

Chapter 2. The Multiplicity of Everyday Life

In our chapter on severe trauma and dissociation, we saw how extreme traumatization of a young child can lead not only to dissociation of memory and feelings, but also to wholesale identity dissociation. Under conditions of extreme trauma, reality is far too frightening and overwhelming to be accepted, and elements of the mind must be split off, dissociated beyond awareness. Just as a moon may form from the debris remaining after the formation of a planet, and then circle in orbit around that planet, so too can the disowned memories and feelings from childhood coalesce into separate identities, orbiting what remains of the self. This astrophysical metaphor is inappropriate from one perspective, in that the debris left over from planetary formation is typically not part of the planet in the first place, whereas the content of a personality alter has been ejected from the fully formed whole self. Nonetheless, the point is that in cases of extreme trauma, some of us have the capacity for extreme dissociation, as a means of protecting ourselves from total mental annihilation, or insanity.

In the course of working with individuals with dissociated identities, a psychologist is exposed to the workings of the mind at the outer limits of dissociation. One sees our creative capacities applied full throttle for self protection. The self is protected by dividing. Consciousness of reality is thereby reduced to the portion of reality which a young child can tolerate. But with age, skills develop, and these divisions in the mind can be mended. This is difficult, because the childhood focus on dissociation must be largely replaced in adulthood by an opposite focus upon integration. In this later process, awareness of, communication with, and cooperation between parts of self must be pursued. This road to reintegration can in some cases result in full restoration of the whole self via fusion, or a less ambitious goal, involving sufficient cooperation between parts to allow one to function as if one were nearly whole.

But this is not a black or white issue, a distinction between the “crazies” and “normals,” so to speak. Dissociation results in multiplicity. When we dissociate or split off a portion of the mind, whether it be a memory, a feeling, a sensation, etc., a division is created between the owned self and the disowned self. This is multiplicity: the creation of multiple selves. There are mild and severe forms of dissociation, resulting in mild and severe degrees of multiplicity. We can suppress

awareness of a feeling or memory out of consciousness temporarily, in order to protect our immediate emotional well-being. Such a feeling or memory may remain in our subconscious mind, and be available to consciousness at a later date. In a more extreme operation, we can repress a feeling or memory deeper, into the unconscious mind, where it is unavailable to consciousness. I prefer not to get too far into technical discussions of the differences between suppression, repression, and dissociation, but we might use both suppression and repression as methods of dissociation, allowing us to split off or disown threatening content of awareness, to varying degrees. Self-consciousness can be viewed on a continuum, ranging from full awareness of feelings, memories, etc. at a given moment in the conscious mind, to deliberate, temporary and mild suppression of awareness in the intermediate level of the subconscious mind, to more wholesale repression of material into the unconscious, basement portion of the mind where it is far less available to consciousness. If you are watching your daughter's ballet performance, and the thought of your own molestation at her age enters your mind, you may suppress it at the moment, even if you are pursuing a recovery effort which involves every day journaling regarding this trauma. Or, you may have repressed this memory so thoroughly that it is disowned in the basement of your mind, and does not intrude at all during the ballet. Using a less extreme example, you may find yourself thinking about your own work stress during the ballet, but realizing this, you may suppress it in order to allow yourself to enjoy your daughter's performance.

We all suppress and repress. These are basic defenses which allow us to minimize negative feelings at the moment, though if practiced too consistently, disowned mental material can accumulate into a larger, disowned self. Viewed from a different perspective, we have twin needs in this domain. We need to feel whole, and operate with the consistency of a whole person, though we also need to avoid awareness of threatening feelings at times. Both of these skills are adaptive, though they clash. If we were to pursue wholeness without exception, we could not function, not only because of the emotional stress associated with awareness of our most distressing memories and feelings, but also because we must be capable of focused concentration in order to accomplish anything. We have to be able to separate elements of our awareness into figure and ground, foreground and background, and focus upon a given target of consciousness if we are to act on or alter it.

But if we suppress, repress, and thereby dissociate threatening or distracting material from consciousness excessively, our disowned self accumulates, and we increasingly lose our wholeness. Mental health involves a delicate balancing between our immediate need for self protection, and our longer term need for internal unity and wholeness.

Dissociation occurs on a continuum, from mild to extreme. Normal, everyday forms of dissociation include daydreaming, in which you allow your mind to wander outside of your immediate environment. Likewise, normal dissociation allows you to temporarily suspend awareness that you are in a movie theater, in order to enjoy the movie. I remember when my wife and I took our three daughters to see Jurassic Park. Youngsters often get prematurely exposed to experiences in the company of their older siblings, and this was just such a mistake, as our youngest, five year old daughter was a bit too young for this movie. She became frightened of the dinosaurs, as if they were about to jump out and eat her. Sometimes it helps to be a psychologist. I turned her around, and she watched the couple behind us eat their popcorn in the security of their theater seats. She was no longer overwhelmed when she returned her attention to the dinosaurs, who were now safely upon a theater screen rather than hunting her in the dinosaur park. She was less dissociated from her surroundings, more in touch with the fact that she was in a movie theater with her parents. But I digress. The point is that we all dissociate ourselves, from our surroundings, our bothersome feelings, our most distressing memories, and our most threatening thoughts about ourselves and others. This is adaptive in most circumstances, and can likewise be adaptive, at least temporarily, when pursued more extremely following more extreme, traumatic circumstances. For example, at least to some extent, it is helpful to suppress fear in the midst of a combat operation. But one must remain mindful of the need for wholeness, lest the ratio between our owned and disowned selves becomes too extreme and self sabotaging. The disowned self does not remain dormant, like a secure waste dump. Material in the subconscious mind, or in the deeper, unconscious mind can still be triggered by internal and external events, and thereby resurface into consciousness, where it has all the more power, because it has been disowned rather than accepted. We must pursue integration as well as dissociation, long term wholeness and self-awareness, as well as short term, self protective non-awareness.

With increasing trauma, we witness increasing degrees of dissociation. With increasing dissociation, we see increasing multiplicity. PTSD and borderline personality disorder are each rooted in trauma, and fall in the middle of the dissociative continuum, in between normal dissociation and the extreme of dissociative identity disorder. There are milder forms of trauma, short of PTSD and BPD, which involve some level of dissociation and multiplicity. At the extreme of DID, we not only see a splitting of identity into separate personality alters, but we also see those alters taking over executive control of behavior, with the host personality being oblivious to her own behavior during this period of lost time. A bit less extreme is the condition known as Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, a misnomer which refers to markedly split identity, but without blatant loss of executive control over behavior. Back in the middle of the dissociative continuum, BPD is known to involve black-and-white extremes in one's perception of oneself and others, varying between adulation and vilification. PTSD involves alternating flooding and numbing of bothersome feelings and memories. In other words, bothersome experiences are sometimes disowned, or dissociated, and at other times reintegrated too suddenly, in the form of a flood of previously dissociated memories and feelings. To a milder extent than DID, PTSD can also involve some identity dissociation. Thus, the man who strikes his wife in a domestic violence incident may proclaim that "That wasn't me," or "I wasn't myself," and be partially correct. Perhaps his wife called him an "idiot" for purchasing a car without her input, which triggered suppressed angry feelings from his childhood, when his father debased him as an idiot in the course of physically abusing him. His anger regarding this abuse has been dissociated, but resurfaces in response to a trigger, i.e., an event which is in some way similar to his suppressed trauma. Are we dealing solely with dissociation of memories and feelings, or identity dissociation as well. These distinctions are more obvious at the extreme of DID, but less apparent in the middle of the continuum. Notice, however, that he said "I wasn't myself," an unwitting acknowledgment that his disowned self produced the behavior, rather than simply saying, "I don't know why I felt so angry," reflecting only the influence of dissociated angry feelings.

None of us escape some degree of trauma in our lives, even if it falls well short of the trauma which typically produces PTSD. All of us suppress and repress bothersome memories and feelings, dissociating ourselves at least temporarily from the most bothersome aspects of our

experience. On an identity level, we all have some sense of the most objectionable part of our self. We may be relatively aware of, and acknowledge this disliked part of self, or we may disown it more thoroughly, with limited self-awareness. Identity is both continuous and discontinuous, integrated and dissociated. We possess distressing awareness of our disliked self at times, while at other times remaining self protectively oblivious to our disowned self. On a less pathological level, note both the continuous and noncontinuous aspects of your child, adolescent, and mature adult selves. Separately touch base with memories of your conscious experience of yourself as a child, as an adolescent, and currently as an adult. There is continuity in your identity, in that each is part of your whole self, united via gradual changes and the continuity of time. On the other hand, there are qualitative, not just quantitative differences in these ego states. Your experience of yourself and your world as a child has an entirely different quality compared to your consciousness as an adolescent, and your current experience as an adult. Likewise, when you are entrenched in the most objectionable, disowned part of yourself, your experience of yourself, others, and the world around you is to some extent qualitatively different than your consciousness when you are thankfully immersed in the healthiest part of yourself. You have a unified, whole sense of yourself, but some discontinuity in your sense of self as well. Multiplicity is the term used to capture the discontinuity in our identity. Our chapter title, the multiplicity of everyday life, refers to the more common versions of identity dissociation.

Various writers in philosophy and psychology have addressed such identity dissociation. In my professional youth, I was intrigued by *The Divided Self*, exploring the roots of psychosis, by the existentialist psychiatrist, R.D. Laing. I was even more impressed by his striking poetry in *Knots*, which I recommend to anyone who has twin interests and poetry on psychology. Nathaniel Branden's *The Disowned Self* also captured my attention, discussing "obliviousness to self," and the centrality of self-esteem. Carl Jung's discussions of the "shadow," referring to the denied aspects of oneself, and the "persona," or social mask, were also instructive. More recently, the "inner child" approach to reclaiming the disowned self, while addressing the cover-up of the codependent or false self, gained popularity, particularly in the writings of John Bradshaw, such as *Homecoming*. I would argue that the ego states in this approach, specifically the inner child, codependent self,

and higher parent, capture the natural multiplicity of the human being. Different personality theorists conceptually carve up the self into different components, most famously, Freud's id, ego, and superego. Personally, I have found that the triad of ego states in the inner child approach to psychological healing provide a quite powerful conceptual framework for healing the milder varieties of early trauma, particularly when major suppression of one's selfhood occurs.

As we shall see in the next chapter dealing with inner child work and codependency, the higher self, the seat of our wisdom, capacity for love, and moral centeredness, must become ascendant, and manage the conflicts between the natural self-centeredness of our inner child, and the other centeredness of our codependent self. Likewise, particularly when the divide between the disowned, inner child and the false or codependent self is pronounced, the higher self must redevelop a relationship with, and nurture the needs and feelings of the abandoned core self/inner child, while negotiating a reduction of the ultimately self-defeating defenses contained within the false, codependent self. You may notice that the term "codependency" can be used somewhat loosely, with multiple meanings, which will demand explanation. In addition, while self-centered individuals may appear less frequently than self-denying other-centered patients in a psychologist's office, pathological self absorption involving narcissistic hedonism is just as problematic and widespread as the self annihilation involved in codependent self-sacrifice. Indeed, self-centered and other-centered individuals are a perfect fit on a pathological level, and often unite in unbalanced marriages. In our next chapter, we will address ways of developing a healthy balance between self and other centeredness, and methods of recovering the disowned self, while minimizing the activity of the false self and its self sabotaging defenses. These methods are integrative, involving awareness, communication with, and cooperation between conflicting sides of self. While the need for these skills is obvious when dealing with the extreme dissociation of and conflict between identities in DID patients, the same integrative techniques are necessary when approaching everyday multiplicity.