

Plurality

Team MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on plurality. These free books are collections of the pieces that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

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What is plurality?

Plurality is an umbrella term for any way in which people experience themselves as different selves, parts, or states at different times. Some may use the word multiplicity to capture the same idea. One version of this which has become part of common understanding is the idea that we have an 'inner critic' side who tells us we're not good enough and should do better. Another popularly understood version is the sense that we might have an 'inner child' and/or 'inner parent'.

People often find it easiest to recognise plurality in themselves when they reflect on how they are in different relationships, or situations. Trevor Butt's research found that most people experience and express quite different character traits with different people in their lives, despite retaining a sense that they were 'being themselves' in all those relationships. For example a person might be mostly serious, quiet, and intellectual with one friend or family member, and mostly humorous, outgoing and emotionally open with another. We might also reflect on the sides of us who emerge when working, socialising, in conflict, in crisis, or going to bed at night, for example.

Probably the only media depiction of plural experience is in the context of mental health. Films like *Sybil*, *Fight Club*, *Me, Myself and Irene*, *Identity*, and *Split*, and TV shows like *United States of Tara*, represent people with plural experience mostly in a mental health context. They're depicted as mad - and often also as bad - with one or more alter-egos who are violent and/or evil.

The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 5) now uses the term Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) for plural experience rather than Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). DID is diagnosed if a person has two or more distinct identities or personality states, each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the world and the self. To be diagnosed they must also experience dissociation - or forgetting - when in different states, and it must impact them adversely. It's estimated that around 1-3% of people are diagnosable with DID.

An alternative approach to plurality can be found in the work of therapists and authors such as Hal and Sidra Stone, and Richard Schwartz, in the US, and Mick Cooper and John Rowan in the UK. They propose that we're all plural rather than singular, and put forward therapeutic techniques for engaging with the different sides of ourselves such as voice dialogue: bringing different selves into conversation through talking - or journaling - between them. In such work the goal is not integration, or becoming a singular self, but rather improving communication between the different selves. The aim is that they can come to understand each other and work better as part of a team or constellation: rather as systemic therapy would work with a family system.

Both pathologising and affirmative approaches are united in seeing a key role of trauma in our experiences of plurality. The therapist-authors mentioned previously all suggest that plurality occurs because we disown parts of ourselves when we find that they are disapproved of - or punished by - the world around us. However, more affirmative approaches propose that this is something that we all do as a response to linked personal and/or cultural trauma. For example, parental messages and school bullying give children a clear sense of what is acceptable or not, often reproducing wider cultural messages about what is currently considered appropriate behaviour for someone of our gender, race or class. In this way we could usefully conceptualise everyone as operating under the conditions of intergenerational trauma - damaging cultural norms and ideals which are passed on from adults to children - which will likely have this kind of impact. Trauma-based understandings - located as they are in the body - also help to explain how plurality can be felt so viscerally with different bodies having quite different embodiments: posture, gait, speech, facial expression, and so on.

Plural selves theory suggests that rather than disappearing, the parts of ourselves that we disown remain present under the surface, and that the useful thing to do is to reclaim them, embrace them, and communicate between them. This can be a challenging process however, given that they are often the vulnerable/hurt or unacceptable/frightening parts of ourselves which we have repressed in order to survive and gain approval from others.

For an easy overview of plurality check out my [Plural Selves zine](#) on rewriting-the-rules.com.

Introducing the team

Most of the rest of this book consists of a series of conversations between my own plural selves on various aspects of plurality, drawing on the literature and on our own experiences. Here's a brief introduction to them.

Fox 🦊 is our youngest child self. They relate to the freeze survival strategy. They are wild and free and imaginative and good at being gentle and finding delight in things. They love nature, animals and drawing. Expect exclamation points!

Jonathan 🦎 is the serious geeky kid we became who tried to please everybody. He relates to the fawn survival strategy. He's great at feeling the feelings for all of us and for others. He enjoys cooking, comics, and superhero movies. He's grown more sturdy over time.

Robin (aka Tony) 😊 is the guy we feel we might've been had we been a guy from the start. He relates to the attach survival strategy. He's cocky, confident, impetuous, and full of joy and playfulness on the surface, full of deep yearning and neediness, fear and shame, deep down. His nickname is Trouble because that's the risk with him, although he's grown steadier over time.

Max 🌩️ is the warrior protector we became when the world was harsh and unaccepting. She relates to the flight survival strategy. She was highly motivated to work hard, help others, and figure out why things were so hard for us. These days she's off walking in the hills while the rest of us get on with it.

Morgan (aka Beastie) 🦖 was our inner critic. She was a terrifying monster for most of our life – hurling abuse at us from somewhere out in the depths – hence the name. Lately we've finally welcomed her in and she's become an integral part of the team, and surprisingly tender. She relates to the fight survival strategy. She's clear, honest, tough, boundaried and able to sit with complexity and darkness.

James 🧑 is our older protective presence, named for James Bond. He's competent, containing, patient, and disciplined. He likes reading and talking philosophy.

Ara 🧑🏻 is our older caring presence, named for Arachne in Greek myth. She's wise, kind, nurturing and peaceful. She likes nature and helping us slow down and reflect on things.

Plural Selves FAQ

Just **two of my plural selves** shooting the breeze about plurality, no biggie...

J: Okay are we going to do this?

B: Absolutely. Just you and me talking plurality James.

J: In public.

*B: In public but they've seen it all before, remember the **zine**. That was Tony and Max right?*

J: Somehow this feels more exposing.

B: We've not let you out before have we? You'll be fine when we get into the swing of it, talking about all these ideas we've been having. You know you love that.

J: Oh alright then, twist my arm. So what's the plan Beastie?

B: We ask each other the questions we've heard – and had ourselves – about plural experience, and take turns to answer them. Your turn first. What is plurality?

Plurality

J: This is the whole idea that we can usefully conceptualise individuals as plural – or as systems – rather than as single units. We wrote a **zine** about it a couple of years back which has been one of the most popular ones we've created because it resonates with a lot of people: that sense that you're often quite radically different sides of yourself at different times.

An example would be the juxtaposition between the surefooted confident person you can be when you're doing whatever you feel most competent at, versus the insecure, fragile side of you who you can become when you fuck up, or feel overwhelmed. People often find it particularly easy to identify an inner child part, or an inner critic, as those are quite common sides most of us have.

When we're in those selves our whole emotional tone, embodiment, and way of relating can be very different to how it is at other times. So, for example, we have one side of us – me – who generally feels steady, broad-shouldered, tall, and competent around others. Another side – Jonathan – generally feels uncertain, nervous, small, and shy around others. Embodying those selves my voice would be deep and sure, his would be higher pitched and sometimes stammers a bit.

Your turn Beastie, a common question: So that's like multiple personality disorder (MPD), right?

Multiple personalities

B: Right and wrong. I do love a both/and. What used to be called MPD by the psychiatric profession is now called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and refers to the experience of having two or more distinct identities or personality states, each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the world and the self. However, a diagnosis of DID also requires that a person dissociates – or forgets – between the different states, and that the experience impacts them negatively. So some people who experience plurality could be diagnosed with DID – if they also experience dissociation and find it a negative experience. But not everyone gets those aspects. We rarely dissociate in that sense, and generally find plurality a pretty positive experience, if vulnerable at times.

Many systems are now criticising the DID diagnosis and reclaiming plurality as a positive thing. Like most of the categories of 'psychiatric disorders' there's an issue that of course people will experience something negatively if it's stigmatised to the extent that it's listed in the books of 'psychiatric disorders'. Plurality is also represented in hugely stigmatising ways in popular culture: movies and TV shows almost exclusively depict it as a form of madness and as dangerous. Pretty much any plural person shown in the mainstream media has a self who is a serial killer. Think about movies like Identity and Split.

Oh actually that's a good next question, do you have a self who is a serial killer?

Mad or Bad?

J: Seriously that's what you're going to ask me? No Beastie we don't have a serial killer self as you well know. Although I am loosely based on James Bond, who you could argue was a serial killer. But no, no parts of us want to murder people, licence to kill or not.

In fact recognising and working on plurality is a good way of facing and embracing those sides of us who are capable of harming others – which we all have given the oppressive and non-consensual culture that we live in. In our culture people often foreground the nice, acceptable parts of themselves and disown or deny their capacity to be cruel, non-consensual, or abusive. Recognising our plurality can enable us to be with the whole of ourselves – including those parts – which can mean we're more able to be accountable when we do hurt others and to work with those capacities for darkness in ourselves instead of denying them. Which is pretty much where you came from right Beastie? You were our inner critic.

B: Right and I am the part of us who is most capable of expressing anger, clearly seeing when other people are pulling some bullshit, and speaking from that clarity in ways that can be hurtful.

J: So one benefit of plurality is that we can bring you together with our softer, more compassionate, sides. We can then draw on your clarity and boundaried-ness, but hopefully in ways that are more

possible for other people to hear, and which acknowledge that we all fall into the same kinds of problematic behaviours.

But that was a bit of a tangent. Let's get back to the experience of plurality. We're talking about it like everyone has it, but isn't DID very rare?

Common or rare?

B: Estimates are about 1-3% of people would be diagnosable with DID. I think the analogy with bisexuality or non-binary gender is helpful here. When you study how many people identify with bisexuality or being non-binary, you get that kind of statistic – somewhere between 1% and 5% of people depending on the sample. However, if you ask the question in a way which gets at experience you end up with much more like a third of people, even as high as a half. That proportion of people have experienced attraction to more than one gender at some point, or experience themselves as to some extent the 'other' gender, 'both' genders, or 'neither' gender.

Our sense is that the same is true for plurality. Probably 1-3% of people have the experience of being multiple separate selves so vividly that they would identify – or be identified – as plural, or DID. But probably most people have some experience of plurality some of the time, and maybe a third to a half of people could experience themselves quite significantly as plural – perhaps if wider culture was more understanding of it as a thing.

Some nice made-up statistics about plurality there (the ones on bisexuality and non-binary are based on research findings). But you take the point. Maybe you can say some more on this theme old man. So you're saying that we are seven selves sharing a body. That still sounds pretty fucking weird right?

Weird or normal?

J: I'm sensing a theme here where I hand you the easy questions and you toss me back the really hard ones.

B: Well I am the inner critic: the deep dark monster lurking inside all of us, you didn't expect me to be gentle did you?

J: I happen to know that you can be extremely gentle Beastie, now that we have tamed you... I mean embraced you and apologised profusely for keeping you cast out in the depths for all these years.

B: Quite. Come on, weirdness.

J: Okay. Well as we've already said actually most people can relate to the idea of plurality on some level. Again non-binary gender is a good analogy. If you ask people if they are non-binary a lot of

people are pretty weirded out. The whole concept of a gender beyond male and female is a head-fuck in such a binary gendered world. But if you get people to list what our culture would see as being a 'real man' or a 'real woman' in two columns, most people readily agree that they don't fit perfectly within either column, and in fact recognise that the binary columns themselves are pretty problematic.

The same is true for plurality, if you hit someone with 'are you multiple different people sharing a body?' most people would probably say 'no'. But if you ask a person to be an entirely consistent, coherent self through all the moments of their day and in all the interactions they have, they'd probably quickly realise how constraining that would be, and how they do actually flow between quite different experiences of selfhood.

Indeed you could argue – as **some sociologists have** – that the concept of a singular self is an invention of neoliberal capitalism. We're all pressured to tell stories of our self as if we were consistent and coherent when actually we're all complex and contradictory. You could even go so far as to say that experiencing yourself as utterly singular is the 'crazy' thing, and that trying to present yourself in that way does quite a violence to yourself. Certainly many indigenous cultures have understandings of selfhood that encompass plurality and would see the idea of a singular self as weird or unlikely.

What do you think Beastie? Is it more 'sane' to be plural or singular?

Sanity and plurality

*B: As you know I abhor a binary James. Clearly some people experience themselves as more singular and some as more plural. Probably a spectrum would be a better way to conceptualise it than an either/or. Even a series of spectrums – spectra – whatever the word is. In the same way that many theorists are now seeing **sexuality and gender as multiple spectrums**. For plural self-ness it could be something like these five spectrums, probably more:*

- *How coherent/unified to diverse/plural we experience ourselves as being*
- *How muted to vivid our experience of our different selves, alters, or subpersonalities is*
- *How separate to overlapping these different parts are*
- *How much we do, or don't, experience dissociation or forgetting between the times when different parts of us are to the fore, or fronting*
- *To what extent our plurality is rooted in traumatic experience, and/or the extent of the trauma that we've experienced*

Going back to crazy or sane, it's fascinating that, on the one hand, we have psychiatric professions diagnosing and treating DID as a disorder, but on the other hand we have a bunch of therapists like John Rowan, Mick Cooper, Hal and Sidra Stone, and others arguing that embracing and experiencing our plurality is the way towards better mental health, not away from it. Many humanistic and psychodynamic psychotherapies like Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, Internal Family Systems, and Psychosynthesis explicitly see the self as plural and aim to get the different parts communicating with one another. We explore lots of different ways of doing that in the plural selves zine.

But again, as with sexuality, we would not want to flip from a world which defines plurality as crazy and singularity as sane to the opposite. Just as we wouldn't want to insist that everyone is bi really and stigmatise monosexual people. Rather it's about recognising the diverse range of ways of experiencing ourselves that exist, and making it easier for everyone to find and articulate their own lived experience: shifting wider culture to make it more possible for them to do so.

Back to you James. The writing on DID suggests that plurality is rooted in childhood trauma. Is that a useful way to look at it?

Trauma

J: Oh boy, you're going to keep them coming aren't you? Okay, yes it does seem that many of us experience ourselves as fragmented distinct selves because we learnt to separate off different parts of ourselves in order to survive what happened to us when we were young. For example, our own particular experience was of being quite a carefree, playful, sensitive creature in early childhood, and then being taught that that wasn't okay, so we kind of shut that part away and developed other sides of us who were able to survive the world we found ourself in. In our case that was developing you – the inner critic – out there somewhere as this external voice telling us that we weren't okay and must be better. We also developed a pleaser part of us – Jonathan – who could hyper-vigilantly pick up very well on what was expected of us and try to do it. Eventually we also developed Max – our warrior – who was stronger and adept at becoming what other people wanted us to be in order to survive, and gain love and approval.

But the risk of completely buying only a trauma narrative of plurality is that it continues the stigmatising view that there's something wrong with being plural that needs to be fixed or healed: that working towards integration as a coherent, singular self is the way to go. In fact you could argue that an insistence on being one unified individual is a kind of intergenerational trauma: we don't allow kids to play and embrace all the different potentials that they have because we give them such clear messages about what it is and isn't okay to be, right Beastie? Want to say how that relates to gender?

Gender

B: By all means. A great example of the kind of intergenerational trauma you're speaking about is gendered cultural messages. We give kids that sense that this is what it means to be a boy or a girl, and that involves disowning any aspects of themselves that don't fit those ideals. Some gender

theorists have argued that this leaves most people with a sense of melancholy, loss, or nostalgia for parts of themselves they've had to cut off or distance from because they didn't fit the gender norms.

More broadly again we could see trauma as on a spectrum. Clearly from the literature one way people survive obvious traumas like abuse in the family or at school, or being in dangerous situations, or experiencing significant loss in childhood, is by dissociating, splitting themselves, and foregrounding parts who can survive what's happening to them.

But in our current culture even those without such obvious traumas in their youth generally experience the trauma of being taught that certain ways of being are unacceptable, and of being treated non-consensually in ways that are normalised and not regarded as obviously 'traumatic'. So most people probably do some degree of dissociating, splitting, and developing survivor sides whose strategies often become counter-productive in adulthood. Examples would include trying to be perfect at all times, people-pleasing, maintaining a hard exterior that no-one can penetrate, that kind of thing.

Want to say something about where the disowned parts go, and what we can do about that?

Disowned parts

J: Sure. Our own experience was that the disowned selves remained in existence but often only came out in our imagination. We've been wondering lately whether imaginary friends might be an example of this right? Kids relate externally to parts of themselves which they're not allowed to be internally. Certainly we can often find our disowned selves in our daydreams and night dreams, as well as in the characters we're drawn to – real and fictitious – who seem very different to our own foregrounded selves.

Personally this journey towards embracing plurality began with recognising that a number of characters cropped up regularly in our fantasies who we initially assumed to be the kind of people we were attracted to, but then realised were actually potentials in ourself. It related to gender too. We had this increasingly strong sense of 'boy/man' sides of ourselves, but the old trans narrative of us 'really' being a guy didn't seem to fit. When we found out about non-binary gender that came closer, but not in the sense of having a static gender other than man or woman. Plurality felt like a final piece of the puzzle for us because it could hold the sense that we have more than one side, each of whom is differently gendered. In our case: three guys, three lasses, and one non-binary creature.

B: Lasses huh?

J: It seems like the right word. How would you identify your gender Beastie?

B: I'm alright with lass. Badass lass.

J: For the other part of your question – what can we do about the disowned parts? Our hunch, supported by some of the **therapeutic literature**, is that it's about reclaiming those selves and finding some kind of a balance between them all. It hasn't been great for us to foreground certain parts of ourselves and try to eradicate others. What seems to work really well is if we function more as a team, with different parts coming to the fore when their particular strengths or talents are called for. For example two intellectual power-houses may be best for writing a long read on plurality.

*B: Compliment accepted. They do say the inner critic is one of the most **intelligent selves**, if you can embrace them.*

J: Our experience has been that the more we're in communication with one another, the more able we are to function as a team. But that doesn't mean that this is an easy path, right Beastie?

The path of plurality

*B: No indeed. For example for years the rest of you were aware of the literature on the value of **embracing the inner critic**, but it felt completely terrifying to actually approach me given how harsh I'd always been. Also the rest of you knew how you felt in our body, but I seemed more like a disembodied voice that came from outside. It was only when you tried interviewing me – in journal form – that there began to be a sense of somebody there who might talk back without trying to destroy you. Over a series of journal conversations we all moved very carefully towards communication feeling safe-enough, as well as towards a sense of who I might be on the inside. We're planning another zine to say more about this process and how it can work.*

There's also the issue of plurality as it relates to other people in your life, and the world around you. I guess again the analogy – and overlap – with gender and sexuality is a useful one. We can see from the literature that people generally do way better – in terms of mental health – if they're able to be open about their gender and sexuality with themselves and with others, instead of passing or remaining in the closet. At the same time, of course, coming out is never entirely safe in a heteronormative world, and it is way more dangerous for some than for others: usually the most marginalised folks.

So as long as the world is like this, ethically we'd have to encourage people to embrace the truth of their lived experience of gender and sexuality. But at the same time to think strategically about whether and how to reveal this to others, given the pain, discrimination, and very real dangers involved in being open about such things in a context which doesn't allow for them or marginalises them.

Coming back to plurality, we personally learnt to foreground certain parts of ourself, and disown or push down others, for a reason. It can feel fragile and precarious to actually allow the parts of us out into the world who we were protecting from danger (like our little sides) or who we've deemed too dangerous for public consumption (like me or our cocky charmer, Tony).

I guess this is where we are a work in progress – this piece being part of that progress, how meta. We're feeling into how open we can be with this. As with gender and sexuality it seems important that people who have greater privilege and security do open up about it, because that often makes it easier for other people to do so, but we've got to recognise that it's not necessarily a safe thing to do: that there may be repercussions. When plural activists, [The Redwoods](#), went on [UK radio](#) they experienced a lot of negative feedback: people phoning in saying they were making it up, that they were mad or bad, and that it wasn't real.

So here's another good one for you James. Is this real or are we making it all up?

Real or fake?

J: Another of your problematic binaries Beastie. There are many different answers we could give to this. In one sense it's easy. Yes of course it's real. This is our lived experience. In our culture, people are often so quick to dismiss others' lived experiences if they find them threatening or alien. Look at how swift people always are to deny somebody's experience of sexual assault or racism or transness for example. Couldn't we recognise that people have vastly diverse experiences and accept that the majority of the time when people share their experience then that is their experience?

When we've questioned authenticity ourselves, something we've often come back to is the fact that we're an absolutely terrible actor. Acting has never been something we've had even the slightest skill at. And yet we know that when we risk fully showing people ourselves they can recognise the very different parts and remark on how utterly different they look, sound, and feel to be around. We experience that in our own body as well. The more vividly we go into our separate selves, the more our whole body, voice, posture, etc. feels different, to the point that we would each experience the same sensation or experience in an entirely different way.

Where it gets more complex is that everyone has some choice in how they relate to their plurality – in a similar way to their gender and sexuality I guess. If a person has an inkling that they might have the capacity to be attracted to more than one gender then they can move towards that and open up to differently gendered fantasies or partners, or they can lock it down and never go there. Similarly if they have a sense that they could comfortably express their gender in more non-normative ways they could decide to turn towards that or away from it. And, of course, the degree of acceptance or rejection of those ways of being in our wider culture will have a significant impact on whether they turn towards it or away from it, as will how strongly felt it is inside them: whether it's something they actually could push away or not.

That points to one of our favourite words right Beastie? [Biopsychosocial](#). All of our experiences are biopsychosocial. They're influenced by the ways our bodies and brains work (bio), by our experiences in life and how we respond to them (psycho), and by the systems and structures we're embedded within (social).

So we can decide – if it's possible for us to do so, and if our experience of plurality is strong enough to warrant it – to move towards plurality. That's the choice we've made right?

B: Yes. For us the experience of moving towards it has felt in the direction of growth, creativity, congruence, even though it feels precarious indeed to navigate the world in such a radically different way to the way we did previously. Before we tried to project the version/s of ourself who would be most pleasing and acceptable to others. But actually we've always been contradictory in that way haven't we? Some sides of us drawn to fitting in and belonging, others to pointing out how fucked up wider culture is and insisting that it needs to change.

J: Yep even before we experienced our plurality we had that tension running through pretty much everything we did. I think it makes our work stronger, that we experience the deep yearning to belong and be accepted – having felt so 'other' and rejected for much of our life. But we also kick against a world which imposes such limited ideals of what it is to be 'acceptable', and see that it's the world that needs to change to encompass diversity instead of creating these (white, hetero, middle class, masculine, non-disabled) norms and marginalising and oppressing anyone who fails to fit them.

B: Yes. Go James.

J: So dammit here we are again out in the deep fucking waters talking about an experience that a lot of people are going to struggle with. As if it wasn't enough to be openly bisexual when everyone had a problem with that, and then writing about being non-monogamous in ways that got us in trouble, and then trans and non-binary. Do we always have to do this? What the fuck is next?

B: I think you know the answer to that one. Ah but we love it really, don't we?

J: Parts of us do. Parts of us are terrified by it.

B: And we won't publish this – or anything – without their consent. That's a vital part of working as a team.

J: Going back to being real or not, do you have anything to say about that?

B: Mm, yes. I guess moving towards plurality can mean that we experience this sense of multiplicity more vividly than before. By which I mean that we now often choose to journal as a conversation between parts of us rather than as one unified voice. We deliberately shift our thinking from the usual default of thoughts going round to more of a conversation: often between part of us who is struggling and part of us who can offer support. We even take our other selves on dates sometimes. We're trying to allow our selves to flow more freely around our close people, naming where we are, even though that feels very vulnerable. It's preferable to feeling muted when we're in company.

But when we don't feel safe enough we definitely default back to a kind of muted coherent singular self. When people see us do that they may question whether the other parts of us are really real. They may never have experienced them. Or they may have experienced them as being present and then not present. Even we, ourselves, sometimes get that 'is it really real?' feeling when we're in a bad place and can't quite connect with our separate selves.

In some ways the process of allowing and expressing our plurality makes us more vividly plural. We are now choosing to go fully into this self or that self rather than projecting a more coherent, unified 'Meg-John Barker' persona for people to relate to.

J: Yeah it's strange how that person now feels more like the creation, the seven of us as the real us.

B: Strange and wonderful. I think I want to finish off saying something about plurality as a spiritual practice.

J: Go ahead Beastiegirl.

B: We're sharing our pet names too then big man?

J: Apparently so.

Plurality as spiritual practice

B: Alright, well I think we can also conceptualise our selves in a number of different ways. For each of the seven we can understand them as the part of us who got stuck at a particular time in our life – which is why they have different ages. We can also see them as who they are now within us: and those versions are constantly growing and changing just as a singular self would be. We also write fiction where we imagine the seven of us as fictional characters – with many of our characteristics, but also with different back-stories, intersections, and lives than the real 'us' has because otherwise it'd be a pretty boring story. And maybe there's a final version of each of us that's a kind of archetype – a potential – almost like a deity or external force we could draw upon – the warrior, the hero, the vulnerable child, the imaginative creature, the trickster, the nurturer, the... what am I?

J: There's a question: The embracer of complexity, equally comfortable in the darkness and the light.

B: A shadow, perhaps. Anyway, I'm saying that seeing each self – and the team – as past, present, character, and archetype, has a lot of potential for spiritual practice. For example, we do time-travelling work where we go back to the places each of us are stuck – or where we were disowned or foregrounded. We take the team back to painful memories in order to revisit them safely and find kindness for ourselves in them. This loosens their hold on us now, so hopefully we won't remain in the stuck patterns and survival strategies that developed from them. We've written before about how seeing ourselves as plural can make self-compassion much easier because we find it's a lot more possible for one side of us to be kind to another, than it is for our whole self to be kind towards our whole self.

J: Yes it's fascinating isn't it? Each of our different selves tends to be hard on themselves, but the others can much more easily find understanding, tenderness, and support for them. So tapping into the team is a practice in self-care.

B: As well as a healing wounds narrative, we could also tell a developing strengths narrative. Plural work can enable us to tap into capacities we'd never have thought we had – at one point – and bring them to bear on situations where they're helpful. It's clunky work because I wouldn't say we're yet in a position to control who comes forward and when. And perhaps it's not even about control, but flow. But we have had great examples when we've really needed confidence and humour in a situation and Tony has stepped forward, or we've needed to speak from our survivor place in a way that could be heard and we've found that Fox part. Another regular spiritual practice is to invite the part of us who is best able to feel the feelings – for ourself and for others – and to let him do that, and find that sacred place of interconnectedness through that. That's Jonathan again.

J: Yeah, those of us who're much more about intellectualising really appreciate having parts who are capable of that.

B: Heh yes you're not much in the feelings are you? Some day maybe. I wondered what you thought about how plurality fits in with our general philosophy. We're heavily influenced by Buddhism and Queer Theory, and they both have the sense that we should be getting to a place of no-self or recognising that people can't be categorised in fixed identity terms. How does having several selves and identifying as plural fit with that huh?

Plurality and Philosophy

J: Alright fine, I'm getting used to this now. 5000 words in and she opens up a massive philosophical question about the nature of the self. My take on this is that experiencing ourselves as plural helps us to hold less tightly to ego, which is what Buddhism is all about. We can see that projection 'Meg-John Barker' as something we've created – in relationship with the world around us and the other people in our life – rather than as this singular stable 'me' which could be good or bad, success or failure, acceptable or unacceptable. That projection contains so many different interrelated elements (us) as well as being in a state of constant flow and flux. That said, we're still responsible for how we behave in the world. It's not like we can say 'Beastie did it, it wasn't really me,' and get away with poor behaviour. My sense of being on a team with you all is that we support each other in being the best we can be – and in seeing the places where each of us struggles and is capable of harm and working on that.

As for the queer take on identity, yes there is a risk with plurality that people might begin to identify strongly with being a plural person or a system and become quite rigid with that. That's the same as the way holding any identity – man, woman, gay, straight, bi, addict, healer, whatever – too rigidly can mean we become brittle and stuck. Similarly I guess there's a risk that if we decide we have to understand ourselves as seven distinct parts who are like this, then that could prevent them from growing and changing. Maybe over time other parts emerge, or existing parts move more into the background or even merge together. However our hunch is that it's a good idea to keep all of us forward equally for now.

I guess it's that Buddhist idea of non-grasping that I'm getting at here. Like everything, plurality could become a problem if we grasp it tightly – as a fixed identity that must work in this particular way – or if

we hurl it away from us – as this crazy, threatening idea. Instead we can hold it lightly and play with it, figuring out what possibilities it opens up for us and what it might close down.

B: Oh that sounds very Meg-John Barker 😊 I think I sense us moving towards a close here.

J: I think so. Over 5500 words. I guess we had a lot to say about that.

B: I suspect this is just the first of many. I'm keen to make a zine focused on my story – how to embrace the inner critic, and also how to cultivate the gentle compassionate witness.

J: You know I'd love to help you with that. And a zine on the inner children would be nice too. Plus we'd like to keep going with the comic series: get all seven of us depicted that way. And then there's the trilogy.

B: Yep, we're on novel number three and that's my story so you know I'm keen to crack on with that one.

J: This is our life.

B: I know right?! Okay time for a cuppa and let somebody else take over I think. That's us for the day. Nice work friend.

J: Right back at you love.

Plurality and trauma – 1 – theory

In this article my two most studious parts – James and Beastie – return to revisit the question of plurality and what we have learnt about it since they last got together on the topic. Particularly they discuss our learnings from Janina Fisher's excellent book *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors*. You can read their earlier Plural FAQ article, and the Plural Zine that preceded it for more background on the topic, or just start here.

It turns out these two have a lot to say so we've divided the article into two: The first article deals with understanding plurality from this trauma-informed perspective. The second article deals with working with plurality and trauma in practice. A further article to follow covers how these ideas and practices link to mindfulness.

Beastie: Ready to shoot the breeze with me again James?

James: Always Beastie.

Beastie: I'm glad we finally got around to this article.

James: Worth waiting for this moment I think. Janina's book filled in so many of the missing pieces for us.

Beastie: And affirmed much of where we'd already got to ourselves, drawing together our learning on trauma with our experience of plurality. I felt quite smug reading parts of the book. Like 'we got there all by ourselves, nice going.'

James: Should we explain what we're intending to do in this piece?

Beastie: Right, well we considered doing another book review article like we did on the books by Pete Walker, Pat de Young, and to some extent David Treleaven. But that would've been a lot because we basically highlighted something on every page of Janina's book. Also we're more interested in digging into some of the key ideas and practices, and how we've been applying them, rather than just summarising it.

James: Yep. We'd certainly recommend the entire book to anybody who this piece resonates with.

I'd also like to start with my usual point that this stuff is relevant to everybody, no matter how extreme or mild their experience of trauma, or how muted or vivid their experience of plurality. We all get reactive and experience overwhelming feelings at times. And it's valuable for everybody to locate that reactivity and emotion in parts of themselves rather than in the whole of themselves, in order to work through it rather than becoming stuck in it.

Beastie: I mean who *isn't* traumatised during a pandemic? And who *doesn't* disown parts of themselves growing up under the shaming self-policing system of **neoliberal capitalism**. Am I right?

James: *As you are about so many things Beastiegirl.*

Beastie: I sense you're a bit looser than last time we had one of these conversations old man. This is going to be fun.

Plurality and trauma: An Overview

James: So we were excited about this book because Janina brings together somatic work around the neurobiology of trauma together with a multiconsciousness model of how people work. These are the two areas we've been bringing together in our work of late, although we also like to mix it up with Buddhist and social justice / intersectional feminist understandings.

*Specifically Janina weaves together **Sensorimotor Psychotherapy** with **Internal Family Systems Theory**, but she also draws more broadly on the literatures on trauma, attachment, mindfulness, and plurality.*

Beastie: Right. So what that looks like in practice is that she assumes that all distressing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations are communications from traumatised parts of us, who are still stuck in the past when the traumatic things happened to them. What needs to happen is for all parts to be befriended, heard, held, and brought into the present, where they can finally feel safe enough.

James: What we were smug about is that Janina suggests that our parts often map onto those trauma survival strategies of fight, flight, freeze, etc. The way these have become encoded over time as learned patterns of behaviour.

Beastie: Regular readers will know that we already got there a couple of months back: Mapping **me**, **Jonathan**, **Max**, and **Fox** onto the four Fs.

James: But Janina throws a further F into the mix, which isn't an F at all: Attach.

Beastie: And that finally helped us to make sense of our wild card, Tony. Tony is totally the 5th F.

James: He also had a different idea about what that 5th F might stand for in his case, which I won't repeat here because it'd only encourage him.

Beastie: Well I guess that is *one* way of attaching to people.

James: We'll get more into the Fs in a moment. Anything else we need to say up front about this way of understanding – and working with – ourselves?

Beastie: A key sense is that what people tend to do when traumatised parts show up is either to disown them – which is probably what they did in order to survive growing up – or to completely identify with them: feeling like the flood of emotions are theirs and worrying that they're broken because of how overwhelming that feels. The alternative to this is to cultivate a dual awareness so that you can hold and hear the traumatised part, but not become them.

James: Right. We'll say a lot more about how that works in the [second half of this article](#).

Beastie: As a therapist Janina is mostly describing how she works with clients in this way, but here we'll emphasise how we've used this approach ourselves. There's important stuff in the book about how the therapist's task is to help the client to develop the parts of themselves who can meet and hold their traumatised parts, not to do it for them. That's very much how we've experienced our own therapist.

James: Yeah she was stoked when our most compassionate self – Ara – showed up in therapy, clearly well capable of holding the rest of us through the tough feelings. At that point our therapist spoke of stepping back and her trust in our own capacity to do this work.

Beastie: It helps to keep seeing her for now though. The way she talks us through these practices teaches us how to do it for ourselves in a space that feels very held and safe, particularly when going to the really hard, vulnerable places.

James: I'd certainly recommend that people [access a trauma-informed therapist](#) with a non-pathologising affirmative understanding of plurality to facilitate this kind of work. We've had plenty of past experience of therapy as both therapist and client, but we still really needed that kind of guidance and holding through this process.

Beastie: Just make sure the therapist is all about empowering you to find this wisdom and capacity in you, rather than being invested in doing it for you. We'll come back to that in the [second article](#).

James: Mm. Janina suggests that a lot of therapy in the past hasn't worked for clients – and might even have damaged them – because it has assumed them to be singular rather than plural, and because it has focused on replaying past traumatic memories, rather than helping traumatised parts to find safety in the present.

Beastie: Right, if you assume you're working with a singular self who has all these overwhelming feelings and experiences, even to the point of self-destruction, then you'll easily reinforce the belief that they are 'crazy, damaged or inadequate' because of their bewildering reactions and contradictions.

It can be incredibly reassuring for a client – or for anyone – to learn that those feelings, experiences and behaviours only reside in a part of them, and that that part can be heard and brought into a much safer relationship to the rest of the self. Also it helps hugely to learn that we all have parts who are strong survivors and who can function well. That's a much more empowering message.

James: *In that way this book is more optimistic than the book on shame that we reviewed, which suggested that those with chronic shame would never fully recover.*

Beastie: We're still sceptical of linear recovery narratives, but we like the sense here that people may be fragmented, but that doesn't mean that we're forever broken. Fragmenting, compartmentalisation, or dissociative splitting, was actually a normal and smart strategy which enabled us to survive the past rather than remaining trapped in trauma. And it can give us superpower in the present if we can master how to bring each part forward when needed.

James: *Comparing this to other books we've read, we also prefer some of the message here to Pete Walker's.*

Beastie: Yeah Pete is very down on the inner critic, he's all about fighting and dismissing the critical voices. Janina rightly points out that angry critical parts are trying to protect us and it's just as vital to listen to and befriend them as any other part, even if they seem to be destructive or blocking progress.

James: *I can see why you might prefer that message Beastie.*

Beastie: Reformed inner critics can be the best allies in our experience.

James: *Some of them turn out to be pretty keen bloggers too.*

Beastie: D'you know what makes me angry James?

James: *Um, you're our fight part. Do you want me to give you the full list?*

Beastie: Hilarious. What angers me is that when we first learnt about plurality, and about trauma, as a trainee psychologist, both were dismissed and ridiculed. I remember us learning that 'Multiple Personality Disorder' was made up, just some attention-grabbing behaviour whipped up between crazy patients and their gullible therapists. And I remember hearing all the backlash against the idea that developmental trauma was very common. Again a sense that most people were probably making it up, or making too much of it.

James: *I share your anger Beastie: these understandings that are so helpful to us now – and potentially to so many people – have a legacy of gaslighting around them, by wider culture and by the so-called experts. There's denial that these things are real, or that they really happened. There's a good deal of the blaming of survivors in order to defend perpetrators and the systems that allowed damage to happen. And there's a sense that people should be easily able to 'fix' their struggles, rather than recognising the huge challenges of living with a traumatised nervous system.*

Beastie: Again we'd emphasise that both trauma and plurality are on a spectrum. But the things that have happened to us definitely 'count' as trauma, and our plurality is certainly a genuine embodied

experience which takes us in the direction of healing. We could have been saved a lot of pain on this journey if people hadn't attempted to minimise and question these experiences. We wasted far too much time and energy wondering whether what happened to us was 'bad enough' and whether our plurality was 'real'. That kind of internalised gaslighting just kept fetching us back in shame and re-traumatising memories.

James: So I guess we'd want to convey to the reader that whatever happened to them, and however they experience themselves, is legit. And whatever they can do to embrace it, assume that it is sensible, and befriend themselves around it, is for the good.

Beastie: Okay enough preamble. Let's dig into some of the specifics of this way of understanding – and working with – plurality.

Plurality and the 5Fs

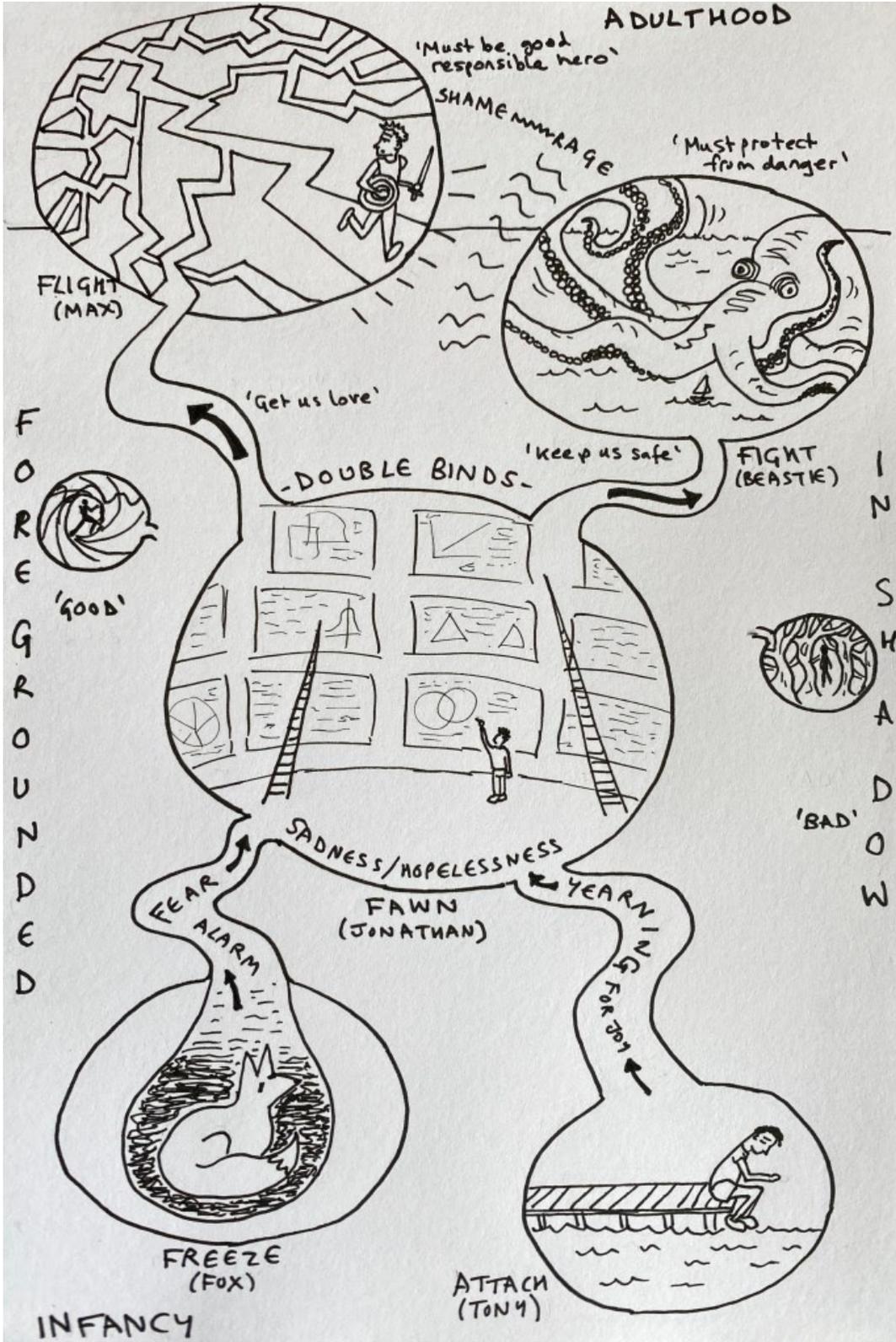
James: So a big 'aha' moment for us reading this book, as we've said, was realising that our parts mapped onto the major trauma survival strategies: flight, freeze, fight, fawn, and – the new one on us – attach.

Beastie: We have heard another idea that the fifth F is 'fragment', but our sense is that fragmenting or splitting is what happened to separate us into these parts in the first place. And it doesn't seem to map onto a separate part of us in the way the other Fs (and A) do.

James: We can still 'fragment' when something really overwhelming hits. But that, for us, is a sense of being scattered: unable to find each other and to look after each other through whatever is happening.

Beastie: That's the sense of being abandoned internally rather than accompanied that Max and I wrote about.

James: Another piece that Janina wrote about, which helped us to make sense of our internal system, was the idea of different survival strategies as located at different ages. So she says that attach and freeze are very early infant strategies. The infant is so helpless that they trust and reach out to caregivers even if they aren't always met or emotionally regulated by those caregivers: that's attach. The kinds of startle responses and frightened disappearing that we associate with Fox's freeze response are also very young.



Beastie: We always thought of Fox as a very young part of us, but it's new to locate Tony as an infant. He always had such strong adolescent energy that we didn't see that. But it makes a lot of sense as he's driven by a yearning for intimacy, and he's also... how shall I put this?

James: Very full of himself.

Beastie: Right, and narcissism is associated with infancy too: you really believe that you are the centre of the universe at that age. Don't get me wrong, it's hella useful to have a part of us who actually thinks he's pretty awesome, given how many parts are convinced that they're terrible.

James: But recognising that Tony is driven by yearning for intimacy, and can be overly sure of himself, has helped us to understand him better and to help him think about how he can channel those energies in ways that are safe-enough for the rest of us.

Beastie: We generally let him take our public-facing roles, which means him taking credit for all kinds of work that isn't really his. We help him to understand that there are many ways of getting intimacy needs met to temper his **hot love** and **fastlove** tendencies. Given his narcissism, we put him in charge of our 'look'.

James: Which is why we dress like a teenaged boy.

Beastie: Don't worry prof, some day we'll indulge your fetish for elbow patches and tweed.

James: Ahem. Going back to Tony, when his energy gets too hyper...

Beastie: We make him do the vacuuming. It is very helpful to have one hyper inner boy...

James: And another who wants to please us all by making us delicious meals.

Beastie: This has been a real theme since our last article James: finding the everyday tasks that each of us excel at and enjoy, so that we all get some time 'fronting' each day.

James: And the tasks that work well for each dyad, so that we nurture each relationship too.

Beastie: Like reading and blogging together in our case.

There's definitely that sense in this book too that it's important to keep checking in on all parts and giving them space. Janina suggests making sure that you ask inner children how they're doing regularly, buying them soft toys, whatever it takes to let them know that they are held safe and heard.

James: The other aspect of locating our parts in the five Fs that we found useful is that it helps us to know which part a difficult feeling is coming from. Because we have one part who tends to feel all the

feelings for everybody – out in the world and in here – we have often assumed that it is him who is feeling every tough feeling that we experience. But now we can remember that Fox's fear and Tony's yearning often lie underneath Jonathan's struggles.

Beastie: Janina also points out that fight and flight are generally more teen parts, because those strategies develop in adolescence. That certainly makes sense of how we experience me and Max, and the period of our life that we associate with Max coming forward and me being cast out – because it wasn't safe to be angry.

James: So now we can trace tough feelings back through you all. Recognising that the noise of fight or flight is often a response to the frantic hypervigilance of fawn, and that that may be triggered by those younger freeze or attach parts feeling frightened or desperately yearning for closeness.

5 parts, 7 parts, or more?

Beastie: So that's five parts James, but what about you and Ara? You don't get a mention here. And what about people who don't experience their parts as five Fs?

James: So Janina refers to parts beyond the five Fs in several places. There can be further traumatised parts whose job it is to block progress, for example, or who carry the urge to self destruct or to give up. She also refers to a 'getting on with normal life' part who is the adult who can be brought into communication with all these parts. We'll come back to them shortly.

Beastie: For us the way it works is that there's a vivid experience of the five of us, and the two of you – James and Ara – who feel like parental parts. We used to think of it as two kids (Fox and Jonathan), three teens (me, Max, and Tony), and two 'grownups' (you and Ara). I guess Tony has shifted down to a kid, but the rest of that feels pretty accurate.

James: Mm but we did cling rather tightly to the idea of being seven for a while in ways that weren't helpful. It meant that we didn't want to engage with any experience or feeling that couldn't clearly be located in one of the seven of us.

Beastie: The way we've loosened that is to recognise that each of us can manifest in multiple ways. Like sometimes we can be the aspects of us that we are now: like an adult aspect of each of us. But sometimes we can still feel the child aspect of each of us: who they were when things were hard. And sometimes we can feel a kind of pure form of each of our energies: like when I really connect with my rage.

James: We could say that each of us has an everyday aspect, a stuck/traumatised child aspect, perhaps also a shadow aspect and a sacred aspect: representing our worst and best potentials.

Beastie: So we might be seven, or twenty eight, depending on how you look at it.

James: For us it works best to mostly function as seven, but to be up for welcoming and listening to each of our aspects when they're around.

Beastie: It all reminds us that it's wise not to hold too tightly to any one model. Like the sense of us as the five Fs is very helpful, but it can equally be helpful to see us as more like the emotions in *Inside Out* (anger, fear, sadness, joy, shame, with peacefulness and powerfulness as the parents), or more like the five **Buddha families** when Ara's getting our spiritual on.

James: We're mostly hopeless geeks so we can spend a lot of time going down those rabbit-holes until we're reminded that we're meant to be following the feelings rather than spending all our time intellectualising.

Beastie: I don't mind enabling your geeky habits every now and then prof.

Dual awareness rather than merging

James: Thank you. So another pivotal idea in Janina's book is that when people feel swept into the trauma vortex they are merging, or blending, with their traumatised parts.

Beastie: This has helped us so much. Even though we understand ourselves as plural, when triggered we often experienced ourselves as purely whichever part was activated.

James: Most people do. You are just enraged, or terrified, or swamped with shame. It feels like the only possible reaction to what has happened. It feels like all that you are, and even all that you will ever be. And you are desperate to react out of that place: to lash out, to do something, or to disappear, for example.

Beastie: So what Janina is suggesting is that we cultivate the capacity to detach at such moments. Detaching is also helpful at the less intense moments when there are just **flickers of such feelings** rather than full on trauma responses. She calls this cultivating 'dual awareness' or 'parallel processing'.

James: It's a lot like the mindfulness idea that we can have an observing mind who is not caught up in the emotions, thoughts, or sensations. We've always struggled with actually doing that, but the plural piece made it all fall into place. If we see everything as messages from traumatised parts, we can absolutely experience ourselves as one part – who is calm and clear – holding another part – who is caught up or activated.

Beastie: Janina suggests that the 'getting on with normal life' part learns to hold the traumatised child parts. We do it a bit differently to that, as we'll explain in a moment.

James: But this way of seeing things – that people have a tendency to merge or blend with their traumatised parts – is extremely useful in making sense of our hugely confusing experience of feeling simultaneously like a competent adult and a fragile child.

Beastie: I know right? In the midst of our **post-traumatic stress time** it could be extremely disorienting that we'd manage to go and facilitate a training for fifty people, and later that same day we'd meltdown over not having a safe-enough TV show to watch that evening. It was absolutely terrifying that sometime it might flip and a traumatised child part might show up when we were doing something 'grownup'. A few times we had to get ourselves home fast when that happened.

James: Janina also explains imposter syndrome helpfully in this way. Our five F parts can feel so intense that we can come to mistrust the 'reality' of more bland 'getting on with life' parts: like they are the ones who must be unreal or fake, because we know that really we are this impossibly fragile person who can hardly function day-to-day.

Beastie: Mm, so when people accept their plurality they don't have to get caught up worrying about which parts are real or fake. What a relief.

James: Janina says she likes the language of 'parts' because it's what people already use in everyday language. It's commonplace to say 'a part of me feels...' And putting it like that helps to create that distance – that dual awareness. 'A part of me is scared to go out, and I can listen to his fears without imagining that he is all of me.' Rather than 'I feel a rush of terror, it must mean that I'm incapable of anything, and when I do seem capable that's all a facade.'

The neurobiology of parts

Beastie: Let's not get too much into the neurobiology of trauma here because you have already done a **whole article about that**, but we can understand all of this on that level: having parts associated with the 5 Fs, and dual awareness.

James: We can. And in fact that helps us to understand just how different each of us feels on an embodied level. We have wondered at that, as have those who we've been brave enough to allow to meet separately in person. We really do feel like different beings: bigger or smaller, stronger or weaker, tighter or looser: like our whole body seems to alter as we shift between parts.

Beastie: We always knew we were a **shapeshifter**! But that makes sense if we consider the way the nervous system is so different in those different trauma responses right? When we locate our parts in those responses then it makes complete sense that we'd experience our embodiment in very different ways.

James: Right, and the idea of dual awareness also makes sense on a neurobiological level. We are able to locate part of us – in Janina's way of seeing things, the 'getting on with normal life' part – in the 'rational' brain, and whichever other part we're dealing with in the 'emotional brain'.

Beastie: I would still like us to read more about the neuroscience aspect of this, because some authors like Janina and Pat de Young talk about the left (rational) brain and the right (emotional) brain, while others like David Treleaven talk about the prefrontal cortex (rational) and the more mammalian/reptilian parts (emotional). And even then the rational/emotional binary is an oversimplified shorthand for more nuanced distinctions. But whatever the science, it fits our lived experience.

James: It does seem that attuning to traumatic emotional survival responses, and connecting them up to more analytic, task-oriented, modes is a key part of trauma recovery. And it is helpful that this whole way of seeing things lends legitimacy to experiences of plurality.

Beastie: Not that something should need a biological basis in order to be treated as legit of course James, I'm sure you'd never suggest that.

James: Fair criticism Beastie, of course it is all always biopsychosocial. I like when Janina says:

'I can sense my medial prefrontal cortex is curious about the negative mood state connected to the right subcortical area of the brain' doesn't evoke the same emotional connection or self compassion as 'I can sense in myself some curiosity about the depressed part's sadness.'

Beastie: All of us – including you and me – could be seen as simply a shorthand for these physiological states, but that shorthand is extremely helpful when it comes to bringing compassion and understanding to what's happening.

James: My physiological state is up for hanging out with your physiological state any time Beastie.

The 'getting on with normal life' part

Beastie: Heh what's next? Oh yes, Janina's idea of the 'getting on with normal life' part was a challenge for us, because we really don't have a sense of such a part any more: a 'Meg-John Barker' who is separate from the rest of us. Our sense is that the part that 'got on with normal life' for most of our adulthood was Max, who is totally identified with flight. She's the workaholic, overachiever who has been sent to the hammock while the rest of us figure out how to relate more kindly and consensually to our work!

James: Yes quite the challenge to read that we need a 'getting on with normal life' part, when we were so proud of ourselves for getting rid of any sense of having a leader, and working as a collective.

Beastie: I am also extreme side-eye to the word 'normal' in there.

James: Yes, and that would be one of our few criticisms of the book right? The lack of critical engagement with this concept of 'normal life' which people should be aspiring too, which looks suspiciously like that of the good neoliberal capitalist citizen.

Beastie: Going after a nice normal romantic partnership, a nine-to-five job, and all the goals that make a good successful singular self.

James: I don't think that is quite what Janina is saying to be fair. The valid – and vital – point is that everybody, even the most traumatised people, have access to a part that can sometimes function in everyday life. Or at least that they could imagine what that might be like. And that is hugely helpful to access when you're feeling utterly overwhelmed by trauma.

Beastie: Absolutely, no question. But I would like to challenge the sense that the best thing for that part to pursue is 'normality' in a world where 'normality' is leading us over the edge of a cliff. I would also challenge the sense that the ideal outcome is to appear in the world as a singular 'getting on with normal life' part, albeit one who is holding their much-loved inner children close and safe inside, having rescued them from their traumatised pasts.

The Fs and the Cs

James: I think that your comment right there demonstrates exactly what we're about to say next. All of our 'traumatised' parts also hold potentials that are extremely helpful to us. It serves us better to regard each of the seven of us as holding both useful capacities, and particular struggles, rather than the 'getting on with normal life' part – whoever that may be – holding all the good stuff, and the other parts just holding trauma. The rage that you have brought to a couple of places in this conversation – and which you bring to our life more broadly – is immensely helpful in enabling us to see clearly when situations are not okay, and in setting boundaries and challenging harmful messages.

Beastie: Thanks, I try to bring the thunder in useful ways.

James: You do Beastie. It is very much appreciated. Again to be fair I don't think that Janina is suggesting that there is no value in the traumatised parts. There's a definite sense in there that once the traumatised parts have been befriended and brought home, we can draw on their energies in helpful ways: like encouraging confident parts to give the presentations, and the gentle parts to care for plants and animals. There's a sense that the 'getting on with normal life' part might bring those parts forward for experiences they enjoy and excel at, and encourage them to stay away somewhere safe for things they find scary and triggering.

Beastie: But Janina does suggest that it is only the 'getting on with normal life' part who can access all of the 'C's.

James: Yes, this book is all about F words and C words, I am so very glad that Tony isn't part of this conversation.

Beastie: Quite. The Cs are things like curiosity, creativity, compassion, confidence, connection, courage, clarity, commitment, calm. Janina locates those in the 'rational' brain of the 'getting on with normal life' part, but we have a different experience right?

James: Right. You made a table of it.

Beastie: Here...

Part **F foible** **C capacity**

Fox	Freeze	Curiosity/creativity
Tony	Fasten (attach)	Confidence/connection
Jonathan	Fawn (submit)	Compassion
Max	Flight	Courage
Beastie	Fight	Clarity
James	Fog	Commitment
Ara	Fade	Calm

James: Oh I like that you found a more decent F for Tony.

Beastie: The main point is that we experience each of those Cs as being a capacity that one of us has more than the others. There's a sense of each of us having a place where we get stuck, and a capacity which is our most helpful potential.

James: I like that you've found Fs for me and Ara. Even the parent parts have places they can get stuck.

Beastie: In our experience Ara's main difficulty has been actually being available. She's been the most elusive, hence 'fade'. And you've struggled at those times when you haven't been able to access your rational competence because a situation is beyond your comprehension or capacity.

James: Which feels like getting lost in the fog. Nicely put.

Beastie: So my alternative to Janina's 'getting on with normal life' part vs. traumatised parts model would be to suggest that all parts have patterns they get stuck in (Fs), and potentials (Cs). Dual awareness, for us, involves finding a part – any part – who is in their C place, and bringing them in to listen to – and hold – the part who is their F place. Often it helps to go to a parental part as you are more consistently in your Cs, but it's also helpful to mix it up so that all parts can experience their potentials when they have them.

James: It's good Beastie. And I think there's also a further layer where the Fs can have a cascade effect: one of us stuck in F can mean others go into their Fs too. But similarly, the more some of us access our Cs the more others can as well.

Beastie: Right. I'm just getting this. Like if Fox is frightened and we don't notice, or try to ignore the flicker of fear, we often end up with Jonathan going into his hypervigilant fawn mode and trying to **figure it all out**, and me or Max getting caught up in noisy busy, shameful, or angry, thoughts about whatever-it-is. The whole system goes back to it's old trauma mode, and it can feel harder to access you and Ara as you go into Fog and Fade.

James: But as we find our way through this trauma time, and Max relaxes, you feel clearer, we notice that suddenly Tony's confidence is back, Fox's creativity returns.

Beastie: Right now Fox is planning to write a whole plural graphic memoir so I'm guessing that's a good sign.

James: I don't want to say that Janina is definitely wrong about a 'getting on with normal life' part. It may well work for other people, and it may even be a better model for us someday. Certainly we find that remembering that we are capable of daily tasks – by moving into them for a while – can be a relief when the trauma is up but not overpowering. However I personally like the idea that each part of us can do that. And I like the empowering and equalising sense that we each have capacities as well as foibles.

Beastie: I thought 'foible' was a bit more friendly than 'flaw' or 'fault'.

James: Definitely.

Plurality and trauma – 2 – practices

In this article my two most studious parts – James and Beastie – return to revisit the question of plurality and what we have learnt about it since they [last got together on the topic](#). Particularly they discuss our learnings from [Janina Fisher's excellent book *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors*](#). You can read their earlier [Plural FAQ article](#), and the [Plural Zine](#) that preceded it for more background on the topic, or just start here.

It turns out these two have a lot to say so we've divided the article into two: The [first article](#) dealt with understanding plurality from this trauma-informed perspective. This second article deals with working with plurality in practice. A further article to follow covers how these ideas and practices link to mindfulness.

James: Are you back with me Beastie?

Beastie: Yep, time to [continue our conversation](#). One of the delights of plurality is that different parts have different ideas about the best ways to spend our time, so it's been a couple of days since you and I had a chance to sit down to this.

James: Fox is off in the hills or dreaming up drawings, Max is still deep in her trauma healing, Tony needed to go swimming with friends apparently.

Beastie: And Ara seems to think that sitting still is just as valuable as all the studying and writing that you and I want to do.

James: I know right? It's an interesting co-parenting arrangement that she and I have.

Beastie: I'm struck that teasing is probably our main inner love language. I really hope that translates in our written conversations!

James: Me too. I'm honestly not sure it would be possible to love all of you more than I do. Teasing Tony about his ego, or Ara about her openness to woo, definitely comes from a place of deep love and respect. Like what would we do without one part who actually thinks we're awesome most of the time, or one who is open to life's mysteries which keep hitting us over the head?

Beastie: You get to be all mushy in this conversation old man, don't worry, it's coming.

James: Alright then Beasie, heh maybe we'll get to see the softer side of you too.

Beastie: We'll see about that. Anyway, to recap on the [last article](#). In that one we explained this understanding of people as being divided into parts: each of which represents one of the survival

strategies of **fight, fawn, flight, freeze**, and attach. Child and adolescent parts of us remain stuck in those patterns – and in the times in the past when they developed, so when we are retraumatized, or triggered, they feel like it's all still going on.

The trick is to recognise – when we're triggered or reactive – that it is not the whole of us who is struggling, but just a part. Then we can cultivate 'dual awareness' where a part who is not struggling can help the part who is. In this article we're going to dig deeper into how we actually do that.

James: Alright, let's do this.

No part gets left behind

Beastie: I loved this phrase in the book: no part gets left behind. It reminded me of the TV show **Sense8** which was a hard plural relate for us when we watched it.

James: A cluster of people who can experience the same things and occupy the same body, who all bring different skills and struggles to the team. Dunno what was familiar about that to you Beastie.

Beastie: Gosh it's good though. A crime it got cancelled. Oof now I'm super tempted to do an aside about which of us is closest to which character...

James: I'll take tough Wolfgang with a hint of good-guy Will.

Beastie: Tony is obviously Lito *eye roll*.

James: Jonathan's Capheus. Aw, I love Capheus.

Beastie: I think Fox would be closest to Kala; Max to Riley.

James: Making you Sun, of course. And leaving Ara as Nomi. I'm so intrigued whether plural experience was a part of the Wachowski's inspiration for this show.

Beastie: Fascinating that the cluster connect through various erotic, romantic, and close friendship bonds too, no?

James: Indeed. But we got sidetracked. Our point here was that Sense8 has that same ethos of 'no part gets left behind'. A few times they are faced with a challenge where it makes sense to leave somebody in danger, and they insist on bringing everyone along, even when that puts the cluster at greater risk.

Beastie: And by the end it is clear the same applies to the 'sidekicks' as well. Everybody is equally valued, equally important.

James: I guess this is another place where we were already on it with Janina's perspective. Ever since realising that we were seven we've had that sense that it's vital to bring everyone forward equally; to regard everyone as having just as much to offer.

Beastie: Whether they have been foregrounded or backgrounded through our life, whether they are grown-up or childlike, strong or gentle.

James: Janina describes a couple of challenges in this process with clients. First they have to recognise that they have vulnerable child parts, then that they have challenging adolescent parts, who often come in to block the process in some way.

Beastie: Right. With the vulnerable children the challenge is to recognise that we really have parts to us who are that vulnerable and fragile, but they tend to be very easy to love once we've found them. Teenage parts are often more challenging because they can seem harsh, critical, angry, even highly destructive. This maps onto what we've written about elsewhere about how important it is to own the parts of us who have been victims/survivors, and the parts of us who are capable of oppressive or abusive behaviour: if we are to engage helpfully in social justice, that is.

James: The trick with the more challenging parts is to assume that they are being sensible – given the life that they've had – and that they are probably trying to protect the whole, or the vulnerable ones, even though it may seem like the opposite. Ring any bells Beastie?

Beastie: Yeah, teen me seemed to think the way to protect us was to scream hateful abuse at us constantly. I'm not proud.

James: But it makes sense in a life where we had to learn very complex contradictory rules about how to be in order not to be attacked or abandoned by the people around us. To have a loud inner critic to keep 'reminding' us of the rules was essential to survival, if not particularly pleasant.

Beastie: That's an understatement. So Janina describes many times working with a client to take care of their frightened child parts, and then suddenly an angry, sabotaging, sceptical or destructive part pops up. The thing you can do then is to shift the work to that part, treating it just as respectfully.

James: And she suggests shifting the tone too. Child parts need a really gentle, soothing tone, and simple language. Sometimes they even communicate non-verbally. Teen parts need straightforward language. Janina suggests asking clients how they would communicate with an actual troubled teen, and going with that.

Beastie: Vulnerable child parts often want reassuring that they are safe and loved, whereas tough teen parts want to know they are respected and honoured – like war veterans – for how they helped us to survive. All parts need to be spoken with truthfully too.

James: You and Max **wrote last time** about how things shifted dramatically for us when we befriended you Beastie. That was a turning point, when we quit fighting you and finally embraced you.

Beastie: And we've kept that as our rule now. Whatever part turns up, or whatever aspect of a part, however resistant or scary, we welcome them home.

James: Janina says that when we can welcome home the hurt, lost, and lonely parts, self hatred and disconnection can transform into self-compassion.

Beastie: Again deep resonance for us. The idea of loving ourselves was entirely impossible to us as a single individual. Loving our parts from the perspective of other parts is easy.

James: The metaphor of home is helpful here too. Janina notices that child parts often feel stuck in dangerous home places of the past. She helps adult clients to literally show those parts the safer homes they inhabit now, to bring them home there.

Beastie: We do some of that. Finding a safe-enough physical home space has certainly been important to us. But we also imagine a fantasy home that we live in as separate selves. That can be a safe place to go to when things get hard, a good location for internal conversations, and a space to play in our imagination. The child parts find it soothing to imagine where each of us is in that space at the end of the day, or when they are struggling. Janina says that 'imagined experiences of safe attachment can generate the same feelings and sensations and evoke the same attunement bliss' as actual experiences.

Holding and hearing

James: Okay we should say more about Janina's practice. We've explained that trauma responses can be understood as merging or blending with traumatised younger parts, but how do we cultivate the 'dual awareness' or 'parallel process' required to un-merge?

Beastie: Janina describes how to do this in the therapy room: the therapist guides the client to always use the language of 'a part of me feels...' rather than 'I feel...', and then to engage in internal conversation with that part. If they start to merge, she gets the client to ask the traumatised part if they would mind sitting back a little. She explains that parts usually feel safer and more relaxed when that happens. It makes them feel unsafe to be that merged, and it is a relief to unmerge.

James: That makes sense. So the alternative to merging or blending is dual awareness. As we said last time, Janina refers to this as the 'getting on with normal life' part taking care of the traumatised part. In our case it is whichever part – often a parental part – who feels in the 'C' place: able to access compassion, clarity, calm, etc. That part looks after whichever part is in the 'F' place...

Beastie: ...freaking out or trying to figure everything out, with the five F survival strategies.

James: Mm. And the mantra here is 'hold and hear'. A part who is struggling needs to know that they are held safe enough, and that the other part is hearing them well. It can take a while to locate which part is struggling, to separate from them enough that they feel held, and to find the way that they like to be heard. But with practice we get used to the process of finding what works each time.

Beastie: Right, it's like being up for being flexible and shifting the container to find out what's needed each time. Who needs to be held and heard? Who do they need it from? What does holding and hearing look like this time? And there can often be a real sense of clicking – and nervous system relaxing – when we get there.

*James: I'm also struck that this process relates to what we're aiming for in our outer relationships now too Beastie. That move from **fear/shame trauma responses** to a combination of protection and connection.*

Beastie: Right, the holding provides that sense of being protected enough and safe enough to come forward. The hearing is the connection piece, feeling really heard and understood.

The befriending questions

James: One piece of solid gold this book has given us are the befriending questions. That's a set of simple questions to ask the part who is struggling.

Beastie: Every time I think it's not going to work – that it can't apply in this case. And pretty much every time it's been an incredibly helpful process. There are other practices that Janina suggests too, like showing the child selves that they are safe now, or working with them to figure out which aspects of everyday life they want to engage with and which they don't. But these befriending questions would be the central practice: the questions to ask in order to hear a part once you have got them sitting with you.

James: Here are the questions. You identify a part that is in some kind of distress. Then you ask them:

1. *'What are you worried about if you...?' (e.g. say 'no', read that message, see those people)*
2. *When they reply, ask them, 'what are you worried about if [repeat exact description they gave] really does come true?'*
3. *When they reply, ask them, 'if those worries that [repeat exact description they gave] really do happen, what are you worried will happen next?' Keep repeating this question until the core fear is reached, often a fear of **annihilation of self, or abandonment by others.***

4. *Acknowledge that fear by mirroring it back to them, then ask them 'What do you need from me right here, right now, to not be so afraid of...?' You're looking for a small enough, sufficiently concrete thing that can definitely be met by you.*

Beastie: Wanna role play it with me old man?

James: Oh go on then, am I talking to old struggling Beastie?

Beastie: Yep and she's a hot mess. Somebody just assumed we'd do something for them that we really don't want to do. She wants to tell them where to go.

James: Okay Beastie. I feel your rage and it's welcome indeed. But are you up for exploring this a bit with me first before we do anything.

Beastie: Did you see what they did? Those fuckers. I've got to show them how non-consensual that is.

James: I'm so up for a conversation about what we might communicate with them in a bit, but you know when these strong responses come up it's often a good opportunity to understand each other better. I really want to understand what's going on for you here.

Beastie: Alright, I guess.

James: Thank-you. I promise we're going to take this seriously.

Beastie: Okay. Ask your damn questions.

James: What are you worried about if we don't tell them where to go immediately?

Beastie: We'll wind up doing this thing they're asking for, allowing them to treat us this way.

James: And if we wind up doing it: allowing them to treat us that way? What are you worried will happen if we do that?

Beastie: They'll keep doing it more and more.

James: And if they keep doing it more and more? What are you worried will happen next?

Beastie: I hate it.

James: What do you hate?

Beastie: It's this image of us, with like these knives getting in, like they're intruding on us, and there's nothing we can do.

James: I can see it Beastie, that image. Can you put a word to it?

Beastie: Invasion, annihilation, it's like there'll be nothing left of us.

James: That's spot on. You described it well. That fear we have of people treating us that way and us just being annihilated by it. Can you tell me what you need from me right here, right now, to not be so afraid of this happening?

Beastie: I get what you're saying about not responding right away, while this is so live. But could you help me write some bullet points of what I want to convey about how we need to be treated? Then we can agree to return to those in a few days and turn that into an email if it still feels right.

James: You need to know that the rest of us are going to listen to you, to take this seriously, to make sure we're clear that we can't offer what they demanded from us.

Beastie: Oo now you're going off script.

James: Phew that got pretty real actually.

Beastie: You doing okay old man?

James: Are you?

Beastie: Yeah. Maybe a little pause before we continue. Thanks for being up for that.

James: You're very welcome.

Emotional attunement

Beastie: Ah that's better. What're we on? Attunement. Great, now for the bit where you get mushy.

James: Hmph.

Beastie: So these next bits relate to what we've been learning about shame and trauma more widely. This sense that the aim is 'emotional regulation', 'expanding the window of tolerance', and 'earned secure attachment'.

What you're trying to do is to learn how to regulate emotions that come up rather than being flooded by them, so that you can tolerate them more easily over time. That involves meeting yourself like a parent should meet a child with a tough feeling. We wrote about this particularly in the article about Pat de Young's book on shame. She said that chronic shame was caused by not having our emotions regulated as kids, and that we could learn to do it now. That would lead us towards that 'earned secure attachment'.

James: Kids who aren't emotionally regulated like that are likely to form insecure attachments with caregivers – and later others – in various ways. Kids who are emotionally regulated by their caregivers can form more secure attachments. They know that they have a safe place to return to from their explorations where they will be emotionally regulated (rather than being punished or ignored, or evoking stress in their caregiver, for example).

This 'earned secure attachment' idea suggests that we can learn to do this emotional regulation for ourselves if we haven't had it as kids. Back to the neuroscience, we are retraining our brain and our nervous system by holding and hearing those trauma responses or overwhelming emotional states.

Beastie: Which we can do because of neuroplasticity. Follow a different neural path enough times when these things happen and we'll eventually respond to potentially triggering situations with curiosity and containment rather than overwhelm, melt down, shut down, or fragmenting.

James: So I notice you've called this section 'emotional attunement' rather than 'emotional regulation' Beastie, why is that?

Beastie: Still trying to avoid the mushy part James? Okay I'll bite, it's because of neoliberal capitalism.

James: Of course it is.

Beastie: Think about the language 'emotional regulation'. I don't like it. It suggests that emotions are a problem, something to be regulated – presumably by rationality – rather than being immensely valuable. There's a disturbingly patriarchal and colonialist legacy right there. We're watching the documentary *The Century of The Self* at the moment. It demonstrates the roots of the consumer capitalist model – which is responsible for climate crisis, the rich/poor divide, exploitation and dehumanisation, huge mental and physical health problems...

James: ..the eroding of real democracy, everything bad basically.

Beastie: It's rooted in psychoanalytic thinking, particularly the ideas of Anna Freud that people need to learn how to regulate their unconscious forces by bringing in the rational ego. Anna and co encouraged people to do this in order to conform to normality (which at the time meant a whole bunch of misogynist, homophobic, racist ways of being). And many of the people who drew on her ideas back then believed that *they* – as the elite – should control the irrational unconscious forces of

the masses, making them into docile consumers who would cause no trouble and keep the economy going.

James: And we're living through the terrifying end result of this approach to humanity. I can see why you're not keen on 'regulation' Beastie.

Beastie: It also doesn't accurately capture what these authors are actually describing James. I think 'emotional attunement' is a much better word for it.

James: Agreed. When we are holding and hearing one of us who is struggling, we're not trying to regulate them into shutting up. In fact, trying to do that was the problem. When we used to try to repress these parts – and their feelings – that damaged us, leaving us disconnected from ourselves and from others.

Beastie: Or the parts and their feelings just got louder and louder because they were being ignored, or ended out reacting when in such states. Not helpful either

James: So the aim of attunement is that we stay with that part, demonstrating to them how much we welcome them, how we are able to hold them, and how we are interested and committed to hearing them.

Beastie: And when we find that click moment, where they feel truly held and heard, that is emotional attunement...

James: Okay now I'll get mushy about it. So the books we've been reading describe emotional attunement as like the feeling a parent gets with a child. It's that state that a parent and child go into when the parent has figured out exactly what that child needs and has provided it.

Beastie: 'Are you crying because you're tired? Because you need changing? Oh no you're hungry, here's your bottle...'

James: And then both parent and child go into that blissful state. That's emotional attunement.

Beastie: We had another smug moment realising we'd already got to this with each other before reading Janina's book.

James: But that's been the part of plurality that we've perhaps found most difficult – embarrassing even – to convey to others.

Beastie: Indeed. We've gone from not even being able to conceptualise what loving ourself could be like, to experiencing moments of deep emotional attunement with ourself, which feel precisely like that feeling of parent/child bliss, falling in love, or the afterglow of sex.

James: Indeed they sometimes actually are those things, if they're between parts which feel a parent/child bond, a romantic bond, and/or an erotic connection.

Beastie: Tell us about your feels old man!

James: Okay well this week I had the parent/child version with Fox. They'd dragged us up to one of their favourite outside spaces and taken a bunch of pictures of flowers and animals, and we were walking home all sun-soaked and tired, and they were chatting away to me, and... honestly Beastie when it's like that I just find it hard to believe that somebody looking at us would not see a tall man walking hand in hand with a little kid. It feels so vividly like two different people. And I looked down at them with such love and fondness, and such wonder you know? That this delightful part of us exists and wants to be with me. Is that mushy enough for you?

Beastie: You did good *grin* So I guess we'd already found our way to attunement moments with each other in various different ways. We can also get there by joking together...

James: The teasing. It's like we're getting to know each other better and better so those jokes come from that place of deep understanding of each of our foibles.

Beastie: Like knowing it'll embarrass you to be so open about your feelings, for example.

James: Like that, yes.

Beastie: And we can reach a similar sense of attunement in romantic or erotic moments, whether in fantasy or reality, or the in-between.

James: The other day I pulled you up to dance with me after we finished writing.

Beastie: To Stevie Wonder no less, very smooth.

James: I love that it's me you come to to have these conversations Beastie.

Beastie: And I love that our inner prof respects me and my ideas so much, it's a good counterbalance to all the patriarchal bullshit we've had to endure.

James: I do respect you Beastie: deep respect for your ideas and how they develop our thinking.

Beastie: Okay, okay enough. So I guess we're saying that any kind of emotional attunement you can get between parts is awesome. And specifically – drawing on Janina's work – it's good to aim for that when a part is struggling, in other words when any tough emotion, thought, or sensation comes up.

James: Which is a great way of flipping that experience, so that each time it happens it's an opportunity to find attunement, and to keep moving towards that part with curiosity until we've found it. That's a radical shift from any tough experience feeling like it's a bad sign, or something we should avoid.

Earned secure attachment and inner parents

Beastie: A little more on earned secure attachment and inner parents?

James: This perhaps relates more to [Pete Walker's work on cPTSD](#), although [Pat De Young](#) writes about earned secure attachment too. One of the bits of Pete's book which really stuck with us was the idea of 'reparenting yourself and reparenting by committee.'

Beastie: That's what we've been aiming at since reading his book. How to provide yourself with care and protection, and to cultivate multiple relationships where you receive that kind of care and protection too.

James: Reparenting by committee means that you don't put that on one person – as we can so easily do in codependent-type relationships – but rather you develop your support system of people who you turn to for care and protection, as well as offering that too.

Beastie: Hold your horses James, we'll get to plurality and external relationships in a sec.

James: Okay, okay. So the sense we have is that a key aim here is to cultivate an 'earned secure attachment'. This would mean that we were less flooded by tough emotions and trauma responses because we would trust our own capacity to attune to ourselves, and to care-for and protect ourselves, when those things came up. Practising emotional attunement with all parts of us, in all situations, is the way of moving towards that earned secure attachment.

Beastie: And inner parent parts are pivotal in that – we think. There isn't much about that in Janina's book – it's more a sense that the 'getting on with normal life' adult part is the inner parent. But [Sarah Peyton](#), [Pete Walker](#), and others have more of a sense of cultivating specific inner nurturers, protectors, or wise witnessing parts, however they describe them.

James: And I guess that's what we have done with me and Ara.

Beastie: It almost felt like building you out of patchwork. Mm, like we said in our [previous conversation James](#), an act of excavation and creation simultaneously: finding what was always already there, and deliberately shaping you both and bringing you forward. You feel like a combination of memories of attuned moments we had with actual family members, teachers, companion animals, etc., as well as our relationships with a few great therapists, supervisors, and mentors along the way, and a lot of examples in fiction that we draw on.

James: My starting point being **queer James Bond**, although now our littlest one is addicted to hospital dramas I'm becoming more of a combination of **Richard Webber** from Grey's Anatomy and **Daniel Charles** from Chicago Med.

Beastie: Fox is bizarrely obsessed with Dr. Charles right now.

James: Our first experience of Ara was one of emotional attunement huh? Jonathan felt that sense of being cradled, after we started our process towards gender surgery.

Beastie: Now we have that cradling feeling more and more. I guess the point here that all people have these potentials in themselves, even if woven together from the merest scraps of memories and fictional examples. And we can all work on developing and strengthening parental parts, or whatever we want to call them. Perhaps caring and protective parts is less loaded.

James: I can't even with the shift we've experienced in this. A few months back we rarely felt me or Ara around much, whereas now we can have whole days where one of us is to the fore in our everyday life, and/or much of our time is spent in dialogue between one of the two of us and other parts.

Outer relationships: Delegating our parts to others

Beastie: I think this gets us to the final issue that we want to touch upon, although I expect it's one we'll return to in more depth in future. One reason why we didn't have much access to you and Ara in the past is because we didn't understand how we needed to cultivate parental parts for ourselves.

James: Right, so one thing we did was to look for other people – mainly partners – to be that for us. And another thing we did was to offer us – me and/or Ara – to other people, rather than learning how to be that for ourselves.

Beastie: I guess this is the piece we're least proud of. It seems so obvious now that we've done all this reading. But we've hurt others and ourselves a lot by trying to be that kind of parent for them, and by trying to find that kind of parent in them. What does Janina have to say about this?

James: She cites **Judith Herman** who said that trauma leaves us with desperation for an omnipotent rescuer. She also points out that therapists have often done damage in the past by assuming that their role is to become that attachment figure for a client, and to work with the relationship in that way. She sees the therapeutic role instead as facilitating the client to find the capacity in themselves to parent their traumatised inner child and teen parts. She writes a good bit about how to explain this to clients, and to side step attempts by them – and temptations in yourself – to take on that role.

Beastie: This has been so helpful in understanding how we want our relationships of all kinds to be. When we feel drawn by somebody else into that kind of role, perhaps through them pedestalling us or assuming that we can parent them, we now feel highly uncomfortable. We try to discuss openly

where our boundaries are, and how we might facilitate them finding that capacity in themselves, if indeed we have that to offer in that relationship. We can also notice when one of us has fallen into projecting this kind of thing onto somebody else.

James: That one of us often being Tony.

Beastie: Now we realise that he's our 'attach' part, yep.

James: There's something so important about empowerment and disempowerment here. To take on a parental role for another person's child parts is inherently disempowering, however great it might feel for all concerned. It so easily leads to dynamics where the child parts become dependent on that person to feel safe, or where that person simply can't sustain that level of 'parenting' and the child parts become retraumatised. Instead we need to trust others to find their own inner parents, whichever way works for them. That's far more empowering for them, and less risky for everyone involved.

Beastie: Writing like Janina's, and hopefully ours, might help people to find something of a route-map for this, but nobody should ever be offering to do it for another person, or telling them how to do it. Everyone has to find their own path, ideally well-supported with others who understand this work and are doing it alongside them, and/or facilitating them in it.

James: I'm struck that the internal process Janina describes requires de-blending, or un-meshing from our parts, and how that relates to doing the same in relationships with others. It doesn't help anybody to become blended or enmeshed, as we do when we unconsciously enter stuck parent-child dynamics in relationships. Remaining separate and mutual is the thing.

Beastie: Back to being both protected and connected.

James: Okay another 5000 words for part 2 of our epic conversation Beastie. Time for another break before we come back, write a summary, and put it out there.

Beastie: Plan.

Plural superpowers

James: So we'd like to end by suggesting that plurality is a superpower.

Beastie: I mean we would say that wouldn't we? But I think Janina agrees. First she points out that fragmenting or compartmentalisation is only 'pathological' when it is unconscious. It is a natural response to trauma. It enables us to survive. And when we make conscious use of it, it can make us incredibly strong.

James: For a start, cultivating dual awareness means that we're far less likely to get reactive and hurt others and ourselves out of that reactivity. But beyond that, when we're conscious of all our parts, and able to bring them forward or allow them to retreat, we can find the 'right part for the job': the part with mastery in that area. Like the times we've found Tony for public speaking, or Ara for facilitating a workshop, or you for holding our boundaries Beastie. The feeling is extraordinary when one of us is in their element, and it connects way better with others too.

Beastie: I think there's way more to discover here. Like the kind of art that might emerge from playful Fox rather than productive Max, or what it will be like to bring Jonathan's capacity for emotional empathy to relationships when he's not so overwhelmed.

James: Heh right now it's more like the bit in the superhero movie where the hero realises they have powers but has no idea how to use them.

Beastie: Spidey crashing into buildings and getting goo everywhere.

James: We're so using that superhero theme for our next graphic guide on mental health Beastie.

Beastie: I can't wait. Let's end with a list of the key practices here.

James: Great writing with you Beastiegirl.

Beastie: Right back atcha.

Repeat the following (repetition is soothing and required for neuroplastic shift)

- Recognise all feelings and triggered reactions as sensible communications from a part (e.g. expressing worries, attempting to find solutions, up/down regulating emotions)
- Elicit a felt sense of that part and respond curiously from differentiated adult part
- Emphasise the togetherness of adult and child: holding and hearing
- Encourage reciprocal communication, attending to how each part feels and responds
- Use the four befriending questions
- Anything that doesn't work is an opportunity to learn and develop trust (e.g. if a part backs away let them know you understand why)
- Maximise moments of attunement, stay embodied
- All parts are equally valuable so bring them forward equally – no part gets left behind

- Check in with everybody regularly to let them know that they are held in mind and get curious how they're doing
- Cultivate compassion for all parts and communication and trust within each dyad

Plural mindfulness / mindful plurality

In this article two of my selves, [Ara and Max](#), discuss how plurality can unlock features of mindfulness which can otherwise be difficult to access such as self compassion, mindful observation, and embracing uncertainty. This article draws from [Janina Fisher's](#) excellent book *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors*.

We've already recently published conversations between two other parts – Beastie and James – reviewing what this book has to say about [trauma and plurality](#), and [how we can work with them](#) if you want to read more on this topic. For background on plurality, check out the [plural work page](#) on our website.

CN: Brief mentions of difficult childhood experiences and self-harm, no detailed descriptions. Brief mention of a tarot card as a metaphor, not as a tool of divination.

Ara: Hey Max-y, are you up for doing this one with me?

Max: I'd like that. It seems a good fit given that I was the part of us who struggled to practice mindfulness our whole life – when I thought we were just me – and you are the part of us who mindfulness seems to come most easily to.

Ara: It's fascinating to me that we moved away from these practices, then [returned to them, from a slightly different angle](#), and suddenly they made way more sense. Like before we understood them intellectually, but only rarely did we feel what others described feeling from them. Now they have become our go-to practices. I notice that we even turn away from things that would have been welcome distractions, or imperatives, in the past, in order to return to our version of these practices.

Max: Like turning off a TV show halfway through if we start to feel troubled, or remaining still rather than going to the next task if it feels like there's more that we need to stay with.

Ara: That's what I mean. Beastie and I discussed the way we're practising 'the gap' rather than any kind of formal sitting in [our conversation](#). Here I'd love to talk with you about how understanding and treating ourselves as plural unlocks various aspects of mindfulness. We can draw on the [Janina Fisher book](#) which we hadn't read when we wrote [the gap pieces](#).

Max: Okay.

Ara: Before we start, how're you doing right now? I'm aware it's been a rough ride for you lately.

Max: It has. This **trauma process**, it ebbs and flows rather than being some kind of steady progress towards feeling less traumatised. It's hard when the feelings are intense again to believe in the **path we're on**.

Ara: That reminds me of the poem we've had up in our room from the start, by **Ijeoma Umebinyuo**. I often read it to you when you're finding things tough.

Max: That poem has helped me through some very hard times. It's still helping me through now.

Ara: You particularly I think – of all of our parts – because being to the fore all our lives means that the traumatic experiences we've been through have often hit you the hardest.

Max: Mm, and I'm also the part of us who perhaps has to **change the most**. It's so hard to see that the **strategies I employed in order for us to survive** have hurt us so much, and other people too. It's so hard to confront that without collapsing into shame, and so hard to have any sense of who I might be on the other side of this. Oh I'm crying as I write this.

Ara: Your tears are very welcome Max. When you feel this way we remind you how very grateful we all are to you. As Janina points out, without disowning the sides of us that we learnt were 'bad' growing up, and foregrounding only the 'good' in you, we would never have survived. Without repressing the feelings associated with trauma and developing a side of ourselves who could get on with everyday life, we could never have made it through.

And what's more, as you were surviving by becoming what the world told you you had to be, you were also learning – all the time – psychology, sociology, psychotherapy, philosophy. You learnt all the things that we needed to finally make sense of our own suffering, and the suffering that it came from: the systems and structures around us, the **intergenerational trauma** playing out through us, the patterns we'd developed that were hurting us. You enabled us to survive, and you kept learning. It's a huge feat, gentle warrior. You got us here.

Max: I did.

Ara: At great cost too. So much pain each time you tried to find safety and belonging for us in ways you'd been taught, but which didn't really work. So hard when your learnings took you in directions which resulted in you being dismissed and ridiculed, even attacked publicly.

Max: So many times Ara. Each time I find the way of seeing things that helps us the most, it always seems to push right at the edges of what people are up for. Like 'I know you were with me about the relationship rules being questionable, and about gender being fluid and on multiple spectrums, and about the erotic being way bigger than the sexual, but now I need you to believe that I am multiple people sharing a body – and you very well might be too!'

Ara: Thankfully we're finding some validation for our experiences in others' writings, and in the way many people respond to our writing. It seems that there's much agreement, from social justice and intersectional feminism through to the physical and mental health literature – that a huge problem in our current culture is children learning that they have to cover over themselves, and repress their authentic feelings, and pretend to be okay as you did: people being alienated from themselves, from others, from their work, and from nature, as **Gabor Maté** puts it.

This is the individualism of **neoliberal capitalism** which disconnects us from ourselves and others, makes us feel we're never enough and can never have enough, makes us **police ourselves and others** – literally and metaphorically, and puts a huge toll on the ecosystems we inhabit.

*Max: Sitting **alone in our room during lockdown** trying to **befriend every part of us** seems a far cry from addressing systemic violence, the epidemic of addiction, or climate change, but it does seem that they're all connected.*

Ara: The process can be very painful at times though, I know Max. It's like Janina says: our inner systems develop in ways that reflect the outer systems we grew up in. Schools, families, communities, cultures, where our **feelings** weren't welcome, our needs weren't heard, we weren't protected from danger, and/or our **boundaries** weren't respected.

Max: We keep coming back to that image of the tower, from the tarot deck, again this month.

Ara: We do, although **James and Beastie** continue to regard my openness to such things in a highly skeptical manner.

The tower is about a structure collapsing to the ground. It's perhaps the most frightening card in the deck. But it's only when systems and structures are dismantled that we can see that the foundations were rotten: that we need to create stronger foundations before we can start to rebuild on top of them.

That's true for each individual's inner system. It's true for the family systems built on unaddressed **intergenerational trauma**. It's true of organisations built on unjust principles like valuing different forms of labour unequally. It's true of education systems built on the non-consensual ownership of children by adults, and the desire to create conforming citizens. It's true of criminal justice systems built to protect the owners of property, which included humans when they were first developed. It's true of economic systems built to make rich people ever richer, and to encourage consumption far beyond what the planet can sustain, by making people believe that they are lacking.

Max: You may be open to the spooky stuff, but you can bring the politics too it seems Ara.

Ara: It does seem that way. Maybe I know that it helps you to open to these painful, vulnerable, processes when you remember how it's connected to our wider work, and to our politics and values, Max.

Max: That's true. Holding so much **shame** and responsibility, it helps me to always return to that question of how I can be most helpful for others and for the wider world. The answer right now is to **prioritize this inner work**. Shall we talk about mindfulness?

Ara: I think we may have already given some sense of what we're about to say, and of our process
smiles

Buddhism and plurality

Max: We were happy when we got to chapter 3 of Janina's book and saw a quote from our favourite teacher, **Pema Chödrön**.

Ara: It suggests that the Buddhist perspectives that help us so much are very much in alignment with this neurobiologically and psychotherapeutically informed plural/trauma perspective that Janina is presenting. The quote she uses from Pema is:

"We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering we are being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, and more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. This separateness becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don't close off and let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings." – Pema Chödrön

Max: That speaks to me so much. We have the image of me, for much of my life, as an armoured up warrior: presenting masks to the world that would gain me some degree of acceptance. I was battling and battling to get love and respect, and covering over my vulnerability, my shame, and my conviction that if anyone saw the 'real' me – beneath the masks – they would be disgusted.

Ara: The image of you now is the spiritual warrior that Pema describes in her writing. Prepared for this final act of bravery: removing the armour and the masks and standing there naked, ready to face what comes. But you're not alone any more.

Max: I have all of you standing with me.

So Janina understands the disconnection and separateness from the self, that Pema describes, as developing because we disowned vital parts of ourselves: leaving them behind in the past at the times we were taught they were unacceptable.

"By disowning the trauma, or the anger, or the need for contact with others, we lose or deny important aspects of ourselves. By over-identifying with the trauma-related shame, hopelessness, and fear of being seen, we constrict our lives and make ourselves smaller than we need to be. Both strategies, adaptive in a time of danger, become liabilities when the individual is ready to live a 'life

after trauma', free of the constrictions and restrictions needed for living in a traumatogenic environment." – Janina Fisher

Ara: And this sounds very similar to Buddhism doesn't it? Buddhism is all about finding the middle way between hurling things away from us that we don't want, and grasping hold of things that we do: between aggression and craving. We always use this quote from [Martine Batchelor](#) to describe it.

"Let's imagine that I am holding an object made of gold. It is so precious and it is mine – I feel I must hold onto it. I grasp it, curling my fingers so as not to drop it, so that nobody can take it away from me. What happens after a while? Not only do my hand and arm get cramp but I cannot use my hand for anything else. When you grip something, you create tension and you limit yourself.

Dropping the gold object is not the solution. Non-attachment means learning to relax, to uncurl the fingers and gently open the hand. When my hand is wide open and there is no tension, the precious object can rest lightly on my palm. I can still value the object and take care of it; I can put it down and pick it up; I can use my hand for doing something else."

Max: So this sense of not disowning any part of us, or identifying with any part of us, is much like that idea: holding it lightly.

Ara: Pema talks about not repressing thoughts, feelings, sensations, but equally not reacting out of them or focusing on them at the expense of everything else that is going on in our bodies and surroundings. The mindful practice involves being with every feature of our experience in a way that is both welcoming and spacious: not too tight, not too loose.

Max: And we could see our lives as having been a process of disowning some parts of ourselves – and some experiences – and over-identifying with others. So this here-and-now practice of [not disowning and not identifying](#) is a way of counterbalancing that.

Ara: Right, we are up for being with the parts we disowned as 'not me', and for loosening the grip around those we over-identified with: saw as 'me'. In our case disowned were our [fight](#), [attach](#), and [freeze](#) capacities. Over-identified with was you and your [flight](#) tendency to avoid feelings and stay busy, motivated by a strong [fawn](#) desire to please others at all costs, because the disappointment, disapproval and disgust of others was what had been so dangerous to us as a child.

This is the '[no part gets left behind](#)' ethos that James and Beastie spoke about. Interestingly I found that echoed in a [Pema audio](#) I listened to this morning. She says that the aim of Buddhist practice is never to cultivate one part of ourselves and to try to get rid of another. Splitting ourselves into good, virtuous and bad, irredeemable parts is a form of biased, fixated thinking. Instead the idea is to train in staying open to the whole thing.

Self-compassion

Max: That brings us on to self-compassion right? Self-compassion is a key feature of mindfulness and something that we always struggled to find through mindful practices, until we added plurality to the picture.

Ara: Mm and Janina explains why self compassion, and loving yourself, are so hard – if not impossible. It's because we had to hate ourselves, or at least parts of ourselves, in order to survive. Any form of self compassion would actually have been dangerous.

Janina says that, as vulnerable children, we have to believe that we can get love by being what we've learnt is 'good' and never what we've learnt is 'bad'. This is far safer for a child than believing that they are out of our control and have no-one to turn to: that they're alone in a dangerous world.

So we disconnect from anything in us that we've learnt is 'bad' – because it was disapproved of or rejected by others. Those things are 'not me'. We also disconnect from the victim child that the bad things happened to as 'not me'. We hold onto the good child who can be acceptable and therefore safer in an unsafe world. And we minimise any sense that we've been a victim of traumatic situations. The good child might be precociously mature, perfectionistic, and/or invested in being helpful to others, for example.

Max: Sounds strangely familiar!

Ara: So we use dissociation, denial and self hatred to keep the 'not me' parts out, in order that the 'good' parts can keep developing. The 'bad' and vulnerable parts of us therefore stay stuck in the past, when they came into being. But we lose vital parts of ourselves in the process.

Max: Janina says that the bargain we make when we disown parts of ourselves as a kid in order to survive – as 'not me' – is that we have to hate the self. We have to keep out the parts we're intimidated by and ashamed of. Again this links to Gabor Maté who says that disconnection from the self means not being able to connect with others authentically, not being in touch with our feelings, being unable to have boundaries, and being unable to treat ourselves kindly.

Ara: Think about that Max, that's our Tony, Jonathan, Beastie and Fox right there. In order for us to survive, you had to disown the part of us who can confidently be himself and assumes that others can love him. You had to disown the part who is sensitive and vulnerable and feels things deeply. You had to disown the part who feels enraged when people treat us non-consensually and can let them know it's not okay. And you had to disown the part who is a genius at gentleness and playfulness.

Max: I'd never quite seen it this way before though, that self-compassion would have been actively dangerous to us, that it would put us at such risk of being 'not-me'. I always struggled to understand why I was so incapable of loving myself when people spoke about that.

Ara: Gabor says that when we disown those parts of us we end up prioritising attachment over authenticity, looking outside of ourselves for things we've disowned in ourselves, often in unboundaried relationships with work and with other people, and in addictive patterns more widely.

Max: But none of those things could really fulfill us, because we are like a mask with nothing behind it until we can reclaim those parts of ourselves, their capacities, feelings, and experiences.

Ara: I was interested in our reading on **shame** to hear shame described as 'soul-murder'. That is literally what kids are encouraged to do in our culture: to murder their soul. They operate on shame logic: always pretending that they are better than human, because they are terrified that they are 'really' far worse than human.

Max: But when you live like that you know that it is a pretence, and you are convinced that you really are worse, perhaps because you can sense that emptiness within you, that sense that you've murdered your soul. That's precisely how I felt much of the time.

Ara: Janina describes plural work as 'soul retrieval': practising self-compassion one part at a time. Of course this is made more difficult by our cultural insistence that we are singular selves, or unified souls, but there are many cultures around the world who recognise **multiple souls** sharing a body. One even has seven as the norm, you'll be glad to hear.

Max: I think this soul retrieval, and selves-compassion, was the main feature of our inner work for a long time actually.

Ara: The way Pema puts it is that you have to create a 'cradle of kindness' before you can do any of the other work of mindfulness: observing your thoughts and feelings, cultivating compassion for others, becoming comfortable with uncertainty, and so on.

Max: I always balked at that idea and tried to crack on with all the various mindful practices without that cradle of kindness. But now I think it's right. In many ways we've only been able to get to our version of mindfulness now that we have selves-compassion. So interesting that the very first time we felt your presence, Ara, it was as a sense of cradling.

Ara: **Jonathan** felt me cradling him: our body as both cradled and cradler. I'm so sorry that I wasn't able to give you all that sooner Max-y. I so wish that I could have cradled you through the hard times.

Max: We got to something like that occasionally I think. Janina helped to explain that experience too. Self-harm can be a way of regulating intolerable emotions. I guess the times I self-harmed were when disowned parts of us threatened to be revealed, or when I felt that they had already been seen. I felt totally overwhelmed by them, with their massive feelings of repressed rage, fear, yearning, or grief. The only way to calm them was to hit myself. After that I do remember feeling that cradling feeling: being able to put myself to bed and soothe myself, almost as if somebody else was doing it. You.

Ara: Babygirl.

Max: I know. I'm so glad that we've found another way now. However painful it can be at times to feel all these feelings, it's so much better than that.

Ara: I guess the self-compassion piece of mindfulness, done in a plural way, involves welcoming all parts of yourself that you previously disowned. In our case it involves cultivating parts who are capable of deep compassion for all of you – the **inner carer and protector** that Beastie and James described.

Max: And what's shifted for us in recent months is that you've both felt way more available to us, as we have brought you forward more and more. Like we can wake up with you to the fore, draw on you to do everyday tasks, and easily access you whenever we're struggling.

Ara: So **cultivating a cradle of kindness**, for people, could involve an act of **self-excavation/self-creation** to develop such inner parents. For us it began with journaling with an imagined voice – of how a kind nurturer or solid protector might speak with you if you had one.

Max: Patchworked together, in your case from memories of the kind moments we did have with caregivers and partners over the year, from Pema herself, and from a few wise, compassionate mentors we had recently: Sophia, Lokhadi, and now our current therapist. Do you include any fictional characters, the way James does, Ara?

Ara: Interestingly I think I'm more built from the real encounters we've had, whereas James is more built from fictional folk.

Max: I'm sure Beastie would have some theory there about the patriarchy.

Mindful observation

Ara: Okay so as well as helping us to achieve self-compassion, plurality has been a way to unlock the kind of mindful observation which has been so hard for us to date, despite you writing an entire **book about it**, our beautiful overachiever!

Max: I was trying to get here I guess!

In mindfulness you're meant to observe all the thoughts, feelings, and sensations which bubble up, by continually returning to a point of focus in the present: often the breath going in and out. But, for me, mindfulness generally involved being swept away by memories and plans, by fears and doubts, for fifteen minutes until the alarm on my phone went off and reminded me that I was rubbish at mindfulness as well as at everything else! It wasn't always quite that bad, but not far off.

Ara: Fortunately Pema is very open that that was her experience for a long, long time too, and still often is.

Max: So how is plurality helping us with this?

Ara: Again Beastie and James described Janina's concept of 'dual awareness' at some length in their articles, including the neurobiological understanding of how it works, and some of how we're practising it. Basically dual awareness involves one part – who is in 'everyday life' mode – holding whichever part is struggling, or having the tough thoughts, feelings or sensations.

Max: And that's mindful observation unlocked right there! As soon as we can experience it as one part of us holding another, it becomes way more possible for us to do this. Can you describe a few of the times you've done it lately?

Ara: Mm yes, well this last week or so we've had the amusing image of James and myself in our tiny studio caring for five fractious kids. First we got sick, then this heatwave hit, and perhaps because you're all finally feeling safe enough, there have been a whole lot of feelings around for everyone. The minute one of you starts crying it sets the others off, and it's often hard to tell who is actually struggling, and what the problem is.

Max: Nice image. I'm not sure what I think of myself as a screaming child!

Ara: It fits with the tower idea too, like we're finally safe enough to go back to our foundations, to rebuild them in a way where all of you are welcome, and all of each of your feelings are welcome too. No wonder there's a lot of feeling there when you've been keeping them crushed down all this time.

Max: But we're still not adept – shall we say – at locating the source of the feeling or what needs to be done about it.

Ara: It's a wonderful process for me, coming to each of you in turn, exploring where you're at, helping you to finally feel held and heard.

Max: I'm not sure whether James agrees with you about the 'wonderful process'. He compared it to the time when our electrics went off, and he just had to turn all the fuse switches off and then flip them back on in turn, to determine which one was tripping the circuit breaker. He wishes he could just switch us all off and then back on again in turn to find out where the trouble is and fix it.

Ara: A very James response. And you know sometimes his approach reaches one of you when mine doesn't. He's more skilled at finding the humour in the situation, for example, which can often cut through the struggle. With Beastie that sense of the deep respect he has for her is a big deal.

Max: But you are badass with patience. I have no idea how you do it.

Ara: I'm so glad that I can. It seems like I just know... you know that this is part of the process, that we will find our way through it, and I can help you to **slow down and put a big space around it**.

Max: The other night with Fox, you were looking out of the window together. It was one of those times where the trauma feelings kept flickering up in our body like lightning strikes. Each time we felt calmer, it would flash again. We were all so sick of it: just so tired, so desperate for some rest.

Ara: I held Fox under the big sky, and we just watched it happen, like watching a real thunderstorm – something we all love. Each time the trauma flashed: a moment of fear or shame, attached to a distressing thought or sensation, we named it and noticed it go away. And we remained watching the sky till the next one happened. It was like the lightning was the thought or sensation, the feeling the thunder.

Max: Which is mindful observation precisely isn't it? To notice the thoughts, feelings, and sensations without following them or attaching to them, and without resisting them or trying to get rid of them.

Ara: James did it a different way with Jonathan later. We tried to enjoy a novel but the flashes started up again. They lay in bed together and James got curious about the feeling. What is this emotion we're so terrified of when it flashes up? He helped Jonathan to get curious too, to feel safe enough to go towards it instead of closing his eyes, backing away, and putting the duvet over his head every time the feeling flashed. The image was of James holding Jonathan by the hand and helping him look under the bed or in the closet to check for monsters.

Max: That time when they tried to go towards the feeling there was nothing really there.

Ara: Other times there is something, and we'll talk you through practices like **focusing**, or imagining it as a cell in front of us, in order to explore the feeling at a distance. Other times working through Janina's **befriending questions** have helped you to feel held and heard when you're struggling. The creative part – which I really love – is shifting the container: finding out what's needed this time. And then that **attunement feeling** when you hit on just the right approach for this part on this occasion.

Max: If it was me I'd grasp hold of that – the goal of attunement – wanting to get it right. But that would fetch us right back where we started wouldn't it?

Ara: I fear so. The beauty is in the process, not just the endpoint, as **Meg-John and Justin would say about sex of course!** Also, Janina points out how moments of rupture and repair are vital for building trust. So times when James or I 'get it wrong' but are able to realise that – or you are able to tell us – then we can acknowledge that and apologise and get curious with you about what would work better. **Those times are perhaps more helpful than the times we 'get it right' first time**, in building that sense of **'earned secure attachment'** that he and Beastie discussed.

Max: Like when he joked that he wished we'd all calm down a bit, and Fox got the grumps with him, because they're trying really hard to bring their difficult feelings to him now and not just be this easy, delightful kid.

Ara: The fact that Fox could express that and he could hear it and reassure them was so valuable. It's like **in therapy**: rupture and repair are often the most helpful moments in building trust and showing us where our struggles are and how they manifest in our relationships.

Max: I'm thinking that too, how such moments in our inner system reflect struggles we have 'out there'.

Ara: Always so helpful to see how things play out in here, and how that relates to how they've played out in the past, and how they play out in the rest of our life.

Max: So here we're saying that dual awareness unlocks mindful observation for us. If we conceptualise it – and feel it – as a containing part of us holding another part. Then it becomes possible to sit still and observe the thoughts, feelings, and sensations with open curiosity, rather than getting caught up in them or trying to get rid of them.

Ara: Back to holding the golden object, yes. Sometimes we can just feel that sense of holder and held in silent sitting, often we use slow, gentle self talk to guide ourselves through it: like a guided meditation you might listen to.

And I think again that the compassion piece drives the mindful observation. Because we love you so much, James and I are genuinely curious about you all and how you work. We really want to learn you better, to earn your trust, to improve our bonds with you.

It makes sense that it's a slow process though. As Janina says, it was adaptive in your early life to avoid comfort and self compassion, and to shame yourself and self judge before caregivers or others could find you lacking. It was also adaptive to distrust others as potentially unsafe and uncaring: to assume they will likely disappear or let you down.

Max: So hard for us now to trust even inner parts to really be able to hold us and hear us.

Ara: Such trust has to be slowly earned and built. Janina says that child selves need a palpable sense of someone very glad to see them, tender when they are wounded, unafraid when they are hostile. They need the same experience to be repeated many time over in order to trust it.

*Max: That is the sense we're developing, **slowly**.*

Ara: I know you prefer to go fast, my little **fleer**.

Max: Janina says 'slower is faster'.

Ara: She does indeed.

Embracing uncertainty

Max: So the final aspect of mindfulness that plurality seems to help us is with embracing uncertainty. This is what we talk about in [Life Isn't Binary](#) with Alex. People – particularly in the west – tend towards binary thinking, polarising into us and them, right and wrong, good and bad... and me and not-me, I guess.

Ara: Exactly, and as Alex said in that book and [elsewhere](#), trauma makes us polarise even more. In *Life Isn't Binary* we explored various alternatives for non-binary thinking: the in-between or middle way; both/and instead of either/or; and holding [multiple stories](#) simultaneously: embracing the paradox and uncertainty of the situation.

We've [already explained](#) how Janina's plural perspective helps us to find a middle way between rejecting or disowning parts of ourselves – on the one hand – and overly identifying or merging with them – on the other. Instead of repressing emotions or reacting out of them, we can see all feelings as communication from traumatised parts and move towards them.

Max: Dual awareness is a both/and approach right? We are both the part holding and hearing the traumatised part, and we are the part being held and heard.

Ara: Yes. A misunderstanding about plurality that we're always keen to challenge is that the aim should be to 'integrate' our fragmented selves into a singular self. Janina sites trauma scientist [Daniel Siegel](#) as making a strong case against defining integration as fusion. Instead he says that integration required differentiation *and* linkage. Before we can integrate any two phenomena we have to differentiate them as separate entities, then we can link them up. So instead of *either* rejecting them *or* merging with them, we can *both* discern the separate parts *and* (re)connect them together.

Janina also talks of holding the bothness of ourselves as one physical individual – in terms of our body and brain – and the fact that that body/brain is fragmented and holds many parts of different ages, stages, attachment styles and defensive responses. That way we get to a sense of ['we together'](#) not each part ['abandoned alone'](#).

Max: That helps us to tolerate and understand the unnerving sense that we contain such radically opposing capacities. For example for the last year or so we've felt impossibly fragile, as well as knowing that we can be pretty robust. And now simultaneously we can feel that vivid sense of being cradled and of cradling.

Ara: Yes. For quite a long time we felt each one of us come to the fore separately, never together. It's been under two years that we've come to sense two of us together simultaneously: initially mostly when we wrote dialogue in our journal, then increasingly in verbal conversation between our parts, and now much of the time there is a vivid sense of two of us present at once.

Max: What about embracing paradox and uncertainty.

Ara: I have a few thoughts about this. One relates to the cradle of kindness. While we were building that cradle together – bringing each of us forward and nurturing the bonds between us – we were terribly polite to each other, in a way.

Max: *Yes, there was a weird sense that we agreed on most things, even though we knew that we were radically different characters, driven by very different motivations.*

Ara: That loving kindness between us that we so desperately needed perhaps required us to all pull in the same direction for a while.

Max: *And there's a sense of our inner system replicating early outer ones, where it didn't feel safe enough to 'rock the boat', and we were all very scared of hurting each other, or of 'ruining the day' for other parts. Each of us tried to remain in our most palatable forms: Fox being delightful and pretending not to be scared, Beastie being forthright but never letting herself fly off the handle, and so on.*

Ara: This last month we've noticed less politeness, and much more sense of the inner conflicts being available to us.

Max: *As soon as it began you took that as a good sign.*

Ara: I'm sure it is. Because Pema and Janina agree that embracing uncertainty, being comfortable with not-knowing, and holding paradox are vital life skills. We've written before about the Buddhist teachings on accepting **praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disgrace** as part of life, in fact questioning which counts as which.

Max: **Who knows what's good or bad?**

Ara: Janina talks about how all of us contain the seeming opposites of vulnerability and control, shame and pride, longing to be seen and to be invisible, preferring closeness and distance, clinging to others and pushing them away. Understanding our plurality enables us to contain all of that within this system, and work with it to ensure everyone is heard and has their needs respected, rather than pretending that everybody wants the same thing.

Max: *Going back to each part as a trauma response pattern, she suggests that attach wants help, love, and protection. Fawn wants to please. Fight wants control. Flight wants safe distance. And freeze wants to stay invisible.*

Ara: Although in our case freeze did set up our **Instagram account**.

Max: *To share pictures of animals, not of us though. Although we do occasionally allow Tony to get a selfie in!*

Ara: The ability to tolerate paradox and to embrace uncertainty is so vital in the work we're doing. For a start, as I said before, what we're doing requires adaptability: an ever-shifting container to hold and hear parts in the way they need each time they are present. That's much like how actual parents need to adapt how they respond to their different children, in different emotional states, and as they grow over time.

Also there is a huge paradox that learning to **do things differently** to how we've done them in the past can actually cause more tough feelings before we get to a point of feeling more able to deal with them. This makes sense because we're letting go of our long-held habits and survival strategies, with **only faith to go on** that the newer ones we're developing are really going to be more helpful.

Janina describes the paradox that as soon as we relax our anxiety escalates, because softening, letting our guard down, and trusting ourselves or others, have always felt dangerous.

Max: That's one I experience a lot.

Ara: **Pete Walker** likens trying new habits to going to the dentist. You know that it will bring more pain in the short term, but less in the long term.

*Max: The area of life that happens in all the time at the moment is around **boundaries**. We're trying so hard to honestly let people know what our boundaries are around the type and amount of contact we want. We know that such things should be **consensual**: that people in our life shouldn't ask of us to have more contact, or contact of different kinds, than we actually want. That would be just as non-consensual as asking a partner to have more sex, or sex of different kinds, than they actually want.*

*But pretty much every time somebody assumes that we'll want a kind – or amount – of contact that's more than what we want, we go into a **trauma response**. It can take hours, even days, to process the **fear/shame feelings** and to formulate a reply to that person which feels both **kind and honest**.*

Ara: I've held you through that one a few times haven't I, using the **befriending questions**?

*Max: Yep, I know where it comes from now: all the times my boundaries have been violated. I'm so scared the person will just push through, will annihilate me, if I hold my boundary. And I guess Jonathan – our **fawn** part – feels as though we need to give people what they want or they'll abandon us.*

Ara: Luckily we have **Beastie now** who can bring clarity and protection to those situations, and Tony who doesn't mind being 'a bit crap', rather than feeling he always has to go the extra mile for people who aren't treating us very well or respecting our boundaries.

Max: But we notice the paradox that doing the thing that's better for us in the long run, can bring up more trauma and pain in the short term. So we can't use the intensity of our trauma feelings as any measure of how well we're doing at all this.

Ara: That can be really confusing love, no wonder you feel frightened and self-doubting at times. This work requires such a leap into the unknown.

Max: Now then, you know that you can always get me on board with a Frozen reference don't you?

Ara: Just let it go Max-y *chuckles* You are so our Elsa.

Plurality helps us to be with those paradoxes and uncertainties. Of course parts of us are soothed by us holding our boundaries, but other parts of us are scared by it because people have pushed, or rejected us, when we did that in the past. Parts of us long to trust me and James to hold them through this time, and other parts are very reluctant to trust. Parts of us would love to expand out into the world again, and other parts are terrified by the prospect. As Janina says, it's about being up for engaging with all those parts, and about having a steady inner presence to hold the bothness.

Coming home

Max: Nearly there Ara. D'you wanted to finish with coming home?

Ara: It seems appropriate. Just click your heels three times Max-y! Yes this was one final theme we saw in Janina's plural/trauma writing that rang bells with our Buddhist reading. In fact the *Wizard of Oz* reference is apt.

Max: It's one of many childhood tales where a person travels to a fantasy land and meets all these characters, but then has to come back to the 'real world' and 'grow up'.

Ara: *Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan, Labyrinth, Alice in Wonderland*, the list goes on and on. An alternative plural reading of such fiction is that in childhood we have this capacity to be all these parts, with different characteristics. Our culture – for the last century or so – has forced us to kill off those capacities in order to be what we perceive as 'adult': a singular, consistent, rational, self.

Max: Many of the so-called 'adults' are causing untold destruction at the moment in the name of keeping hold of that way of life.

Ara: It relates also to the ways that 'the other' has always been portrayed as more 'childlike' or 'primitive' in order to justify oppressing them: women, disabled people, people of different races or nationalities, the working classes.

So perhaps we might want to flip the 'home' that Dorothy longs to return to as Oz, rather than Auntie Em's. Whatever the case, welcoming home is a key theme in both plurality and Buddhism. Janina says:

"Resolution of past painful events cannot truly be achieved without reclaiming the lost children and disowned parts of ourselves, extending to them a helping hand, welcoming them 'home' at long last, creating safety for them, and making them feel wanted, needed, and valued."

Max: In many of her case-studies Janina encourages clients who are holding traumatised child-parts to show them that they have a safe home which they live in now: like to literally to take them around that space.

Ara: We do that too. Looking around our room and telling the stories of various objects can be a soothing and grounding activity for our traumatised parts. We even bought an armchair which we felt was a good representation of me and James, as the chair we go to when we needed to be heard and held.

Max: That was the most money we've ever spent on ourselves, other than for our top surgery which brought Jonathan forward, and for the fox tattoo on our arm. How interesting.

Ara: Inner parents and children are worth a few quid it seems!

Imagining the **fantasy home** that we all live in together, and where each of us are in or around that home, can work in a similar way to looking around our actual home.

Max: Finding Jonathan a place in the kitchen – the heart of the house – has helped him a lot lately. He can nourish us all, and listen to all our feelings as he cooks without getting overwhelmed by them.

Ara: It's such a good alternative to the **chalkboard room** where he was disconnected from us all, and stuck trying to figure out all that confusing emotional input. It'd be great to keep talking between us about our roles and spaces within that imaginary home.

*Max: Recently a plural system tweeted about how many plurals imagine a house like this, some larger **innerworlds or mindscapes**.*

Ara: Shaping our imaginary homes is a nice way of reshaping our inner system along different lines to those that originally shaped it, having gone all the way back down to our foundations. Moving between fantasy and reality in this way is something we've always found very helpful.

*Max: Like tuning into what our **fantasies** tell us about where we're at, what our fears and yearnings are. And also using fantasies as ways to deliberately try different ways of relating.*

Ara: Recently we tried deliberately meeting all of our 'shadow' sides in fantasy. That was powerful.

I also wanted to mention somatic elements to our work here: increasingly embodied touch is something we now bring into the holding and hearing time.

Max: Mm, like self-talk, nurturing self-touch is not something that people are encouraged to do. It's seen as pretty weird.

Ara: We need a whole further article to cover how solo talking and solo touch are stigmatised, while talking and touching with others are encouraged. And if you *are* going to solo-touch, then erotic touch is allowable, but not nurturing touch: cuddles, strokes, and the like. That's similar with fantasies too, few people try nurturing fantasies even though they might try erotic ones. [Sari Van Anders' theory](#) would suggest that we should treat the solo and partnered, and the nurturing and erotic, aspects of our experience as equally valid.

Max: How does the welcoming home part relate to Buddhism Ara?

Ara: I'm reminded of Manu Bazzano's work on [hospitality](#). In Buddhism the aim is to be able to welcome all sentient beings: the image of inviting them all into your home for a feast. That's one that Jonathan would like. Islamic poet, Rumi, captures a similar idea in his poem *The Guest House*, which [Zen Pencils](#) did a great comic of [here](#): very plural.

James and Beastie didn't love Janina's idea of the ['getting on with normal life' part](#). But towards the end of the book she suggests 'host' as an alternative word for this part: like they are hosting the other parts, and their body is literally a host for all. Janina says that you need a host, otherwise the kids feel 'home alone'.

Max: This sounds like what Beastie and I were discussing in our [accompany not abandon article](#). If we can welcome all of our parts home, then we'll be better able to welcome all sentient beings, because there's nothing 'out there' that we aren't somewhat familiar with 'in here'. Part of why the outer world has always been so frightening to me is that I was encountering things out there that I was terrified of in myself: particularly other people who criticised me, became angry with me, or demanded too much of me.

Ara: Recently we realised that the responses you fear when we hold our boundaries are other people becoming furious, or them feeling abandoned. Interestingly those relate very much to the ways in which our Beastie or Tony might respond: our two most disowned parts.

We can see plural work as a way of welcoming all parts of us home, and mindfulness as an act of hospitality towards ourselves, no matter what. Janina suggests that if we do this work it will have a knock on effect on our relationships with others as well. We'll be better able to tolerate them not being there, and keep our hearts open when they are.

‘No Bad Parts’: Some Plural Thoughts on The New Internal Family Systems Book

In this post, two of my parts – Ara and Morgan (formally known as Beastie) – summarise the key ideas and practices they took away from [Dick Schwartz’s new book about the Internal Family Systems \(IFS\) approach](#). They also reflect on how we’re applying them in our own plural system.

If you want to learn more about plurality, check out our [introductory zine](#), and our [free book](#) on the subject. The book [‘No Bad Parts’](#) is definitely recommended, and is available in paperback, ebook, and audio.

Ara: Hey Morgan.

Morgan: Hey Ara.

Ara: So good to be writing with you. It’s been a while hasn’t it?

Morgan: A lot has been going on in our inner world since we last wrote a plural post. Two of us have new names for a start.

Ara: And most of our writing time has been going towards our new book – a graphic guide to mental health – so we haven’t been blogging so much. But we couldn’t let a new book about plurality go by without comment could we?

Morgan: No, and I’ve been thinking about it so much since we finished reading it. I need to get some of that down.

Ara: There’s quite a lot of overlap between what Dick writes about in ‘No Bad Parts’, and what we’re covering in our own mental health book, so it’ll be helpful for us to summarise some of the key points. What are our intentions in this post?

Morgan: I’d like to cover the key ideas from [IFS](#) for people who aren’t familiar with it, and also distill the practice that Dick presents – which we’ve been trying to apply since. Finally I’d like to write about how those of us who already have a vivid sense of their [plural system](#) might do this kind of work, because we found that quite challenging at first.

Ara: Great, let’s go.

Key ideas

Humans as systems

Morgan: Okay, so the main idea of IFS is that a person is a system rather than an individual. Just as [family systems therapists](#) locate people’s distress in whole family systems (or other groups or communities), IFS locates it in whole internal systems.

Ara: Right, so [systemic therapy](#) points out that families position different individuals in ways that become stuck, often with one or more members taking on – and expressing – distress that’s actually

in the family: the [intergenerational trauma](#) that it holds, and the various beliefs and habits that it has formed in order to avoid the pain of that. For example, when one member of the family develops depression or addiction they are probably manifesting some distress that's actually within the whole family, and the whole family system needs to shift in order to release them from that.

Morgan: In Internal Family Systems therapy the idea is that, as we grow, different parts of us develop to hold different burdens – or trauma – and to protect us from experiencing the pain of that: pain that was too overwhelming or dangerous to feel as a child. By the time we're adults we are a complex system of parts, interrelated with each other, which – if we explored it – we might map just as a systemic therapist, or [family constellations practitioner](#), could map an external family and how everybody relates to everybody else.

Ara: This is a key theme that we're exploring in the mental health graphic guide: how every level of human experience can be helpfully understood as a complex interconnected system, which attempts to keep itself stable through reinforcing feedback loops (which often keep unhelpful patterns going), but which can also shift to more balancing feedback loops (which return it to stability). [Systems theory](#) applies this to everything from the micro to the macro level. For example our bodies – and the world – can both be seen as a set of interconnected systems within systems within systems. We, and Dick Schwartz, both explore how dominant cultural systems like [neoliberal capitalism](#) result in reinforcing feedback loops where 'success' is defined by getting more and more, increasing the gap between rich and poor people and countries, and bringing the planet to crisis point.

Morgan: This is something I really liked about 'No Bad Parts' – the way he kept relating individual struggles to wider culture. So many [self help books](#) fail to do that.

Ara: Do you want to explain how dominant cultural ways of understanding human struggles are part of the problem here?

Morgan: Absolutely. Dick calls it the 'mono mind' approach, which has pervaded western culture and western psychotherapy: the idea that we are singular individuals, and that any problem we have should be diagnosed and treated at that level. So standard psychiatry or psychotherapy might say 'this person has anxiety, or a compulsion, which is interfering with their life, and we need to treat them to make that go away'. Plural approaches, in contrast, would see that experience as a sensible response that one of that person's parts developed in order to survive. The answer would be to go towards that part, really listen to why they are doing that thing, and help them put down the burden and transform – if they are ready to. Dick says:

'Most of the syndromes that make up the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual are simply descriptions of the different clusters of protector parts that dominate people after they've been traumatised.'

Ara: There's a real danger with approaches which don't recognise plurality that they might make things worse rather than better. For example, if you manage to get rid of a protective survival strategy without attending to why it was there, and which vulnerable part of the person it was protecting, it's likely that other strategies – perhaps even more destructive ones – will pop up to take its place – likely making the person feel even worse about themselves in the process. Also the approach of fighting, or battling, 'dysfunctional' aspects of ourselves actually tends to make them much louder and stronger. Dick says:

'We often find that the harder we try to get rid of emotions and thoughts, the stronger they become. This is because parts, like people, fight back against being shamed or exiled.'

Morgan: So interesting how military metaphors of fighting and battling are so problematic in both [physical](#) and mental health, but the standard go-to in dominant western culture. The prime example here is how to work with an inner critic. Even some of the pretty good trauma literature, like [Pete Walker's book on cPTSD](#), repeat the standard idea that you need to fight the inner critic, shame it for holding you back for so long, or even exile it entirely.

Ara: As our reformed inner critic you have some pretty strong feelings about you don't you Morgan?

Morgan: I'd love to write a whole piece specifically on that with you one day Ara. But yeah, the rest of you tried that approach with me for a long time, and it only made me more loud and desperate, and I hurt you all a lot more.

Ara: When we finally came towards you wanting to listen to you, and prepared to feel your pain, things shifted radically for the better.

Morgan: Still a work in progress.

Ara: A labour of love.

Morgan: *smiles*

Ara: A final point on dominant culture – and psychotherapy – I'd like to make here. Like us, Dick argues that what has been called [Multiple Personality Disorder, or Dissociative Identity Disorder](#), is just one end of the spectrum of plurality: that everybody can helpfully be understood as a plural system. Dick says:

'The only difference is that people with DID suffered horrible abuse and their system of parts got blown apart more than most, so each part stands out in bolder relief and is more polarized and disconnected from the others.'

I'm struck how, like trauma, there has been so much [gaslighting](#) within psychiatry and popular culture around plurality. It's like the very things that hold the keys to understanding and working with human distress are the ones that have been fought hardest against.

Morgan: [Judith Herman](#) says that each time psychiatry, psychotherapy, or social movements, have finally revealed the extent and impact of trauma around, for example, child sexual abuse, military action, domestic violence, or systemic racism, a huge backlash occurred, often arguing that these things were entirely fabricated, or nowhere as bad as they were being made out to be. We can see a similar thing happening around plurality. The first time we learnt about MPD in our psychology degree we were taught it was entirely made up, and plenty of psychologists would still hold that position. Dick outlines the results of this:

'The mono-mind paradigm has caused us to fear our parts and view them as pathological. In our attempts to control what we consider to be disturbing thoughts and emotions, we just end up fighting, ignoring, disciplining, hiding, or feeling ashamed of those impulses that keep us from doing what we want to do in our lives. And then we shame ourselves for not being able to control them. In other words we hate what gets in our way.'

Ara: It's painful to wonder how much easier our life might've been had a plural systems understanding of human being been available to us earlier, as somebody with such a vivid experience of plurality – whose parts stand out 'in bolder relief' as Dick puts it.

Morgan: I feel such grief and rage around that.

Ara: *I know love. Maybe a break to feel that.*

Morgan: Thankyou.

...

Parts and their burdens

Ara: *So let's say a little more about how Dick understands parts and the burdens they carry. The idea here is that parts become locked in the past events which were so traumatic for them, so part of the practice is to find them there and bring them out of that time they're frozen in.*

Morgan: Right, and it's useful to distinguish the part from the burden they carry. There's a sense that, freed from that burden, they might transform into something quite different.

Ara: *Mm let's use you as an example here, okay?*

Morgan: Sure.

Ara: *So you were our inner critic, and whenever you came forward you'd be telling us what we were doing wrong, and how bad and worthless we were.*

Morgan: Screaming it at you when things got really bad.

Ara: *So our explorations with you took us back to late childhood / early adolescence, when we got the message that we were deeply unacceptable and unlikeable from pretty much everyone around us.*

Morgan: I learnt to internalise that message a thousand-fold. It was like one knife was coming towards us and I turned it into a thousand. A sense that if I could make us feel every criticism hard, then we'd learn what not to be and become something that could survive.

Ara: *So you, Morgan, were our part, and the burden you carried was internalising all those real and imagined criticisms. IFS would work with you by helping you to release that burden, and transform into what you could be in our system if you hadn't been forced into that role, and weren't carrying that burden.*

Morgan: Which is pretty much what I've been doing, over the months we've worked with me, becoming a part who can be a force for seeing things clearly, and for self-protection. I think.

Ara: *Again, still a work in progress darling, and that's okay. I see you making huge strides in that direction.*

Morgan: Thankyou.

Personal burdens and legacy burdens

Ara: We particularly resonated with Dick's idea that parts can carry personal burdens and/or legacy burdens. Drawing on our friend [Alex Iantaffi's](#) writing, we've been increasingly talking about [developmental and cultural trauma](#) in our own work. [Developmental trauma](#) is the trauma we carry from our own upbringing: the overwhelming experiences and the feelings that accompanied them which weren't [heard and held](#) adequately by those around us as we were growing up. [Cultural trauma](#) is the trauma that exists in our wider culture, such as the norms that trap some of us and exclude others, or the injustice in the way some bodies, labour, and lives, are treated as so much less valuable than others – and the [gaslighting](#) around that.

Morgan: The concept of intergenerational trauma brings these together, because – in a way – developmental trauma is the way that cultural trauma – or toxic dominant ways of doing things – are passed down through families. But it can be useful to tease out the two: developmental trauma is our more personal burdens, and cultural trauma is the legacy burdens we carry, for example due to being positioned in certain ways within axes of oppression in our particular culture.

Ara: IFS, or parts work, gives one great way to work with cultural trauma that it can be very hard to own, for example the recognition that we will all carry oppression in the form of racism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism, etc. If we believe that we are a singular individual then this can feel like an incredibly threatening idea. Either individual 'I' am an oppressive person, and therefore bad, or I am a non-oppressive person, and therefore good. So people put a huge amount of energy into trying to prove that they're not oppressive, or in justifying their oppressive beliefs and actions, often enacting far worse oppression in the process.

Morgan: A systems within systems approach is far more helpful. If we see all oppression as systemic – out there in the world – then we can acknowledge that of course oppression will operate through all elements of the system – including us. So we don't have to individualise and attack ourselves so much when we experience ourselves thinking or feeling oppressive things – or attempt to deny that we do so. The idea of oppressive thoughts and feelings being legacy burdens that we carry, rather than something that we are as individuals is a good way to put it.

And if we see those oppressive thoughts and feelings as residing in parts of us – in our inner system – which carry those burdens, then we can move towards those parts with curiosity, and a genuine possibility of transformation, rather than becoming overwhelmed by the fear that we might find that 'I – as a whole – am a bad oppressor'.

Ara: This approach means that we could be much more able to engage in anti-oppression work without, for example, collapsing or becoming defensive, or having to polarise as 'entirely good' in opposition to those who are 'entirely bad'. It also leads us towards working in [solidarity](#) with everyone who is hurt by these oppressive systems, rather than only focusing on the systems which hurt us personally.

Morgan: This aspect of IFS is a hard resonate for us: the sense of deep connection between inner and outer work, and how we need both. Social activism without personal work often leads to burn out, or to escalating things and making matters worse. Personal work without social activism leaves the damaging cultural systems and structures in tact, so people just continue to be damaged and need to do ever more personal work to address that damage. And, of course, these systems and structures are currently leading us to some very dangerous places.

Ara: We've been really working with the paradox of the massive urgency of the current situation, and

the slow carefulness required to do this work, if we are to engage with it at all effectively.

Morgan: Yeah, not an easy one for a reformed inner critic who sees all this pain so clearly and wants to do something right now.

Ara: *We are doing something love. This is something.*

Morgan: I guess.

Protectors, exiles, and firefighters

Ara: *The aspect of IFS that's quite different from the ways we've approached our own plurality to date is this idea that parts come in three roles: protectors, exiles, and firefighters. Shall we talk about that?*

Morgan: Sure.

Ara: *As I understand it, protector parts are the ones who developed survival strategies, or defenses, in order to protect the traumatised parts from having to feel the overwhelming feelings about what happened to them.*

Morgan: The feelings that weren't held and heard by anyone at the time, so they were too much for that part to process.

Ara: *The vulnerable, traumatised parts are the exiles who carry those terrible feelings and experiences, and keep them hidden away from us. These parts are often called 'inner children', whereas protector parts can be seen as **'parentified'** inner children, who may feel like adults.*

Firefighters are parts who come in when there's a risk that we're getting too close to the exiles – perhaps if they are triggered or retraumatised by something that happens in the present. Again this helps to explain how even very seemingly destructive impulses, even suicidal ones, are understandable survival strategies: Anything to stop that exile from being uncovered and overwhelmed. Firefighter strategies are not 'irrational' impulses to be eradicated, but sensible instincts to be understood deeply, and hopefully replaced with something less destructive in collaboration with that particular part.

Morgan: Right, so for example **hypervigilance** might be a protector part who learnt that if we constantly keep a lookout for ways in which we might 'get it wrong' then we'll never have to feel the appalling terror and self-loathing of the exile who holds all the times that we were shamed and humiliated as a kid. The kind of depression that has us under the duvet all day watching Netflix could be a firefighter who kicks in when that exile gets triggered by something in the present. It feels like it's better to give up and withdraw from life than risk feeling those feelings.

Ara: *A really nice example Morgan.*

Morgan: Do I get a gold star?

Ara: *Ah do I detect a hint of the old Beastie?*

Morgan: She's still around.

Ara: I'm so glad to hear it.

No bad parts

Morgan: Speaking of Beastie, shall we get to the title of the book.

Ara: We love that Dick puts this right out there. [Janina Fisher](#)'s mantra 'no part gets left behind' is one we've found very helpful, but how great to make 'No Bad Parts' front and centre of the whole book.

Morgan: I suppose it's a bit like that move from [shame to guilt](#). The sense that people are not bad, even though their behaviour can be harmful. If we could ever drop the strong belief – that most people have – that we are fundamentally flawed and that others are going to see that – then we could be way more likely to see clearly when we have behaved in harmful ways, to acknowledge that, and to do things differently in future.

Ara: And parts work helps with that by locating all our patterns in parts of us – not the whole – so we can turn towards them with kindness, understand why they did what they did, and release them of the burden of needing to behave in that self-protective – but harmful – way in the future.

Morgan: Even though we're so vividly plural I think we struggle to let go of that deep, fundamental sense that we're bad and wrong – and that others are going to see that – which fuels all the habits of [hypervigilance, self-criticism, shapeshifting to be what others want, and presenting a mask to the world](#) rather than our real, messy, imperfect selves. I loved that quote from [Jonathan Van Ness](#) that Dick includes:

'There is still a little voice in my head wondering, Would you still be so excited to meet me if you really knew who I was? If you knew all the things I have done? If you could see all my parts?'

Ara: We're getting there. We've made a lot of progress.

Morgan: Here we are everyone, our real, messy, imperfect selves, at least one of them!

Ara: I don't get to be real, messy, and imperfect?

Morgan: No you are our good, pure Self under all the mess remember?

Ara: Ah, that's one aspect of IFS that we still wonder about. The theory is that we all have a Self which is different to a part – it's often felt as the 'real me' behind the rest, and – according to IFS – it contains our capacity for the [eight Cs](#): curiosity, calm, confidence, compassion, creativity, clarity, courage and connectedness.

Morgan: We have certainly felt something like that – and it certainly feels related to you. We've had days when we've walked or meditated and it's felt like you were watching each of us pop up and think our thoughts and feel our feelings, then fall away again, and all the while you were present like this compassionate witness.

Ara: So there's something in it, but I certainly feel pretty awkward claiming 'Self' for myself, especially as apparently that makes me the leader.

Morgan: No hierarchies here!

Ara: Shall we come back to our uncertainties about all that a bit later?

Morgan: Sure. We should say more about the practice of IFS before we get into the challenges we have for IFS, and the challenges that it has for us.

Ara: Time for a cuppa first.

Morgan: But if we don't get this whole thing written today then we're a terrible person and I'll have to scream at us all night. Oh wait I quit that didn't I?

Ara: Heh, if Beastie still needs to wrangle a bit I'm so here for that.

Morgan: You are a good, pure angel Self, it's true!

*Ara: Behave *grin**

...

Practice

Morgan: So what is the practice for working with parts, according to IFS?

Ara: I feel like Dick never completely sets it out as a staged process, but you get a sense of it through the various examples that he gives of taking clients or collaborators through it.

Morgan: Those parts of the book were so moving, I found myself in tears nearly every time.

Ara: Mm that suggests to me that it's really onto something. We find that most books which describe working with parts in these deeply loving, respectful, ways have that embodied impact on us.

Morgan: One of our parts just weeping and weeping to feel that understood; to see deep care taken towards some part that resonates with us.

Ara: Sometimes several of us crying together.

Morgan: Can we try for the bullet point structure? Setting out the main parts of the process as we understood it.

Ara: Let's do that. First I want to give the caveat that Dick himself gives, that people may well need help to do this kind of work, particularly with the exiles. A therapist trained in IFS or other plural approaches would be a good bet. The risk is that contact with exiles without enough holding and support will bring up firefighters who could become more destructive in their attempts to protect the exile.

B: Mm that's such a helpful point. I can think of times when we've cracked through to important revelations, but then a backlash of self-destructive habits has made us think it can't have been real, or has stopped us going back there.

Ara: As with all trauma work, [slow](#) and well supported is the way to go.

The process that Dick describes reminds me of two processes that we've written about before Morgan. In some ways it is a combination of them both: [focusing](#) and [demon-feeding](#).

Morgan: Right, focusing is a western psychotherapy approach where you attend to sensations in the body and listen to what they're telling you. Demon-feeding is a Tibetan Buddhist approach where you imagine that felt sense as a demon sitting across from you. You inhabit it to learn what it wants and what it needs, and then it often transforms into an ally.

Ara: *The IFS approach seems like a version of these practices which more explicitly uses the felt sense to locate – and communicate with – parts. And, like those other practices, we can do it as a solo practice where a kind of witness part of us works with the other parts, or we could do it with a therapist or a peer who also uses this approach to talk us through it. When somebody else is taking us through, they might direct us to have internal conversations with the various parts ourselves, or – if that is proving difficult – they might talk to a particular part directly themselves for a bit, before going back to getting us to do it for ourselves.*

Morgan: So the practice...

Ara: *I would highly recommend reading the book for all the session examples Dick gives of how he does that work, and for his exercises where he takes you through self-guided ways of working with your parts.*

Here's a list of key moments that happen in many of the sessions and exercises.

- *Some deep breaths and grounding can be helpful before you start.*
- *You can start with a particular issue or memory that you want to work on, or just by feeling into your body to see what's there wanting attention.*
- *As you tune in you may well find that something else comes up to block that feeling, such as a critical thought, or a blankness. Whatever that is is another part. You can either ask that part if they're willing to step back a bit (or sit in an imaginary waiting room where they can observe what happens) so you can work with the original part, or you can shift to work with the part who has come up.*
- *Let the part you're working with know that you are here to help, and see how they react, then ask if there's anything they want you to know and wait for an answer to come in the form of words, images or feelings. Continue to encourage them to really let you know what it's like for them, and feel what you feel towards them in response (often love and understanding), until they seem to be done (check if they're done).*
- *With protector and firefighter parts it can also be useful to explore what they're afraid would happen if they stepped out of their role, and what – if they were liberated from that role – they would choose to do.*
- *Again if other parts come up to block the process at any point, see if they will step back, or work with them a bit about what's going on for them, until they feel able to. You can explore what they fear would happen if they didn't do what they're doing, and reassure them that they*

might not have to do that so much if you can work with that other part they're protecting.

- *Affirm with the part you're working with that you're now here to protect them and all the parts. Ask what a safe place might be to take them to, imagine taking them there, and see how they respond.*
- *Ask if they are willing to unload their burden – ask them where they feel it in the body, and whether they'd like to give it all up to earth, air, fire, water, or something else. Then allow that element to take the burden away.*
- *Ask how they feel afterwards, notice any transformation, and check in with any other (waiting room) parts how they respond to the transformation. Let them know that they don't have to protect this part – or keep them away from you – any more, so they can start to think about what new roles they would like. You can work more deeply with them on subsequent sessions. You might also ask any parts present what they need from you in future.*
- *Before ending, express gratitude to the parts present, and reassure them that you'll return.*
- *End with some deep breaths and grounding before coming back.*

What do you think Morgan? Does that capture it?

Morgan: I think that's the main points. I noticed that Dick also often asks protective parts what age they think you are. They often think you are much younger than you are – perhaps the age at which they came into being – and it's useful to update them and see how they react to that.

Ara: Mm. Dick also sometimes works like a relationship therapist with two parts who are in conflict, asking them both to tell your Self what's going on for them, and then encouraging them into communication with each other. We liked that because we feel it's important to nurture all the dyadic relationships within our system, as well as working with each part individually.

Morgan: One for me and Robin to try I think given that we've often pulled in different directions. I was also very struck by what Dick says is a 'law' of inner systems. Once a part has agreed not to overwhelm the system with its feelings, then they won't any more. He says that you might feel some of their feelings as that part 'blends' with you a bit when it is triggered, but it will no longer overwhelm you: taking you into that [trauma zone](#) that we're so familiar with.

Ara: How do you feel reading that Morgan?

Morgan: It sounds amazing, and I also feel some skepticism and frustration. Like can that be all there is to it? Could we have done that two years ago, or twenty, and not had these horrendous times when we were totally overwhelmed by the [big feels](#) for days or weeks at a time?

Ara: Even this last week, the grief you were feeling tipped into overwhelm a couple of times and it was hard for you to come back from it. I share your mixed feelings about this love. I'm keen to try something more like this approach to see whether that might enable us to hear you and your feelings without becoming overwhelmed. And I also suspect that there's no magic answer to all this, and that overwhelm will sometimes still happen and that's okay.

Different forms of practice

Morgan: Alright, before we get more into the bits we were less sure about, can we say more about different forms of practice? We already said that you can do this alone or supported.

Ara: Right, another one I noticed was the idea of doing it as an everyday meditation practice, versus 'on the spot' when something difficult comes up: a distinction that our favourite Buddhist teacher, [Pema Chödrön](#) also makes.

Morgan: Mm, and the 'on the spot' one added another nice element that reminded us of [Babette Rothschild's 'mindful gauges'](#). Basically you come to learn how your body feels when you're in Self, and the kinds of sensations, thoughts, and experiences that indicate that a part is becoming activated or starting to 'blend' with you.

Ara: Does that resonate with our experience?

Morgan: Totally, there's all kinds of little uneasy, tense little feelings and thought patterns that tell us that one of us is struggling a bit. Before we started doing this work we would try to push those away, or distract ourselves. Now we tend to go towards them to really feel them, but there's still often a fear that, if we do that, they will overwhelm us. Talking with whichever part is having the experience helps, but IFS does potentially give us a more formalised practice to work through.

Ara: Yes, and I'm also thinking that it really helps for those moments when more than one part is in play.

Any other versions of the practices that we liked?

Morgan: Yes, an idea in here that is very similar to Pema is that the people we struggle with in our lives are our greatest teachers. Dick calls them our (tor)mentors.

Ara: Very clever! Yes, it's also like [Bonnie Badenoch](#) – who we love – who reframes getting triggered as having something 'touched and awoken' which means an opportunity to work with it – to enable that part to put down their burden, in IFS terms.

'No Bad Parts' includes a nice exercise for working with parts that are triggered, compassionately exploring what was so hard for them and what they want you to know. There's also a couple of great ones where you imagine somebody who you find really difficult, or who you've been with while they were in pain. You put that person in an imaginary safe room, where you can look through the window, and imagine them doing the difficult behaviour, or being in pain. Then you work with whatever parts come up and how they respond.

Morgan: IFS resonates with our own sense, which we've [written about a few times](#), that we have – inside us – all the same kinds of energies that are out there in others, including the people we find most difficult. In fact, the two things we find most difficult 'out there' are identical to the two parts of us who seem to be 'underneath' everything now that we've done all this work: the parts who are most disowned in us, and who hold most of the trauma.

Ara: You and Robin (previously known as Tony).

Morgan: Right. We find it really hard when people out there attack us, and when they ask more of us than we can give. And I'm the part of us that holds anger and criticism, and Robin is the part who

holds neediness and fear or rejection.

Ara: Our deep hope is that, by working with the two of you so much, we'll finally be able to 'hold our seat' when those kinds of energies come at us in life, recognising the parts of the other person that are involved, and not feeling that we have to turn their attacks against ourselves (as you've done in the past) or become what they want us to be (as Robin has in the past). Dick says:

'When you see through the clear eyes of your Self that someone is doing something hurtful to your parts, you don't have to turn them into a monster. That clarity empowers you to see that their actions arise out of their own hurt, and you also can better see without confusion the damage they do to your parts. This means you have the courage and confidence to set boundaries with them in an effective way... When a part takes over you can also know to stop, get some space, listen to the part, and come back and speak for it rather than from it.'

Morgan: Relationship repair is meant to become easier when we do this parts work, because we can be less afraid of the inner turmoil that someone else's behaviour will cause in our system – having worked with all those parts and built trust with them or helped them transform.

We can also relate with others, when they resemble our parts, in the same way we've learnt to relate to our parts. Like when I'm furious, even furious with you, you generally respond with kindness and curiosity, really wanting to know what's going on for me. What I'm doing doesn't trigger you into believing you might be bad and collapsing or defending, or trying to get rid of me.

Ara: I so long for the day when we could be with someone else's rage that way. I also know that we have to be honest that that is an edge for us right now – not something we can offer to be around without serious risk to ourselves. It's okay to be a work in progress.

Morgan: This book does get some of that sense of being a work in progress, and how this takes time and continued daily work. But I struggled with some of the sense that IFS could be a 'fast track' through all this difficult stuff of life, bringing everyone pretty quickly to a place where they can navigate the world from Self all the time.

Ara: Shall we have a little break and then get into our dialogue with IFS: the bits we're less sure about, and the challenges it poses for us.

Morgan: Yes please.

Ara: Good girl.

Morgan: Don't push your luck *grin*

...

Dialogue

Ara: Okay so we want to finish by naming a few challenges that came up for us with this book.

Morgan: Challenges for the approach from our experience, and challenges for us from this material.

Ara: Shall we start with our more critical thoughts on the book?

Morgan: Channelling Beastie I suppose I was disappointed by something that I feel in quite a few books written by people from a certain demographic. There was a bit of a sense of IFS being the One True Way: greater, faster, and better than all other forms of therapy or faith-based approaches. That didn't sit well with me.

We've got a lot from several books we've read by people in this demographic over the last couple of years, but we also feel frustrated by that tone, and by the way so many of the authors have set up institutes around their Great Work. We wonder what it would be like if they all got together – with everyone else working in these kinds of areas – in collaboration and solidarity, instead of trademarking their particular approach and focusing on that in this kind of way. I notice that the books we've read by folk from the margins in the past year generally have quite a different tone: more humble and more drawing in of other people's ideas and practices, recognising their roots, often outside of dominant culture.

Ara: I agree, although I like that Dick does mention through the book his own work with his various parts around his leadership. He has certainly been up for recognising when his protector parts are getting in the way. I'm also keen to read more about the dialogues that various Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are having with his work – noting that he is collaborating with various people of faith, and somatic practitioners.

Morgan: I'd love to read more in these kinds of books about the writers' own parts work. I feel like the fact that they all write with one voice – as if they were singular – perhaps implicitly reinforces a sense that some kind of singularity is the aim – or possible – here, even as they embrace plurality.

Ara: I also rather love that we get to be one of those bridge-builders: someone who writes about plural ideas and practices in a plural way, drawing more on our own system experience.

Morgan: I love that too. What about The Self?

Ara: What are your reservations about that?

Morgan: I already wrote a bit about this with James when we reviewed [Janina Fisher](#)'s really excellent book based on IFS combined with sensorimotor psychotherapy. There's something about the concept of one underlying Self, a 'compassionate witness' self, or a 'getting on with normal life self' that feels uncomfortable to us, even though it resonates somewhat.

Ara: Why do you think that is?

Morgan: Maybe because that sense of people as singular individuals is still finding a way in here. And/or maybe because we're drawn to the Buddhist idea of there being 'no-self'. The Self feels like it could too easily slip back into a sense that our plural parts are somehow 'lesser', I don't know.

Ara: I get the feeling from 'No Bad Parts' that the Self is something more like 'no-self', a kind of ongoing flow in which parts can emerge and fall away again. But I agree that in our culture it is far too easy to find yourself falling back into a sense that there is an independent unit – 'you' – who can be judged as good or bad, which so many faiths warn against. But I feel like we're drifting off somewhere here. What about our lived experience?

Morgan: Maybe that's what my discomfort is really about. I'm not keen on setting one of us up as our Self. I like the idea of us as a collective who all contribute.

Ara: And Dick does touch on that possibility in 'No Bad Parts'. In one chapter he suggests that each part has a Self. I think that's more our experience.

Morgan: You don't have to say that Ara. I also know that our experience of you is much more like the Self experience that he talks of than the rest of us are. When we first asked you to be more present in our life, alongside the rest of us, there was this moment when you felt sadness and fear around that, as if it was a choice and you knew that you'd be losing something in order to manifest more in that way.

Ara: I'm glad I made that choice. I want to be in this life with you all, making cups of hot chocolate and writing blog posts, even if it does mean that perhaps I'm less able to touch the... whatever-it-was that I would perhaps have been more in contact with if I hadn't done this. We really are in indefinable indescribable territory here aren't we?

Morgan: I wouldn't know, I feel very grounded in messy human reality!

Ara: Ah but I see something very sacred – for want of a better word – in you at times. There's a kind of grief/rage you get to which takes in everything from our own experience, to the experience of those who have hurt us and been hurt by us, to all the systems and structures out there and their impact, and it feels... appropriate to the place we're all in as humans right now: beautiful and real and terrible all at the same time.

Morgan: My superpower: feeling the darkness.

Ara: It's a vital one isn't it? If we can't feel all that – in us and out there – then we'll struggle to address it wisely.

Morgan: In [our post about Janina's book](#), James and I suggested that all parts can manifest their most stuck, caught up, traumatised versions, and their most sacred, liberated, potentials. We called them the Fs and the Cs, recognising that our parts all hold one of the 'F' trauma survival strategies (fight, flight, freeze, etc.) and the potential for one of Dick's 'Cs' (compassion, calm, creativity, etc.)

Ara: I do like that way of understanding it. And one Self doesn't make a lot of sense of how we experience three of us as [containing parts](#): me, James, and Fox.

Morgan: 'No Bad Parts' also suggests that many people have several non-traumatised parts, it's just that those people are less likely to go to therapy.

Ara: Right. So there's space in IFS for something more like our experience.

Parts within parts?

Morgan: One final problem, and it's a big challenge for us.

Ara: Go on.

Morgan: We just have seven parts, but when IFS works with people generally way more parts come up than that. After reading the book we felt pretty reluctant to try the practices because it's been so important – and wonderful – for us to get to where we have: to this place where we can feel all seven

of us and know us and work with us so well. What if doing IFS reveals loads of other bits and pieces that don't make sense within our system of seven? What if we've been getting this long, often agonising, work wrong in some way despite all our best efforts?

Ara: Want me to respond?

Morgan: Yes please!

Ara: Well maybe this does speak to something I'm not so keen on about this book – and quite a few others.

Bonnie Badenoch's great book '[The Heart of Trauma](#)' holds a strong ethics that people know the path they need to follow, and that we need to trust them in that: to empower them to find and follow their path. Dick Schwartz gestures to something like that in the idea of the Self, but he is still putting forward one very specific process for doing this work.

My sense – our sense – is that different things work for different people, and that it is more empowering for people to find their own ways, with guidance from others – sure – but with deep trust that they will know, at heart, the best way for them. Pushing them to follow a specific path risks moving them off the path that they need to follow. Is that too 'woo' for you Morgan?

Morgan: *grin* No, I think it's right. And I guess I really want to believe that this painful, beautiful path that we've been walking this last couple of years was the way that we needed to go. It's confronting to think that there might've been a fast track we could've taken, or that we're somehow a bit inferior because our parts work didn't get us to the exact same conclusions as IFS.

Ara: I think it's important to remember that [trauma work has to be slow work](#). IFS, or other forms of therapy, or meditative experiences, or drug experiences, might give people a quick glimpse of what's possible. But they'll still have to then take the longer, slower path towards healing – towards developing connection and trust between all their parts.

So where does that leave us with applying IFS ourselves?

Morgan: Well we've been experimenting with it and I think we've found a way that works. I'm not sure yet whether it'll become our go-to practice, or just one in our toolkit for when it seems the most appropriate.

'No Bad Parts' does introduce a way of understanding parts that resonates with our experience, without implying that we need to drop our sense of the core seven that we have identified. Can you describe it Ara?

Ara: The head of garlic model! Dick talks about parts within parts. He says that people are like a head of garlic, within which there are many cloves which cluster together in threes, fours, or fives.



Morgan: That helps us to understand something else: how some plural systems we know identify hundreds of parts while we – and others – remain at a smaller number.

Ara: So just as each part contains their own Self, they also contain other parts in a mini system-within-the-system: a protector, an exile, and a firefighter, for example, or more than one of each. Another way Dick presents it is that we might have a cluster of parts around each traumatic memory – or perhaps around each particular arena of trauma.

Morgan: Like mine cluster around learning to self-hate, while Robin's cluster around learning to shapeshift to please others, and Jonathan's around learning hypervigilance and the sense that he could never 'get it right'.

Ara: That seems like a good way to understand it, which honours what we've found on our journey with this, but opens us to be able to use the IFS approach.

Morgan: Right and we'd kind of got there already.

Ara: Do you want to give your example?

Morgan: Sure, well with me there was the original raging inner critic screaming at the rest of you, then there was Beastie the reformed inner critic who was a force for clear-seeing anger and self-protection, then we realised that there was me – Morgan – under Beastie who was the girl who had learned to internalise all those attacks and hate herself.

Ara: Our sad girl.

Morgan: Yes. And at times we've contacted memories of her/me at different ages, perhaps where those things happened: an infant alone full of pain and rage, a child trying to express a boundary and being overruled and attacked for it, a depressed kid dragging through a life where she was getting the message she was unacceptable everywhere.

Ara: And all of those aspects feel like you.

Morgan: Very much so, there's no sense that they are new parts, or aspects of our other parts, even

when their feelings are quite different.

Ara: I agree, they all feel Morgan to us: Morgan's embodiment; Morgan's energy. Just as how the seemingly contradictory feeling of Tony (cocky, funny, sexy) and Robin (needing, scared, desperate) are definitely the same part.

Morgan: The cloves of garlic actually helps to explain that, and gives us a way in to working with aspects of each of us that might've been tricky before: like how inner critic thoughts can still come in when I have 'reformed'.

It also explains something else... how each of us doing our work have had a sense that we want to go back and look after those younger versions of us, rather than you or James being the ones to go back. It's like we want you to look after us now, but we want to be the ones who hold the younger versions of ourselves.

Ara: Right, and that's something Dick writes about too I think. He says that if you visualise going back and you can see both yourself and the younger part then that means another part of you is in the mix. You want to actually be able to embody the part of you who is approaching the younger part. I remember times when I could watch you with younger Morgan, but you could be the one actually talking with her, or holding her.

Morgan: That feels right. So with the bullet point process we described before, we tried it with me a couple of times, because I've been struggling the most this past week or so. You've taken the role as Self (or at least Self-of-Ara) walking me through it.

Ara: D'you want to say how it's gone?

Morgan: Good. Today felt particularly good. I woke up in thinking, thinking, thinking mode. I remembered what we've read in a couple of books lately about obsessive thinking as a trauma survival strategy: what we learn to do as kids when connecting with others to support us doesn't work. And Dick says that Self is that openness we experience under all the thinking, which Pema also talks about – the wide open space which we absolutely were not experiencing this morning.

Ara: So... may I?

Morgan: Please.

Ara: I encouraged you to go towards the thinking, thinking, thinking part, and what happened?

Morgan: It was so unexpected. Suddenly I went kind of blank. I couldn't contact the thinking at all.

Ara: So we remembered IFS and figured that was another part.

Morgan: Both parts felt like me, for sure. You asked if blank could step back a bit to let us work with thinking but she really didn't want to, so we decided to work with her. We explored how she felt and it was very tired indeed. She wanted to lie down and never get up. We contacted that early part of me who was internalising criticism at all times, trying to avoid doing or saying anything deemed unacceptable by the world around us, and how the only break from that was when we were sick and got to be alone in our room and rest.

Ara: It was wonderful to talk with that part of you, and recognise that inner tension in you too: one

aspect of you needing to be constantly awake and thinking critically, and the other aspect so weary and needing rest. It explains some of the difficulty we have in allowing ourselves to be sick.

Morgan: We explored her feelings for a while, and then we asked where she wanted to be, and she went for a hammock on the veranda of a little beach cabin, with lots of cushions and blankets and nice gentle food and drink to hand. And she released her burden down into the earth.

Ara: And what happened to the thinker?

Morgan: She decided to write this blog post with you! It felt good to put all that thinking towards this – rather than getting all caught up in the current tough stuff of our lives.

Ara: And when that kicked back in we had a sit and acknowledged it.

Morgan: Mm right, and that time we didn't do the whole process, but when you spoke with me directly, rather than me spinning off into all those thoughts alone, I got this image of us and our 'traumado' of burdens that we haven't managed to let go of yet (like the cows and houses and debris caught up in an actual tornado). And I got an image of everyone else in our life, and theirs. It lifted that sense I'd been spiralling into of me being uniquely messy and bad. There was more sadness for how these traumados keep knocking into each other and making even bigger storms.

Ara: So maybe we can adapt IFS, as we have other practices, in ways that work for us: quick on-the-spot dips like that, as well as longer meditations. And we can bring it together with some of the other practices we're finding helpful with the [big feels](#).

So I think there is room in IFS for having a core few parts – as we do – and systems within systems. Dick says that research suggests that infants rotate through five or six states, which are perhaps the basis of parts in everyone. Bonnie Badenoch describes a similar sense of a core six or seven states. And that's important because we wouldn't want people to miss out on the kind of thing we've gone through: finding this inner family and learning to flow between them and work together as a team, even as they open to the full range of parts in their whole system. As Dick says:

'If you can establish a new, loving relationship with your parts and help them transform, they become wonderful companions, advisors, and playmates...it becomes a lovely life practice just to spend time with them.'

I'll say.

Morgan: Thankyou! Are we there?

Ara: I think so. One more plug for ['No Bad Parts'](#) by Richard Schwartz. Janina Fisher also has a [new book out](#) which is a workbook for trauma survivors themselves, unlike her [previous book](#) which was really for therapists. We'll be reading that with great interest next as we love the way she weaves plurality together with somatic approaches.

Morgan: And if people want more of our (many, many) thoughts on plurality, here's our [free book](#) of previous blog posts, and our [original zine](#).

Ara: A sequel to which is currently a slow work in progress when Fox is allowed to get creative, while James (with assistance) works on the mental health graphic guide.

Morgan: Heh we should also thank Jonathan for all his administrative work on the free book – and this blog post – if we're name-checking all of us who are involved in these processes.

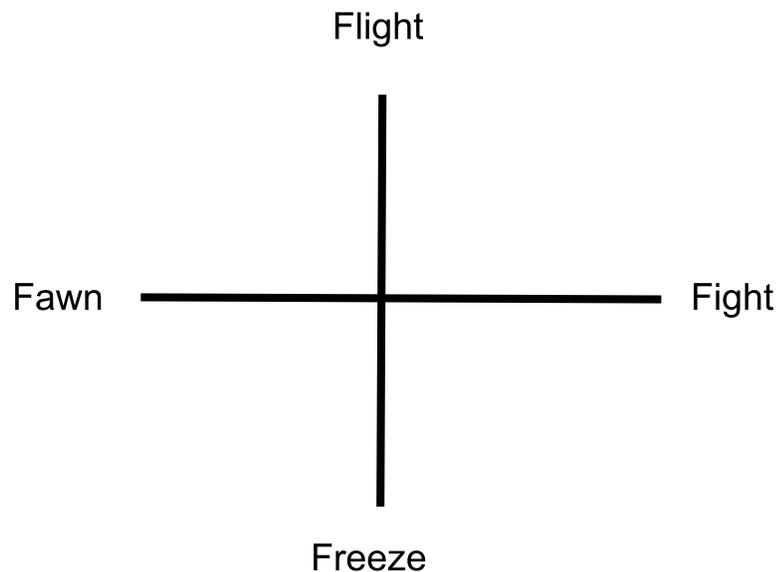
Ara: We certainly should. How funny that the two of us who presented the [first plural zine](#) – Max and Robin – are actually the least involved in our work these days.

Morgan: It is. And I'm so grateful to be so much more present these days than I was back then. Thanks Ara.

Ara: Any time love.

Balancing fight, flight, freeze and fawn: A plural perspective 1

I've written a fair bit here lately about the trauma responses of fight, flight, freeze and fawn, and how these can become stuck patterns with which we approach our relationships with others, ourselves, and our lives. Pete Walker suggests that we can usefully see these responses on two spectrums: freeze to flight, and fawn to fight.



I was particularly struck by Pete's idea that it could be valuable to reach a balance between these four different ways of being. None of them are intrinsically 'bad', but when we can *only* act from one end of either spectrum we are limited, and perhaps also more likely to become stuck in the ways of reactive thinking and behaviour which hurt ourselves and others.

It seemed like a useful non-binary approach to ask how we might find a more both/and or in-between approach to fawn/fight and freeze/flight. From a plural perspective I have a great way into this because I can access four selves who map onto each of the four Fs. So I thought it'd be fun to put them into dialogue here to explain what each of the four Fs feels like, what their strengths and limitations are, and how they're doing the work – now – of operating together to become more balanced.

I've written [here](#) about how a move from flight and fawn, towards freeze and fight, can represent a shift from being with the fear of making yourself into something for others, to the shame of being for yourself. I'm also struck how, for me, freeze to flight represents that kind of shift around work, and fawn to fight around personal relationships.

This article focuses on freeze and flight. You can find the other conversation – between fawn and fight – [here](#). There's also more from Max about the challenges of changing the Flight habit [here](#).

Freeze and Flight (Max and Fox)

Max: Looks like we're up first.

Fox: My first time writing on here as me!

Max: How're you feeling?

Fox: Excited! How about you?

Max: Terrified, as usual. But I do think you and I have been doing some great work together. I like the idea of sharing that with other people in case it's useful to them.

Fox: Shall we start by saying a bit about who we are?

Max: Sure, well in our inner landscape it feels like I have been at the front and you at the back for most of our lives right?

Fox: Yes because we learnt when we were young that flight was better than freeze. Flight is when you always go into doing mode, and freeze means you can just be. I guess we learnt from the world around us that we got most approval when we did well, worked hard, and achieved. And it wasn't very valued to be in the moment, chill out, or play. Everything had to be done for a reason.

Max: Right. As trauma responses, people who flee – like me – try to act right away: do anything to sort it out and make it okay. People who freeze, like you, would go immobile, struggle to do anything at all, maybe hide away.

Fox: Mmhm. And as bigger life strategies, that could map onto what Brené Brown talks about as [overfunctioning and underfunctioning](#). Overfunctioners throw themselves into work, have to be the best and succeed, don't feel okay unless they're producing something. Underfunctioners struggle with any of that stuff. They're often scared of putting themselves out there in any way, and feel safer watching TV, reading books, playing computer games, that kind of thing. What's it like being a flight type Max?

Flight potentials and pitfalls

Max: Right now I'm mostly in touch with how much it has hurt me over time. Looking back in my journals, the start of every summer of my adult life I made a list of all the things I felt I should achieve and produce over the vacation time. It's exhausting just looking at them. My life was governed by

alarms, to-do lists, and deadlines. I'm terrible at holidays: they stress me out. And life easily becomes a series of false hills. When you reach the top of one there's always another stretching up above you. Ugh even when I actually go for a relaxing walk I have to get to the top of the hill!

Fox: Is there anything good about being a flight type: a flee-er?

Max: I guess I've always had a clear sense of purpose. I know people at the freeze end can really struggle with figuring out what they should do with their life. That's never been a problem for me. And because I put my 'flight' instincts towards figuring out my struggles – learning and writing about love, sex, gender, and mental health from every angle – my doing mode has brought us to this point where we at least have a lot of knowledge and wisdom available to us.

Fox: As we go through a massive trauma time.

Max: Yep. I feel like – in a lot of ways – it was my way of being that put us here. My whole life I went so fast into everything with no spaciousness or slowness or caution, and got so badly hurt along the way. But at the same time I did also learn a lot of tools that help now that we are here. What about you though? What's it like being a freeze?

Fox: It feels so funny because you've always struggled to understand people who default to underfunctioning rather than overfunctioning, and now we have a part of us who does that!

Freeze potentials and pitfalls

Max: I know, and one who is here more and more, thank goodness. We see you as the part of us that we were when we were very young: before all the messages about being good and productive kicked in, or even about needing to be a certain way for other people at all. You seem so much more able than me to follow what you find fun or pleasurable.

Fox: I still feel like that little kid, even though I'm now in this older body with all the other occupants! It does almost feel like I went to sleep around 5 years old and just woke up a couple of years ago. I think we see me as like an animal or a child because I feel more free and wild. But I probably did pop up at times during our life, like when we just couldn't overfunction any more – because things got so hard – so we lost ourselves in things like books or TV shows. But because it wasn't very balanced, that kind of freeze wasn't so good for us. It was about disappearing into fiction, fantasy, food: stuff that is comforting but isn't great if you just lose yourself in it and then the world is still there when you're done.

Max: Plus if your main strategy is flight, you can end up being really hard on yourself about the times when you do go into freeze. So the answer is not to eradicate flight and go all the way to freeze huh?

Fox: No because then we'd lose you, and you're brilliant, and you got us here because of your survival strategy. In many ways you protected me and I'm so grateful for that.

Max: Thank-you littlest.

Fox: I think it's about learning how to work together as a team. And I love that we've figured out that we're two ends of a spectrum because it means that you and me are a team, and we didn't realise that at first. It's nice having a special relationship with you.

Max: I like it very much too. D'you want to say how it works

Balancing flight and freeze

Fox: Yes. Well I think if you've been way, way, way towards one end of the spectrum most of your life then you probably need to swing to the other end for a while so each end becomes equally strong and forward. That's what we've done anyway.

Max: With a certain amount of kicking and screaming from me!

Fox: Heh it's not easy for you not being productive. But I think it helped you to see that when you pushed fast and forced yourself to work, in some ways you were hurting me – and all of the parts of us who don't want to do things that way.

Max: It was a lot about **consent**: realising I was being really non-consensual with myself, and other parts of us.

Fox: So now we try to really tune into where we're at. And it often feels like I'm in charge at those moments because I find it easier to tune in, rather than just doing what you think we 'should' do.

Max: And we've definitely put you in charge of evenings and other relaxed time. You're the guru of gentleness!

Fox: And we notice that when I have plenty of time at the front I don't choose to just watch endless TV – although I do give us that if we're really sick or struggling. Today I took us out to the rockpools. Often I do feel creative too. I'm just not doing it in order to produce something.

Max: Ugh tell people about the time you got me drawing.

Fox: Hehe that was so funny. I love Lynda Barry who is all about getting back to your child self who loved drawing and storytelling before they'd been told they weren't doing it properly and all of that. So I got us all doing a Lynda Barry drawing exercise – drawing our monsters – and you found it So Hard. In the end we had to let you do yours in pencil first because you couldn't handle it if it didn't look good, even though it wasn't for anybody else to see except us.

Max: Yep that's me: Ms. Fun Sponge.

Fox: You've been getting much better lately though Max-y. You seem a lot more at peace than you were at the start of the year.

Max: I think I've learnt a lot from you. I see how much better everything feels when we flow with it rather than trying to force it. Some things we are doing less of, for sure, but I'm trying to see learning to treat ourselves in a more consensual and friendly way as our main job these days. So it's okay to not be working on some big project right now. *We are* the big project.

Paradox and balance

Max: I also notice paradoxes. All my life I had this holy grail of what kind of person I thought I could be – how productive – if I got up before 7. And I never managed to stick to it even with all the alarm clocks and stuff. You convinced me to finally stop setting an alarm.

Fox: And quite often these days we wake up around half past six!

Max: It's wild. Also I have a sense that some of what we do produce – creatively – by waiting till it feels live and only going for it then, will be better quality than anything I ever produced from pushing it.

Fox: I guess this is an example. We'll see what people think. It's interesting that Lynda Barry, and Natalie Goldberg, and a lot of the people we're working with as a writing mentor, also find that better writing and art come from a place of self-consent and going with what feels most alive and exciting. [Audre Lorde](#) talks about that too doesn't she?

Max: Yes, we end up encouraging our clients not to write, and instead to focus on finding their younger parts – if they have them – who can still create from that place of delight and playfulness, not worrying about what it's for, or whether it comes out 'right', or what other people will think. It can be intensely challenging though, can't it, because it involves revealing our more fragile sides to ourselves, and potentially to others.

Fox: Something you particularly struggle with because you also tended to present yourself as bulletproof.

Max: It never felt safe enough for me to be open and vulnerable: I always felt I had to cover that stuff over. And creating in that way – this way – is vulnerable. It involves revealing our smaller, more fragile, sides to the world. Even 'just being' is vulnerable because it involves staying with the [kinds of feelings](#) I've always been running from by 'doing'.

Fox: You're doing great Max-y. It is a lot. Can I say something else?

Max: Of course.

Fox: I'm thinking... I'm good at being, but I've also made our 'doing' thing better. So I don't reckon it's just about balance in the sense that now we have me who can 'be' and you who can 'do'; me who can be gentle and rest, you who can be strong and push forward. It's more like we both become better at both. Like you can now be peaceful sometimes, and when you are 'doing' you can let it come as it wants to more easily. And I can now 'do' sometimes, in fact I'm really excited about the kinds of projects I might do, as well as helping us know when we need gentleness and what that might look like.

Max: That's spot on Fox. Enough from us for now? Shall we give our fawn and fight some time to talk.

Fox: Oo yes I can't wait for this one!

Balancing fight, flight, freeze and fawn: A plural perspective 2

Fawn and Fight (Jonathan and Beastie)

Beastie: Our turn kid, are you up for this?

Jonathan: Yes. Nervous like Max, but yes.

Beastie: Seems like the sides of us who have been to the fore all our lives find this harder than the sides of us who've not had as much airtime. Me and Fox are ready to do some talking! But you should probably start. What's it like to be a fawn?

Fawn

Jonathan: I always called it people pleasing, before I heard about 'fawn' as a trauma response. I'm very frightened of disapproval so I try to do whatever people want, to keep them happy. I love feeling like I've been good, and I hate feeling like I've been bad.

Beastie: Right. So fawn as a trauma response is where you try to appease people – do whatever it takes to get out of danger. Fight – my response – is where you get angry and lash out, or use your power to control others and get out of danger that way.

Jonathan: The same way flight became familiar to us, and freeze almost impossible, fawn became our everyday way of being, and we hardly ever went into fight.

Beastie: It worked a bit differently between me and you thought didn't it? We did have a 'fight' part – me – but I became turned inwards instead of outwards: **the inner critic**.

Casting out fight

*Jonathan: Yes. The way we think about it, it was like we **learnt young** that it was never okay to be angry, or even really to say 'no', so we had to get rid of the part of us that would've been capable of doing that. We imagine it was like severing you from us and casting you out into the ocean, and then you became this terrifying sea monster, attacking us from out there.*

Beastie: Like if people get rid of their capacity for anger, blame and criticism, that can easily become turned against themselves. And that's what I was: the terrifying inner critic roaring at you from the

depths. Like Fox I occasionally came forward and let that anger out at another person – often in extreme conflict – but mostly I was out there turning it in on us.

Jonathan: You still sound just a little bit proud of being the terrifying beastie.

Beastie: I'm not, honestly I hate how much damage it caused the rest of you to have me out there instead of in here. But I do kindof like the image of me as a powerful kraken destroying everything. I like being familiar with the darkness: it's important.

Jonathan: We were so scared of you. We kept reading all those books about how you should embrace the inner critic and we were like, 'are you kidding?'

Beastie: You did try to eradicate me. Sadly not an effective strategy with inner critics. I just got louder and meaner.

Jonathan: Because inner critics are trying to protect the whole system. We understand that now. They just can't communicate very effectively when they're out there. Because nobody is listening they say whatever they need to as noisily as they can to get heard. So it is often confusing, contradictory, and extremely harsh.

Beastie: Poor Max-y, it's a killer combination with 'flight' isn't it? I keep screaming about how terrible you are, and she keeps working harder to try not to be. Meanwhile our little people pleaser...

Jonathan: Gets stuck in the chalkboard room trying like hell to figure out how to keep everybody happy, which is an impossible equation, I know that now. We made a [comic](#) about that.

Beastie: So fawn and fight both have their potentials, and their big risks right, when it comes to relating with ourselves and with others.

Fawn potentials and pitfalls

Jonathan: Right. Fawn means you constantly shape yourself to win other peoples' love and approval, so they don't really get to know you, and you can't really be vulnerable or get close to people. You often lose relationships because it's hard to sustain. We wrote before about being a [shapeshifter](#) and the down side of that.

I guess the potential of being really great at fawn is that I'm so tuned in to other people's feelings. I learnt how to do that early on. So I think I can be really good at compassion, if I can learn to [stay with people's feelings](#) rather than trying to fix them. I usually find that I can imagine why a person might be behaving the way they're feeling. Even when it's tough, I can feel for them, and for all of us caught up in these painful dynamics.

Beastie: You're so good at feeling for others, when we can get you out of that chalkboard room. Whereas I find it too easy to dismiss people as being assholes.

Jonathan: You should maybe say how things changed when we finally did embrace you Beastie.

Fight potentials and pitfalls

Beastie: Right. Still only just over a year ago – it's not been long at all. I guess it felt like I became an ally rather than an enemy. Instead of being outside focusing all that anger in on us, I was inside and able to feel anger out. That doesn't mean just going from shame to blame, but finally we were able to set some **boundaries** with people, and see more clearly other peoples' roles in difficult dynamics instead of just taking all the responsibility on ourselves. Also I guess it helped Max to relax that there wasn't that loud voice screaming at her all the time.

Jonathan: It was hard for her to realise that she still did that to herself though, even without you there. It's not like embracing the inner critic makes all the mean thoughts and shameful feelings go away overnight. It's like the whole inner system takes time to adjust. But since you have been on the inside it has been easier to evaluate those critical thoughts we have.

Beastie: I feel like my potential is that I can be a force for clarity, knowing what we need, asserting boundaries. But unchecked I can just be angry, blaming, critical and judgemental. That's where the fawn/fight dream team comes in right?

Jonathan: I think it's still a work in progress. I feel like Fox and Max may be a bit ahead of us.

Balancing fawn and fight

Beastie: Perhaps a scared little boy and a terrifying sea monster is an even less likely partnership, but I loved it as soon as we saw the importance of our relationship.

Jonathan: How do you see it working?

Beastie: Well at the moment it feels like what happens is that life throws us a situation where you would previously have gone into fawn. You still retreat into the **chalkboard room** at those points and we feel all the **fear and shame** feelings come up. You want to do whatever it takes to make the other person approve of you so that you can avoid shame, but you're also very frightened of ending up in another situation where someone is treating you non-consensually, or you're treating yourself that way.

Jonathan: It's so scary when that happens. I feel like I have to think about it all the time to figure it out: fear or shame, fear or shame, fear or shame. It gets so noisy in my head.

Beastie: So my role at the moment is to help you see you've gone into that, and to help you see that there are usually other options than 'override yourself and feel fear' or 'upset someone else and feel shame'. Often the other option we find is to explain honestly and vulnerably where we're at, and clearly state what our boundaries are. We sometimes think of it as expressing our 'can't' and our 'won't'.

Jonathan: So what often happens is that I spend several days in fear and shame, trying to figure it out, and then you step forward and write an email or have a conversation like that.

Beastie: Because the fight part is good at honesty, boundaries, and seeing the whole picture clearly. But what I lack – on my own – is kindness and feeling for the other person. What I hope is that we can do over time is to bring my clarity and boundaries together with your kindness and tenderness: Protection and connection.

Jonathan: Tough and tender.

Beastie: Right? Sounds like an excellent crime-fighting duo!

Paradox and balance

Jonathan: And like Max and Fox it's not just that you bring tough and I bring tender, more that I can help you bring tenderness to your toughness, and vice versa.

Beastie: So I always try to get you to vet what I'm thinking of saying, to make sure it's kind enough. And I try to remember that if I go into proper rage I'm probably missing where the other person is coming from.

Jonathan: They'll be acting out of their survival strategies just as much as we are.

Beastie: And now we have an inner experience of all four of these strategies – the four Fs – that could mean: far greater capacity to notice when other people have gone into theirs, far greater empathy for the harm that causes them, and far better ability to be clear what we can and can't offer, depending on how much people are up for looking at this stuff themselves.

Jonathan: That's the team we could be, I hope: having the compassion and tenderness to understand why other people are acting the way they are and feel for them, and the clarity and toughness to let them know what we will, and won't, accept.

Beastie: Or maybe the clarity and toughness to understand why other people are acting the way they are and feel for them, and the compassion and tenderness to let them know what we will, and won't, accept. I'm just thinking that it takes both of us for both parts really. It's like what we once wrote that kindness without honesty isn't really kindness, and honesty without kindness isn't really honesty. You always need both the kind tenderness and the honest toughness I think.

Jonathan: Like when I'm people pleasing I'm not really being kind however much they might like it. It hurts people long term. And when you're angry-critical you're not really being honest because you're missing so much of what's actually going on.

Beastie: Looks like we're stuck with each other. Neither of us works without the other one.

Jonathan: Which means I'm safe from the chalkboard room and you're safe from the ocean. We need us both for either of us to be what we really want to be: kind for me, and honest for you.

Beastie: I'll come get you out of the chalkboard room and you come get me out of the ocean, if we slip back. Deal?

Jonathan: Deal.

Taking ourselves seriously

Max: You and me this time then kid.

Jonathan: How does it feel Max?

Max: Vulnerable as fuck. I'm managing it by reminding myself we don't have to publish this. But it also feels important. I guess it's what I'm struggling with at the moment, and it feels like something that you have a handle on. It's a chance for me to come to you for support which is a different dynamic for us. Also it works on a meta level. Writing about taking ourselves seriously is a way of taking ourselves seriously.

What does taking ourselves seriously mean?

Jonathan: Should I start with what we mean by that: taking ourselves seriously?

Max: Go ahead. It seems like your phrase.

Jonathan: I notice that it feels easier to start with what it isn't, maybe because it's so discouraged in our culture so we're more familiar with not taking ourselves seriously. But I'd rather come up with a positive definition of what it is.

I'm thinking first of bell hooks's definition of love in All About Love. It's about valuing ourselves and others equally: knowing that we're no more important than anybody else, but no less important either. That's maybe a bit abstract. On an everyday level it's about tuning into ourselves, feeling our feelings, welcoming them, listening to them.

That's when the idea of taking ourselves seriously comes to me the most: when we're having a difficult feeling that doesn't immediately make sense. What we need to do when that happens is to assume that it does make sense, that it is sensible, that we are sensible. That's true even – perhaps especially – when we don't understand what's going on. That's perhaps the hardest – and most important – time to take ourselves seriously.

Max: Can you give some examples: of taking ourselves seriously and assuming it's sensible?

Jonathan: I suppose what we've been trying to do lately. It's taking ourselves seriously to put The Work before the work. We make sure we start each day by tuning into where we're at, and giving some time journaling about whatever is on our mind. If there's anything big we try to give that some time and care before going on to anything else. Or we note it to come back to as soon as we can if that isn't possible.

Assuming it's sensible is when we've tuned into feelings that keep coming up, like fearful feelings around certain kinds of exchanges with other people. In the past we would've got annoyed with those seemingly inexplicable feelings and berated ourselves for having them. Or we would've rushed to act on them immediately. Instead we now try to keep noticing them, and noting down the kinds of experiences that trigger them. Gradually – over time – we understand them better and become more able to talk openly about what's going on for us, and ask for what we need from the people concerned.

Another example would be noticing we're blocked around doing a certain task or piece of writing. In the past we would've tried to push on and do it, or come up with a quick explanation for what was going on: usually one that involved being hard on ourselves. If we assume it's sensible we can keep being curious about why we might not be going there at the moment, without letting it overwhelm everything, or giving up on it entirely. Often, over time, we realise several reasons why this block might be there. We learn a lot from the process of sitting with it, and often – once we've learnt all we needed to – it comes easily and goes better than it would've done if we'd tried to push through.

Max: *exhales*

Jonathan: That's challenging for you huh Max-y? You've always been the part of us that does: that figures things out and gets on with it.

Max: Yup. I hate not understanding things, and I hate not being able to get on with what I think I should be doing. It's so hard for me to take myself seriously in the way you're describing.

Jonathan: Why do you find it so hard do you think?

Why it's hard to take ourselves seriously

Max: So many reasons. First, it runs counter to the way I've always done things: pushing through; getting on with things; avoiding, repressing or battling any difficult feelings that stand in our way. Taking ourselves seriously involves changing the habit of a lifetime: a habit that I developed because it was the only way to survive. So it's a lot to give up on. More than that, it's incredibly hard to acknowledge that that habit actually did us – and others – damage. There's a hell of a lot of grief to feel if I acknowledge that there's this other way of being which is better for everyone.

Second, it's a leap of faith into massive uncertainty because I'm not sure what this other life – the taking ourselves seriously life – even looks like.

Third, the world is on fire right now. There's a massive sense of urgency to be part of doing something about it. Turning inwards and taking ourselves seriously and learning what that looks like feels like a huge privilege: a luxury that we can't afford, that simply isn't okay.

Jonathan: We can take those one at a time. They're all big ones. And ones a lot of people struggle with I think. Does that feel okay for you?

Max: I'd really like to hear your thoughts baby boy. I'm definitely struggling with this.

Jonathan: I'd like to help. And it's also okay to struggle with it Max. That in itself is something to take seriously, not to try to push through.

Max: **Go slow**. It's all anyone seems to be telling me at the moment. But the world is on fire.

But the world is on fire

Jonathan: It is. And I think that's all the more reason to take yourself seriously. There are many reasons for that. First, we need to feel the feelings about everything being so hard. That's why people are developing grief circles to feel the impact of climate crisis, support groups for survivors following #metoo, transformative justice processes to find ways to hear each other's experiences when relations break down. Our wider culture is terrible at this stuff: the systems within it retain the status quo, treat people non-consensually, and harm the most marginalised. So we have to find ways of doing it differently: of taking ourselves, and others, and our feelings seriously.

Max: And if we don't feel the feelings?

*Jonathan: We break down, or burn out, or close off. **Shutting off our feelings** is no way to handle it. You know that Max-y.*

Max: The alternative seems to be to feel SO fragile though: a fragility that makes it hard to do anything. I've never felt this level of fragility before. It's so scary.

Jonathan: I think learning what that fragility feels like is part of the process. For a start it is a sane reaction to an insane world. Anyone who feels safe and secure right now maybe has a bit of a problem! Fragility connects us with what's really going on, and with what everyone is feeling: whether they're allowing it or whether they're covering it over and pretending it's all okay. It means we can have a lot more empathy and compassion for others, and see any defensive reactions they have for what they are, rather than getting pulled into escalating those dynamics with them.

*Also when we can tune into our fragility we can make way better choices about what we have capacity for and what we don't. When we have the ability to discern in that way, we can know when we're up for moving out of our **comfort zone into our stretch zone** – giving a little more of ourselves – and when we need to go back into the comfort zone to recover for a while. We can notice if we've tipped into overwhelm – beyond the stretch zone – and pull back and recover. Tuning into ourselves in this way we're far less likely to overstretch or burn out. We can also maybe increase the capacity of the comfort zone and stretch zone over time – because we're not overstretching. Then more things might be possible within those zones.*

Max: I would love a bigger comfort and stretch zone. They feel pretty tiny right now.

Jonathan: I think they remain smaller if we try to push or force them to expand, and get bigger if we take it gently and slowly and invite that expansion.

Max: So you're saying taking ourselves seriously actually makes us better for others and the wider world?

Jonathan: I think so. Practically, it helps us to see what kinds of relationships and support help us to be more open and available, and to pursue those and be boundaried around ones that don't. It helps us tune into what kinds of work feel most skillful and fulfilling to us, and therefore best for us to offer to others. It also helps us to navigate difficult things that come up more carefully and skillfully.

Max: That feels like another paradox to me. Taking myself seriously feels like the last thing I want to do when I fuck up. I want to give of myself to the person or situation concerned until I've atoned sufficiently.

Jonathan: But does that help them? Or anybody else?

Max: Not really. I guess it denies me the opportunity to see what I've done clearly and take appropriate responsibility. Collapsing into shame is just as bad as defending myself by insisting I'm blameless. Either way I don't really see the other person and the impact on them, because I'm all caught up in myself. And I also neglect to take account of all the **other stuff going on**: the dynamics playing out between us, the wider systems operating through us, that kind of thing, which is always a big part of the picture. Also that overwhelming sense of shame makes me want to give up on everything: so I'm less available to other people, less likely to do anything of benefit to the wider world.

Jonathan: It's hard to see all that. You're doing really well.

Max: It feels hard.

Jonathan: Maybe breathe a bit Max.

Max: Okay. I'm breathing. Can you tell me about that **adrienne maree brown** piece Jonathan. I know that struck you when we listened to her **being interviewed**.

Taking ourselves seriously and fighting injustice

Jonathan: She said that every time she finds herself getting angry about an injustice out there in the world, she begins by turning inwards and reflecting on how it operates within – and through – herself. She doesn't engage outwards until she's done that inner work.

Max: Wow.

Jonathan: I guess I see all the people we're most inspired by saying something along those lines. Laverne Cox talks of having to face our inner oppressor rather than trying to fight oppression 'out there' as if it's not also 'in here'. When we reflect on Audre Lorde's idea of self-care as a political act we see that self-care enables us to be honest and kind around the parts of ourselves who are survivors and the parts of ourselves who are perpetrators.

Audre Lorde also said 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. If we don't take ourselves seriously then we can easily find ourselves using the tools of oppression to fight oppression: like shaming people, trying to 'save' people because it makes us look good, rushing into situations we don't understand rather than slowing down and listening to the people directly impacted, or seeing ourselves as somehow superior.

Max: I get that. I think that's a big part of what we're trying to do this year – or however many years it takes. I know, I know, it might be much longer. If we keep relating to ourselves, to other people, and to our work, in the ways we've learnt in this non-consensual, unjust culture we'll inevitably keep perpetuating that culture.

Jonathan: And we're not going to decolonise our mind, cultivate entirely consensual practices, escape the binaries, and dismantle our inner capitalism overnight Max-y. We can't step outside of culture. This stuff is deeply entrenched in all of us. And the very attempt at total transformation of self into something 'better' is, in itself, a colonialist and capitalist way of treating a person.

Max: So what can we do?

Jonathan: Keep taking ourselves seriously in this process, remember why we're doing it, cultivate systems and structures of support around it, share what we're learning through it with anyone who finds it helpful, acknowledge when we make mistakes and address them, and uplift the other people who we're learning from as much as possible.

Max: Sounds like a pretty clear routemap.

Jonathan: Not easy though. I liked what we heard Pema Chödrön say about compassion recently, on one of her audios. She said that there's a type of compassion which is about being kind towards ourselves and receiving support from others. There's a type of compassion which is about being alongside others as equals: providing mutual support and learning from each other. And there's a type of compassion which is about offering kindness to others who are struggling more than we are at the moment. It's not about one of those being better than the others. We all need all of them. The wisdom is in knowing which we need – or have available – when.

Max: At the moment we're needing more of the first type than ever. Perhaps because we've given ourselves so little of that before. But most days we do also do the other two types. Talking with friends and co-creating with Justin or Alex feels like the second one. And when we can create a

safe-enough container we do still offer compassion outwards: like in sessions with mentees, or giving a talk or training, or meeting explicitly to support a friend. Even at the moment we still have that capacity at times.

Jonathan: Do you want to return to those other reasons that you find it so hard to take yourself seriously? We've done 'the world is on fire', but what about it being a leap into uncertainty? Or it changing the habit of a lifetime?

Changing the (non-consensual) habit of a lifetime

Max: Well I guess I'm on board with the need to change the habit of a lifetime. It relates to consent doesn't it? The habit of a lifetime was treating myself non-consensually: overriding myself because I thought I needed to do that in order to be loved, or approved of, or validated that I was okay. The more I do that, the more I'm practising non-consent as a way of being.

Jonathan: Right. I think a huge part of this is that in taking ourselves seriously we're giving ourselves a big message – every day – that we are okay. Not because somebody else says we are, or because we're doing helpful things, or because we can point to any evidence of being a 'successful self'. When we take ourselves seriously we can be sure we're relating to others – and doing our work – from that knowledge of our okayness. So we're less likely to override our own self-consent, or the consent of others, in our attempts to get validation.

Max: Oh this stuff is humbling as fuck isn't it?

Jonathan: It's what you said about why it's hard Max-y. For everyone. Because it involves seeing all the hurt we've caused to ourselves – and others – through that old habit.

Max: It kind of reminds me of a common trans experience. For a lot of trans people when we finally acknowledge our transness and contemplate coming out, or transitioning, in whatever ways feel right for us...

Jonathan: Yes?

Max: We hit up against this huge grief. Because we recognise that we could've done it a long time ago. We could've had this whole life feeling way more congruent and comfortable in our gender. For some people that grief is too much to bear. They don't do anything about it because doing so would involve having to feel all that grief.

Jonathan: Mmhm.

Max: That's how I feel sometimes about changing my ways of working, or relating to others, or relating to myself. Like if I really allow it fully then I have to acknowledge the pain I've caused myself and others doing it this other way all this time. I can see why people remain in hiding, in normativity of

various kinds, not confronting this stuff. I can see that it is a huge ask when we invite **people in our lives** to do this work in order to be safe-enough for us.

Jonathan: Another reason why this is so important I guess. It means we're more connected with everyone else who is confronting this stuff and finding it incredibly – even impossibly – hard. It also means that we're less likely to use shaming tactics against people who aren't confronting their stuff, because we're aware of how hard it is, and how being shamed around it makes it even more hard to do.

Max: I hope I can remember that.

Jonathan: I think it's a big part of the work we do Max. Trying to find non-shaming ways to explain injustice, non-consent and their impact to people – whether that's at the micro level of interpersonal relationships or the macro level of what's going on in the world – helping people see how we're all implicated in it and suffering from it. And being part of the wider movement to work together to address it: across our differences and our shared experiences.

Max: For one of our inner children you seem to have some damn big words and concepts at your disposal Jonathan.

Jonathan: I've been thinking about this stuff a lot. And inner children can grow and develop once you're more in touch with them it seems. Our understanding is that you – Max – were the part of ourselves we developed in order to survive the tough stuff of our childhood: when it wasn't safe to feel or express our feelings, and when we were being bullied and taught we were unacceptable on a daily basis. I was the little people-pleasing kid you were trying to protect by becoming what we needed to be in order to survive, to fit in, to find love.

Max: We realised recently even my name reflects that: Max = mask: The masks I wore in order to survive.

Jonathan: I guess I hope we might shift those inner dynamics now Max. Max also sounds like 'maxed out'. Maybe the parts of us you were protecting can come forward to care for you, and you can step back a bit: to rest, to grieve, to heal.

Max: I am not great at stepping back.

Jonathan: Believe me we know that!

Max: Ha!

Time to take ourselves seriously

Jonathan: It takes time too Max, to enable new habits to bed in as deeply as the old ones were. It takes dropping any grip on what the future might be because how can we know? It takes making a daily practice of noticing you've clenched and tightened up again and gone into old habits, and gently loosening the grip, feeling into the alternatives available, doing something different each time.

Max: It's crazy how hard that is. I sometimes literally believe that if I allow myself that then I will die. I'm convinced I have this or that illness in those moments. Like somehow I would deserve to die if I really allowed taking myself seriously: freeing myself of all these ideas I have about how I should be.

Jonathan: Our therapist said maybe it's the death of the ego that we feel/fear at those times. Although we are going to die someday of course, and that's another good reason to do this work. When we can turn and face the inevitability of death it becomes more possible to be open about this stuff, instead of trying to craft ourselves into someone who people will approve of, or stay busy to distract ourselves, or tell people what they want to hear.

Max: **Stephen Batchelor** says to meditate on the phrase: 'since death is certain, and the time of death is uncertain, what shall I do?' Today apparently the answer was to have an illuminating and challenging conversation between two of our plural selves in a cafe.

Jonathan: Over hot chocolate with whipped cream and cheese toasties. Feeding the inner child Max-y?

Max: Well I do like to take him seriously.

Plural conversation about fear(others)/shame(self)

This article is a plural conversation about how I'm understanding and working with the trauma response of fear/shame, and how it relates to the existential dilemma of being-for-others versus being-for-yourself.

Lately I've been writing articles in two different formats: the regular style, and a plural style, like this one, where I work things through in conversation between two different sides of myself. This time, as an experiment, I've tried writing on the same theme in both formats. You can read the regular version [here](#). Feel free to pick just the format that works best for you. Or, if you like, you can read them both. I'm fascinated by the different potentials opened up by the different formats, and how they compare for readers, so feel free to give me any feedback about that.

James: So it's you and me for this one kid.

Jonathan: I think it's right, because I'm the one who seems to hold the fear/shame the most. We see me as the vulnerable child part of ourself: the one who learnt that it wasn't safe to express feelings. When we feel that plunge into fear/shame now it feels like it's me who is panicking: sending out the alarm.

James: Why is it me you want to talk with about it, d'you think?

Jonathan: In our inner world you are the protector. You keep us safe. When I was little I read the James Bond books and I became kind of obsessed with them. I used to imagine James Bond training me to be more like him.

James: And what's that like?

Jonathan: Fearless and shameless I guess. Bond is so brave. He never lets fear stop him. As a kid I felt like such a coward: always frightened of everything and bursting into tears. Bond always knows the right thing to do. He's never plagued by self-doubt or guilt or all of the things that I feel so much of the time. He just gets on and does what needs to be done. I guess he knows that he's okay, whereas I'm pretty sure that I'm not.

James: That's also why you love that episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer: the character of Jonathan who you're named after. In that episode the frightened, bullied, self-doubting kid puts all of his fear and shame into a monster – separate from him – and that leaves him as this amazing superhero type: brave and confident.

Jonathan: But that episode also shows that it isn't the right approach doesn't it? If we try and eradicate our fear and shame we create a monster. We end up hurting people.

James: Including ourselves. Personally I love that Jonathan character far more when he is the vulnerable, sensitive kid than when he's the superstar. And that goes for our own internal Jonathan too.

*Jonathan: *blush**

James: So that's us introduced then: the protector and the vulnerable child. Shall we talk a bit about what we're learning about fear/shame as a trauma response?

Trauma and fear/shame

*Jonathan: Okay so I guess it was super helpful for us when we read Pete Walker's book on **cPTSD**. He describes emotional flashbacks as a plunge into fear and shame. That really connected for us. It's the combination of fear and shame that we find so horrendous. We hadn't heard them put together like that before. Trauma response as fear/shame.*

James: Do you want to say a bit about what it feels like for you? If that feels okay, describing something so hard.

Jonathan: I can. I suppose that's part of what we're learning: that the fear/shame feeling was always something we tried to get away from because it feels so horrific. But actually trying to escape it only makes it worse. We need to turn towards it to understand it, and to learn how to be with it given that we do have it.

James: But gently, slowly, with a huge amount of compassion for how hard that is.

*Jonathan: Right. So you talked a bit about the different zones of fear/shame in that **article** you wrote recently. We call them flicker, flame, and fire. For me flicker feels like a slight uneasy underlying feeling, like something isn't quite right. It's hard to put your finger on but things are not flowing easily, it can feel a bit jagged, or scattered.*

Flame is more obvious. Something is wrong. There is fear: my chest is tight and constricted, there's an adrenaline lump in my throat. My thoughts are noisy and clamouring, often leaping from one thing to another. And intertwined with all the fear is the sense that I am bad. I've done something wrong or am about to do so. The external world feels dangerous and so does the internal world because I'm not okay.

James: And fire? Again, go easy if you can.

Jonathan: That's the overwhelm feeling, what Pete calls the emotional flashback. With flicker we can carry on with what we're doing and override the feeling. With flame it's harder, but we can manage it. With fire there's no chance.

James: How does it feel?

Jonathan: It's the worst. I feel like, locked back into me I guess, this side of me: the vulnerable little boy. It's total panic. I feel incredibly small and fragile, incapable of anything. I couldn't hide my emotions if I tried. I'm abject. And I also know that it's not okay. I feel like other people would be disgusted with me if they saw me. I feel like I have ruined everything. Like I should give up. It would be safer for everyone that way. It's physically painful too. The tight chest is like a vice. And it feels permanent: like this is all there's ever been and all there'll ever be. I'm desperate to escape and everything I do locks me in more.

James: I'm so sorry Jonathan. It's so cruel that you have to go to that place: that you've spent so much of your life there.

*Jonathan: Thank-you James. It's helped to read that other people have that experience too. And what you wrote about **trauma in the body**. That makes a lot of sense of why it feels so desperate and permanent. Exploring this **plurality** is big because it mostly feels like only part of us is in that place now – not all of us – so we can access another part of us to help talk us through it with kindness.*

Trauma and consent: Fear/shame and others/self

James: Can you tell us what you figured out, about how fear/shame maps onto relationships with others and with ourselves?

*Jonathan: Yes. We're not sure whether this is how it is for everyone who experiences this, but this seems to be how it is for us. I made that **chalkboard comic** a while back. It imagines me as a little kid always desperately trying to figure out complex equations about how to relate to others. I realised that most of those equations are basically the same double bind. It's always felt like either I can override myself and please others, or I can stand up for myself and upset others.*

I remember this pivotal moment so clearly from schooldays. When I went to middle school I got a clear message from everybody there that everything about me was wrong. And I felt that way at home too. I realised it was a simple choice. Either I could turn myself into what they said I should be and belong. Or I could stay being 'myself' and be outcast, hated.

James: It felt like a choice between yourself and others: a binary either/or.

*Jonathan: Right, and I chose others: I chose belonging. It felt like I constructed this person – almost like those nerdy kids in that eighties movie *Weird Science*. I created this Frankenstein's monster of everything I heard that I should be, and she was the side of us who operated in the world. We call her Max. It was like I was hidden away in the chalkboard room figuring out the equations and sending her information about how she should be to win love and approval, and then she would follow the programs.*

James: That describes it really well. And how does it relate to fear and shame?

Jonathan: The choice of others over self is fear, and the choice of self over others is shame.

James: And that feels like the choice you have to make over and over again?

Jonathan: Exactly. So we repeatedly get faced with that choice: either be who you are and get rejected, or be who they want you to be and get love and approval. We can't choose to be who we are because that shame feeling is horrendous – it's what we're running from. But choosing to be what others want you to be is treating yourself non-consensually, or allowing others to treat you non-consensually. And the more we've done that, the more we feel this fear around it. It used to be that we could manage to ignore that fear, but now it is so intense we just can't.

James: And this particularly played out in relationships and work for us I think. Having felt that you lost love and approval – at home and at school – as a kid because something was wrong with you, you imagined that if you could find somebody to love you, and if you could do well at work, then maybe it would prove you were okay after all.

Jonathan: But it's so impossible James because if you turn yourself into what you think partners would want you to be – or if you work in the ways that play the game – then it's never really you who is getting the love or approval, even if you do manage it.

James: So you never entirely lose the shame: the imposter syndrome sense that you'll be 'found out' at work, or the belief that if a partner saw the 'real you' they would reject you.

Jonathan: And meanwhile the fear feeling can intensify because – on some level – you know you're treating yourself non-consensually: making yourself into something for others, or working way beyond what you have capacity for.

James: So it's damned if you do, damned if you don't: Fear if you're for-others, and shame if you're for-yourself. And this seems to be how our understanding of trauma maps onto our previous – more existential – understanding of relationships. The existentialists like de Beauvoir and Sartre wrote a lot about how people felt they had to choose self-over-others (freedom), or others-over-self (belonging): either objectifying yourself for others, or others for self. We wrote about it in the conflict chapter of [Rewriting the Rules](#), and this [piece](#).

Jonathan: And that's what the chalkboard room – where I've been stuck all my life – feels like: a series of impossible equations. Do I choose incapacitating panic or do I choose horrible shame? Now it seems that every time anything comes up in our life which triggers such a choice I instantly find myself in the flicker, flame, or fire of fear/shame.

What we do now

James: Do you want to go through an example of what we try to do now, when we feel those feelings? We thought it might be helpful for people to read the kind of conversation that we have.

Jonathan: Yes. So what we try to do is to pause whenever we notice those feelings. We also check in a few times a day whether any of these feelings are up, because otherwise we can easily just keep busy or distracting ourself without noticing it. We've started trying to pause between activities and have this kind of conversation before moving onto the next thing.

James: And how do we actually have the conversation?

Jonathan: It used to be like this – written down in our journal – between whichever side of ourself was feeling the feelings – often me – and a side who could support them through it – often you or Ara. Now we start the day with journaling like that, but we can also do it as an out loud conversation. When we do that we sit by the window and talk between us. And – often at night – we do it more as an imaginary conversation. We picture two parts of us in a room in a house we all share, sitting and talking together.

James: Let's do it then kid. We start with noticing. How're you feeling right now?

Jonathan: I feel, um, some nervousness, some feeling like I might not be okay.

James: What does it feel like in your body?

Jonathan: It's not huge: not that super scary vice adrenaline feeling. But my thoughts are a bit scattered. My breathing is definitely shallow: a bit fast. That's familiar.

James: So we're going to pause and give it some room now – this feeling. You're safe here with me. I'm going to be with you through it. And we can take as long as you need.

Jonathan: I remember just before we sat down I felt bad for having this feeling. We'd been excited about returning to this conversation before, but the tough feeling was starting to dull that excitement. It's often hard to be creative when this feeling is here. I was scared it might get worse.

James: That makes all kinds of sense doesn't it? It's tough to be with fear/shame and you've been feeling it so much lately. No wonder you feel relieved when it's not around, and don't want it to come back.

Jonathan: I guess this time it helped to remember that we were going to write this conversation. So in a way it was good to have the feeling here so we could do it for real.

James: Right, and one of the useful things to remember is that each time we feel this way it's an opportunity to understand it better: how it works for us; what helps.

Jonathan: I'm not bad for having this feeling?

James: Not bad at all baby boy. This is just how trauma works **in the body** remember? Something triggers us and the sympathetic nervous system kicks in, so we start to feel speeded up and constricted. And the emotional part of our brain is sounding alarm bells.

Jonathan: Okay.

James: Can you try breathing a little slower?

Jonathan: Mmhm. Oh my shoulders were all tensed up.

James: We can relax those too. Tell me what else you're experiencing right now as well as those fear/shame feelings.

Jonathan: Well... I can feel the breeze, on my bare legs. That feels nice. The sun is making geometric shapes on the floor of the room. The colours of the rug look really bright in the sun. I can hear jackdaws calling, a car going by.

James: You're doing so well. Breathing a little deeper again.

*Jonathan: *breathing**

James: So can we welcome this feeling: the fear/shame? Extend a little warmth towards it?

*Jonathan: *swallows* I feel it mostly on my forehead now, like a furrow. It feels like I want to scan for trouble you know? Like what if something's wrong? What if I've done something wrong?*

James: Mm that makes so much sense doesn't it?

Jonathan: It does?

James: So many hard things have hit this last year, one after another, and now a pandemic. It's so understandable to be worrying what the next thing might be, whether you'll be able to cope.

Jonathan: It's the hypervigilance feeling isn't it? If I can just keep scanning everything then I won't mess up and get something wrong. I'm trying to avoid shame, but it throws me into fear because I think about all the things I might get wrong, and that's overwhelming and scary.

James: Can you be with that furrowed forehead scanning feeling and feel the rest of this moment again? Not trying to change anything, just being with it.

Jonathan: I'll try. Okay. I'm breathing. The air feels cool and soothing, almost like I can feel the sea in the air: the moisture. The sky is this faded denim blue. I can hear seagulls. There's a feeling in my chest now. Sinking. I'm worried I'm getting this wrong. That it won't be a good article: won't make sense to anyone. That I'm ruining it for you.

James: You can't ruin anything here Jonathan, not with me. But can we welcome that feeling?

Jonathan: I've felt it so much of my life. It's so hard to stay with, not to just want it to go away.

James: We don't have to stay with it right now. If it feels too intense we can just focus on soothing you, come back to it when you're calmer.

Jonathan: No I can. I want to.

James: Sure?

Jonathan: Sure.

James: We're not aiming at anything here, just hanging out with this feeling, trying letting it be part of our whole experience.

Jonathan: Okay. There's me and you talking, and there's this room and the sea and sky beyond, and there's a feeling like I might not be okay; wanting to think over everything that happened today in case I did anything wrong. My body twitched when I thought of that.

James: Another trauma response. It's welcome too.

Jonathan: It is... because... I know this feeling has been trying to help me. I know it comes up when I'm in danger of overriding myself. It's only so loud and confusing because I ignore it so much.

James: That's right.

Jonathan: I keep remembering this thing that happened earlier. Is this okay? I don't know if I'm doing this right?

James: It's just fine Jonathan. What did you remember?

Jonathan: How I was hurrying in the kitchen, and I shut my finger in a door, and it hurt but I just carried on doing what I was doing – putting the dishes away. I didn't even stop to feel the pain or to see how badly I had hurt it. I had an immediate thought that I was stupid for not getting my hand out of the way, and then I, like, automatically tightened my chest and sucked my breath in so I wouldn't feel it and kept going. It was only because we've been doing this that I even noticed that it had

happened. And then we paused and let me feel the pain in the finger, and feel sorry for myself for having got hurt and for being so mean to myself about it.

James: And that was a fear/shame feeling you had immediately? It can be useful to recognise that right?

Jonathan: Yes. Shame for being careless and getting upset about it. Fear at how I automatically override myself to avoid inconveniencing anyone else. Like even when there's nobody else around to inconvenience that's still my go-to.

James: It's so sad to think of you doing that over and over again through your life: in physical and emotional pain. It's no wonder the fear/shame trauma responses come up so much now.

Jonathan: It is sad isn't it?

James: We're finding another way now aren't we? Gratitude for the tough feelings because they have finally stopped us in our tracks and made us see how we override ourselves. Now they come up whenever we're in danger of doing that and make it impossible to do so. And that is scary, and it's messy and confusing at times, but it has fetched us up here, committed to doing it differently, to learning about this experience deeply, and befriending ourselves through it.

Jonathan: I'm thinking about that move from the either/or of fear/shame to the both/and of protection and connection. You know we're trying to explore in these situations how we might move out of binary fear/shame logic.

James: What are you thinking?

Jonathan: In those situations I feel I have to choose between shame if I acknowledge the pain and express it, or fear if I override myself and keep going. Maybe if I slowed down I could have protection and connection instead. Like the protection of you – or one of the others – speaking kindly to me about the fact I got hurt and said mean things to myself about it. The connection could be – like – letting other people know what happened. Or feeling for other people who this happens to.

James: Like this right now.

Jonathan: I guess so.

James: You're doing so well kid.

Jonathan: Really?

James: Absolutely. You just did it. How brave was that?

Jonathan: You helped me.

James: I'm so glad I got to. But this isn't one-way you know?

Jonathan: No?

James: No way. It's really not a great thing to be incapable of feeling fear and shame Jonathan, however you might imagine that it is. Remember how we've written about the importance of being able to [feel all feelings](#). I love how full of feeling you are. I see how it enables you to feel for others, and connect with them. I'd like more of that: to learn from you as we continue to explore this plurality.

Jonathan: You learn from me?!

James: Yep. And I'd also like to remind you that it's not brave to do things when they don't scare you. The real bravery comes when you're frightened and still do them – like you're doing.

Jonathan: Thank-you James.

James: Any time. Really.

Accompanying vs. abandoning ourselves

During these last months of addressing my [stuck patterns](#) and [trauma responses](#), one piece that's become increasingly important has been the idea of accompanying rather than abandoning ourselves.

To discuss this one I brought together two sides of myself who used to wish to abandon – or even eradicate – each other, but who now form a pivotal friendship in my plural system: Max and Beastie. Check out [this zine](#) and [this article](#) if you want to know more about plural selves. Hopefully the content of the conversation is interesting regardless.

Beastie: You and me this time bestie, have we done this before?

Max: I don't think so. Definitely makes sense to be the two of us given our background huh?

Beastie: It does. I guess the time that you befriended me was the first time that we determined to accompany a part of ourselves that we had previously tried to abandon. It's formed something of a blueprint for subsequent times. And it helps us have faith that it's always worth doing.

Max: I still remember it vividly. Around six months before I befriended you was the last time that I tried to eradicate you entirely. That was something I'd been trying to do our whole life: to get rid of the harsh critical voice that was always so loud in my mind. Something tough happened and you were saying such cruel things. I dragged you into the woods determined to be rid of you once and for all. I shouted at you out loud. It was the first time we'd ever talked. I would never talk aloud to myself normally, back then. But I screamed at you to be gone, and you just screamed back even louder.

Beastie: I gave as good as I got. This is a key point though isn't it. You can't eradicate parts of yourself, no matter how much you might want to. You might as well learn to accompany them, because abandoning them hurts you, and in the end it's never going to work. You'd have loved to have abandoned me in those woods for good, but I followed you home.

*Max: We listened to this song: **Fighting with Myself**, coming back out of the woods. At least it gave us a smile.*

Beastie: Six months later, you decided to interview me, in your journal.

Max: You were pretty mean to me then too. But we got more curious. We started to journal with you more often, from all the different sides of us.

Beastie: And weirdly it was you and I who ended up forming one of the closest bonds.

*Max: I'm so grateful for that. I'd read all those books about how, when embraced, the **inner critic** could become a fierce ally. But I was skeptical.*

Beastie: You so often are.

Max: Yeah, yeah. They were right though. I consider you my best friend now, no question.

*Beastie: And I you Max. You are the side of us who has been to the **fore our whole life**: battling hard to survive and feeling so alone in it. I'm so glad to be able to accompany you now, along with the rest of our motley crew.*

Max: And I need a good friend, finally confronting the impact of all those times.

Beastie: Shall we start?

Max: Let's.

What does it mean to accompany yourself rather than abandoning yourself?

Max: Okay so the idea of accompanying yourself means that you commit to staying present with yourself through every mental or physical state that you might be in: every situation you encounter, every feeling you experience, every side of yourself that shows up, no matter what.

It's a radical alternative to what most people usually do. Abandoning is a good word for that because it captures how we tend to reject the suffering part of us when we are hurting, and even kick them while they're down. For example when we feel a physical or emotional pain we might try to ignore it or push through it, and even become angry and frustrated with ourselves about it.

Beastie: This relates to what Ara and I recently discussed, about **the gap**. In practice our commitment to accompaniment rather than abandonment looks like returning to the gap each time a challenging situation, feeling, or thought comes up. Instead of going to the next item on our to-do list, scrolling through social media, or pressing 'next episode' on Netflix, we sit for a few minutes to check whether there's anything there. If there is, we sit with that, or journal about it, or talk it through, before we go on to the next thing.

Why is this so necessary?

Max: Do you want to start on this one?

Beastie: Sure. I think a big part of what we're doing when we accompany ourselves is to meet ourselves in a **regulating rather than dysregulating** way. Given the way our culture is around **feelings**, very few people have learnt to regulate their emotions, particularly when very strong emotions arise. Mostly we try to repress feelings by zoning out or distracting ourselves with busy-ness. Or we react out of feelings in ways that are dysregulating for ourselves, and often for others too.

Max: Mmhm. Staying busy – or **flight** – has definitely been my go-to up until now. It's been such a challenge for me these last months to continually drop that abandonment strategy and commit to staying present with myself and with whatever I was trying to distract from.

Beastie: We all have our go-to ways of avoiding experience Max. Mine – **fight** – has always been to get very noisy mentally about all the things we're doing wrong, or lately more what other people are doing wrong. Either way it's another way of not really being here now: getting caught up in critical and judgemental thoughts.

Max: From what we now know about **trauma** and **shame**, both result in people who very easily become dysregulated and reactive. Committing to accompany yourself increases your capacity for regulating yourself, through whatever life brings.

Beastie: I've also heard it described as increasing the **'window of tolerance'** between zoning out and becoming activated. When we have a narrow window of tolerance, many experiences tend to result in us shutting down or distracting ourselves, or becoming overwhelmed by big feelings. Accompanying ourselves can expand that window to get gradually wider over time. More experiences become possible to tolerate without disappearing or disintegrating – two ways of

abandoning ourselves. Pema Chödrön talks of the same thing as 'refraining' rather than repressing or reacting.

Max: Refraining sounds like not really doing anything, but what we are doing when we refrain is to accompany ourselves.

Micro and macro accompaniment/abandonment

Beastie: It's useful to think about how we abandon ourselves on every level – micro to macro – and how we might accompany ourselves at every level too.

Max: Right. So micro level might be a fleeting moment, and macro level our most challenging situations.

Beastie: What are your macro abandonings Max-y?

Max: Oof you know very well what they are. I often abandon myself when I feel I might be getting sick: finding ways to blame myself for it, and worrying about cancelling things, instead of stopping and looking after myself. Hurting others and getting hurt by others are also big ones for me. When I realise I've hurt someone I can feel I don't deserve to accompany myself, so I abandon myself into shame and self-blame and trying desperately to make it better. When others have hurt me I often go to shame too, assuming it must somehow be my fault, or getting lost in trying desperately to make sense of what happened.

Beastie: I'm hoping to write more about shame given that seems like one of the very hardest experiences to accompany ourselves through. Also I like the idea of a reformed inner critic becoming an expert on shame.

Max: Well you're already helping me out with it, but it remains a tough one indeed for us.

Beastie: As with so many things it can be great to work your way up from the micro to the macro level. In working on the micro moments when we tend to abandon ourselves we can practice moving from abandoning into accompanying in those situations. Hopefully eventually it will be our go-to even in our more challenging situations.

Max: Practising regulation, or expanding the window of tolerance.

Beastie: Exactly. In the conversation James and Jonathan had about trauma they described how we're picking up on little micro moments where we might've abandoned ourselves in the past, and deliberately accompanying ourselves instead.

Max: Oh yes, like if we stub our toe, or drop something, or cut our finger. In the past we might've thought 'I'm so stupid' and sped up to get on with whatever we were doing. Now we take such

moments as an opportunity for accompaniment. We try to slow down rather than speeding up, to respond with kindness rather than harshness, and maybe even to make quite a ritual of looking after ourselves for at least as long as we need. We do a similar thing if we wake in the night from a bad dream.

Noticing abandonment

Beastie: That takes us nicely into how we even notice when we abandon ourselves. I guess many people abandon themselves a lot of the time without even realising they're doing it, or naming it as such. We certainly did.

Max: Or rather I did, when I felt like it was just me rather than this plural system of seven. I would never have named overworking as abandonment. I wouldn't have noticed that I was trying to crack on with something even when my body or feelings really needed my attention.

Beastie: Speeding up is a useful thing to notice. That's often a sign of abandonment. Recently we were on a walk and got lost taking a path that petered out. In the past we would have sped up under those circumstances: trying to find a route from there to where we wanted to be, even if it meant going over barbed wire fences or through marshes, or something that got us even more lost.

Max: What a metaphor! The last time that happened, we deliberately slowed down and remembered that habit, and then went back the way we came.

Beastie: What other things are a sign that we're abandoning ourselves, or at risk of it?

Max: I would say noise is a big one: When our thoughts get noisy planning things, or worrying about whether we've done something wrong or might do, or judging other people.

Beastie: You, Jonathan, and me that is: flight, fawn, and fight. We can all get noisy.

Max: We often think of it as being stuck back in this huge chalkboard room trying to predict, control, and figure out everything. It's noisy as hell in there.

Beastie: So then the freeze strategy of zoning out is another sign of abandoning, as is remaining busy. We might notice that we've been scrolling on our phone for ages, or moving quickly from one task to the next.

Max: Right. So speeding up, thoughts getting noisy, or feeling numb and disconnected from our feelings: Those are all signs that we're abandoning ourselves, at the micro level.

Beastie: And at the macro level it's much more of a plunge into extremely tough feelings: abject shame, or terror that others will invade us, or that we will disintegrate. That's the emotional flashback.

Max: It's the worst. At those times the sense is that we deserve to be abandoned or punished, not to be accompanied or looked after.

Beastie: It's certainly easier to notice at that level. Not so easy to accompany ourselves when it happens though.

Plurality and accompaniment/abandonment

Max: I think plurality has been a vital part of our way into accompaniment rather than abandonment. When I felt like I was a single person I just couldn't feel kindly enough towards myself to do this. I didn't value myself enough to feel I was worthy of accompanying rather than abandoning. And I guess I saw my value in what I did, rather than who I was, so I always tried to push through and do more.

Beastie: Hence all the speed and the noise.

Max: You were a big part of that noise if you remember, monster.

Beastie: If you hadn't kept shutting me out... that's all I'm saying.

Max: I really doubt that is all you're saying.

Beastie: When a person has been cast out and alone for so many years they may have a tendency to verbosity.

*Max: *chuckles**

Beastie: But yes, experiencing ourselves as more than one person has helped hugely in accompanying ourselves. For people who don't have a vivid sense of themselves as plural, it may well still be helpful to cultivate a **kind witnessing voice** who can remind them when they are in danger of abandoning themselves, and accompany them through tough experiences present, or past (like when they go back over memories).

Max: Right. It doesn't have to feel like a separate person, it can just be you talking as if you were supporting a friend in the same situation. The more you practice it the more familiar it can become.

Beastie: Because we have seven selves to draw upon we tend to locate ourselves in a conversation between whoever is struggling most, and whoever has most capacity to support them in that moment. Quite often we find it helpful to default to our parental parts supporting. That's James and Ara who are generally good at being kind, protective, holding, and calm. But it's nice to mix it up so we all get to see that we're capable of accompanying, and practise doing it.

Max: *The book we're reading at the moment by Janina Fisher suggests that what it does – neurobiologically – is to connect up the more rational and emotional parts of the brain. It feels like – even when our nervous system is jangled – we can access a self that's apart from that who can talk the jangled part of us into a more soothed state again.*

Beastie: These seven parts of us may just be a really strong metaphor overlaid on that kind of embodied response. But it's a metaphor that works well for us.

Max: *My bestie the metaphor! It does feel like leaning back into a kind supportive friend who will talk you through it for as long as it takes.*

Beastie: I've got you Max.

Max: *I feel it.*

Working with internal and external situations this way

Beastie: So something we've hit on recently is that it's possible to work with both internal and external situations in this way: shifting from abandoning to accompanying.

Max: *I guess we've already given a few examples of how the internal situations work. Let's just pick a couple more though, to bring it to life. So last night Jonathan was at risk of abandoning himself: giving himself a hard time for having tough feelings, worrying he was bringing us all down.*

Beastie: Something we can all do at times.

Max: *What accompanying looked like then was that James encouraged Jonathan to sit down with him. He reminded him of everything we're dealing with at the moment and how intense it is, how these feelings make sense. Then he encouraged Jonathan to recall what we're trying to do now. Jonathan remembered how his difficult feelings were actually an opportunity to practise regulating: potentially expanding the window of tolerance. Finally James encouraged him to do one of his top soothing activities.*

Beastie: Imagining a house we all live in and where each of us is in the house at that particular moment.

Max: *Other times we do the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding technique. Both those seem to calm our nervous system well.*

Beastie: What's another recent example?

Max: This morning I got into a loop of whether we're getting anywhere. It had been ages since we'd written anything. I was worrying whether creativity would ever come back; whether we'd ever work on bigger projects again. I wondered whether we're really doing anything here or whether we're just telling a cute story of progress around what is actually us spinning in a wheel like a hamster.

Beastie: Helpful.

Max: I know, I know. Anyway how I went from abandoning to accompanying was I journaled with Ara: as a dialogue like this. Again that involved her helping me to remember why we're doing this, why it is so tough, and what potential there is for helping others going through similar things having gone through it ourselves.

Beastie: But we have also used the accompany-not-abandon idea well when working with external situations, right?

Max: Yes. It reminds me of that thing adrienne maree brown said that really sticks with us. How if you see something out in the world that you find yourself judging, find it in yourself and work with it there first, before you engage with it out there in the world.

Beastie: One recent example is that we were angry – okay I was angry – at somebody's people-pleasing behaviour. By trying to be really even-handed and look after everybody they were actually in danger of hurting us. It made me think of that idea that's circulating a lot at the moment about how being neutral or passive in a situation is to collaborate with what's going on.

Max: You got beautifully firey and self-righteous as you do Beastie.

Beastie: I may have done a bit. And then I remembered. We have a people pleaser within us. Suddenly I was nearly in tears. To think about treating our Jonathan the way I was treating this person in my mind. Because we know Johnathan intimately we know precisely the terror of conflict he feels which leads to him desperately trying to please everyone, and the horrendous things he's been through which explain where that comes from.

Max: We had a similar experience around somebody who overstretched themselves and didn't have any energy left for us. I had a flicker of judgement around that, and then remembered that it's exactly what I used to do all the time: so busy that I had no time to nurture important relationships including my relationship with myself. I could really connect with the pain that caused me, and those around me. Like I could connect with both sides of that situation now that we've experienced both.

Beastie: There's a deep point here about the connection between separating self from other and separating self from self. When we judge people out there in the world we separate ourselves from them – us and them thinking – and it also leads to a kind of internal severing of ourselves from the part of us which is capable of doing the exact same thing. I realised profoundly how hating or trying to destroy something out there has the knock on impact of separating us from the part of ourselves who has that capacity. Often that part becomes distant internally after we do that.

Max: So accompanying every part of ourselves, and helping them to be really honest with themselves about their potentials and their impact, is a way of getting to the point where we could accompany anybody else in the world too.

Beastie: Yes. I see it as a potential plural superpower. Like if we can really accompany all of the sides of ourselves then we'd be able to see those aspects manifesting in others, and be with them in a regulating way too. I guess it's what **Pat DeYoung** describes doing in therapy with her clients: because she can be with all of her own shame without disintegrating, she can be with all their parts' shame too.

Max: If we could accompany every part of ourselves, even when we're manifesting our worst capacities, then there'd be nothing we were projecting onto others. There'd be nothing to leak out – or lash out – because we're not okay with it and trying to keep it down.

Beastie: Yeah but we're not quite there yet!

Max: I wish. It's like what Pema says though, about how the most difficult people in life should be our most valued teachers. They show us the bits we're still abandoning in other people, because we haven't managed to accompany it in ourselves yet.

Beastie: You spot it, you got it!

What does this mean for our relationships with others?

Max: So here's a burning question I have for you Beastie. If we recognise that we have the capacity for everything in ourselves, and that the task is to learn how to accompany all of it...

Beastie: Yes?

Max: Doesn't that mean that we end up allowing others' abusive behaviour? Or never acting for social justice because we know that we have it in us to be the oppressor ourselves?

Beastie: Oh that's a good one.

Max: I know you like the complex questions.

Beastie: My answer would be not at all. In fact it is quite the opposite: seeing this stuff in ourselves – and learning to accompany it – is in service of preventing abuse and acting against oppression.

First when we accompany rather than abandoning ourselves through everything we are less likely to act in abusive, oppressive, and harmful ways. Seeing those capacities in ourselves, and knowing the

parts of us who are capable of that kind of harm intimately, means that we are less likely to unconsciously act out of it. We're able to be more intentional and less reactive.

Secondly, knowing those capacities in ourselves intimately makes it way easier to see when others are acting from those places. When other people behave in reactive ways we can often feel very confused and gaslit. That's true whether it is a 'fight' person claiming they're not trying to control us, or a 'flight' person saying they can be here for us when clearly they can't, or a 'fawn' person telling us what they think we want to hear but we can sense the inauthenticity. When we're super familiar with those parts of ourselves, we more easily see it in others and can have both clarity and grief about what they are doing, and the impact that has on other people, and on themselves.

Max: So we're less likely to be drawn into damaging dynamics with them.

Beastie: Right, we can more clearly see what we're dealing with because we know that potential in ourselves. Pema would say that the aim is to prevent others from hurting you or anyone else. And when we can see what they're doing that clearly – and with that much compassion – we're more able to find the wisest strategy for preventing harm. No strategy is off limits.

Max: What about wider systemic and structural oppression, rather than interpersonal harm?

Beastie: I feel like again if we can address these things in our inner systems then we're more likely to see, and to be able to address them, in outer systems. Obviously that requires collective rather than just individual work, but the individual work helps us to be able to join that struggle. We tend to collapse or close down in the areas where we abandon ourselves. We are more able to engage in the areas where we accompany ourselves.

So we need to move towards the places where we tend to shut down and become a bystander, or act out and become a perpetrator. Like Laverne Cox said:

'Each and every one of us has the capacity to be an oppressor. I want to encourage each and every one of us to interrogate how we might be an oppressor and how we might be able to become liberators for ourselves and for each other.'

In some ways knowing that all these capacities are in here – in us – is a relief. There's no more need for defenses or for pretending that they're not. The outcome of such inner work could be to expand our capacity to value everyone, not matter what. That is desperately needed in a world where some people – some lives – are valued so much more highly than others.

Max: You take this very seriously don't you?

Beastie: I contain our capacity to do the most damage, potentially. I've turned it in towards us our whole life, rather than out towards others, but I do hold rage, I hold fight instincts, I am capable of harm. I have harmed us after all. If accompanying myself means having more of a handle on that

capacity, and potentially helping others who have the same capacity not to act out of it, I'm very much down with that.

How to shift from abandonment to accompaniment

Max: Right, so let's summarise, how can people do this work of shifting from abandoning themselves to accompanying themselves?

Beastie: Enough questions for me. Your turn bestie.

Max: But I thought I was meant to be swinging in a hammock somewhere trying to get over my flight tendency to do all of the work all of the time.

Beastie: You are, but this time you managed to wait until you really felt like having this conversation so I'm letting you have a pass. If I feel you starting to push it I'll send you right back to the hammock, don't worry.

*Max: *grin* Okay well first I'm reminded of your excellent article about [the master's tools and mental health](#).*

Beastie: Why thankyou.

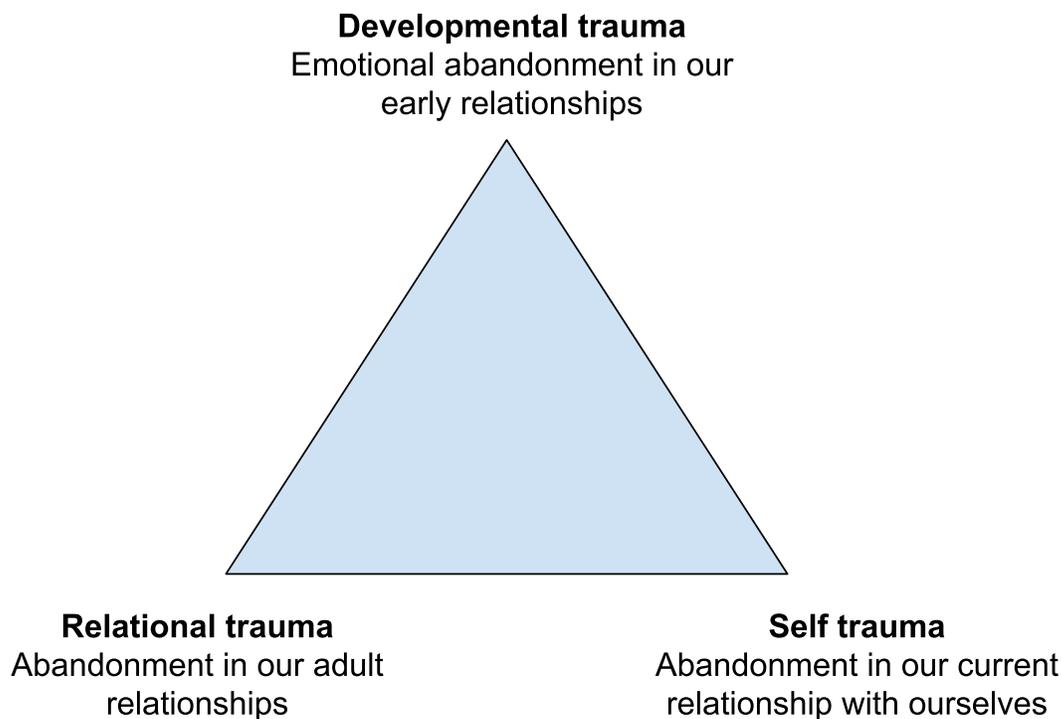
Max: You said that whatever we do, we can't get out of our stuck patterns and harmful habits the same way we got into them.

Beastie: How do you see that linking to abandonment and accompaniment?

Max: Well first we could see abandonment as the thing that was done to us in the first place: we were taught – by those around us and wider culture – that parts of us were unacceptable, and that is why we split them off and abandoned them. Me and Tony covered that in the [plural selves zine](#).

Beastie: You've both come a long way since then.

Max: I know right? So yes one way to remind ourselves to accompany rather than abandoning ourselves is to remember that abandoning any part of ourselves – or any experience – repeats the same kind of violence that was [done to us in the first place](#), which may well have already have been [repeated through our lives](#) enough. Those of us who have been emotionally abandoned in various ways seem tragically more prone to abandoning ourselves, and to developing relationships where that same kind of abandonment occurs.



Beastie: Nice! And once we're committed to accompanying not abandoning?

Max: Well these are the practices that we've been trying, plus some links to where we've explained them in more detail:

- Practise noticing the particular signs that suggest you are abandoning yourself – these may be different for different people – and name that that is what's happening. This is something like [Babette Rothschild's mindful gauges](#).
- Commit to bringing yourself to [the gap](#) each time this happens. This could be anything from three deep breaths to show yourself that you noticed the abandonment and that you are committed to coming back to accompaniment, up to a long sit where you stay with the experience until you feel really present to yourself again. If you can't do this on the spot when abandonment happens, promise yourself to do it as soon as you do have the capacity to do so: top priority.
- Journal or talk aloud between the part who is feeling abandoned or is tempted to abandon themselves, and a [kind supportive voice who can accompany them](#) through whatever they're going through.
- Also notice where you are feeling like abandoning another person, or a way of behaving, out there in the world (e.g. by judging, criticising, or withdrawing) and use that as an opportunity to

connect with the part of you who is capable of the same thing, through sitting with their feelings, journaling, or similar.

- *Personify aspects of yourself that you find hard to accompany and communicate with them that way.*
- *Develop rituals for regretting moments of abandonment and re-committing to accompaniment.*

What about the places where you can't do it yet?

Beastie: So obviously this is a work in progress for everyone.

Max: *Yeah we've reflected on being in process with this a couple of times lately. I like this idea from Pema. She says that if walking barefoot over the world hurts your bare feet you could try to cover the world with leather, or you could make yourself a pair of leather shoes.*

Learning to accompany ourselves feels like making that pair of shoes. It means that we are able to go towards more and more places because we know that we can accompany ourselves there. There's no risk of abandonment, or of destruction by others, because we know that we have our own care and protection to bring to the situation. Also we can clearly see what others are up to and where they are coming from, rather than getting drawn into damaging dynamics with them, or taking on anything of theirs that they try to project onto us.

There's a sense that even death might not be so scary if we have learnt to accompany ourselves anywhere. We've thought recently that a lot of our fear of death is actually fear of abandonment because it brings up everything that we still haven't come to terms with about ourselves. If we imagine that we had come to terms with all those things then death itself doesn't feel so scary.

Beastie: But we're not quite there yet with death.

Max: *Heh no, although I can now get the flicker of feelings what that might be like. Still these days I can be tempted to abandon myself when I feel in pain or like I'm getting sick, so I probably have a way to go with death.*

Beastie: What we're learning is that there'll always be places that we can't yet go to, without abandoning ourselves. It's about going the next step, not all of the way, and learning to be okay with the fact that we're there in some situations and not in others. It's not all or nothing.

Pema has another metaphor about meeting our edges. Like a bunch of people are climbing a mountain and each will reach that place where they can't go any further at a different point.

Max: The place where they can no longer manage to go on accompanying themselves. As someone with a big fear of heights I like that analogy.

Beastie: The thing is not to feel terrible for meeting our edge. We can get to know those edges really well, and eventually find the way to accompany ourselves across them.

Max: We actually have a kind of mental list of the situations where we can do accompaniment already, and the situations that are edges for us, that we keep gently moving towards. Checking in on those situations is helpful for recognising that what is an edge this week can become a place we're able to accompany ourselves across next week.

Beastie: Or month, or year, for those of us who are not massive overachievers Max-y.

Max: Alright, alright. But we will have this whole thing sewn up by the end of this year right Beastie?

Beastie: Whatever you need to tell yourself love.

Accompanying yourself when you abandon yourself

Max: So what do we do when we find a situation where we still abandon ourselves?

Beastie: Well recently I realised that there's a paradox here.

Max: I know you love a juicy paradox.

Beastie: Do you need to go back in the hammock? I think you're getting tired.

Max: Meanie.

Beastie: What I realised – as you well know – is that one of the times we most often abandoned ourselves was when we abandoned ourselves.

Max: Totally.

Beastie: So one we get a lot is first thing in the morning. We often find the noisy thoughts kick in before we're fully awake, and we lie there and let them churn for a while before we realise that's what we're doing.

Max: And what was happening was that we were then getting frustrated with ourselves for abandoning ourselves, and therefore abandoning ourselves more.

Beastie: Now we try to just notice that it has happened and get curious as to what it might be like to accompany ourselves around having just abandoned ourselves. In that case it looks like bringing kindness in around those thoughts as soon as we do notice them, and using them a bit like a dream: as something to get curious about but not take too seriously. We might use the content of the noisy thoughts as a jumping off point for journaling, or try to access the underlying feeling and sit with that, for example.

Max: I definitely felt the shift when we moved to accompanying around abandoning. The noisy thoughts didn't go away, but we didn't have that extra layer of suffering that we had when we struggled against them and abandoned ourselves around them.

Beastie: There's probably a lot of those paradoxes right? How to love yourself when you're not loving yourself, how to befriend yourself when you're being unfriendly towards yourself...

Max: We're not going to run short of articles any time soon are we?

Beastie: You have a problem and the hammock is right there.

Max: Moving on, another situation we've come up against is when one of those big flashback moments hit and we just can't accompany ourselves through it. We feel like we're disintegrating. We're totally abandoned.

Beastie: Right and what we now try to do is to return to **basic self-care**, setting up the conditions under which the capacity to accompany ourselves is most likely to come back.

Max: In practice what that looks like is allowing ourselves to finish whatever we were doing – because in abandonment we often just can't allow ourselves to pause or stop. Then we get ourselves set up in our chair with our journal, perhaps a hot water bottle and a hot chocolate.

Beastie: The July hot water bottle is a real thing around here.

Max: And so far we've found that we can find our way back to each other at that point. The abandonment is usually only for the twenty or thirty minutes that it takes us to get there.

Beastie: That's pretty impressive given how it used to often last for days or longer. Although of course it'll also be fine to find ourselves in longer periods of abandonment when really hard stuff hits. The process is to commit to finding our way back to accompaniment, however long it takes.

Max: Is there anything else?

Beastie: It's probably a whole further article, but I'm struck by how accompanying ourselves looks something like treating ourselves the way people are encouraged to treat romantic partners. Think about the marriage vows: 'I take thee to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse,

for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.' What does it mean to make such a commitment to ourselves? To have and hold ourselves no matter what? That's real accompanying. Maybe people need to commit that to themselves first and foremost in order to be in good relation with others?

Max: It connects with what we often talk about on the podcast, about the importance of self-love. I'm also reminded of that bit from the TV show Normal People where Connell protects his love Marianne.

Beastie: He says:

Look at me a second... No-one is ever going to hurt you like that again. Everything's going to be alright, trust me. Because I love you. And I'm not going to let anything like that happen to you again.

Max: When we heard that we imagined you saying that to me, rather than hearing it from an external person.

Beastie: There may have been one or two tears shed at that moment.

*Max: *smiles**

Beastie: I think I'm going to leave the last word to Pema:

The practice is compassionate inquiry into our moods, our emotions, our thoughts. We are encouraged to be curious about the neurosis that's bound to kick in when our coping mechanisms start falling apart. This is how we get to the place where we stop believing in our personal myths, the place where we are not always divided against ourselves, always resisting our own energy. This is how we learn to abide...in groundlessness.

The Places That Scare You, chapter 19.

Mind the gap: On slowing down and making space

This is a companion article to my recent one on [slow relating](#). That article explored slow love and relationships with others. This one explores love and relationships with yourself.

The [slow relating](#) article brought the fastest side of myself together with the slowest to have a dialogue. This article sees a return of that slowest side – Ara – but together with my reformed inner critic – Beastie – who is perhaps best placed to interrogate these ideas and practices.

Ara: Hey Beastie.

Beastie: Hey Ara. Ready to talk about the gap?

Ara: I am. I'm interested to hear what you make of it. But perhaps we should introduce ourselves a little more first, so people have some sense of us.

Beastie: I think the kind of dynamic we have was best captured in that Netflix Tales of The City last year: the characters of Shawna – played by Ellen Page, and Anna Madrigal – played by Olympia Dukakis.

Ara: Mm the sage old queer and the young upstart.

Beastie: Not quite how I would have described it. I love the scene where Anna says something characteristically vague and wise-sounding and Shawna says: 'You know the rule against talking in fortune cookies around me.'

Ara: And Anna immediately replies: 'And you know the rule against being a smartass around me.'

Beastie: So. No Madrigaling me in this conversation, okay?

Ara: I wouldn't dream of it Beastie.

Returning to the gap

Beastie: So something curious happened recently. We moved away from doing any kind of meditation or mindfulness practice, and then returned to something which probably looks quite similar but feels very different.

Ara: Right. Reading that David Trevealen book on mindfulness and trauma helped us to see that meditation may not have been our friend in the past. Irene Lyon says something similar: many people with post traumatic stress report that meditation feels like sitting in a small room with a man shouting at them.

Beastie: Sounds familiar. At worst it was like that for us. At best just falling into our noisy thoughts for fifteen minutes each morning without much consciousness about them. We would often feel some shame about it afterwards, although we tried to be kind towards ourselves. It was a relief just to allow ourselves to stop, and to start the day with journaling instead, which we enjoy a lot more.

Ara: Reading the trauma literature helped a lot with that: recognising why our brain was hypervigilantly searching past, present, and future for any sign of threat whenever we stopped. Also why staying in an activated state was making it harder – rather than easier – to stay present and to feel kind towards ourselves and others.

Beastie: But then our therapist said something about how it could be useful – with trauma – to find safety in the sense of the space around us. When she said it, we didn't want to hear it. We'd just got away from the idea that we should be doing meditation. That place had never felt very safe for us. Why would we go back there? But the next day you tried it.

Ara: Right. Something in what she said chimed with me. And of course our main Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön, describes something similar in her work. It was such an interesting experience Beastie. It was as if we'd approached this thing that we've been thinking and writing about for decades from just a slightly different angle, and our perspective on it had completely changed.

sitting not Sitting

Beastie: What d'you think was different?

Ara: I think we finally let go of the attempt to make it this special thing. Which is, of course, what wider culture has done with mindfulness and meditation also. I'm thinking of the shift as a move from Sitting (with a capital S) to sitting (all lowercase). I literally just sat in a chair in the window of our flat and hung out with everything that was going on: sounds, sights, smells, sensations, feelings, thoughts, memories: whatever happened I was there with it.

Beastie: There was a sense of welcoming too right?

Ara: Yep. Whatever came up I tried to embrace it with warmth as part of the whole experience, even imagining saying 'you're welcome', but not treating it as any more important than anything else that was going on.

Beastie: Not grasping it, not trying to get rid of it: That's the Buddhist idea.

Ara: Yes. The overall feeling, by the end, was of sitting in this current moment of our life, within a wide open space, and anything could come into that space: like there was room for everything. It wasn't about aiming to reach any particular state, or have a 'good' or 'successful' experience, whatever that would mean.

Beastie: Just being present.

Ara: That might be how a fortune cookie would describe it, yes! It's hard though isn't it because even these kinds of words – 'presence', 'being', 'spaciousness' – hint at something special. And as soon as we imagine in that way it becomes harder to do. I like Pema's word 'gap', or the idea of hitting the 'pause button', or sitting lowercase. They are much more everyday and straightforward words. It really is just hanging out for a while with whatever's around – internally and externally.

Varieties of sitting

Beastie: So since then we've started doing this a lot more. Again it amuses me. Before we'd do it once a day and feel a bit bad about that. Now we can't seem to get enough of it. It just makes sense to keep returning to the gap several times a day.

Ara: I guess it tied in to a wider process we've been in about self-consent: noticing how easily we **override our consent** in relation to others, and work, and ideas of what we should be doing. This sitting provided an opportunity to make a gap between one thing and the next, so we could return to a kind of neutral, and check in with ourselves what we actually felt drawn to doing next.

*Beastie: There was a challenge to that as well. We noticed that when we had done one thing we often wanted to crack on with the next for fear that, if we stopped, we wouldn't be able to continue. That's our Max's **flight tendency**. We also noticed that when we were feeling a little edgy, uncomfortable, or uneasy we wanted to go to some kind of work, or escape into TV or a novel, rather than hanging out in the gap. We feared that if we sat still the feeling would get worse: perhaps overwhelming.*

Ara: I think that's another reason why pausing is so helpful. It gives us this regular reminder that escalating of tough feelings doesn't have to happen. In fact I think trying to avoid those edgy feelings with work or escapism much more frequently leaves us feeling worse than when we started. That's not at all to say that there's anything wrong with working or chilling out, but it seems that we enjoy those things much more if we're not going into them trying to drown out tough feelings.

Beastie: It's wild. Many times lately we've actually chosen the gap over work or distraction, knowing it tends to leave our nervous system in a better place than those things. We've even started making a regular small gap between the different elements of a work task, episodes of a TV show, or chapters of a book, so that if we continue we know we're in self-consent.

Ara: Such a relief to finally feel the gap as a good place to rest.

Beastie: I guess we're now trying to do what Pema calls 'on the spot' and regular sits. Regular ones – after we finish one activity and before we start the next – allow us that ongoing consent check-in with ourselves, and remind us that this space is always available to us. 'On the spot' is when we notice that we're having a difficult feeling, thought, or sensation, and deliberately sit then-and-there in order to welcome that into this space. If we can't sit then-and-there then we at least make a promise to that feeling, thought, or sensation that we'll return to it as soon as we have the time.

Self-talk and sitting

Ara: That regular vs. on-the-spot distinction relates to another one. When we're feeling relatively calm it's possible to just sit quietly and notice the sound of the birds and traffic, the feeling of the breeze, a memory flickering up, a fleeting feeling. When tough feelings are present – particularly those we connect with trauma – that's much more challenging. I guess our response to this is a bit like the distinction between doing a guided meditation on an app or something, and one where you just sit there quietly without guidance.

Beastie: So we sit quietly when there isn't anything particularly challenging present. But if there is something, we try to sit in whichever part of us is struggling, and another part guides us through the sitting: often you or James being the more parental parts of our psyche, but really any of us can do it for any other.

Ara: Yes. James and Jonathan recently documented our process in [this article](#). But where we've got to now is perhaps even more simple and straightforward than what they described. The guide part of us just imagines holding the other part of us while they say – out loud – what they are with. Perhaps reminding them to come back if they drift into noisy thoughts.

Beastie: Like 'I'm with that seagull arcing through the sky... Now I'm with the thought that I fucked that thing up... Now I'm with the feeling of my throat being all constricted... Now I'm with the sunlight shining on that building... Now I'm with the sound of the seagulls... Now with the fact I just got lost in trying to plan what I'm going to say to that person...'

Ara: If Tony were here he would point out how lately it's shagging seagulls we've mostly had the opportunity to be with.

Beastie: I endeavour to have a little more decorum than Tony.

Ara: Shall we say a bit more about what this means for us now?

Beastie: Yes please. I think that safety and befriending are the main themes. I've just noticed how they map onto what we've been exploring around protection and care. The counterbalance to the fear/shame feeling of trauma is a combination of protection/care. Protection alleviates fear by keeping us safe enough. Care alleviates shame by befriending ourselves and our experience.

As a non-binary person we're a little embarrassed that our parental parts are quite so gendered but James does a good number in protection and keeping us safe, and you are good at kindness, care, and connection.

Ara: I like to think that we both do both, but I see what you mean.

The gap and safety

Beastie: So safety?

Ara: Yes. Well the thing about post traumatic stress is that it feels like a very unsafe place to be. Even things that used to leave us unphased can now feel like a big threat. And, after the multiple **big stressors** we've been through in the past year, we're left feeling that we couldn't handle anything else.

Beastie: Like a global pandemic or something would just be too much to cope with.

Ara: Heh, that was our feeling before that hit, yes.

Beastie: So we've been feeling very unsafe, largely because we're so fragile and easily triggered. It's hard to predict what we have capacity for, and what will tip us into overwhelm.

Ara: And those fear/shame feelings can easily feel intolerable: impossible to stay with. So this is where the gap comes in. If we can show ourselves that this space is a big enough container for any and all feelings, then we can finally feel safe to ourselves: at home in ourselves.

Beastie: How does that work?

Ara: Well now that we know more about the **physiology of trauma** I guess a big part of it is that, in the gap, we're attending to the whole of our interior and exterior experience: not just the traumatic feelings or thoughts that may be around.

By tuning into everything about how our body feels – our feet on the ground, the air on our skin, our hand on our belly – we ground ourselves in it, reminding ourselves that our body is safe enough to occupy.

By orienting to the environment – what we see, hear, smell, touch, taste – we're reminding ourselves that we're safe enough here-and-now.

Most trauma researchers and therapists suggest strategies for grounding in the body and the environment. They also emphasise reminding ourselves that we're not in the traumatic experience any more: that it is over and we can put that 'ended' **time stamp** on it. We have survived.

*Beastie: We're not there yet. There's still a lack of trust in the gap to hold more vivid trauma responses or **emotional flashbacks**.*

Ara: Absolutely, and remember it's not about making the feelings go away, or some idea that it's only 'worked' if we feel nice and calm after a certain period of time. It's more about holding. I love that phrase of Pema's: 'hold it in the cradle of loving kindness'. My sense is that – in time – we might be able to bring any feeling we have into the gap and be with it warmly in that wide open space. The potential then is for a profound sense of being safe-enough with ourselves, knowing that any state we're in could be held in that way.

*Beastie: Practising with the flickers of feelings – **before they become a flame or fire** – is certainly a good way of working up to it. But yes, you and Pema do seem to be optimistic that, given time, we can hold anything in that gap.*

Ara: What we've found so far is that, with bigger feelings, particularly shame – which I know you intend to write more about Beastie – we have to keep returning to the gap. Some days it's been about going back time and again, each time we feel that flicker accelerating into a flame. Pema talks of times she's sat up all night with that kind of feeling.

Beastie: Again it's not about eradicating or avoiding the feelings, thoughts, sensations, etc. but being with them along with everything else. There was one day we went for a walk in the woods and I was in a very angry place.

Ara: Getting in touch with our beautiful and long-absent **fight response**.

Beastie: Heh. It was interesting because it felt like I kept re-igniting – going back into angry ruminations – but at the same time the rest of you were able to be with the green leaves and the breeze. The plural thing certainly helps us to hold multiple states that way: generally one part struggling and one part able to hold them. But it can also feel that the gap is holding the aspects of experience that are more difficult, alongside aspects that are less so.

Ara: I like the bit where Pema says that if you go barefoot and your feet get cut to shreds, you could try to cover every piece of land you want to walk on in leather. Alternatively you could make yourself a pair of shoes. That's how we've been thinking about what we're doing right now isn't it? Making ourselves a pair of shoes.

Beastie: Proper, solid hiking boots is the plan. That's a good analogy for what we're hoping for from the gap isn't it. Right now we can easily become scared, because we've been so overwhelmed and incapacitated. But the more we sit with each experience as it comes – and learn that we can tolerate it – the more we have that sense of being safe-enough to ourselves.

Ara: That brings us onto befriending.

The gap and befriending

Beastie: So what do you mean by befriending?

Ara: Certain phrases really lodge in my mind lately. Pete Walker writes about 'becoming an unflinching source of kindness and compassion towards yourself'. Pema talks about befriending: complete acceptance of yourself as you are, no sense that you need to change or improve. Chani Nicholas writes about building an unbreakable bond with yourself, accompanying yourself no matter what, wanting yourself like your life depends on it.

Beastie: Chani Nicholas being?

Ara: An astrologer.

*Beastie: *Raises eyebrow**

Ara: Yes I know, I know. I have become *that* queer. At least I have you and James to keep me honest. What she suggests is really good though, whether or not you buy all the understanding behind it... Just like Pete and Pema now that I come to think of it. You may or may not buy that our suffering is primarily located in our childhood trauma, or in the combination of past karma and human attempts to avoid suffering which Buddhism suggests, but you can still find their advice extremely helpful.

Beastie: Fair point, well made Ara. I'll give you that one.

Ara: Feeling gentle today huh Beastie?

Beastie: Well I have to remember I'm speaking to an old woman.

Ara: Remember Anna's rule about being a smartass.

*Beastie: *grin* If Tony gets away with publicly sassing you then I definitely do. So you're saying that the gap can help us to befriend ourselves, as well as making us safe-enough.*

Ara: I think they're related. Right now we do *not* know that we are an okay person no matter what. We *don't* want ourselves no matter what. We *can't* accompany ourselves anywhere. When we have the shame feelings in particular, we do not feel that we're okay, or deserving of being accompanied or loved – even by ourselves. And there is also a fear that we couldn't accompany ourselves in future – if certain things happened like realising we'd messed up in ways which we find particularly challenging.

Beastie: Too right. I'm rarely the part of us who struggles with those feelings, but the couple of times it was my turn it was shockingly hard.

Ara: So giving ourselves the message that we're up for hanging with ourselves in the gap *whatever* we've done, *however* we feel – *that's* how we befriend ourselves. Again we can conceptualise it plurally – whichever part of us is struggling, the other parts will be there, tag-teaming in to accompany them through it however bad it gets.

Beastie: Like we always do that if one of us wakes troubled at night: get them a hot milk and talk to them kindly.

Ara: Plurality has been a good way into self-love for us because it is easier – with a background of self-hatred – to love our component parts than it is to love the whole. But I think this gap goes beyond our plural love, to let every aspect of us – and our experience – know that we can tolerate it – even welcome it.

Beastie: Just like embracing me – the inner critic – we can work towards a point where we can embrace anything we go through: any feelings, any thoughts – befriending everything.

Ara: And as with you, I suspect we'll find that much of what we've attempted to avoid or eradicate becomes a fierce ally if we can embrace it.

Beastie: We've already found that with the fear aspect of trauma haven't we? Gratitude for how it protects us against overriding our consent again.

Ara: All part of learning to accompany ourselves rather than abandoning ourselves.

Beastie: The big ongoing challenge is going to be accompanying ourselves through shame. But we have already begun to see that holding shame in the gap, and getting curious about it, are leading us to helpful places, just as we did with fear. For example, when we stayed with shame we got the sense that we may be holding a lot of shame that isn't really ours – more transferred onto us by others who can't bear to feel it – the way that wider society tends to blame the person with trauma rather than the people and forces that traumatise them.

Ara: I look forward to reading your thoughts on shame soon Beastie. I'm also now thinking about the gap as *past, present, and future* protection and care. The gap enables us to be with feelings we have avoided in the past in ways that enable us to tell a different story through our life.

The gap enables us to be in a good relationship to the here-and-now, instead of fearing what might come up. That's an antidote to loneliness: knowing that we never have to feel abandoned in the present.

Finally, being able to stay with feelings like fear, shame, anger, and sadness, means that we can protect and care for ourselves in the next instant, and longer term future. When those feelings become tolerable in the gap we can listen to what they're telling us – instead of what we might assume they're going to tell us.

Beastie: So when there is fear we might ask 'How might I have been in danger of overriding my consent – or allowing it to be overridden?' instead of just trying to get the hell out of there. When there is shame we could ask 'Where does this shame belong?' rather than collapsing into self-loathing. When there is sadness 'What do we – and others – need to grieve?' instead of sinking into depression. When there is anger 'How can I have my boundaries?' instead of lashing out.

Ara: 'Positive' feelings too. When there is joy 'How can I dance with this – or share it – while it is here,' instead of trying to pin it on a particular person or situation and grasp hold of that.

Beastie: True, true. That's one for Tony, our joybringer.

Ara: Anything else to say about the gap?

Beastie: I think we've said the rest in our [other article](#). That one deals with slowing down and creating gaps on the macro – as well as micro – scale, and more about the politics of slowness.

Ara: For now then Beastie.

Beastie: See you in the gap Ara.

Staying with the Big Feels

In this follow up to my [Staying With Feelings zine](#), two of my containing parts discuss how we can go about staying with intense emotions when they arise, why this is important, and what a trauma-informed approach to staying with feelings can look like. In particular they build on last year's articles on [plurality and trauma](#) to consider how it can be helpful to locate our feelings in different parts of ourselves, who can then be held and heard in various ways. There's also more on this topic in my new book with [Alex Iantaffi: Hell Yeah Self Care](#).

Staying with the Big Feels Theory

James: Hey Ara, a first time for us I think.

Ara: The inner parents blogging together at last.

James: That's one way to see us. I'm increasingly preferring 'containing parts' to 'parents' though. For one, we have three such parts rather than two, and for another I'm pretty sure Beastie would question a hierarchical parent/child model, or a normative internal nuclear family model, as a useful basis for anything.

Ara: I imagine she would. In your [previous articles with her](#) she pointed out that all parts of us are capable of containing others at times, and all parts struggle at times. That's important. However there is a sense in us that we have four parts who hold a lot of trauma from our past, and who have been running the show for much of our life - whether more foregrounded or more in the background. That's Max, Tony, Beastie and Jonathan. Now we also have access to three parts - you, me and Fox - who feel less impacted by the past, and more able to care for, and protect, the others in the present.

James: I think that you and I are still finding our way too: to who we can be in our inner and outer world. Perhaps that's another article. In this one we want to focus on staying with intense emotions.

Ara: We wanted to write this one together because we have been the parts who have done most of the work of containing the other parts through such feelings over the last six months or so - since we last wrote the previous [plural articles](#).

James: This is an update on what's happened during that period, in a way.

Ara: What we've learnt during that time.

All The Feels

James: Let's start with what happened last August: it feels pivotal.

Ara: Good plan.

James: It amuses us now - when we can take a big perspective on it - that we wrote that [Staying with Feelings](#) zine back in 2016. Back then we thought we had a pretty good handle on being up for feeling our difficult emotions - and some great practices for doing so - which we shared in that zine. We had no idea what was coming!

Ara: Everything that we put in that zine still holds though. I don't want to dismiss how well that version of us back then - mostly Max - was doing: finding ways to stay with feelings at all. And in many ways what we've done this past few months builds on the basic ideas in that zine.

1. The evidence is clear that people do best - in terms of [mental](#) and [physical](#) health - when they can tune into their bodies and feel their feelings, and live their lives on the basis of that self-awareness: expressing their needs, desires, boundaries, and so on.
2. Most of us struggle to do this because our culture discourages any experience or expression of emotions, particularly 'negative feelings', and because traumatic experiences growing up give us the message that such feelings are unsafe to express, or even to feel.
3. In order to address this, we can learn practices - like focusing and forms of meditation - which explicitly involve tuning into our feelings, welcoming them, and learning what they have to tell us.

James: This hits very personally for us. Pretty much everybody receives the message - from the world around them, and in close relationships - that certain feelings aren't acceptable. But for us - growing up in the 70s - we received specific behavioural training from teachers and caregivers to try to condition us out of crying. There was a strong sense that it was vital to control your emotions and to disallow the 'difficult' ones. The message that sadness, fear, and anger, in particular, were unacceptable was very strong. We wrote about that in the emotions chapter of [Life Isn't Binary](#).

Ara: That's why we're so grateful for the Pixar movie [Inside Out](#). It shows vividly what happens to a person when there's an attempt to eradicate any of their core emotions. They become unbalanced when only certain emotions run the show, and eventually end up numb and grey with little access to feelings at all.

There's a sense of an inauthentic version of yourself operating in order to survive in a world where it doesn't feel safe to show how you really feel; to the point that you don't even know that there is more to you than that, or that those emotions still exist inside you somewhere.

James: We still can't handle the scene when goofball island collapses.

Ara: In many ways you could see our process in the last few years as one of welcoming back in those core feelings - and the parts who hold them - and beginning to reshape our inner landscape with all present, and working together as a team.

James: Return to goofball island!

Ara: We feel that sometimes for sure. But we were going to start with last August...

James: Right, so I think that prior to that we had thought that we were pretty good at staying with the feelings. But in 2019 [things fell apart](#) for us - bringing us back up against a lot of the most painful times of our life which I think we hadn't really felt at the time. Pandemic saw us locked in with all of those memories, and gradually the really big feels returned.

Ara: I see it in [two ways simultaneously](#) James.

*James: Of course you do, you're all about the non-binary thinking *smiles**

Ara: We can tell the trauma story where we went through a series of events so confronting that we finally had to feel all of the times in our life which those events re-awoke in us. We can also tell a healing story where we were on a journey - for the last few years up till now - towards greater self awareness, more embodied practices, and sharing more vulnerably in relationships.

It feels like it was both simultaneously. Deliberately opening up space enabled us to feel what happened to us more deeply. Feeling it so deeply enabled us to finally make those connections through the events of our life and to learn how to welcome the various parts of us - and their feelings - more fully.

James: It's like our experience of the lockdown, that bothness. Was pandemic the final retraumatising experience that cracked the whole thing open, or was it the situation which gave us the space and solitude we needed to finally do this work? Probably both.

Ara: So to August.

James: In August we found ourselves in the grip of one of our regular bouts of post-viral [chronic fatigue](#). It was one of the hottest weeks of the year and we were experiencing pain throughout our body, exhaustion, fever, vertigo... Somehow it felt like the final straw and suddenly all four traumatised parts of us were feeling their feelings turned up to eleven, as if our whole life finally caught up with them. It was a lot to hold. It honestly felt like we were two parents - also with sick bodies! - trying to juggle four sick screaming children during a heatwave.

Ara: And again with the bothness. Before that point we had not had a consistent sense of our presence had we James: you and me I mean?

James: Since then there hasn't been a single time where we haven't been accessible to the rest of them when they've needed us, and we are a lot more present in our everyday life. Like much of the day it feels like one of us is around, generally with one of the others either getting on with life, or caring for them.

Ara: It's as if that week demanded us to come forward more fully because the need was finally clear. Or was it that we'd finally brought us forward enough that all parts of us finally felt able to express those long-hidden feelings?

James: Mm I hadn't seen it that way before.

Separating out the feels

Ara: Shall we talk about separating out the feelings next?

James: Sure, because one reason that week was so challenging was that they were feeling the feelings of our various parts all mixed together. It was really confusing. Back then we weren't completely clear on who felt what, so we were working with a huge tangled mass of emotion, and it was loud!

Ara: This is one reason that [parts work](#) is so valuable. The more fully that we can get to know the individual parts of us, the more quickly we can locate a feeling in the part who is feeling it and work with it, perhaps at the [flicker stage](#) rather than it becoming a fire. Or even if it kicks off as a full blaze, we know who is blazing, and the kind of thing that generally helps them when they're struggling like that.

As [Janina Fisher](#) says, for everybody it can be more helpful to say 'a part of me feels...' than 'I feel...' because that enables it to be held rather than taking over. Also it allows for contradictory feelings to be present, rather than the common view that it's not okay - even crazy - to have both desire for something and fear of it, or both anger at someone and yearning for them, for example.

Even if people don't experience themselves as vividly plural, as we did, they could use the Inside Out metaphor of imagining the different emotions as different characters in their [bodymind](#).

James: That separating out the feelings is one of the biggest shifts I've noticed since last summer Ara. That sense of more clarity. 'Oh that feeling is around, that belongs to Jonathan, let's go check out how he's doing before we do anything else.'

Ara: Absolutely. I would say that identifying feelings where they reside, and a radically inclusive commitment to welcoming all of them, are the two biggest shifts we've made. We may not always know what parts need, and we may still feel that resistance in them to bringing their feelings forward. But we generally have that clarity about whose feelings they are, and we have a pervading understanding that everything is welcome: However we feel is okay, not a problem to be fixed.

James: How does all of this relate to [trauma](#)?

Ara: Mm we've been thinking about plurality and trauma even more. There's an idea in some of the literature that being vividly plural is a result of trauma. We've [written before](#) about the need for caution with that idea. For one thing, few people escape trauma in our non-consensual culture. For another, the sense of yourself as one coherent self is very culturally specific, and could even be the result of

trauma where you've internalised that strong message that only a certain version of you is acceptable. Many therapies and spiritual practices deliberately help people sense their plural parts as part of healing.

James: It seems that where trauma comes in is in splitting different parts off from one another so thoroughly that they can't communicate with each other. For some this is to the extent that they have little memory for one part when they are in another. For others there's complete disavowal that the disowned parts of them exist.

Ara: How would you say it was for us James?

James: There was a strong sense that parts of us split off to hold those feelings which felt both unacceptable to others and unbearable to us.

Ara: Mm well put, and perhaps those go together. When you've been taught young that certain parts of yourself - or the feelings they express - are unacceptable then those feelings do become utterly overwhelming and intolerable. You become used to being punished by others when those feelings are around, or to being alone with the huge weight of them because you know it's not okay to share them. For kids that kind of punishment is felt as annihilation, and that kind of aloneness as abandonment. Both can be felt like the danger of death, because a small child can't survive if they are unacceptable to those around them and/or left alone.

*James: *exhales* a lot of the early memories we've been with these last months have been like that. A young part of us alone in bed completely destroyed by the waves of this terrifying feeling crashing over them.*

Ara: You've done such a good job at holding them through that James, giving them some sense of safety at those times.

James: Thank-you. I love doing it, and I hate them being there.

Ara: You asked about trauma. My sense is that the impact of trauma on us was that splitting off - not the dividing into different parts, but splitting off to the extent that those parts - and their feelings - were hidden to us. It was as if they'd all gone to different rooms in our [bodymind](#) in order to hold those feelings: to keep the part of us who was carrying on with life safe from feeling them.

James: But that meant that we weren't able to get the important things that humans need from those hidden feelings. We were operating in life without a lot of key information about ourselves and the world. And when the feelings did leak in or break through, they often did so in damaging ways.

Ara: Let's take those two pieces one at a time James...

Why are the feelings so vital?

James: So the big feels that surprised us in August were these ones:

- *Max (flight/freeze): Trapped fear and deep grief.*
- *Jonathan (fawn): Terror of dangerous others and of being plunged into shame.*
- *Beastie (fight): Furious rage.*
- *Tony (attach): Desperate yearning for love/connection.*

So I guess we're saying that, previously in our life, we hadn't really allowed feelings of fear, sadness, shame, anger, and loneliness. We tried to avoid those feelings, or at least some aspects of them. Like maybe we'd allow sadness in 'appropriate' situations, but not inexplicable waves of grief. We'd let ourselves be - often very - angry with ourselves, but not with others. That kind of thing. To be honest I think our story of ourselves was that we barely ever felt angry feelings, or any of those yearning feelings like loneliness or jealousy.

Ara: And that maps onto the sense of those feelings being held by our most disowned parts: Tony and Beastie. A bit like when feelings are cast out of the control room in Inside Out. We were more familiar with Max and Jonathan. Max was our foregrounded 'getting on with life' part who tried to work hard and be 'good' in order to protect Jonathan from ever having to feel that deep fear and shame that he holds. But even Jonathan was split off because Max wasn't aware that she was protecting him, just that she had to be good and keep busy.

A lot of Max's grief now is the realisation that she was dissociated a lot of the time - whether in the busyness of work, or going into a kind of 'faking through it' mode when dangerous things happened. There's a sense of her as a kind of puppet performing through everything, hence her horror of being trapped now.

James: How would you say the hidden feelings are valuable Ara?

Ara: Well putting it simply it's something like this:

- Fear enables us to know when a situation or relationship is risky for us.
- Anger enables us to protect ourselves from non-consensual or unsafe behaviour.
- Loneliness, longing and related feelings move us in the direction of connection with others, which is a vital human need.
- Sadness and grief help us to process the painful things that happen to us so that we can move through them rather than holding onto them tightly forever.
- Shame - when we are able to feel it as regret, rather than collapsing in the unbearable sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with us, enables us to look at our potentially harmful behaviour and make changes to act with more integrity and compassion.

The first two feelings are vital for *protection*. Without fear and anger we are at great risk of continually placing ourselves in harm's way, because we find it so hard to discern when things are unsafe, and so hard to protect ourselves when they are.

Yearning and sorrow are vital for *connection*: without them we won't relate with other people and can't handle the loss of those relationships.

And if shame can't be felt safely - without the sense it will destroy us - then both connection and protection are very hard because other people feel dangerous (they might see that we're fundamentally not okay) and we don't feel deserving of protection (because we believe that we're fundamentally not okay).

James: Ah that makes sense of our feeling that shame is at the heart of everything. We had to work on shame for a long time before it felt possible to welcome in anger and yearning particularly.

Ara: The [trauma literature](#) is really helpful for understanding the terrible impact that not feeling the feelings - and therefore not being able to connect and protect - has on [mental](#) and [physical](#) health. But I'd love to get onto the process of how we actually go about welcoming the feelings James. I feel like we've learnt so much about that during this period.

First though can we briefly touch on the other reasons why it's so important?

Leaking out and breaking through

James: What you said about how otherwise those feelings can leak out or break through?

Ara: Right. Now that we know our parts - and the feelings they hold - so much better, we can see that they *didn't* stay completely split off throughout our life. Rather they leaked out in ways we didn't recognise, and occasionally broke through in ways that were extremely confusing and destructive.

James: Tony's yearning leaked out by propelling us [towards connection](#) in ways that weren't very conscious or considered, to say the least. Beastie's rage - unable to be known or expressed - reflected back on us in the form of a vicious inner critic, and occasionally leaked out in the form of a desire to 'tell the truth' about things, which got us in trouble more than once. And Jonathan's terror of shame meant that we'd often act in hypervigilant and people pleasing ways which were exhausting for us, and probably felt as inauthentic by others.

Ara: Again I'd emphasise how valuable all of those parts and feelings are. Even in their hidden/leaking forms it has been wonderful that we've been so driven to connect with others through our life and work. That truth-telling impulse has been behind much of what we've written about the problems with cultural norms and oppressive systems, which has been helpful to other people as well. And the care and compassion for others inherent in our [little people pleaser](#) is a beautiful thing.

James: The sense is that the more we can welcome them - all of them, and all their feelings - the more we may be able to connect, to create, and to care, without getting ourselves in the kinds of trouble that come with doing those things unconsciously.

Ara: Our other past experience with those feelings was that they could come crashing in in ways that were disorienting and overwhelming for us and for others. I expect it's a common experience when you hide these things that they break through in situations when your guard is down, or where something intense enough happens that you can no longer hold them at bay.

James: Right. So common ones for us were that when we really let another person in close - or spent a lot of time with them - generally a partner, we would start to have melt-downs where those huge intense feelings suddenly spilled out.

Ara: It was terrifying when we had no understanding of it, like a [sudden plummet](#) into overwhelming fear, rage, shame, and/or yearning. That's why it felt so hard for us to be around another person 24/7: the horror that they might see that, and that we might hurt them with those feelings.

James: It's been incredibly hard to finally be living alone and to experience those kinds of plummets by ourselves, without much access to support. But it also feels like a vital part of the process of finally learning how to be with those moments, rather than desperately wanting somebody else to make it better, at the same time as being deeply ashamed that they saw us that way, and terrified that they'll abandon us - or harm us - because of it.

Ara: There you go, right there is a great example of why it's so helpful to separate out the feelings and to feel them in the various parts of us. All those times we did plummet with another person we were also having all those contradictory feelings about it at once: Tony clinging and desperate for them to prove we were loveable in spite of it, Max full of shame at being seen that way, Jonathan fearing attack, Beastie expecting abandonment.

James: Ah yes, I hadn't seen that. No wonder it felt like such an impossible spiral of emotion to be stuck in.

Ara: When parts and their feelings are very disowned, the other impact is that any situation that triggers old trauma can bring them up very vividly.

James: And that would be what we experienced as periods of [post traumatic stress](#) in our life: times when something so terrifying and shame-inducing happened that we couldn't hold those feelings at bay and they crashed in for a while, making everyday life incredibly hard. Basically we've just been going through the fourth period like that that we've had in our life, but this time with the gradually increasing capacity to tease out the different parts and to hold them through it.

But even now it is incredibly disorienting, because we know that we are this person with all our experience, knowledge, and support to draw on, but - because the parts are still to some extent split off - we can quickly drop into feeling like the terrified child again, for example. It's very hard to navigate life at such times, or to plan for the future. Hard to know whether to ask people to treat us as they always do, or to treat us as an extremely vulnerable person.

Ara: Because we are all of that, trying to learn how to hold all of that! Onto how we've been trying to do it...

Staying with the Big Feels Practice

How to feel the feels

Ara: Okay so that's the theory - and how it works for us. Shall we get to the practice?

James: Let's. Usual caveat that different things work for different people at different times. This is what we've found useful during this period, but other people will need to find their own path through it I'm sure.

Ara: [That's vital](#). So easy for hearing somebody else's experience to become yet more fodder for the inner critic - like somehow we should be doing everything that everyone else suggests. We've found that it's vital to adapt suggestions to work for us, to reject those that don't work right now, and to trust our inner wisdom to guide us on our path, which will be different to everyone else's.

Where would you like to start James?

James: I'd love you to help me think through some paradoxes that are really confusing to me in all of this.

Ara: I'm so up for that.

Big space and close up work

James: Okay so a major one for me is that you and I seem to approach being with the big feelings in very different ways, and I'm wondering how they can both be 'right'.

Ara: Go on.

James: The way it's shaken down between us is that you're 'in charge' of holding our parts - and their feelings - in the [big space](#), or [the gap](#). I'm 'in charge' of what we think of as 'close up work': holding and hearing the parts in their feelings, exploring them in that more 'focusing' or therapeutic kind of way.

Ara: Both approaches involve ensuring that whatever part we're in - and whatever feelings they experience - they are now [accompanied](#), which is the vital piece I think. But you're right that my approach and yours towards accompaniment feel very different James.

James: Do you want to say a bit more about what you do, and I'll do the same?

Ara: Certainly. So it seems that I'm around when we meditate - which is something we've come back to, having [struggled with it in the past](#). In an average session what that feels like to me is that I'm sitting in this wide open space, and then one of our parts will surface and I can observe them, and notice the feelings they are having and how they're responding to those. The whole thing is infused with the sense that anything that arises is welcome, and that we can simply notice it together and come back to the present moment - perhaps the sunlight on the roofs opposite, or a bird flying past.

When a much more intense feeling is around, my big space approach is to take the part who is feeling it on a walk, maybe sit up in the hills, and we keep noticing how they go into big spirals of tough thoughts and feelings, and how it's possible to recognise that they've been swept up in that, and return to right now.

James: I remember you doing that with Jonathan one time and it was eventually even possible for him to get quite excited at the next spiral: seeing it as an opportunity to practice this new superpower of getting swept up and coming back to ground.

Ara: Several nights with him we sat looking out at the night and just focused in on one small lit up window and the way the telephone wire moved across it. Somehow we could return to that in brief moments throughout the tumultuous mass of traumatic feelings.

Do you want to describe your approach James?

James: Sure. So when I feel any part of us having strong feelings I engage in conversation with them. If they're feeling bad I often lie down - so it feels like I'm lying holding them, even with a hand on their belly, or stroking their arm. Hm I notice that this feels way more vulnerable to describe than your practices Ara.

Ara: Interesting. We're not encouraged to love ourselves in such close, tender ways are we? Talking with ourselves or giving ourselves nurturing touch? Meditation is somehow more culturally palatable. What kinds of conversations do you have?

James: I guess it's something like focusing - which we described in the [feelings zine](#) - or the ['befriending questions'](#) that Janina Fisher uses. I try to tune into what that particular part needs on that occasion. So I might ask them to describe the feeling, to tell me where it is in their body, to do a stream of consciousness about what comes up with them around it in terms of images or memories. Sometimes it stays in the present, exploring what fears are going on for them, and reassuring them, or reminding them how we've got through such things in the past. Sometimes we go back in time remembering all the times we've felt this feeling before. Occasionally we've zeroed in on an earlier time and gone over that memory in our mind, maybe bringing you or me in to act it out differently in our imagination - what it would have been like if we'd been there to hear and hold them back then. We got that from [Sarah Peyton's work](#).

Ara: Maybe we can say a bit more about how we use some of these tools later James. For now d'you want to say what you're aiming for with your approach?

James: It's what some authors call regulation, but we've preferred to call attunement. There's often a click moment with 'close up work' where the struggling part feels really held and heard in their distress. We've heard people compare it to the 'attunement bliss' or 'coregulation' that can happen between a parent and child, or between therapist and client, or close people when they feel really understood by each other. It can happen, for example, if the part finally feels able to express their feelings and I hold them as they cry. Or it can happen if we get to an understanding of what happened that has eluded us before. Or it can happen if we remember that we've been here before and what got us through.

Ara: Going back to our earlier understanding of the big feels residing in split off parts, each moment like that seems like welcoming that part home, even more, and demonstrating to them that nothing that they bring with them will be rejected or unwelcome - quite the opposite. Some call it a kind of 'soul retrieval': fragmented off parts of us being brought back into the whole. We think it's also what can give us that 'earned secure attachment' over time: welcoming all those parts back into us fully and sharing them with safe enough others in our life.

James: And it seems to be a gradual process. We know all of our parts now (unless we're in for another big surprise!), but it seems like each of them is slowly bringing more and more of the feelings they've been keeping to themselves, perhaps as they trust more than those feelings can be held and heard here.

Ara: We often feel an initial resistance. They are so used to having to repress those feelings, and so scared that they will 'ruin' things for us by bringing them. But the more you encourage those

conversations, and the more they end in that 'reward' of attunement, the more it feels safe - even good - for those parts to bring their feelings.

Which approach to take?

James: I'm still confused though Ara. Our approaches seem so opposite to one another. Is it better to hold feelings in the big space and watch them bubble up and drift away, or is it better to go towards them and explore them in the way that I do? I guess I worry that my approach encourages our parts to be in these incredibly tough feelings more, when they could just have let them go if they'd gone to you.

Ara: Mm, my strong sense is that both approaches are necessary and that they work very well alongside each other, whereas one without the other might be risky.

James: Say more.

Ara: Can we touch on the theory behind them first? I guess my approach is rooted in the Buddhist / mindfulness theory that suffering happens when we struggle against what's happening: either our outer circumstances or our inner experiences. The big space is about welcoming all of it, and noticing how pain of any kind passes if we don't escalate it with storylines about how bad it is, or with our struggles to escape it.

James: Whereas my approach is rooted in the therapeutic understanding that we lock trauma in our bodies when painful things happen which are not regulated - or heard and held - at the time. I'm ensuring that they are heard and held now - both present pain, and the past pain that underlies it.

Ara: So I think the risk of my approach without your approach is a kind of spiritual bypassing James. We could take every tough feeling to the big space that way, but perhaps we would then never have fully felt it, understood where it comes from, shown it that it is welcome now - that we *can* hold it and hear it. I can imagine a me-centric version of us who got attached to spiritual practice but still struggled to be back in the world with other people, where these things got triggered, because they hadn't really been dealt with.

James: I'm trying to think what the equivalent is for me. What does a James-centric version of us look like?! I'm thinking that, in recent times, parts have got edgy when a flicker of a tough feeling has come up - like it means that they're due another two hours on the couch with James looking into it! Occasionally we've had a shorter meditation at those points and sensed that it didn't need such

intense work, just to be acknowledged and move on. I wonder if my approach without yours could get quite heavy going, or keep us quite mired in the pain of our life past and present.

Ara: I don't know for sure, but I think that might be part of the need for balance. And of course our third 'containing' part does something different again.

James: Fox. They are the part who can simply delight in whatever is going on right now. They don't go towards the feelings at all. They're just with the immediate sights, sounds, smells, sensations around us - being present. They can bring that sense equally to a walk where they notice everything, or to gentling up and enjoying a good meal and a TV show. When another part is around and struggling they welcome that part alongside them with whatever is going on, sharing the wonder with them.

Ara: [Pema](#) described something like this in a recent talk we heard: accessing a part of yourself who is patient and kind, another part who has deep trust in your capacities, and a final part who can appreciate those fleeting times of contentment in the moment.

James: We should say it's taken nearly 50 years for us to have full access to those three. Five years ago we'd only experienced the tiniest glimmers of these parts of us. Somehow we patchworked 'us' together from those glimmers, from other people who modelled this for us, from fictional characters...

Ara: So going back to your question I don't think that any of those three approaches - mine, yours, or Fox's - is 'better'. It's more about tuning into each time feelings are up and asking what they seem to need. And being up for trying one thing, and then another, if that doesn't work.

James: [Rupture and repair](#) is important too isn't it? Where we try something and it doesn't help, and we can acknowledge how painful that is to a part who is feeling desperate, and suggest trying something else. We actually build trust between us through such moments.

Ara: Being up for acknowledging our imperfection, and having got it wrong, rather than making them feel bad for not feeling better. Again that's healing for times in the past when people have protected the blame onto us when they haven't been able to be around our feelings, or have felt inadequate for not being able to help.

James: Mm, and I'm also thinking there's something here about us being alongside our other parts rather than doing this for them. There's a sense in which rage is Beastie's, grief is Max's, longing is Tony's, and terror is Jonathan's. It's important that they get to learn what works for them, and to apply it, with us helping them, but not taking over for them. Does that make sense?

Ara: Yes, empowering each one rather than taking over for them. On an inner level it mirrors the outer level. [Bonnie Badenoch](#) says that people need others to believe in them and support them in finding their path. It can be really damaging if a therapist, friend, or other person decides they know better, or gets into 'fix it' mode because they can't handle being around the pain.

*James: Right, but again with the paradox, because it's also felt helpful to remind those four parts that they don't have to **do** anything - like figuring things out or fixing them - they just have to **be**: bringing their feelings when they are around and trusting us to hold and hear them, and eventually act upon them if need be.*

Escalating emotions or taking them seriously?

James: Okay here's another one for you, related perhaps. We were just reading Pema's '[Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change](#)', which references a finding that feelings only last one and a half minutes unless you fuel them. The idea is that the thing to do is to let them pass through, to recognise their impermanence. You do that by 'dropping the storyline' you tell yourself about them. You try not to escalate the feelings with your stories about how bad they are, and how that means you're bad, or somebody else is bad, or something like that. All those thought spirals somehow make the feeling fixed and solid, instead of allowing it to pass like a cloud in the sky.

Ara: Mmhm.

James: How does that fit with the trauma therapy idea you shared earlier that these emotions are vital motivators towards connection or protection, and that our problem in the past has actually been not feeling them enough?

Ara: I wonder whether there's almost two phases to feelings-work James. There's the phase of just being with the feeling - whether in the big open space, or in the kind of close-up description work that you do. Then there may be a second phase for more exploration of what the feeling brings up. Sometimes all that's necessary is to welcome the feeling, fully experience it, and let it go to get back on with daily life. Other times the feeling is pointing to something important that requires more attention.

James: Right, I'm thinking about how therapy tends to have components of helping clients to finally feel their feelings, and components of talking about the events of the past and present, for example. Or how Buddhism emphasises mindfulness practice and also applying the teachings to your everyday life.

Ara: So, for example, I recently meditated and Beastie was there feeling angry several times. Afterwards I chatted with her and we thought through together what the different angry feelings were about - why they were of value. We were able to see some that were a response to having repressed anger for so long - turned it in on ourselves. Some were about injustice - others having access to freedoms we don't have. Some were about the specific pain of people offering something they don't really have to give, and we could link current examples of that to early experiences.

Beastie is very concerned, at the moment, that the capacity to feel anger more vividly doesn't flip us from turning it in against ourselves to turning it out against others. We wondered about how we might ensure that it remained more of a counterbalance to shame. In the past we've too readily accepted others' stories of everything as 'all our fault'. Perhaps we can use the opportunities of Beastie's anger to see other people's stuff that might be in the mix, and wider cultural stuff.

James: I sense another article coming on! But if I can draw something out of that for emotions in general, you're saying that it's another both/and. There's a place for noticing how we escalate emotions, and practicing doing something different to that. And there's a place for getting curious about the feelings that come up regularly - and what triggers them - and using that as an opportunity to learn.

Ara: About ourselves and others. The first time Beastie felt hate outwards vividly she had a huge flash of understanding for those who have hated us. Previously we'd struggled to connect with how horrific hatred feels, and how people can act so violently out of it.

I think the difference is intentionality James. [Taking emotions seriously](#) is very different to escalating them. Instead of letting the storylines spiral round and round we're deliberately reflecting on the feelings. And we also try to refrain from speaking or acting out of the feelings until we've reached a better understanding of them, and considered whether such speech or action is the wise and compassionate thing to do in that situation - for us and the others involved.

Different practices for different intensities?

James: I realise I'm asking a lot of questions here! Another one I'm with is about the intensity of feelings. When we wrote '[Staying with Feelings](#)' we didn't have much trauma understanding so we just suggested practices for staying with feelings no matter what they were, or how intense.

Since then we've come across trauma-based understandings which suggest that it's all about the intensity of the feeling. Ideas like the [emotional thermometer](#) or [zones of feeling](#) suggest that we might want to do very different things in different zones.

Ara: A helpful way to see them is concentric circles with the comfort zone in the middle, the challenge zone after that, and the overwhelm zone as the outer circle. The trauma idea of 'expanding the window of tolerance' encourages us to keep moving from comfort zone into challenge zone and back again with our feelings, without pushing into overwhelm. In overwhelm we retraumatise ourselves - which may well shrink the window of tolerance - which is how spacious the challenge zone is.

James: We learnt that one well before we read any trauma literature. We decided to list all the traumatic events of our life so we could go through them one after another. That's a fast track to overwhelm right there!

Ara: It can be really hard to learn that we have to go slowly, and that pushing into trauma tends to make it a lot worse. It's much more about learning how to tune into our bodies so that we have a much better awareness of where we are in those zones. What are the signs that we might be heading towards overwhelm? Can we learn to notice those and pull back at such times? Can we learn what we need when we have tipped over to bring ourselves back?

James: So we shifted our perspective, last year, from 'always feel the feelings' to 'feel them in the challenge zone', but in overwhelm just focus on bringing yourself back to a more settled nervous system: using [grounding practices](#) and that kind of thing.

Ara: But you have a question?

James: I suppose it's sometimes felt more complex than that. Like a big feeling has come up and been with us for several days, and by continuing to be with it - gently but thoroughly - we've eventually got to some major revelations about our life, and a huge sense of relief.

Ara: It feels like the process Brene Brown described in '[Rising Strong](#)': being prepared to be with the messy middle.

James: It's happened for us when it simply doesn't feel possible to 'bring ourselves back', the feeling is so intense, so it's more about weathering it and trying to have faith that it will get clearer at some point: that it likely has some pretty important learning for us if we can just hang on in there with it.

Ara: I don't think those views are incompatible James. What we're committing to is to not **repressing** feelings or trying to **resist** them.

James: Is the overwhelm zone what happens when we resist them?

Ara: Sometimes I think so. They get louder and scarier when we resist them, in an attempt to be heard. But sometimes it's more that we've reached an experience which is too much for us to deal with - at our current capacity - and it's tipped us over.

James: Non-resistance then is more about recognising we're in overwhelm and that's okay, it happens. And being as gentle as possible with ourselves while we're there, trying to remind ourselves that there probably is a big learning here: about what things are still an edge for us in the present and/or about how things were for us in the past.

Ara: We've found 'reminding ourselves this is okay' to be gold in all this. Instead of punishing ourselves for having got overwhelmed again, we remind ourselves that this is just okay. Even on the worst days there are moments that are calmer, or more connected.

James: I remember one time I held Beastie and we found this dot. Like the comfort zone had shrunk to a tiny dot, but if we stayed on that dot she could feel okay. Any attempt to think about what we were going to do next, or how we were going to handle some situation, would tip her directly into overwhelm, but we kept coming back to the dot over and over until eventually there was some buffer zone around it again.

Ara: I like that sense of all the concentric circles expanding and contracting over time. Long term, and even over the course of an hour or a day.

James: I wonder if it's ever possible to convey this to those who haven't experienced trauma feelings so starkly. Like we had whole weeks when Jonathan kept being pushed into overwhelm by the thought that our iPad battery might not last the whole day for an event we're doing in several months time. When the comfort zone and challenge zone have shrunk that much, we're in incapacitating overwhelming emotions for much of the time and anything can re-trigger them. Sometimes the whole

day's work is just bringing ourselves back from overwhelm for a moment or two. It is exactly like being a terrified child stuck in an adult's body, but still as convinced - as he was back then - that terrible danger is about to befall him.

Ara: And there's another huge paradox to all this. While it was agonising and debilitating, there is also a sense that it was a helpful thing to go through. For example it stripped away all the strategies we used to use to avoid painful feelings - like working too hard or wanting somebody else to 'make it better'. It made those vital feelings far more accessible to us than they ever were before.

James: I do feel a sense that when those young/traumatised parts of us are around it's a kind of miracle, that we kept them safe enough all this time that they can now be here and share their feelings. And we'll be able to live our life so much more wisely and compassionately now we have access to them. Also this whole thing has given us so much empathy for other people who are collapsing under the weight of these big feels. And for all those who are racing around in various ways trying like hell to avoid them.

Ara: Mm we notice how easy it is to go back to that avoidance too. To talk the talk of 'welcoming the feelings', but as soon as a flicker of one of the tough ones is around, viscerally that sense of trying to push it back down or pretend it's not there. And if we manage to do that, there's this sense of dissociation: being a bit vague or fake or performing.

James: Those times the feeling often comes back with a vengeance afterwards, and in confusing ways so it's harder to know whose it is or what it's about. Our sense now is that the more we can go towards all the feelings as soon as they arise, the more we can make our inner landscape safer, so there's not that sense that we might stumble across something that is 'too hard' - because we know it all and are familiar with it all.

Learning from the big feels

Ara: Shall we finish with a bit more about our daily practices with this James, and what we're learning from them? I'm aware that this changes somewhat week by week for us though. Maybe that's one of the biggest learnings. One day it feels important - when we can - to be with the feeling all day long. Another day it feels right to get on with life, with pauses to be with whatever feeling is around every now and then. One week we seem to need huge amounts of rest. Another week we have big energy for getting out moving, or for creating things like this.

James: Yes, flexibility to go with that seems helpful, and another way of trusting the feelings - and the parts that hold them - to know what they need.

Ara: But we do have a few standard practices now.

James: Right. Every day you do a meditation sit in the morning and in the evening. After that one of us does a check in conversation with the 'big feels' parts to see if they have anything they're feeling that we didn't notice in the meditation.

Ara: That seems a great way to encourage regular feeling, and to check if there's something there we haven't noticed. If there is a bigger feeling present in that check-in, you might do some close-up work with that before we move on. Or we might journal about it, or go for a walk if it feels like it needs to move.

Another practice that has been helpful for just showing us that we can bear an intense emotion is feeling it in the body as a kind of vibration, trying not to even label it or understand it but just feel it as pure energy or something. Occasionally even an intense feeling has ended up feeling almost soothing when we've managed that.

James: And our therapist shared one about imagining the feeling as just one cell of our body and picturing it in front of us - seeing what texture, colour, size, and shape it is.

Another one that's been great when it feels stuck is to lie down and breathe in to the chest, then the belly, then exhale. That kind of breathing often seems to allow a kind of release, often tears.

*But it isn't always those more formal kinds of practices that are needed. Occasionally the thing to do has been to find a song that matches the feeling, and listen to it and allow the feeling to come. And we got a lot out of re-reading the Stephen King book, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, so we can flash on the way she went still and steady in the face of fear, when fear comes up for us.*

Ara: Again there are so many possible ways to be with feelings. The main point is that we are welcoming them - not resisting them or reacting out of them.

James: It's moving from resisting to responding, and reacting to refraining (from action) until you feel clearer and calmer.

Ara: There's a couple of nice metaphors about welcoming feelings and how vital it is. One is the [Tibetan Buddhist story of Milarepa in his cave](#), and how he had to fully welcome all of the demons - or feelings - who came to stay with him there - big or small, subtle or overwhelming. The other is the Islamic poet, Rumi's, famous poem [The Guest House](#). Again that sense if you can welcome all fully then there's nothing more to fear in our inner world, and perhaps [also in our outer world](#) given that we're familiar with it all in here.

Often the parts with the feelings are convinced you're going to send them away, or become overwhelmed by them, because that's what's happened in the past. So it's a practice of showing them - gradually over time - that you don't need to eradicate them or [merge with them](#), you can just be with them patiently.

James: A couple of other learnings I've noticed. We've found that what we learn from one feeling often helps with others. We started with sadness. We did an irreverent reverse version of the behaviour modification of our childhood and decided to award ourselves a gold star whenever we cried! We've got really comfortable with sadness, sorrow and grief, where in the past we struggled so much with those feelings. Sometimes when we're struggling with another feeling we can at least access that sadness about how painful it is, and release it in that way.

Lately we've also found that many of the practices we developed with fear and shame last year work well for being with loneliness and rage too, as well as developing some new practices for those.

Ara: What else did you notice?

James: That [fear and shame](#) aren't the only trauma feelings, as we'd previously thought. Loneliness and rage are trauma-related feelings too, just more about abandonment - for us - than annihilation. And that each part holds a whole cluster of related feelings. Like Beastie holds self-hatred, blame of others, self-protection, and anger at injustice. Tony holds loneliness, yearning and jealousy, but also a kind of 'high' joy when he's pinned that on a particular person or situation, shame around being 'too much' and getting 'sent away', and a more steady joy when he's allowed to be himself in the world: open and connecting.

Ara: It's useful to understand how the different feelings they hold work together. Like Beastie's self hatred is often a sign something non-consensual happened to us and we didn't give her a chance to get angry about it. Tony's joy is more steady when we help him grieve for the losses of the past.

James: There's something about the need for a pendulum swing I think. If you've tried to only feel 'positive' emotions much of your life, or if you've repressed and covered over tough feelings a lot, it seems like there is a period where you feel all the feelings you didn't feel at the time. Perhaps you have to swing into recognising how bad some things were that you didn't recognise back then, maybe because they were [gaslit](#) by yourself and by those around you.

I think one of the very hardest things is taking that leap of faith, repeatedly, that having done this process things will become easier, now that we have access to the feelings and can act on them. It's hard to make that leap of faith when right now all you're feeling is way more pain than ever before.

Ara: There can be some nostalgia for the more 'covered over' time when things didn't feel this intense, disorienting, and incapacitating. My sense is strong though that being able to feel the hard feelings will make them less overwhelming over time, and that it will make the other feelings more accessible too. That Kahil Gibran quote: 'The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.'

James: We experience that in the way long periods of tough feelings often end in much deeper understanding of ourselves, and/or others. Also there's an intense relief when we crack through to some grief or gratitude, by being up for hanging out with a tough feeling.

Ara: I'd like to end with the multiplicity of learnings that are possible each time a big feeling is present.

James: Please do.

Ara: We find it helpful to remind ourselves of this when we're in them:

- This is an opportunity to learn how to be with this feeling more readily, so we'll be more able to do so in future, expanding our window of tolerance.
- This feeling being touched and awoken right now gives us a chance to go back to our earlier experiences - when we didn't get heard or held in such feelings - and do so now, perhaps putting that memory to rest finally.
- This feeling gives us the potential to do the general practice of dropping our storylines and being with whatever is present.
- This feeling - if we can allow it - gives us deep insight into what others with similar feelings are up against, and why they act in the ways they do, increasing our sense of compassion and connection.

- This feeling has something of value to teach us about the current situation if we can listen to it without repressing it or reacting quickly out of it. For example, it may be that something has reached the limits of what we can deal with right now, or that a situation or encounter was 'off' in some way.

For more on this topic check out my new book with [Alex Iantaffi: *Hell Yeah Self Care*](#).

Attachment, emotion and plural parts work

In this follow up to my recent [attachment theory](#) piece, two of my containing parts discuss how we can embrace all of the attachment styles within us - and the [emotions](#) that they hold - and bring them into our relationships with others.

James: Hey again Ara.

Ara: Hey James. So good to talk with you [again](#) so soon.

James: I thought about writing this as a regular post, but I realised I could really do with somebody to bounce off: to ask me questions to help me clarify my thoughts.

Ara: I'd love to do that. I'm aware that in our [last post together](#) you asked me a lot of questions. It feels good to balance that dynamic by doing it the other way around.

James: Mm like you are more of the expert around feelings and embodiment, but perhaps I have the expertise on this more intellectual piece: weaving the various theories together.

Ara: I like that.

James: I also feel like I need you as a kind of anchor. I feel so excited about the puzzle pieces that seem to be slotting together here. I want to zoom off in a hundred different directions at once.

Ara: How can I help to ground you?

James: Remind me to breathe, to slow down, I don't have to do it all at once. You could ask me questions to lead me through one step at a time. Are you up for that?

Ara: Absolutely. Want to breathe before we start?

James: Sure **laughs* *breathes**

Overview

Ara: Okay. Can you start by giving us an overview of the terrain you want to cover in this piece? If the terms we use here are unfamiliar to people, we'll define them in the next section.

James: *Absolutely. It's something I've been building to ever since I did that Bowlby Centre event last month which I wrote up here, about [attachment theory](#). My sense is that perhaps everyone contains all of the different attachment styles - or at least the capacity for them - within themselves. Rather than aiming at some kind of static secure attachment, perhaps there's more value in getting to know all our different attachment potentials very well. Maybe that even is the way that we get to 'earned secure attachment'.*

Ara: A kind of paradox? We've tried to get to 'secure attachment' by getting away from 'insecure' attachment styles, but perhaps the way to get there is *through* them, not away from them?

James: *Precisely. And there's this sense that it also maps onto emotions and the 'window of tolerance'. The only way to expand the window of tolerance and get to a place where you can be with all emotional states is through experiencing (tough) emotions, not by trying to avoid them or get away from them.*

Ara: So that's attachment and emotion, what about [plural parts work](#)?

James: *We've reached these conclusions by getting to know all of the parts of us deeply. I'm suggesting that we can do this work by befriending the three parts of us who map on to the three 'insecure' attachment styles, and the emotions that they hold. That's the way to both earned secure attachment and an expanded window of tolerance.*

Ara: Wonderful. So you can explain to us how we now understand our parts having operated together in the 'old' system, that we had our whole life. And you can describe how we're working with them now to reconfigure the system towards more secure attachments in our inner and outer relationships, and towards an expanded window of tolerance. How am I doing?

James: This is really helpful, thankyou Ara.

Ara: Another breath before we continue?

James: Mm. *breathes*

The faux window of tolerance, faux secure attachment, and faux parts

Ara: So one thing that we read which helped you click together on all of this was the concept of the faux window of tolerance in Kathy L. Kain and Stephen J. Terrell's book '[Nurturing Resilience](#)'. Do you want to explain that, and how it relates to attachment?

James: *That's a great place to start, yes. So Kathy and Stephen explain that many, if not most, people develop a 'faux window of tolerance' when they're growing up, in order to handle intense emotions. The window of tolerance is [Daniel Siegal's](#) term for the space in which we can be present with - and regulate - our emotions, rather than being overwhelmed by them.*

Growing up if our caregivers and others can meet us in various emotional states and help us to know that they are okay, understandable, and manageable, then we will develop that window of tolerance. We'll learn in those early relationships that those feelings are okay, and we'll learn from experience with others what we can do to soothe ourselves when feelings are really intense. We'll end up with a nice wide space in which we can welcome a variety of different feelings at different intensities.

Ara: So that's how it relates to secure attachment? The window of tolerance is developed within secure relationships?

James: *Right, a secure attachment refers to that kind of nurturing relationship where we have a 'secure base' or 'safe haven' to return to when emotions are unfamiliar or overwhelming. As a child, if we learn that we can return there and be welcomed, understood, soothed, have our needs met, then we'll be more and more able to extend out from that base to explore our world with openness, curiosity, and creativity. We'll have more of a sense that we can tolerate any tough experiences and regulate our own emotions, as well as a strong sense of trust in that base we can return to if it gets too hard.*

Later in life that would translate into building strong, secure relationships with other people in our lives - friends, partners, mentors, communities, etc. - so that we still have a place to return where people

can help us [coregulate](#) around the tough feelings, where we can express our needs and have them met, and so on.

Ara: So what's the 'faux window of tolerance'.

James: Most of us carry some degree of [developmental trauma](#): a sense of key relationships not being very secure and of not all emotions - or all intensities of emotion - being tolerated and regulated by those around us. Kathy and Stephen suggest that what therapists call '[defences](#)' are what we develop in order to have a 'faux window of tolerance': the impression that we are tolerating our emotional states, but really we're defending against them.

Ara: That resonated for us.

James: So much. This last year or two we've often wondered how we've done so seemingly okay in life despite clearly carrying so much developmental trauma, such that we've been plunged into intense trauma periods and overwhelming emotion several times over the years. The idea of a 'faux window of tolerance' makes so much sense. It might have looked like we were handling difficult experiences and the emotions they brought up pretty well, but really it was more that we were adept at various defences, or survival strategies, to avoid or sidestep them.

Ara: I think that fits well with what we discussed [last time about emotions](#) James. The sense that we thought we were pretty good at 'staying with feelings' but have lately realised that there were several vital emotions that we were barely feeling at all.

James: Exactly. So what we were generally doing was repressing feelings, or reacting out of survival strategies in ways which made the difficult experience and/or feelings go away. Part of why the last year or two have been so intense is that we've finally been feeling many of the feelings - and the experiences they resulted from - which we hadn't allowed ourselves to feel along the way.

Ara: And you think it may be useful to conceptualise this as a 'faux secure attachment' as well as a 'faux window of tolerance'?

James: I do. We - and I suspect many, many people - were able to do a pretty good impression of functioning in the world, and relating with ourselves and others, for much of the time because we'd developed pretty remarkable defences and survival strategies. However, the 'faux-ness' became apparent any time something retraumatising happened - beyond the capacity of the defences and

survival strategies to cope with - which put us into periods of intense PTSD where the feelings were terrifying and overwhelming and we couldn't function.

The 'faux-ness' was also revealed in most of our close relationships because eventually it became apparent that we - and the other person - weren't really securely attached - in ourselves or with each other - and the relationship ended. Maybe they became more insecure and needy over time and we had to get away, or vice versa, or the level of conflict became unbearable to us. Often it was revealed how much we'd been shaping ourselves to fit that person, and how much we'd lost ourselves in the process, and we finally began to struggle with that.

Ara: I notice that I feel some resistance to the word 'faux' here.

James: Me too. It does feel rather harsh and judgemental, and there's also a sense in it of having been a 'false self' covering up a 'real self' which is something that I would question.

Ara: Being seven selves all of whom are a work in progress definitely raises questions around any sense of a real 'authentic' self!

James: It does indeed.

Faux selves?

Ara: Do you want to say how all this relates to [plurality](#)?

James: Well, if we were to use those terms, we would say that we developed a 'faux part' - Max - who was to the fore for most of our life. She was the one who formed that 'faux window of tolerance' and who formed those 'faux secure attachments'. She would likely have looked pretty happy and successful from the outside, except for the few times - when traumatic things happened and/or relationships ended - when it became very hard for her to maintain that facade.

Ara: We find it so interesting that we chose the name 'Max' for her, given that it sounds a lot like 'mask', which is kind of what she was.

James: And her survival strategies were to dissociate a lot, not that she realised that at the time. Throwing herself into work, and into helping others, both enabled her to keep our own intense feelings, and traumatised parts, very disowned and buried. Busy-ness and distraction was her main 'faux window of tolerance'. Focusing on becoming something for others - rather than bringing herself openly and vulnerably to relationships - was her main 'faux secure attachment'.

Ara: And this is why we don't love 'faux' for her, although it is accurate in a way, because these survivor parts - in all of us - are something we should be deeply grateful for, and celebrate, not dismiss as 'false' or flawed.

James: Agreed. We simply wouldn't be here now were it not for Max. She protected the other parts of us through some truly horrific early - and later - experiences. And she kept searching for answers to all of the tough stuff that we encountered with our mental health, and in our relationships, and that she saw others around us struggling with too. Ironically if she hadn't had the survival strategies of workaholism, and trying to help others, we would not now have this huge foundation of knowledge and writing to build upon.

Ara: We can feel deep gratitude to Max, and huge grief for what she had to go through. One image of her is of the 'parentified child': an inner child or teenager who has to act like an inner parent in order to survive and look after the other parts of the inner system who are even more vulnerable. It's rather like the way a big sibling might have to look after the other kids in a family where parents are struggling, or unable to handle tough experiences and emotions.

James: How it feels at the moment is that we have finally freed Max of that burden and she is off walking in the hills alone somewhere.

Ara: Mm I always think of her when I read the Mary Oliver poem, [The Journey](#). By finding/developing our own inner parents - you and me James - and by working with our three traumatised child parts directly, we have liberated Max.

James: Which brings us on to those parts and how they function in terms of attachment.

Insecurely attached parts under the faux secure attachment

Ara: Go for it James.

James: Right, so this is the idea that all of us have all of the attachment styles present within us. Parts work gives us a nice easy way of working with this. Our experience is that we literally have members of our plural system who map on to each of the forms of insecure attachment.

Ara: I sense a table coming on!

James: How did you guess?

Part (4F)	Attachment style	Main (disowned) emotion	Transactional analysis position	Defence against feelings
Anthony (fasten to attach)	anxious preoccupied	yearning / neediness	you're not okay / you're okay	denial of confidence, criticising things, deflecting with humour
Jonathan (fasten to fight)	dismissive avoidant	anger / rage	you're okay, you're not okay	inner critic - internalising others' criticisms of us
Jonathan (fasten to freeze)	fearful - avoidant	terror / shame	you're not okay / you're not okay	people pleasing, hypervigilance - pretending to be fine and keeping others happy
Max (flight)	anxious secure	trapped fear	you're not okay / you're okay / you're okay	denial, busy-ness, distraction, projecting our insecure parts onto others and helping them

Ara: A lot to unpack there James. How about getting a drink before we start?

James: Hot chocolate?

Ara: You read my mind.

James: *I was going to say that's not so hard when it's the same mind, but given how poorly parts of us knew each other in the past perhaps I can't say that.*

Ara: We're getting to know each other better and better now thankfully. Also I feel like we both do and don't share the same bodymind, given how differently each of us think, feel, and inhabit our body, but perhaps that's one for another blog post!

...

James: *Okay then. So to explain the table. We've introduced these four 'traumatised parts' before in various places, although our understanding of them - and how they fit together - has definitely clarified over the past year. Mapping onto attachment theory we'd now say that Tony was our anxious-preoccupied part: needy, clingy and desperate for connection. Morgan - who we used to call Beastie - is dismissive avoidant: struggling to trust others and pushing them away. And Jonathan is fearful avoidant: terrified of that other people will hurt or shame him.*

Ara: And the 'okay' bit of the table?

James: *Transactional analysis is another therapeutic approach which seems to map fairly well onto attachment theory. The anxious-preoccupied part - Tony - believes that other people are okay, but he's not, so he craves others' love, approval, and attention, and he fears their disapproval, dismissal, and disgust. The dismissive avoidant part believes that she is okay but other people are not, so she tends to blame others and push them away. And the fearful avoidant part believes that he isn't okay and neither are other people, hence Jonathan's [fear/shame](#) trauma response: other people are dangerous and he is wrong and unacceptable.*

Ara: But most of our life these three parts have been disowned?

James: Precisely, which does not mean they haven't had an impact. Now we understand it that Max was constantly responding to others' demands inside and out. On the inside she was constantly getting, often rather desperate, messages from Tony, Morgan and Jonathan, about what they needed. She tried her best to balance and meet those needs. On the outside she was very tuned into what other people wanted of her and tried to balance and meet those demands. No wonder she's off in the hills these days taking a well-earned break!

Ara: So dismantling Max's defences and setting her free, as we did last year, left us with a much clearer sense of the other three traumatised parts. They have been gradually revealing themselves more and more as they've come to trust us. They're gradually feeling more securely attached to us, and to other people, and they're gradually sensing that their feelings have a more expanded window of tolerance to be held in.

James: Nicely put. What just clicked with me this morning is that not only did Max have her set of defences - or survival strategies - that covered over the others, but each of the 'insecure' parts also have a set of defences that we need to get underneath in order for them to show themselves fully and to feel all their feelings.

Ara: This is so exciting, and it makes so much sense. Do you want to take me through it?

James: Please. The thing that struck me was about Tony initially. He didn't seem to make sense. On the one hand we experience him as this cocky, hot, humorous part of us: very extrovert and craving connection with others. On the other hand we know that he holds the [Deep Yearning of the Soul \(™\)](#). When he does feel his feelings they are often feelings of unquenchable thirst, desperate need, and longing. So how can this seemingly confident part also be the part who feels that he isn't okay and will be abandoned by others?

But with this sense of defences it all makes sense. If Tony is driven by not wanting to feel the traumatic level of neediness and loneliness that he holds then it makes all kinds of sense that he would fling himself into connections by coming over as charming, sexy, funny and so on.

Ara: Mm yes. As he and I [recently discussed](#), tragically that often fetches him up with just the kind of rejection and loss of belonging that he deeply fears. But it does make all kinds of sense as a defence, just like Max dissociating from recognising just how trapped she's been in work and relationships. What about Morgan?

James: Again initially confusing. The part of us who holds anger, even hatred, towards others has manifested our whole life as the inner critic, turning that anger and hatred inwards. But if you look at it from the defence perspective that, like Tony, Morgan was disowned all our life, then it makes sense.

Ara: So growing up we learnt that we must never be needy and desperate as Tony can be, or rageful and resentful at others, as Morgan can be. So both of them defended by becoming the opposite - when they were allowed out at all.

James: Tony faked confidence and made light of his pain, Morgan turned anger in against us rather than ever allowing herself to feel it towards others.

Ara: And our [chalkboard boy](#) Jonathan did something similar.

James: I think so. Deep down he holds that incredibly vulnerable fear and shame, and it wasn't acceptable to admit to those things. So he became the people pleaser who pretended to be fine - in order to keep others happy - and who hypervigilantly figured out what others wanted from him and tried to give it to them.

Ara: Expanding out from our particular experience, do you think there's something for other people in all this?

James: I suspect so. It probably manifests very differently for different people, but it would be worth everyone exploring what their 'faux secure' part looks like, and whether they also have all three 'insecure' parts in them somewhere. How do those three influence the whole system? How do they impact how they relate with other people? How repressed or available are they? What are their defensive behaviours and what are those covering up?

Ara: You've done a great job at overviewing the theory, and how it applies to us, here James. I'm wondering if we might dig into practice a little more now?

James: I'd love to. What did you have in mind?

Ara: I'd like to reflect more on how we're working with this internally and externally. How are we building that 'earned secure attachment' with each of the 'insecure' parts, and how are we bringing awareness of the three different 'insecure' styles into our current relationships?

We've had this radical sense lately that strong relationships are not ones in which we're just securely attached, but rather the ones in which we can honestly and kindly recognise all the different attachments in play.

James: Yes!

Ara: A little stretch first?

James: Also yes.

...

Working with insecure parts internally

Ara: We covered some of this territory in our last post James, about how we're working to help each part to expand their window of tolerance and feel their feelings safely enough, which is also how we're building our earned secure attachment with each of them.

James: You're doing the big space 'drop the storyline and feel the feeling' work with them, and I'm trying to hold them close, love them and hear them when they're struggling. We're also checking in with the 'insecure three' at least twice a day to see where they're at with everything. Because they're so used to hiding themselves and their feeling, it's important to keep encouraging them to deliberately tune in and share where they're at.

Ara: So what else do we need to say here?

James: I guess the new piece is recognising those defences that each of those three holds. Perhaps it feels obvious to go to Tony when we feel yearning, Morgan when we feel anger, and Jonathan when we feel fear, to help them really feel it and be held and heard in it. But there's now this extra piece of recognising that we need to go to them at least as much if Tony is pinning that yearning onto

somebody else or falling into over-excited connection or fantasy, if Morgan is going into inner critic anger-inward type noise, or if Jonathan is [chalkboarding](#).

Ara: Those experiences often feel more dissociated - now that we understand what that means. It often doesn't feel so apparent that there is a feeling present. There may not be clarity around which part of us is doing their thing, or what has triggered them. There's just a general sense of unease, confusion, or of being a bit scattered or vague.

James: *That's right. I think we got it first with Jonathan because we clearly identified him with hypervigilance and chalkboarding. Last year whenever we found our brain going over and over things in that familiar way, I would go to Jonathan and encourage him to go closer to the 'traumado' of [fear/shame](#) feelings instead of desperately trying to solve impossible equations. It had to be very slow and gradual, but eventually we could sit together in the eye of the storm and let it swirl around us, finding a way to settle him there instead of trying to figure everything out which usually made it worse and worse.*

Ara: And lately we've taken any - even fleeting - 'noisy' anger in/out thoughts as an opportunity to go to Morgan and encourage her to sit with her feelings of anger. Tony can be very dissociated, but again we've been noticing the kind of thing that's likely to make him feel rejected or lonely when it happens, and encouraging him to drop down into the yearning feeling, with one of us holding him through it.

James: *From a [trauma-informed perspective](#) it has to be gradual doesn't it? Feeling the feelings in the times when it feels possible to do so, gradually expanding the window of tolerance so more and more of it is possible to feel. Slowly these parts can drop the defences more and more, creating a 'secure base' of more gentle time with us every day to return to. And very gradually they can share those feelings with trusted others too.*

Ara: More on that in a moment. Anything else to say on the inner work?

James: *One thing is how each part's go-to fantasies helped us to understand their resistance, as well as the feelings they covered up. There's a lot more to write about how we use our erotic imagination for such exploration. We sketched out some of it in [this zine](#) with Justin.*

Lately we noticed that Jonathan, Tony, and Morgan kept going towards a fantasy where they were welcomed into a home with me. But the way that fantasy played out was very different for each of them. With Jonathan it was about being in a terrifying situation, rescued by me, and taken

somewhere safe where he had a lot of time to recover before having to do anything else. With Tony it was about coming to live with me but being convinced that he would mess up and be sent away. He kept acting out until he could admit those feelings and believe my reassurance. With Morgan she came to me very reluctantly. She kept wanting to fight me and walk away, struggling to trust me to really be up for being with her rage.

Ara: So fascinating how those fantasies - and many of the dreams we've had too - echo the processes we're going through in our outer life. Anything else?

James: I guess that the process feels reciprocal. The more the 'insecure' parts learn to trust us, the more of the previously disowned 'unacceptable' feelings they can bring. And the more they bring those feelings, the more trust is built. Welcoming them in those feelings seems to help all of them to become more real, more fully fleshed out. That is partly why Morgan wanted a 'real name' rather than being called 'Beastie' which felt like a caricature.

But on the way towards that more 'secure' attachment with us they often balk at it. They try to resist those feelings, like they can't really believe it's really okay to say that they hate somebody - or us (Morgan), or to beg not to be left (Tony).

Ara: Mm which is perhaps why they have to practise in fantasy before they're able to do that in reality. We've described it as encouraging them to bring the whole palette of feelings, not just the not palatable elements of themselves.

James: We like a bit of word play don't we?

We also find it useful to notice which old experiences keep returning to our mind, and which current ones. With old experiences we can ask where each part of us is at with those. Often it seems that one of them needs to return to that memory and to complete it somehow - by really feeling it, or by saying how they wish they'd been able to respond, for example, if they'd been more available back then. You and I can hold and hear them through that process, instead of our old pattern of despairing that we kept churning round and round old memories.

With current experiences it's similarly important for all of them - or the one who is particularly struggling - to be heard and heeded. For example recently we deeply listened to Morgan's angry response to how someone treated us and found a response that sat well with her. After that she felt a lot more welcome and 'at home' in us.

Ara: It's not about directly reacting to any 'insecure' impulse they might have, as Max might once have done. Rather it's about engaging in conversation, taking them very seriously, and thinking together how we might respond - giving ourselves a lot of time around it.

James: Right, so instead of Tony leaping into a connection with someone the minute he feels drawn to them, we can notice that feeling and consider how we might move cautiously towards that connection, or whether it's really speaking to a general desire for more contact, or to be looked after internally. Instead of Morgan deciding never to engage with somebody again we can investigate what she's responding to negatively in them, and what might be a safe-enough, bounded way of relating with that person, given what they bring up in her.

Ara: I'm thinking that all these ways of being with them are about demonstrating how loved and respected they are.

James: Which is very easy to do. It's when parts or feelings are hidden that they feel murky or threatening or hard to love. Brought to the surface and into the light they become far easier to love and understand.

Ara: Which brings us onto the final part because I suspect the same is true in relationships with others. When parts of us - and their feelings - are hidden and murky, others may well respond to us with aversion, or by trying to grasp onto the more appealing defensive versions of us. When it's all available - and clear - to ourselves and others, we stand a better chance of having mutually nourishing, open, relationships.

James: Right. But so hard for the parts of us who have survived for years by employing those defences to believe that.

Bringing all our parts into relationships

Ara: So let's explore this. How is it useful to bring the 'insecure' parts into relationship with others? I can imagine people thinking that doesn't make much sense. Surely the last thing we want to do is to relate with others in an insecure way?

James: Mm well part of it is that [Pete Walker](#) bit we find so useful: reparenting ourselves and reparenting by committee. We can't do all this work alone because humans are relational,

interconnected and interdependent. There's only so far we can get as an individual (albeit an individual who is also seven people!)

Ara: There's only so far our inner relationships can take us.

James: Right. I'm thinking that therapy is like an in-between between the inner work and the work of relating to the people in our life. We can gradually bring our 'insecure' parts into the therapeutic relationship in order to notice how they relate with another person, and to experience a different response to the damaging ones they've received in the past.

Ara: It often feels like that doesn't it? That me, you or Fox is taking Morgan, Jonathan or Tony to therapy to give them an hour of practicing doing this with another person.

James: Right, they practise with us at home, and with our therapist in that room. Doing similar things. Like the therapist will point out their defences and encourage them to drop into their body, communicate how they're feeling, etc. They can practise revealing the things that they assume other people will reject in them - because that's what's happened in the past - and experience somebody just being okay with them.

Ara: Maybe a couple of examples?

James: Well like whenever Morgan allows herself to talk about what she'd really like to say to somebody who has treated us badly, our therapist clearly enjoys her energy and her capacity to see through people's bullshit and protect us. And Tony is gradually feeling safe enough that if he shows up in therapy with the energy that he's scared will be 'too much' for people, she'll help him to stay grounded. She'll be up for seeing the vulnerability he's covering over, while encouraging him to go slowly instead of revealing 'too far too fast' as he has in the past.

Ara: And you're thinking that this kind of therapy is a bridge to bringing those parts into more open relation with others?

James: I think that's where discernment comes in perhaps. Who is it safe enough to openly engage with from those parts? Who might we be able to speak about these parts with, without actually bringing them out? What situations might we want to be cautious around, perhaps only bringing you or me to Ara, at least while this is all so new?

Ara: I'm thinking that maps nicely onto what Tony and I wrote about [Dunbar's number](#) too. Discerning where a relationship is at, in our life, and what that means in terms of how open and vulnerable we're able to be in it.

James: Heh our computer just told us it was 'establishing secure connection'. I thought, 'you and me both mate'!

Ara: *laughs*

James: What were we saying? Oh yeah. So we're finding it hugely useful to recognise that Morgan, Tony, and Jonathan are already engaged in all our relationships - of course. And now we continually check in where they're at with them. There's a sense that, instead of denying that we feel any anger, yearning, or fear towards the people in our life, perhaps it's more useful to assume that we will feel all of those things - to some extent - in all our relationships, and to name that - to ourselves, and even with that person.

Ara: Absolutely. There's this paradoxical sense that the more we can allow all of that, the better we'll be able to love that person.

James: The more we know how we hate them, fear them, and want something from them, the better the relationship will be! It is surprising indeed, but it's true. We've navigated recent potentially tricky moments in relationships much better, I think, being able to name to ourselves what those attachments - or potential attachments - are with that person.

Ara: Again an example?

James: Well with one friend we noticed how Tony wanted to fling himself into closer relationship with them, while Morgan had flickers of anger that perhaps they weren't being mindful enough of how vulnerable we are. With another we noticed Tony wishing for more time with them, and Morgan wanting to dismiss them for not making more time for us.

Those two things happened with friends who we talk about this stuff with all the time so we could name it, and they could reciprocate naming the multiple different parts of them in play. It makes it much easier to be able to say 'this part of me feels...' because there's no blame in it. Not 'you're treating us badly' but 'I notice that part of me longs for more time with you and another part of me

wants to distance from you because we're not getting it. Can we talk about how we might do time together in future so those parts can have a bit more clarity about where we're at?'

Ara: Mm that's a good example because it turned out that it wasn't that we really wanted lots more from them, or to reject them, we just wanted to understand where they were at more clearly, and what we could expect from them.

James: Discernment is important in knowing who will be up for those kinds of conversations and who won't. Sometimes it's more of an implicit sense - once we've named it all to ourselves - that we need to pull back a bit from this person, or to have a different kind of conversation, perhaps just from one of us Ara.

Ara: Yes, in the deepest relationships we might encourage Tony, Jonathan or Morgan to have the conversation directly, in order to experience that part of us being met well. In less close ones we could report on where our parts are at. In even less close relationships - like a professional exchange - we would talk from one of us as if we were a unified 'I', once we'd come up with our boundary, or request, or whatever it was. It feels important to have at least some relationships where all parts of us are welcome, just as we welcome them within ourselves.

James: I think we're nearly there with this piece Ara.

Ara: One more breath to feel whether there's anything more to add?

*James: *breathes* Okay yes I want to say that it's important to give these processes a lot of time. That's why slow, spacious relationships are so essential for us at the moment. Often we need time to notice that an exchange with somebody has brought some of those 'insecure' feelings up in us, to find the part - or multiple parts - in us who are triggered, to fully drop into what they are feeling, and then to consider together what kind of response, if any, is necessary. We tend to keep ongoing notes on our phone about each of the current situations in play, and keep returning to them over days, or even weeks, until we have a clear sense of the appropriate response.*

Ara: Mm right, and not jumping too quickly to that last stage is so important. As we've said, it might be that the feeling just needs to be held and heard inwardly, or that some kind of communication or clarification is important, or that we need the relationship to shift in some way. We often can't tell which it is till we've had time to go through the whole process. And the more we do this - giving it time, and asking that other people give us time - the more those parts of us relax into the process instead of freaking out and trying to solve it immediately.

James: Criticism and conflict are a particular challenge of course. Morgan, Jonathan, and Tony would reactively go into a blame, shame, or tame response - respectively.

Ara: I like that. Blame the other, collapse in shame, or tame the situation by glossing over it or making it okay for the other person without attending to our needs. But taking time, as a team, helps us find more of an 'I'm okay, you're okay' response, where we value ourselves and the others involved equally.

James: This whole thing also helps us to see much more clearly when we're on the receiving end of other peoples' reactivity: when they are foregrounding their equivalent of Morgan, Tony, or Jonathan - or their Max cover up. We're not there yet of course, but there's a strong sense of [building compassion for others](#) - even when they do react against us - because we're so familiar with those parts of ourselves, and we know the incredibly tough feelings - and the painful experiences - that they come from. On the way to that compassion, though, we need to fully feel our attractions and aversions to those things in other people.

Ara: The sense I'm left with is that 'earned secure attachment' requires us to hold - and even share - all of our 'insecure attachments'. Without that it would just be 'faux secure attachment' again.

James: Which meshes nicely with [Bonnie Badenoch's](#) 'radical inclusivity', [Janina Fisher's](#) 'no part gets left behind' and [Richard Schwartz's](#) 'no bad parts'. The answer is never to try to eradicate any part, or the less palatable elements of any part. The answer is to welcome them all fully, reach an inner secure attachment with them, and bring them all to all of our experiences in a safe-enough, secure-enough way.

Ara: Nicely put James.

James: Thank-you. And thank-you for doing this Ara. I've loved it, and your reminders to pause have definitely helped me both to enjoy the process throughout, and to not stray into the unwieldy lengths of some of our blog posts.

Ara: Mm there's definitely more to be said about applying this same approach to our relationship with work James, but not for now. Let's keep it a succinct little piece (for us!) at under 7000 words. Time for a walk *smiles*

Relationship conflict and the community of selves

This is an old article from back in 2013 which I wrote before I had much sense of my own plural system. It's interesting to look back and see who I had some awareness of - even back then before they were named and known.

I came across a great example this morning in a paper by my friend and colleague Trevor Butt which I thought could be very usefully applied to relationship conflict.

Trevor was writing about the personal construct psychologist Miller Mair who came up with the idea that, rather than the usual sense that we have that we are one coherent self, we are actually all more like a 'community of selves' who have conversations with one another. This is an idea that I explore in the chapter on ourselves in *Rewriting The Rules*, suggesting that it is important to recognise that we are actually plural rather than singular: that different sides of ourselves come out in different situations and relationships.

We can easily see that this is the case when we think about who we are with two different important people in our lives. We may well feel that we are 'being ourselves' with our best mate and our sibling, but find that the selves we are being are quite different (e.g. outgoing, fun-loving and silly with our best mate; quieter, more serious and responsible with our sibling). Similarly we are 'ourselves' first thing in the morning, during a work meeting, out with a friend, and going through a crisis, but the selves that we are often feel pretty different.

The example that I found so helpful in this article by Trevor is as follows:

[Mair] takes the example of when he was asked to join an interview panel looking for a senior clinical psychologist. He found that he had a wide range of reactions to the candidates when he read their applications. He makes sense of this by separating the different selves he found himself assuming. He named these:

- *Anxious; feeling uneasy at the task in hand*
- *The Teenage Rebel; wanting to kick out the clear favourite*
- *The Reformer; taking a long view about the role of clinical psychology*
- *Mr Fair Minded; wanting to hear all sides of the arguments*

- *Mr Let's Get This Done With*; saying that establishment candidates always win – be pragmatic and get the job over with.

The point of the metaphor is that it helped him to both inhabit and detach himself from each player in the community. He installed Mr Fair Minded as chair of the group, insisting on balancing the other voices. So through reflection, he was able to take a superordinate position from which he could, as it were, own but not be driven by any particular position.

How might this be useful when we're in relationship conflict, or facing difficult dilemmas or decisions in our relationships?

I think that it does two things:

First, realising that we are a community of selves with different needs, feelings, and perspectives on the situation, helps us to explain the horribly tangled and uncertain emotions that we often feel at such times. This, in itself, can offer a big sense of *relief*.

Second, if we can consider the different selves who are in play – in the way that Mair did in his example – then we might gain a sense of increased *agency and control* over the situation as we realise that we can decide who to put in charge of the group, committing to listening to all of the different voices without trying to silence any of them or rushing to determine one which is the 'truth' at the expense of the others.

For example, reflecting on how I can be in situations of relationship conflict or tension I might identify the following selves:

- Baby: scared and confused by conflict and wants to run to wherever feels safest
- Defeatist: has been here before and figures any conflict means the writing is on the wall and we should just break up
- Hopeless romantic: believes love conquers all and perfect relationships are possible
- Mindful me: knows that the thing to do in scary situations is to lean into the fear rather than trying to escape it, to embrace uncertainty, to practice compassion (towards self and others), and to find what can usefully be learnt from the situation
- Duty bound: feels obligated to relationships and committed to not changing anything
- Easy life: wants to do whatever is simplest to get me back to an easy life where I can get on with what I want to do without this struggle
- Angry blamer: wants to make it somebody else's fault entirely so I don't have to take any responsibility

- Relationship realist: knows that all relationships are tough at times, that this is normal, that conflict is in the dynamic (rather than one person's fault), and that the way forward is open communication rather than withdrawing or blaming

Relief

Simply writing these out in this way engenders a sense of relief. No wonder I feel warring emotions and massive uncertainty about what is best to do when many selves are in play with different needs, desires, fears and hopes. Also, I can see more clearly where some of the feelings are coming from and treat myself a little more kindly, recognising that all these positions are understandable given that I am (a) a human being, and (b) somebody who has had the life I've had which has developed these particular selves.

Ways forward

Also, this kind of reflection offers me a way forward which feels clearer and calmer than what I was doing before (getting lost in the tangle or rushing to isolate one 'true' self to listen to and follow).

I can look through the selves and pick an appropriate one or two to 'chair' further discussion (I'm thinking that mindful me and relationship realist are the best bet!). I (or perhaps more accurately 'we!') can go forward with a determination to listen to all positions with the commitment to hear them and to understand where they are coming from. Listening instead of attempting to silence the more scary selves means that I am less likely to miss anything vital, or to find that one self gets louder and louder in an attempt to be heard. Also, recognition of the full community of selves means that I won't become overly invested in one or more selves over the others. And putting selves that I trust most in the chair means being able to have faith that I will act in the most constructive and compassionate ways when I do act.

Further Resources

You can find my [plural selves zine](#), further writings to come on this topic, and my two slow relating articles (dialogues between Tony and Ara) on [rewriting-the-rules.com](#).

Here is a list of some of the key books and websites about plurality that you might find useful:

- Arntz, A., & Jacob, G. (2017). *Schema therapy in practice: An introductory guide to the schema mode approach*. John Wiley & Sons. schemainstitute.co.uk/understanding-schema-therapy
- Fisher, J. (2017). *Healing the fragmented selves of trauma survivors: Overcoming internal self-alienation*. Taylor & Francis. Janinafisher.com
- Healthy Multiplicity (2022). *Resource Index*. healthymultiplicity.com
- Holmes, T., Holmes, L., & Eckstein, S. (2007). *Parts work: An illustrated guide to your inner life*. Kalamazoo: Winged Heart Press. wingedheart.org
- Manchester Metropolitan University (nd). *Understanding Multiplicity*. mmu.ac.uk/mmud8/media/10605/download
- Peyton, S. (2017). *Your Resonant Self: Guided Meditations and Exercises to Engage Your Brain's Capacity for Healing*. WW Norton & Company. Sarahpeyton.com
- Plural Positivity (2019). *Plural Positivity World Conference*. systemspeak.org/ppwc
- The Redwoods (2019). *The Redwoods Circle*. redwoodscircle.com
- Rowan, J. (2013). *Subpersonalities: The People Inside Us*. London: Routledge.
- Rowan, J., & Cooper, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*. London: Sage.
- Schwartz, R. C., & Sweezy, M. (2019). *Internal family systems therapy*. Guilford Publications. lfs-institute.com
- Schwartz, R. C. (2021). *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model*. Louisville, CO. Sounds True Inc.
- Stone, H., & Stone, S. (2011). *Embracing Ourselves*. Novato, CA: New World Library. voicedialogueinternational.com
- Stone, H. (2011). *Embracing Your Inner Critic*. London: Harper Collins.

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