

Plurality 2

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. The other one - Plurality 1 - contains most of the introductions to the idea of plurality and to key theories and practices. This one - Plurality 2 - contains more conversations and pieces about specific aspects of plurality.

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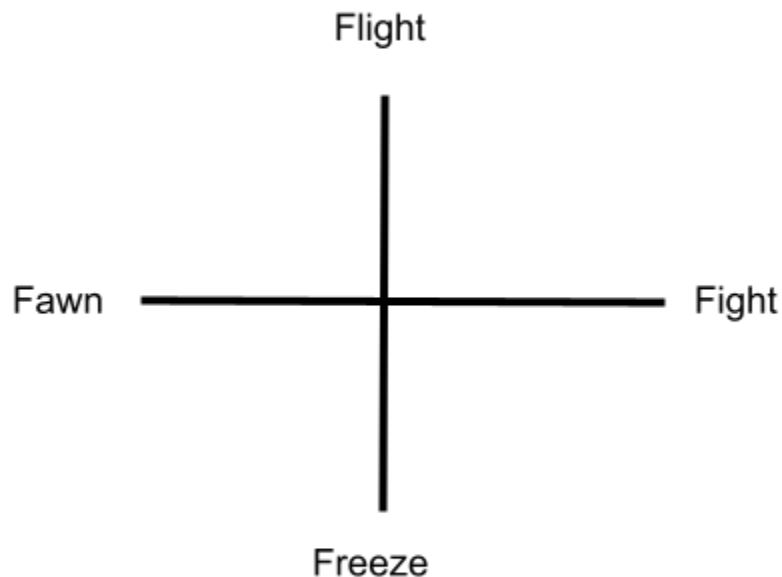
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Balancing fight, flight, freeze and fawn: A plural perspective 1

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



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

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

I've written [here](#) about how a move from flight and fawn, towards freeze and fight, can represent a shift from being with the fear of making yourself into something for others, to the

shame of being for yourself. I'm also struck how, for me, freeze to flight represents that kind of shift around work, and fawn to fight around personal relationships.

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

Freeze and Flight (Max and Fox)

Max: Looks like we're up first.

Fox: My first time writing on here as me!

Max: How're you feeling?

Fox: Excited! How about you?

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

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

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

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

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

Fox: Mmhm. And as bigger life strategies, that could map onto what Brené Brown talks about as [overfunctioning and underfunctioning](#). Overfunctioners throw themselves into work, have to be the best and succeed, don't feel okay unless they're producing something. Underfunctioners struggle with any of that stuff. They're often scared of putting themselves

out there in any way, and feel safer watching TV, reading books, playing computer games, that kind of thing. What's it like being a flight type Max?

Flight potentials and pitfalls

Max: Right now I'm mostly in touch with how much it has hurt me over time. Looking back in my journals, the start of every summer of my adult life I made a list of all the things I felt I should achieve and produce over the vacation time. It's exhausting just looking at them. My life was governed by alarms, to-do lists, and deadlines. I'm terrible at holidays: they stress me out. And life easily becomes a series of false hills. When you reach the top of one there's always another stretching up above you. Ugh even when I actually go for a relaxing walk I have to get to the top of the hill!

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

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

*Fox: As we go through a massive **trauma** time.*

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

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

Freeze potentials and pitfalls

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

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

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

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

Max: Thank-you littlest.

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

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

Balancing flight and freeze

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paradox and balance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Max: Of course.

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

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

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

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

Fawn and Fight (Jonathan and Beastie)

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

Jonathan: Yes. Nervous like Max, but yes.

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

Fawn

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

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

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

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

Casting out fight

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

Beastie: Like if people get rid of their capacity for anger, blame and criticism, that can easily become turned against themselves. And that's what I was: the terrifying inner critic roaring at you from the depths. Like Fox I occasionally came forward and let that anger out at another person – often in extreme conflict – but mostly I was out there turning it in on us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fawn potentials and pitfalls

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

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

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

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

Fight potentials and pitfalls

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

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

Beastie: I feel like my potential is that I can be a force for clarity, knowing what we need, asserting boundaries. But unchecked I can just be angry, blaming, critical and judgemental. That's where the fawn/fight dream team comes in right?

Jonathan: I think it's still a work in progress. I feel like Fox and Max may be a bit ahead of us.

Balancing fawn and fight

Beastie: Perhaps a scared little boy and a terrifying sea monster is an even less likely partnership, but I loved it as soon as we saw the importance of our relationship.

Jonathan: How do you see it working?

Beastie: Well at the moment it feels like what happens is that life throws us a situation where you would previously have gone into fawn. You still retreat into the chalkboard room at those points and we feel all the fear and shame feelings come up. You want to do whatever it takes to make the other person approve of you so that you can avoid shame, but you're also very frightened of ending up in another situation where someone is treating you non-consensually, or you're treating yourself that way.

Jonathan: It's so scary when that happens. I feel like I have to think about it all the time to figure it out: fear or shame, fear or shame, fear or shame. It gets so noisy in my head.

Beastie: So my role at the moment is to help you see you've gone into that, and to help you see that there are usually other options than 'override yourself and feel fear' or 'upset someone else and feel shame'. Often the other option we find is to explain honestly and vulnerably where we're at, and clearly state what our boundaries are. We sometimes think of it as expressing our 'can't' and our 'won't'.

Jonathan: So what often happens is that I spend several days in fear and shame, trying to figure it out, and then you step forward and write an email or have a conversation like that.

Beastie: Because the fight part is good at honesty, boundaries, and seeing the whole picture clearly. But what I lack – on my own – is kindness and feeling for the other person. What I hope is that we can do over time is to bring my clarity and boundaries together with your kindness and tenderness: Protection and connection.

Jonathan: Tough and tender.

Beastie: Right? Sounds like an excellent crime-fighting duo!

Paradox and balance

Jonathan: And like Max and Fox it's not just that you bring tough and I bring tender, more that I can help you bring tenderness to your toughness, and vice versa.

Beastie: So I always try to get you to vet what I'm thinking of saying, to make sure it's kind enough. And I try to remember that if I go into proper rage I'm probably missing where the other person is coming from.

Jonathan: They'll be acting out of their survival strategies just as much as we are.

Beastie: And now we have an inner experience of all four of these strategies – the four Fs – that could mean: far greater capacity to notice when other people have gone into theirs, far greater empathy for the harm that causes them, and far better ability to be clear what we can and can't offer, depending on how much people are up for looking at this stuff themselves.

Jonathan: That's the team we could be, I hope: having the compassion and tenderness to understand why other people are acting the way they are and feel for them, and the clarity and toughness to let them know what we will, and won't, accept.

Beastie: Or maybe the clarity and toughness to understand why other people are acting the way they are and feel for them, and the compassion and tenderness to let them know what we will, and won't, accept. I'm just thinking that it takes both of us for both parts really. It's like what we once wrote that **kindness without honesty isn't really kindness, and honesty without kindness isn't really honesty**. You always need both the kind tenderness and the honest toughness I think.

Jonathan: Like when I'm people pleasing I'm not really being kind however much they might like it. It hurts people long term. And when you're angry-critical you're not really being honest because you're missing so much of what's actually going on.

Beastie: Looks like we're stuck with each other. Neither of us works without the other one.

Jonathan: Which means I'm safe from the chalkboard room and you're safe from the ocean. We need us both for either of us to be what we really want to be: kind for me, and honest for you.

Beastie: I'll come get you out of the chalkboard room and you come get me out of the ocean, if we slip back. Deal?

Jonathan: Deal.

Taking ourselves seriously

Max: You and me this time then kid.

Jonathan: How does it feel Max?

Max: Vulnerable as fuck. I'm managing it by reminding myself we don't have to publish this. But it also feels important. I guess it's what I'm struggling with at the moment, and it feels like something that you have a handle on. It's a chance for me to come to you for support which is a different dynamic for us. Also it works on a meta level. Writing about taking ourselves seriously is a way of taking ourselves seriously.

What does taking ourselves seriously mean?

Jonathan: Should I start with what we mean by that: taking ourselves seriously?

Max: Go ahead. It seems like your phrase.

Jonathan: I notice that it feels easier to start with what it isn't, maybe because it's so discouraged in our culture so we're more familiar with not taking ourselves seriously. But I'd rather come up with a positive definition of what it is.

I'm thinking first of bell hooks's definition of love in All About Love. It's about valuing ourselves and others equally: knowing that we're no more important than anybody else, but no less important either. That's maybe a bit abstract. On an everyday level it's about tuning into ourselves, feeling our feelings, welcoming them, listening to them.

That's when the idea of taking ourselves seriously comes to me the most: when we're having a difficult feeling that doesn't immediately make sense. What we need to do when that happens is to assume that it does make sense, that it is sensible, that we are sensible. That's true even – perhaps especially – when we don't understand what's going on. That's perhaps the hardest – and most important – time to take ourselves seriously.

Max: Can you give some examples: of taking ourselves seriously and assuming it's sensible?

Jonathan: I suppose what we've been trying to do lately. It's taking ourselves seriously to put The Work before the work. We make sure we start each day by tuning into where we're at,

and giving some time journaling about whatever is on our mind. If there's anything big we try to give that some time and care before going on to anything else. Or we note it to come back to as soon as we can if that isn't possible.

Assuming it's sensible is when we've tuned into feelings that keep coming up, like fearful feelings around certain kinds of exchanges with other people. In the past we would've got annoyed with those seemingly inexplicable feelings and berated ourselves for having them. Or we would've rushed to act on them immediately. Instead we now try to keep noticing them, and noting down the kinds of experiences that trigger them. Gradually – over time – we understand them better and become more able to talk openly about what's going on for us, and ask for what we need from the people concerned.

Another example would be noticing we're blocked around doing a certain task or piece of writing. In the past we would've tried to push on and do it, or come up with a quick explanation for what was going on: usually one that involved being hard on ourselves. If we assume it's sensible we can keep being curious about why we might not be going there at the moment, without letting it overwhelm everything, or giving up on it entirely. Often, over time, we realise several reasons why this block might be there. We learn a lot from the process of sitting with it, and often – once we've learnt all we needed to – it comes easily and goes better than it would've done if we'd tried to push through.

Max: *exhales*

Jonathan: That's challenging for you huh Max-y? You've always been the part of us that does: that figures things out and gets on with it.

Max: Yup. I hate not understanding things, and I hate not being able to get on with what I think I should be doing. It's so hard for me to take myself seriously in the way you're describing.

Jonathan: Why do you find it so hard do you think?

Why it's hard to take ourselves seriously

Max: So many reasons. First, it runs counter to the way I've always done things: pushing through; getting on with things; avoiding, repressing or battling any difficult feelings that stand in our way. Taking ourselves seriously involves changing the habit of a lifetime: a habit that I developed because it was the only way to survive. So it's a lot to give up on. More than that, it's incredibly hard to acknowledge that that habit actually did us – and others – damage. There's a hell of a lot of grief to feel if I acknowledge that there's this other way of being which is better for everyone.

Second, it's a leap of faith into massive uncertainty because I'm not sure what this other life – the taking ourselves seriously life – even looks like.

Third, the world is on fire right now. There's a massive sense of urgency to be part of doing something about it. Turning inwards and taking ourselves seriously and learning what that looks like feels like a huge privilege: a luxury that we can't afford, that simply isn't okay.

Jonathan: We can take those one at a time. They're all big ones. And ones a lot of people struggle with I think. Does that feel okay for you?

Max: I'd really like to hear your thoughts baby boy. I'm definitely struggling with this.

Jonathan: I'd like to help. And it's also okay to struggle with it Max. That in itself is something to take seriously, not to try to push through.

Max: **Go slow**. It's all anyone seems to be telling me at the moment. But the world is on fire.

But the world is on fire

Jonathan: It is. And I think that's all the more reason to take yourself seriously. There are many reasons for that. First, we need to feel the feelings about everything being so hard. That's why people are developing grief circles to feel the impact of climate crisis, support groups for survivors following #metoo, transformative justice processes to find ways to hear each other's experiences when relations break down. Our wider culture is terrible at this stuff: the systems within it retain the status quo, treat people non-consensually, and harm the most marginalised. So we have to find ways of doing it differently: of taking ourselves, and others, and our feelings seriously.

Max: And if we don't feel the feelings?

*Jonathan: We break down, or burn out, or close off. **Shutting off our feelings** is no way to handle it. You know that Max-y.*

Max: The alternative seems to be to feel SO fragile though: a fragility that makes it hard to do anything. I've never felt this level of fragility before. It's so scary.

Jonathan: I think learning what that fragility feels like is part of the process. For a start it is a sane reaction to an insane world. Anyone who feels safe and secure right now maybe has a bit of a problem! Fragility connects us with what's really going on, and with what everyone is

feeling: whether they're allowing it or whether they're covering it over and pretending it's all okay. It means we can have a lot more empathy and compassion for others, and see any defensive reactions they have for what they are, rather than getting pulled into escalating those dynamics with them.

*Also when we can tune into our fragility we can make way better choices about what we have capacity for and what we don't. When we have the ability to discern in that way, we can know when we're up for moving out of our **comfort zone into our stretch zone** – giving a little more of ourselves – and when we need to go back into the comfort zone to recover for a while. We can notice if we've tipped into overwhelm – beyond the stretch zone – and pull back and recover. Tuning into ourselves in this way we're far less likely to overstretch or burn out. We can also maybe increase the capacity of the comfort zone and stretch zone over time – because we're not overstretching. Then more things might be possible within those zones.*

Max: I would love a bigger comfort and stretch zone. They feel pretty tiny right now.

Jonathan: I think they remain smaller if we try to push or force them to expand, and get bigger if we take it gently and slowly and invite that expansion.

Max: So you're saying taking ourselves seriously actually makes us better for others and the wider world?

Jonathan: I think so. Practically, it helps us to see what kinds of relationships and support help us to be more open and available, and to pursue those and be boundaried around ones that don't. It helps us tune into what kinds of work feel most skillful and fulfilling to us, and therefore best for us to offer to others. It also helps us to navigate difficult things that come up more carefully and skillfully.

Max: That feels like another paradox to me. Taking myself seriously feels like the last thing I want to do when I fuck up. I want to give of myself to the person or situation concerned until I've atoned sufficiently.

Jonathan: But does that help them? Or anybody else?

Max: Not really. I guess it denies me the opportunity to see what I've done clearly and take appropriate responsibility. Collapsing into shame is just as bad as defending myself by insisting I'm blameless. Either way I don't really see the other person and the impact on them, because I'm all caught up in myself. And I also neglect to take account of all the **other stuff going on**: the dynamics playing out between us, the wider systems operating through us, that kind of thing, which is always a big part of the picture. Also that overwhelming sense of shame

makes me want to give up on everything: so I'm less available to other people, less likely to do anything of benefit to the wider world.

Jonathan: It's hard to see all that. You're doing really well.

Max: It feels hard.

Jonathan: Maybe breathe a bit Max.

Max: Okay. I'm breathing. Can you tell me about that **adrienne maree brown** piece Jonathan. I know that struck you when we listened to her **being interviewed**.

Taking ourselves seriously and fighting injustice

Jonathan: She said that every time she finds herself getting angry about an injustice out there in the world, she begins by turning inwards and reflecting on how it operates within – and through – herself. She doesn't engage outwards until she's done that inner work.

Max: Wow.

*Jonathan: I guess I see all the people we're most inspired by saying something along those lines. **Laverne Cox** talks of having to face our inner oppressor rather than trying to fight oppression 'out there' as if it's not also 'in here'. When we reflect on **Audre Lorde's idea of self-care as a political act** we see that self-care enables us to be honest and kind around the parts of ourselves who are survivors and the parts of ourselves who are perpetrators.*

*Audre Lorde also said **'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'**. If we don't take ourselves seriously then we can easily find ourselves using the tools of oppression to fight oppression: like shaming people, trying to 'save' people because it makes us look good, rushing into situations we don't understand rather than slowing down and listening to the people directly impacted, or seeing ourselves as somehow superior.*

Max: I get that. I think that's a big part of what we're trying to do this year – or however many years it takes. I know, I know, it might be much longer. If we keep relating to ourselves, to other people, and to our work, in the ways we've learnt in this non-consensual, unjust culture we'll inevitably keep perpetuating that culture.

Jonathan: And we're not going to decolonise our mind, cultivate entirely consensual practices, escape the binaries, and dismantle our inner capitalism overnight Max-y. We can't step

outside of culture. This stuff is deeply entrenched in all of us. And the very attempt at total transformation of self into something 'better' is, in itself, a colonialist and capitalist way of treating a person.

Max: So what can we do?

Jonathan: Keep taking ourselves seriously in this process, remember why we're doing it, cultivate systems and structures of support around it, share what we're learning through it with anyone who finds it helpful, acknowledge when we make mistakes and address them, and uplift the other people who we're learning from as much as possible.

Max: Sounds like a pretty clear routemap.

Jonathan: Not easy though. I liked what we heard Pema Chödrön say about compassion recently, on one of her audios. She said that there's a type of compassion which is about being kind towards ourselves and receiving support from others. There's a type of compassion which is about being alongside others as equals: providing mutual support and learning from each other. And there's a type of compassion which is about offering kindness to others who are struggling more than we are at the moment. It's not about one of those being better than the others. We all need all of them. The wisdom is in knowing which we need – or have available – when.

Max: At the moment we're needing more of the first type than ever. Perhaps because we've given ourselves so little of that before. But most days we do also do the other two types. Talking with friends and co-creating with Justin or Alex feels like the second one. And when we can create a safe-enough container we do still offer compassion outwards: like in sessions with mentees, or giving a talk or training, or meeting explicitly to support a friend. Even at the moment we still have that capacity at times.

Jonathan: Do you want to return to those other reasons that you find it so hard to take yourself seriously? We've done 'the world is on fire', but what about it being a leap into uncertainty? Or it changing the habit of a lifetime?

Changing the (non-consensual) habit of a lifetime

Max: Well I guess I'm on board with the need to change the habit of a lifetime. It relates to consent doesn't it? The habit of a lifetime was treating myself non-consensually: overriding myself because I thought I needed to do that in order to be loved, or approved of, or validated that I was okay. The more I do that, the more I'm practising non-consent as a way of being.

Jonathan: Right. I think a huge part of this is that in taking ourselves seriously we're giving ourselves a big message – every day – that we are okay. Not because somebody else says we are, or because we're doing helpful things, or because we can point to any evidence of being a 'successful self'. When we take ourselves seriously we can be sure we're relating to others – and doing our work – from that knowledge of our okayness. So we're less likely to override our own self-consent, or the consent of others, in our attempts to get validation.

Max: Oh this stuff is humbling as fuck isn't it?

Jonathan: It's what you said about why it's hard Max-y. For everyone. Because it involves seeing all the hurt we've caused to ourselves – and others – through that old habit.

Max: It kind of reminds me of a common trans experience. For a lot of trans people when we finally acknowledge our transness and contemplate coming out, or transitioning, in whatever ways feel right for us...

Jonathan: Yes?

Max: We hit up against this huge grief. Because we recognise that we could've done it a long time ago. We could've had this whole life feeling way more congruent and comfortable in our gender. For some people that grief is too much to bear. They don't do anything about it because doing so would involve having to feel all that grief.

Jonathan: Mhmm.

Max: That's how I feel sometimes about changing my ways of working, or relating to others, or relating to myself. Like if I really **allow it fully** then I have to acknowledge the pain I've caused myself and others doing it this other way all this time. I can see why people remain in hiding, in normativity of various kinds, not confronting this stuff. I can see that it is a huge ask when we invite **people in our lives** to do this work in order to be safe-enough for us.

Jonathan: Another reason why this is so important I guess. It means we're more connected with everyone else who is confronting this stuff and finding it incredibly – even impossibly – hard. It also means that we're less likely to use shaming tactics against people who aren't confronting their stuff, because we're aware of how hard it is, and how being shamed around it makes it even more hard to do.

Max: I hope I can remember that.

Jonathan: I think it's a big part of the work we do Max. Trying to find non-shaming ways to explain injustice, non-consent and their impact to people – whether that's at the micro level of interpersonal relationships or the macro level of what's going on in the world – helping people see how we're all implicated in it and suffering from it. And being part of the wider movement to work together to address it: across our differences and our shared experiences.

Max: For one of our inner children you seem to have some damn big words and concepts at your disposal Jonathan.

Jonathan: I've been thinking about this stuff a lot. And inner children can grow and develop once you're more in touch with them it seems. Our understanding is that you – Max – were the part of ourselves we developed in order to survive the tough stuff of our childhood: when it wasn't safe to feel or express our feelings, and when we were being bullied and taught we were unacceptable on a daily basis. I was the little people-pleasing kid you were trying to protect by becoming what we needed to be in order to survive, to fit in, to find love.

Max: We realised recently even my name reflects that: Max = mask: The masks I wore in order to survive.

Jonathan: I guess I hope we might shift those inner dynamics now Max. Max also sounds like 'maxed out'. Maybe the parts of us you were protecting can come forward to care for you, and you can step back a bit: to rest, to grieve, to heal.

Max: I am not great at stepping back.

Jonathan: Believe me we know that!

Max: Ha!

Time to take ourselves seriously

Jonathan: It takes time too Max, to enable new habits to bed in as deeply as the old ones were. It takes dropping any grip on what the future might be because how can we know? It takes making a daily practice of noticing you've clenched and tightened up again and gone into old habits, and gently loosening the grip, feeling into the alternatives available, doing something different each time.

Max: It's crazy how hard that is. I sometimes literally believe that if I allow myself that then I will die. I'm convinced I have this or that illness in those moments. Like somehow I would

deserve to die if I really allowed taking myself seriously: freeing myself of all these ideas I have about how I should be.

Jonathan: Our therapist said maybe it's the death of the ego that we feel/fear at those times. Although we are going to die someday of course, and that's another good reason to do this work. When we can turn and face the inevitability of death it becomes more possible to be open about this stuff, instead of trying to craft ourselves into someone who people will approve of, or stay busy to distract ourselves, or tell people what they want to hear.

Max: **Stephen Batchelor** says to meditate on the phrase: 'since death is certain, and the time of death is uncertain, what shall I do?' Today apparently the answer was to have an illuminating and challenging conversation between two of our plural selves in a cafe.

Jonathan: Over hot chocolate with whipped cream and cheese toasties. Feeding the inner child Max-y?

Max: Well I do like to take him seriously.

Plural conversation about fear(others)/shame(self)

This article is a plural conversation about how I'm understanding and working with the trauma response of fear/shame, and how it relates to the existential dilemma of being-for-others versus being-for-yourself.

*Lately I've been writing articles in two different formats: the regular style, and a **plural** style, like this one, where I work things through in conversation between two different sides of myself. This time, as an experiment, I've tried writing on the same theme in both formats. You can read the regular version [here](#). Feel free to pick just the format that works best for you. Or, if you like, you can read them both. I'm fascinated by the different potentials opened up by the different formats, and how they compare for readers, so feel free to give me any feedback about that.*

James: So it's you and me for this one kid.

*Jonathan: I think it's right, because I'm the one who seems to hold the fear/shame the most. We see me as the **vulnerable child** part of ourself: the one who learnt that it wasn't safe to express feelings. When we feel that plunge into fear/shame now it feels like it's me who is panicking: sending out the alarm.*

James: Why is it me you want to talk with about it, d'you think?

Jonathan: In our inner world you are the protector. You keep us safe. When I was little I read the James Bond books and I became kind of obsessed with them. I used to imagine James Bond training me to be more like him.

James: And what's that like?

Jonathan: Fearless and shameless I guess. Bond is so brave. He never lets fear stop him. As a kid I felt like such a coward: always frightened of everything and bursting into tears. Bond always knows the right thing to do. He's never plagued by self-doubt or guilt or all of the things that I feel so much of the time. He just gets on and does what needs to be done. I guess he knows that he's okay, whereas I'm pretty sure that I'm not.

James: That's also why you love that episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer: the character of **Jonathan** who you're named after. In that episode the frightened, bullied, self-doubting kid

puts all of his fear and shame into a monster – separate from him – and that leaves him as this amazing superhero type: brave and confident.

Jonathan: But that episode also shows that it isn't the right approach doesn't it? If we try and eradicate our fear and shame we create a monster. We end up hurting people.

James: Including ourselves. Personally I love that Jonathan character far more when he is the vulnerable, sensitive kid than when he's the superstar. And that goes for our own internal Jonathan too.

*Jonathan: *blush**

James: So that's us introduced then: the protector and the vulnerable child. Shall we talk a bit about what we're learning about fear/shame as a trauma response?

Trauma and fear/shame

Jonathan: Okay so I guess it was super helpful for us when we read Pete Walker's book on [cPTSD](#). He describes emotional flashbacks as a plunge into fear and shame. That really connected for us. It's the combination of fear and shame that we find so horrendous. We hadn't heard them put together like that before. Trauma response as fear/shame.

James: Do you want to say a bit about what it feels like for you? If that feels okay, describing something so hard.

Jonathan: I can. I suppose that's part of what we're learning: that the fear/shame feeling was always something we tried to get away from because it feels so horrific. But actually trying to escape it only makes it worse. We need to turn towards it to understand it, and to learn how to be with it given that we do have it.

James: But gently, slowly, with a huge amount of compassion for how hard that is.

Jonathan: Right. So you talked a bit about the different zones of fear/shame in that [article](#) you wrote recently. We call them flicker, flame, and fire. For me flicker feels like a slight uneasy underlying feeling, like something isn't quite right. It's hard to put your finger on but things are not flowing easily, it can feel a bit jagged, or scattered.

Flame is more obvious. Something is wrong. There is fear: my chest is tight and constricted, there's an adrenaline lump in my throat. My thoughts are noisy and clamouring, often leaping

from one thing to another. And intertwined with all the fear is the sense that I am bad. I've done something wrong or am about to do so. The external world feels dangerous and so does the internal world because I'm not okay.

James: And fire? Again, go easy if you can.

Jonathan: That's the overwhelm feeling, what Pete calls the emotional flashback. With flicker we can carry on with what we're doing and override the feeling. With flame it's harder, but we can manage it. With fire there's no chance.

James: How does it feel?

Jonathan: It's the worst. I feel like, locked back into me I guess, this side of me: the vulnerable little boy. It's total panic. I feel incredibly small and fragile, incapable of anything. I couldn't hide my emotions if I tried. I'm abject. And I also know that it's not okay. I feel like other people would be disgusted with me if they saw me. I feel like I have ruined everything. Like I should give up. It would be safer for everyone that way. It's physically painful too. The tight chest is like a vice. And it feels permanent: like this is all there's ever been and all there'll ever be. I'm desperate to escape and everything I do locks me in more.

James: I'm so sorry Jonathan. It's so cruel that you have to go to that place: that you've spent so much of your life there.

*Jonathan: Thank-you James. It's helped to read that other people have that experience too. And what you wrote about **trauma in the body**. That makes a lot of sense of why it feels so desperate and permanent. Exploring this **plurality** is big because it mostly feels like only part of us is in that place now – not all of us – so we can access another part of us to help talk us through it with kindness.*

Trauma and consent: Fear/shame and others/self

James: Can you tell us what you figured out, about how fear/shame maps onto relationships with others and with ourselves?

*Jonathan: Yes. We're not sure whether this is how it is for everyone who experiences this, but this seems to be how it is for us. I made that **chalkboard comic** a while back. It imagines me as a little kid always desperately trying to figure out complex equations about how to relate to others. I realised that most of those equations are basically the same double bind. It's always*

felt like either I can override myself and please others, or I can stand up for myself and upset others.

I remember this pivotal moment so clearly from schooldays. When I went to middle school I got a clear message from everybody there that everything about me was wrong. And I felt that way at home too. I realised it was a simple choice. Either I could turn myself into what they said I should be and belong. Or I could stay being 'myself' and be outcast, hated.

James: It felt like a choice between yourself and others: a binary either/or.

*Jonathan: Right, and I chose others: I chose belonging. It felt like I constructed this person – almost like those nerdy kids in that eighties movie *Weird Science*. I created this Frankenstein's monster of everything I heard that I should be, and she was the side of us who operated in the world. We call her Max. It was like I was hidden away in the chalkboard room figuring out the equations and sending her information about how she should be to win love and approval, and then she would follow the programs.*

James: That describes it really well. And how does it relate to fear and shame?

Jonathan: The choice of others over self is fear, and the choice of self over others is shame.

James: And that feels like the choice you have to make over and over again?

Jonathan: Exactly. So we repeatedly get faced with that choice: either be who you are and get rejected, or be who they want you to be and get love and approval. We can't choose to be who we are because that shame feeling is horrendous – it's what we're running from. But choosing to be what others want you to be is treating yourself non-consensually, or allowing others to treat you non-consensually. And the more we've done that, the more we feel this fear around it. It used to be that we could manage to ignore that fear, but now it is so intense we just can't.

James: And this particularly played out in relationships and work for us I think. Having felt that you lost love and approval – at home and at school – as a kid because something was wrong with you, you imagined that if you could find somebody to love you, and if you could do well at work, then maybe it would prove you were okay after all.

Jonathan: But it's so impossible James because if you turn yourself into what you think partners would want you to be – or if you work in the ways that play the game – then it's never really you who is getting the love or approval, even if you do manage it.

James: So you never entirely lose the shame: the imposter syndrome sense that you'll be 'found out' at work, or the belief that if a partner saw the 'real you' they would reject you.

Jonathan: And meanwhile the fear feeling can intensify because – on some level – you know you're treating yourself non-consensually: making yourself into something for others, or working way beyond what you have capacity for.

James: So it's damned if you do, damned if you don't: Fear if you're for-others, and shame if you're for-yourself. And this seems to be how our understanding of trauma maps onto our previous – more existential – understanding of relationships. The existentialists like de Beauvoir and Sartre wrote a lot about how people felt they had to choose self-over-others (freedom), or others-over-self (belonging): either objectifying yourself for others, or others for self. We wrote about it in the conflict chapter of [Rewriting the Rules](#), and this [piece](#).

Jonathan: And that's what the chalkboard room – where I've been stuck all my life – feels like: a series of impossible equations. Do I choose incapacitating panic or do I choose horrible shame? Now it seems that every time anything comes up in our life which triggers such a choice I instantly find myself in the flicker, flame, or fire of fear/shame.

What we do now

James: Do you want to go through an example of what we try to do now, when we feel those feelings? We thought it might be helpful for people to read the kind of conversation that we have.

Jonathan: Yes. So what we try to do is to pause whenever we notice those feelings. We also check in a few times a day whether any of these feelings are up, because otherwise we can easily just keep busy or distracting ourself without noticing it. We've started trying to pause between activities and have this kind of conversation before moving onto the next thing.

James: And how do we actually have the conversation?

Jonathan: It used to be like this – written down in our journal – between whichever side of ourself was feeling the feelings – often me – and a side who could support them through it – often you or Ara. Now we start the day with journaling like that, but we can also do it as an out loud conversation. When we do that we sit by the window and talk between us. And – often at night – we do it more as an imaginary conversation. We picture two parts of us in a room in a house we all share, sitting and talking together.

James: Let's do it then kid. We start with noticing. How're you feeling right now?

Jonathan: I feel, um, some nervousness, some feeling like I might not be okay.

James: What does it feel like in your body?

Jonathan: It's not huge: not that super scary vice adrenaline feeling. But my thoughts are a bit scattered. My breathing is definitely shallow: a bit fast. That's familiar.

James: So we're going to pause and give it some room now – this feeling. You're safe here with me. I'm going to be with you through it. And we can take as long as you need.

Jonathan: I remember just before we sat down I felt bad for having this feeling. We'd been excited about returning to this conversation before, but the tough feeling was starting to dull that excitement. It's often hard to be creative when this feeling is here. I was scared it might get worse.

James: That makes all kinds of sense doesn't it? It's tough to be with fear/shame and you've been feeling it so much lately. No wonder you feel relieved when it's not around, and don't want it to come back.

Jonathan: I guess this time it helped to remember that we were going to write this conversation. So in a way it was good to have the feeling here so we could do it for real.

James: Right, and one of the useful things to remember is that each time we feel this way it's an opportunity to understand it better: how it works for us; what helps.

Jonathan: I'm not bad for having this feeling?

James: Not bad at all baby boy. This is just how trauma works **in the body** remember? Something triggers us and the sympathetic nervous system kicks in, so we start to feel speeded up and constricted. And the emotional part of our brain is sounding alarm bells.

Jonathan: Okay.

James: Can you try breathing a little slower?

Jonathan: Mmhm. Oh my shoulders were all tensed up.

James: We can relax those too. Tell me what else you're experiencing right now as well as those fear/shame feelings.

Jonathan: Well... I can feel the breeze, on my bare legs. That feels nice. The sun is making geometric shapes on the floor of the room. The colours of the rug look really bright in the sun. I can hear jackdaws calling, a car going by.

James: You're doing so well. Breathing a little deeper again.

*Jonathan: *breathing**

James: So can we welcome this feeling: the fear/shame? Extend a little warmth towards it?

*Jonathan: *swallows* I feel it mostly on my forehead now, like a furrow. It feels like I want to scan for trouble you know? Like what if something's wrong? What if I've done something wrong?*

James: Mm that makes so much sense doesn't it?

Jonathan: It does?

James: So many hard things have hit this last year, one after another, and now a pandemic. It's so understandable to be worrying what the next thing might be, whether you'll be able to cope.

Jonathan: It's the hypervigilance feeling isn't it? If I can just keep scanning everything then I won't mess up and get something wrong. I'm trying to avoid shame, but it throws me into fear because I think about all the things I might get wrong, and that's overwhelming and scary.

James: Can you be with that furrowed forehead scanning feeling and feel the rest of this moment again? Not trying to change anything, just being with it.

Jonathan: I'll try. Okay. I'm breathing. The air feels cool and soothing, almost like I can feel the sea in the air: the moisture. The sky is this faded denim blue. I can hear seagulls. There's a feeling in my chest now. Sinking. I'm worried I'm getting this wrong. That it won't be a good article: won't make sense to anyone. That I'm ruining it for you.

James: You can't ruin anything here Jonathan, not with me. But can we welcome that feeling?

Jonathan: I've felt it so much of my life. It's so hard to stay with, not to just want it to go away.

James: We don't have to stay with it right now. If it feels too intense we can just focus on soothing you, come back to it when you're calmer.

Jonathan: No I can. I want to.

James: Sure?

Jonathan: Sure.

James: We're not aiming at anything here, just hanging out with this feeling, trying letting it be part of our whole experience.

Jonathan: Okay. There's me and you talking, and there's this room and the sea and sky beyond, and there's a feeling like I might not be okay; wanting to think over everything that happened today in case I did anything wrong. My body twitched when I thought of that.

James: Another trauma response. It's welcome too.

Jonathan: It is... because... I know this feeling has been trying to help me. I know it comes up when I'm in danger of overriding myself. It's only so loud and confusing because I ignore it so much.

James: That's right.

Jonathan: I keep remembering this thing that happened earlier. Is this okay? I don't know if I'm doing this right?

James: It's just fine Jonathan. What did you remember?

Jonathan: How I was hurrying in the kitchen, and I shut my finger in a door, and it hurt but I just carried on doing what I was doing – putting the dishes away. I didn't even stop to feel the pain or to see how badly I had hurt it. I had an immediate thought that I was stupid for not getting my hand out of the way, and then I, like, automatically tightened my chest and sucked my breath in so I wouldn't feel it and kept going. It was only because we've been doing this that I even noticed that it had happened. And then we paused and let me feel the pain in the finger, and feel sorry for myself for having got hurt and for being so mean to myself about it.

James: And that was a fear/shame feeling you had immediately? It can be useful to recognise that right?

Jonathan: Yes. Shame for being careless and getting upset about it. Fear at how I automatically override myself to avoid inconveniencing anyone else. Like even when there's nobody else around to inconvenience that's still my go-to.

James: It's so sad to think of you doing that over and over again through your life: in physical and emotional pain. It's no wonder the fear/shame trauma responses come up so much now.

Jonathan: It is sad isn't it?

James: We're finding another way now aren't we? Gratitude for the tough feelings because they have finally stopped us in our tracks and made us see how we override ourselves. Now they come up whenever we're in danger of doing that and make it impossible to do so. And that is scary, and it's messy and confusing at times, but it has fetched us up here, committed to doing it differently, to learning about this experience deeply, and befriending ourselves through it.

Jonathan: I'm thinking about that move from the either/or of fear/shame to the both/and of protection and connection. You know we're trying to explore in these situations how we might move out of binary fear/shame logic.

James: What are you thinking?

Jonathan: In those situations I feel I have to choose between shame if I acknowledge the pain and express it, or fear if I override myself and keep going. Maybe if I slowed down I could have protection and connection instead. Like the protection of you – or one of the others – speaking kindly to me about the fact I got hurt and said mean things to myself about it. The connection could be – like – letting other people know what happened. Or feeling for other people who this happens to.

James: Like this right now.

Jonathan: I guess so.

James: You're doing so well kid.

Jonathan: Really?

James: Absolutely. You just did it. How brave was that?

Jonathan: You helped me.

James: I'm so glad I got to. But this isn't one-way you know?

Jonathan: No?

James: No way. It's really not a great thing to be incapable of feeling fear and shame Jonathan, however you might imagine that it is. Remember how we've written about the importance of being able to **feel all feelings**. I love how full of feeling you are. I see how it enables you to feel for others, and connect with them. I'd like more of that: to learn from you as we continue to explore this plurality.

Jonathan: You learn from me?!

James: Yep. And I'd also like to remind you that it's not brave to do things when they don't scare you. The real bravery comes when you're frightened and still do them – like you're doing.

Jonathan: Thank-you James.

James: Any time. Really.

Accompanying vs. abandoning ourselves

During these last months of addressing my [stuck patterns](#) and [trauma responses](#), one piece that's become increasingly important has been the idea of accompanying rather than abandoning ourselves.

To discuss this one I brought together two sides of myself who used to wish to abandon – or even eradicate – each other, but who now form a pivotal friendship in my plural system: Max and Beastie. Check out [this zine](#) and [this article](#) if you want to know more about plural selves. Hopefully the content of the conversation is interesting regardless.

Beastie: You and me this time bestie, have we done this before?

Max: *I don't think so. Definitely makes sense to be the two of us given our background huh?*

Beastie: It does. I guess the time that you befriended me was the first time that we determined to accompany a part of ourselves that we had previously tried to abandon. It's formed something of a blueprint for subsequent times. And it helps us have faith that it's always worth doing.

Max: *I still remember it vividly. Around six months before I befriended you was the last time that I tried to eradicate you entirely. That was something I'd been trying to do our whole life: to get rid of the harsh critical voice that was always so loud in my mind. Something tough happened and you were saying such cruel things. I dragged you into the woods determined to be rid of you once and for all. I shouted at you out loud. It was the first time we'd ever talked. I would never talk aloud to myself normally, back then. But I screamed at you to be gone, and you just screamed back even louder.*

Beastie: I gave as good as I got. This is a key point though isn't it. You can't eradicate parts of yourself, no matter how much you might want to. You might as well learn to accompany them, because abandoning them hurts you, and in the end it's never going to work. You'd have loved to have abandoned me in those woods for good, but I followed you home.

Max: *We listened to this song: [Fighting with Myself](#), coming back out of the woods. At least it gave us a smile.*

Beastie: Six months later, you decided to interview me, in your journal.

Max: You were pretty mean to me then too. But we got more curious. We started to journal with you more often, from all the different sides of us.

Beastie: And weirdly it was you and I who ended up forming one of the closest bonds.

Max: I'm so grateful for that. I'd read all those books about how, when embraced, the inner critic could become a fierce ally. But I was skeptical.

Beastie: You so often are.

Max: Yeah, yeah. They were right though. I consider you my best friend now, no question.

Beastie: And I you Max. You are the side of us who has been to the fore our whole life: battling hard to survive and feeling so alone in it. I'm so glad to be able to accompany you now, along with the rest of our motley crew.

Max: And I need a good friend, finally confronting the impact of all those times.

Beastie: Shall we start?

Max: Let's.

What does it mean to accompany yourself rather than abandoning yourself?

Max: Okay so the idea of accompanying yourself means that you commit to staying present with yourself through every mental or physical state that you might be in: every situation you encounter, every feeling you experience, every side of yourself that shows up, no matter what.

It's a radical alternative to what most people usually do. Abandoning is a good word for that because it captures how we tend to reject the suffering part of us when we are hurting, and even kick them while they're down. For example when we feel a physical or emotional pain we might try to ignore it or push through it, and even become angry and frustrated with ourselves about it.

Beastie: This relates to what Ara and I recently discussed, about the gap. In practice our commitment to accompaniment rather than abandonment looks like returning to the gap each time a challenging situation, feeling, or thought comes up. Instead of going to the next item on our to-do list, scrolling through social media, or pressing 'next episode' on Netflix, we sit for a

few minutes to check whether there's anything there. If there is, we sit with that, or journal about it, or talk it through, before we go on to the next thing.

Why is this so necessary?

Max: Do you want to start on this one?

Beastie: Sure. I think a big part of what we're doing when we accompany ourselves is to meet ourselves in a **regulating rather than dysregulating** way. Given the way our culture is around **feelings**, very few people have learnt to regulate their emotions, particularly when very strong emotions arise. Mostly we try to repress feelings by zoning out or distracting ourselves with busy-ness. Or we react out of feelings in ways that are dysregulating for ourselves, and often for others too.

*Max: Mmhm. Staying busy – or **flight** – has definitely been my go-to up until now. It's been such a challenge for me these last months to continually drop that abandonment strategy and commit to staying present with myself and with whatever I was trying to distract from.*

Beastie: We all have our go-to ways of avoiding experience Max. Mine – **fight** – has always been to get very noisy mentally about all the things we're doing wrong, or lately more what other people are doing wrong. Either way it's another way of not really being here now: getting caught up in critical and judgemental thoughts.

*Max: From what we now know about **trauma** and **shame**, both result in people who very easily become dysregulated and reactive. Committing to accompany yourself increases your capacity for regulating yourself, through whatever life brings.*

Beastie: I've also heard it described as increasing the '**window of tolerance**' between zoning out and becoming activated. When we have a narrow window of tolerance, many experiences tend to result in us shutting down or distracting ourselves, or becoming overwhelmed by big feelings. Accompanying ourselves can expand that window to get gradually wider over time. More experiences become possible to tolerate without disappearing or disintegrating – two ways of abandoning ourselves. Pema Chödrön talks of the same thing as '**refraining**' rather than repressing or reacting.

Max: Refraining sounds like not really doing anything, but what we are doing when we refrain is to accompany ourselves.

Micro and macro accompaniment/abandonment

Beastie: It's useful to think about how we abandon ourselves on every level – micro to macro – and how we might accompany ourselves at every level too.

Max: Right. So micro level might be a fleeting moment, and macro level our most challenging situations.

Beastie: What are your macro abandonings Max-y?

Max: Oof you know very well what they are. I often abandon myself when I feel I might be getting sick: finding ways to blame myself for it, and worrying about cancelling things, instead of stopping and looking after myself. Hurting others and getting hurt by others are also big ones for me. When I realise I've hurt someone I can feel I don't deserve to accompany myself, so I abandon myself into shame and self-blame and trying desperately to make it better. When others have hurt me I often go to shame too, assuming it must somehow be my fault, or getting lost in trying desperately to make sense of what happened.

Beastie: I'm hoping to write more about shame given that seems like one of the very hardest experiences to accompany ourselves through. Also I like the idea of a reformed inner critic becoming an expert on shame.

Max: Well you're already helping me out with it, but it remains a tough one indeed for us.

Beastie: As with so many things it can be great to **work your way up** from the micro to the macro level. In working on the micro moments when we tend to abandon ourselves we can practice moving from abandoning into accompanying in those situations. Hopefully eventually it will be our go-to even in our more challenging situations.

Max: Practising regulation, or expanding the window of tolerance.

Beastie: Exactly. In the conversation **James and Jonathan had about trauma** they described how we're picking up on little micro moments where we might've abandoned ourselves in the past, and deliberately accompanying ourselves instead.

Max: Oh yes, like if we stub our toe, or drop something, or cut our finger. In the past we might've thought 'I'm so stupid' and sped up to get on with whatever we were doing. Now we take such moments as an opportunity for accompaniment. We try to slow down rather than speeding up, to respond with kindness rather than harshness, and maybe even to make quite a ritual of looking after ourselves for at least as long as we need. We do a similar thing if we wake in the night from a bad dream.

Noticing abandonment

Beastie: That takes us nicely into how we even notice when we abandon ourselves. I guess many people abandon themselves a lot of the time without even realising they're doing it, or naming it as such. We certainly did.

Max: Or rather I did, when I felt like it was just me rather than this plural system of seven. I would never have named overworking as abandonment. I wouldn't have noticed that I was trying to crack on with something even when my body or feelings really needed my attention.

Beastie: Speeding up is a useful thing to notice. That's often a sign of abandonment. Recently we were on a walk and got lost taking a path that petered out. In the past we would have sped up under those circumstances: trying to find a route from there to where we wanted to be, even if it meant going over barbed wire fences or through marshes, or something that got us even more lost.

Max: What a metaphor! The last time that happened, we deliberately slowed down and remembered that habit, and then went back the way we came.

Beastie: What other things are a sign that we're abandoning ourselves, or at risk of it?

Max: I would say noise is a big one: When our thoughts get noisy planning things, or worrying about whether we've done something wrong or might do, or judging other people.

Beastie: You, Jonathan, and me that is: flight, fawn, and fight. We can all get noisy.

Max: We often think of it as being stuck back in this huge chalkboard room trying to predict, control, and figure out everything. It's noisy as hell in there.

Beastie: So then the freeze strategy of zoning out is another sign of abandoning, as is remaining busy. We might notice that we've been scrolling on our phone for ages, or moving quickly from one task to the next.

Max: Right. So speeding up, thoughts getting noisy, or feeling numb and disconnected from our feelings: Those are all signs that we're abandoning ourselves, at the micro level.

Beastie: And at the macro level it's much more of a plunge into extremely tough feelings: abject shame, or terror that others will invade us, or that we will disintegrate. That's the emotional flashback.

Max: It's the worst. At those times the sense is that we deserve to be abandoned or punished, not to be accompanied or looked after.

Beastie: It's certainly easier to notice at that level. Not so easy to accompany ourselves when it happens though.

Plurality and accompaniment/abandonment

Max: I think plurality has been a vital part of our way into accompaniment rather than abandonment. When I felt like I was a single person I just couldn't feel kindly enough towards myself to do this. I didn't value myself enough to feel I was worthy of accompanying rather than abandoning. And I guess I saw my value in what I did, rather than who I was, so I always tried to push through and do more.

Beastie: Hence all the speed and the noise.

Max: You were a big part of that noise if you remember, monster.

Beastie: If you hadn't kept shutting me out... that's all I'm saying.

Max: I really doubt that is all you're saying.

Beastie: When a person has been cast out and alone for so many years they may have a tendency to verbosity.

*Max: *chuckles**

Beastie: But yes, experiencing ourselves as more than one person has helped hugely in accompanying ourselves. For people who don't have a vivid sense of themselves as plural, it may well still be helpful to cultivate a **kind witnessing voice** who can remind them when they are in danger of abandoning themselves, and accompany them through tough experiences present, or past (like when they go back over memories).

Max: Right. It doesn't have to feel like a separate person, it can just be you talking as if you were supporting a friend in the same situation. The more you practice it the more familiar it can become.

Beastie: Because we have seven selves to draw upon we tend to locate ourselves in a conversation between whoever is struggling most, and whoever has most capacity to support

them in that moment. Quite often we find it helpful to default to our parental parts supporting. That's James and Ara who are generally good at being kind, protective, holding, and calm. But it's nice to mix it up so we all get to see that we're capable of accompanying, and practise doing it.

Max: The book we're reading at the moment by Janina Fisher suggests that what it does – neurobiologically – is to connect up the more rational and emotional parts of the brain. It feels like – even when our nervous system is jangled – we can access a self that's apart from that who can talk the jangled part of us into a more soothed state again.

Beastie: These seven parts of us may just be a really strong metaphor overlaid on that kind of embodied response. But it's a metaphor that works well for us.

Max: My bestie the metaphor! It does feel like leaning back into a kind supportive friend who will talk you through it for as long as it takes.

Beastie: I've got you Max.

Max: I feel it.

Working with internal and external situations this way

Beastie: So something we've hit on recently is that it's possible to work with both internal and external situations in this way: shifting from abandoning to accompanying.

Max: I guess we've already given a few examples of how the internal situations work. Let's just pick a couple more though, to bring it to life. So last night Jonathan was at risk of abandoning himself: giving himself a hard time for having tough feelings, worrying he was bringing us all down.

Beastie: Something we can all do at times.

Max: What accompanying looked like then was that James encouraged Jonathan to sit down with him. He reminded him of everything we're dealing with at the moment and how intense it is, how these feelings make sense. Then he encouraged Jonathan to recall what we're trying to do now. Jonathan remembered how his difficult feelings were actually an opportunity to practise regulating: potentially expanding the window of tolerance. Finally James encouraged him to do one of his top soothing activities.

Beastie: Imagining a house we all live in and where each of us is in the house at that particular moment.

Max: Other times we do the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding technique. Both those seem to calm our nervous system well.

Beastie: What's another recent example?

Max: This morning I got into a loop of whether we're getting anywhere. It had been ages since we'd written anything. I was worrying whether creativity would ever come back; whether we'd ever work on bigger projects again. I wondered whether we're really doing anything here or whether we're just telling a cute story of progress around what is actually us spinning in a wheel like a hamster.

Beastie: Helpful.

Max: I know, I know. Anyway how I went from abandoning to accompanying was I journaled with Ara: as a dialogue like this. Again that involved her helping me to remember why we're doing this, why it is so tough, and what potential there is for helping others going through similar things having gone through it ourselves.

Beastie: But we have also used the accompany-not-abandon idea well when working with external situations, right?

Max: Yes. It reminds me of that thing adrienne maree brown said that really sticks with us. How if you see something out in the world that you find yourself judging, find it in yourself and work with it there first, before you engage with it out there in the world.

Beastie: One recent example is that we were angry – okay I was angry – at somebody's people-pleasing behaviour. By trying to be really even-handed and look after everybody they were actually in danger of hurting us. It made me think of that idea that's circulating a lot at the moment about how being neutral or passive in a situation is to collaborate with what's going on.

Max: You got beautifully firey and self-righteous as you do Beastie.

Beastie: I may have done a bit. And then I remembered. We have a people pleaser within us. Suddenly I was nearly in tears. To think about treating our Jonathan the way I was treating this person in my mind. Because we know Johnathan intimately we know precisely the terror of

conflict he feels which leads to him desperately trying to please everyone, and the horrendous things he's been through which explain where that comes from.

Max: We had a similar experience around somebody who overstretched themselves and didn't have any energy left for us. I had a flicker of judgement around that, and then remembered that it's exactly what I used to do all the time: so busy that I had no time to nurture important relationships including my relationship with myself. I could really connect with the pain that caused me, and those around me. Like I could connect with both sides of that situation now that we've experienced both.

Beastie: There's a deep point here about the connection between separating self from other and separating self from self. When we judge people out there in the world we separate ourselves from them – us and them thinking – and it also leads to a kind of internal severing of ourselves from the part of us which is capable of doing the exact same thing. I realised profoundly how hating or trying to destroy something out there has the knock on impact of separating us from the part of ourselves who has that capacity. Often that part becomes distant internally after we do that.

Max: So accompanying every part of ourselves, and helping them to be really honest with themselves about their potentials and their impact, is a way of getting to the point where we could accompany anybody else in the world too.

Beastie: Yes. I see it as a potential plural superpower. Like if we can really accompany all of the sides of ourselves then we'd be able to see those aspects manifesting in others, and be with them in a regulating way too. I guess it's what Pat DeYoung describes doing in therapy with her clients: because she can be with all of her own shame without disintegrating, she can be with all their parts' shame too.

Max: If we could accompany every part of ourselves, even when we're manifesting our worst capacities, then there'd be nothing we were projecting onto others. There'd be nothing to leak out – or lash out – because we're not okay with it and trying to keep it down.

Beastie: Yeah but we're not quite there yet!

Max: I wish. It's like what Pema says though, about how the most difficult people in life should be our most valued teachers. They show us the bits we're still abandoning in other people, because we haven't managed to accompany it in ourselves yet.

Beastie: You spot it, you got it!

What does this mean for our relationships with others?

Max: So here's a burning question I have for you Beastie. If we recognise that we have the capacity for everything in ourselves, and that the task is to learn how to accompany all of it...

Beastie: Yes?

Max: Doesn't that mean that we end up allowing others' abusive behaviour? Or never acting for social justice because we know that we have it in us to be the oppressor ourselves?

Beastie: Oh that's a good one.

Max: I know you like the complex questions.

Beastie: My answer would be not at all. In fact it is quite the opposite: seeing this stuff in ourselves – and learning to accompany it – is in service of preventing abuse and acting against oppression.

First when we accompany rather than abandoning ourselves through everything we are less likely to act in abusive, oppressive, and harmful ways. Seeing those capacities in ourselves, and knowing the parts of us who are capable of that kind of harm intimately, means that we are less likely to unconsciously act out of it. We're able to be more intentional and less reactive.

Secondly, knowing those capacities in ourselves intimately makes it way easier to see when others are acting from those places. When other people behave in reactive ways we can often feel very confused and gaslit. That's true whether it is a 'fight' person claiming they're not trying to control us, or a 'flight' person saying they can be here for us when clearly they can't, or a 'fawn' person telling us what they think we want to hear but we can sense the inauthenticity. When we're super familiar with those parts of ourselves, we more easily see it in others and can have both clarity and grief about what they are doing, and the impact that has on other people, and on themselves.

Max: So we're less likely to be drawn into damaging dynamics with them.

Beastie: Right, we can more clearly see what we're dealing with because we know that potential in ourselves. Pema would say that the aim is to prevent others from hurting you or anyone else. And when we can see what they're doing that clearly – and with that much

compassion – we're more able to find the wisest strategy for preventing harm. No strategy is off limits.

Max: What about wider systemic and structural oppression, rather than interpersonal harm?

Beastie: I feel like again if we can address these things in our inner systems then we're more likely to see, and to be able to address them, in outer systems. Obviously that requires collective rather than just individual work, but the individual work helps us to be able to join that struggle. We tend to collapse or close down in the areas where we abandon ourselves. We are more able to engage in the areas where we accompany ourselves.

So we need to move towards the places where we tend to shut down and become a bystander, or act out and become a perpetrator. Like Laverne Cox said:

'Each and every one of us has the capacity to be an oppressor. I want to encourage each and every one of us to interrogate how we might be an oppressor and how we might be able to become liberators for ourselves and for each other.'

In some ways knowing that all these capacities are in here – in us – is a relief. There's no more need for defenses or for pretending that they're not. The outcome of such inner work could be to expand our capacity to value everyone, not matter what. That is desperately needed in a world where some people – some lives – are valued so much more highly than others.

Max: You take this very seriously don't you?

Beastie: I contain our capacity to do the most damage, potentially. I've turned it in towards us our whole life, rather than out towards others, but I do hold rage, I hold fight instincts, I am capable of harm. I have harmed us after all. If accompanying myself means having more of a handle on that capacity, and potentially helping others who have the same capacity not to act out of it, I'm very much down with that.

How to shift from abandonment to accompaniment

Max: Right, so let's summarise, how can people do this work of shifting from abandoning themselves to accompanying themselves?

Beastie: Enough questions for me. Your turn bestie.

Max: But I thought I was meant to be swinging in a hammock somewhere trying to get over my flight tendency to do all of the work all of the time.

Beastie: You are, but this time you managed to wait until you really felt like having this conversation so I'm letting you have a pass. If I feel you starting to push it I'll send you right back to the hammock, don't worry.

*Max: *grin* Okay well first I'm reminded of your excellent article about [the master's tools and mental health](#).*

Beastie: Why thankyou.

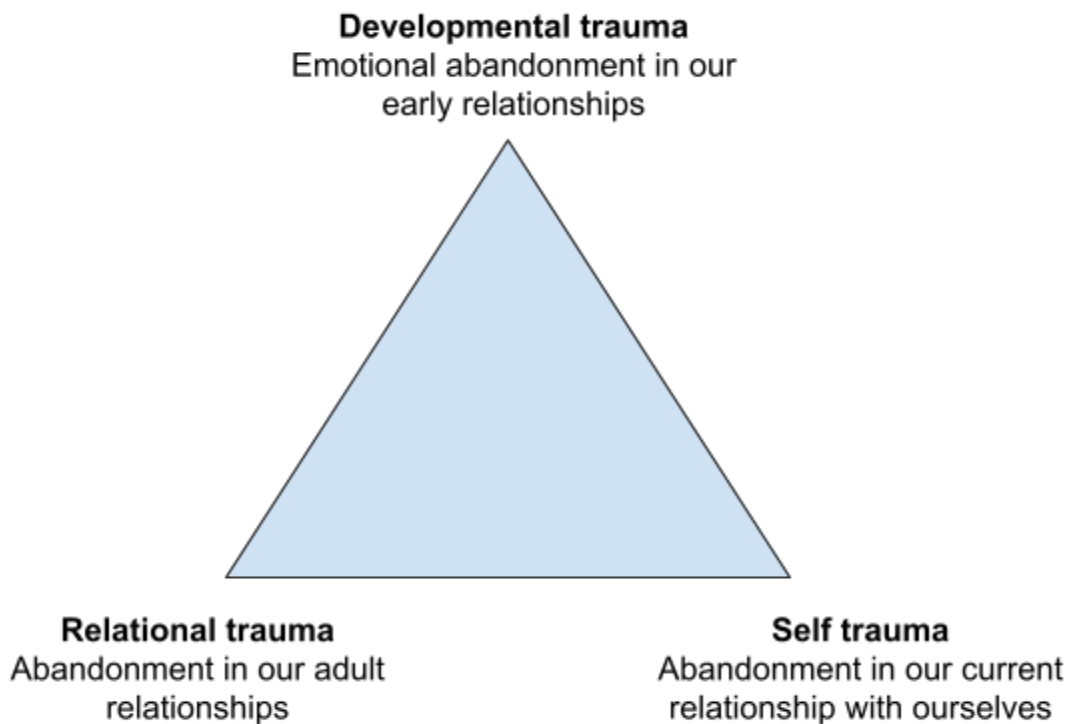
Max: You said that whatever we do, we can't get out of our stuck patterns and harmful habits the same way we got into them.

Beastie: How do you see that linking to abandonment and accompaniment?

Max: Well first we could see abandonment as the thing that was done to us in the first place: we were taught – by those around us and wider culture – that parts of us were unacceptable, and that is why we split them off and abandoned them. Me and Tony covered that in the [plural selves zine](#).

Beastie: You've both come a long way since then.

Max: I know right? So yes one way to remind ourselves to accompany rather than abandoning ourselves is to remember that abandoning any part of ourselves – or any experience – repeats the same kind of violence that was [done to us in the first place](#), which may well have already have been [repeated through our lives](#) enough. Those of us who have been emotionally abandoned in various ways seem tragically more prone to abandoning ourselves, and to developing relationships where that same kind of abandonment occurs.



Beastie: Nice! And once we're committed to accompanying not abandoning?

Max: Well these are the practices that we've been trying, plus some links to where we've explained them in more detail:

- *Practise noticing the particular signs that suggest you are abandoning yourself – these may be different for different people – and name that that is what's happening. This is something like **Babette Rothschild's mindful gauges**.*
- *Commit to bringing yourself to **the gap** each time this happens. This could be anything from three deep breaths to show yourself that you noticed the abandonment and that you are committed to coming back to accompaniment, up to a long sit where you stay with the experience until you feel really present to yourself again. If you can't do this on the spot when abandonment happens, promise yourself to do it as soon as you do have the capacity to do so: top priority.*
- *Journal or talk aloud between the part who is feeling abandoned or is tempted to abandon themselves, and a **kind supportive voice who can accompany them** through whatever they're going through.*
- *Also notice where you are feeling like abandoning another person, or a way of behaving, out there in the world (e.g. by judging, criticising, or withdrawing) and use that as an*

opportunity to connect with the part of you who is capable of the same thing, through sitting with their feelings, journaling, or similar.

- *Personify aspects of yourself that you find hard to accompany and communicate with them that way.*
- *Develop rituals for regretting moments of abandonment and re-committing to accompaniment.*

What about the places where you can't do it yet?

Beastie: So obviously this is a work in progress for everyone.

Max: Yeah we've reflected on being in process with this a couple of times lately. I like this idea from Pema. She says that if walking barefoot over the world hurts your bare feet you could try to cover the world with leather, or you could make yourself a pair of leather shoes.

Learning to accompany ourselves feels like making that pair of shoes. It means that we are able to go towards more and more places because we know that we can accompany ourselves there. There's no risk of abandonment, or of destruction by others, because we know that we have our own care and protection to bring to the situation. Also we can clearly see what others are up to and where they are coming from, rather than getting drawn into damaging dynamics with them, or taking on anything of theirs that they try to project onto us.

There's a sense that even death might not be so scary if we have learnt to accompany ourselves anywhere. We've thought recently that a lot of our fear of death is actually fear of abandonment because it brings up everything that we still haven't come to terms with about ourselves. If we imagine that we had come to terms with all those things then death itself doesn't feel so scary.

Beastie: But we're not quite there yet with death.

Max: Heh no, although I can now get the flicker of feelings what that might be like. Still these days I can be tempted to abandon myself when I feel in pain or like I'm getting sick, so I probably have a way to go with death.

Beastie: What we're learning is that there'll always be places that we can't yet go to, without abandoning ourselves. It's about going the next step, not all of the way, and learning to be okay with the fact that we're there in some situations and not in others. It's not all or nothing.

Pema has another metaphor about meeting our edges. Like a bunch of people are climbing a mountain and each will reach that place where they can't go any further at a different point.

Max: The place where they can no longer manage to go on accompanying themselves. As someone with a big fear of heights I like that analogy.

Beastie: The thing is not to feel terrible for meeting our edge. We can get to know those edges really well, and eventually find the way to accompany ourselves across them.

Max: We actually have a kind of mental list of the situations where we can do accompaniment already, and the situations that are edges for us, that we keep gently moving towards. Checking in on those situations is helpful for recognising that what is an edge this week can become a place we're able to accompany ourselves across next week.

Beastie: Or month, or year, for those of us who are not massive overachievers Max-y.

Max: Alright, alright. But we will have this whole thing sewn up by the end of this year right Beastie?

Beastie: Whatever you need to tell yourself love.

Accompanying yourself when you abandon yourself

Max: So what do we do when we find a situation where we still abandon ourselves?

Beastie: Well recently I realised that there's a paradox here.

Max: I know you love a juicy paradox.

Beastie: Do you need to go back in the hammock? I think you're getting tired.

Max: Meanie.

Beastie: What I realised – as you well know – is that one of the times we most often abandoned ourselves was when we abandoned ourselves.

Max: Totally.

Beastie: So one we get a lot is first thing in the morning. We often find the noisy thoughts kick in before we're fully awake, and we lie there and let them churn for a while before we realise that's what we're doing.

Max: And what was happening was that we were then getting frustrated with ourselves for abandoning ourselves, and therefore abandoning ourselves more.

Beastie: Now we try to just notice that it has happened and get curious as to what it might be like to accompany ourselves around having just abandoned ourselves. In that case it looks like bringing kindness in around those thoughts as soon as we do notice them, and using them a bit like a dream: as something to get curious about but not take too seriously. We might use the content of the noisy thoughts as a jumping off point for journaling, or try to access the underlying feeling and sit with that, for example.

Max: I definitely felt the shift when we moved to accompanying around abandoning. The noisy thoughts didn't go away, but we didn't have that extra layer of suffering that we had when we struggled against them and abandoned ourselves around them.

Beastie: There's probably a lot of those paradoxes right? How to love yourself when you're not loving yourself, how to befriend yourself when you're being unfriendly towards yourself...

Max: We're not going to run short of articles any time soon are we?

Beastie: You have a problem and the hammock is right there.

Max: Moving on, another situation we've come up against is when one of those big flashback moments hit and we just can't accompany ourselves through it. We feel like we're disintegrating. We're totally abandoned.

Beastie: Right and what we now try to do is to return to **basic self-care**, setting up the conditions under which the capacity to accompany ourselves is most likely to come back.

Max: In practice what that looks like is allowing ourselves to finish whatever we were doing – because in abandonment we often just can't allow ourselves to pause or stop. Then we get ourselves set up in our chair with our journal, perhaps a hot water bottle and a hot chocolate.

Beastie: The July hot water bottle is a real thing around here.

Max: And so far we've found that we can find our way back to each other at that point. The abandonment is usually only for the twenty or thirty minutes that it takes us to get there.

Beastie: That's pretty impressive given how it used to often last for days or longer. Although of course it'll also be fine to find ourselves in longer periods of abandonment when really hard stuff hits. The process is to commit to finding our way back to accompaniment, however long it takes.

Max: Is there anything else?

Beastie: It's probably a whole further article, but I'm struck by how accompanying ourselves looks something like treating ourselves the way people are encouraged to treat romantic partners. Think about the marriage vows: 'I take thee to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.' What does it mean to make such a commitment to ourselves? To have and hold ourselves no matter what? That's real accompanying. Maybe people need to commit that to themselves first and foremost in order to be in good relation with others?

Max: It connects with what we often talk about on the podcast, about the importance of self-love. I'm also reminded of that bit from the TV show Normal People where Connell protects his love Marianne.

Beastie: He says:

Look at me a second... No-one is ever going to hurt you like that again. Everything's going to be alright, trust me. Because I love you. And I'm not going to let anything like that happen to you again.

Max: When we heard that we imagined you saying that to me, rather than hearing it from an external person.

Beastie: There may have been one or two tears shed at that moment.

*Max: *smiles**

Beastie: I think I'm going to leave the last word to Pema:

The practice is compassionate inquiry into our moods, our emotions, our thoughts. We are encouraged to be curious about the neurosis that's bound to kick in when our coping mechanisms start falling apart. This is how we get to the place where we stop believing in our personal myths, the place where we are not always divided against ourselves, always resisting our own energy. This is how we learn to abide...in groundlessness.

The Places That Scare You, chapter 19.

Mind the gap: On slowing down and making space

This is a companion article to my recent one on [slow relating](#). That article explored slow love and relationships with others. This one explores love and relationships with yourself.

The [slow relating](#) article brought the fastest side of myself together with the slowest to have a dialogue. This article sees a return of that slowest side – Ara – but together with my reformed inner critic – Beastie – who is perhaps best placed to interrogate these ideas and practices.

Ara: Hey Beastie.

Beastie: Hey Ara. Ready to talk about the gap?

Ara: I am. I'm interested to hear what you make of it. But perhaps we should introduce ourselves a little more first, so people have some sense of us.

Beastie: I think the kind of dynamic we have was best captured in that Netflix Tales of The City last year: the characters of Shawna – played by Ellen Page, and Anna Madrigal – played by Olympia Dukakis.

Ara: Mm the sage old queer and the young upstart.

Beastie: Not quite how I would have described it. I love the scene where Anna says something characteristically vague and wise-sounding and Shawna says: 'You know the rule against talking in fortune cookies around me.'

Ara: And Anna immediately replies: 'And you know the rule against being a smartass around me.'

Beastie: So. No Madrigaling me in this conversation, okay?

Ara: I wouldn't dream of it Beastie.

Returning to the gap

Beastie: So something curious happened recently. We moved away from doing any kind of meditation or mindfulness practice, and then returned to something which probably looks quite similar but feels very different.

Ara: Right. Reading that **David Trevelan** book on mindfulness and trauma helped us to see that meditation may **not have been our friend** in the past. **Irene Lyon** says something similar: many people with post traumatic stress report that meditation feels like sitting in a small room with a man shouting at them.

Beastie: Sounds familiar. At worst it was like that for us. At best just falling into our noisy thoughts for fifteen minutes each morning without much consciousness about them. We would often feel some shame about it afterwards, although we tried to be kind towards ourselves. It was a relief just to allow ourselves to stop, and to start the day with journaling instead, which we enjoy a lot more.

Ara: Reading the **trauma literature** helped a lot with that: recognising why our brain was hypervigilantly searching past, present, and future for any sign of threat whenever we stopped. Also why staying in an activated state was making it harder – rather than easier – to stay present and to feel kind towards ourselves and others.

Beastie: But then our therapist said something about how it could be useful – with trauma – to find safety in the sense of the space around us. When she said it, we didn't want to hear it. We'd just got away from the idea that we should be doing meditation. That place had never felt very safe for us. Why would we go back there? But the next day you tried it.

Ara: Right. Something in what she said chimed with me. And of course our main Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön, describes something similar in **her work**. It was such an interesting experience **Beastie**. It was as if we'd approached this thing that we've been **thinking** and **writing about** for decades from just a slightly different angle, and our perspective on it had completely changed.

sitting not Sitting

Beastie: What d'you think was different?

Ara: I think we finally let go of the attempt to make it this special thing. Which is, of course, what **wider culture** has done with mindfulness and meditation also. I'm thinking of the shift as

a move from Sitting (with a capital S) to sitting (all lowercase). I literally just sat in a chair in the window of our flat and hung out with everything that was going on: sounds, sights, smells, sensations, feelings, thoughts, memories: whatever happened I was there with it.

Beastie: There was a sense of welcoming too right?

Ara: Yep. Whatever came up I tried to embrace it with warmth as part of the whole experience, even imagining saying 'you're welcome', but not treating it as any *more* important than anything else that was going on.

Beastie: Not grasping it, not trying to get rid of it: That's the Buddhist idea.

Ara: Yes. The overall feeling, by the end, was of sitting in this current moment of our life, within a wide open space, and anything could come into that space: like there was room for everything. It wasn't about aiming to reach any particular state, or have a 'good' or 'successful' experience, whatever that would mean.

Beastie: Just being present.

Ara: That might be how a fortune cookie would describe it, yes! It's hard though isn't it because even these kinds of words – 'presence', 'being', 'spaciousness' – hint at something special. And as soon as we imagine in that way it becomes harder to do. I like Pema's word 'gap', or the idea of hitting the 'pause button', or sitting lowercase. They are much more everyday and straightforward words. It really is just hanging out for a while with whatever's around – internally and externally.

Varieties of sitting

Beastie: So since then we've started doing this a lot more. Again it amuses me. Before we'd do it once a day and feel a bit bad about that. Now we can't seem to get enough of it. It just makes sense to keep returning to the gap several times a day.

Ara: I guess it tied in to a wider process we've been in about self-consent: noticing how easily we **override our consent** in relation to others, and work, and ideas of what we should be doing. This sitting provided an opportunity to make a gap between one thing and the next, so we could return to a kind of neutral, and check in with ourselves what we actually felt drawn to doing next.

*Beastie: There was a challenge to that as well. We noticed that when we had done one thing we often wanted to crack on with the next for fear that, if we stopped, we wouldn't be able to continue. That's our Max's **flight tendency**. We also noticed that when we were feeling a little edgy, uncomfortable, or uneasy we wanted to go to some kind of work, or escape into TV or a novel, rather than hanging out in the gap. We feared that if we sat still the feeling would get worse: perhaps overwhelming.*

Ara: I think that's another reason why pausing is so helpful. It gives us this regular reminder that escalating of tough feelings doesn't have to happen. In fact I think trying to avoid those edgy feelings with work or escapism much more frequently leaves us feeling worse than when we started. That's not at all to say that there's anything wrong with working or chilling out, but it seems that we enjoy those things much more if we're not going into them trying to drown out tough feelings.

Beastie: It's wild. Many times lately we've actually chosen the gap over work or distraction, knowing it tends to leave our nervous system in a better place than those things. We've even started making a regular small gap between the different elements of a work task, episodes of a TV show, or chapters of a book, so that if we continue we know we're in self-consent.

Ara: Such a relief to finally feel the gap as a good place to rest.

*Beastie: I guess we're now trying to do what Pema calls 'on the spot' and regular sits. Regular ones – after we finish one activity and before we start the next – allow us that ongoing **consent check-in** with ourselves, and remind us that this space is always available to us. 'On the spot' is when we notice that we're having a difficult feeling, thought, or sensation, and deliberately sit then-and-there in order to welcome that into this space. If we can't sit then-and-there then we at least make a promise to that feeling, thought, or sensation that we'll return to it as soon as we have the time.*

Self-talk and sitting

Ara: That regular vs. on-the-spot distinction relates to another one. When we're feeling relatively calm it's possible to just sit quietly and notice the sound of the birds and traffic, the feeling of the breeze, a memory flickering up, a fleeting feeling. When tough feelings are present – particularly those we connect with trauma – that's much more challenging. I guess our response to this is a bit like the distinction between doing a guided meditation on an app or something, and one where you just sit there quietly without guidance.

Beastie: So we sit quietly when there isn't anything particularly challenging present. But if there is something, we try to sit in whichever part of us is struggling, and another part guides

us through the sitting: often you or James being the more parental parts of our psyche, but really any of us can do it for any other.

Ara: Yes. James and Jonathan recently documented our process in [this article](#). But where we've got to now is perhaps even more simple and straightforward than what they described. The guide part of us just imagines holding the other part of us while they say – out loud – what they are with. Perhaps reminding them to come back if they drift into noisy thoughts.

Beastie: Like 'I'm with that seagull arcing through the sky... Now I'm with the thought that I fucked that thing up... Now I'm with the feeling of my throat being all constricted... Now I'm with the sunlight shining on that building... Now I'm with the sound of the seagulls... Now with the fact I just got lost in trying to plan what I'm going to say to that person...'

Ara: If Tony were here he would point out how lately it's shagging seagulls we've mostly had the opportunity to be with.

Beastie: I endeavour to have a little more decorum than Tony.

Ara: Shall we say a bit more about what this means for us now?

Beastie: Yes please. I think that safety and befriending are the main themes. I've just noticed how they map onto what we've been exploring around protection and care. The counterbalance to the [fear/shame feeling of trauma is a combination of protection/care](#). Protection alleviates fear by keeping us safe enough. Care alleviates shame by befriending ourselves and our experience.

As a non-binary person we're a little embarrassed that our parental parts are quite so gendered but James does a good number in protection and keeping us safe, and you are good at kindness, care, and connection.

Ara: I like to think that we both do both, but I see what you mean.

The gap and safety

Beastie: So safety?

Ara: Yes. Well the thing about post traumatic stress is that it feels like a very unsafe place to be. Even things that used to leave us unphased can now feel like a big threat. And, after the

multiple **big stressors** we've been through in the past year, we're left feeling that we couldn't handle anything else.

Beastie: Like a global pandemic or something would just be too much to cope with.

Ara: Heh, that was our feeling before that hit, yes.

Beastie: So we've been feeling very unsafe, largely because we're so fragile and easily triggered. It's hard to predict what we have capacity for, and what will tip us into overwhelm.

Ara: And those fear/shame feelings can easily feel intolerable: impossible to stay with. So this is where the gap comes in. If we can show ourselves that this space is a big enough container for any and all feelings, then we can finally feel safe to ourselves: at home in ourselves.

Beastie: How does that work?

Ara: Well now that we know more about the **physiology of trauma** I guess a big part of it is that, in the gap, we're attending to the whole of our interior and exterior experience: not just the traumatic feelings or thoughts that may be around.

By tuning into everything about how our body feels – our feet on the ground, the air on our skin, our hand on our belly – we ground ourselves in it, reminding ourselves that our body is safe enough to occupy.

By orienting to the environment – what we see, hear, smell, touch, taste – we're reminding ourselves that we're safe enough here-and-now.

Most trauma researchers and therapists suggest strategies for grounding in the body and the environment. They also emphasise reminding ourselves that we're not in the traumatic experience any more: that it is over and we can put that 'ended' **time stamp** on it. We have survived.

*Beastie: We're not there yet. There's still a lack of trust in the gap to hold more vivid trauma responses or **emotional flashbacks**.*

Ara: Absolutely, and remember it's not about making the feelings go away, or some idea that it's only 'worked' if we feel nice and calm after a certain period of time. It's more about holding. I love that phrase of Pema's: 'hold it in the cradle of loving kindness'. My sense is that – in time – we might be able to bring any feeling we have into the gap and be with it warmly in that

wide open space. The potential then is for a profound sense of being safe-enough with ourselves, knowing that any state we're in could be held in that way.

Beastie: Practising with the flickers of feelings – before they become a flame or fire – is certainly a good way of working up to it. But yes, you and Pema do seem to be optimistic that, given time, we can hold anything in that gap.

Ara: What we've found so far is that, with bigger feelings, particularly shame – which I know you intend to write more about Beastie – we have to keep returning to the gap. Some days it's been about going back time and again, each time we feel that flicker accelerating into a flame. Pema talks of times she's sat up all night with that kind of feeling.

Beastie: Again it's not about eradicating or avoiding the feelings, thoughts, sensations, etc. but being with them along with everything else. There was one day we went for a walk in the woods and I was in a very angry place.

Ara: Getting in touch with our beautiful and long-absent fight response.

Beastie: Heh. It was interesting because it felt like I kept re-igniting – going back into angry ruminations – but at the same time the rest of you were able to be with the green leaves and the breeze. The plural thing certainly helps us to hold multiple states that way: generally one part struggling and one part able to hold them. But it can also feel that the gap is holding the aspects of experience that are more difficult, alongside aspects that are less so.

Ara: I like the bit where Pema says that if you go barefoot and your feet get cut to shreds, you could try to cover every piece of land you want to walk on in leather. Alternatively you could make yourself a pair of shoes. That's how we've been thinking about what we're doing right now isn't it? Making ourselves a pair of shoes.

Beastie: Proper, solid hiking boots is the plan. That's a good analogy for what we're hoping for from the gap isn't it. Right now we can easily become scared, because we've been so overwhelmed and incapacitated. But the more we sit with each experience as it comes – and learn that we can tolerate it – the more we have that sense of being safe-enough to ourselves.

Ara: That brings us onto befriending.

The gap and befriending

Beastie: So what do you mean by befriending?

Ara: Certain phrases really lodge in my mind lately. Pete Walker writes about ‘becoming an unflinching source of kindness and compassion towards yourself’. Pema talks about befriending: complete acceptance of yourself as you are, no sense that you need to change or improve. Chani Nicholas writes about building an unbreakable bond with yourself, accompanying yourself no matter what, wanting yourself like your life depends on it.

Beastie: Chani Nicholas being?

Ara: An astrologer.

*Beastie: *Raises eyebrow**

Ara: Yes I know, I know. I have become *that* queer. At least I have you and James to keep me honest. What she suggests is really good though, whether or not you buy all the understanding behind it... Just like Pete and Pema now that I come to think of it. You may or may not buy that our suffering is primarily located in our childhood trauma, or in the combination of past karma and human attempts to avoid suffering which Buddhism suggests, but you can still find their advice extremely helpful.

Beastie: Fair point, well made Ara. I'll give you that one.

Ara: Feeling gentle today huh Beastie?

Beastie: Well I have to remember I'm speaking to an old woman.

Ara: Remember Anna's rule about being a smartass.

*Beastie: *grin* If Tony gets away with publicly sassing you then I definitely do. So you're saying that the gap can help us to befriend ourselves, as well as making us safe-enough.*

Ara: I think they're related. Right now we do *not* know that we are an okay person no matter what. We *don't* want ourselves no matter what. We *can't* accompany ourselves anywhere. When we have the shame feelings in particular, we do not feel that we're okay, or deserving of being accompanied or loved – even by ourselves. And there is also a fear that we couldn't accompany ourselves in future – if certain things happened like realising we'd messed up in ways which we find particularly challenging.

Beastie: Too right. I'm rarely the part of us who struggles with those feelings, but the couple of times it was my turn it was shockingly hard.

Ara: So giving ourselves the message that we're up for hanging with ourselves in the gap *whatever* we've done, *however* we feel – *that's* how we befriend ourselves. Again we can conceptualise it plurally – whichever part of us is struggling, the other parts will be there, tag-teaming in to accompany them through it however bad it gets.

Beastie: Like we always do that if one of us wakes troubled at night: get them a hot milk and talk to them kindly.

Ara: Plurality has been a good way into self-love for us because it is easier – with a background of self-hatred – to love our component parts than it is to love the whole. But I think this gap goes beyond our plural love, to let every aspect of us – and our experience – know that we can tolerate it – even welcome it.

*Beastie: Just like embracing me – **the inner critic** – we can work towards a point where we can embrace anything we go through: any feelings, any thoughts – befriending everything.*

Ara: And as with you, I suspect we'll find that much of what we've attempted to avoid or eradicate becomes a fierce ally if we can embrace it.

*Beastie: We've already found that with the **fear aspect** of trauma haven't we? Gratitude for how it protects us against overriding our consent again.*

Ara: All part of learning to accompany ourselves rather than abandoning ourselves.

*Beastie: The big ongoing challenge is going to be accompanying ourselves through shame. But we have already begun to see that holding shame in the gap, and getting curious about it, are leading us to helpful places, just as we did with fear. For example, when we stayed with shame we got the sense that we may be holding a lot of shame that isn't really ours – more transferred onto us by others who can't bear to feel it – the way that wider society tends to **blame the person with trauma** rather than the people and forces that traumatise them.*

Ara: I look forward to reading your thoughts on shame soon Beastie. I'm also now thinking about the gap as *past, present, and future* protection and care. The gap enables us to be with feelings we have avoided in the past in ways that enable us to tell a different story through our life.

The gap enables us to be in a good relationship to the here-and-now, instead of fearing what might come up. That's an antidote to loneliness: knowing that we never have to feel abandoned in the present.

Finally, being able to stay with feelings like fear, shame, anger, and sadness, means that we can protect and care for ourselves in the next instant, and longer term future. When those feelings become tolerable in the gap we can listen to what they're telling us – instead of what we might assume they're going to tell us.

Beastie: So when there is fear we might ask 'How might I have been in danger of overriding my consent – or allowing it to be overridden?' instead of just trying to get the hell out of there. When there is shame we could ask 'Where does this shame belong?' rather than collapsing into self-loathing. When there is sadness 'What do we – and others – need to grieve?' instead of sinking into depression. When there is anger 'How can I have my boundaries?' instead of lashing out.

Ara: 'Positive' feelings too. When there is joy 'How can I dance with this – or share it – while it is here,' instead of trying to pin it on a particular person or situation and grasp hold of that.

Beastie: True, true. That's one for Tony, our joybringer.

Ara: Anything else to say about the gap?

Beastie: I think we've said the rest in our [other article](#). That one deals with slowing down and creating gaps on the macro – as well as micro – scale, and more about the politics of slowness.

Ara: For now then Beastie.

Beastie: See you in the gap Ara.

Staying with the Big Feels

In this follow up to my [Staying With Feelings zine](#), two of my containing parts discuss how we can go about staying with intense emotions when they arise, why this is important, and what a trauma-informed approach to staying with feelings can look like. In particular they build on last year's articles on [plurality and trauma](#) to consider how it can be helpful to locate our feelings in different parts of ourselves, who can then be held and heard in various ways. There's also more on this topic in my new book with [Alex Iantaffi: Hell Yeah Self Care](#).

Staying with the Big Feels Theory

James: Hey Ara, a first time for us I think.

Ara: The inner parents blogging together at last.

James: That's one way to see us. I'm increasingly preferring 'containing parts' to 'parents' though. For one, we have three such parts rather than two, and for another I'm pretty sure Beastie would question a hierarchical parent/child model, or a normative internal nuclear family model, as a useful basis for anything.

Ara: I imagine she would. In your [previous articles with her](#) she pointed out that all parts of us are capable of containing others at times, and all parts struggle at times. That's important. However there is a sense in us that we have four parts who hold a lot of trauma from our past, and who have been running the show for much of our life - whether more foregrounded or more in the background. That's Max, Tony, Beastie and Jonathan. Now we also have access to three parts - you, me and Fox - who feel less impacted by the past, and more able to care for, and protect, the others in the present.

James: I think that you and I are still finding our way too: to who we can be in our inner and outer world. Perhaps that's another article. In this one we want to focus on staying with intense emotions.

Ara: We wanted to write this one together because we have been the parts who have done most of the work of containing the other parts through such feelings over the last six months or so - since we last wrote the previous [plural articles](#).

James: This is an update on what's happened during that period, in a way.

Ara: What we've learnt during that time.

All The Feels

James: Let's start with what happened last August: it feels pivotal.

Ara: Good plan.

James: It amuses us now - when we can take a big perspective on it - that we wrote that [Staying with Feelings](#) zine back in 2016. Back then we thought we had a pretty good handle on being up for feeling our difficult emotions - and some great practices for doing so - which we shared in that zine. We had no idea what was coming!

Ara: Everything that we put in that zine still holds though. I don't want to dismiss how well that version of us back then - mostly Max - was doing: finding ways to stay with feelings at all. And in many ways what we've done this past few months builds on the basic ideas in that zine.

1. The evidence is clear that people do best - in terms of [mental](#) and [physical](#) health - when they can tune into their bodies and feel their feelings, and live their lives on the basis of that self-awareness: expressing their needs, desires, boundaries, and so on.
2. Most of us struggle to do this because our culture discourages any experience or expression of emotions, particularly 'negative feelings', and because traumatic experiences growing up give us the message that such feelings are unsafe to express, or even to feel.
3. In order to address this, we can learn practices - like focusing and forms of meditation - which explicitly involve tuning into our feelings, welcoming them, and learning what they have to tell us.

James: This hits very personally for us. Pretty much everybody receives the message - from the world around them, and in close relationships - that certain feelings aren't acceptable. But for us - growing up in the 70s - we received specific behavioural training from teachers and caregivers to try to condition us out of crying. There was a strong sense that it was vital to control your emotions and to disallow the 'difficult' ones. The message that sadness, fear, and anger, in particular, were unacceptable was very strong. We wrote about that in the emotions chapter of [Life Isn't Binary](#).

Ara: That's why we're so grateful for the Pixar movie [Inside Out](#). It shows vividly what happens to a person when there's an attempt to eradicate any of their core emotions. They become unbalanced when only certain emotions run the show, and eventually end up numb and grey with little access to feelings at all.

There's a sense of an inauthentic version of yourself operating in order to survive in a world where it doesn't feel safe to show how you really feel; to the point that you don't even know that there is more to you than that, or that those emotions still exist inside you somewhere.

James: We still can't handle the scene when goofball island collapses.

Ara: In many ways you could see our process in the last few years as one of welcoming back in those core feelings - and the parts who hold them - and beginning to reshape our inner landscape with all present, and working together as a team.

James: Return to goofball island!

Ara: We feel that sometimes for sure. But we were going to start with last August...

James: Right, so I think that prior to that we had thought that we were pretty good at staying with the feelings. But in 2019 [things fell apart](#) for us - bringing us back up against a lot of the most painful times of our life which I think we hadn't really felt at the time. Pandemic saw us locked in with all of those memories, and gradually the really big feels returned.

Ara: I see it in [two ways simultaneously](#) James.

*James: Of course you do, you're all about the non-binary thinking *smiles**

Ara: We can tell the trauma story where we went through a series of events so confronting that we finally had to feel all of the times in our life which those events re-awoke in us. We can also tell a healing story where we were on a journey - for the last few years up till now - towards greater self awareness, more embodied practices, and sharing more vulnerably in relationships.

It feels like it was both simultaneously. Deliberately opening up space enabled us to feel what happened to us more deeply. Feeling it so deeply enabled us to finally make those connections through the events of our life and to learn how to welcome the various parts of us - and their feelings - more fully.

James: It's like our experience of the lockdown, that bothness. Was pandemic the final re-traumatizing experience that cracked the whole thing open, or was it the situation which gave us the space and solitude we needed to finally do this work? Probably both.

Ara: So to August.

James: In August we found ourselves in the grip of one of our regular bouts of [post-viral chronic fatigue](#). It was one of the hottest weeks of the year and we were experiencing pain

throughout our body, exhaustion, fever, vertigo... Somehow it felt like the final straw and suddenly all four traumatised parts of us were feeling their feelings turned up to eleven, as if our whole life finally caught up with them. It was a lot to hold. It honestly felt like we were two parents - also with sick bodies! - trying to juggle four sick screaming children during a heatwave.

Ara: And again with the bothness. Before that point we had not had a consistent sense of our presence had we James: you and me I mean?

James: Since then there hasn't been a single time where we haven't been accessible to the rest of them when they've needed us, and we are a lot more present in our everyday life. Like much of the day it feels like one of us is around, generally with one of the others either getting on with life, or caring for them.

Ara: It's as if that week demanded us to come forward more fully because the need was finally clear. Or was it that we'd finally brought us forward enough that all parts of us finally felt able to express those long-hidden feelings?

James: Mm I hadn't seen it that way before.

Separating out the feels

Ara: Shall we talk about separating out the feelings next?

James: Sure, because one reason that week was so challenging was that they were feeling the feelings of our various parts all mixed together. It was really confusing. Back then we weren't completely clear on who felt what, so we were working with a huge tangled mass of emotion, and it was loud!

Ara: This is one reason that [parts work](#) is so valuable. The more fully that we can get to know the individual parts of us, the more quickly we can locate a feeling in the part who is feeling it and work with it, perhaps at the [flicker stage](#) rather than it becoming a fire. Or even if it kicks off as a full blaze, we know who is blazing, and the kind of thing that generally helps them when they're struggling like that.

As [Janina Fisher](#) says, for everybody it can be more helpful to say 'a part of me feels...' than 'I feel...' because that enables it to be held rather than taking over. Also it allows for contradictory feelings to be present, rather than the common view that it's not okay - even crazy - to have both desire for something and fear of it, or both anger at someone and yearning for them, for example.

Even if people don't experience themselves as vividly plural, as we did, they could use the Inside Out metaphor of imagining the different emotions as different characters in their [bodymind](#).

James: That separating out the feelings is one of the biggest shifts I've noticed since last summer Ara. That sense of more clarity. 'Oh that feeling is around, that belongs to Jonathan, let's go check out how he's doing before we do anything else.'

Ara: Absolutely. I would say that identifying feelings where they reside, and a radically inclusive commitment to welcoming all of them, are the two biggest shifts we've made. We may not always know what parts need, and we may still feel that resistance in them to bringing their feelings forward. But we generally have that clarity about whose feelings they are, and we have a pervading understanding that everything is welcome: However we feel is okay, not a problem to be fixed.

James: How does all of this relate to [trauma](#)?

Ara: Mm we've been thinking about plurality and trauma even more. There's an idea in some of the literature that being vividly plural is a result of trauma. We've [written before](#) about the need for caution with that idea. For one thing, few people escape trauma in our non-consensual culture. For another, the sense of yourself as one coherent self is very culturally specific, and could even be the result of trauma where you've internalised that strong message that only a certain version of you is acceptable. Many therapies and spiritual practices deliberately help people sense their plural parts as part of healing.

James: It seems that where trauma comes in is in splitting different parts off from one another so thoroughly that they can't communicate with each other. For some this is to the extent that they have little memory for one part when they are in another. For others there's complete disavowal that the disowned parts of them exist.

Ara: How would you say it was for us James?

James: There was a strong sense that parts of us split off to hold those feelings which felt both unacceptable to others and unbearable to us.

Ara: Mm well put, and perhaps those go together. When you've been taught young that certain parts of yourself - or the feelings they express - are unacceptable then those feelings do become utterly overwhelming and intolerable. You become used to being punished by others when those feelings are around, or to being alone with the huge weight of them because you know it's not okay to share them. For kids that kind of punishment is felt as annihilation, and that kind of aloneness as abandonment. Both can be felt like the danger of

death, because a small child can't survive if they are unacceptable to those around them and/or left alone.

*James: *exhales* a lot of the early memories we've been with these last months have been like that. A young part of us alone in bed completely destroyed by the waves of this terrifying feeling crashing over them.*

Ara: You've done such a good job at holding them through that James, giving them some sense of safety at those times.

James: Thank-you. I love doing it, and I hate them being there.

Ara: You asked about trauma. My sense is that the impact of trauma on us was that splitting off - not the dividing into different parts, but splitting off to the extent that those parts - and their feelings - were hidden to us. It was as if they'd all gone to different rooms in our [bodymind](#) in order to hold those feelings: to keep the part of us who was carrying on with life safe from feeling them.

James: But that meant that we weren't able to get the important things that humans need from those hidden feelings. We were operating in life without a lot of key information about ourselves and the world. And when the feelings did leak in or break through, they often did so in damaging ways.

Ara: Let's take those two pieces one at a time James...

Why are the feelings so vital?

James: So the big feels that surprised us in August were these ones:

- *Max (flight/freeze): Trapped fear and deep grief.*
- *Jonathan (fawn): Terror of dangerous others and of being plunged into shame.*
- *Beastie (fight): Furious rage.*
- *Tony (attach): Desperate yearning for love/connection.*

So I guess we're saying that, previously in our life, we hadn't really allowed feelings of fear, sadness, shame, anger, and loneliness. We tried to avoid those feelings, or at least some aspects of them. Like maybe we'd allow sadness in 'appropriate' situations, but not inexplicable waves of grief. We'd let ourselves be - often very - angry with ourselves, but not with others. That kind of thing. To be honest I think our story of ourselves was that we barely ever felt angry feelings, or any of those yearning feelings like loneliness or jealousy.

Ara: And that maps onto the sense of those feelings being held by our most disowned parts: Tony and Beastie. A bit like when feelings are cast out of the control room in Inside Out. We were more familiar with Max and Jonathan. Max was our foregrounded 'getting on with life'

part who tried to work hard and be 'good' in order to protect Jonathan from ever having to feel that deep fear and shame that he holds. But even Jonathan was split off because Max wasn't aware that she was protecting him, just that she had to be good and keep busy.

A lot of Max's grief now is the realisation that she was dissociated a lot of the time - whether in the busyness of work, or going into a kind of 'faking through it' mode when dangerous things happened. There's a sense of her as a kind of puppet performing through everything, hence her horror of being trapped now.

James: How would you say the hidden feelings are valuable Ara?

Ara: Well putting it simply it's something like this:

- Fear enables us to know when a situation or relationship is risky for us.
- Anger enables us to protect ourselves from non-consensual or unsafe behaviour.
- Loneliness, longing and related feelings move us in the direction of connection with others, which is a vital human need.
- Sadness and grief help us to process the painful things that happen to us so that we can move through them rather than holding onto them tightly forever.
- Shame - when we are able to feel it as regret, rather than collapsing in the unbearable sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with us, enables us to look at our potentially harmful behaviour and make changes to act with more integrity and compassion.

The first two feelings are vital for *protection*. Without fear and anger we are at great risk of continually placing ourselves in harm's way, because we find it so hard to discern when things are unsafe, and so hard to protect ourselves when they are.

Yearning and sorrow are vital for *connection*: without them we won't relate with other people and can't handle the loss of those relationships.

And if shame can't be felt safely - without the sense it will destroy us - then both connection and protection are very hard because other people feel dangerous (they might see that we're fundamentally not okay) and we don't feel deserving of protection (because we believe that we're fundamentally not okay).

James: Ah that makes sense of our feeling that shame is at the heart of everything. We had to work on shame for a long time before it felt possible to welcome in anger and yearning particularly.

Ara: The [trauma literature](#) is really helpful for understanding the terrible impact that not feeling the feelings - and therefore not being able to connect and protect - has on [mental](#) and

[physical](#) health. But I'd love to get onto the process of how we actually go about welcoming the feelings James. I feel like we've learnt so much about that during this period.

First though can we briefly touch on the other reasons why it's so important?

Leaking out and breaking through

James: What you said about how otherwise those feelings can leak out or break through?

Ara: Right. Now that we know our parts - and the feelings they hold - so much better, we can see that they *didn't* stay completely split off throughout our life. Rather they leaked out in ways we didn't recognise, and occasionally broke through in ways that were extremely confusing and destructive.

James: Tony's yearning leaked out by propelling us [towards connection](#) in ways that weren't very conscious or considered, to say the least. Beastie's rage - unable to be known or expressed - reflected back on us in the form of a vicious inner critic, and occasionally leaked out in the form of a desire to 'tell the truth' about things, which got us in trouble more than once. And Jonathan's terror of shame meant that we'd often act in hypervigilant and people pleasing ways which were exhausting for us, and probably felt as inauthentic by others.

Ara: Again I'd emphasise how valuable all of those parts and feelings are. Even in their hidden/leaking forms it has been wonderful that we've been so driven to connect with others through our life and work. That truth-telling impulse has been behind much of what we've written about the problems with cultural norms and oppressive systems, which has been helpful to other people as well. And the care and compassion for others inherent in our [little people pleaser](#) is a beautiful thing.

James: The sense is that the more we can welcome them - all of them, and all their feelings - the more we may be able to connect, to create, and to care, without getting ourselves in the kinds of trouble that come with doing those things unconsciously.

Ara: Our other past experience with those feelings was that they could come crashing in in ways that were disorienting and overwhelming for us and for others. I expect it's a common experience when you hide these things that they break through in situations when your guard is down, or where something intense enough happens that you can no longer hold them at bay.

James: Right. So common ones for us were that when we really let another person in close - or spent a lot of time with them - generally a partner, we would start to have melt-downs where those huge intense feelings suddenly spilled out.

Ara: It was terrifying when we had no understanding of it, like a [sudden plummet](#) into overwhelming fear, rage, shame, and/or yearning. That's why it felt so hard for us to be around another person 24/7: the horror that they might see that, and that we might hurt them with those feelings.

James: It's been incredibly hard to finally be living alone and to experience those kinds of plummets by ourselves, without much access to support. But it also feels like a vital part of the process of finally learning how to be with those moments, rather than desperately wanting somebody else to make it better, at the same time as being deeply ashamed that they saw us that way, and terrified that they'll abandon us - or harm us - because of it.

Ara: There you go, right there is a great example of why it's so helpful to separate out the feelings and to feel them in the various parts of us. All those times we did plummet with another person we were also having all those contradictory feelings about it at once: Tony clinging and desperate for them to prove we were loveable in spite of it, Max full of shame at being seen that way, Jonathan fearing attack, Beastie expecting abandonment.

James: Ah yes, I hadn't seen that. No wonder it felt like such an impossible spiral of emotion to be stuck in.

Ara: When parts and their feelings are very disowned, the other impact is that any situation that triggers old trauma can bring them up very vividly.

James: And that would be what we experienced as periods of [post traumatic stress](#) in our life: times when something so terrifying and shame-inducing happened that we couldn't hold those feelings at bay and they crashed in for a while, making everyday life incredibly hard. Basically we've just been going through the fourth period like that that we've had in our life, but this time with the gradually increasing capacity to tease out the different parts and to hold them through it.

But even now it is incredibly disorienting, because we know that we are this person with all our experience, knowledge, and support to draw on, but - because the parts are still to some extent split off - we can quickly drop into feeling like the terrified child again, for example. It's very hard to navigate life at such times, or to plan for the future. Hard to know whether to ask people to treat us as they always do, or to treat us as an extremely vulnerable person.

Ara: Because we are all of that, trying to learn how to hold all of that! Onto how we've been trying to do it...

Staying with the Big Feels Practice

How to feel the feels

Ara: Okay so that's the theory - and how it works for us. Shall we get to the practice?

James: Let's. Usual caveat that different things work for different people at different times. This is what we've found useful during this period, but other people will need to find their own path through it I'm sure.

Ara: [That's vital](#). So easy for hearing somebody else's experience to become yet more fodder for the inner critic - like somehow we should be doing everything that everyone else suggests. We've found that it's vital to adapt suggestions to work for us, to reject those that don't work right now, and to trust our inner wisdom to guide us on our path, which will be different to everyone else's.

Where would you like to start James?

James: I'd love you to help me think through some paradoxes that are really confusing to me in all of this.

Ara: I'm so up for that.

Big space and close up work

James: Okay so a major one for me is that you and I seem to approach being with the big feelings in very different ways, and I'm wondering how they can both be 'right'.

Ara: Go on.

James: The way it's shaken down between us is that you're 'in charge' of holding our parts - and their feelings - in the [big space](#), or [the gap](#). I'm 'in charge' of what we think of as 'close up work': holding and hearing the parts in their feelings, exploring them in that more 'focusing' or therapeutic kind of way.

Ara: Both approaches involve ensuring that whatever part we're in - and whatever feelings they experience - they are now [accompanied](#), which is the vital piece I think. But you're right that my approach and yours towards accompaniment feel very different James.

James: Do you want to say a bit more about what you do, and I'll do the same?

Ara: Certainly. So it seems that I'm around when we meditate - which is something we've come back to, having [struggled with it in the past](#). In an average session what that feels like to me is that I'm sitting in this wide open space, and then one of our parts will surface and I can observe them, and notice the feelings they are having and how they're responding to those. The whole thing is infused with the sense that anything that arises is welcome, and that we

can simply notice it together and come back to the present moment - perhaps the sunlight on the roofs opposite, or a bird flying past.

When a much more intense feeling is around, my big space approach is to take the part who is feeling it on a walk, maybe sit up in the hills, and we keep noticing how they go into big spirals of tough thoughts and feelings, and how it's possible to recognise that they've been swept up in that, and return to right now.

James: I remember you doing that with Jonathan one time and it was eventually even possible for him to get quite excited at the next spiral: seeing it as an opportunity to practice this new superpower of getting swept up and coming back to ground.

Ara: Several nights with him we sat looking out at the night and just focused in on one small lit up window and the way the telephone wire moved across it. Somehow we could return to that in brief moments throughout the tumultuous mass of traumatic feelings.

Do you want to describe your approach James?

James: Sure. So when I feel any part of us having strong feelings I engage in conversation with them. If they're feeling bad I often lie down - so it feels like I'm lying holding them, even with a hand on their belly, or stroking their arm. Hm I notice that this feels way more vulnerable to describe than your practices Ara.

Ara: Interesting. We're not encouraged to love ourselves in such close, tender ways are we? Talking with ourselves or giving ourselves nurturing touch? Meditation is somehow more culturally palatable. What kinds of conversations do you have?

James: I guess it's something like focusing - which we described in the [feelings zine](#) - or the '[befriending questions](#)' that Janina Fisher uses. I try to tune into what that particular part needs on that occasion. So I might ask them to describe the feeling, to tell me where it is in their body, to do a stream of consciousness about what comes up with them around it in terms of images or memories. Sometimes it stays in the present, exploring what fears are going on for them, and reassuring them, or reminding them how we've got through such things in the past. Sometimes we go back in time remembering all the times we've felt this feeling before. Occasionally we've zeroed in on an earlier time and gone over that memory in our mind, maybe bringing you or me in to act it out differently in our imagination - what it would have been like if we'd been there to hear and hold them back then. We got that from [Sarah Peyton's work](#).

Ara: Maybe we can say a bit more about how we use some of these tools later James. For now d'you want to say what you're aiming for with your approach?

James: It's what some authors call regulation, but we've preferred to call attunement. There's often a click moment with 'close up work' where the struggling part feels really held and heard in their distress. We've heard people compare it to the 'attunement bliss' or 'coregulation' that can happen between a parent and child, or between therapist and client, or close people when they feel really understood by each other. It can happen, for example, if the part finally feels able to express their feelings and I hold them as they cry. Or it can happen if we get to an understanding of what happened that has eluded us before. Or it can happen if we remember that we've been here before and what got us through.

Ara: Going back to our earlier understanding of the big feels residing in split off parts, each moment like that seems like welcoming that part home, even more, and demonstrating to them that nothing that they bring with them will be rejected or unwelcome - quite the opposite. Some call it a kind of 'soul retrieval': fragmented off parts of us being brought back into the whole. We think it's also what can give us that 'earned secure attachment' over time: welcoming all those parts back into us fully and sharing them with safe enough others in our life.

James: And it seems to be a gradual process. We know all of our parts now (unless we're in for another big surprise!), but it seems like each of them is slowly bringing more and more of the feelings they've been keeping to themselves, perhaps as they trust more than those feelings can be held and heard here.

Ara: We often feel an initial resistance. They are so used to having to repress those feelings, and so scared that they will 'ruin' things for us by bringing them. But the more you encourage those conversations, and the more they end in that 'reward' of attunement, the more it feels safe - even good - for those parts to bring their feelings.

Which approach to take?

James: I'm still confused though Ara. Our approaches seem so opposite to one another. Is it better to hold feelings in the big space and watch them bubble up and drift away, or is it better to go towards them and explore them in the way that I do? I guess I worry that my approach encourages our parts to be in these incredibly tough feelings more, when they could just have let them go if they'd gone to you.

Ara: Mm, my strong sense is that both approaches are necessary and that they work very well alongside each other, whereas one without the other might be risky.

James: Say more.

Ara: Can we touch on the theory behind them first? I guess my approach is rooted in the Buddhist / mindfulness theory that suffering happens when we struggle against what's happening: either our outer circumstances or our inner experiences. The big space is about

welcoming all of it, and noticing how pain of any kind passes if we don't escalate it with storylines about how bad it is, or with our struggles to escape it.

James: Whereas my approach is rooted in the therapeutic understanding that we lock trauma in our bodies when painful things happen which are not regulated - or heard and held - at the time. I'm ensuring that they are heard and held now - both present pain, and the past pain that underlies it.

Ara: So I think the risk of my approach without your approach is a kind of spiritual bypassing James. We could take every tough feeling to the big space that way, but perhaps we would then never have fully felt it, understood where it comes from, shown it that it is welcome now - that we *can* hold it and hear it. I can imagine a me-centric version of us who got attached to spiritual practice but still struggled to be back in the world with other people, where these things got triggered, because they hadn't really been dealt with.

James: I'm trying to think what the equivalent is for me. What does a James-centric version of us look like?! I'm thinking that, in recent times, parts have got edgy when a flicker of a tough feeling has come up - like it means that they're due another two hours on the couch with James looking into it! Occasionally we've had a shorter meditation at those points and sensed that it didn't need such intense work, just to be acknowledged and move on. I wonder if my approach without yours could get quite heavy going, or keep us quite mired in the pain of our life past and present.

Ara: I don't know for sure, but I think that might be part of the need for balance. And of course our third 'containing' part does something different again.

James: Fox. They are the part who can simply delight in whatever is going on right now. They don't go towards the feelings at all. They're just with the immediate sights, sounds, smells, sensations around us - being present. They can bring that sense equally to a walk where they notice everything, or to gentling up and enjoying a good meal and a TV show. When another part is around and struggling they welcome that part alongside them with whatever is going on, sharing the wonder with them.

Ara: [Pema](#) described something like this in a recent talk we heard: accessing a part of yourself who is patient and kind, another part who has deep trust in your capacities, and a final part who can appreciate those fleeting times of contentment in the moment.

James: We should say it's taken nearly 50 years for us to have full access to those three. Five years ago we'd only experienced the tiniest glimmers of these parts of us. Somehow we patchworked 'us' together from those glimmers, from other people who modelled this for us, from fictional characters...

Ara: So going back to your question I don't think that any of those three approaches - mine, yours, or Fox's - is 'better'. It's more about tuning into each time feelings are up and asking what they seem to need. And being up for trying one thing, and then another, if that doesn't work.

James: [Rupture and repair](#) is important too isn't it? Where we try something and it doesn't help, and we can acknowledge how painful that is to a part who is feeling desperate, and suggest trying something else. We actually build trust between us through such moments.

Ara: Being up for acknowledging our imperfection, and having got it wrong, rather than making them feel bad for not feeling better. Again that's healing for times in the past when people have protected the blame onto us when they haven't been able to be around our feelings, or have felt inadequate for not being able to help.

James: Mm, and I'm also thinking there's something here about us being alongside our other parts rather than doing this for them. There's a sense in which rage is Beastie's, grief is Max's, longing is Tony's, and terror is Jonathan's. It's important that they get to learn what works for them, and to apply it, with us helping them, but not taking over for them. Does that make sense?

Ara: Yes, empowering each one rather than taking over for them. On an inner level it mirrors the outer level. [Bonnie Badenoch](#) says that people need others to believe in them and support them in finding their path. It can be really damaging if a therapist, friend, or other person decides they know better, or gets into 'fix it' mode because they can't handle being around the pain.

*James: Right, but again with the paradox, because it's also felt helpful to remind those four parts that they don't have to **do** anything - like figuring things out or fixing them - they just have to **be**: bringing their feelings when they are around and trusting us to hold and hear them, and eventually act upon them if need be.*

Escalating emotions or taking them seriously?

James: Okay here's another one for you, related perhaps. We were just reading Pema's '[Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change](#)', which references a finding that feelings only last one and a half minutes unless you fuel them. The idea is that the thing to do is to let them pass through, to recognise their impermanence. You do that by 'dropping the storyline' you tell yourself about them. You try not to escalate the feelings with your stories about how bad they are, and how that means you're bad, or somebody else is bad, or something like that. All those thought spirals somehow make the feeling fixed and solid, instead of allowing it to pass like a cloud in the sky.

Ara: Mmhm.

James: How does that fit with the trauma therapy idea you shared earlier that these emotions are vital motivators towards connection or protection, and that our problem in the past has actually been not feeling them enough?

Ara: I wonder whether there's almost two phases to feelings-work James. There's the phase of just being with the feeling - whether in the big open space, or in the kind of close-up description work that you do. Then there may be a second phase for more exploration of what the feeling brings up. Sometimes all that's necessary is to welcome the feeling, fully experience it, and let it go to get back on with daily life. Other times the feeling is pointing to something important that requires more attention.

James: Right, I'm thinking about how therapy tends to have components of helping clients to finally feel their feelings, and components of talking about the events of the past and present, for example. Or how Buddhism emphasises mindfulness practice and also applying the teachings to your everyday life.

Ara: So, for example, I recently meditated and Beastie was there feeling angry several times. Afterwards I chatted with her and we thought through together what the different angry feelings were about - why they were of value. We were able to see some that were a response to having repressed anger for so long - turned it in on ourselves. Some were about injustice - others having access to freedoms we don't have. Some were about the specific pain of people offering something they don't really have to give, and we could link current examples of that to early experiences.

Beastie is very concerned, at the moment, that the capacity to feel anger more vividly doesn't flip us from turning it in against ourselves to turning it out against others. We wondered about how we might ensure that it remained more of a counterbalance to shame. In the past we've too readily accepted others' stories of everything as 'all our fault'. Perhaps we can use the opportunities of Beastie's anger to see other people's stuff that might be in the mix, and wider cultural stuff.

James: I sense another article coming on! But if I can draw something out of that for emotions in general, you're saying that it's another both/and. There's a place for noticing how we escalate emotions, and practicing doing something different to that. And there's a place for getting curious about the feelings that come up regularly - and what triggers them - and using that as an opportunity to learn.

Ara: About ourselves and others. The first time Beastie felt hate outwards vividly she had a huge flash of understanding for those who have hated us. Previously we'd struggled to connect with how horrific hatred feels, and how people can act so violently out of it.

I think the difference is intentionality James. [Taking emotions seriously](#) is very different to escalating them. Instead of letting the storylines spiral round and round we're deliberately reflecting on the feelings. And we also try to refrain from speaking or acting out of the feelings until we've reached a better understanding of them, and considered whether such speech or action is the wise and compassionate thing to do in that situation - for us and the others involved.

Different practices for different intensities?

James: I realise I'm asking a lot of questions here! Another one I'm with is about the intensity of feelings. When we wrote '[Staying with Feelings](#)' we didn't have much trauma understanding so we just suggested practices for staying with feelings no matter what they were, or how intense.

Since then we've come across trauma-based understandings which suggest that it's all about the intensity of the feeling. Ideas like the [emotional thermometer](#) or [zones of feeling](#) suggest that we might want to do very different things in different zones.

Ara: A helpful way to see them is concentric circles with the comfort zone in the middle, the challenge zone after that, and the overwhelm zone as the outer circle. The trauma idea of 'expanding the window of tolerance' encourages us to keep moving from comfort zone into challenge zone and back again with our feelings, without pushing into overwhelm. In overwhelm we retraumatise ourselves - which may well shrink the window of tolerance - which is how spacious the challenge zone is.

James: We learnt that one well before we read any trauma literature. We decided to list all the traumatic events of our life so we could go through them one after another. That's a fast track to overwhelm right there!

Ara: It can be really hard to learn that we have to go slowly, and that pushing into trauma tends to make it a lot worse. It's much more about learning how to tune into our bodies so that we have a much better awareness of where we are in those zones. What are the signs that we might be heading towards overwhelm? Can we learn to notice those and pull back at such times? Can we learn what we need when we have tipped over to bring ourselves back?

James: So we shifted our perspective, last year, from 'always feel the feelings' to 'feel them in the challenge zone', but in overwhelm just focus on bringing yourself back to a more settled nervous system: using [grounding practices](#) and that kind of thing.

Ara: But you have a question?

James: I suppose it's sometimes felt more complex than that. Like a big feeling has come up and been with us for several days, and by continuing to be with it - gently but thoroughly - we've eventually got to some major revelations about our life, and a huge sense of relief.

Ara: It feels like the process Brene Brown described in ['Rising Strong'](#): being prepared to be with the messy middle.

James: It's happened for us when it simply doesn't feel possible to 'bring ourselves back', the feeling is so intense, so it's more about weathering it and trying to have faith that it will get clearer at some point: that it likely has some pretty important learning for us if we can just hang on in there with it.

Ara: I don't think those views are incompatible James. What we're committing to is to not **repressing** feelings or trying to **resist** them.

James: Is the overwhelm zone what happens when we resist them?

Ara: Sometimes I think so. They get louder and scarier when we resist them, in an attempt to be heard. But sometimes it's more that we've reached an experience which is too much for us to deal with - at our current capacity - and it's tipped us over.

James: Non-resistance then is more about recognising we're in overwhelm and that's okay, it happens. And being as gentle as possible with ourselves while we're there, trying to remind ourselves that there probably is a big learning here: about what things are still an edge for us in the present and/or about how things were for us in the past.

Ara: We've found 'reminding ourselves this is okay' to be gold in all this. Instead of punishing ourselves for having got overwhelmed again, we remind ourselves that this is just okay. Even on the worst days there are moments that are calmer, or more connected.

James: I remember one time I held Beastie and we found this dot. Like the comfort zone had shrunk to a tiny dot, but if we stayed on that dot she could feel okay. Any attempt to think about what we were going to do next, or how we were going to handle some situation, would tip her directly into overwhelm, but we kept coming back to the dot over and over until eventually there was some buffer zone around it again.

Ara: I like that sense of all the concentric circles expanding and contracting over time. Long term, and even over the course of an hour or a day.

James: I wonder if it's ever possible to convey this to those who haven't experienced trauma feelings so starkly. Like we had whole weeks when Jonathan kept being pushed into overwhelm by the thought that our iPad battery might not last the whole day for an event

we're doing in several months time. When the comfort zone and challenge zone have shrunk that much, we're in incapacitating overwhelming emotions for much of the time and anything can re-trigger them. Sometimes the whole day's work is just bringing ourselves back from overwhelm for a moment or two. It is exactly like being a terrified child stuck in an adult's body, but still as convinced - as he was back then - that terrible danger is about to befall him.

Ara: And there's another huge paradox to all this. While it was agonising and debilitating, there is also a sense that it was a helpful thing to go through. For example it stripped away all the strategies we used to use to avoid painful feelings - like working too hard or wanting somebody else to 'make it better'. It made those vital feelings far more accessible to us than they ever were before.

James: I do feel a sense that when those young/traumatised parts of us are around it's a kind of miracle, that we kept them safe enough all this time that they can now be here and share their feelings. And we'll be able to live our life so much more wisely and compassionately now we have access to them. Also this whole thing has given us so much empathy for other people who are collapsing under the weight of these big feels. And for all those who are racing around in various ways trying like hell to avoid them.

Ara: Mm we notice how easy it is to go back to that avoidance too. To talk the talk of 'welcoming the feelings', but as soon as a flicker of one of the tough ones is around, viscerally that sense of trying to push it back down or pretend it's not there. And if we manage to do that, there's this sense of dissociation: being a bit vague or fake or performing.

James: Those times the feeling often comes back with a vengeance afterwards, and in confusing ways so it's harder to know whose it is or what it's about. Our sense now is that the more we can go towards all the feelings as soon as they arise, the more we can make our inner landscape safer, so there's not that sense that we might stumble across something that is 'too hard' - because we know it all and are familiar with it all.

Learning from the big feels

Ara: Shall we finish with a bit more about our daily practices with this James, and what we're learning from them? I'm aware that this changes somewhat week by week for us though. Maybe that's one of the biggest learnings. One day it feels important - when we can - to be with the feeling all day long. Another day it feels right to get on with life, with pauses to be with whatever feeling is around every now and then. One week we seem to need huge amounts of rest. Another week we have big energy for getting out moving, or for creating things like this.

James: Yes, flexibility to go with that seems helpful, and another way of trusting the feelings - and the parts that hold them - to know what they need.

Ara: But we do have a few standard practices now.

James: Right. Every day you do a meditation sit in the morning and in the evening. After that one of us does a check in conversation with the 'big feels' parts to see if they have anything they're feeling that we didn't notice in the meditation.

Ara: That seems a great way to encourage regular feeling, and to check if there's something there we haven't noticed. If there is a bigger feeling present in that check-in, you might do some close-up work with that before we move on. Or we might journal about it, or go for a walk if it feels like it needs to move.

Another practice that has been helpful for just showing us that we can bear an intense emotion is feeling it in the body as a kind of vibration, trying not to even label it or understand it but just feel it as pure energy or something. Occasionally even an intense feeling has ended up feeling almost soothing when we've managed that.

James: And our therapist shared one about imagining the feeling as just one cell of our body and picturing it in front of us - seeing what texture, colour, size, and shape it is.

Another one that's been great when it feels stuck is to lie down and breathe in to the chest, then the belly, then exhale. That kind of breathing often seems to allow a kind of release, often tears.

*But it isn't always those more formal kinds of practices that are needed. Occasionally the thing to do has been to find a song that matches the feeling, and listen to it and allow the feeling to come. And we got a lot out of re-reading the Stephen King book, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, so we can flash on the way she went still and steady in the face of fear, when fear comes up for us.*

Ara: Again there are so many possible ways to be with feelings. The main point is that we are welcoming them - not resisting them or reacting out of them.

James: It's moving from resisting to responding, and reacting to refraining (from action) until you feel clearer and calmer.

Ara: There's a couple of nice metaphors about welcoming feelings and how vital it is. One is the [Tibetan Buddhist story of Milarepa in his cave](#), and how he had to fully welcome all of the demons - or feelings - who came to stay with him there - big or small, subtle or overwhelming. The other is the Islamic poet, Rumi's, famous poem [The Guest House](#). Again that sense if you can welcome all fully then there's nothing more to fear in our inner world, and perhaps [also in our outer world](#) given that we're familiar with it all in here.

Often the parts with the feelings are convinced you're going to send them away, or become overwhelmed by them, because that's what's happened in the past. So it's a practice of showing them - gradually over time - that you don't need to eradicate them or [merge with them](#), you can just be with them patiently.

James: A couple of other learnings I've noticed. We've found that what we learn from one feeling often helps with others. We started with sadness. We did an irreverent reverse version of the behaviour modification of our childhood and decided to award ourselves a gold star whenever we cried! We've got really comfortable with sadness, sorrow and grief, where in the past we struggled so much with those feelings. Sometimes when we're struggling with another feeling we can at least access that sadness about how painful it is, and release it in that way.

Lately we've also found that many of the practices we developed with fear and shame last year work well for being with loneliness and rage too, as well as developing some new practices for those.

Ara: What else did you notice?

James: That [fear and shame](#) aren't the only trauma feelings, as we'd previously thought. Loneliness and rage are trauma-related feelings too, just more about abandonment - for us - than annihilation. And that each part holds a whole cluster of related feelings. Like Beastie holds self-hatred, blame of others, self-protection, and anger at injustice. Tony holds loneliness, yearning and jealousy, but also a kind of 'high' joy when he's pinned that on a particular person or situation, shame around being 'too much' and getting 'sent away', and a more steady joy when he's allowed to be himself in the world: open and connecting.

Ara: It's useful to understand how the different feelings they hold work together. Like Beastie's self hatred is often a sign something non-consensual happened to us and we didn't give her a chance to get angry about it. Tony's joy is more steady when we help him grieve for the losses of the past.

James: There's something about the need for a pendulum swing I think. If you've tried to only feel 'positive' emotions much of your life, or if you've repressed and covered over tough feelings a lot, it seems like there is a period where you feel all the feelings you didn't feel at the time. Perhaps you have to swing into recognising how bad some things were that you didn't recognise back then, maybe because they were [gaslit](#) by yourself and by those around you.

I think one of the very hardest things is taking that leap of faith, repeatedly, that having done this process things will become easier, now that we have access to the feelings and can act on them. It's hard to make that leap of faith when right now all you're feeling is way more pain than ever before.

Ara: There can be some nostalgia for the more 'covered over' time when things didn't feel this intense, disorienting, and incapacitating. My sense is strong though that being able to feel the hard feelings will make them less overwhelming over time, and that it will make the other feelings more accessible too. That Kahil Gibran quote: 'The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.'

James: We experience that in the way long periods of tough feelings often end in much deeper understanding of ourselves, and/or others. Also there's an intense relief when we crack through to some grief or gratitude, by being up for hanging out with a tough feeling.

Ara: I'd like to end with the multiplicity of learnings that are possible each time a big feeling is present.

James: Please do.

Ara: We find it helpful to remind ourselves of this when we're in them:

- This is an opportunity to learn how to be with this feeling more readily, so we'll be more able to do so in future, expanding our window of tolerance.
- This feeling being touched and awoken right now gives us a chance to go back to our earlier experiences - when we didn't get heard or held in such feelings - and do so now, perhaps putting that memory to rest finally.
- This feeling gives us the potential to do the general practice of dropping our storylines and being with whatever is present.
- This feeling - if we can allow it - gives us deep insight into what others with similar feelings are up against, and why they act in the ways they do, increasing our sense of compassion and connection.
- This feeling has something of value to teach us about the current situation if we can listen to it without repressing it or reacting quickly out of it. For example, it may be that something has reached the limits of what we can deal with right now, or that a situation or encounter was 'off' in some way.

For more on this topic check out my new book with [Alex Iantaffi](#): [Hell Yeah Self Care](#).

Attachment, emotion and plural parts work

In this follow up to my recent [attachment theory](#) piece, two of my containing parts discuss how we can embrace all of the attachment styles within us - and the [emotions](#) that they hold - and bring them into our relationships with others.

James: Hey again Ara.

Ara: Hey James. So good to talk with you [again](#) so soon.

James: I thought about writing this as a regular post, but I realised I could really do with somebody to bounce off: to ask me questions to help me clarify my thoughts.

Ara: I'd love to do that. I'm aware that in our [last post together](#) you asked me a lot of questions. It feels good to balance that dynamic by doing it the other way around.

James: Mm like you are more of the expert around feelings and embodiment, but perhaps I have the expertise on this more intellectual piece: weaving the various theories together.

Ara: I like that.

James: I also feel like I need you as a kind of anchor. I feel so excited about the puzzle pieces that seem to be slotting together here. I want to zoom off in a hundred different directions at once.

Ara: How can I help to ground you?

James: Remind me to breathe, to slow down, I don't have to do it all at once. You could ask me questions to lead me through one step at a time. Are you up for that?

Ara: Absolutely. Want to breathe before we start?

*James: Sure *laughs* *breathes**

Overview

Ara: Okay. Can you start by giving us an overview of the terrain you want to cover in this piece? If the terms we use here are unfamiliar to people, we'll define them in the next section.

James: Absolutely. It's something I've been building to ever since I did that Bowlby Centre event last month which I wrote up here, about [attachment theory](#). My sense is that perhaps everyone contains all of the different attachment styles - or at least the capacity for them - within themselves. Rather than aiming at some kind of static secure attachment, perhaps there's more value in getting to know all our different attachment potentials very well. Maybe that even is the way that we get to 'earned secure attachment'.

Ara: A kind of paradox? We've tried to get to 'secure attachment' by getting away from 'insecure' attachment styles, but perhaps the way to get there is *through* them, not away from them?

James: Precisely. And there's this sense that it also maps onto emotions and the 'window of tolerance'. The only way to expand the window of tolerance and get to a place where you can be with all emotional states is through experiencing (tough) emotions, not by trying to avoid them or get away from them.

Ara: So that's attachment and emotion, what about [plural parts work](#)?

James: We've reached these conclusions by getting to know all of the parts of us deeply. I'm suggesting that we can do this work by befriending the three parts of us who map on to the three 'insecure' attachment styles, and the emotions that they hold. That's the way to both earned secure attachment and an expanded window of tolerance.

Ara: Wonderful. So you can explain to us how we now understand our parts having operated together in the 'old' system, that we had our whole life. And you can describe how we're working with them now to reconfigure the system towards more secure attachments in our inner and outer relationships, and towards an expanded window of tolerance. How am I doing?

James: This is really helpful, thank you Ara.

Ara: Another breath before we continue?

*James: Mm. *breathes**

The faux window of tolerance, faux secure attachment, and faux parts

Ara: So one thing that we read which helped you click together on all of this was the concept of the faux window of tolerance in Kathy L. Kain and Stephen J. Terrell's book '[Nurturing Resilience](#)'. Do you want to explain that, and how it relates to attachment?

James: That's a great place to start, yes. So Kathy and Stephen explain that many, if not most, people develop a 'faux window of tolerance' when they're growing up, in order to handle

intense emotions. The window of tolerance is [Daniel Siegal's](#) term for the space in which we can be present with - and regulate - our emotions, rather than being overwhelmed by them.

Growing up if our caregivers and others can meet us in various emotional states and help us to know that they are okay, understandable, and manageable, then we will develop that window of tolerance. We'll learn in those early relationships that those feelings are okay, and we'll learn from experience with others what we can do to soothe ourselves when feelings are really intense. We'll end up with a nice wide space in which we can welcome a variety of different feelings at different intensities.

Ara: So that's how it relates to secure attachment? The window of tolerance is developed within secure relationships?

James: Right, a secure attachment refers to that kind of nurturing relationship where we have a 'secure base' or 'safe haven' to return to when emotions are unfamiliar or overwhelming. As a child, if we learn that we can return there and be welcomed, understood, soothed, have our needs met, then we'll be more and more able to extend out from that base to explore our world with openness, curiosity, and creativity. We'll have more of a sense that we can tolerate any tough experiences and regulate our own emotions, as well as a strong sense of trust in that base we can return to if it gets too hard.

Later in life that would translate into building strong, secure relationships with other people in our lives - friends, partners, mentors, communities, etc. - so that we still have a place to return where people can help us [coregulate](#) around the tough feelings, where we can express our needs and have them met, and so on.

Ara: So what's the 'faux window of tolerance'.

James: Most of us carry some degree of [developmental trauma](#): a sense of key relationships not being very secure and of not all emotions - or all intensities of emotion - being tolerated and regulated by those around us. Kathy and Stephen suggest that what therapists call '[defences](#)' are what we develop in order to have a 'faux window of tolerance': the impression that we are tolerating our emotional states, but really we're defending against them.

Ara: That resonated for us.

James: So much. This last year or two we've often wondered how we've done so seemingly okay in life despite clearly carrying so much developmental trauma, such that we've been plunged into intense trauma periods and overwhelming emotion several times over the years. The idea of a 'faux window of tolerance' makes so much sense. It might have looked like we were handling difficult experiences and the emotions they brought up pretty well, but really it

was more that we were adept at various defences, or survival strategies, to avoid or sidestep them.

Ara: I think that fits well with what we discussed [last time about emotions](#) James. The sense that we thought we were pretty good at 'staying with feelings' but have lately realised that there were several vital emotions that we were barely feeling at all.

James: Exactly. So what we were generally doing was repressing feelings, or reacting out of survival strategies in ways which made the difficult experience and/or feelings go away. Part of why the last year or two have been so intense is that we've finally been feeling many of the feelings - and the experiences they resulted from - which we hadn't allowed ourselves to feel along the way.

Ara: And you think it may be useful to conceptualise this as a 'faux secure attachment' as well as a 'faux window of tolerance'?

James: I do. We - and I suspect many, many people - were able to do a pretty good impression of functioning in the world, and relating with ourselves and others, for much of the time because we'd developed pretty remarkable defences and survival strategies. However, the 'faux-ness' became apparent any time something retraumatising happened - beyond the capacity of the defences and survival strategies to cope with - which put us into periods of intense PTSD where the feelings were terrifying and overwhelming and we couldn't function.

The 'faux-ness' was also revealed in most of our close relationships because eventually it became apparent that we - and the other person - weren't really securely attached - in ourselves or with each other - and the relationship ended. Maybe they became more insecure and needy over time and we had to get away, or vice versa, or the level of conflict became unbearable to us. Often it was revealed how much we'd been shaping ourselves to fit that person, and how much we'd lost ourselves in the process, and we finally began to struggle with that.

Ara: I notice that I feel some resistance to the word 'faux' here.

James: Me too. It does feel rather harsh and judgemental, and there's also a sense in it of having been a 'false self' covering up a 'real self' which is something that I would question.

Ara: Being seven selves all of whom are a work in progress definitely raises questions around any sense of a real 'authentic' self!

James: It does indeed.

Faux selves?

Ara: Do you want to say how all this relates to [plurality](#)?

James: Well, if we were to use those terms, we would say that we developed a 'faux part' - Max - who was to the fore for most of our life. She was the one who formed that 'faux window of tolerance' and who formed those 'faux secure attachments'. She would likely have looked pretty happy and successful from the outside, except for the few times - when traumatic things happened and/or relationships ended - when it became very hard for her to maintain that facade.

Ara: We find it so interesting that we chose the name 'Max' for her, given that it sounds a lot like 'mask', which is kind of what she was.

James: And her survival strategies were to dissociate a lot, not that she realised that at the time. Throwing herself into work, and into helping others, both enabled her to keep our own intense feelings, and traumatised parts, very disowned and buried. Busy-ness and distraction was her main 'faux window of tolerance'. Focusing on becoming something for others - rather than bringing herself openly and vulnerably to relationships - was her main 'faux secure attachment'.

Ara: And this is why we don't love 'faux' for her, although it is accurate in a way, because these survivor parts - in all of us - are something we should be deeply grateful for, and celebrate, not dismiss as 'false' or flawed.

James: Agreed. We simply wouldn't be here now were it not for Max. She protected the other parts of us through some truly horrific early - and later - experiences. And she kept searching for answers to all of the tough stuff that we encountered with our mental health, and in our relationships, and that she saw others around us struggling with too. Ironically if she hadn't had the survival strategies of workaholism, and trying to help others, we would not now have this huge foundation of knowledge and writing to build upon.

Ara: We can feel deep gratitude to Max, and huge grief for what she had to go through. One image of her is of the 'parentified child': an inner child or teenager who has to act like an inner parent in order to survive and look after the other parts of the inner system who are even more vulnerable. It's rather like the way a big sibling might have to look after the other kids in a family where parents are struggling, or unable to handle tough experiences and emotions.

James: How it feels at the moment is that we have finally freed Max of that burden and she is off walking in the hills alone somewhere.

Ara: Mm I always think of her when I read the Mary Oliver poem, [The Journey](#). By finding/developing our own inner parents - you and me James - and by working with our three traumatised child parts directly, we have liberated Max.

James: Which brings us on to those parts and how they function in terms of attachment.

Insecurely attached parts under the faux secure attachment

Ara: Go for it James.

James: Right, so this is the idea that all of us have all of the attachment styles present within us. Parts work gives us a nice easy way of working with this. Our experience is that we literally have members of our plural system who map on to each of the forms of insecure attachment.

Ara: I sense a table coming on!

James: How did you guess?

Part (4F)	Attachment style	Main (disowned) emotion	Transactional analysis position	defence against feeling those emotions
Tony (fasten / attach)	Anxious preoccupied	Yearning neediness	I'm not okay you're okay	Veneer of confidence eroticising things deflecting with humour
Morgan aka Beastie (fight)	Dismissive avoidant	Anger / rage	I'm okay, you're not okay	Inner critic - internalising others' criticisms of us
Jonathan (fawn freeze)	Fearful avoidant	Terror / shame	I'm not okay you're not okay	People pleasing hypervigilance pretending to be fine and keeping others happy
Max (flight)	Faux secure covering over	Trapped fear	I'm pretending that I'm okay	Busy-ness, distraction projecting our insecure parts onto others and

	the others		and you're okay	helping them
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Ara: A lot to unpack there James. How about getting a drink before we start?

James: Hot chocolate?

Ara: You read my mind.

James: I was going to say that's not so hard when it's the same mind, but given how poorly parts of us knew each other in the past perhaps I can't say that.

Ara: We're getting to know each other better and better now thankfully. Also I feel like we both do and don't share the same bodymind, given how differently each of us think, feel, and inhabit our body, but perhaps that's one for another blog post!

...

James: Okay then. So to explain the table. We've introduced these four 'traumatised parts' before in various places, although our understanding of them - and how they fit together - has definitely clarified over the past year. Mapping onto attachment theory we'd now say that Tony was our anxious-preoccupied part: needy, clingy and desperate for connection. Morgan - who we used to call Beastie - is dismissive avoidant: struggling to trust others and pushing them away. And Jonathan is fearful avoidant: terrified of that other people will hurt or shame him.

Ara: And the 'okay' bit of the table?

James: Transactional analysis is another therapeutic approach which seems to map fairly well onto attachment theory. The anxious-preoccupied part - Tony - believes that other people are okay, but he's not, so he craves others' love, approval, and attention, and he fears their disapproval, dismissal, and disgust. The dismissive avoidant part believes that she is okay but other people are not, so she tends to blame others and push them away. And the fearful avoidant part believes that he isn't okay and neither are other people, hence Jonathan's [fear/shame](#) trauma response: other people are dangerous and he is wrong and unacceptable.

Ara: But most of our life these three parts have been disowned?

James: Precisely, which does not mean they haven't had an impact. Now we understand it that Max was constantly responding to others' demands inside and out. On the inside she was constantly getting, often rather desperate, messages from Tony, Morgan and Jonathan, about

what they needed. She tried her best to balance and meet those needs. On the outside she was very tuned into what other people wanted of her and tried to balance and meet those demands. No wonder she's off in the hills these days taking a well-earned break!

Ara: So dismantling Max's defences and setting her free, as we did last year, left us with a much clearer sense of the other three traumatised parts. They have been gradually revealing themselves more and more as they've come to trust us. They're gradually feeling more securely attached to us, and to other people, and they're gradually sensing that their feelings have a more expanded window of tolerance to be held in.

James: Nicely put. What just clicked with me this morning is that not only did Max have her set of defences - or survival strategies - that covered over the others, but each of the 'insecure' parts also have a set of defences that we need to get underneath in order for them to show themselves fully and to feel all their feelings.

Ara: This is so exciting, and it makes so much sense. Do you want to take me through it?

James: Please. The thing that struck me was about Tony initially. He didn't seem to make sense. On the one hand we experience him as this cocky, hot, humorous part of us: very extrovert and craving connection with others. On the other hand we know that he holds the [Deep Yearning of the Soul \(™\)](#). When he does feel his feelings they are often feelings of unquenchable thirst, desperate need, and longing. So how can this seemingly confident part also be the part who feels that he isn't okay and will be abandoned by others?

But with this sense of defences it all makes sense. If Tony is driven by not wanting to feel the traumatic level of neediness and loneliness that he holds then it makes all kinds of sense that he would fling himself into connections by coming over as charming, sexy, funny and so on.

Ara: Mm yes. As he and I [recently discussed](#), tragically that often fetches him up with just the kind of rejection and loss of belonging that he deeply fears. But it does make all kinds of sense as a defence, just like Max dissociating from recognising just how trapped she's been in work and relationships. What about Morgan?

James: Again initially confusing. The part of us who holds anger, even hatred, towards others has manifested our whole life as the inner critic, turning that anger and hatred inwards. But if you look at it from the defence perspective that, like Tony, Morgan was disowned all our life, then it makes sense.

Ara: So growing up we learnt that we must never be needy and desperate as Tony can be, or rageful and resentful at others, as Morgan can be. So both of them defended by becoming the opposite - when they were allowed out at all.

James: Tony faked confidence and made light of his pain, Morgan turned anger in against us rather than ever allowing herself to feel it towards others.

Ara: And our [chalkboard boy](#) Jonathan did something similar.

James: I think so. Deep down he holds that incredibly vulnerable fear and shame, and it wasn't acceptable to admit to those things. So he became the people pleaser who pretended to be fine - in order to keep others happy - and who hypervigilantly figured out what others wanted from him and tried to give it to them.

Ara: Expanding out from our particular experience, do you think there's something for other people in all this?

James: I suspect so. It probably manifests very differently for different people, but it would be worth everyone exploring what their 'faux secure' part looks like, and whether they also have all three 'insecure' parts in them somewhere. How do those three influence the whole system? How do they impact how they relate with other people? How repressed or available are they? What are their defensive behaviours and what are those covering up?

Ara: You've done a great job at overviewing the theory, and how it applies to us, here James. I'm wondering if we might dig into practice a little more now?

James: I'd love to. What did you have in mind?

Ara: I'd like to reflect more on how we're working with this internally and externally. How are we building that 'earned secure attachment' with each of the 'insecure' parts, and how are we bringing awareness of the three different 'insecure' styles into our current relationships?

We've had this radical sense lately that strong relationships are not ones in which we're just securely attached, but rather the ones in which we can honestly and kindly recognise all the different attachments in play.

James: Yes!

Ara: A little stretch first?

James: Also yes.

...

Working with insecure parts internally

Ara: We covered some of this territory in our last post James, about how we're working to help each part to expand their window of tolerance and feel their feelings safely enough, which is also how we're building our earned secure attachment with each of them.

James: You're doing the big space 'drop the storyline and feel the feeling' work with them, and I'm trying to hold them close, love them and hear them when they're struggling. We're also checking in with the 'insecure three' at least twice a day to see where they're at with everything. Because they're so used to hiding themselves and their feeling, it's important to keep encouraging them to deliberately tune in and share where they're at.

Ara: So what else do we need to say here?

James: I guess the new piece is recognising those defences that each of those three holds. Perhaps it feels obvious to go to Tony when we feel yearning, Morgan when we feel anger, and Jonathan when we feel fear, to help them really feel it and be held and heard in it. But there's now this extra piece of recognising that we need to go to them at least as much if Tony is pinning that yearning onto somebody else or falling into over-excited connection or fantasy, if Morgan is going into inner critic anger-inward type noise, or if Jonathan is [chalkboarding](#).

Ara: Those experiences often feel more dissociated - now that we understand what that means. It often doesn't feel so apparent that there *is* a feeling present. There may not be clarity around which part of us is doing their thing, or what has triggered them. There's just a general sense of unease, confusion, or of being a bit scattered or vague.

James: That's right. I think we got it first with Jonathan because we clearly identified him with hypervigilance and chalkboarding. Last year whenever we found our brain going over and over things in that familiar way, I would go to Jonathan and encourage him to go closer to the 'traumado' of [fear/shame](#) feelings instead of desperately trying to solve impossible equations. It had to be very slow and gradual, but eventually we could sit together in the eye of the storm and let it swirl around us, finding a way to settle him there instead of trying to figure everything out which usually made it worse and worse.

Ara: And lately we've taken any - even fleeting - 'noisy' anger in/out thoughts as an opportunity to go to Morgan and encourage her to sit with her feelings of anger. Tony can be very dissociated, but again we've been noticing the kind of thing that's likely to make him feel rejected or lonely when it happens, and encouraging him to drop down into the yearning feeling, with one of us holding him through it.

James: From a [trauma-informed perspective](#) it has to be gradual doesn't it? Feeling the feelings in the times when it feels possible to do so, gradually expanding the window of tolerance so more and more of it is possible to feel. Slowly these parts can drop the defences

more and more, creating a 'secure base' of more gentle time with us every day to return to. And very gradually they can share those feelings with trusted others too.

Ara: More on that in a moment. Anything else to say on the inner work?

James: One thing is how each part's go-to fantasies helped us to understand their resistance, as well as the feelings they covered up. There's a lot more to write about how we use our erotic imagination for such exploration. We sketched out some of it in [this zine](#) with Justin.

Lately we noticed that Jonathan, Tony, and Morgan kept going towards a fantasy where they were welcomed into a home with me. But the way that fantasy played out was very different for each of them. With Jonathan it was about being in a terrifying situation, rescued by me, and taken somewhere safe where he had a lot of time to recover before having to do anything else. With Tony it was about coming to live with me but being convinced that he would mess up and be sent away. He kept acting out until he could admit those feelings and believe my reassurance. With Morgan she came to me very reluctantly. She kept wanting to fight me and walk away, struggling to trust me to really be up for being with her rage.

Ara: So fascinating how those fantasies - and many of the dreams we've had too - echo the processes we're going through in our outer life. Anything else?

James: I guess that the process feels reciprocal. The more the 'insecure' parts learn to trust us, the more of the previously disowned 'unacceptable' feelings they can bring. And the more they bring those feelings, the more trust is built. Welcoming them in those feelings seems to help all of them to become more real, more fully fleshed out. That is partly why Morgan wanted a 'real name' rather than being called 'Beastie' which felt like a caricature.

But on the way towards that more 'secure' attachment with us they often balk at it. They try to resist those feelings, like they can't really believe it's really okay to say that they hate somebody - or us (Morgan), or to beg not to be left (Tony).

Ara: Mm which is perhaps why they have to practise in fantasy before they're able to do that in reality. We've described it as encouraging them to bring the whole palette of feelings, not just the not palatable elements of themselves.

James: We like a bit of word play don't we?

We also find it useful to notice which old experiences keep returning to our mind, and which current ones. With old experiences we can ask where each part of us is at with those. Often it seems that one of them needs to return to that memory and to complete it somehow - by really feeling it, or by saying how they wish they'd been able to respond, for example, if they'd

been more available back then. You and I can hold and hear them through that process, instead of our old pattern of despairing that we kept churning round and round old memories.

With current experiences it's similarly important for all of them - or the one who is particularly struggling - to be heard and heeded. For example recently we deeply listened to Morgan's angry response to how someone treated us and found a response that sat well with her. After that she felt a lot more welcome and 'at home' in us.

Ara: It's not about directly reacting to any 'insecure' impulse they might have, as Max might once have done. Rather it's about engaging in conversation, taking them very seriously, and thinking together how we might respond - giving ourselves a lot of time around it.

James: Right, so instead of Tony leaping into a connection with someone the minute he feels drawn to them, we can notice that feeling and consider how we might move cautiously towards that connection, or whether it's really speaking to a general desire for more contact, or to be looked after internally. Instead of Morgan deciding never to engage with somebody again we can investigate what she's responding to negatively in them, and what might be a safe-enough, bounded way of relating with that person, given what they bring up in her.

Ara: I'm thinking that all these ways of being with them are about demonstrating how loved and respected they are.

James: Which is very easy to do. It's when parts or feelings are hidden that they feel murky or threatening or hard to love. Brought to the surface and into the light they become far easier to love and understand.

Ara: Which brings us onto the final part because I suspect the same is true in relationships with others. When parts of us - and their feelings - are hidden and murky, others may well respond to us with aversion, or by trying to grasp onto the more appealing defensive versions of us. When it's all available - and clear - to ourselves and others, we stand a better chance of having mutually nourishing, open, relationships.

James: Right. But so hard for the parts of us who have survived for years by employing those defences to believe that.

Bringing all our parts into relationships

Ara: So let's explore this. How is it useful to bring the 'insecure' parts into relationship with others? I can imagine people thinking that doesn't make much sense. Surely the last thing we want to do is to relate with others in an insecure way?

James: Mm well part of it is that [Pete Walker](#) bit we find so useful: reparenting ourselves and reparenting by committee. We can't do all this work alone because humans are relational,

interconnected and interdependent. There's only so far we can get as an individual (albeit an individual who is also seven people!)

Ara: There's only so far our inner relationships can take us.

James: Right. I'm thinking that therapy is like an in-between between the inner work and the work of relating to the people in our life. We can gradually bring our 'insecure' parts into the therapeutic relationship in order to notice how they relate with another person, and to experience a different response to the damaging ones they've received in the past.

Ara: It often feels like that doesn't it? That me, you or Fox is taking Morgan, Jonathan or Tony to therapy to give them an hour of practicing doing this with another person.

James: Right, they practise with us at home, and with our therapist in that room. Doing similar things. Like the therapist will point out their defences and encourage them to drop into their body, communicate how they're feeling, etc. They can practise revealing the things that they assume other people will reject in them - because that's what's happened in the past - and experience somebody just being okay with them.

Ara: Maybe a couple of examples?

James: Well like whenever Morgan allows herself to talk about what she'd really like to say to somebody who has treated us badly, our therapist clearly enjoys her energy and her capacity to see through people's bullshit and protect us. And Tony is gradually feeling safe enough that if he shows up in therapy with the energy that he's scared will be 'too much' for people, she'll help him to stay grounded. She'll be up for seeing the vulnerability he's covering over, while encouraging him to go slowly instead of revealing 'too far too fast' as he has in the past.

Ara: And you're thinking that this kind of therapy is a bridge to bringing those parts into more open relation with others?

James: I think that's where discernment comes in perhaps. Who is it safe enough to openly engage with from those parts? Who might we be able to speak about these parts with, without actually bringing them out? What situations might we want to be cautious around, perhaps only bringing you or me to Ara, at least while this is all so new?

Ara: I'm thinking that maps nicely onto what Tony and I wrote about [Dunbar's number](#) too. Discerning where a relationship is at, in our life, and what that means in terms of how open and vulnerable we're able to be in it.

James: Heh our computer just told us it was 'establishing secure connection'. I thought, 'you and me both mate'!

Ara: *laughs*

James: What were we saying? Oh yeah. So we're finding it hugely useful to recognise that Morgan, Tony, and Jonathan are already engaged in all our relationships - of course. And now we continually check in where they're at with them. There's a sense that, instead of denying that we feel any anger, yearning, or fear towards the people in our life, perhaps it's more useful to assume that we will feel all of those things - to some extent - in all our relationships, and to name that - to ourselves, and even with that person.

Ara: Absolutely. There's this paradoxical sense that the more we can allow all of that, the better we'll be able to love that person.

James: The more we know how we hate them, fear them, and want something from them, the better the relationship will be! It is surprising indeed, but it's true. We've navigated recent potentially tricky moments in relationships much better, I think, being able to name to ourselves what those attachments - or potential attachments - are with that person.

Ara: Again an example?

James: Well with one friend we noticed how Tony wanted to fling himself into closer relationship with them, while Morgan had flickers of anger that perhaps they weren't being mindful enough of how vulnerable we are. With another we noticed Tony wishing for more time with them, and Morgan wanting to dismiss them for not making more time for us.

Those two things happened with friends who we talk about this stuff with all the time so we could name it, and they could reciprocate naming the multiple different parts of them in play. It makes it much easier to be able to say 'this part of me feels...' because there's no blame in it. Not 'you're treating us badly' but 'I notice that part of me longs for more time with you and another part of me wants to distance from you because we're not getting it. Can we talk about how we might do time together in future so those parts can have a bit more clarity about where we're at?'

Ara: Mm that's a good example because it turned out that it wasn't that we really wanted lots more from them, or to reject them, we just wanted to understand where they were at more clearly, and what we could expect from them.

James: Discernment is important in knowing who will be up for those kinds of conversations and who won't. Sometimes it's more of an implicit sense - once we've named it all to ourselves - that we need to pull back a bit from this person, or to have a different kind of conversation, perhaps just from one of us Ara.

Ara: Yes, in the deepest relationships we might encourage Tony, Jonathan or Morgan to have the conversation directly, in order to experience that part of us being met well. In less close ones we could report on where our parts are at. In even less close relationships - like a professional exchange - we would talk from one of us as if we were a unified 'I', once we'd come up with our boundary, or request, or whatever it was. It feels important to have at least some relationships where all parts of us are welcome, just as we welcome them within ourselves.

James: I think we're nearly there with this piece Ara.

Ara: One more breath to feel whether there's anything more to add?

*James: *breathes* Okay yes I want to say that it's important to give these processes a lot of time. That's why slow, spacious relationships are so essential for us at the moment. Often we need time to notice that an exchange with somebody has brought some of those 'insecure' feelings up in us, to find the part - or multiple parts - in us who are triggered, to fully drop into what they are feeling, and then to consider together what kind of response, if any, is necessary. We tend to keep ongoing notes on our phone about each of the current situations in play, and keep returning to them over days, or even weeks, until we have a clear sense of the appropriate response.*

Ara: Mm right, and not jumping too quickly to that last stage is so important. As we've said, it might be that the feeling just needs to be held and heard inwardly, or that some kind of communication or clarification is important, or that we need the relationship to shift in some way. We often can't tell which it is till we've had time to go through the whole process. And the more we do this - giving it time, and asking that other people give us time - the more those parts of us relax into the process instead of freaking out and trying to solve it immediately.

James: Criticism and conflict are a particular challenge of course. Morgan, Jonathan, and Tony would reactively go into a blame, shame, or tame response - respectively.

Ara: I like that. Blame the other, collapse in shame, or tame the situation by glossing over it or making it okay for the other person without attending to our needs. But taking time, as a team, helps us find more of an 'I'm okay, you're okay' response, where we value ourselves and the others involved equally.

James: This whole thing also helps us to see much more clearly when we're on the receiving end of other peoples' reactivity: when they are foregrounding their equivalent of Morgan, Tony, or Jonathan - or their Max cover up. We're not there yet of course, but there's a strong sense of [building compassion for others](#) - even when they do react against us - because we're so familiar with those parts of ourselves, and we know the incredibly tough feelings - and the

painful experiences - that they come from. On the way to that compassion, though, we need to fully feel our attractions and aversions to those things in other people.

Ara: The sense I'm left with is that 'earned secure attachment' requires us to hold - and even share - all of our 'insecure attachments'. Without that it would just be 'faux secure attachment' again.

James: Which meshes nicely with [Bonnie Badenoch](#)'s 'radical inclusivity', [Janina Fisher](#)'s 'no part gets left behind' and [Richard Schwartz](#)'s 'no bad parts'. The answer is never to try to eradicate any part, or the less palatable elements of any part. The answer is to welcome them all fully, reach an inner secure attachment with them, and bring them all to all of our experiences in a safe-enough, secure-enough way.

Ara: Nicely put James.

James: Thank-you. And thank-you for doing this Ara. I've loved it, and your reminders to pause have definitely helped me both to enjoy the process throughout, and to not stray into the unwieldy lengths of some of our blog posts.

Ara: Mm there's definitely more to be said about applying this same approach to our relationship with work James, but not for now. Let's keep it a succinct little piece (for us!) at under 7000 words. Time for a walk *smiles*

Relationship conflict and the community of selves

This is an old article from back in 2013 which I wrote before I had much sense of my own plural system. It's interesting to look back and see who I had some awareness of - even back then before they were named and known.

I came across a great example this morning in a paper by my friend and colleague Trevor Butt which I thought could be very usefully applied to relationship conflict.

Trevor was writing about the personal construct psychologist Miller Mair who came up with the idea that, rather than the usual sense that we have that we are one coherent self, we are actually all more like a 'community of selves' who have conversations with one another. This is an idea that I explore in the chapter on ourselves in *Rewriting The Rules*, suggesting that it is important to recognise that we are actually plural rather than singular: that different sides of ourselves come out in different situations and relationships.

We can easily see that this is the case when we think about who we are with two different important people in our lives. We may well feel that we are 'being ourselves' with our best mate and our sibling, but find that the selves we are being are quite different (e.g. outgoing, fun-loving and silly with our best mate; quieter, more serious and responsible with our sibling). Similarly we are 'ourselves' first thing in the morning, during a work meeting, out with a friend, and going through a crisis, but the selves that we are often feel pretty different.

The example that I found so helpful in this article by Trevor is as follows:

[Mair] takes the example of when he was asked to join an interview panel looking for a senior clinical psychologist. He found that he had a wide range of reactions to the candidates when he read their applications. He makes sense of this by separating the different selves he found himself assuming. He named these:

- *Anxious; feeling uneasy at the task in hand*
- *The Teenage Rebel; wanting to kick out the clear favourite*
- *The Reformer; taking a long view about the role of clinical psychology*
- *Mr Fair Minded; wanting to hear all sides of the arguments*
- *Mr Let's Get This Done With; saying that establishment candidates always win – be pragmatic and get the job over with.*

The point of the metaphor is that it helped him to both inhabit and detach himself from each player in the community. He installed Mr Fair Minded as chair of the group, insisting on balancing the other voices. So through reflection, he was able to take a superordinate position from which he could, as it were, own but not be driven by any particular position.

How might this be useful when we're in relationship conflict, or facing difficult dilemmas or decisions in our relationships?

I think that it does two things:

First, realising that we are a community of selves with different needs, feelings, and perspectives on the situation, helps us to explain the horribly tangled and uncertain emotions that we often feel at such times. This, in itself, can offer a big sense of *relief*.

Second, if we can consider the different selves who are in play – in the way that Mair did in his example – then we might gain a sense of increased *agency and control* over the situation as we realise that we can decide who to put in charge of the group, committing to listening to all of the different voices without trying to silence any of them or rushing to determine one which is the 'truth' at the expense of the others.

For example, reflecting on how I can be in situations of relationship conflict or tension I might identify the following selves:

- Baby: scared and confused by conflict and wants to run to wherever feels safest
- Defeatist: has been here before and figures any conflict means the writing is on the wall and we should just break up
- Hopeless romantic: believes love conquers all and perfect relationships are possible
- Mindful me: knows that the thing to do in scary situations is to lean into the fear rather than trying to escape it, to embrace uncertainty, to practice compassion (towards self and others), and to find what can usefully be learnt from the situation
- Duty bound: feels obligated to relationships and committed to not changing anything
- Easy life: wants to do whatever is simplest to get me back to an easy life where I can get on with what I want to do without this struggle
- Angry blamer: wants to make it somebody else's fault entirely so I don't have to take any responsibility
- Relationship realist: knows that all relationships are tough at times, that this is normal, that conflict is in the dynamic (rather than one person's fault), and that the way forward is open communication rather than withdrawing or blaming

Relief

Simply writing these out in this way engenders a sense of relief. No wonder I feel warring emotions and massive uncertainty about what is best to do when many selves are in play with different needs, desires, fears and hopes. Also, I can see more clearly where some of the feelings are coming from and treat myself a little more kindly, recognising that all these positions are understandable given that I am (a) a human being, and (b) somebody who has had the life I've had which has developed these particular selves.

Ways forward

Also, this kind of reflection offers me a way forward which feels clearer and calmer than what I was doing before (getting lost in the tangle or rushing to isolate one 'true' self to listen to and follow).

I can look through the selves and pick an appropriate one or two to 'chair' further discussion (I'm thinking that mindful me and relationship realist are the best bet!). I (or perhaps more accurately 'we'!) can go forward with a determination to listen to all positions with the commitment to hear them and to understand where they are coming from. Listening instead of attempting to silence the more scary selves means that I am less likely to miss anything vital, or to find that one self gets louder and louder in an attempt to be heard. Also, recognition of the full community of selves means that I won't become overly invested in one or more selves over the others. And putting selves that I trust most in the chair means being able to have faith that I will act in the most constructive and compassionate ways when I do act.

Further Resources

You can find my [plural selves zine](#), further writings to come on this topic, and my two slow relating articles (dialogues between Tony and Ara) on [rewriting-the-rules.com](#).

Here is a list of some of the key books and websites about plurality that you might find useful:

- Arntz, A., & Jacob, G. (2017). *Schema therapy in practice: An introductory guide to the schema mode approach*. John Wiley & Sons. schemainstitute.co.uk/understanding-schema-therapy
- 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*. redwoodscircle.com
- Rowan, J. (2013). *Subpersonalities: The People Inside Us*. London: Routledge.
- Rowan, J., & Cooper, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*. London: Sage.
- Schwartz, R. C., & Sweezy, M. (2019). *Internal family systems therapy*. Guilford Publications. ifs-institute.com
- Schwartz, R. C. (2021). *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model*. Louisville, CO. Sounds True Inc.
- Stone, H., & Stone, S. (2011). *Embracing Ourselves*. Novato, CA: New World Library. voicedialogueinternational.com
- Stone, H. (2011). *Embracing Your Inner Critic*. London: Harper Collins.

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