

Embracing All Our Selves

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This article is the first in a series of four written in 1994 for the journal, Psychotherapy in Australia.

There is a mysterious realm within each of us that alternately beckons and frightens the explorer with its depth, its complexities and its sometimes startling contradictions.

This kingdom of the psyche and its many disparate facets has long been a source of fascination to us. In the early seventies we discovered that the psyche contained many individual selves, each with its own way of perceiving the world, each with its own personal history, physical characteristics, emotional and physical reactions, and opinions on how we should run our lives.

We have spent much of our time, both professional and personal, in [exploring these selves](#) which determine, to a considerable extent, the course of our lives. We have found that the more sharply we become attuned to these inner voices, the more real choice we are able to exercise in the pursuit of our individual destinies.

The Birth of Personality

Let us begin with a consideration of the development of personality and the pivotal role that vulnerability plays in each of our lives. We are all born totally vulnerable and, in our early years, we must be cared for by other people. Our very lives depend upon this. Therefore, we begin, as early as possible, to develop a personality that will help us to protect this vulnerable core, this inner child that lives within each of us. This inner child is with us forever. It never grows up and we are always responsible for its well being.

The way we take care of this child is a major factor in determining the kind of personality we develop.

Very early in our lives a 'self' begins to develop to protect this child, a self that we call the Protector/Controller. It looks around and begins to determine what behavior is safe for the child and what behavior is likely to bring physical or emotional pain. It notices what behavior is rewarded and what is punished. It figures out the roles of the world around us so that this world is predictable and makes sense, and sets up an appropriate code of behavior for our specific environment. When it is functioning appropriately it changes its rules to accommodate any new input. It helps to keep life coherent, and is basically rational in nature. It becomes the Operating Ego or the cornerstone of our personality. Along with the other primary selves that develop to support it, it represents who we are in the world.

As time moves on, other parts of the personality develop, each contributing its flavor to this Operating Ego. A Pusher may develop to make sure we get done what has to be done—and more besides. If it pushes hard enough then we will be so successful that no-one can criticize us or attack us. A Pleaser generally develops that makes sure we are nice to people and thus our child remains safe. An Inner Critic develops to keep us living properly according to the laws of this Protector/ Controller, or, perhaps, an inner Rule Maker. Each of these selves develops in relationship to, and under the aegis of, the original Protector/Controller. Together they comprise what is known as the primary self

system and it is this primary self systems that defines who we are in the world to ourselves and to others.

Primary Selves, Disowned Selves and the Aware Ego

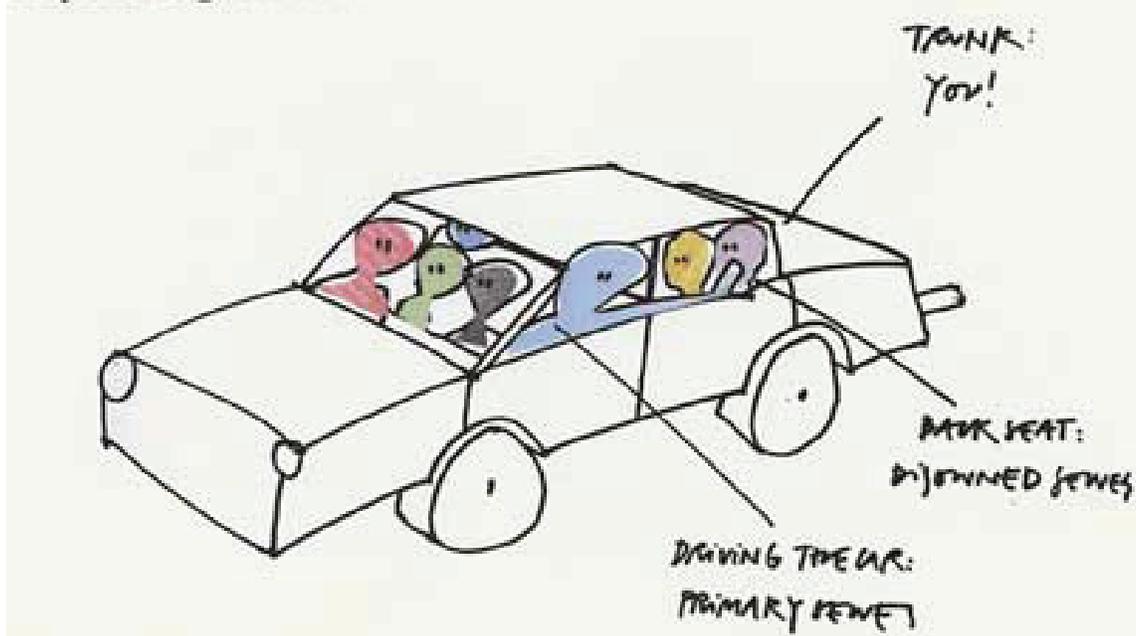
What is generally seen as 'the ego' or as one's personality in general, is basically the Protector/Controller and the primary selves around it. By definition, the job of the ego is to provide a good executive function for the psyche. It needs to make choices, like a good CEO. It needs to drive our psychological car, to attempt to bring order to the conflicting parts of the psyche.

If, however, the ego is the Protector/Controller in conjunction with the Pleaser and Pusher and Rational Selves, then the choices made in life come from the consciousness and basic psychology of these particular selves that comprise this Operating Ego. It is this Operating Ego that spiritually oriented

disciplines are trying to eliminate when they advise us to eliminate the ego so that our spiritual development can proceed. This domination by the primary selves which make up the Operating Ego means that there will be contrasting selves of equal and opposite energy that are disowned or repressed. For instance, if the Protector/Controller has helped a man develop a strong Pusher in order to make him successful in the world, on the other side will be a less developed or even a disowned system of selves associated with playfulness, relaxation or lack of ambition.

The primary selves vary from family to family, culture to culture, and can even change in the course of our lives. The most common personality developed in our culture is one in which there is a strong Protector/Controller, and vulnerability has been largely disowned. In this way, the primary selves allow an individual to operate in the world with authority and power and one is

Psychological Car



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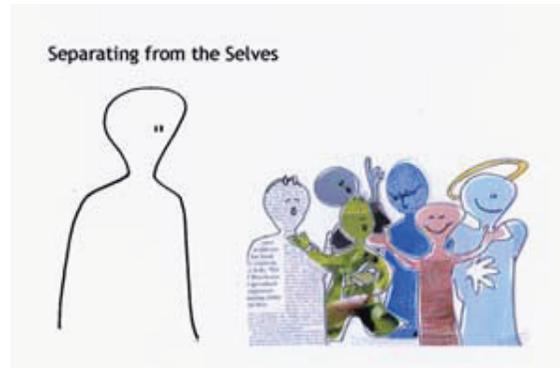
less likely to be hurt or victimized. These primary selves are the selves that we identify with. The selves that lose out in this process are ones that have to do with vulnerability, sensitivity, shyness, 'being' (rather than "doing"), and the expression of real feelings and emotions. These are the selves that are seen as subversive and possibly even dangerous by the more powerful primary selves and which are disowned.

Jane is a 35 year old woman very much identified with her mother role in life. She took on this role as early as three years of age, a fairly common pattern in dysfunctional families. She was always available to people and doing things for them and never gave priority to her own needs. Her Responsible Mother Self and Pleasing Daughter were primary and her Selfish Self and her Vulnerable Child were both disowned. How is Jane to ever know that she has these disowned selves? Her concept of herself or Operating Ego is this Pleasing Daughter and Responsible Mother. This is also how she is seen by the world around her. She feels basically secure in her identification with this role. It is true that she has migraine headaches and is not sleeping well at night, and that her marriage has also gone quite dead. Since her primary selves determine her perceptions of the world, however, she would not connect the actions of these selves to any of her problems.

The primary selves are the window or the glasses through which each of us sees the world. They represent our Operating Ego until we do the work that separates us from their limited reality and thus give birth to what we term as a new Aware Ego. This Aware Ego is constantly separating from the primary selves and thus becomes able to embrace them, and the disowned selves on the other side, without being identified with either.

The Development of The Aware Ego

All consciousness work at some level is working with primary and disowned selves. Discovering the primary selves is difficult since they represent



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who you are in the world and the way to discover your primary selves is to begin by discovering your disowned selves. Just take a moment and ask yourself the following questions. Who is it in your life that pushes your emotional buttons? Whom do you judge? Conversely, who is so wonderful that you are a mere nothing in comparison? If you can discover and isolate the quality or qualities that push your buttons negatively, or that you overvalue positively, then you have one or more of your disowned selves available to you.

Generally speaking, we are very negatively related and judgmental towards people who carry our disowned selves or, on the other hand, we are fascinated by them. Whatever the case, and of this you may be sure, life will bring our disowned selves to us repeatedly until we are able to claim them as our own. One of Jane's disowned selves is carried by people who are selfish and think only of themselves. Her oldest daughter and her younger sister live this self out for her; they are both teachers for her. She has much conflict with both of them and will continue to do so until she

is able to separate from her Pleasing Daughter and learn to embrace it and the Selfish Self, on the other side, without being identified with either one.

George is a successful trial lawyer. He has the reputation of being tough but fair. He hates “wimps.” A “wimp” is someone who is weak and vulnerable and who cannot take care of himself or herself. A wimp cries a lot and always seems to be victimized by the world. Unfortunately, George’s daughter fulfills all of these requirements. George is very hooked into her because she suffers terribly at school and with her friends. Everyone seems to take advantage of her. In his growing years George had parents who were very strict with him, especially his father. George’s Protector/ Controller pulled in a strong group of selves to make up a powerful operating ego. These included a Pusher, a Money Maker, an Ambitious self, a Perfectionist, a Controlling Father self, and a very strong Power Broker. Vulnerability, weakness of any kind, shyness, all became an anathema to these primary selves. However, every disowned self returns to haunt us in our life over and over again. We marry them, our children live them out, they become our business partners, or our enemies. George’s daughter lives out all of his disowned material. Until George is able to separate his aware ego from his primary selves, he will never be able to learn to honor the selves on the other side and, perhaps in that process, free his daughter from her role as the family victim.

These disowned selves present each of us with an unparalleled opportunity to learn and to grow. We must, however, stand back from the people in our lives that cause us pain and stress and recognize them as teachers that are essential for our own personal development. The greater the hatred and judgment, the more powerful is the

disowned self operating within us.

Jane hates powerful, dominating women. She sees herself as being more loving and compassionate. Her system of primary selves developed as a reaction formation against a forceful and dominating mother. Now she hates aggressive, dominating women. We may be sure that life will bring her a series of aggressive dominating women for her to fight with and suffer over until she learns the lessons of disowned selves. Her best friend is such a person. Jane says, ‘I can’t understand why I’m friends with her. We’re so opposite. Most of the time I don’t know if I’m loving her or hating her!’

Embracing and honoring a disowned self does not mean that one needs to become that self. It simply means that one must disengage from the primary self system and learn to honor the selves on the other side. It is not necessary to try to change one’s behavior or to become somebody different. One need simply say something like, ‘Look I recognize you. You terrify me and I cannot let you take over my life, but I do know that you are there and I will be aware of you and I will listen to your words. I will feel your feelings and I will honor you as best I can.’ When disowned selves first come out, they are often absolute terrors. Once they are out, however, we find that what they want is to be acknowledged, to be honored, to be listened to and taken seriously, just in the same way that you and I need to be taken seriously.

This, of course, is the crux of the matter. These selves, as we have said from the beginning, are real people. They inhabit our bodies, but they are real people. When they are ignored, they get nasty and they become vindictive towards us. The longer and deeper that they are imprisoned, the crazier they tend to become so when they finally emerge it is often in a very primitive form, ‘proving’ for the primary selves that they were

properly disowned in the first place!

If one has been forced to disown natural instinctual energies as most of us have, these energies build up power in the unconscious and become frightening, perhaps even destructive. In this disowned state, they may develop unnatural power over us. They become our hated enemies. In their extreme forms, we sometimes refer to them as 'daemonic.' A Protestant minister has disowned his sexuality over many years. In the course of his therapy, he dreams that he is trying to wrestle a drunk penis into the cold shower. His sexuality was not drunk to begin with. It was just sexuality. Disowned over time, the sexuality acquired greater and greater energy and became more difficult to control. In a few years, if nothing were to change, we can probably assume that it would no longer be manageable and then there might well be a more serious consequence of this disowning process. We recently have seen this process lived out by a number of television evangelists whose disowned selves exploded into public prominence and caused no end of discomfort for everyone.

Does this mean that our minister has to live out his sexuality in the world? Not necessarily so. It means that he has in him feelings and a voice that wishes to express those feelings. He must separate the aware ego from the Protector/Controller and its friends and begin to embrace both sides. He has to learn to live with his Monk and with Dionysius. He must learn to honor both selves and what they represent. What he will actually do to honor these energies is his to decide. Hopefully, he will have an aware ego making his decision for him.

Honoring the selves does not mean letting them take over one's life. If someone is very constricted and suddenly discovers the freer, more flowing selves, our job as therapists is not to support the new flowing selves against the

constriction of the more traditional selves. All this would do is substitute one extreme for the other. This is an extremely critical issue in new age consciousness. Our experience is that the more conservative and constricted side of our nature has become a disowned self for most people involved in consciousness work. In the attempt to grow and change, one's back gets turned on our origins, our basic conservatism. This disowned conservatism is then projected back onto the society that is seen quite judgmentally as being constricted and negative. Though the perception may have some accuracy, the judgment behind it does not help things in any way.

None of us can be saved from the reality of our disowned selves. There is nothing pathological in this situation. Each of us at this moment is identified with a primary self system and each of us has a disowned or less-owned self system that is operating. No amount of psychological work can save us from this condition. The unconscious is unconscious! Wisdom is, at least in part, the knowledge of this reality. And what a relief we can experience if we truly accept this!

The Psychology of Selves

The Psychology of Selves is basically a way of viewing the evolution of consciousness in an individual. Consciousness is not a goal to be reached by a process that is embraced. There are three distinct aspects of the consciousness process. These are: awareness; experience of selves; and the aware ego.

1. Awareness is a point of reference that allows one to view with objectivity whatever is happening inside or outside of ourselves. There is no judgment and there is no attachment as to how one should be in the world. There is just the act of witnessing what actually is in one's world.

Awareness is simply a point of reference, a place of pure insight. It is not an action state.

2. The second level of our distinction concerns the actual experience of different selves of energy patterns. The experience of anger is different from the awareness of anger. If one experiences anger and has no awareness of it, then one remains locked into this affective state and consciousness cannot evolve. If one has an awareness of anger with no experience of it, then one remains locked at an awareness level and consciousness cannot proceed. This is the reason why so many strong meditators that we see in clinical practice often have no relationship to their passions. They define consciousness as awareness and reject that act of experiencing the emotions. By the same token, individuals who have worked with a therapist or teacher who identify expression of emotions as the fundamental transformational path, may remain locked into the emotional plane, forever reacting emotionally with no ability to disengage anytime from the emotions. Both are necessary—awareness and experience.

3. The third component of consciousness is the process of the aware ego. Historically speaking, the ego has always been defined as the executive function of the psyche, the choice maker. This definition is as good today as it was at the beginning of the century. We have already differentiated between the operating ego and the aware ego. The aware ego, as we have seen, grows little by little as it is able to separate from the primary selves and learns to embrace the opposing disowned or less developed system of selves.

The aware ego, unlike awareness, is an action state. The action may be directed towards the world or it may simply be the ability to hold and live with the tension of opposites.

The Path Ahead

The exploration and mapping of the psyche—particularly its darker and more frightening corners—brings amazing new insight and excitement to our lives. Knowing the terrain within us lessens our fear and vulnerability and enables us to see both the opportunities and the dangers in life more clearly. Integrating new selves brings much added richness to our experiences. Replacing an operating ego with an aware ego gives a surprising number of choices in life where before there was none.

All therapy and growth forms are working at some level with these different selves. Voice Dialogue is a method we have evolved that has served us particularly well.

There is no end to the selves that can be contacted by this method. If they feel treated with respect and honor, and that the facilitator is treating them as real people, these voice systems open up in the most remarkable ways. This technique, which can be used by a wide variety of individuals, both professional therapists and layman alike, is described in detail in our book, *Embracing Our Selves: The Voice Dialogue Manual*.

The discovery of the multiple selves that inhabit the psyche and run our lives without our knowledge is the number one task of consciousness. It is only by truly assuming responsibility for ourselves that we can stop seeing them in other people. After all, those many people out there that we judge and hate and overvalue are direct expression of our disowned inner nature. By claiming all of our heritage, we naturally must view our fellow humans with greater compassion and understanding and accept our share of responsibility for both the difficulties and the well-being of the planet.