

MULTIPLE SELVES:

Expanding Our Notion of Identity

by Valerie Andrews

In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, comedian Lily Tomlin portrays an astonishing range of characters, including a gossipy hairdresser, a weathered cowboy, a conservative businessman, a rebellious teenager, and a tart-tongued bag lady. We are entranced by performers like Tomlin, Dana Carvey, and Robin Williams because we, too, have the urge to cast off our routine identities and try on different selves.

Actors, storytellers, and novelists draw on their alternate selves to flesh out their characters. But psychologists point out that we all harbor multiple personalities—for example, there's the kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother who has a bohemian wild woman buried within her, or the administrator whose conventional nine-to-five self hides a globe-trotting adventurer with no use for a pension plan. We occasionally catch glimpses of these alternate selves, but for the most part our dominant personality—the one we present to the world—keeps the others in check. In the last few years, however, a number of therapists and artists have begun giving workshops to help individuals explore their alternate identities.

Hal and Sidra Stone, a husband-and-wife team of clinical psychologists who have studied multiple selves for the last 25 years, are creators of an interactive process called Voice Dialogue. Participants learn to identify and “interview” their inner characters—a process, the Stones say, that helps people access their intuition and gain a broader understanding of their relationship.

Most of us may be aware of only one personality—the one that behaves rationally and responsibly and faces the world each day, explain the Stones, authors of the book *Embracing Ourselves*. Yet with practice, they say, we can learn to uncover and talk to other “hidden selves.” Eventually, we may discover a cast of 40 or 50 sub-personalities within, although the majority of us begin with a repertoire of perhaps five or six. That prospect may seem frightening, given that many books, movies, and TV shows depict multiple personalities as manifestations of mental illness in which an unsuspecting character switches back and forth between a “good” and an “evil” persona. But as Sidra Stone explains, “Psychotics have a full amnesiac barrier between the different selves, and none of them connect. Healthy individuals have a strong ego that allows them to communicate with all these personalities and come away with new experiences and new insights.”

At the Delos Institute in Mendocino, California, Sidra, age 60, and Hal, age 70, hold weeklong workshops to help people make such alter ego connections. Five facilitators work one-on-one with participants, who meet in intimate groups of 12 to 14. “In these seminars, we treat these selves just like real people,” Sidra says. “We ask for their concerns and opinions. That’s the essence of Voice Dialogue.”

Much of their inspiration, say the Stones, comes from the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, who 50 years ago put forth his theory of “archetypes.” It was Jung’s goal to help people understand the main characters or forces at work within

the human psyche. His dramatis personae included the Great Mother and the Devouring Mother, the Good Father and the Tyrant, the Wise Old Woman and the Wise Old Man. Jung believed we could communicate with them through a technique called active imagination. That means sitting down in a quiet place, then holding an imaginary conversation with them, just as in childhood, one might talk to an imaginary friend.

The whole purpose is to get a dialogue going, to express one's fear or discomfort, or even to ask for wisdom and advice.

Voice Dialogue differs from Jung's technique in that it asks us to roll up our sleeves, take a deep breath, and actually embody all these different personae. A workshop facilitator interviews the various selves; if the personalities get too pushy or too powerful, the facilitator can intervene. "We ask each participant to actually get up and move around the room, until she finds the place that personality wants to speak from," Sidra explains. "The Vulnerable Child may curl up on the floor, and the Mother may sit very upright in her chair. The first thing we try to do is identify that self and observe its physical energy.

"As people enter different selves," she adds, "their blood pressure changes, and so does the color of their skin. When you talk to the vulnerable child, the brow will flatten out and wrinkles often disappear. Some selves stutter because they're insecure. After a while, you get adept at identifying the selves and their different energy fields."

Modern psychology has a tendency to look at all these selves as splinters or unrelated fragments of the psyche, but Voice Dialogue shows us how they come together and work as a system. The key to controlling and integrating such a system is cultivation of an aware ego. That gives us a neutral ground, a way to listen to the different voices in others and in ourselves. "Every time we identify and interview a different self," says Sidra, "we then request that the person step back into the aware ego and process the information. We ask, 'What did you think about what the Artist had to say?' Or, 'How do you feel about the demands you've just heard from your Inner Critic?'"

"The Aware Ego," adds Hal, "can listen to all sides and embrace the opposites. It can hold the tension between the part of you that wants to be committed and the part that needs independence, between the part of you that loves your job and the part that wants to quit and take a flier."

Once you become comfortable with these personalities, you can draw on them for greater awareness in everyday life. "You can play these different selves like an orchestra," explains Sidra. "But the aware ego is the master conductor: It can pull in different selves and tune them up or tune them down."

The Stones discovered the different selves early in their own relationship. One day Hat said to Sidra, "You know, there's a vulnerable little girl in you. Will you let me talk to her?" Sidra agreed, and soon curled up in the posture of a tiny child. "We were both astonished that this quiet person had emerged," Sidra recalls. "Most of the time I'm very extroverted and rational. This creature was in touch with the magic of the world, saw colors more intensely, and was highly intuitive."

Over time, Hal and Sidra got to know the Vulnerable Child in each other.

“These inner characters helped us dive beneath our fancy psychological terms and go directly to our feelings,” Sidra notes. The Vulnerable Child, the Stones believe, is the core self, but is so shy and sensitive that we develop one or two other “dominant personalities” to deal with other people’s demands and “make it in the world.” Here are some dominant personalities most of us utilize from time to time:

The Protector wants to be sure we are well fed and financially secure.

The Pleaser wants us to “be nice” so others will love and accept us.

The Pusher wants us to put our nose to the grindstone and “live up to our responsibilities.”

The Perfectionist says, “If you do everything right, then you will be loved.”

The Caretaker says, “Be responsible. Everybody else’s needs come first.”

The Rational Thinker says “Don’t be flaky. Stick to the facts.”

The Inner Critic is that voice that censors us and says, “You’re not good enough. You’ll never make it. You’re not original.”

The dominant self is concerned with our need for love and protection, but when it takes control, Sidra says, it can end up boxing us in. “It is like an overprotective parent. It takes over because it doesn’t want to see us hurt. It wants to make us socially acceptable, and in doing so, it can hamper our creativity and growth.”

Because it acts as the gatekeeper nothing happens psychologically without its permission—the Stones make sure to validate the dominant self, to thank it for the contribution it makes to the participant’s daily life. Then they try to find out more about its main concerns. They interview each person in the group to identify the dominant personality, then begin asking simple questions, such as, “How’s your week been? How’s your relationship with your spouse? Is there anything you’d like to talk about today?”

“The first thing I told the Stones about myself was that I’m a single working mother,” says participant Laura Holmes. “But I didn’t realize how much time I spent in mother mode until I got to the workshop. It was clear in that initial interview that I was obsessed with being a Caretaker. This was the self that was running my daily life.”

Laura’s Caretaker, she recalls, was a no-nonsense personality who felt she was an authority on parenthood: “I was there for Laura when she was pregnant. I took her to the library and had her read everything about early childhood development. I make sure she takes good care of her son and doesn’t neglect him. And I make sure she takes care of a lot of other people, too.”

The Stones asked the Caretaker, “is there anything you’d like Laura to pay more attention to?” “You bet,” came the reply. “I’d like her to pay more attention to me and forget that singer. How can she be a good mother if she auditions for the opera and wants to be an artist?”

“This is how one personality leads us to another,” Sidra explains. “in that moment, we identified a disowned self, one that Laura had been taught to repress or ignore.” Whereas the dominant self tends to be overprotective and controlling, the disowned selves are often playful, humorous, and freewheeling, with the risk-taking and unconventional tendencies so often frowned on by a

culture that overemphasizes responsibility and achievement.

“The disowned selves are the parts of us we were taught are unacceptable, inefficient, or downright unworthy,” Sidra emphasizes. “They might include the Beach Bum, the Risk Taker, the Rebel, and the Drop-out. They may also include the more inspired roles of the Artist, the Dreamer, and the Visionary. We abandon these inner selves because society labels them unproductive or frivolous. Yet when we start to honor them, we discover a whole new range of creative possibilities.”

In the workshop, Laura got to enter the world of the Artist and listen to the singer’s point of view. “When I became the singer,” Laura notes, “I gave out a completely different energy. I crossed my legs, moved my chair forward, and was immediately more theatrical.”

Laura learned that the Caretaker and the Artist both had long lists of things they wanted her to accomplish. She suddenly understood why she always felt as though she “had too much to do and was always running out of time.”

Talking to the different selves can be like running a family meeting or mediating between two heavily armed opponents, Sidra observes. The dominant selves are terrified by their opposites and can put up a good deal of resistance when they start to emerge. The Pusher, for example, fears the Beach Bum. The Protector is unnerved by the Risk Taker. The Pleaser finds the Rebel dangerous and out of line. The Perfectionist looks with horror at the Drop-out who doesn’t care about an ordered life. The Caretaker fears the Artist who might run out on her responsibilities. The Rational Thinker tries to quash the Dreamer. The Inner Critic wants to disarm the Visionary.

The Voice Dialogue technique, say the Stones, can be especially useful in times of transition, such as when you’re starting a new job or relationship. First you need to identify the conflicting voices that are present and feel the tension as they begin to pull against each other. The next step is to ask someone you trust to talk to the conflicting parts of you: the part that wants to get married and the part that wants to keep your independence, or the you who wants to get that next promotion and the you who wants to forget about the rat race and go off on a Buddhist retreat.

“You may have to repeat this process a number of times, until the selves finish giving you their information,” Sidra observes. “In the end, however, you should be able to make a more conscious decision based on all the data you’ve received.”

In their second book, *Embracing Each Other*, the Stones focus on the role alternate selves play in our relationships. “The people we are attracted to—or end up in conflict with over and over again -- carry the selves we need to learn from,” says Sidra. Often a woman who plays the “martyr” may end up with a self-centered man to learn how to get her needs met. Or a computer specialist, who works in a cool, technical atmosphere, picks an emotional mate to make contact with his passion. It’s the old saw—we choose our opposites—and then sign up for a long and sometimes arduous apprenticeship.

But when one person in the relationship integrates a disowned self, the whole dynamic changes. “I once worked with a couple who owned a business together,” Sidra recalls. “He was a relaxed, laid-back guy. One of his primary selves was a

Beach Bum, a real loose character who never worried about anything. The wife was stuck with the Perfectionist. She took the books home, watched the inventory and was so obsessed she couldn't sleep at night. The harder she worked, the more relaxed he got. When I showed the woman how to stand up to her Perfectionist, she started being less responsible, and the husband had to pick up his load. Finally they sold the business because they both wanted a less stressful life."

Miriam Dyak and her husband, Richard Berger, have been going to Voice Dialogue workshops since 1985. "We run a gallery in Seattle," says Miriam, "and we have different styles of dealing with finances. When it's time to take a risk, I often go into the frightened, vulnerable self. Then Richard feels I'm being negative. He wants to be the creative entrepreneur and my fear is stopping him. We take time out to explore these different points of view and then we make our critical decisions. Over time, the Voice Dialogue process has deeply enriched our partnership."

John and Leanne Dougherty, of Knoxville, Tennessee, found that the Voice Dialogue workshops gave them a common language. "Now we have a real communication system," says Leanne, a therapist. "We can look at each other and see who's talking, and know which self is present. We know when to step back and let that personality have its say."

The Doughertys, who have attended Voice Dialogue workshops for the last 15 years, are about to teach its techniques in a new couples group. Leanne already uses it in her counseling practice and John, a doctor, sometimes uses Voice Dialogue to interview his patients.

"If someone has chronic headaches, I will ask them to speak from the self that has the worst time with this pain." This information comes in handy when he makes a diagnosis.

Laura Holmes sums up her experience in the workshop: "In the course of the seminar, I worked with my Caretaker, my Artist, my Pusher, my Vulnerable Child, and my Inner Critic. I explored the 'to-do lists' each one of these selves had for me. And I found a place to stand, in the aware ego, and began to mediate. After the Voice Dialogue work, I feel a lot more relaxed. The sense of need and urgency that underlaid my life is gone."

Says Miriam Dyak, "After doing Voice Dialogue, you learn not to take your problems so seriously. You are aware that you've got all these competing voices, so you lighten up and learn how to go easy on yourself."

SELF-IMAGES

Since many people find it easier to access their various personalities through images, the Stones have called upon artist Suzanne Perot, 48, who is an expert in the medium of collage, to do a special afternoon session at Voice Dialogue workshops. "Collage allows us to project our different selves onto a piece of paper," observes Perot. "We get the picture first. The name for it comes later. And since this is primarily an intuitive way of working, there are some surprises. Often a new self comes forth with valuable information about our relationships or our creative work."

Participants select random images from magazines, calendars, and fine art

reproductions. Perot gives them a long sheet of paper and asks them to create a “time line.” The idea is to chronicle the personalities that emerge at different junctures of their lives. “The collage will contain images of the Vulnerable Child,” she explains, “but it will also show the selves we take on later, in order to be validated by the family and the culture.”

“Men who are burdened with a lot of responsibility invariably choose images of the Provider, but somewhere in the collage we’ll find the Beach Bum who wants to get away from the daily struggle. Women usually pick images of the Caretaker, but the opposite personality also shows up. The Power Self, who wants recognition in the world, comes out in images of high fashion, diamonds, or dollar signs.”

The “time line” exercise also indicates how the different personalities work together. In a section of a collage Perot made for herself, there is a sixties Flower Child, barefoot, with long straight hair, love beads, and no makeup. “I played this role for a while,” she notes, “but inside me there was also a CEO who made sure I took care of business and was a good mother.”

It’s useful to look at how we’ve been helped, in the past, by our more spontaneous and intuitive selves, adds Perot. “This encourages us to trust them and call on them to solve whatever problems we are facing now.”

Perot has also developed a three dimensional collage called the Self Box that helps people to differentiate between the selves they show the world and the ones they tend to keep locked away. “We start with a plain white box, then begin to paste images inside and out. The selection of the pictures and their placement is unconscious, but after a while, a pattern forms. On the outside of the box, we see the dominant selves, like the Provider, the Caretaker, the Pusher, or the Perfectionist. Inside, we find images of the Vulnerable Self, as well as pictures of the Dreamer, the Visionary, or the Artist. Most people hide those personalities that give voice to their intuition, their creativity and their spiritual nature.”

The collage workshop gave Kathleen Downes, a former university teacher and researcher, a glimpse of an emerging self. “I was surprised by the images I chose. My collage showed an adventurer and traveler, and that personality became dominant in the next few months. I’m in the process of reshaping and reinventing my career, and I’ve been attending professional conferences in Bali, Hawaii, and New Zealand. I used to think there was only one right way to do things. But the workshop helped me to realize there are many different selves living inside me. It gave me permission to include them and to live in a more creative way.”

WRITING THE SELVES

Writing is another way to connect with our alternative identities. “A human being is a very complex system,” observes poet and novelist Deena Metzger, who leads writing workshops in her home in Topanga Canyon, California, and nationwide. Participants in her seminars create characters, write their histories, and get to know them intimately. “Each one of us is a little universe, filled with many different selves,” says Metzger, author of *Writing for Your Life*. Yet we rarely get a chance to explore what it might be like to stand in the shoes of another person—say, a midwife or a healer, a peace

worker, a tribal elder, a teenage mother, a gang member, an Inca chief. “We are vessels in which many selves and values coexist. The problem is that we are taught to choose and develop only one.”

Metzger, 60, whose recent books *Tree* and *Intimate Nature* focus on the richness and diversity of the natural world, urges her students “to take a risk, delve into new realities, go into the unknown. Writing works only when you move beyond the limits of your routine personality. A story gets exciting when you have the courage to explore what it’s like to be somebody else.”

Workshop participant Karen Gottlieb grew up in a suburban house in Queens, New York, with loving and protective parents. Yet she “happened upon” a character named Johnny Stiletto. “He’s slim-hipped, sharp, and doesn’t take crap from anybody. He can get around in a tough urban environment and he lives in the shadows. He’s the street kid that I never was and he helps balance out my polite exterior. He lives in the recesses of my psyche, but he also has a place—a geographic location in the world.”

Metzger’s students don’t dialogue with their characters. Instead they get to know these “selves” as they tell their stories. When Metzger once asked class members to write about someone they wouldn’t ordinarily meet, L.A. psychotherapist Jane Plotkin was afraid she wouldn’t come up with anything at all. Suddenly she got an image of a nine year-old black girl wearing a plaid dress. “She just popped into my mind and at first, I was afraid I wouldn’t know how to relate to her,” she recalls. “But I watched and listened to her, and slowly her story unfolded. I saw that she was in prison, sitting on a cot with her mother who had been arrested for shoplifting. I saw that her mother’s spirit had been broken, but this child had a plumb line to the spiritual roots of the black tradition. She was an old soul in a little girl’s body. She remembered how to draw sustenance from the world, even from the ground of slavery.

“This is a profound creative process and it’s bound to spill over into other areas of your life,” says Plotkin. “On one level, I have a new sensitivity to myself and others. As I learned how to participate in the world-view of this little girl, I discovered a quality of innocence and openness. And I learned about a strength that goes back through the generations and whose roots are deeper than our family of origin.”

Over the last 25 years of helping students evoke their different selves, Metzger has developed techniques for jump-starting the imagination. “I like timed exercises, because they force people to move past the inner critic and draw upon their intuition. I ask my students to do the impossible—to pick a character and write his or her life history in ten minutes. When you have to work fast, there’s no time to be self-conscious. You have to write down the first thing that comes into your head.”

Metzger also works with lists and free association. “Right now, I’m teaching women who have breast cancer. I give them ten minutes to list all their memories and associations with that illness. This sounds difficult, but it’s astonishing how well it works.” Participants write a paragraph or two on each image or association. Finally, they write a fictional story of a woman who has breast cancer, incorporating their own memories and life experiences.

In this workshop, Metzger also asks participants to create a character who has learned how to heal herself. To get them started, she requests that they make a list of all the moments in their lives when they felt whole and empowered—for example, the time I stood up to my boss, the day my son was born, or the long-awaited vacation I finally gave myself. The women expand upon this list until they can tell the story of a character who has survived her diagnosis and gone on to renew her life. By the end of the class, Metzger says, “We have explored two different selves—the one who suffers and the one who learns how to nourish and cure. The profound lesson is that both these selves are intertwined. One could not exist without the other. There is a direct link between our own health and well-being and our ability to validate these different selves.”

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

Which method is best for exploring the various and numerous inner selves? That’s a matter of personal preference, everyone agrees. For people who feel comfortable being interviewed and acting out, Voice Dialogue has great appeal. “It’s an excellent tool for business executives because it honors the rational mind,” John Dougherty adds. “And it’s an easy process for men to relate to, because we tend to be systematic thinkers. It helps us to make a bridge to the more emotional and intuitive aspects of our lives.”

More visually oriented people may prefer Perot’s collage workshop, but it’s also surprisingly effective for overly articulate types. “It can help people go deeper than words and get to a place that’s more visionary and intuitive,” Perot explains.

Deena Metzger’s writing seminars attract people who like to create complex worlds and follow their characters into dark and unfamiliar territory. “I’m a very private person, so I prefer working in my notebooks,” explains one workshop participant.

But whatever the medium, these methods all achieve the same end enabling participants to uncover hidden parts of themselves and integrate them into the kind of person they’d really like to be.

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