

Imagine waking to find a note on your pillow by the side of you, apparently written by a total stranger, or perhaps waking up in a place you don't know, wearing clothes you don't recognise...

If you are 'blessed' with 'Dissociative Identity Disorder' (DID), sometimes called 'Multiple Personality Disorder', you may well have experienced these and other, frightening and seemingly bizarre things



Most of us will have regular internal conversations with ourselves, but when we do, we generally know it is a single 'I' talking or thinking, with the same 'I' answering. Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), is a clinically-diagnosed spectrum of mental disorders, which varies from quite mild to quite extreme forms. It is thought that up to 1% of the general population have a place somewhere on that spectrum, and it is quite possible that without realising it you know someone with DID who is leading an outwardly normal life.

The Western medical model perceives a DID sufferer to have periods where they feel they are someone else, or have another part of themselves in the 'driving seat'; they may have little or no recollection of what they have done in the recent past, while another part of their personality was in charge.

During these times of memory loss or impairment, they feel removed from - 'dissociated from' - the 'I' that existed a while ago and experience being a different personality.

Although it does not happen on a regular timetable, it might be helpful to think of it a little like this: imagine it is mid morning, and you can only clearly remember the periods between sunrise and lunchtime each day. But when it is between lunchtime and sunset, you can only clearly remember those times of each day instead, and you feel that the person who was in your body between sunrise and lunchtime was a different person. The same happens between sunset and midnight, and between midnight and sunrise.

So in our very crude example, there would be four personalities living in one body, each personality unable to remember their experience as one of the others, and so not feeling part of the whole, and unable to integrate the personalities present at the other times of the day. Of course that is only a very simplistic example, the reality of being DID is far more complex.

In Western psychology, DID is understood to be caused by many factors, such as childhood abuse, environmental influences, physical damage or chemically induced problems in brain functioning.

A person with DID may change

Sam's Story

A shamanic practitioner shares her personal story with Nicholas Breeze Wood

A phenomena in many shamanic cultures the world over, is that of being possessed or taken over by a spirit of some sort. Some of these would explain it as an ancestor spirit, in others it would be a spirit of nature.

In Mongolian shamanism this spirit possession is known as being

in the state of *ongod oroad* - being taken over by the spirit. It even occurs in Western culture: the Religious Society of Friends were historically nicknamed 'Quakers' as they were seen to 'quake' when Spirit came into them - a nickname by which they are now commonly known.

personality in just a few seconds, and then act as a completely different person. They may also exhibit seemingly strange physical differences between the personalities, such as different allergies or even one personality being short-sighted while another is not.

The different personalities will probably have different genders, sexual orientations, ages, or even nationalities, and there have been extreme cases where one personality even speaks a language the other personalities do not.

Generally, people with DID have between two to ten personalities but there have been cases recorded where there have been hundreds of personalities in one body.

DID is still not very well understood by mental health professionals, and there has been a long history of mis-diagnosis. Once it is diagnosed correctly however, the patient may undergo extensive psychotherapy, often for years.

The aim of therapy used to be to gently 'dissolve' the walls separating the different personalities so that the dissociation could gradually diminish and the separate parts of the personality brought to an integrated whole. A more modern goal to therapy however is to enable a good communication between the different personalities as in a 'company board meeting', so the patient can come to a consensus of behaviour that is appropriate for all the personality parts.

This therapy will also need to enable the patient to come to terms with any traumatic cause of the condition and enable healing of that trauma.

In essence, the view of psychotherapy is that people always make the most healthy choice they can for themselves in order to survive. Someone 'choosing' to become DID therefore made a positive survival 'choice' - the best one they were able to make given their life challenges. The treatment aim is then to help the client find a better choice that makes their life richer and more functional.

A SHAMANIC VIEW OF DID

The shamanic view of DID is different but in some ways parallel to the psychological view. In the shamanic view, extreme trauma may well trigger extreme soul-loss. Soul-loss is when a part of the vital

energy essence and personality splits off from a person and retreats to a 'safe place' beyond their painful present reality to protect itself.

As a result of this soul-loss the person may lose their normal vitality and interest in life, feel de-energised and disconnected from everyday reality as if something vital was missing (which of course it is). They will also be energetically an empty vessel, and so in the shamanic concept of illness there is space in their energy for a 'lodger' to move in (see the article in this issue about de-possession by Betsy Bergstrom).

For the Western shamanic practitioner, entering a state of *ongod oroad*, or conscious intended spirit possession, is something generally not discussed. Our mainstream cultural fear of appearing mad, seems to result in a reluctance to admit to being possessed by a spirit with whom we are working shamanically. And yet many shamanic practitioners have told me that this form of possession happens to them in the course of their shamanic work; it happens to me too, during one particular healing practice I undertake.

When I am in that altered perception state I am not 'me'. I do not remember it clearly afterwards, but I know that I watch myself, watch what the body I generally know as 'mine' is doing - almost as if from the back of my head. The first time this happened I was not expecting it and it was very frightening. Nowadays I am more used to this happening, and as with other shamanic experiences that go beyond the ordinary world, it can be integrated within the disciplines of the system. So working with the shamanic consciousness and knowledge creates a framework for boundaries and control.

There is much in common between DID and some deep shamanic trance states, and historically shamans were often labelled as 'mentally ill' by those who studied them. The range of illness associated with shamanism includes Bipolar Disorder (which used to be called Manic Depression),

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Schizophrenia, Autistic Spectrum Disorders and DID. I would not in any way dismiss the psychological view of DID, but I would offer a shamanic perspective as a parallel system of understanding; during the personal empowerment process of psychotherapy it could be argued that the soul parts that initially fled in order to feel safe, can return once more, and there is now no longer a suitable lodging space for other spirit beings.

Here, a shamanic practitioner who is 'blessed' with DID, has offered to share with readers their experience of the condition and how they manage it within their shamanic practice. In the following interview Sam (not their real name) speaks frankly and courageously about a condition which causes much fear in others and often a sense of isolation in the person 'blessed' with it.

Speaking to Sam, she responds to my questions with the pronoun

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'we' - her story will explain why as you read on.

NBW: Sam, can you try and describe what DID feels like?

SAM: Asking a multiple how it feels to be who they are is much like asking a woman what it feels like to be a woman, or a man a man. What it is possible to talk about is how it felt when we realised that was what we were.

There was a wonderful book which helped us very much ¹. It helped correct the common misconception that all multiple systems function in the same or similar ways, which is a view fuelled by books and films like 'Sybil', 'When Rabbit Howls ²' or 'The Three Faces of Eve.'

Until we read that book, although those other popular stories resonated deeply inside us, we thought it couldn't be possible that we were multiple, because we failed to match up to those dramatised examples. The common truth is that becoming multiple is a sane and healthy way to survive an impossible situation and as every multiple's impossible situation is different, so each multiple system is a unique adaptation to circumstance.

Having suspected deep down inside for a long time - and having rejected the thought, and having had it forcibly rejected for us by the one friend we tried to broach the possibility with - we spent several more years steadfastly ignoring the written notes which appeared around the house, the voices inside and the pictures we drew.

NBW: That must have been disturbing to you though, did you seek therapy of any kind?

SAM: Yes, and as we progressed deeper and deeper into therapy the evidence built.

We found a book called 'The Flock' ³ which described a situation much closer to our reality and eventually plucked up courage to ask our then therapist to read it. Her response was 'now I understand,' and rapidly, in the safe therapy environment, we tumbled out from the protective mirrored shell within

which we had been existing, more or less safely into the world.

Here is one of a set of poems one of us wrote at the time:-

*A sacrifice of love beyond measure
The symbolic death of she who
held us safe, allowing the
multiple selves we truly are
to free fall into the light.
Locks tumbling, making sense
at last of our shadowy half
lives lived through a mirrored
glass so very darkly
At last the raggle taggle
army has arrived
The lost Tribe of Isisrael
With dignity and as of right
Each one of us steps forward with
Our name, Our pain,
Our individual store of memories
To share and set free.*

NBW: that must have been an extraordinary experience.

SAM: Yes, that heralded a time of huge liberation for us, both release and relief, and of getting to know one another in a totally new way, of coming to understand and put together fragments of our joint stories until we had something of a coherent whole - or at least more coherent than the mere handful of fragments we entered therapy with!

It was also very much about feeling 'real' for the first time ever. Until that point we had always felt as if we copied other people in everything, albeit an indiscernible split second behind. That actually was the truth, as there was not really any single part of us functional enough to live a full life and we had, and still do have, a hugely strong sense of self-preservation and knew above all how to keep ourselves safe and outside the mental health system.

Despite much that is written in the theoretical literature, there isn't a main core personality in our system and our therapist soon gave up trying to find one! We have individual voices - literally and metaphorically - and different handwriting and, until we became as co-conscious as we are today, used to communicate a lot through the written word, as the boxes and boxes full of paper in the cupboards will attest.

NBW: So how do you manage the everyday tasks of life?

SAM: We tend to have areas of life and tasks that we prefer, and fortunately there is at least one of



We tend to have areas of life and tasks that we prefer,

fortunately there is at least one of us who is happy washing up!

us who is happy washing up! But there is a relatively smooth operation in general and if one is too upset or tired to function, then there's almost invariably someone else who can come forward and take up the reins - and yes we do argue and row from time to time - so it's much like being in a family.

Most of us can shamanically journey and each have different skills and interests, so we're able, when needs be, to provide an instant and full healing circle when one of us needs it!

Some things can be annoying however, for instance painkillers can be next to useless, as sometimes the one capable of swallowing the pill isn't the one with the headache!

NBW: How many are you?

SAM: When we first emerged there were far more 'personalities' than there are now. Some were memory keepers, others possessing spirits who had come over time and, in the main, helped us to function in the world.

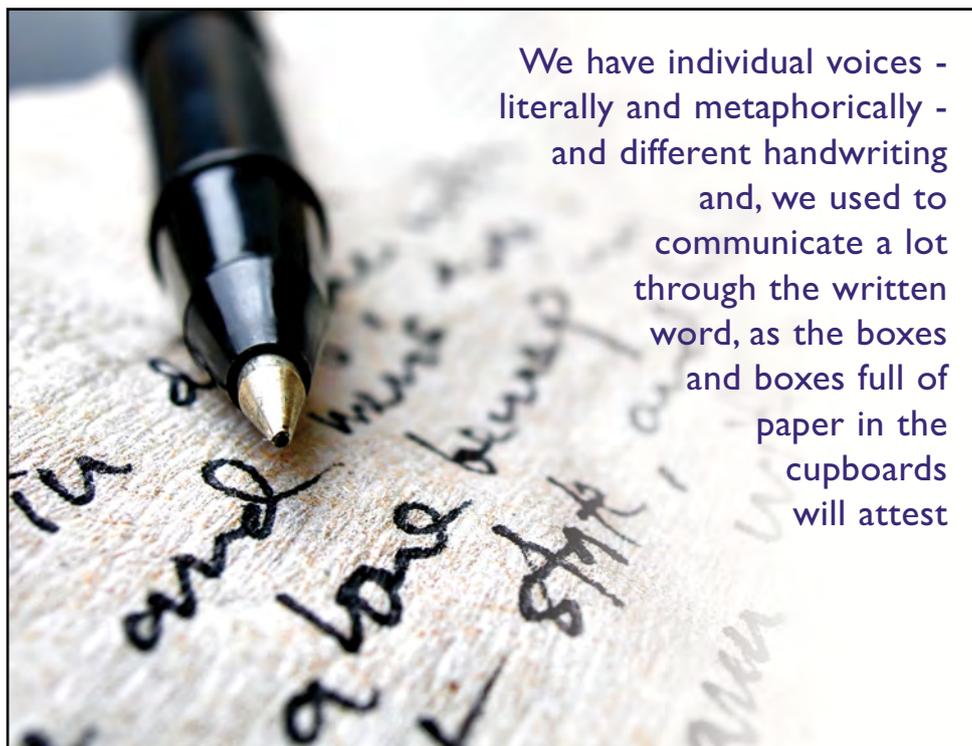
One such, called Chloe, acted for many years as housekeeper and nanny to us all, and fronted the world when we were in too great a disarray, and made sure we were fed and clean and clothed, we owe her an enormous debt of gratitude.

Now there are thirteen of us plus numerous - and as yet undifferentiated - babies. We 'emerged' sequentially, as if we were born as a complete onion, and the outer layer of the onion fronted the world. At each major trauma, or accumulation of traumas, that layer was shed and the next one in took centre stage, and the shed layer went deep inside.

Some held the role for weeks, others months and some for several years. We have been able to pinpoint the splitting places and their causes, even to the extent of one school report stating that 'a much more pleasing personality has emerged this term'!

We share a gender as we share a birthing, though to get certain ones of us to accept that they are girls and not boys hasn't always been easy or straightforward.

Our ages vary as did the age of each of the splits - cooking is frequently accompanied by a healthy rendition of 'the wheels on the bus' which must appear very odd from the outside, emanating from a distinctly middle-aged body.



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And we know when and where we are safe to be as we are, and when we needs must keep our dialogue sub vocal - just because you can't see it or hear it don't mean it ain't happening!

NBW: How do you manage communication between you all?

SAM: Communication isn't really a problem, we chatter endlessly when alone, we are frequently co-conscious now and each have the equivalent of our space inside and know where to find one another and to respect one another's privacy.

NBW: But this is not common knowledge to the world at large, so what has it been like for you being in 'normal' society?

It's fine being in 'normal' society, after all we've always been in it, so to an extent it's 'normal' to us too. As with all extremely precious things and events in life that may be open to misinterpretation, we're exceedingly careful who we tell and err always on the side of caution.

By and large those we have entrusted with our truth have embraced us as we are. We tend to have our own individual friends and respect one another's friendships, so the number of people who have met more than one of us at a sitting can be counted on the fingers of one hand. With those we feel safe and who are familiar with us all, we will sometimes take it in

turns to come out and chat.

In the early days when we were still in the throes of returning memories - usually in the form of full abreactive body memories - and often under great stress surviving in the wider world, it was often like a revolving door as we cycled in and out from minute to minute, each taking as much of 'out there' as we could stand, or escaping to 'out there' for respite from the horrors of 'in here'.

Before we had a clue what we are, it amazed people that we could be in meltdown one minute and giving directions to the train station the next, not a tear in sight.

NBW: It must have been enormously difficult to cope with. Have you had orthodox medical help?

SAM: Yes - and no. We had a brush with the world of institutional mental health at an early and impressionable age, and by and large have avoided it ever since.

On the whole our experience of the medical profession is that all they can say is 'we've nothing at all to offer you, therefore have these anti-depressants, and tranquilisers, and sleeping pills, and... which we know you don't need, but by having them you'll at least allow me to feel I've done something'!

There have been times over the years when we have been forced to come into contact with 'the professionals,' for example when our

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needs were becoming too extreme for safe holding within conventional private psychotherapy and we were seeking funding for the six month stay we'd been offered at a residential therapeutic community.

Our then doctor, on refusing to fund our treatment - despite its being sanctioned by two consultant psychiatrists - told us that our life would always be hard and miserable so we may as well get used to it, whilst his partner suggested that we remove ourselves from their area.

We never did get to the therapeutic community, but did acquire a social worker - again there was nothing on offer. For some reason we were deemed unsuitable for an incest survivors group, but she did give us her time and support, and was an invaluable resource for us all, accepting each and every one of us just the way we were. Another time we needed hospitalisation for a purely physical condition and the staff there knew

our situation and appeared to just accept it at face value which was a true gift.

By that time we had got ourselves a new and far more sympathetic doctor who certainly never questioned what we were, although knew there was no help on offer from within the regular health providers, and we suspect was grateful that we were being well held within the world of long-term private therapy.

NBW: It used to be more prevalent that therapists would try to put all the parts back together - into a single whole. What was your experience?

SAM: Integration was attempted, but it was possibly a bit of a contrived affair, which may account for my negative reaction to it. It was like having your whole family wiped out in a car crash and being left alone to rattle around as best you could. The grief was phenomenal... but in retrospect we suspect it was necessary to tide us

over until such time as we could reconvene in a healthier way, and so make de-integration a real choice, but that's a whole other saga!

NBW: You have obviously had to gain great self-awareness in order to understand yourselves. Do you consider you were born like this, or do you see external causes for your condition?

SAM: An abused child will find ways of surviving that abuse, and disassociation is a common response. Multiplicity tends to develop in the face of sustained long term abuse.

In our case it began at birth and the sustained sexual abuse continued until he got us pregnant and we had an abortion when we were fourteen. It was all kept quiet - how would the world judge our nice middle class family if that little lot got out?

In many ways it was the emotional and mental abuse which did more damage than the sexual and physical, although all have left their scars. The body never lies nor forgets, and the memories are stored inside until such time as it is safe for them to emerge.

We carried a child protection agency phone number with us, but discarded it when we discovered that life imprisonment doesn't literally mean 'life,' and if we asked for help, on the off chance we were believed, and he was sent to jail, he would one day be released and come and kill us.

NBW: With the physical world around you intolerable, what about the spirit world - where did that fit with you?

SAM: Well, we probably made our first shamanic journeys around the age of two, when we regularly made up stories about the animals we could see in the fluff on the blanket in our cot.

Around the age of thirteen we went through the traditional Christian rite of passage - confirmation. In our case this was shortly followed by a dramatic and life changing experience in which we felt literally expelled from the church by an unseen hand. We never returned, and our spiritual life turned to the wilds, especially to the beach nearby which became our sanctuary and solace. With all the advantages of hindsight it's often seemed that the spirits were yet again setting us on track.

Probably the profoundest impact it's had on our sense of the shamanic aspects of life is in our relationship to death. From the time we arrived in double figures we were never without a blade somewhere close to hand. It was an insurance policy, the promise that if things got so bad, then we had an escape route ready, and in having that safety net in place we gained the strength to carry on.

Walking hand in hand with death has made it our friend as well as our safety valve and shaped much of the shamanic work we are drawn towards.

NBW: How about your relationship with shamanism, when did that really start to become solid for you?

SAM: Shamanism found us rather than any one of us deliberately

seeking out a shamanic path.

At first it was intense and unforgettable encounters with creatures in the wild, then one of us precipitately entered a three month spell of non-stop spontaneous shamanic journeying.

These were journeys of pain, of healing, of heart stopping beauty and a profundity beyond anything any of us has encountered since. It was as a result of these journeys that we sought a shamanic teacher to help us learn how to enter into them deliberately rather than at the spirits' whim - this was a true spiritual emergence for us all.

We each have our own relationships with our own spirit helpers and power animals and there is no confusion for any of us between us and them, they are our helpers and as such external to us.

NBW: How would you explain spirit possession in regards to your condition, and how have you experienced it?

SAM: When we first realised that we were multiple and came tumbling out of what had contained us, there were amongst us what we would now recognise as possessing spirits, or what we would rather refer to as 'possession states'. In our case, with one very notable exception, these were generally beneficent extras, whose intention was to help rather than destroy, even if their methods may have been unconventional at times.

Possession states entered the gaps left by soul loss. Initially we had some like that, especially one, Harl, who was a chain-wielding biker and very protective, but wasn't actually part of the 'core birth-onion'.

As those of us from the birth-onion became stronger and more adept at managing our lives, these extras gradually moved on to other places, not with any great drama or fanfare, just a gentle slipping away.

For those of us from the original birthing, there is no sense of spirit possession in what we experience amongst ourselves, we're all here all the time, even when we're not manifesting in the outside world.

In our experience there's absolutely no similarity between 'spirit possession' and us switching. It's hard to explain but we know we're all a part of an 'in here' and when spirit comes through us we're quite clear that

it's coming through from 'out there.' It's rather like when a visitor comes to your house, and although they're in your house you know they're not part of your family which lives there!

Most of us can journey and have no difficulty distinguishing between a journey state and our everyday reality, so have no sense of being possessed in that way. We can only speak for ourselves and from our own experience so the experience of other multiple systems may be entirely different.

NBW: How do you see DID as a feature in your life, and see it within society as a whole.

SAM: For us DID is a map which best explains our experience, whether or not it's literally diagnostically verifiable.

Shamanically we could look at our situation - because it was so sequential - as serial soul loss. Though that said, it was only at the beginning of this year that we realised that the reason we had absolutely no memory of the sexual element was because there was a part which lived that side of our life, of whom we were totally unaware until now. And that's been an interesting one to come to terms with! As she came replete with the memories, it has filled in gaps and explained some other previously inexplicable bizarre behaviours.

It's important also to say we're not freaks who you invite to your dinner party in the hope they switch, or dangerous Jekyll and Hyde murderers who may go on the rampage at any second - we're just people who evolved an unconventional way of surviving the otherwise unsurvivable.

Yes - we may switch at any moment, but only usually because we find ourselves in a situation unbearably stressful to that one part, and a part more capable slips in to take over.

And it isn't only something that happens to poor, sick, deranged, psychotics! People often have an attitude of 'I'm OK, I can sit back and feel superior.. I'm not like that - I'm normal!' That attitude happens with possession states too: people think 'that's all very interesting and I'm sure it affects a lot of people but I know I'm not possessed.' There will be people reading this article who are DID, even if they aren't aware that's what they are, and it would be sad to scare them off.

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NOTES:

- 1: Multiple Personality Disorder from the Inside Out' W. Giller, Barry M. Cohen, Esther Giller, Lynn W. (Sidran Press 1991)
- 2: 'When Rabbit Howls' Truddi Chase (Jove Books 1990)
- 3: 'Flock: The Autobiography of a Multiple Personality' Joan Frances Casey (Ballantine Books 1992)

Support group and advice: www.dailystrength.org/c/Multiple-Personalities/support-group

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