

Plurality 1

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.

I had enough material on plurality for two books. This one - Plurality 1 - contains most of the introductions to the idea of plurality and to key theories and practices. The second one - Plurality 2 - contains more conversations and pieces about specific aspects of plurality.

If you enjoy these books, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

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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 - and Plurality 2 - 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, bounded 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 boundedness, 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 ourselves 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 ourselves 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 retraumatising 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

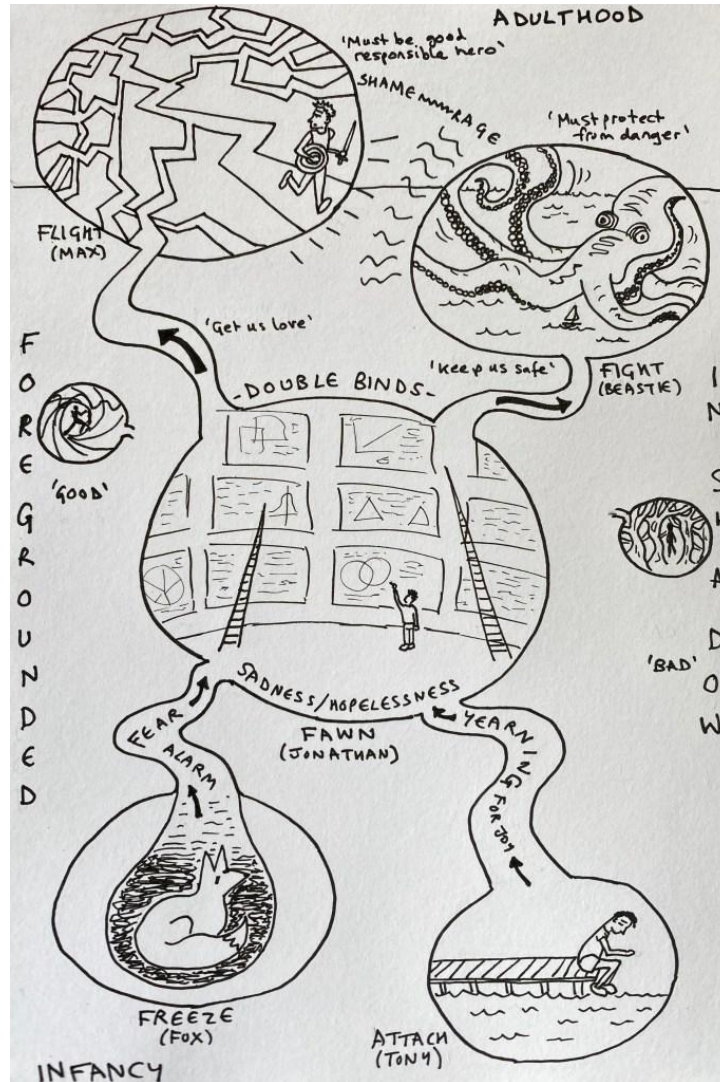
James: So a big 'aha' moment for us reading this book, as we've said, was realising that our parts mapped onto the major trauma survival strategies: flight, freeze, fight, fawn, and – the new one on us – attach.

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 retraumatised, 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 sceptical 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 cites 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.

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
- Feldman, M. (nd). *Resources relating to plurality*. margeauxfeldman.com
- Fisher, J. (2021). *Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma*. PESI Publishing & Media. 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
- Plural Association (2022). The Plural Association. thepluralassociation.org
- The Redwoods (2019). *The Redwoods Circle*. redwoodcircle.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.
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- 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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