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

By Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC

In last month's article, we discussed the Self and how this can be comprised of many layers and dynamic parts. This included identifying how human beings have a basic need for connection, beginning from birth and continuing throughout our lives. We learn to adapt to our environment, learning social messages from family, friends, and institutions about what it means to be accepted by others. Our drive for human connection and acceptance is strong, necessary for survival, and has the capacity to shape our behavior.

As we mature, we develop defenses to protect us from rejection. However, the parts of self that we deem unacceptable do not disappear. The aspects of ourselves that have been pushed down, ignored, dismissed, or denied in order to defend against painful experiences of rejection and disconnection from others still reside in us. We refer to these aspects as the "missing self."

The Missing Self, Our Shadow Side

The Missing Self, or shadow of self, is a term used to describe the denied, disowned, and hidden parts of who we are. These are the areas of functioning where energy has been blocked as a result of all the years of subtle, as well as less than subtle, social messages. They include our capacity to sense, feel, think, and act that we gave up in order to be acceptable. Like a tourniquet stops the flow of blood to the extremities to save the vital life-supporting organs, we stop the flow of energy and thus numb out or lose functioning in otherwise healthy parts of self expression. We need all aspects of functioning. The more we block off parts of self, the more rigid and imbalanced we become. Below are some parts of this Missing Self.

The Denied Self

The Denied Self consists of traits that we do not even know that we possess. They are so abhorrent or dystonic (not matching our perception of self) that we do not allow ourselves to know we have them. They can include negative traits such as self-righteousness, bigotry, abusiveness, submissiveness, violence, and voyeurism. There is usually a lot of energy attached to these traits so that when we see them in others we find them extremely disturbing. They tend to be traits of parents, caregivers or siblings that we despised and do not want to have because they were associated with considerable pain.

The Disowned Self

The Disowned Self consists of the traits that we see as positive in others that we admire, but do not acknowledge in ourselves. Others may know we have them, but we do not. Often we experience fear or anxiety around saying that we have a given quality and are quick to negate it. We essentially disown the trait. A woman who was sexually abused as a young girl may deny being beautiful when given a compliment as an adult. For her, the thought of being potentially attractive to men could trigger fear of vulnerability or of getting hurt again. She may admire other beautiful women, but disown her own beauty.

The Hidden Self

The Hidden Self is the composite of those traits that we know we have but do not let anyone else know about. To protect the very essence of our being we keep these traits hidden from view. Often we have a lot of shame attached to them. For example, if a young boy was taught that "men don't cry," he may find crying in public extremely shame-producing. He may never cry in the presence of another, stuffing emotions so that he does not experience the shaming feeling of hot tears rolling down his face.

There are two other forms of Self that surface as adaptations or defense. These include the Social Self and the Presentational Self.

The Social Self

The Social Self is our public facade, the way we believe other people see us. If you paused to write down a list of traits that you think others view you as having, this is your Social Self. It includes parts of our original self, which remained intact, as well as the false traits we developed to cover up the parts we feel are unacceptable.



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Presentational Self

The Presentational Self reflects the way we want others to perceive us. We put a considerable amount of effort into being seen this way. This is the presentation that we want others to see instead of the disowned and hidden traits. It is our cosmetic concealer to hide the imperfections and to distract from what we regard as unacceptable.

During the romantic stage of falling in love, no effort is too great to present the Self in such a way that our partner falls in love with us. We keep some of our less desirable attributes out of sight and enhance what we deem attractive. We might be extremely accommodating and flexible, even if we tend to be more rigid and uncompromising in reality. Once the commitment deepens, we tend to put less effort into the Presentational Self. Deep down, we want to be loved for who we are despite all our warts and imperfections. This shift often leads to accusations by disillusioned partners that, “You’ve changed.” In actuality, your Presentational Self began to relax and the concealer started to wear off a bit. When our partner complains, this can reinforce the belief that we are unacceptable when without our perfecting concealer. This can feel discouraging and disheartening; defensiveness toward our partner tends to follow.

Getting into a Love Relationship: An Attempt To Become Whole Again

Since we give up parts of ourselves in childhood to adapt to our world, we end up missing the wholeness we once possessed. To become whole, we need to bring those denied, disowned, and hidden traits back. Often, we do this by unconsciously getting into a relationship with someone who either possesses some of the traits themselves or can be a reasonable “stand-in” for our family-of-origin by projecting traits onto them.

Initially, as we fall in love, we may experience a sense of wholeness or unification with our partner. However, after the glow of romantic love wears off and commitment settles in, we may begin to see the undesirable traits of our partner more vividly. These traits are ones that we connect with loss of safety or love. This causes us to feel anxious or upset that our partner has them. We feel the same way that we felt about having these traits in ourselves, and we do to our partner what was previously done to us – we shame them, attack them, reject them, model how not to have those traits, invalidate them, and fail to nurture them. As long as we continue to relate to these traits in our partner in these ways, we cannot allow ourselves to have them back. A metaphor for this would be the smoker who quits smoking. She/he dare not entertain the thought of enjoying another cigarette and instead becomes instantly disgusted and irritated by those who still light up. If we remain disgusted and at odds with the thought of smoking, the danger of returning to it ourselves is diminished.

We know a trait is unlovable and unacceptable in our partner by the fact that we refuse to love or accept it. We cannot allow ourselves to have it because then we will be unlovable or unacceptable again, too. This was learned well in childhood and we do not easily depart from learning that was born in pain. The problem is, as long as we continue to attack and criticize aspects of our partner that we dislike, we will stay incomplete and in conflict! For this reason, berating your partner is actually a form of self-abuse: you are attacking the part of yourself that you rejected and had your partner carry for you. Another way to explain losing parts of Self and getting into relationship is:

We have it, we lose it, we miss it, we find it, we want it, we marry it, we see it, we fear it, we attack it, and we stay incomplete.

The journey back to wholeness involves a growing awareness of past influences, what was lost, and how we are compensating for that loss. This includes becoming conscious of how this plays out in our most intimate relationships. The journey also includes holding a vision of what we desire as healthy, whole adults in truly loving, nurturing relationships. This is a process of acknowledgement, growth, and integration. So what are the traits of your Missing Self? They include the traits that you hate and admire most in others, especially in your romantic partner – yet you do not see these traits in yourself. Many times, these can also be traits in our children that we dismiss, discourage, or become angry over.

Since our defenses have done a marvelous job disguising and hiding traits and believing that they are only in others, becoming aware and conscious is critical to growth. Individual and relationship therapy provides a safe setting to get in touch with our defenses and adaptations. The process of accepting others gives us permission to also accept ourselves, and vice versa. As we forgive and accept, we activate healing in ourselves and move toward increasingly whole, generative relationships.



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