

I am \_\_\_\_\_

## WHO AM I? – QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER



by Carolyn Spring

I am DID, I'm a woman, I'm a mother, a wife – who am I?

My therapist seems confused with that question. She wants to look for a deeper meaning, the question behind the question, but for me it really is that simple. What – who – am I? I don't know. I have no sense of a core, an inside-ness. Am I the same as other people? Am I different? Am I even me? I have times – lots of times, too many times – when I realise that I have been here but I have not been here. Who then am I when I am not here?

Sometimes there is just a blank in the missing time, like one of those exam papers or forms that say: Page left intentionally blank. There is a sense of emptiness, a gap, a pause, a missingness. And other times I remember myself as if watching a film, the words that I said frayed at the edges and out of context, perhaps with no

surroundings, no face on the person I was talking to, no sense of hot or cold or happy or sad, no sense of physically having been in a body, no sense of time or the passing of time or the reference of a fixed point in time. Then I am watching myself from the inside, unthinking, uncritically observing as if detached and floating outside of time, without any sense of where I am or who this person is who is speaking – words that I know are coming out of my mouth, words that I know in some sense have something to do with me and my life, but words that I am surprised to hear. And just occasionally there is a thought passing across the front of my mind: why did I say that? But even then the 'I' is uncertain, and perhaps it would be more accurate to say: why was that said?

Such is the experience, some of the time, for me. At least, I think it is me and I am never altogether sure. I have realised that



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it is easier, more efficient, not to question if it is me or not, to shrug my mental shoulders and accept it, and agree that it is, to go along with the ruse or the game or the ploy or whatever it is that everyone else is playing, to act like it's normal, to act like it's okay, and not to question.

When I question it, my mind tumbles over into knots and I stagger like a toddler taking their first steps. Did this happen? Is this me? I hear words describing events of hurt and hurting, of abuses and terrors and night-times and day-times and a whole alien cacophony of indescribable, impossible, atrocious things, and is this me? I hear, or I heard – time doesn't make much sense. I hear of this little girl and big, tall men, and I don't know who this little girl is except that she says 'I' and the mouth that says 'I' is mine. I am traumatised by the hearing if I consider it beyond that. Eventually, when I do, I laugh and shake it off, say, 'It doesn't matter', find something bizarrely and blackly humorous at the shredding of tissues on the carpet in front of me, and I wonder where time is, how long I've been there, wonder if it is my body that is tingling with pins and needles. It is a strange thing, this dissociation. It is warmly, reassuringly, undeniably familiar. This is the way it is, the way it always is – the floatiness, the sense of wondering of 'Is this me?' And I never know if it is.

I don't know if this is me now, sitting in a copycat franchised coffee shop: I could be anywhere in the country. Around me are young mothers with designer watches

and impossibly straightened hair. Is that real? Do their lives have anything to do with mine? This arcade of shops, all plastic, shiny, buy-me gloss: what does it have to do with terror and blood and bestial atrocities? Is it real? So much of the time, my mind seems to dance between two worlds. I don't know which one is real. I don't know which one is mine. I can see a neon-grotesque Burger King sign and there is grease in the air and pushchairs and immaculate fake-tan mothers with sunglasses on their heads, and bottles of Coke and old men with beer bellies and the jingle of a children's carousel and a shiny tiled floor leading to rows and rows and rows of glistening shop-fronts, and I wonder: is this real? Have I imagined it? Then at other times, the other images in my head, pouring out of my mouth – horrors that are familiar, and I can smell the fear in my palms, and words are tumbling out of my mouth, a panicky, terrible, confused, mish-mash narrative, and it feels real, more real than Burger King.

I look up and I am in my therapist's room. I look up and I am in the cafe area of the shopping mall. I look up and I am in bed in the dark. I look up and I don't know if I am I. There is no thread of continuity between these places, these experiences. Who am I now, writing this, re-reading this, re-writing this?

That is the problem with dissociation, with being DID. It is not a diagnosis of a state of mind, a state of being. It is a diagnosis of a whole multipack of states



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of minds and states of being that I cannot put into words. Am I DID? I don't know. I am, but the other I is not. I was abused, and the other I was not. I can remember trauma and torture and horror, but I cannot. And all day, we merge, we swim, we roll together like waves breaking on my mind. Who am I?

Confusion in therapy. I know that's true. No I don't. I'm looking forward to going away. I'm terrified about going away. It's not as clear cut as we'd like it to be. It's not a case of one part of me is ok and I'm not. It's more fluid, more viscerally in-and-out, spectral, than that. Even my physical, bodily states swim and merge and splash apart so that I don't know what I am. Am I cold, am I hot, do I need a wee? I don't know. Some of me does, some of me doesn't.

But gradually, over time, I have begun to find an inside me, a core me, a me that is still me even when time flutters around and I have been in-and-out. It's like weaving a single strand through multiple parts of a garment. There is something, somewhere, that hangs it all together. I am one person; I just have multiple parts. This kaleidoscopic interior vision of me is multiple and appears fragmented, but that fragmentation is a trick of the mind,

to make it less awful. Gradually, over time, I have been able to accept that I am the entirety of all of those parts, even though I can't see them all at the same time. I have a husband, a therapist, who stay the same. They are the same person. They are like a fixed point in the sky, my psychological North Star, to navigate around my internal world. They stay the same even when I do not. Their time runs only in forwards, never in reverse. When they are here they are here; they don't experience here-ness from over there. At first I found that curious, that they seemed so grounded in now, in here, in being themselves in the thisness of life. And then I began to crave it. Slipping away into the fuzzy elsewhere to avoid the reminders, the feelings, the sensation of pain, began (gradually, over time) to appeal less. I began to want to know who I am.

And I realised: I haven't known who I am because I haven't wanted to. I haven't wanted it to be true. But I am all of me. The parts who were abused. The parts who were taunted. The parts who were shamed. The parts who were unwanted. The parts who perpetrated.

I am all of me. I am all these parts of me. That is who I am. •

