

Survival of Bodily Death
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Multiple Personality Disorder Adam Crabtree

Adam Crabtree has been working in this field for many years and is friends with several prominent multiples including Chris Sizemore, who is Eve of the Three Faces of Eve (Thigpen, 1957). There is no single form the disorder takes and no one way to describe it. In the last Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the name was changed to Dissociative Identity Disorder, though in this discussion, he used the old nomenclature. A typical multiple has 20-30 personalities, many of which are fragmentary. They can be of different ages, sexual orientation, or sex. The striking thing about the disorder is the degree to which each personality feels separate and autonomous from the others. Each has a separate body image. Their hallucinatory abilities allow this sense to extend even to their reflections in a mirror; different personalities will perceive their self-imagined body, age, sex, and appearance. Furthermore, these different personalities may manifest unique handwriting, gestures, body language, and speech patterns and can have different preferences and even allergies. For example, Chris Sizemore had one personality with an allergy to fur; only when this personality was "out" did her immune system mount an allergic reaction.

At first these dramatic changes are shocking and fascinating for the therapist, but eventually they become commonplace. A typical multiple, if such a label is even possible, has one main personality that handles most of daily life. Very often that personality knows nothing about the other personalities, and if they do, it is only indirectly. However, all of the other personalities may know about each other. Alliances, friendships, and rivalries are common amongst those who know each other. Aaron DeGlanville related the case of Kit Castle, who had a younger male personality that fell in love with an older female; he was dismayed when he found out they inhabited the same body.

Most therapy with MPD aims toward an eventual integration in which the personalities either subsume into a "main" personality or actually disappear. Adam had one client, though, who did not want to become fully integrated, and she lived successfully as a multiple after her destructive personalities were transformed into positive forces. Integration does not happen in only one way. In some situations, the personalities gradually get to know each other and begin to merge, leading to a final fusion of all. However, it is equally common for the other personalities to just stop coming, leaving only one personality in the end without any real fusion. In the case of Chris Sizemore, who eventually revealed 21 personalities, a new and final personality emerged at the end of her therapy and the others disappeared, which was symbolized for her in a dream. The final personality may or may not retain the skills, knowledge, or characteristics of the previous personalities. The whole therapeutic process is highly individual and unique in its trajectory.

Another common dimension of the healing process is the emergence of one or more Inner Self Helpers. The ISHs often play a dispassionate, all-knowing, and organizing role, forming alliances and healing inner rifts. They can present the situation very clearly and without much emotion. Michael Murphy brought in a possible connection with the Witness consciousness cultivated in many meditative traditions. One aspect of zazen can be seen as an owning of more and more, a dilation of the small mind to include more of the Big Mind. Though Adam felt there were some useful parallels, there are important differences as well. For example, the ISHs typically disappear at the end of the therapeutic process, and they are perceived as a more ethereal and sometimes even angelic entity that is there to guide for a time. Bruce Greyson reported on a fascinating unpublished case in which a multiple had a NDE and recognized the being of light as her ISH. During times of distress, she turned to this ISH as a sort of inner mother figure, and her recognition of the ISH as a being of light during her NDE was healing for her.

MPD has magnetized more controversy than any other psychological diagnosis in recent years for a number of reasons. First, it brings us face to face with the ugly reality of abuse, since it is believed by many that this syndrome usually results from childhood sexual abuse. Second, it forces us to deal with the vagaries and mysteries of memory. Third, there are claims that it is iatrogenic -- induced by the therapist. There may even be a culturally conditioned dimension to the syndrome. In *From Mesmer to Freud* (Crabtree, 1993), Adam discusses "symptom language," the way in which a person can express an illness or disturbance within a society. Different societies encourage or permit diverse languaging of a disturbance which leads to the existence of culture-specific manifestations of pathology. All of these factors have contributed to the backlash against the existence of the disorder. Furthermore, on a philosophical level, MPD brings into question the unity of the self. Perhaps because it serves as an extreme example of the complexity of the self, humans fear it.

Adam thinks that the negative reaction to MPD amongst professionals and others derives mainly from trepidation around automatism. Automatism is things we experience as happening to us which come from our unconscious mind. We might think, feel, or do something over which we have no control. We are both fascinated and frightened by these automatisms; for example, almost everyone loves the automatisms generated by a stage hypnotist but we are terrified of the automatism of possession. Because we so value control in our culture, we are threatened by automatisms and seek ways to explain them away, to deny their occurrence, or to account for them in purely physiological terms. Our ego wants full control, or at least the illusion of control. MPD undermines that feeling of control by positing intelligent subliminal action. The discourse around MPD is rarely rational, triggering all manner of primitive fears, even with seasoned professionals.

Multiples bear upon the subject of survival of bodily death for a number of reasons. First, they often perceive an impending integration as a death, an obliteration of the separate sense of self. Both fear and grief are important components of the process and it can serve as a model of actual death. Second, there is a ground of awareness, a naked fact of consciousness, which transcends the particular personalities and acts as a hidden glue to organize them into a fairly cohesive system. This background organization never comes to the fore in therapy, though its presence can be inferred. Third, the personalities seem convincingly separate, including having separate subconscious minds. Even in deep trance, there seems to be no real crossover or connection between the personalities. Bruce Greyson brought up an interesting question: what happens if we regress these alter personalities to previous lives? Do they report different past lives? Adam could not see why not and brought up the case of Chris Sizemore, who feels some of her personalities are from previous lives. Charles Tart suggested one way we could view MPD is as a failure or breakdown of normal karmic repression mechanisms.

For Adam, a model that can account for MPD is one that holds the deathlessness of the "I" (pure consciousness) in juxtaposition to the transitory "me's" (personality clumps) which may well disappear in the process of integration. The true "I" is a presence or point of awareness; the experience of this "beingness" leads to a subjective certitude of immortality. This is relevant to the question of what survives. Perhaps postmortem survival parallels the process at work in MPD: much of the individualized personality "dies" but the pure consciousness (puruṣa in Sanskrit) remains. The ultimate "I" is free of any qualities or particulars and is eternal, while the "me" is a product of qualities and particulars and is temporal. Between the ground of "I" and the separate particular identity of "me" is a level of inner organization that is still largely unexplored. Adam feels that much of this terrain cannot be explored objectively; only through our subjective experience can we begin to discern its outlines. On this issue, he aligns with Charles Tart's rather radical suggestion for state-specific sciences which would, in this case, take the form of subjective reports from those capable of exploring such terrain.

In terms of the survival issue, Bruce Greyson questioned whether this formulation is useful for us. Most survival discussion revolves around something like a personality surviving, whereas Adam's model only deals with the survival of something stripped of all personality. Adam responded that he feels something of the "me" survives beyond bodily death; however, that something is not necessarily eternal, even if it can transmigrate into another life. Bruce pointed out that in the rebirth cases, there is fairly extensive documentation of memories and personality characteristics from the reported previous life. In Adam's preliminary map, the bare "I" is not necessarily distinct from one person to the next. His primordial "I" is identical with divine reality, the oneness of which mystics so often speak. Habitual patterns of experience come along and snatch up the one "I" into separate identifications which are ultimately temporary and unreal, even if convincing. That said, many of our experiences are very "sticky" and difficult to disidentify from, so our separate, distinctive personalities can seem quite solid. This echoes the conclusions of many nondual mystical traditions.

Michael Grosso pointed out that this discussion leads to a practical point, namely, that our efforts in survival research might be redirected away from traces of individual survival and towards the direct experiential realization of the ultimate "I," leading us to know intuitively that we are immortal beings: a mystical turn for survival research, following the teachings of great masters. The common claim in spiritual circles is that we should not worry about personal survival, that we should focus on something deeper. Unless, Michael Murphy countered, we are part of a supreme evolutionary adventure in which part of our individualized personality is manifesting higher and higher potentials. The "I" witnesses while the self evolves. The dichotomy between the witnessing ground and the evolving self was portrayed in the Rg Veda in the following way: there are two birds on the World Tree, one eats the sweet fruit, while the other watches and eats not. This is the dichotomy between the changeless, primordial Self and the self engaged in the dance of life. In Murphy's view, survival research dwells on the second self, which is equally important; the ecstatic play of lila has intrinsic value and is not just something to be overcome.

Sukie Miller commented that in many cultures, cultivating some kind of multiplicity is desirable and honored, especially for shamanic or healing roles. She wondered whether it is possible to heal the destructive or maladaptive multiples and leave the rest of the system intact. This brought up the issue of whether it is better to "cure" multiples or just help them lead more adaptive lives. Adam made the point that there is almost always tremendous suffering with multiples: personalities conflict and sabotage each other, memories are not integrated, relationships are fragmented. Even so, integration is not a completely positive event since diversity and richness are often lost. For example, Billy Milligan had several personalities that painted, each with a distinctive style, and he successfully sold three or four styles of paintings. When he became integrated, however, only one style of painting remained.

Many high-level skills are lost during integration, though no in-depth study has been done to explore what is lost and what remains. The MPD literature revolves mainly around diagnosis and treatment; very little delves into the implications for metanormal human capacity. MPD is a window into fantastic abilities of the unconscious mind and yet very little phenomenological work has been done, much less work with intentionally cultivating such abilities. Michael Murphy pointed out that multiples are hypnotic virtuosos who have been practicing dissociative skills for a lifetime. Since psychological health often relates to the capacity for multiple ego states and creativity is linked to tolerance of ambiguity, we can perhaps view multiples as a more extreme example of a healthy inner diversity. Some aspects of the disorder may be desirable. Charles Tart wondered whether we could discover more high-functioning multiples who are not in therapy and encourage them to model higher level functioning for other multiples. In Adam's experience, though, the effect of multiples on each other in a group -- which he has led -- often runs counter to therapeutic goals. For example, he saw one person go from not being self-mutilating to self-mutilating.

Adam stressed the importance of addressing our tendency to "entitize" in these discussions; William James wrote that "thought tends to personification," an important point to bear in mind as we discuss this subject. A thought can lead to fixed ideas, and indeed a thought-cluster in multiples organizes into a separate, personalized identity. He feels uneasy when people start entitizing multiple personalities, Inner Self Helpers, and even hierarchies of ISHs. An alternative to entitizing is to admit there are levels of organization involved which we cannot fathom. We can talk to all of the personalities in a multiple and never find one that is the originator of another personality. They are created and organized in a very clever way such that none of the personalities know how the organization happens.

References

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