharmonies, moods and feelings, encounters and conversations: they experience the input of everyday life more "loudly" and intensely than others, and react and suffer accordingly.

This means that they are exposed to constant overstimulation that they must process. This is emotionally draining, and HSPs can feel overwhelmed, stressed out and drained more quickly than others. Sometimes, at the end of a strenuous day, their energy reserves suddenly disappear. Then it is difficult for them to last through the evening, and they go to bed early. This can be frustrating, especially if they had had plans for the evening. Even plans which would seem to be relaxing, such as a night at the movies or hanging out with good friends, can be too much for HSPs because

they no longer have any capacity to take in new stimulation. This can be annoying and difficult to understand, especially for close friends and marriage partners who have been looking forward to a nice evening together. But there is no use in trying to convince HSPs to “stick it out.” The best thing you can do for them is to accept them and leave them alone, or take over a task for them so they have time to regenerate. In such cases, it helps me a lot if I can just take a “time out” for a half an hour or so, lying down alone and closing my eyes. This recharges my batteries enough to help me make it through the rest of the day.

Everyone knows what it is like to be overwhelmed: you just feel like being alone or running away, and if that is impossible, you get aggressive. Our bodies have their own way of reacting to overstimulation, and they send out warning signals. HSPs should learn to recognize and understand their bodies’ overload signals. If these signals persist over a long period of time, this should be taken as a warning to change something in our lifestyle to head off the possibility of serious consequences such as burnout or a heart attack. Typical physical signals include: a strong sense of agitation, possibly with a pounding heart; breaking into a sweat; a look of panic; blushing; tension in the shoulders or back of the neck, or even the throat or jaw; difficulty falling or staying asleep. These are often accompanied by a feeling of being vulnerable and helpless, together with great irritability, rage, or confusion.

HSPs need absolute peace and quiet in order to relax. The best way for them to relax emotionally is to “lose themselves” in another world. I like to relax by reading novels or watching movies; my favorites are detective stories like Agatha Christie’s: fictional stories that I know will end with the bad guy getting caught and punished. I can’t stand it if he isn’t! I like to read the end of very suspenseful stories so that I can enjoy the rest, knowing it will end up okay. I can relax especially well by laughing through funny movies. I can’t stand to watch movies about Hitler, war or real scenes of violence. I sometimes even have

to leave the room if a normal movie or a sports event gets too suspenseful. The World Soccer Cup that was held in Germany in 2006 was fantastic fun for almost everyone else in the country; for me it was torture. Especially when the German team played, I couldn't stand it. The tension stressed me out too much. Other HSPs pursue a hobby or sport or listen to music to relax. Two other ways for me to relax are taking walks in woods or fields or doing light gardening.

Unless they have been emotionally wounded and have responded by building a hard protective shell around themselves, HSPs are generally very friendly people. They are good listeners and have an amazing ability to empathize. People with problems feel drawn to them, and they can often be found in professions compatible with their gifting. They love to help others, even if it means that their own interests have to take a back seat. They are constantly in danger of being used by others.

Unfortunately, their warm and respectful manner is not always properly valued; they are often misunderstood or rejected because they are "so different." Because of their reserved manner, they are often underestimated. They are extremely emotionally vulnerable and many have been wounded often. Their response is a tendency to decline to participate in many social activities. They prefer a few safe friends; some even become loners.

Since their life experiences lead most HSPs to (incorrectly) feel inferior and insecure, it is difficult for them to "sell themselves." They doubt their capabilities, play them down and sell themselves short when it comes to certain types of work. If they are self-employed as counselors, they have difficulty earning a living with this attitude, even if their work is excellent.

In groups and society in general, HSPs are enabled by their strong intuition to perceive much of which others are unaware. They see hazards or trends coming and can avert dangerous developments. But who listens to them, or who would allow them to have influence or think them capable having influence? Most HSPs

don't think themselves worthy of being heard; they are hampered by their own careful nature and lack of self-worth. But in sudden crises, when everyone else is losing their head, the HSPs are often the ones who take over, act thoughtfully and manage the situation. Afterwards, they often feel drained and exhausted, only to wear themselves out even more with self-critical second-guessing as to what they could and should have done better.

Sometimes, HSPs are placed in leadership positions against their will. They are trusted because of their ability to perceive and assess situations, be balanced and master crises. If they are not emotionally wounded, they can take on responsibility and perform excellently. But they do not seek such positions because they know that they aren't really made for them. The constant responsibility, coupled with their strong sense of personal responsibility, perception and inner vow never to hurt anyone, quickly lead to a sense of failure. It is almost impossible for them to satisfy their own inner demand that they perfectly master the contradictory responsibilities inherent in leadership positions. All of their strength is gone and they feel drained and deeply dissatisfied. Many then become hard and controlling in order to master the situation; others give up and run away from their responsibility, leaving those around them to scratch their heads and wonder why. The fact is that HSPs are not made to be leaders or aggressive warriors, but to bring their strengths to bear by offering priestly counsel.

At this point, I would like to say a few words about my favorite person in the Old Testament, Joseph, Jacob's second-youngest son. I can identify with him very well because he has many characteristics and life experiences that are typical of HSPs. For his brothers, Joseph was the outsider, the black sheep. He had intense dreams and knew early on what was going to happen. But, because he used this knowledge unwisely, his older brothers hated him. To get rid of him, they sold him "downriver" to Egypt. There, his high moral standards got him into trouble and he ended up in prison. At the very lowest point in his life, his prophetic gift, that had gotten him into trouble so many times, "saved" him. Because

of his wisdom, he was given a high political position, a position that he would never have wanted or been able to get on his own. All of this made it possible for him to save an entire nation and his own family. At the end of the story, we read, “And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:21) It’s a fact that HSBs love to confirm themselves as saviors, helpers, comforters and peacemakers. And, like Joseph, they often need someone who realizes what they have to offer and gives them a secure position that enables them to act for the good of all.

The personal account below describes again the typical character traits of a HSB. It was written by Martin, a man who would never have dreamed that he could be classified as highly sensitive. According to the DISC test, a model used to describe behavior patterns, his pattern tends to be dominant/conscientious, i.e. goal-oriented and unemotional. Such a person tends to seem more hard or distant than sensitive and empathetic.

When Christa gave her lecture on highly sensitive burden bearers on the last day of the seminar, my spontaneous thought was: ‘Finally, a topic that has nothing to do with me. Now I can relax.’ I had enough to think about with all the other subjects that had been covered. My wife is actually the one who is a typical example of a burden bearer: she suffers with people, is always defending the underdog and can’t watch violent movies. But because I am more of a dominant, goal-oriented person, I couldn’t really picture myself as a burden bearer. But some of the traits were an exact description of me, and at the end of the talk, I felt confused because I sensed that the topic did have a lot to do with me.

Art and music: I love landscapes and warm, Mediterranean colors, which explains my love of painting. I love to go to art galleries. I’ve started to paint again myself, and it helps me to relax.

Music stimulates me very much, especially emotional ballads. Music can take me away into another world. Emotional scenes in movies almost always touch me so deeply that I have to wipe tears away from my eyes – almost always, not just every now and then.

Praise and worship also mean a lot to me. I sense God's love and presence intensely and am surprised when others don't. I'm learning not to judge people who do not have this high sensitivity.

Need for quiet: I have a very strong need for times of peace and quiet in my daily life. I can have as much fun as anyone, enjoy fellowship and join in celebrations, but afterwards, I need to be alone for a while. I still can't read and concentrate when there is background noise. Even the neighbor's crowing rooster gets on my nerves. Now I know that I need to plan more quiet times for myself.

When our children were small, family vacations were stressful for me. In the vacation homes we rented, the normal background noise of children got on my nerves so badly that I felt enraged and regretted having gone on vacation with them. Sometimes, I was so horrified at my inner agitation and rage that I thought I must be mentally ill or under spiritual attack. My frequent anger caused problems in my relationship with my children, and these problems did not improve until after they had gone through puberty. I have a lot of regrets about this because I deeply love my children. It is horrifying to me how much HSBs who don't understand their gift can wound others. Now I finally understand the causes and effects, and have better control over my life.

Other people's burdens: I can tell how people I know are doing without asking them. Then I have a very strong desire to pray for them with authority so that they are immediately helped or healed. I long for more authority in prayer so that more people's needs can be met. I often give people a bear hug to show them "You are loved. You are someone special. You are valuable. I see that in you. I understand you." To encourage, comfort and bless, that is what I most strongly long to do in spiritual ministry. But I'm learning more and more that Jesus is the Savior and I'm not. I have to hand the burdens over to him because I can't carry them myself.

God's voice: When my inner tension is in balance and I am not hindered by being upset or holding onto something I know is wrong, I can enter into God's presence and hear His voice. I often receive pictures from Him in my mind's eye. This is one of the main ways in which I experience Him speaking to

me. Things have happened to confirm that this is a real gift. One confirmation is that when I pray for people or convey to them what I have received as an impression, they are often so deeply touched that they break out in tears. What I say is actually nothing special, but somehow, something gets passed along to them that touches them. When I counsel someone, it is often very helpful that I sense where a problem is and what steps need to be taken to arrive at a solution.

Church and Worship Services: It only takes a few notes for me to sense whether praise comes from the heart and is honest or not. The same goes for sermons. I can't stand superficial posturing and so sometimes I have to leave the church service. This used to be very confusing for me and caused me to become judgmental. My criticism often upset people and some saw me as a complainer and manipulator. This seemed extremely unfair to me, and I had to deal with a lot of bitterness. In this area, my sensitivity seems to me to be more of a burden than a gift.

In the church I used to go to, there was a lot of hurt and there were a lot of unresolved conflicts. But everything was swept under the rug and everyone just carried on and acted as if nothing had happened. In the church services, there was so much depression that I could hardly stand it. A friend of mine who is also a burden bearer confirmed this to me when she said, "I could just explode!" My wife often felt like she needed to scream.

It's the same way for me. These situations seem to me to show that wounding and sin can leave a door open for negative spiritual powers. I would be interested to know whether highly sensitive people have a special sense for spiritual warfare and whether God has given them the spiritual gifts they need for this, such as the gift of discernment of spirits or the gifts of wisdom and word of knowledge.

What have I learned? Well, actually, I always wanted to be strong and have things under control; I wanted to be like John Wayne in real life. But my sensitivity always broke through. I have highs and lows, and even depressive phases. I have learned to take them to Jesus and allow His Spirit to flow into my heart so that I can receive peace and healing. Although this helps, I used to hate my sensitivity because it always seemed

to be standing in my way. I had the feeling that my gifts and abilities were constantly being hindered or even destroyed by it.

People always used to accuse me of letting my feelings run away with me. I thought I did, too. But now I'm learning more and more to differentiate between my feelings and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And I know that what I sense is not nonsense just because someone else may not be able to understand it.

I have to keep a careful watch over my heart. When I come home after an experience like a difficult worship service or conversation and feel confused and burdened, I have to pray right away so I can give up the burden and pray for peace and healing. Prayer and the word of God calm me down and clear my thoughts. Proverbs 4:23 is an important verse for me: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." This verse has been a constant help during my healing process in counseling.

Knowing about HSB has made me much more relaxed. I have made peace with my high sensitivity and no longer see it as a curse but rather as a gift, even if I still have to learn how to deal with it correctly. I feel much more secure in regarding this "sensing" the same way as an ability to discern things logically. In the most diverse decisions, even in work situations, I now give my inner impressions the same weight as objective evidence.

One of the things we can learn from this personal story is that, when we talk about sensitive or highly sensitive persons, we have to first overcome a bias. More than a few of us link the term "sensitive" to the cliché of a feminine person, a kind of shy wallflower, or an old aunt who manipulates the entire family with her hypersensitivity. But these pictures are misleading when applied to high sensitivity! High sensitivity is to be found just as often among males as among females, but men are more likely to hide it because they see it as not being masculine. Our society is happy to allow girls and women to show sensitivity, seeing it as a feminine characteristic, but men are expected to be strong and lead the way. Highly sensitive boys grow up under this pressure and have to find a way to live with their sensitivity in the

hard, cold world of school life. Because they don't correspond to society's expectations and norms, they experience much more misunderstanding and rejection in their childhood and are more deeply wounded than female HSPs. This results in deep identity crises. Wanting to be accepted and not to seem strange, many boys learn to protect themselves with a hard shell. This makes it possible for them to function as is expected of them, but inside, they are constantly struggling to choose between their inner sensitivity and the role they have assumed. Later on, most decide to continue to play the role of a hard man because it makes them feel secure. It seems to me that many of them become successful in their professions, but neglect their responsibility in the family by being uncommunicative and leading an independent life or by trying to control the family. This dilemma comes across clearly in Martin's life. He needs not only information about his high sensitivity but also inner healing and counseling to help him become secure in his newly discovered identity. Later, we will talk about some of the questions that Martin raised.

High sensitivity is evidenced not only in relationships. Especially with men, there is often a marked high sensitivity in technical fields. Many tinkerers and inventors are highly gifted and highly sensitive. They perceive the slightest changes and are creative in finding solutions for difficult problems. They prefer to work on projects alone and undisturbed. More than a few Nobel Prize winners have been highly sensitive people. Their gift has made them successful and famous, but as HSPs, they do not enjoy being in the spotlight. Isaac Newton (1643–1727), one of the most important scientists ever, had all the characteristics of a highly sensitive person. He was considered absent-minded, had periods of depression and lived a lonely life, living only for his scientific studies of physics, mathematics and chemistry.

