



“Now that We Have Tools that Work, We can Look at all this Stuff”

Internal Parts: Case Study & Reflections

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This case study describes some of my experiences with both dissociated and non-dissociative internal parts, as part of my own healing journey.

Brief comments about memory and dissociation: There is a broad continuum between “regular” memory and memory carried by severely dissociated fully amnesic alter personalities. Regular memory can include vivid memories of important events, including images of what happened, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, words that were spoken, thoughts you had at the time, and also emotions that were present at the time. These memories are available to normal recall. If you ask me “Do you remember your wedding?” I will reply “Yes, indeed” and can quickly recall details in all the categories mentioned above.

On the other end of the spectrum we have memories carried by severely dissociated, fully-amnesic parts/alters. Severely dissociated fully-amnesic parts/alters are the “personalities” people talk about in Multiple Personality Disorder (now Dissociative Identity Disorder). With the most fully dissociated alter personalities there is a complete amnesic barrier in both directions between the adult ego-state and the dissociated internal part. The adult in the present has no memory of the original traumatic events and she also has no memory of what happens during the times when the alter is “out” (in control of the body, connected and communicating with the outside world). If the alter comes out during a therapy/ministry session and talks with the therapist/minister, the adult will have no memory of what happened during the time the alter was out and will be amazed at how quickly the session went. The adult might even be startled to notice that the clock suddenly jumped ahead 30 minutes. A complete amnesic barrier in both directions also results in the alter/internal part having no memory or awareness of the adult’s life. The internal part has not been “watching from inside” and does not know what happened when it was not out. Its last memory is of the last time it was out. Sometimes its last memory is of a traumatic event it carries and it has no memory of the years between this traumatic event and the current adult present. Understandably, alters that are isolated in this way are confused and disoriented when they connect with the present and come out: “Who are you?”, “What happened?”, “Where am I and how did I get here?”, “I’m five years old – why am I in this adult body?!” The most fully dissociated alters/parts also have amnesic barriers between each other. In this scenario internal parts do not communicate internally, and sometimes are not even aware of each other.

In between regular memory and the most severely dissociated, fully-amnesic alter personalities is an interesting zone where traumatic memories (or just the painful emotions) can be dissociated without the involvement of internal parts, or where less-severely dissociated parts carry memories or components of memories. People experience a wide range of intensity/severity of each of the basic ingredients, and also every possible combination of the basic ingredients. For example, the amnesic barrier can come down when the part is connected to the present (“out”), resulting in a dual-awareness experience (as opposed to only one or the other being present). In this scenario, the person experiences his normal, current adult-self being present in some way,

but it feels as if his current adult and a child from his past are sharing his conscious awareness – sharing his thoughts, feelings, and even behavior. The released amnesic barrier that produces dual awareness also results in both the adult and the alter remembering afterwards. They will both remember what happens during time when the internal part is out, and the adult will retain the memory of any traumatic events that the internal part releases during this time.

Or the amnesic barrier between the adult and internal part can be present in only one direction. In this case the internal part can “watch from the inside” even when it is not connected to the present in any way that the adult is aware of. These parts are not confused or disoriented when they connect with the present. They know where they are, are not surprised by the date, and are not surprised to be in an adult body. People also have internal family systems where there are no amnesic barriers between internal parts. The parts in these internal family systems share memories, communicate, and interact to varying degrees. They can even carry on complex interactions without the adult-self being aware of what is happening. (See my essay on Internal Family Systems for additional comments.)

In this middle zone of partially-dissociated parts it seems like the memory/memories are stored in a package along with an accompanying ego-state. A larger package of the experience of being the six-year-old boy is stored, as opposed to just one vivid memory that occurred when you were six years old. At one end of this middle zone, it feels like little more than a particularly intense “regular” memory. If you know what to look for, you can see/feel a faint shadow of a child ego-state accompanying the memory. I think this is a very common phenomena but most people don’t even see it because they don’t know how to interpret/understand the subtle aspects of the experience that indicate something more than just a regular memory is connected. At the other end of this middle zone, it feels like the complete experience and ego-state of a child from your past is present in a very real way.

An especially common phenomena is to have the painful emotions from a traumatic memory being carried by dissociated parts. If you ask me about this memory, I will reply “Oh yes, I can remember that happening.” But any of the particularly painful emotions carried by dissociated parts will be missing. These emotions will not be accessible unless something triggers or facilitates the dissociated parts to connect and bring the emotions forward.

Brief comments about traumatic-implicit-memory, child-ego-state internal parts: I think it is helpful to recognize traumatic-implicit-memory child-ego-state internal parts as being a qualitatively different phenomena from dissociated internal parts. With these *non-dissociative* internal parts, the person has traumatic-implicit-memory packages that carry enough child-ego-state that the person feels like they are at least partly blended with their child-self from the time of the original experience when these memories get triggered forward.

The internal subjective experience is that the person feels like they are *blended* - they will feel like their adult self is *blended with*, and *co-conscious with*, the child ego-state from the traumatic memory. When they choose to lean more heavily on the child part, and relate from the perspective of the child part, they will look, sound, and feel like a child from the age of the memory. They will use language as if they are a child at the age of the memory, and they will express thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and maturity as if they are a child at the age of the memory. In contrast, when the person chooses to lean more heavily on their adult self, and relate from the perspective of their adult self, they will look, sound, and feel like their adult self in the present. They will use language as if they are their adult self, and they will express thoughts,

emotions, perceptions, and maturity as if they are their adult-self in the present. **AND** the person can transition back and forth between the child part/child perspective and their adult self/adult perspective, *whenever they choose to*, without difficulty or confusion.¹ Furthermore, even when they are relating from the perspective of the child part, they are still fully aware, and can easily acknowledge, that they are actually an adult in the present.

In my experience, implicit-memory child-ego-state parts don't use plural pronouns, such as "we" or "us." They don't refer to the adult-self in third person, as if the adult-self were a completely separate person (for example, "*she* had to work on *her* term paper last night). And there are no amnesic barriers.

Just as with dissociated internal parts, these non-dissociative child parts can carry issues/concerns that can hinder the process (such as guardian lies, vows, and bitterness), and that need to be addressed in order to move forward.

(In contrast, dissociated internal parts feel more separate than non-dissociative parts. The person's internal subjective experience is more like switching back and forth between two different people, as opposed to being *blended*, with shifting back and forth between which side of the blend they are emphasizing. If the person is experiencing co-consciousness and the adult/host is forward, the person feels like they *are* their adult self, and that they are hearing the voice/thoughts of a different person inside, and then reporting this content to the outside world. When the dissociated part is forward, the person feels like they *are* the child part, with the adult self as a separate person inside. And the person is *not* able to switch back and forth, *whenever they choose to*, without difficulty or confusion)

As Charlotte and I learned more about dissociation and internal parts, one of the most important realizations for us was that mild dissociative phenomena and subtle internal parts are very common. With this new awareness we were able to see what had been there all along -- we became aware of the presence of dissociated and/or non-dissociative parts in ourselves and in many of our clients. Our current perception is that most of us have dissociated internal parts and/or non-dissociative internal parts. A lot of people talk about their "inner child." I have become convinced that many of these people are perceiving these dissociated and/or non-dissociative internal parts.

Prior to starting my own healing work in 1998, I had absolutely no awareness of any kind of internal-parts phenomena in my own life. The first experience challenging me to consider the possibility that I had internal-parts came one night as Charlotte was helping me work on a particularly intense trigger. We were working on the triggered perception that the Lord doesn't come to me or help me when I get stuck, even though I am asking Him for help, guidance, and comfort. I connected with an amazingly deep and intense place of feeling betrayed and abandoned: "I can't do it. I am stuck and alone. I want help and am asking for help but nobody is helping me/going to help me." I felt like I was 5% thirty-eight-year-old adult and 95% angry, discouraged six-year-old child. The faint, weak presence of my thirty-eight-year-old adult self

¹When the person is intensely blended with early, severe trauma (like my first experience of blending with my eighteen-month-old separation trauma and six-year-old dyslexia trauma, as described below), it can take a bit of effort to shift from the child perspective to the adult perspective. But this move is still relatively smooth and easy, as compared to switching back and forth between the adult-self and dissociated internal parts. And again, with traumatic-implicit-memory, child-ego-state parts the person can make the shift whenever they choose to do so.

was still holding onto “This isn’t true. I know the Lord is good and that He is with me even though I cannot perceive Him. There are reasons He limits his intervention, allows evil in our lives, etc.” But the much, much stronger presence of a very miserable, very angry six-year-old was insisting, “You don’t protect me, Lord – You allow this unbearable pain. And You don’t come to me or help me when I desperately need You. There is no possible excuse for allowing this pain and deliberately withholding Your care in this way – You are stupid, horrible, mean, incompetent, and neglectful, and I hate You!”²

I was shaken by the clarity and incredible intensity of these thoughts and feelings. I can clearly remember thinking, “This must be kind of what it feels like to have an internal part being triggered forward. This is certainly as close as I ever want to get!” As the clock crept past 1:00 a.m. and I was still stuck in this place of flaming anger, deep discouragement, and painful loneliness, I remember thinking: “If this little guy is still mostly driving in the morning, we will have to call all my patients and cancel their appointments. There is no way I can function as a licenced physician if this kid is still 95% in the driver’s seat.” I was still holding onto some degree of denial because I was still thinking, “This must be *kind of like* having an internal part triggered forward. *But that certainly can’t be happening to me, so it must just be something that looks and feels like it.*”

I had a second potent experience of an internal part coming forward sometime around January of 1999, after the first five or six Theophostic sessions which Charlotte facilitated for me. Each of these sessions had been powerful and had resulted in important changes in my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This reality was steadily sinking deeper and deeper into my heart and mind, and this eventually had profound effects on how I worked with my personal collection of wounds, dysfunctions, weaknesses, blind spots, and sins.

There were some wounds, dysfunctions, weaknesses, blind spots, and sins that were painful but that I could at least look at, talk about, and work on – certain things made me more anxious or angry than might be expected, certain people seemed to get under my skin in a special way, certain problems seemed to be particularly difficult for me to solve, certain things I did were mildly selfish or inconsiderate, etc. All of the items in this category met the following criteria: I felt like there was a real chance of doing something about them and they were bearably painful. *However*, there was another category that I was vaguely aware of but that I tried (in some subtle and barely conscious way) to avoid seeing or thinking about. For example, I got along with people when I was working, but in casual contexts I talked too much. I was pressured, restless, anxious, and just irritating to be around. I got on people’s nerves and they didn’t want to be with me. This was why I hadn’t had any close friends for most of my life. Furthermore, I had tried, *with zero success*, to change these things for more than thirty years. I felt like I just couldn’t look at this stuff, let alone talk about it or work on it – it was too painful, and also felt totally hopeless. I couldn’t conceive of how it could be different. “What am I going to do about it? This is just

²This triggered package was from the trauma of having undiagnosed dyslexia in kindergarden and first grade, where I felt increasingly stuck and hopeless as I was unable to learn to read, day after day after day, for two years. And I felt totally alone in this misery because nobody recognized the problem and then provided the help I needed, but rather concluded that I was just stubbornly refusing to cooperate with the teaching program. Furthermore, this grade-school experience triggered my earlier separation trauma, so that my distress was dramatically exacerbated by the much more intense pain of being separated from my parents at eighteen months of age. (See *Outsmarting Yourself* or *The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life* for detailed discussion of my early separation trauma.)

the way I am. To ‘see’ it will just hurt more and make me depressed.”

So one day after the first five-or-six successful Theophostic sessions, I was gently poking around the edges of my “too painful, scary, and hopeless to look at” dysfunctions when a clear, strong, distinct thought suddenly came into my mind: “If we have new tools that work this effectively, this quickly, and this consistently, then it’s safe to look at all this stuff. We can afford to acknowledge this stuff because we have tools that can deal with anything we find.” It was like this place/part in my mind had just run the feasibility-study software again, now that the numbers had changed. Before, the cost of lumber was \$1.25/board-foot and we couldn’t afford to do the project. But now new healing tools were making lumber available at \$.25/board-foot, and this reality had fully connected after five or six dramatically successful practice sessions. “We can afford to do it now – let’s get started.”

This thought was so clear and distinct that it was almost an audible voice. It was the most potent experience I have ever had of an internal “voice.”³ Subjectively it felt like it came from inside, but from somewhere “other” than my usual adult-self/ego-state. It was not just clear and strong, but also distinct and even independent/autonomous in some subtle and odd way. And this internal part did *not* just feel like my child-self from inside of a childhood memory, but rather like a separate, distinct protector/guardian/manager. Leading me to the assessment that this was a dissociated internal part.⁴

Now, after years of ongoing healing work while being aware of internal parts phenomena, I can see a lot of more-subtle evidence of internal child parts in my life. For example, when I am connected to an anxious internal child part, my voice will get high and squeaky (embarrassing to me and very annoying to others). My vocabulary will change, and especially the vocabulary of my thoughts. (Often I will edit before I speak, but the internal thoughts first come with vocabulary such as, “Stupid poo-poo head!” instead of “You are being completely unreasonable. I don’t think you are being honest with me or yourself.”) My facial expression will become that of a frightened or angry child, with wide eyes and that “overwhelmed” look. And most significantly, I *feel* like a child inside. As I have become more aware of all this and have come to understand it much better, I can now quickly and easily see all of these indicators and recognize, “Yes, I feel like I am six years old, on the playground, and frightened.”

Seeing, recognizing, and understanding these phenomena make it much easier to understand the “strange” ego-states I find myself in when something really triggers me: “Oh. I know what’s going on. I’m blended with a six-year-old child part who is carrying memories of feeling frightened and powerless while being bullied on my grade-school playground.” It is also much easier for my adult-self to navigate the situation appropriately when I can recognize that an internal child part is being triggered forward: “I hear you little buddy. Your feelings are legitimate and important, and we will listen to you and take care of them as soon as we have some space. In the mean time you need to take your hands off the steering wheel and let me

³The subjective experience of an *internal* voice, as opposed to an *external*, audible voice, as one would experience with auditory hallucinations.

⁴When a non-dissociative part is triggered forward, I feel like I am blended with the memory content that it carries. And I have a very clear perception of what the child part is thinking and feeling regarding the situation I am dealing with – as if I am blended with it’s perspective on the whole situation. But I never “hear” thoughts from non-dissociative parts, as if they are talking to me.

drive (figuratively).” When I can recognize that an internal part is being triggered forward, it is also much easier to attribute the thoughts and emotions to the real source (old memory being triggered), and then to let Charlotte help me instead of blaming her for “making me feel this way.”

Seeing, recognizing, and understanding these phenomena has tremendously facilitated my healing work. It makes it much easier to find and connect with missing emotions (the piece that is usually “missing” in my healing work). Many times we have been working on something that should logically be very important but that appears to have no emotions attached. I either feel a vague, distant numbness or nothing at all. We use the direct-eye-contact technique that we have found to be so effective for bringing internal parts forward.⁵ Charlotte does this and makes a simple and gentle request such as “Can I talk to the little boy who felt so unsafe on the playground every day?” Within seconds, feelings are stirring. Within minutes, the internal part has come forward, the emotions are connected, and we can move on with the healing work.

⁵For description and discussion of this direct-eye-contact technique, see “The Direct Eye Contact Technique for Engaging with Internal Parts,” available as a free download from the Special Subjects/Advanced Topics section of the Resources page of www.immanuelapproach.com.