

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

## *Parts of Self – Losing and Becoming Whole Again – Part 1*

By Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, CIRT

JANUARY, 2010

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 1



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## **Parts of Self: Losing, Finding, and Becoming Whole Again**

By Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, CIRT

The Self is dynamic, developing through childhood and forward into our adult lives. Generally, most infants come into the world as whole and complete, albeit with some unique genetic predispositions. Ideally, if these children received perfect parenting and lived in an optimal world, they would not need to develop psychological defenses. Defenses are only needed when the environment is unsafe or lacking in nurturing. In an ideal world without defenses, our energies would flow freely to enhance all aspects of our functioning. Our original wholeness and personhood would remain intact.

However, when confronted with disruptions of safety to our environment, we create defenses or adaptations. Such defenses are designed to protect us from pain and to ensure our survival. However, defenses also can restrict our range of responses, causing us to become rigid or inhibited.

As we develop, we receive messages from our parents, family-of-origin, community, religious institutions, schools, and society about how we are accepted or rejected by others. Ask any American middle school teen and he or she can tell you instantly about who is in the “in crowd” and who has been relegated to a status of “unpopular.” We learn what it means to be included or excluded early in life. Even preschoolers can be observed forming cliques!

Connectedness and relating is part of our experience from our very birth. As a species, humans primarily survive by forming communities and sharing responsibilities. We pay attention to how to acquire, maintain, and sustain relationships; it is part of our survival. Likewise, when we experience disconnection, it is registered as painful – our survival is threatened!

Many scientific studies have focused attention on human connection as well as disconnection. This includes studies on how social and emotional disconnection impacts the brain and body. In a fascinating article by the Journal of the American Medical Association, researchers found evidence of how social rejection is actually registered in the same processing area of the brain as internal physical pain (JAMA; Vol. 290 No.18, November 12, 2003). So when someone describes rejection from a loved one as feeling like a “punch in the stomach” or having a “broken heart,” these are accurate descriptions. Emotional aches and pains can have the punch and intensity of a true physical malady. Since we all tend to avoid pain, we learn from others about how to best protect ourselves. We may feel shamed, ridiculed, or rejected for expressing ourselves in certain ways. Likewise, we may experience disgust or may reject the way our parents or others behave. As a result of this learned pain, we give up parts of our wholeness in order to be acceptable to others and to be acceptable to ourselves. When we block off, dismiss, or overdevelop aspects of ourselves in order to be acceptable to others (or to ourselves), we essentially distort some aspects of our original wholeness, our original Self. When parts of Self are no longer acceptable, they move into the shadows. We cannot allow it to exist in the light or our own awareness, nor can we reveal it to others. To do so would risk the acceptance we desperately need. This shadowy side of the unacceptable is referred to as the “Missing Self.”

As parts of self are actively pushed down into the shadows by shaming and disgust, they tend to take on a separate existence that has compulsive quality. We will tend to react by compulsively repressing a trait, compulsively expressing it, or both. In a scene at the beginning of the autobiographical movie about Tina Turner, ‘What’s Love Got to Do With It,’ she is repeatedly shamed and eventually rejected by her choir mistress for her irrepressible bursts of individual song during choir practice. She went on to make a highly successful career using her individual voice in concert with choral back-up. However, in her marriage with her husband, her individual voice was lost and inhibited in the relationship. Sometimes being shamed is so painful, we lose our voice altogether.



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## *The Self Has Depth and Layers*

Some parts we know about ourselves but keep hidden from others. Other aspects are so alien or unacceptable that we do not even allow ourselves to know about them. There may also be parts of Self others recognize even if we do not. Still other times, we subdue and hide aspects of Self from both ourselves and others. If you have ever heard anyone say, “If you really knew who I am, you wouldn’t like me,” then you have encountered someone struggling with aspects of Self. They may find parts of themselves abhorrent and fear that you would also if you truly knew them.

So we start out whole and then life experiences and socialization impact our wholeness. We get messages to “do this” but “don’t ever do that,” and we block, repress, or exaggerate qualities as we experience the shaping effects of our social world. Sometimes we express an aspect of Self and it is invalidated (or negated), like when someone crushes our dreams or tells us we are not smart enough, fast enough, strong enough, or skilled enough to accomplish something. Other times, parts of us are just neglected or inadequately nurtured due to an impoverished environment. For example, a child that grows up in a crime-filled, violent neighborhood, may not have the safety and freedom to explore his academic skills. He may learn to be tough and street-smart, but underdevelop his intellectual potential. He may also learn socially that being “smart” and studious is not a way to be accepted by his friends.

As a result of these combined experiences, parts of our true Self are *Hidden*, *Denied*, and *Disowned*. We create a *Presentational Self* to cover up the bare areas, to cover over the parts that are not allowed. We present this patched-up self to the world, but sometimes even this gets criticized. More patches may be created as we continue to adapt to our surroundings.

However, the aspects of Self that we attempt to discard for survival do not magically disappear. We are a closed system, so we have to do something with the traits that we despise. Typically, we will unconsciously do one of the following:

- 1) **Pick someone** who has that trait, get into a relationship with that person and have them express That trait for the both of you. For example, a person who was not allowed to be angry might get into a relationship with someone who has ready access to their anger and can express it easily.
- 2) **Project the traits** that we do not like onto those around us. We see them as having the trait whether or not they do, relate to them as if they did, and sooner or later they start to identify with the trait and to behave as if they had it all along. A metaphor for this would be an innocent but wrongly accused suspect who after intensive grilling takes on some aspects of an offender. He becomes defensive, angry, and even hostile. The person begins to behave as if “guilty” even though he is not.
- 3) **Provoke those around us** to express the denied and disowned parts of ourselves (that we dare not express). That is, we interact in provoking ways that pull out the undesired aspects that we ourselves despise. An example would be if you hold intense anger inside, but do not express the anger. Perhaps you were hurt by someone in your family who was always angry. This was never healed and resolved. Now in relationship with your partner, you do not directly show anger even though it lies within. Instead, you may nit-pick or be critical of your partner. They in turn get fed up and explode, and then you blame them for constantly being angry and unreasonable. It is typically far easier to hate in someone else an undesired trait than to turn on ourselves and see what truly lies within. In the example given, to take ownership would mean to acknowledge that we are angry and need to express it instead of nit-picking our partner. This may also include becoming aware of the anger that predates our partner, but is triggered in the present relationship.

Acknowledging these aspects of dealing with unresolved issues and the Self can be challenging. With all my training and past experience, even I struggled with acknowledging that I might tend to cope in these ways. I preferred to blame others and dismiss the possibility of me projecting or provoking. It is difficult to bring into the light the parts of ourselves that we try so hard to discreetly compensate for and to cope with. To acknowledge our defenses can almost seem like betraying or exposing oneself. If you also share some of these feelings in response, including some anger, these would be normal and expected reactions. Thank you for bearing with me for the sake of learning and growing! Next month, we will look more closely at this subject by revealing parts of the “Missing Self” and exploring aspects of the relationship healing process.



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