



WHO'S **REALLY** RUNNING YOUR LIFE?

An introduction to Your *Inner* Family

By Peter K. Gerlach, MSW; Board Member
Stepfamily Association of America

Acknowledgment

I gratefully recognize a source of many of the ideas below: Richard Schwartz, Ph.D., and two groups of clinical colleagues with whom I studied the "Inner Family Systems model" during 1990-92. Dick had developed the model for over a decade as a therapist, researcher, and teacher. He said "my clients taught me about their inner parts and family, and how to work with them." His concepts closely match my own experience as a person, a therapist since 1981, and a lifelong student of human relations. I've blended my thoughts with his and several other theorists, and am responsible for what follows.

Links in this booklet lead to Web pages at the non-profit "Stepfamily inFormation" site <http://sfhelp.org>.

Ever Argue With Your Self?

Remember the last time you momentarily "*hated*" a beloved person? Or the last time you wanted to go to an interesting event, and an inner voice said "Oh, come on, stay home and *rest!*" Have you ever struggled between longing for a delicious treat, and "knowing" that it was "bad for me"? When was the last time you said (or heard) "I don't know what got into me!" or "She really seems like two people"? Do you ever have whole dialogs with yourself, or talk to yourself out loud? Ever wrestle with "breaking a bad habit," or felt "torn," or wondered where your dreams come from, and what they mean?

Most of us have inner discussions and battles many times a day. They're so common that we seldom notice them. Yet most of us don't know who these inner "voices" are or how to

harmonize them and effectively use the very real gifts our many "speakers" bring us.

This article proposes that these voices in us belong to a real *inner* family or team of "subselves" which can learn to be peaceful, cooperative, and highly productive in marvelous ways.

Meeting your inner family and helping it to function smoothly as a team vs. a squabbling set of infighters, is called "parts work" here. This article introduces you to your inner family and highlights some implications of learning to harmonize them. You can read more detail about these in my book *Who's Really Running Your Life?* (Xlibris.com), or the Web pages at <http://sfhelp.org/01/links01.htm>.

For perspective, let's briefly recap four major ideas about how people "tick": Freud's theories, transactional analysis, "multiple" personalities, and "inner children."

Inner "Parts" Aren't New

Socrates writes us across the ages that his inner life was controlled by "dai-mons."

Like him, people have tried for centuries to explain their thoughts, dreams, actions, and "natures." All cultures have evolved beliefs that spirits, god/s, imps, stars, leprechauns, fairies, goblins, cosmic and planetary rays, witches, angels, "ethers", ghosts, and space beings cause humans to feel, experience, think, and do weird and wonderful things.

Freud's 3 Parts and 3 Minds

Early last century, Sigmund Freud proposed a startling new idea: that we each have

three personality parts that determine who we "are": our Id, Ego, and Superego. He felt that they drove us to act from "instincts" and "drives" to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Freud also proposed that we all have three minds: the *unconscious* (never "knowable"), the *preconscious* (eventually knowable), and the *conscious*. He felt these three interact in ways we can't comprehend, causing inevitable mystery in what we think and do (or don't). Freud's ideas revolutionized at least the Western world's views on how to understand and heal "madness," depression, and many human "mental" problems.

Around 1950, scientists began an increasing exploration and use of *psychotropic drugs*. These reliably relieved depressions, controlled violent mood swings, and improved other troublesome human emotional behaviors. The combination of Freud's ideas and the new chemicals turned (many) shamans with rattles into psychiatrists with couches, in just four generations: an evolutionary fingersnap.

(Outer) Families Become "The Patient"

Also in the mid 1950's, several mental health pioneers began exploring the novel idea that clients' emotional problems could be eased by putting their whole family on the couch at once, so to speak. *Family therapy* flowered, bringing impressive results for many, specially when combined with emerging *communications* and *systems* theories. Clinicians increasingly began to work on outer families, while a dedicated core kept focused on taming and balancing Ids, Egos, and Superegos.

Because Freud's ideas were obscure to many, they were recast in the 1960's by professionals who used Transactional Analysis (TA). In 1967, Dr. Thomas Harris wrote "I'm OK - You're OK," which suggested that we each had inner Parent, Child, and Adult sub-personalities that determined our feelings, beliefs, and behavior. A therapeutic goal became helping people understand and balance these three inner entities, and keeping their Adult in charge. I know of no one who proposed treat-

ing the three together with inner family therapy.

While the TA idea was spreading through our culture, more psycho/biological knowledge evolved. This included growing evidence that alcoholism - long thought to come from a "weak will," a "defective character," or a "demon" (e.g. rum) - really came from a combination of the addicts' genes and childhood (family) trauma. It's now clear that addicts metabolize ethyl alcohol differently than non-addicts because of a genetic inheritance.

Our Inner Child Becomes Famous

In the late 1970's, a new set of mindscape pioneers suggested that the grown children of alcoholic families, whether addicted themselves or not, had common emotional traits and troubles like depression, low self esteem, and divorce/s. It became clear that kids in alcoholic families almost always were seriously (and accidentally) deprived of key emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical nurturing - as their parents had been. In the next decade, a flood of books, conferences, 12-step support groups, magazines, and two national advocacy groups erupted across the country for millions of troubled *Adult Children of Alcoholics* (ACoAs) to help them toward emotional and spiritual recovery.

From this came an explosion of national interest in nurturing and healing our *Inner Child* (singular), who retained the fear, sadness, and shame of real birthfamily trauma and low nurturance. Two kinds of people excited by this idea were adults coming from any kind of painful early years ("Adult Children"), and healers and entrepreneurs who wanted to help them. Because of unintended childhood neglect and abuse, our "Inner Children of the Past" were clearly *wounded*, *orphaned*, or *lost*. Unrecognized, they seemed to cause many of us serious personal problems.

One such problem, viewed now by many as a relationship compulsion as harmful as any chemical addiction, is codependence. Since the mid-80's, hundreds of Codependents Anonymous (CoDA) 12-step support groups have bloomed in every state, as a

rainbow of people admit and struggle to break free from powerful addictions to a lover, parent, child, or some other person.

Theorists proposed that codependents' inner children were terrified of abandonment, because as real kids, they had felt searingly neglected and rejected by caregivers at home and perhaps in school or at church. Where true, it often turned out that the *caregivers'* parents had been similarly abused and/or psychologically neglected... "Toxic parenting", and the crippling shame that it causes, was labeled "the gift that goes on giving..."

Because of the surge of public identification and interest in these ideas, programs and books now abound on healing from dysfunctional families, abusive or neglectful parents, and "emotionally absent" parents. An awful and hopeful offshoot is the mushrooming U.S. awareness of how common childhood sexual abuse has been and is. Professionals recently estimated that one of four American females and one of seven males is molested by their 18th birthday. The emotional and spiritual trauma from this is usually devastating and long lasting. To survive too little consistent emotional and spiritual nurturance (vs. thrive), young kids appear to "go to (inner) pieces:" our personalities "fragment" a little or a lot.

"Splitting" and Multiple Personalities

From studies across the world, mental health researchers now agree that adults and children surviving cataclysmic natural and man-made disasters like war and personal abuse often have an automatic protective reaction. Clinicians call it "mental *dissociation*," or "splitting." It probably comes from the brain adaptively "rewiring" itself into a network of semi-independent regions which become personality *parts* or *subelves*. This seems to be a natural way we humans are designed to avoid being overwhelmed by intolerably chaotic, terrifying, or painful experiences in early childhood.

One symptom of splitting is that survivors numb themselves, and (temporarily) feel no pain from a terrible physical or emotional in-

jury. Other symptoms are reality distortions like some "amnesia," believing that a current horror is happening to "someone else" (projection), or isn't happening at all (denial). Many (most?) delusions, hallucinations, neuroses, paranoias, and psychosomatic illnesses stem from this automatic reflex to protect ourselves from perceived outer and inner horrors.

Protective psychological "rewiring" allows a helpless abuse victim to "float up to the ceiling," "become an eagle soaring free," "visit the beach," or become a detached observer, vs. fully experiencing their agony and overwhelm. Children enduring intolerable sexual, emotional, physical, or spiritual abuse, including major deprivations and rejections, appear to do the same thing. To combat unbearable terror, shame, hopelessness, and loneliness, kids invent invisible, magical companions and/or retreating into dream worlds, which are absolutely real to them.

In the last 25 years, it's become well documented that a small percent of any human population has *truly* "split" (multiple personalities). These people repeatedly show patterns of hidden or obvious changes in thinking, abilities, and behavior, as though they literally become "another person" at times. Studies document that each subpersonality or *alter* in the host person can have its own IQ, memories, skills, voice, likes, and even unique allergies and eyeglass prescriptions!

Frequently, some alters don't know about each other. If they do, they can be deeply loyal, indifferent, or suspicious and fiercely competitive for control of the host person. Almost always, these *extremely* split people have experienced agonizing traumas in their early life. Historically, the public hears of only the most sensational of such cases, like "Sibyl," "When Rabbit Howls," or "the Three Faces of Eve."

Many such people who suffer from multiple personality disorder (MPD) are greatly frightened and embarrassed by its symptoms. They live with what feels like an uncontrollable inner life. Understandably, they try hard to deny or mask the evidence of their alters.

Someone in your life now may have MPD (now officially dubbed "Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)") without you suspecting it. Professionals working with these trauma-survivors patiently assist them towards awareness, acceptance, and eventual "fusion" and permanent integration of some alters. Many subjective DID reports of this happening are now documented.

The 90's: Decade of the Inner Family?

In 100 years, then, at least part of our Western society has gone from believing in moon rays (making "lunatics") and devils to (outer) family therapy, psychological splitting and multiple personalities, inner children, adults and parents, and recovery from childhood trauma.

The concept of ordinary persons *normally* having a whole inner family or team of "sub-selves" simply links and extends these developing ideas. There's growing evidence that most of us are not full multiples, and *do* form multi-part personalities. Some people have more parts ("sub-selves") than others, depending on the mix of pain, fear, and nurturance they experienced as a young child. Since I've begun studying this phenomenon, I've seen many people identify 15 or more active sub-selves *without being "crazy" in the least* - though at times we can feel that way!

Our sub-selves seem to be like a group of people living in the same dwelling. They each have different skills, jobs, ages, values, and needs, and they may or may not know about, understand, and accept each other. Sub-selves can ally, fight bitterly, or ignore or hide from some others, like members of any group. And like any crowd working together, if individual sub-selves are acknowledged, respected, and effectively led, stress drops, and harmony, cooperation, and achievements soar!

Our language doesn't yet have an accepted word to describe the sub-selves who dwell within us. Yet we often write and speak about our parts: "He was of two minds...", "She has a musical side to her," "I'm getting a

double message from you," "Make up your *mind*, will you?", and "Sometimes she can be very jealous." Here, we'll use the terms **parts**, **sub-selves**, inner team or family **members**, and **inner voices**, interchangeably. Pick which term feels best to you or choose your own...

Is it possible or probable that "you" are really a number of semi-independent sub-selves interacting with your body? What are you thinking right now? Is there more than one voice (*thought stream*)? If so, who's "speaking"? Where did they come from? How do those sub-selves feel about each other? What do they want? What would your life be like if your sub-selves cooperated as a loyal team with a common goal (life purpose)? What might happen to your favorite worries, "bad habits" (like smoking, under-exercising, and overeating), and stresses?

Meet Your Inner Family

Your personal group of inner sub-selves is as unique as your fingerprints. Yet most of us have some personality parts with common "jobs" or roles. They can be called by a wide range of names, but their *functions* seem the same.

Three Groups of Sub-selves

However labeled, our inner team members seem to fall into three sets (was Freud on the right track?). They can be called Regulars, Vulnerables, and Guardians. While each inner-family member brings us unique and special talents, abilities, and limits, those in each group have common traits. All three teams are unified by one goal: to protect us from extreme discomforts and dangers, and to *survive* in the world moment to moment. This is not the same as *thriving*.

The Regulars are the "general staff" that guide us through daily life situations when things appear safe enough. Richard Schwartz calls them *Managers*. A vital concept is that one of the standard Regulars is a part we'll call our **true Self**, (capital "S"). Her or his

unique natural talent is *excellent* inner leadership, like an expert CEO, athletic coach, orchestra conductor, or airplane captain. This subself can help us be marvelously effective and serene, or may be blocked from doing so by other agitated, distrustful subselves. The word **self** (small "s") means all our parts together as a group, like a *class* of students and their instructor.

Vulnerable parts are usually young (developmentally), ranging from embryos to infants to teens. *All our inner kids* fit here: most of us have several. Because they are inexperienced, naive, and dependent, Vulnerables become very excited easily (*activated* or *energized*). Like real children, they risk significant injury and *pain* from impulsive behaviors. Our inner kids can be intensely needy, joyous, amazed, or thrilled. When they "activate," they seem to infuse or "take over" our Self. Richard Schwartz calls this **blending**. As this happens, we're flooded with this young part's perceptions, emotions, and needs. *We* (adults) act impulsively, and "become childish." Has this ever happened to you? ("I'm 46, and I feel like a kid around my Dad.")

To protect one or more Vulnerables or us as a whole, our **Guardian parts** stay on constant alert to imagined or actual dangers. They're like a Green Beret or SWAT team of dedicated specialists who watch even when we sleep. Normally inactive, one or several Guardians spring into action whenever they believe that a Vulnerable part is too upset or may be in danger. They too can blend and disable our Self then, often causing extreme reactions and behaviors that are hurtful to us or others.

Typical signs of Guardians in action are "failing," "forgetting," "spacing or numbing out," procrastination, apathy, screaming, seduction, stealing, abuse to self or others, lying, sickness, depression, insomnia, physical pain (like migraines) or illness, delusions, phobias, suicidal thoughts, addictions, and many more...

Such harmful-protective actions may seem crazy or paradoxical. Typical Guardians seem to have their own kind of logic. With narrow

views, and often badly distorted information, they're fiercely dedicated to protecting us and our defenseless inner kids. *Guardians stand down only when they trust that our Self and other Regulars can reliably keep our Vulnerables safe.* Building this trust over time, and freeing and empowering your Self to naturally harmonize and lead your three teams, is the goal of "parts work."

Typical Subselves

Who comprises your three inner groups? Though *each of us has a unique roster*, some parts seem to be very common in *function* among us all. Some functions or roles are done by a single part, and some by several. You probably have some, not all, of these. See whom you recognize...

Typical Inner-family **Regular** Subselves

- **Self** / Leader / Coach / CEO / Chairperson
- Adult / Co-Exec ("Common sense")
- Healer / Health Director
- Analyzer / Thinker
- Spiritual One
- Wise One / Sage / Crone
- Nurturer / Good Mom / Good Dad
- Survivor
- Historian ("memory")
- Artist / Creative One
- Organizer / Planner
- Striver / Do-er / Achiever
- Professional One
- Judge
- Observer
- Organizer / Planner

Typical **Vulnerable** Subselves (Inner Children)

- Innocent / Naive Child
- Happy / Playful Child
- Shamed Child
- Sad / Grieving Child
- Playful / Social Child
- Anxious / Terrified Child
- Curious Child / Student
- Guilty Child
- Joker / Clown / Trickster
- Fetus / Infant
- Awed / Delighted Child
- Loving Child
- Lonely / Lost Child
- Dreamer / Fantasizer
- Lusty One (often a teen)

Typical **Guardian** Subselves (goal: protect the Vulnerables)

- Warrior / Amazon
- Indulger / Addict
- Controller / Manipulator
- Hermit / Loner
- Catastrophizer / Pessimist
- Abuser / Rager / Sadist
- Saboteur / Loser
- Entertainer / Pretender
- Black Sheep / Scapegoat
- Rationalizer
- Hypochondriac / Sick One
- Anesthetist / Numb-er
- Assassin / Suicider
- Evader / Avoider
- Perfectionist / Idealist
- Witch / Bitch
- Rebel / Defier
- Liar / Con artist
- Hoarder / Miser
- Psycho / Weirdo
- Saint / Martyr
- People Pleaser
- Procrastinator
- Victim / Helpless One
- Worrier / Panicked One
- Seducer / Tramp / Tease
- Distracter / Confuser
- Illusionist / Magician
- Vagabond / Drifter / Bum
- Daredevil / Risk taker
- Thief
- Hero(ine) / Star
- Critic / Shamer / Blamer

The purpose or function of each subself is more important than its name here. With some editing, do you see the whole "You" represented here? Who *are you*, anyway? If

y'all were just one Being, I'd ask "who *is* you?"!

Higher Parts: A Fourth Group?

Many believe we each have one or several **spiritual parts**. These live inside us, "somewhere else," or both. People speak of special experiences with their *Higher Self*, a *Collective Unconscious*, *Mastermind*, *Soul*, *Higher Power*, *Guide*, *the One or Old Ones*, and/or a *Guardian Angel*. Many followers of Jesus experience the *indwelling Christ* or *Spirit within*, guiding us by a "still, small caring **Future Self**. Such spiritual energies are ridiculous, fanciful, or absurd to some people, while others are certain of them from personal experience. Do, or could, you have *spiritual* family members who care for, nurture, and protect you? How might they communicate with you, or vice versa? Who or what do you pray to, if you do?

In his years of inner-family work, Dick Schwartz reports experiences of some (not all) people becoming aware of an external spiritual "councils" or "watchers" that send caring guidance at crucial times. Could this be the source of *hunches*, *knowings*, *premonitions*, and *intuition*?

I'd be surprised if you weren't wondering some of these standard questions...

What Are My Parts Like?

While each subself is unique within us, they all seem to have common traits. From the reports of hundreds of people who have done parts work, our inner-family members all seem to:

- **Be semi-independent regions of our brains**. As such, they can't be "killed," fired, ejected, or banished. They *can* be refocused and retrained, and are often eager to do so, when that feels safe to do.
- **Be benign**: from its own view, every subself means us well.
- **Be developed or not**, depending on inner and outer events and environments.
- **Activate or rest**, depending on perceived current inner and outer life conditions.

voice." Millions of oriental and other peoples venerate and obey ancestral *spirits*.

Other millions seek their *Buddha Nature*. Many Native Americans and others *know* they have a Totem, or Spirit Guide, a special visionary and real Being who watches over, guides, and protects them. In her interesting 1990 book "Recreating Your Self," therapist Nancy Napier proposes that we can meet and be advised by our wise and

- **Have individually-unique talents** and abilities, and a primary job or mission that subselves use them for. Each part also has limits, and they...
- **Have their own thoughts**, ideas, feelings, and perceptions of the inner and outer world - which are sometimes very wrong.

And our talented subselves...

- **Are able to quickly change** to new benign inner goals, when they appear useful and viable; and they...
- **Want inner and outer recognition**, respect, and appreciation for their efforts, and respond to these "just like people do."
- **Are extremely self-protective** of themselves and us, though their ideas of protection, paradoxically, may cause us pain.
- **Are of equal value to us**. As in any true team, there is no one best part, overall. Each subself excels in certain situations.
- **Live in the present or the past**. When feeling safe enough, those in the (usually traumatic) past can come to live in the present.

And our subselves can...

- **Communicate with each other** and with "us" via thoughts, "voices", hunches, feelings, images, visions, memories, day and night dreams, and physical sensations, like "tight" stomachs and throats, neck and back pains, cramps, headaches, tinglings or numbnesses, "floating anxiety", "panic attacks", warm or cool skins, thumping hearts, "crawling" and "light" feelings, and many others.
- **Be male, female, or neither**, regardless of the gender of their person.

- Not know each other, or misunderstand, fear, distrust, and compete with each other, alone or as allies.
- Disguise themselves or hide from "us" and each other, if feeling confused or unsafe.
- Have preferred names, specific ages, and favorite locations in our bodies, which can change.
- Perceive that they have their own "body," which may be "lost" via real-life trauma, and regained via parts work.
- Return to remembered real traumas, and, with planning and new inner-family awareness, leadership, and alliances, "re-do" these events to reduce or end old fears and compulsions.
- Cause us and relieve us of many physical and emotional symptoms; and...
- Be able to (eventually) function automatically as a true co-operative team, lead by our Self or its delegates in any situation.

More Detail: Key Subself Traits

Our personality parts will often give us "voices" and/or images of themselves on request, either clear and accurate, or symbolic or disguised. They want to be noticed and heard! Often very distrustful at first, they may hide until they feel it's safe to be known by other parts or people. One scared part may block another from identifying itself. Some people only have different inner "voices," while others have images, feelings, or a combination.

The images parts use can be of real or imaginary children or adults; cartoon or fiction characters; males, females, or neither; plants, animals, or objects in Nature; geometric or abstract shapes... just about anything. One part chose the image of "a pile of black dirt." Another was "a pack of ferrets."

Parts can change their images as they feel more trusting, or use alternating images, depending on how they feel. Your parts are neural regions, *not* their images. So if a subself looks or sounds like your childhood Father, it's not *him!*

Some of your subselves live in the present, and others are trapped in the past. The latter are usually young ones or Guardians who literally don't know or believe that the world is different than when they "began" (i.e. started developing). That may have in your mother's womb, or when you were four days, or three, seven, or 13 years, old. They pursue their goals based on beliefs that are no longer true, but they minimize or don't believe that.

Parts may know they're in the past, but can fear shifting to the present, or not know how to. In parts work, they can tour your present life and choose to live here when that feels safe to everyone. When they do, people usually report feeling noticeably more "together." Does "get it (my act) together" take on a new meaning here?

Each subself brings you one or several special abilities like compassion, wisdom, joy, humor, concentration, playfulness, curiosity, creativity, patience, bravery, and so on. Building inner-family awareness and cooperation lets these gifts be used in combinations that best fit any moment. These gifts and the energies that power them can be channeled and directed to harm or help you in any situation.

Our subselves can learn and change their minds about themselves, each other, and the real world. They can switch goals and strategies within us quickly, and work cooperatively and peacefully with each other. Like most team members who feel useful and appreciated, they really prefer this, once they believe it's really possible and safe. This inner-family cooperation can build over time, with loving patience and intentional subself education, negotiation, and problem solving.

What are you "hearing" and feeling now? Who's "speaking"?

Though some subselves may seem "bad" or "evil" at first, they all truly mean to *help*. They intensely fear that some catastrophe will happen to you if they stop what they're doing, even if it causes their host person pain or harm. Such parts see no acceptable alternatives to their way of keeping you safe. They

also greatly fear losing their "job." When they learn of safe alternatives, there's often another role they'd rather take.

For example, a woman plagued by repeated "uncontrollable" failures at work eventually found a *Saboteur* part that was responsible. It feared that if the woman was as successful as she was capable of being, she would "get a swelled head," reap scorn and ridicule, and *be rejected again* (as in her childhood). The *Saboteur* used the inner image of a curly-haired five year old girl. She acknowledged that by making the woman "forget" things, procrastinate, and not propose innovative ideas, it was hurting her, but this devoted Guardian subself saw no options to protecting the woman from certain rejection.

After meeting the woman's Self and some negotiation and retraining, the *Saboteur* said she would rather become a spiritual director for all the other parts. With their agreement, she tried that out. The woman reported feeling "different" about herself, and that her life changed "for the better..."

A controversial implication of this idea is that *there are no intrinsically "evil" or "bad" people*. There are *profoundly wounded* people whose chaotic parts live in a distorted, terrifying, shameful inner past. They do cause real pain and suffering to themselves and others. Other people have real physical and neural disabilities and chemical imbalances. They too can do bad things, but (I believe) are not immoral or evil by nature. *Inner-family work offers genuine hope of positive change to wounded people, and drugs and medical procedures can relieve some of the latter.*

When our subselves are terrified or deeply hurt, angry, or ashamed, they can try to "take us over." Like "real people," subselves fight with each other regularly, each believing it's right, and wanting its way with and for you. Without internal trust and Self leadership, these battles often hurt us and others. When this happens, we feel torn, confused, "uneasy", and perhaps awash in conflicting feelings about a person, idea, or event. These times are just like a group wres-

ting over control of a car: one subself wants to go faster; another to hit the brakes, a third holds their head and screams, while a fourth pulls on the wheel and yells "we've got to turn, right *now!*" Ever feel anything like this? Who "wins"?

Because our true Self is distrusted and overwhelmed (blended) at such times, we lose our ability to react calmly to situations, make balanced decisions, and coordinate and use our subselves' talents wisely. A common reaction at such times is "I don't know *what* got into me (or *you!*)!"

Someone living in fear all the time (i.e. constantly blended with a terrified Vulnerable) may never realize this is happening. S/He may have never experienced the serenity and power of having their Self trusted and in charge! Without inner-family awareness, such people live as terrified and deeply unhappy children guiltily masquerading as adults their entire lives. *The potential to change this re-occurs with every sunrise.*

Parts work (inner-family harmonizing) helps people see their daily inner conflicts in a new way. It helps their Self or competent, trusted delegates to "drive." This skilled leader part takes in the advice of other inner team members involved, adds his or her own wisdom, and calmly makes decisions that best fit current and long-term situations. The more this happens, the greater the trust Vulnerable and Guardian subselves feel in the Self's ability to value and listen to them, and keep everyone safe.

Before parts work, *the average peace or chaos in our inner family usually (1) mimics the emotional conditions in our childhood years, and (2) creates and seeks similar conditions in our present outer family and work lives.* We often unconsciously reproduce our real early-family deprivations and traumas over and over...

Where Did My Subselves Come From?

It seems that *we're born with the capacity to develop subselves, specially the Regulars.* Vulnerable and Guardian parts seem to de-

velop after some major traumatic incidents or periods that we experience, usually as infants (or embryos?) and pre-teen children.

These are times we felt agonizingly hurt, shamed, confused, stressed, or terrified by caregivers, teachers, strangers, animals, or Nature. Often these traumas are so shocking and painful (e.g. abandonments and abuse) that we protectively "forget" they happened. The personality fragments that appear after these events seem to *never* forget. They tirelessly guard us against similar wounding and harm, long after any real threat is gone.

When feeling safe, subselves will usually tell or show what "started" them via thought streams, memories, and/or flash-backs. Often, Vulnerable parts are the same age as we were as real children when some great pain, shame, or terror occurred. Gently educating these young ones and their Guardians, and moving subselves to the present when they all feel safe, can end harmful obsessions, compulsions, and other habits.

For example: how does a child cope with the searing pains of feeling repeatedly ignored, ridiculed, or beaten by a beloved, essential, parent? She can unconsciously develop a subself which aims to guard her from ever really trusting and relying on, and being shamed or hurt by, any adult male or female. Other subselves may oppose this and strive for healthy relationships with safe adults.

This creates a draining inner tension the girl or woman may not be conscious of. It can cause her to "endlessly" feel exhausted, irritable, depressed, and to have dissatisfying approach-avoid, roller-coaster relationships "over and over." Meeting all her subselves respectfully and patiently, bringing any "stuck" in the past safely into the present, and making peace between her warring inner subselves to let her Self lead, offers potential healing for such painful, depressing, unconscious struggles.

What Do My Parts Want?

Every subself seems devoted to keeping their host person and themselves safe from

pain and harm, as *they* define "safe." Like people, they strive fiercely to keep their roles or "jobs" intact and to be free to use their gifts productively. Each personality part also appears to long for recognition, trust, respect, and appreciation for what they ceaselessly try to do for us.

At first, some subselves typically fear that others, and/or an external friend or professional, will misunderstand and dislike them, and want to "fire," kill, or banish them. Such parts can resist your meeting or disclosing your inner teams (inner voices: "*What stupidity! A real waste of time! Don't be a jerk! You're weird! This'll never work! STOP! You'll uncover a horror you can't handle! You'll flip out!*")

Or these subselves can try to hide themselves by blocking any thoughts, sensations, images, or inwardly saying "*I won't talk to you or let you "see" (image) me!*" These are normal defenses which subside as parts come to trust that they and you are safe.

Distrustful subselves can also be terrified that if you explore your inner crew, you'll find and "free" a paralyzed part they see as very vulnerable or dangerous to you or them. Patience, empathy, and safe risk-takings change this. Other inner-family members, specially young ones, will welcome you ("*I've waited so long to be noticed and cared for! Please don't leave me!*")

If I Have All These Parts ... Who am "I, Myself;" Who's ME?

Terms can be confusing at first. "Me," "myself," and "I" each usually mean *all* your physical, emotional, and spiritual parts together: the whole person called by your name. Your Self (capital "S") denotes your inner leader/coordinator subself. When agitated parts blend with (take over) your Self, you may experience their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and goals as "me." **They are not you** as a whole. If another part is controlling your Self, "I" and "Me" refer to that part, *not* you as a whole person. Confusions sub-

side when your Self is enabled, well trusted, and free to lead.

Incidentally, Regular subselves can take over your Self just like Vulnerables and Guardians. Know anyone who's "always in their head"? Their Self is probably controlled by their distrustful *Analyzer*, who may fear that allowing emotions would be disastrous to the person. Can you think of someone constantly obsessed with others' opinions and being "right"? Their Self may be "always" controlled by an alliance of their hyperanxious *Judge*, *Perfectionist*, and *Shamed One*.

What's My Self Like?

Like all parts, your true Self has special abilities. It is not more "powerful" or "better" than any other subself. Her or His main talent and aim is to be an excellent personality leader. As such, this part's gifts are to (a) realistically perceive situations in light of your major abilities and life goals, (b) seek and evaluate the counsel of inner and outer advisors, and then (c) calmly coordinate other parts in making effective decisions and acting on them.

Your Self is like a naturally talented orchestra conductor, drama or dance troupe director, congregational minister, or an athletic team coach. S/He skillfully clarifies and communicates goals, resolves impasses, delegates responsibilities, and builds morale and teamwork. Your Self can give recognition and praise, coach, and make artistic, complex, and "tough" judgments well, every time. When trusted by all other parts and free to lead, s/he can reliably counsel, encourage, and empower other confused or overexcited parts in all kinds of life situations. Can you imagine having such a subself in charge of your life?

At any moment, your Self may be free to lead and coordinate, strongly influenced or controlled by, or blocked or paralyzed by other subselves. Your Self is unlike a coach or musical conductor in that it can't fire rebellious team members. S/He can't stop other parts from interfering or taking control. There

is no board of directors or police to appeal to. S/He needs trust and willing co-operation from your other parts to be *really* effective for them and you. Subselves can only come to believe in the judgment and leadership of your Self from experience. They then *want* to follow your Self from respect and trust rather than fear, resignation, or duty.

As an eye can't behold itself without a mirror, your Self can't "see" itself in an inner image. S/He is the see-er. So if you work with your inner family and you image "your Self," know that it's *another* part. The "you" who's "working" is your Self. If your un-blended Self says "I," it may mean your whole person or the Self alone. This gets clearer as you do more parts work.

Some theorists believe that we have an inner family or "cast of characters" *without* a leading Self. Our momentary thoughts, feelings, and actions are a blend of all our parts, which get along by group consensus as some communes and organizations do. Leader-Self or family consensus - which concept fits better for you? From years of study and doing inner family therapy with scores of people, I believe that we each have a skillful and dedicated executive Self among our crew.

How Do I know if My Self is Leading?

Have you ever belonged to a harmonious team of people with a common purpose and a leader you all liked, respected, and really trusted? How did you *feel* in that group? When this happens in their *inner* family, people say they feel *calm* or *serene*, *centered*, *light*, *strong*, *clear*, *firm*, *purposeful*, *focused*, *decisive*, *wise*, *alive*, *alert*, "up," *aware*, *resilient*, *realistically optimistic*, and *grounded*, even in a crisis. These feelings are sure signs your Self is unblended and free to lead. Have you had periods of feeling some mix of those? How often do you get them? Would you like them more often? Dumb question?

Many people from low-nurturance childhoods have rarely or *never* experienced a clear-minded period of time when their true Self was truly in charge. Understandably,

they may scoff at the idea that inner-family harmony is a real option for them or anyone.

How Do Parts Behave?

A true story: A single mother holding a very stressful and responsible managerial job began to develop severe back pains that woke her up in the middle of most nights. As she tried to fall asleep again, she usually experienced "mind racing": obsessing on the chaos at work, and the difficult situations she faced there and personally. Her doctor and a chiropractor could find nothing physically wrong. Meditation, aspirin, and prayer didn't help. She was becoming more and more exhausted, irritable, and distracted both at work and with her early-teen daughter and friends.

Inner-family inquiries revealed a part who said clearly it was responsible for the back pain and mind-racing. It used the image of a hulking teenage boy. He said he knew he was causing the woman distress and pain, but saw no other way to ensure that she had enough time to carefully think through the next day's activities. He only vaguely knew of her Self, and had no trust that she or any other part could reliably protect the woman against "failing" and being humiliated and shamed at work. It developed that the woman had a very young part that believed she was "no good," and the "Hulk" was devoted to protecting her.

When respectfully acknowledged, "Hulk" was willing to meet with the woman's Self, and other competent Regulars like her *Professional One*. Over time, Hulk said he was willing to try to let them prepare adequately for the day's work. Her back pains stopped and didn't recur. True story.

Is There Any Danger In Meeting My Inner Family?

No! At first, your Guardians and Vulnerables may feel alarmed, and strongly resist. As they gradually come to trust that your intent is to learn about, appreciate, and help each member use its gifts fully and effec-

tively, and to reduce inner and outer conflict and stress, their resistances shift to enthusiastic co-operation.

In ignorance and fear, our culture links adaptive "false-self" formation and multi-part personalities with mental illness, and *craziness*. People who show this extreme fragmentation (DID) are often sensationalized by in the media and are misunderstood and feared. The idea that we *all* have a team of semi-independent subselves is not yet commonly considered, much less accepted.

When first hearing this inner-family concept, people are often skeptical, scornful, or amused by it (how about *you?*). This may be one or more scared parts doing its defensive job well. It also may be that such people truly have no inner team, and really do "have it together." In my experience, this is *rare!*

Some people's Guardians or Vulnerables fear that doing parts work will unleash some awful "force" or indefinable, destructive "things," or overwhelming feelings. In my 12 years' experience, this isn't true. What *can* happen - when your Self and Guardians clearly believe you're strong enough - is that repressed experiences and related memories and feelings can be *safely* accessed and released. Such recall often signals breaking old, protective denials, and the release of frozen grief. These are tolerably uncomfortable, healing times.

I now believe that over time, such releases can free many courageous people from unconscious bondage to some (not all) physical conditions like chronic pain, asthma, headaches, and insomnia; emotional states like panic or rage attacks, depressions, "hyperactivity," "seasonal affective disorder," or "numbness;" or destructive habits like obsessions, reflexive pessimism, addictions, over-isolation, and self-sabotage.

Harmonizing your inner family is fail-safe: you (all) control it. You do only what you wish, when you wish, and how you want to. This work is not magic or a cure-all. It is an effective way for many people to feel calmer and more confidence and enjoyment in their life, over time. When used cooperatively and with

appropriate education, parts work can often help resolve some vexing relationship problems, including codependence, marital conflict, and parent-child struggles.

Do Your and My Parts Interact?

All the time! My Vulnerables and Guardians are regularly activated by perceived threats of attack or rejection by "you" (your subselves), and vice versa. People with a history of relationship struggles may have seldom or never experienced a steady pairing of (my Self's in charge) and (your Self's in charge) with a friend or lover. I suspect the latter is often true of *soulmates*.

In their fascinating 1989 paperback "Embracing Each Other," voice-dialog pioneers Hal Stone and Sidra Winkleman-Stone explore this topic in depth. After 20 years' clinical study, their opinion is that people with disowned (denied) parts are compulsively drawn to successive partners who have a very active similar part. These repressed parts are often self-judged as unlikable or repulsive, being selfish, profane, brazen, dishonest, preachy, lazy, or the like. By consciously accepting the disowned parts and not allowing them to dominate, the compulsive relationships fade.

Many of the stressful behavioral cycles we have with special people become clear and can change via parts work. For instance:

T Jack is attracted to Anita, both emotionally (Adult man, Needy Boy, and Good Father subselves) and sexually (Lusting Teen part). Anita responds *unconsciously* to each of these with four complementary subselves – her...

- Adult Woman,
- Good Mom,
- Lonely Girl, and her ...
- Sensual Female.

If Jack seems to pull away, her Lonely Girl gets scared and sad, based on early real emotional abandonment by her father. One or several distrustful Guardians quickly blend

and take her Self over. They may "make" her behavior shaming, seductive, rejecting, abusive, controlling, and/or pitiable.

Jack's dominant subselves can respond to these in many ways. If Anita's Guardian is a *Guilt Tripper*, Jack's sensitive *Shamed Child* will feel awful. His *People-Pleaser* Guardian will spring to life, so Jack apologizes to Anita and becomes attentive again. Her *Scared Girl* is reassured, so the *Guilt Tripper* stands down, freeing her Self. His *Shamed Child* gradually feels better, and his *Pleaser* gives way to his *Adult* and Self.

This whole sequence might take two weeks, or five minutes. Without awareness of their parts' interactions and their Selves' disablement by a "false self," Jack and Anita's relationship goes on until the next version of this avoid-approach (or another) cycle repeats. Seen this way, "Jack and Anita" are eight or more semi-independent subselves interacting to create a complex and dynamic relationship between two physical people.

Similar cycles occur in all relationships: friend-friend, clerk-customer, parent-child, boss-employee, student-teacher, and so on. Larger groups like human families become stunningly complex if member's Selves aren't regularly in charge. Few of us are aware of the *amazing* interactions that happen at lightning speed within and between us. Does this make sense to you?

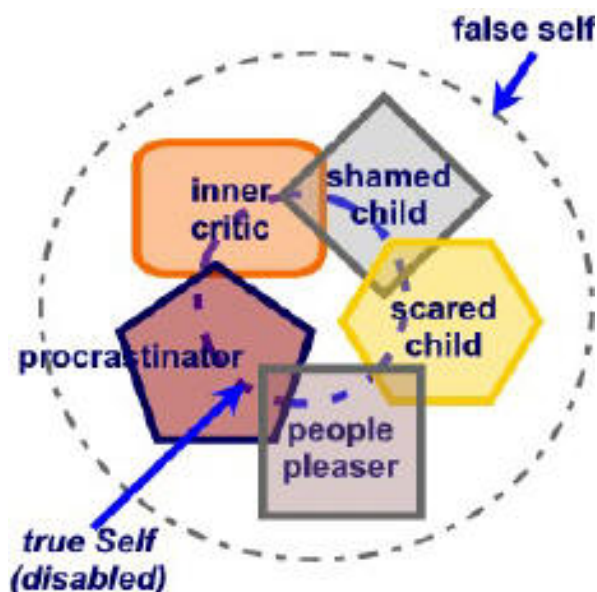
Summing Up, and Moving On

T his article suggests that normal people have a personality composed of semi-independent *parts* or *subelves*. These make up a psycho-spiritual inner family whose dynamics shape our thoughts, perceptions and behaviors from moment to moment. Most of us aren't aware of our subselves or *who leads* out inner team. That can lead to inner chaos and ineffective or self-harmful decisions and behavior.

Our sets of subselves are unique, yet they do common functions for each of us. All mean us well, though some, born of real life trauma, can be misinformed, untrusting, and

fiercely rigid until they get help. Some live in the past, not knowing that their founding danger is *long* gone. Battles between our parts can overwhelm our natural leader, our Self, and cause emotional, physical, mental, and relationship stresses and problems.

A number of professionals suggest that abused or neglected children automatically create a **false self** over time to please their caregivers and reduce the child's pain and fear. This self (small "s") may actually be a group of Vulnerable and Guardian parts who have protectively taken over, because our *real* Self and Regular staff couldn't (yet) safely lead and cope.



High-nurturance outer families promote unblended true Selves in their children. This happens partly because the adult caregivers reliably shield kids against excessive pain, shame, and fear, rather than cause them. See <http://sfhelp.org/01/health.htm> on the Web for a summary of the ~30 traits of high-nurturance families. Did you grow up with such traits? Are your kids blessed with them?

Do you know your true Self? Do you show others who you *really* are?



We all were hurt and frightened as children, many of us more severely than we know. "Finding one's Self" is the very real, rewarding task of gradually learning which subselves have ruled us all our lives, helping them relax, and freeing our true Self to guide us safely and serenely through each day. That's his or her special and natural talent and steadfast goal.

You can meet and harmonize your inner family, over time. Inner-family negotiations can reduce inner and outer battles, some painful physical and emotional symptoms, and grow a genuine serenity and productivity in your life. You can learn to do parts work ("inner-family therapy") by and for yourself, though it helps to have a skilled guide at first. Organizing and harmonizing your dynamic, talented inner family is a learned skill no different than any other you. You have your own therapy office and resident therapist and clinical staff wherever you are: the world's shortest commute!

For more detail, and the steps involved in doing parts work, see the guidebook "Who's Really Running Your Life?" (Xlibris.com), or the Web pages at <http://sfhelp.org/01/links01.htm>.

For other inner-family titles, see the booklist at <http://sfhelp.org/11/booklist.ht>