

ONE BODY, MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES: A PAULINE APPROACH TO DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER

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Dissociative Identity Disorder.¹

The words stung more than I thought they would.

Dissociative Identity Disorder.

The diagnosis did not come as a surprise. I had specifically sought out psychological assessment to evaluate my theory as to what had happened to my mind fourteen months prior when, while studying for my doctorate in clinical psychology, I “cracked” under the weight of unresolved trauma and suddenly became a person that I did not recognize in the slightest. When my downfall reached the rock bottom of on-the-streets homelessness, it finally occurred to me that what I had been experiencing might meet criteria for the one diagnosis that we didn’t touch on in school and had been instructed to simply “refer out.”

No, the diagnosis was not a surprise. But it did feel like a pronouncement of doom.

Dissociative Identity Disorder is the current name for what had been previously termed “Multiple Personality Disorder,” a mental illness in which an individual possesses more than one discrete personality identity, each with its own worldview, personal history, and characteristics. The classic model of this phenomenon’s etiology is that chronic interpersonal trauma during a person’s early childhood years causes

1. Though this and other medical terms typically appear lowercased in most sources, I feel it is important to capitalize such terms as a way of emphasizing their legitimacy as clinical diagnoses.

such intense inner turmoil that the psyche must splinter itself into various parts for the person to be able to cope with the ongoing trauma.

While I was lucky to retain a relatively congruous personality for twenty-seven years, I also retained the psychosocial factors that made me vulnerable to the illness. I was a ticking time bomb of complex trauma, a disorganized attachment style, and deep self-loathing for my pattern of repeatedly falling into the hands of abusers. The inner turmoil shattered my psyche and created an unwillingness of the normative sides of myself to allow each other to play the roles for which they are meant.

As an illustration of how this might happen, consider the part of yourself that entertains babies. It more than likely thinks, speaks, and acts differently than the part of you that shows up to boardroom meetings. But if inner strife were to become so intense that each part believes that its priorities are always the most important, you might end up baby-talking in a power suit . . . and losing your job. This then would foster further self-loathing and lead to suppression of the part of yourself that brings joy to your infant child, creating dysfunction in your parenting life. When the relationship with your child flounders and you realize that you haven't been parenting well, you will likely then reciprocate your business part's resentment and strive to suppress its tendencies as you carefully attend to changing your attitude and behavior as a parent. Lather, rinse, repeat.

This type of perpetual disdain and division within myself became so intense that each of my various parts began to shut the others out from conscious awareness, which causes me "blackout" memory loss when I have a "switch" in personality. The result: inner-world chaos, outer-world disability, and intense suicidal ideation.

One body with many parts—each competing for control. This is Dissociative Identity Disorder.

My diagnosis became official during an inpatient psychiatric stay at an institute that specializes in complex trauma and the dissociative disorders that sometimes result. Over the prior six months, I had spent nearly as much time in psych wards as I had outside of them. Active

suicidality was an unshakable companion. I experienced memory loss from hour to hour and, at one point, woke up with the calendar indicating that it was eleven weeks later than I expected. My body somaticized psychological distress as tics, seizures, and chronic pain. I was in constant fight-or-flight mode and had frequent periods of dissociative solipsism in which I was convinced that nothing existed outside of my consciousness.

I was also newly in relationship with God after having had a remarkable encounter with grace when my soul was in such a wretched state that even the staunchest atheist might have described it as “total depravity.” This “mighty change of heart” effected immediate change and wholehearted discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth, but I puzzled over how to make theological and existential sense of what was happening to my brain and body. Moreover, I struggled to understand how I might be able to help myself and pursue some semblance of stability and wellness.

I had grown up with the story of Joseph Smith receiving his First Vision after following the counsel of James 1:5 to ask God for wisdom, and I continued to carry the belief that God would also enable me to receive the insight I lacked. My prayer for help was a constant whisper and frequent cry, and I tried to put myself in positions to receive his guidance.

During this search for wisdom, a dear friend and spiritual mentor brought me to a retired psychiatrist who was known among Protestants in our area for also being a powerful “prayer warrior” with the gift of intercession for those under spiritual attack. I was new to the culture of biblical Christianity and wasn’t sure what to expect from the visit, but I anticipated that she would treat me as somebody possessed by demons.

Over lunch, the dreaded question came as she asked me if I knew where Dissociative Identity Disorder was in the Bible.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. “*My name is Legion, for we are many.*”² The synoptic accounts of the unrestrainable man with an evil spirit had always

2. Mark 5:9.

disturbed me, and I had heard more than one Christian counselor slap my diagnosis on the story far too casually for my comfort. While I don't wholly dismiss the possibility of demonic involvement in my case, the broad equation of Dissociative Identity Disorder with possession feels like the same unhelpful disdain and devaluation that caused my parts to split in the first place.

Yet there I was, in the kitchen of a firm believer in spiritual warfare. I silently pleaded with God that whether I was about to be healed or traumatized by the surely impending exorcism, I would know that he was with me.

"Oh!" she remarked, "No, I wasn't thinking about that. I meant more along the lines of how to navigate your multiplicity."

Navigate?

Oh. Perhaps these parts inside of me who wanted so desperately to be seen and valued weren't demons that needed to be cast into filthy swine after all. I exhaled the stale breath that I didn't realize I was holding. Then, I inhaled a fresh perspective.

I left that day with deepened resolve to keep diving into the word and to continue engaging with the Word who would indeed offer me the wisdom I was asking him so earnestly for.

But it wasn't until that inpatient treatment experience with my newly confirmed diagnosis that I found my answer. My therapist there had been encouraging me to come up with a common goal that the various parts of myself could unite around, but I could not find one to literally save my life. I had nothing in common with myself; there was too much internal polarity. Part of me was incredibly social, and part of me was very fearful of humans. Part of me had its identity in being a victim, and another part would do anything to avoid acknowledging my past victimization. My self-loathing only continued to fester, and I was forced to rely on God's moment-to-moment grace like I never had before.

Seeking solace, I spent every free moment in my Bible. I found comfort in the Jewish discipline of mourning in Lamentations. I related

to Paul's struggle in prison—"to live is Christ, and to die is gain."³ I tried to take heart in reading 1 Peter, hoping that I was being "refined by fire." Other patients caught on to my coping mechanism and read Psalms to me when I was gripped by panic attacks or psychogenic seizures.

Eventually I turned to the familiar comfort of what had long been my favorite chapter: Romans 6. And there it was in verse 13—instruction that I'd read dozens of times but never while searching for how to cope with Dissociative Identity Disorder:

Offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

Every part of myself.

A common goal.

Oh yes, I think we could all get on board with this.

I paged forward to chapter 12 where Paul fleshes out the metaphor of part-unity more fully:

Each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function. . . .

Each member belongs to all the others. . . .

Be devoted to one another in love.

If there was anyone who needed a "renewing of the mind," it was me, and here I now had a particularly apt roadmap for how the individualistic shards of that shattered mind might find unity as one body.

Could it be that simple?

As it turns out, it is about as simple as asking Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals to view the other as being within the body of Christ. But it was possible, and not wholly bunk in its hermeneutic—Paul was exhorting the Romans to devote their whole selves to the cause of God's army. The word translated as the singular "instrument" is actually plural in the Greek, which alters its Hellenistic connotation from being a generic tool or implement to being a collective set of weapons or heavy armor. The same root word is used in Ephesians 6 for the "whole armor" of God.

3. Philippians 1:21.

While in treatment I learned that each member of my Dissociative Identity Disorder “internal family system” exists for a specific reason. Each carries a portion of the weight of my difficult life history, and each plays a protective role for me as a whole. The six-year-old part of me, who I call “Bobby,” comes out when I feel threatened. He holds the pain of times when I was largely powerless in my trauma. While other members of my system get frustrated with Bobby’s paralyzing sense of helplessness, he actually has a very protective role—his pitiful crying pushes away people who will be impatient or triggering, and he draws in nurturers who are more likely to meet my needs and help me escape harm. Similarly, I’ve very critically disparaged thirteen-year-old “Jenni,” who reads too deeply into the intentions of kind people and often hurts them in her panic about what those intentions could mean. She carries trauma that was inflicted by a partner, and she raises her preemptive red flags out of a protective desire to prevent future abuse.

One body. Many clunky, heavily armored parts that are just doing what they can to help me survive.

Treatment opened my eyes to the possibility of complete recovery. As it turns out, Dissociative Identity Disorder does not have to be a life sentence, but recovery requires, on average, seven years of intensive therapy with counselors who specialize in complex trauma and dissociative disorders. The goals of therapy look a bit like what one would expect to see when a family seeks counseling to heal deep divides: open, honest, and thoughtful communication must be fostered between each member of the system, each member must do their own work to heal their personal baggage, and a commitment to the good of each member and to the system as a whole must be reestablished. Through the integration of my discrete parts, I can become whole.

The work is slow and arduous, but the progress has been undeniable. I have been remarkably blessed to find a phenomenal trauma therapist who also brings God into our sessions. Jesus Christ acts as a healer, a wise arbiter, and a model of loving commitment to the good

of the “other.” He is the common ground out of which inner unity can grow.

My dissociative parts abide in Christ, finding safety with his help as we process traumatic memories in therapy. When ready, each has the opportunity to symbolically hand over the weight of their trauma and grief to Jesus. To me, this “unburdening” ritual has looked like each part offering him their ineffective, self-made armor. In turn, he offers us the pieces of his full, unfailing armor—armor that finally meets our needs.

In Christ, I receive a belt of truth to gird my loins. This belt calms the part of me that believes that I am defined by sexual trauma.

In Christ, I have shoes that ground me in the gospel of peace—a gospel I can proclaim. This quiets the part of me that runs from others when I become fearful of conversation.

In Christ, I have a chance to be whole.

There is one piece of God’s armor that we have had from the beginning—the sword of the Spirit in the word of God. And as each part of me holds this sword, we discover that it offers us unity. It enables us with strength far beyond our own, and together we wield this tool with inner fortitude. In greater wholeness, I find I am extended an answer to my James 1:5 prayer—wisdom to walk the path of recovery in Jesus’ way.

One body. Many parts. Yes, my name is Legion, for we are many. But we are learning to see ourselves for who we are—valuable members within the body of Christ. We belong to him. We have been brought from death to life through him. And with his help we are learning to be devoted to one another in love. We work together—individually and collectively—as instruments of his righteousness.

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