



ALTERS ASSEMBLE



By Anonymous

There's no denying it: everyone likes a superhero. From the Greek gods to the current comic book heroes, the human race appears to be endlessly fascinated by the notion of power and ability that exceeds our natural levels of physical prowess and mental dexterity. Recently, the transformation of DC and Marvel characters onto the big screen has increased our interest in these fictional battles and displays of strength, courage and potential self-sacrifice. Most of us love an exhilarating battle between the forces of good and evil-not least the movie tycoons raking in the profits from the box office-but as I watched the latest addition to Marvel's Avenger series, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), sequel to *Avengers Assemble* (2012), it became

strikingly clear how many parallels there are between the Avengers and my life with dissociative identity disorder (DID).

Dissociative identity disorder occurs 'as a response to extreme trauma that occurs at an early age and usually over an extended period of time' (Bray Haddock, 2001, p.xvi). The survival mechanism afforded by DID means that instead of inhabiting a single identity, I have multiple personalities co-existing within a single, albeit fragmented, autonomy. This may seem strange to those who see me as a coherent and highly-functioning individual, but fundamentally 'that image is only an imitation: people who are multiple cannot think like the rest of [you] and [you] cannot think like them' (Miller, 2012, p.20). It is this void



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of shared perception that can make understanding DID so complicated-for everyone involved. As Rachel Turnbull says about people without DID: 'you make sense of my life through the matrix of your own experiences' (2015, p.27). When these experiences don't have sufficient similarity, we can struggle to find the words to explain them.

For me, this is why metaphors are invaluable. By using words from one realm of experience and applying them to another, we are able to conceptualise even the most abstract perspectives (Holding, 2015). Popular culture is rife with symbolism, but framing my DID within the clearly delineated universe of Marvel's Avengers was revelatory. Don't panic, I'm not saying I'm a superhero-that would make me delusional not dissociative! Rather, the characters and concepts behind this team of superheroes

have direct connotations with not only how I understand my sense of self, but also how DID is explained by clinicians.

These people may be isolated, unbalanced even, but I believe with the right push they can be exactly what we need.

(Nick Fury in Avengers Assemble, 2012)

At first glance, the Avengers are a random assortment of self-absorbed misfits. Any suggestion that they should be combined into an ultimate force of protection seems almost absurd. They are argumentative, egotistical and, on more than one occasion, out of control. Immediately as I write this, I see the parallel with the 'alters' or 'parts' of my personality who have developed from years of repeated dissociation. Looking at them from within our system of identities, they seem unrelated, unstructured and, more often than not, unnecessary. Over time and with therapy, I am coming to see that quite the opposite is true.

The fundamental feature of the Avengers (demi-god Thor notwithstanding) is their humanity. Before their particular traits or powers were utilised, they were normal people with the potential for normal lives. Like someone with a dissociative disorder, there was no expectation that their life would be overturned by a new set of circumstances, which would demand a new way of relating to the world. Perhaps the



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best example of this is Captain America. Known as the First Avenger, Steve Rogers was a less-than-average WW2 soldier who became genetically enhanced into a supersoldier, defeated the bad guys with his own sacrifice and spent nearly 70 years frozen inside his crashed aircraft. Not surprisingly, waking up in the 21st century was somewhat disconcerting. For those of us who have experienced 'lost time', the discomfort of the situation is not lost on us. Not knowing what has happened while you've been 'gone' is hard enough to live with, without being expected to save the world at the same time!

Rogers keeps a notebook of things to catch up with from his time on ice, so that he can fill in the blanks of history. In the same way, working through the past in therapy can be useful to join the dots between recalled events, so we can locate them in the past rather than having them intruding into the present via flashbacks and somatisation. The powerful force of flashback is utilised in *Age of Ultron* (2015) as Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow, relives traumatic childhood memories whilst under mind-control. The experiences she goes through as she becomes lost in her past mirror the flooding of pain and emotion that can occur when triggered. In fact, watching those scenes was almost too easy to relate to and I felt myself grasping at grounding

techniques to quell the rush of my own panic. Seeing it play out in front of me rather than within me, however, helped me to see not only what I already knew of the debilitating power of flashbacks, but also reminded me that a child cannot be held responsible for the things that are done to them or expected of them. Accepting that as a child I was a victim is still incredibly hard, yet seeing someone else in that situation makes clear and obvious sense. Watching Romanoff's initiation into life as an assassin may seem far-fetched to some, but the underlying principles of grooming and physical abuse will hold true for many others.

It is perhaps no surprise that Romanoff has an emotional connection with Bruce Banner. Whilst she has been trained to disconnect from her emotions in order to kill without conscience, Banner has learned to disconnect from his anger in order to prevent changing into the Hulk. The Jekyll/Hyde switch of mild-mannered scientist Banner into the rage-filled, muscle-ripped (and green) Hulk has to be the most obvious connection to DID. Banner is triggered into the Hulk without warning, tipping his entire personality out of balance so that, as he says, he is 'exposed, like a raw nerve' (*Avengers Assemble*, 2012). Out of control, he causes damage and destruction to anything in his way (hopefully bad guys) and when

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he returns to his original identity he has no recollection of his actions. Banner's storyline mirrors the fear I used to feel about switching into my parts. Like him, I would do anything to avoid losing control of what I deemed my real self. Over time, I am learning that the other parts of me are of great value and can often protect me in situations where I am overwhelmed-if I allow and respect them to do that. Banner comes to a similar realisation with the help of Iron Man, Tony Stark:

Stark: That much gamma exposure should have killed you.

Banner: So you're saying the Hulk - the other guy - saved my life. That's nice. It's a nice sentiment. Saved it for what?

Stark: I guess we'll find out.

Banner: You might not like that.

Stark: You just might.

(Avengers Assemble, 2012)

By the end of the film, Banner realises that the Hulk is needed as a member of the team to save the world and allows himself to switch to his other part. This acceptance, that sometimes it is necessary and purposeful to be another part of our self, is a hard yet crucial lesson to learn. Embracing rather than fighting your parts can take a long time and a lot of work. Even now, there are times when I think I should be able to do everything on my own. The truth, however, is that despite how

separate they may feel, they all contain an essence of me. To lose even part of that essence, or life force, would ultimately end in my own destruction. As my therapist has sought to remind my more suicidal parts over the years: 'If one goes, you all go'.

Similarly, Tony Stark learns the power of life essence when he loses his original (and not that admirable) identity to become Iron Man after he is wounded trying to sell his own missiles. By engineering a way to prevent internal shrapnel from entering his heart and killing him, he becomes reliant on his technology to keep him alive. He explains to Banner: 'This little circle of light - it's a part of me now. It's a terrible privilege' (Avengers Assemble, 2012).

In the same way, I rely on my parts to keep me alive. The situations from which they arose may indeed have been terrible, but having them with me now, to share my life and help me understand my life, is also a privilege. They have a vast depth of insight that I learn from constantly, not just when processing things in therapy. With them on my side, I can make more progress, much as Stark does when he works with the others instead of pursuing his own agenda.

The shared agenda of the Avengers is epitomised in their name. To avenge is to take vengeance on an act or person that has caused harm or humiliation.



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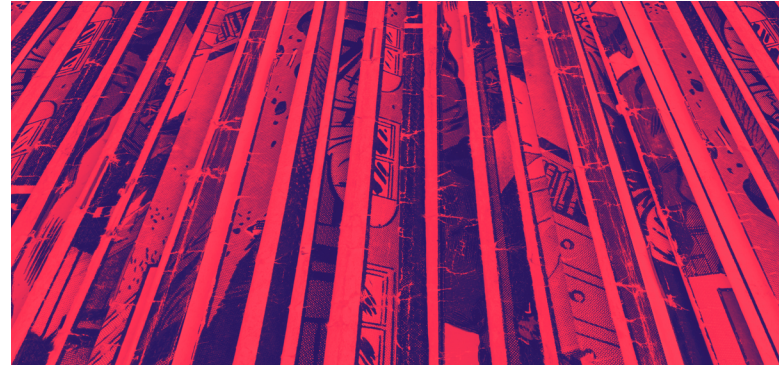
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Although synonymous with revenge, it evokes a greater sense of justice: whilst the idea of revenge can feel spiteful or ill-calculated, the desire to avenge oneself or another holds sentiments of truth and righteousness. As Carolyn Spring (2015) comments in her article on DID, 'Recovery is my best revenge': 'It's the part of us that stands up in the midst of evil and says, That ain't right!'

Yet often with DID, the circumstances surrounding past acts have created a feedback loop that prohibits us from feeling such antagonism to our perpetrators. Even when this loop is broken and these feelings begin to surface, it is still a challenge to acknowledge and accept the validity of the desire to exact some form of vengeance (directly or metaphorically).

For me, the clear comic book binary of good and evil shown in Avenger narratives helps me to clarify the shifting shades of grey that surround our memories (or not) and understanding (or not) of the past. First and foremost, an Avenger is someone who will fight for justice. Seeing myself and my team of parts in this light brings a consistent sense of hope for the future.

And just like DID, the key to the Avengers is their capacity to work together. As the Avengers' coordinator, Nick Fury, says:



The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people to see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could.
(Avengers Assemble, 2012)

The Avengers have no obvious connection to each other, apart from the fact that each of them has a specific skill that gives them an advantage in certain situations. In the same way, my collection of parts has drawn itself together to protect me from events beyond my control. Their role is to step in when their particular aptitude is most relevant and together they offer a wide skillset of coping mechanisms. Like the Avengers, their numbers grow and the lineup changes as we deal with different issues and events. For too long I resisted the acceptance of new members of the team, preferring the 'go to' parts who had served me faithfully time and again. Increasing times of destabilisation, however, forced me to admit that even Iron Man needs to



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rest from time to time! Allowing that part to have some space, not only helped me to see the unique abilities of other new or overlooked parts, but it also meant that when my Iron Man returned he would almost always have had his suit upgraded, making him stronger and more able to cope with the new things we were encountering in life and in therapy.

So for me, the biggest thing I have come to understand from the Avengers team is the concept itself: a team. When I first became aware of my DID it all seemed disjointed. I had parts of different ages and genders, personalities and aptitudes all thrown together in a seemingly disorganised mess. No-one communicated with each other for a long time and when eventually they did, it was with hostile distaste. How could what they were doing to help be as good as another part's attempts? Why should they get along with each other when they had survived till now on their own?

In Avenger terms, this parallel is writ large in their storylines. Not only are they shown to be disjointed and antagonistic, this feature is also played upon to the advantage of the current source of evil. When the Avengers are discontented with each other, they are unable to succeed in their overall aim to create peace. Only when they are united as a team and can see their individual roles working together can they become truly effective.

My therapist has spent many sessions helping me to encourage my parts to connect as a team, to 'all pull in the same direction'. It's not an easy task. Like the Avengers, there are some big egos to contend with! However, being able to remind myself, and them, of our overarching goal to obtain a sense of peace, both with the past and in the present, is an invaluable coping tool to have at my disposal. When things get heated internally as new parts arrive and want to show off their role-not always kindly-the intention to join together as one whole is what saves us from meltdown. And in time to come, as therapy progresses, things settle down and we become more integrated, the team may well disperse. But I know that, like the Avengers, they will always be there if I need them.

Agent Hill: What happens if we get in a situation like this again?

Fury: They'll come back.

Agent Hill: Why?

Fury: Because we'll need them to.

(Avengers Assemble, 2012)

I'm sure many people have phrases that help them keep focus and control. 'Avengers Assemble' may not be the most profound mantra in the world, but it works for us and that's something for which we remain grateful. ■

