

Let There Be Light Creating Differentiation and Safety with a Highly Dissociative Client Through Relational Body-Psychotherapy

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Abstract

Dissociative Identity Disorder presents a unique challenge to any therapeutic process, and even more so to psychotherapists who choose to work relationally. This paper is a collaborative effort of psychotherapist and client, exploring together various aspects of the journey of creating differentiation and reclaiming secure attachment within a highly dissociative presentation. Through Kate's experiential account of her therapeutic process, the paper examines the impact of severe trauma on the relational field, and offers a body-centred and relational approach to psychotherapeutic work with Dissociative Identity Disorder. The paper further demonstrates the countertransferential journeys, and therapist's own work as it unravels parallel to the client's and suggests that relational body-psychotherapy stands a genuine chance of interrupting disorganised attachment schemas; that psychotherapy as a primarily loving relationship can, when allowed in, touch even the most wounded of places and illuminate the darkest corners of the psyche.

Key words

Dissociation - Disorganised Attachment – Relationality - Dissociative Identity Disorder

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness He called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.
Genesis 1:1-5

I had a recurring dream as a young boy, where I was eaten alive by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayers lion. I would approach the big MGM ring, watching with awe the lion inside it, feeling compelled to draw closer. As the lion roared I came closer still and let my head drop into his jaws.

I remember the dark quietness inside and recall the thoughts I used to have there, inside the lion's head, inside my dream. I would wonder what it meant if I died in my dream. People always told me that it was impossible, that you woke up in the last minute. And then, in a slow motion of stillness and dissociation the lion would lock his jaw, biting my head off.

There was a sharp pain and then a long period of nothingness, a blessed nothingness.

Asaf: Introduction: form and flow

The dialogue between understanding that is acquired theoretically, and knowledge gained through experience always intrigues me. My client Kate, who has co-written this paper with me, has taught me extensively about attachment and love, dissociation and trauma, hope, pain and connection. It is my hope that through her story, a personal account of therapeutic journeying, you will gain a taste of both the theoretical and experiential aspects of our work together, and of the complexity of Kate's story. But before plunging into her fascinating world, perhaps we can take a look at form and flow.

Life begins with distinction, with organization. In the bible, creation began with a distinction – the naming of light, that separated it from darkness. Before the time of distinction, the world was all flow, formless, chaotic. All was possible, yet nothing distinct; all choices were open, yet none was realized.

The egg opens to receive the sperm; the fertilized egg travels down the fallopian tube and grounds itself in the uterus. How do the embryonic cells differentiate? How does the embryo know which cells are going to form a leg and which a liver? Which would become a nerve cell and which a muscle? The cells organise themselves in relation to one another. The principle of organising, of creating form, is not singular, but a matrix of relationship – in space and between different levels of cells. Every aspect of organisation takes place within context, and the context of human organisation is one of relationships.

All organisms move between organisation and change; between 'being organised', taking form, and the process of organising – being in flow. The former allows us to function in the world – it is about stability, knowing what things are, how things are. The latter, allows us to adjust and adapt to new changing conditions, both outside of us and within us.

This 'dipping' into the land of pre-distinction, of chaos and of possibilities is a biologically necessary process. As every new experience requires adaptation, it requires both form and flow – both the capacity to 'be in gear' and the in-between process. But what if we get stuck in chaos, what if something happens to us where distinction and form cannot be completed? What if we get stuck in trance?

Two major ways we organize our reality and create forms are through our muscular structure (how we hold ourselves, where we 'hold') and linguistic organisation. Both linguistic and structural reorganizations are processes of integration. The unity of linguistic and structural reorganization is necessary in reuniting the split self by owning, holistically, all of what is me.

But sometimes this reuniting is ill-advised. Sometimes, fragmentation and separation are necessary to maintain the safety and survival of the person.

Rosenberg, Rand and Asay (1985) relate to splitting as separating from the body to avoid pain, resulting in avoidance of feelings – good and bad – and deadening oneself. This paper will allow you a glimpse into a person who chose such a deep, deadening split as a creative feat against psychic death.

When such extreme measures are taken, when the very core of the self is split; when the form that a person takes is one of multiple, disconnected fragments of selves, the return to the land of the living is a long and slow journey. Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) represents one such brave attempt to sustain life in unliveable situations through tearing the matrix of self. And the story here, told by Kate, is an heroic account of such an attempt.

Kate: Before the beginning

Kate

Deep down I always knew something was wrong. I often thought how good it would be to see a psychotherapist, but I ignored it because who wants to be sick or crazy? Difficulties with acute stress at school and then at university led to a breakdown in my early 20's. Then, wrenching myself out of a disastrous first marriage to an abusive man, I decided to "forget" deliberately all about what had happened and just get on with my life, make something of it. I didn't think about my first marriage for many years. The sexually abusive aspect of my experience in that first marriage was quite simply missing from my memory.

When I was thirty, I set up my own company and it has gone from strength to strength, one of the global leaders in its field. I married and had two children. But aged 46 I had another breakdown, this time much more serious.

I sought therapy for help with fear of flying, one of my numerous phobias, but finding a safe place simply allowed me to collapse, and soon I had stopped working and was able to do very little, overwhelmed by anxiety and sheer panic. In fact, the thing that appealed to me most was to be hospitalized in some kind of catatonic state that required me to do nothing. Above all, the memories of my first marriage began to resurface and went round and round in my head obsessively. I just couldn't stop them.

At the beginning of therapy, I was not conscious of parts, just that my experience of life had become bewildering. I was swimming in a soup of confusion. Notes of a typical session, which I sent to Asaf, said:

I had been feeling a bit distant, a bit detached from reality, it was a bit difficult to keep a grip on what I should be doing, so I was late leaving the house, and I was nearly late for the session because I was wandering around and forgot the time. I wanted to look at you, but it was hard to do. I think I was rocking because I was trying to stay present and it's comforting to rock. When you held me, it was nice to be held and I felt safe. I thought I could lie there for a long time. But after a while, I began to feel anxious, and I could feel energy inside my body. At first it was small and I could cope with it, but then it began to come in waves like it does at night when I wake up, like fear, what I used to feel as pain. And when I had this feeling, I felt like I wanted to move, but I couldn't work out how, but then I had this feeling like when you are trapped or restrained and you panic and I just wanted to get out, and I wanted to hit with my arms and kick with my legs, anything to get out.

I came to session after session and was unable to say more than a sentence or two. Asaf asked me to send him an email after each session describing my feelings inside. I wrote these stream-of-consciousness accounts of the sessions – which I am quoting from in this article - later the same day when I could still remember what had happened. Reading them now is like visiting a distant country:

I wanted to push the cushion off, and I did want to hit the cushion and hurt it. I wanted to say things, but it was very difficult to speak and I had to try very hard to say 'get off me, stop it, I don't like it, leave me alone.' Then, when I had pushed the cushion and hit it a lot, I rolled onto my stomach because I thought I had finished and I wanted to rest but then suddenly I was really in the scary space and I could feel the spasms in my chest really strongly and I felt pinned to the floor and I felt crushed and choked and I couldn't breathe and all around me was fear and panic and it was over my head and it was really scary. So I rolled on my side and the feelings began to subside and then in a wave I felt this feeling of emotional hurt and it was in front of me like before when I felt this mountain of pain, and it hurt to sense these feelings were there, but I felt a bit removed from them like I was protected from feeling them fully. You asked me where was the pain but I just felt frightened and I looked inside but I couldn't feel anything in my body, there was nothing there, it was all outside my body.

Asaf & Kate: The Beginning

When philosopher Simone Weil wrote (1947): “The false god changes suffering into violence; the true God changes violence into suffering,” I believe she spoke of the process of healing. Severance is violence, and healing goes through the ability to suffer, to bear the broken heart, allow it to burn with hurt, and be supported through this process, so as to come out on the other side, still human.

My cousin Alon was killed in Lebanon a few months short of my Bar-Mitzvah (thirteenth birthday). I remember my dad coming into my room, telling me that the teachers were on strike and there was no school that day. He looked distraught but I attributed it to the hour, and was jumping with joy. When I was later told of the ‘real’ reason for skipping school, my mood shifted. Not to sadness or distress, but instead to numbness, an ever so familiar numbness with which came great shame, for being so inhuman.

I was not allowed to go to the funeral, but went to the grave at the end of the ‘Shiva,’ seven days after the funeral. Many people stood by the grave. Many familiar faces, many soldiers. I knew that something horrid had happened. I understood, as much as I could the loss and could clearly sense that my uncle, my father, my family will never be the same, but felt nothing. A veil had fallen. To be more accurate I did feel that I ought to have felt sadness, and was anxious and shamed of my lack of empathy, sadness or tearfulness. I stood by the grave, trying to will myself to cry, contorting my face and keeping my eyes open without blinking, in the hope that my humanness will awaken, that my suffering will come; nothing. In my shame, I wet my fingers with spit and secretly applied it to my eyes, so I would seem to cry; such was my wish to join the realm of human feelings.

At twelve, though, my dissociative tendencies were already well in place. I could do many feelings: anxiety, insecurity, anger, shame and also extreme excitement or playfulness. I could do these very well. Yet the softer, more vulnerable spectrum of the emotional rainbow was inaccessible for me: sadness, grief, yearning, needing. Even when I could feel it: I couldn’t express them.

The curse and blessing of dissociative tendencies go far back to my infancy. My training and practice as a psychotherapist and particularly in the choice of working relationally as a body-psychotherapist represents, for me, the journey of reclaiming my capacity to feel. Having spent many years worshipping the false god, seeking practices that would help me disconnect and sever those aspects of myself that I found too painful, I am now seeking the true god, that of recovery, of healing.

I open my heart to receive myself and others and endeavour to remain open, not to allow life experiences – my own and others’ – to sever my connections within myself, with another and with something larger. I try to connect to that which resides both inside us and outside of us. Knowing my default tendency to cut off, to observe rather than participate, I engage in constant reminders that with severance life disappears; that, as Tennyson so beautifully posed (1850): “tis better to have loved and have lost than never to have loved at all.”

But it was very difficult to be true to this ethos with Kate. Our first two years were dreadfully taxing. The dissociative patterns were both familiar and unbearable, and I was filled with compassion and helplessness, anger and full-blown narcissistic desire to save. In those two years Kate would come into the sessions and if she said more than a sentence, I felt celebratory. She would easily regress to places where I felt an abuser, and I could not call upon an adult part of her. In my countertransference, in the resonance, I was distressed, anxious, washed over by waves I was not certain I could survive. At first, when Kate presented all flow and very little form, it was my role to hold the chaos, to bear it without severing myself from her, from our relationship and from myself. And not always was I successful in that task.

Kate

Alongside the pattern of regressive memories was the struggle between the part of me that just wanted out, to end it all, and the part that was clinging to life, sometimes just by my fingertips. Part of me went to pharmacy after pharmacy buying packets of paracetamol while part of me inside was shouting “no”. And alongside this in the sessions and in my personal life was the presence of an uncomfortable mixture of fear and repulsion with sexual arousal, the two intertwined so that whichever started first, the other feeling would follow not far behind.

And our sessions were taken up with giving space to the part that wanted an end to it all or to the difficult task of trying to separate out my sexual feelings from feelings of fear and repulsion or in trying to avoid me lapsing into the non-speaking space. The draw to go to the part where I couldn’t speak, or the struggle I faced between the part that wanted suicide and the part that wanted life, the part that wanted to come to the sessions and just be, not to have to do anything, or the angry part; I learned that I needed to give all these parts of me space and not ignore parts of me as I had always done before, so that I could develop a healthier way of being in the world.

Asaf

I could sense Kate’s story. I could sense the dread, the abuse, the confusion of safety, sexual arousal and terror: not only in Kate, but inside of me too. I have to admit that these sessions brought into my attention that I am not as good a person as I would have liked to imagine, that my thoughts and feelings could easily visit the darkest of shadows; and coming back to remembering

choice, to choose life – because how can I expect Kate, with history of incestuous, familial sexual abuse from such an early age, to make a choice of life if I cannot do so myself?

Kate & Asaf : Shadows of abuse

Kate

The flashbacks continued throughout the fourth year of therapy. We put a lot of work into helping me see that I was choosing to go to these scary spaces, but to be honest even now I'm not convinced. Something would trigger a flashback, bringing feelings that quickly overwhelmed me. Some tension developed between us. We discussed being stuck:

Asaf said that after the last session he felt sad because we are a bit stuck and I keep going to these places and abandoning the adult me. And he talked about how if we are going to work in these spaces my adult must be present. He pointed out I get lots of signals of what's happening. I said I couldn't stop it, it was too powerful. He said I could go there, but I must name what's happening to me and keep the adult me present. He said that when the signals came I knew what was happening, that it seemed nice and safe but that then it becomes unsafe and scary. I said I need to be able to hide. I was feeling dizzy. Asaf asked what was happening, so I explained I felt dizzy and I said I was regressing. It was difficult to speak. I decided to get up and walk around but it was more of a shuffle and I couldn't stop it, the process. I lay down on the cushions and I cried and cried. Asaf sat next to me and put his arm round me. Asaf asked me if I knew that he loved me and I said 'no, I can't feel that.' I couldn't speak very easily.

It was useful to learn the things which triggered flashbacks, which included being held with both arms, lying on my front, having my hair stroked, feeling trapped or restrained, anything covering my mouth, lying on my back, touching certain sensitive points in my back.

In a session that I found very significant, we made a hypnotic journey into the dark space in my mind. Imagine an arid, colourless desert landscape, the grey stones and boulders eerily lit by a distant yellow sun low on the horizon, almost obscured by an oppressive roof of rolling, dark clouds. There, by a large boulder, we met Roxanne, a beautiful leopard whose fierce yellow gaze is matched by her menacing growl. My younger parts are intimidated by her subdued ferocity; they aren't allowed to touch her, but they feel very safe with her standing guard on their safe space, the den. When I summon Roxanne I feel much safer and I love imagining running my hand through her luxuriant, soft fur.

Asaf

It took a long while, but through the insistence on attachment, a lot of holding, and withstanding the story (and with much therapeutic and supervision support) we started to have a system. Now Kate no longer had to send me long emails between sessions. After a while, she could read these emails to me in the sessions, then shorten her emails into poems, then read the poems. Two years later, we could actually speak.

The adolescent parts frequently pretended to be an adult, resulting in a quick spiralling down into terror and panic, and it was despairing to watch, and witness. They are still struggling to announce their presence, which is understandable given Kate's background, but makes the therapeutic work unstable at times. However, once we understood some more about the inner working of Kate's parts, we could engage in creation: making distinctions between parts was beginning to take shape, and as there was (slightly) less fear in the system, the younger parts began to speak. Sometimes they were fully separated from Kate, and at other times, as you can notice in the paragraphs below, two or more parts speak together.

Kate

We had once before made a list of all the things I had learned which help me feel safe when I'm afraid, over twenty of them, and now Asaf suggested we put them in a safety box. We spent a session that felt very special to me preparing the box. After decorating it with stickers we drew cards with reminders of exercises like imagining my safe space - a beautiful green room - going walking or jogging, listening to music, listening to a hypnotic exercise which Asaf recorded for me. Lining the box with tissue paper, we added a small bottle of oil perfumed like the oil burned in the therapy room, coloured strings to make a safe space, special stones and shells I had collected. Last of all, a little toy leopard that Asaf gave me. I love my safety box. The message inside the lid reminds me that, "*when you need this box it will feel as if nothing will help but the things in this box really will help you*".

Asaf gave me the DES questionnaire (Dissociative Experience Scale) to complete, my first introduction to the idea that I might be diagnosed with a dissociative disorder. I filled it in several times, noticing that every time I wanted to give a different answer. The first time I scored low for most questions. I explained to Asaf that this was "because I couldn't remember how it feels

being me. Then I was playing the piano the next day, and I really couldn't play very well, my hands felt small and weak and they couldn't find the notes that are usually quite familiar. Then the penny dropped. This is one of the experiences described in the questionnaire. I found that every question needed careful checking against my experience several times. "Asaf suggested going for an assessment for a dissociative disorder, but I wasn't sure about doing it. Part of me thought Asaf was wrong.

Asaf, Kate & Sally: EMDR

Spending most of our sessions simply making Kate safe was important, but very different from 'normal' psychotherapy. It was very taxing to discuss anything that had any emotional significance whatsoever without slipping into terror. Once Kate froze, we had to spend long minutes 'bringing her back' from the contorting, shaking, nonverbal regressive terror she was sucked into. We did it through holding, incredibly proactive interventions (even going for walks in the park) and continuous investment in our here-and-now relationship. But still, we spent the majority of our time putting out fires, and it was a painful process for the two of us. I wanted Kate to experience some joy; and my offer for EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) was in order to attempt some trauma work that would not spin her quickly into trauma-land. Our EMDR processes were with Sally, a nine-year-old part of Kate. They wrote:

Kate & Sally

The first session of EMDR was a luminous experience which ended when the young Sally smiled at me and said she didn't understand my sadness. "It doesn't matter, let it go" Sally said. The second session of EMDR was more difficult. I had chosen to work with an accident when I fell in the garden aged nine and broke my arm. I visualized the scene and remembered running into the house to my mother holding my lifeless arm up and crying.

The first thing that I came up with was to do with Mum not listening. 'Why doesn't she pay attention to me?' I remembered how I never felt that my feelings were acknowledged, that I didn't feel valued, so I was always trying hard, terrified of failure. I knew my parents loved me, but I didn't **feel** loved. They didn't show me or tell me that they loved me. I remembered the shock of going to a friend's house to a family that was much more openly affectionate than mine. 'It's not good enough' I said about how my mother parented me, and I felt angry with her. I went back to the broken arm incident, and I saw that I felt angry with her. I could see that she was frightened and didn't know what to do, but I didn't want to let her off the hook. She just wasn't listening to me as I screamed and screamed, she wasn't giving me enough respect to realize that I wouldn't be screaming unless there was really something wrong.

I felt stuck on the fact that I could see that my mother was frightened and didn't know what to do and in my frustration at not communicating that something was really wrong. Why wasn't she more caring and sympathetic when I was hurt? Something inside was shifting and I felt waves of fear pass through my body from my feet to my head. We worked through it with eye movements. Once the familiar spasms started, but we went back to the scene and carried on. Suddenly I had the feeling that something was breaking through from another time and place, like someone switched channels.

I had the feeling I don't want to be touched and I put my hand up to push someone away. When I withdrew my hand it reached out again to push away. I had the sense of a struggle; fear mixed with sexual arousal. We worked through it but then it changed again and I had the sense of being overwhelmed, of a big feeling of pain in front of me, over me and I asked Asaf to stop. We returned to the scene in my dining room when I was nine and I asked my mother why didn't you pay attention to me, listen to me, pay attention to my feelings? And I felt these waves of feeling going down my body which I couldn't identify - an energy, not unpleasant but healing. And we finished the EMDR thinking of feelings of being loveable and safe.

Asaf

Following these EMDR sessions with Sally, she has become the least frightened of all of Kate's parts, and was a great help when Kate, or another part, got stuck or too frightened, I now had an 'inside ally' to call upon in troubled spaces. Still, very little of what happened was revealed. She would write in children's handwriting short sentences on a paper: "Stop it, Dad. Don't touch me, Dad. Leave me alone." But no matter how many parts emerged, they seemed to remember next to nothing, even though their bodies expressed the terror, pain and betrayal they have experienced.

Kate, Asaf and others: a first glance at a complex system

Kate

We planned to do more sessions of EMDR but I began to worry about the part of me that didn't want to know. In my mind's eye, I kept seeing her sitting with her arms hanging in her lap and her head hanging down. I told Asaf that I didn't want to proceed without listening to this part of me. Asaf said he wanted to speak to her. He said we could have a conference with all of my parts but I had begun to droop my head and straight away I started crying.

I think I said she's very sad, this part of me." I couldn't stop crying. Asaf asked if I wanted contact. "She's very frightened." I replied and all the time I was crying and I couldn't stop even though I tried. Asaf said "you look very isolated." and I said, "That's how it is for this part of me." When the fear had subsided a little, Asaf asked to hold me. Now that I was feeling safer he asked to talk to the part of me that doesn't want to know. At first I talked of this part of me as her, but then something switched inside and I was her, speaking in a girlish voice. Asaf spoke to her very gently and she was still crying. He asked how old she was, and she said twelve, and he asked what had happened to her to make her split when she was twelve, but she said she didn't know.

As we began to acknowledge my parts more fully and began to get to know them, they started to blossom in a way that really surprised me. In one session Asaf asked me to describe all the parts of me. "I explained that there was a little baby wrapped in a shawl, a year-old baby who sometimes cries but sometimes is happy, a three-year-old girl, a nine-year-old who always wears a dress, the twelve-year-old and the teenage me."

The angry teenager was a strong feature of the sessions for a while: "And the teenage me was angry again, and Asaf got her to make angry noises, and she could do that quite easily even though I couldn't. And she said **she** wanted to be in charge, not the grown up, but Asaf explained that no part needed to be in charge, all the parts of me have to work together." She had no problem saying things that Kate couldn't give voice to, like telling Asaf that she didn't want him to go away on holiday, and through this I learned the value of giving voice to and owning my feelings instead of pushing them away if they were painful or inconvenient. "I needed the brave teenage me to feel very safe so I could say it to Asaf; the grown up me couldn't do it."

Asaf asked if the twelve-year-old would talk to him, and I said I don't know. He asked if he could hold her, and I said yes so he held me and asked to talk to the twelve-year-old. 'I spoke to him in a whisper because I couldn't speak any louder even though I tried very hard, and I said that I was very frightened and that nobody realized how frightened I am.' I can't remember everything but I remember Asaf suggesting that she had her own secret space and she liked that idea. Then Asaf asked to speak to the teenager and I wondered if I could just switch to her and if I was just making it all up but she came out and was her usual feisty, bolshy self. She said 'the grown up doesn't want me to keep coming out.' We talked about anger and how angry she is, and she said, "I have to have all the anger so that it doesn't inconvenience the grown up."

Asaf

As body psychotherapists, and indeed many attachment-conscious psychotherapists, these descriptions may not seem abnormal. We all have parts, we all work with parts. You may wonder, how does someone with dissociative identity disorder differ from our normal dissociation? I think that the answer lies in the relationship between the parts and the whole and the means by which they are kept separate. Kate's 'switching' is not a result of therapeutic practice, it happens naturally. The parts cannot always remember what other parts did (she would tell me things dozens of times, from different parts, not remembering that she had), and they have different relationships with me. As Valerie Sinason, a brave woman and a forerunner for believing, in supporting and raising awareness of DID in the UK had written (2002): "At one level the idea that five different people could all have timeshares in one body seems absurd. And yet, it is both delusional and real and all at the same time" (p.7).

The first few years of psychotherapy with Kate were so distressing because I often ended up with babies, who could not speak or express themselves in any clear way: and nobody was there to help. Although I knew that Kate was highly dissociative, it took me a few years to realise the extent of her dissociation – and recognise that she was DID. The amnesic barriers never ceased to surprise me, and while part-work as a therapeutic tool usually aims at integration, I am not certain that integration is what we were seeking here, with Kate. We wanted peace, safety and a good operational communication system. To some extent, Kate has no hierarchical cohesive ego system. On some level, Kate is not 'the real' person while the others are 'parts'; on some level we simply helped discern what structure (form) could be extracted from life that required constant flow, from life under continuous threat to the very survival of the ego. This required not only unstoppable humorous interventions (so as to avoid the seriousness of terror), and continuous creative means, but more so – it demanded that I loved my own self-loathed child, that I opened to receive that which was within me that I, for long many years, refused to open to. And that I learned to be with more ease with oceans of not knowing.

Kate

Asaf devised creative exercises to help distinguish my parts:

He said that when he was a child there was a washing line between his bedroom and his sister's and they used to send each other messages and gifts via the line and pulley, so he said we could send messages and gifts to my parts and so we did. And to the fourteen-year-old I sent a purple fleecy blanket to curl up with if she feels afraid; to the five-year-old Asaf sent a chocolate muffin and I sent a box with something in it for when she feels frightened but I don't remember what. I don't remember all the gifts but to the adult Asaf sent a special mobile phone that she could use to keep in contact with all the parts and I sent her magic shoes that when she wore them danced around joyfully. They sent gifts back to me. One sent me a spider in a box and I was frightened because I don't like spiders, but it turned out to be a silly spider that spoke to me and said something like "don't be afraid" and it had silly red lips and made me laugh. And at the end when my grown up came back I noticed that I feel more complete when we spend time with my young parts.

As well as looking in the imaginary mobile phone to see who it was, we tried various other techniques for identifying who came out like going to my den and asking parts who it was, or seeing who was missing from the den. None of these felt very reliable or meaningful to me.

One day the nine-year-old said she had a name, Sally, and it felt good that she had a name and she really likes her name. One week Sally told Asaf how during the week the twelve-year-old had been very angry and imagined coming to St Albans and sitting near the door and refusing to come into the room. Soon after that I switched and the twelve-year-old came, her voice soft and fragile.

I told Asaf I had been sad and angry and we played at discharging anger by stomping on the floor. I said how I get frightened and Asaf said 'there's nothing to be frightened of here. Are you frightened of me?' And I said 'a bit.' He asked why and I said 'Because you're a man.' Asaf asked whether I had a name, and I thought about it and then suggested Rebecca. Asaf asked why I hadn't been around for so long, and I said I was frightened and shy. Asaf laid his hand on my tummy, and after a while I felt a warm sexual glow spreading through my body. Asaf said 'sexual energy is the energy of life.' I was fidgety and Asaf said 'All of your feelings are welcome here including your sexual feelings. You are safe here, I won't act sexually towards you so your feelings are safe.' Asaf said that at the moment it's like his bag of strings are if they aren't tied in balls; my personalities aren't defined enough. But he hopes that if we work this way my parts will get better defined and things will be easier. Asaf said that he liked me, and he asked how it felt to hear that and I said 'squirmy.' Asaf didn't understand the word so I explained that it's how your body goes if someone is holding you down and you are trying to get away. 'But I'm not holding you down' he replied, so I explained that it can also mean feeling embarrassed.

Asaf

The safer Kate became, the more easily discernable were the switches – and this, in turn, helped Kate and the others with healthier emotional regulation and 'being in the world.' The distinction of parts also helped us make sense of amnesic gaps in Kate's presentation.

Kate

On my way to the next session I noticed the unfamiliar sensation of part of me not wanting to go. Asaf suggested that we ask this part to be present for a few minutes.

I felt myself switching and lay there wondering who's this and when Asaf asked the answer came back 'I'm Hannah..' A new part, around Sally's age, but unlike Sally this part was terrified. She couldn't stop shaking and she burst into tears and cried for a long time. Asaf covered her with a blanket but still she was shaking. So he tapped lightly on my face with his fingertips and focusing on that physical sensation helped her stop shaking. She said 'I've been here before.' and Asaf said 'I know' but the adult felt a bit baffled.

We both noticed that we knew when Sally came out because suddenly I would be wide awake and Asaf speculated that Sally is wide awake because she is the least frightened part and that my parts feel sleepy because they were used to going to sleep when they were frightened, so that when they woke up again it would all be over and I thought this resonated with my experience.

The three-year-old announced one day that her name was Amelia. She loves making up stories like the story of a fish named Danny who went to visit a wise old shell at the bottom of the sea.

The wise old shell offered Danny one wish and Danny had to decide what to wish for. He wanted to wish for lots of things to eat or lots of new friends or for his mother to come back. He couldn't decide which then he decided to wish for lots of food to eat, but straight after he wished he realized he really wanted to wish for lots of new friends. But he got lots of food, so lots of other fish came to look and he let them share the food and made lots of new friends, and one of the fish who came to look was his Mummy, so the wise old shell was looking after him anyway. I'm very proud of my story. (Amelia, 3)

Asaf, Sally and Kate: Diagnosis, a recognition of multiplicity

As soon as we started working with the assumption of multiplicity, therapeutic progress was clear and Kate was happier, and less frightened. Indeed, there was always great sadness and fear in the background, as all the young parts were subjected to horrible abuse, even if they did not talk about it, but Kate's life was easier. Our sessions became more manageable and communication flowing. The new form was unlike any other I know. It was not of integration, but one of multiplicity and relationship between parts, but it was working. It was as if I had to be ten different therapists for ten different people. With the young parts we played, sang songs and made up stories, with the older – we conversed. Different parts had different vocabulary, and I would use humour, varied vocabulary and continuous observation of body signals to discern switches and shifts between parts. My body-psychotherapy training helped me notice shifts before verbal content was presented, and it was particularly useful with charged emotional content. Periodically, someone would disclose a piece of disturbing biographical data, including touching genitalia, penetration, choking sensations and description of abuse. Consistently, these descriptions were quickly forgotten. I felt like the person telling the story had yet to come to the surface.

But Kate was always functioning and seemed healthy and powerful and although she struggled most of her life, nobody else believed that she suffered. Kate could speak about her difficulties in ways that made you think she was a doctor diagnosing some pathetic distant tribe. And professionals failed to recognise time and again her vulnerability. We thought of getting a diagnosis of dissociative disorder for a variety of reasons. The first was to help her make sense of herself and the world around her, in particular, when facing healthcare services; the second was to attain a recognition for her multiplicity – an anchor for her progress and her reality. The third was more complex. I was contemplating moving back to Israel in two or three years, and although I hadn't made up my mind at that point, I knew that, with a formal diagnosis of DID Kate might find specialised support more easily.

There are two main places for assessing DID in the UK, one through the Clinic for Dissociative Studies headed by Valerie Sinason, the other through Remy Aquarone of the Pottergate Centre. While exploring both possibilities, Kate chose the latter because of the difficulties of getting NHS funding to go to the Clinic for Dissociative Studies.

Kate

Getting the date for the assessment for a dissociative disorder plunged me into more fear, waking me at night, and during the day using up my energy like a computer slowed down by a programme running in the background. I couldn't imagine the adult allowing the little ones out during the assessment in a new place, where I probably wouldn't feel safe, in front of people I hadn't met before. How would they assess me if they only met one part? Asaf suggested that I speak with Remy Aquarone on the telephone beforehand. I wasn't sure I could do it but we arranged to ring him from one of my sessions and we fixed a date.

I was apprehensive about speaking to Remy. I decided we could think of some questions to ask about the assessment. There were eight questions like "what colour is the room? Can I arrive early and ring Asaf first? Does one person ask all the questions or does each of them ask different questions? Will I be able to have a drink of water and a box of tissues? Do you need to meet all my parts? What do you do to help people feel safe?" I think different parts wanted to ask different questions.

Then we had to decide who would speak to Remy. Kate had gone already, so Asaf asked if someone would like to volunteer. Sally loves helping and organizing things, so she said she would like to do it. And when I switched to be Sally, suddenly I didn't feel so frightened, in fact, she enjoyed being in charge. 'I said to Remy that I had a list of questions to ask him.' Even though she was less frightened my body shook all the time Sally was on the phone. Sally said to Remy 'there are eight questions.' and she asked them one by one, but when she got to question seven, she asked question eight instead because it was easier. Asaf pointed to question seven. It was the question 'Do you need to meet all my parts?' I knew I had to ask it, but it was just a bit scary, and I shook even more when I asked it. But it was OK, Remy said that he only needed to meet whoever wanted to come and that they would work with whoever is there, though it would help if they could meet some parts. I said that's all the questions. Then Remy said could he ask me one and when I said 'yes' he asked 'Is this Kate I'm speaking to?'

and I said ‘no, it is Sally.’ Remy asked ‘Right, Sally, do you ask all the questions then?’ and I said ‘no, it’s just that I’m not as frightened as the others.’” (Sally, 9)

That evening I sent Remy an email listing my parts, and as I typed out the list with their names and ages, Sally came again. “I put in all of their favourite colours because I really like it: I like mauve, Milly likes pale blue, Amelia loves pink, the babies have yellow and white because they are too little to choose. Hannah’s favourite colour is red, Rebecca’s is turquoise because it’s more grown up, and Miranda’s is purple. I really enjoyed typing this list and sending it to Remy.”

These favourite colors have since become my own creative and reliable way to identify my parts.

Asaf

When we are not certain who is in the room, I ask the person with me what their favourite colour is. They usually know immediately, and we have a useful reference to know who is there. How difficult it is not to know who you are!

Kate

During the assessment, the adult was being hyper-vigilant and didn’t want any parts to come out because she was embarrassed to be so weird. But it was difficult to keep a lid on them, and the effort made her speak in a robotic, expressionless voice and my body shook. After an hour of questions, I felt exhausted from the effort and shaky, so I asked for a break. I decided that as Remy had spoken to Sally, and she was less frightened, it would make sense for her to come to the assessment. I realized that it was going to be difficult to get her to come, so I took Doobie, the teddy who works as Asaf’s assistant, in with me for the second part of the assessment. They asked me lots more questions, and I held Doobie. Then right at the end Remy asked whether Sally would come. Kate said she wasn’t sure but he said ‘Come on Sally, you’ve spoken to me before, do you remember?’ and suddenly there she was.

I was feeling shy but not too frightened, and I told Roger (the psychiatrist) and Remy about Doobie and how there is Panda as well in Asaf’s room, but we always play with Doobie and Asaf says we are mean to Panda. Remy looked at the list of parts from my email, and we talked about them all. I explained how some parts had come with a name like me and Amelia, and the others chose names. Then I explained how Rebecca whispers all the time and that there’s a very angry part that might be Miranda. Then I said we need to get Kate back, and I explained about the magic questions, and Remy asked what book Kate was reading, and I had to make a huge effort to bring Kate back but she did come back and we went home.

Kate and others, Asaf: Post Diagnosis

Kate

Getting the DID diagnosis was a shock, even though we had been working with my parts for a long time. And Miranda (14) usually refuses to accept having parts: “*Asaf commented that I seem to resist, and I said that’s because part of me doesn’t want all this. ‘What do you mean by all this?’ he asked ‘I don’t want to have parts, it’s silly and I want them to go away.’ So Asaf said ‘OK let’s put all your parts in a box and throw them away.’ I thought about this and began to laugh because I immediately felt that I love my parts and I really didn’t want to get rid of them.*”

We spent an entertaining session recording all my parts talking into Asaf’s iPod. They were all keen to contribute, Sally first, then Amelia, then Milly (the six-year-old), then Rebecca, whispering as usual, then bolshy Miranda, then Hannah, who hadn’t been to a session for ages. I couldn’t remember what they had all said afterwards, but I remember we laughed a lot, and it was fun. Then Asaf said he wanted to speak to the cynical part that doesn’t believe any of this stuff. And I replied that they wouldn’t speak into the microphone, so we switched it off. Then I was speaking to Asaf in this deeper voice, quite a different part, not frightened, quite angry, who looked Asaf in the eye. I don’t remember much about this conversation except that he said that he was a boy, and I remember observing in my head and thinking ‘I’m making this all up’, but then again I couldn’t speak in Kate’s voice.

Asaf

Richard, the boy, claimed to have seen it all. He made all the other parts ‘sleep’ while dad and granddad did horrible things to them from babyhood. Nothing was done to him, he said, because he was a boy. Richard told me a little bit of what he had experienced, but it was very difficult for him. The other parts did not know he was protecting him, and I was called to protect this boy, who took upon himself to be the carrier of such unfathomable burden. I commended him for his bravery, and

was very saddened by our meeting. I guess I was hoping, too, that Kate made it all up. It was better than hearing of what she had been through. Kate had almost complete amnesia to Richard's first conversation, but remembered more of his later appearances.

Kate

One day a phone session was hijacked from the beginning by a completely new part who said she was called Karen, who didn't seem to know why she was speaking to Asaf or what she was doing there, while Kate was inside wondering what was going on. Karen knew that Kate wanted to speak, but she said "I don't know what to say, why am I talking to you?" She felt very confused. I had very little memory of the conversation, and Asaf told me about it at my next session. Karen has reappeared recently:

Asaf pointed out that I wasn't an adult, and he asked who I was but I said 'I don't know.' I was speaking in a whisper. He asked what my favourite colour was, but when I looked inside I couldn't tell. All the time I felt cold, but Asaf said the room was hot, and it was fear that was making me cold. Asaf asked 'Are you Karen?' and I nodded. He said I could choose a favourite colour, and I told him it was orange like the blanket. I told Asaf how I live in a cave on my own. Asaf asked 'Didn't I want to be with the others?' but I told him how they mess around, and I don't want to. I told Asaf I was very sad. Asaf was shutting his eyes like he was sleepy. I asked why he was shutting his eyes, and he said so he could listen more carefully. 'So you can listen with your tummy,' I said, and Asaf said yes. I told Asaf the sadness was in my tummy, and I shut my eyes, and Asaf said 'Listen to your tummy.' so I did and I said there was a lot of hurt there, as well as sadness, and as I felt it more strongly I said there was pain there too. I told Asaf about my cave which has little shelves with lights in and lots of cushions. (Karen, 7)

*

Milly (5-6) is feeling left out, and she wants to say that she is very creative too and once she made up a special song:

*I'm a cucumber long and green,
lift my leaf and I'll be seen,
pick me up and take me in the kitchen,
slice me up and crunch, crunch, crunch.*

I sang it twice, and it was funny. And I made up a story about a bear called Boris who got lost in a dark forest. He was rescued by a badger called Brandon and his wife Brenda and then he had to choose between two tunnels, one where he could go to a beautiful, happy place with rivers of chocolate and the other back to the dark forest where he was lost and had no friends and family. He chose to go back to the dark forest because he knew he had to, but Brenda told him to go to the clearing where someone would help him. So he went to the clearing where Asaf said he made a friend out of strawberries and cherries and his beary godmother turned him into a real friend, and they were rescued by a beautiful white flying horse. Asaf made up some bits of the story.

The most recent part to emerge is Richard.

Then I switched again and it was really difficult to speak, and it's difficult to remember what happened. Asaf asked questions like, 'Are you someone who's been here before?' 'No.' 'Are you a girl?' 'No.' 'It's very difficult to speak', he said in a croaky voice. Asaf said 'it's safe.' 'How is it safe?' The boy asked. 'The door is locked and there is just you and me,' Asaf replied, 'no-one else can get in. Do you have a name?' But the boy shook his head. 'You should have a name, what name would you like?' Asaf asked, and the boy said 'Richard.' Asaf asked if Richard knew who Amelia was pushing away because Amelia said she didn't know. The boy said 'Yes, it's her Dad, but she can't know that.' Asaf had asked Amelia if one of the others knew who she was pushing away, and she said they did and they said to her 'It's our Dad.' and she said 'they said it's my Dad but that can't be right, can it? Because he wouldn't do anything nasty to me.' And Asaf said 'No, he wouldn't.'

Richard said 'I've got all the memories because the girls can't have them.' Asaf said he was very very brave to have all the memories, but that now he didn't have to hold them on his own any more. He could give them to Asaf. Richard said, 'I'm not allowed to tell.' Asaf asked if he had been told that, and he nodded because he couldn't speak. Richard told Asaf things about seeing Amelia on the bed and her Dad leaning over her and holding her to the bed so that she can't move and can't breathe. Richard said 'I have the memories so that the girls don't have to have them and to save Amelia because otherwise she would die.' And Asaf said it was very clever to save Amelia because probably she would die if she knew. And he asked Richard if he had made Amelia sleep, and Richard said 'Yes, she's asleep. Amelia wants him to stop, but Dad likes it so he doesn't stop.' Richard said 'I like trucks and airplanes and cars. I don't like girly things, and the girls always choose girly

stickers.’ Asaf said he had stickers Richard would like, airplanes, lorries, cars, etc, and that he could choose one at the end. Asaf said ‘It’s good to hand over the memories to me, now you can offload a lot of fear.’ And then Richard said he was going to go back to the den.’

The next session Richard came again, and he looked at Kate’s body and felt revulsion.

‘I don’t want to be a girl’, he said. ‘You’re not a girl’ Asaf replied, and he explained how he was a boy existing in Kate’s body. On the phone after this session, Richard asked Asaf if he could come to the sessions and just be there and not have memories. He asked Asaf if he had any boy’s books, and Asaf said he would bring some.

Asaf & Kate: Let there be light

*You, darkness, of whom I am born
I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illumines
and excludes all the rest.*

*But the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations – just as they are.
It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.
I believe in the night.*

Rainer Maria Rilke (in Barrows & Macy, 1996)

I have recently written another paper about a dissociative client. It was a very emotionally charged piece for me, one that required a deep reaching into my soul and kept me awake for long weeks. When I offered Kate to write this paper together, I imagined it would be a similar experience. Kate took a long time to write this, and as you can probably see from the writing, different parts – different ages – are involved, expressing a variety of styles and grammatical complexities. I was faced with a choice of either minimising Kate’s writing and adding an academic frame that would illuminate the points I wanted to make, or allowing her to take centre stage, trust that the story of Kate and the others can entice, educate and raise questions in you and so, let go of what I thought this joint effort would look like.

In so doing we have written a piece that is more a therapeutic narrative than an article, and I have intentionally avoided giving too many details of the traumatic material in Kate’s background. This is both for your sake, as graphic details of abuse can easily divert attention from Kate to her story, and also for Kate’s sake: I promised Richard not to tell her too much. I hope that you could appreciate it from the complex web of responding to the world she has employed.

The chaotic world of dissociation Kate had inhabited was one where only few feelings were recognised. Either auto-pilot or non-functioning were the main organisational structures. She had sadly declared her incapacity to love, and I feel that through our work Kate has experienced the first genuinely intimate and loving relationship in her life. May many more come.

During our work, emotions, feelings and sensations were named and thus the inner world of fragmentation, Atlantis, was slowly allowed and encouraged to emerge from the depth of the ocean. I want to emphasise that such complex dealings with the world and its threats are not a ‘first line of defense’ but result from severe, life threatening trauma. Dissociative identities are created on platforms of real abuse, trauma and torture by attachment figures or at least without any secure attachment figures supporting the person. We are not shattered like this with appropriate love.

The rupture of life occurring when the hand that feeds us is the same hand that deeply harms us and threatens to destroy us is irreparable for the child. The very core of organisation, of identity, of self-sense, is torn apart.

So when form has been reorganised through secure-enough flow, when disorganised attachment is named, supported and some gained security takes place, the darkness is no longer as dangerous.

The brave and creative act of dissociation ensures that these horrors are not experienced as happening to me, but rather to this ‘other.’ This act both saves us and damns us at the same time. It leads to a chaotic life of isolation and fragmentation, when life and love themselves are associated with fear and death. And the way back home, through the slow recreation of secure attachment, through the gradual separation of love from hate, from harm, goes through the body. Two people touching; two people are reminded of life, and hopefully – choosing to say yes, to allow it in, to embody it fully, to connect.

Kate

So here I am now, still trying to make sense of life with parts instead of life ignorant of my parts. For the first few years of therapy I had this idea of “getting better”. I didn’t want to get better, I think because it represented life lived with constant

fear and anxiety, as I now realise my life was before all this. But there was always this assumption that I was going to some better place in my experience. More recently I've been trying to think that this is how it is from now on and explore what that feels like. The therapeutic journey continues.

Asaf

In July 2009 I am going back to live in Israel. After seven years of working together psychotherapeutically with Kate, our shared journey will take another shape. We shall continue to have phone sessions, and email contact. For the young parts, 'appropriate therapeutic ending' has very little meaning. And so, in order to leave without abandoning Kate, Amelia, Milly, Karen, Sally, Richard, Hannah, Rebecca, Miranda and the two babies, we will stretch our connection further into the future.

It saddens me to witness the atrocities that we are capable of as humans, and to know that my own shadows are just as dark. It saddens me to experience the injustice and unfairness in the struggle of those who suffered early trauma and experienced inadequate attachment. I am in awe of Kate's ingenious ways of maintaining a living, hopeful and human presence through segregation and dissociation; somehow this extreme measure sustained a powerful and lovely person, a person (or persons) that I love deeply.

And so it leaves me, nonetheless, hopeful. I am hopeful in witnessing how love can penetrate the most painful and damaged of places and remind it of life; that attachment and connection can reach beyond psychobabble and diagnoses, beyond pathologies and through defences, and touch it.

I am hopeful as I feel how, through touching Kate and all her parts, both of us became better people, kinder to ourselves and our surrounding, more able to cultivate the opposite of trauma in the world: secure attachment, connection, love, belonging, holding. Secure attachment is, in my opinion, not only the main ingredient of a healthy, functional person, but that of a healthy society. And, in order to go back to Israel, where trauma and dissociation rules, I need to hold on to this faith; to hold on to it tightly.

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