



“Now that we have tools that work, we can look at all this stuff”
Dissociative Phenomena: Case Study & Reflections

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This case study describes some of our experience with dissociative phenomena as a part of my own internal psychological system. Charlotte and I are learning about all of this and wanting to be humble. We would be glad to hear feedback and/or concerns.

Some of you reading this may respond “Of course – I’ve known that for years,” some of you may feel “Oh my gosh. This kind of thing has been happening to me my whole life – it finally makes sense,” still others will feel “This is too weird.”

Brief comments about memory and dissociation: My current perception is that there is a broad continuum between “regular” memory and memory carried by severely dissociated fully amnesic “alter” personalities. “Regular” memory can include vivid memories of important events including images of what happened, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, words that were spoken, thoughts you had at the time, and also emotions that were present at the time. These memories are available to normal recall. If you ask me “Do you remember your wedding?” I will reply “Yes, indeed” and can quickly recall details in all the categories mentioned above.

Severely dissociated fully amnesic parts/alters are the “personalities” people talk about in Multiple Personality Disorder (now Dissociative Identity Disorder). With the most fully dissociated alter personalities there is a complete amnesic barrier in both directions between the adult ego state and the dissociated internal part. The adult in the present has no memory of the original traumatic events and she also has no memory of what happens during the times when the alter is “out” (in control of the body, connected and communicating with the outside world). If the alter comes out during a Theophostic^{®1} session and talks with the therapist/minister, the adult will have no memory of what happened during the time the alter was out and will be amazed at how quickly the session went. The adult might even be startled to notice that the clock suddenly jumped ahead 30 minutes. A complete amnesic barrier in both directions also results in the alter/internal part having no memory or awareness of the adult. The internal part has not been “watching from inside” and does not know what happened when it was not out. Its last memory is of the last time it was out. Sometimes its last memory is of a traumatic event it carries and it has no memory of the years between this traumatic event and the current adult present. Understandably, alters that are isolated in this way are confused and disoriented when they connect with the present and come out. “Who are you?”, “What happened?”, “How did I get here?”, “I am five years old, why am I in this adult body?” The most fully dissociated alters/parts also have amnesic barriers between each other. The internal parts do not communicate or cooperate internally, and sometimes are not even aware of each other.

In between regular memory and the most severely dissociated fully amnesic alter personalities is an interesting zone where less severely dissociated/partially dissociated “parts” carry memories

¹Theophostic Ministry is a trademark of Dr. Ed Smith and Alathia Ministries, Inc., of Campbellsville, Kentucky.

or components of memories. People experience a wide range of intensity/severity of each of the basic ingredients and also every possible combination of the basic ingredients. The amnesic barrier can come down when the part is connected to the present (“out”), resulting in a dual awareness experience (as opposed to “one or the other” being present). One experiences his normal, current adult self being present in some way, but it feels as if his current adult and a child from his past are “sharing” his conscious awareness, sharing his thoughts, feelings, and even behavior. The released amnesic barrier of dual awareness also results in both the adult and the alter remembering afterwards. They will both remember what happens during time when the internal part is out and the adult will retain the memory of any traumatic events that the internal part releases during this time. The amnesic barrier between the adult and internal part can be present in only one direction. In this case the internal part can “watch from the inside” even when it is not connected to the present in any way that the adult is aware of. These parts are not confused or disoriented when they connect with the present. They know where they are, are not surprised by the date, and are not surprised to be in an adult body. People also have internal systems where there are no amnesic barriers between internal parts. The parts in these systems share memories, communicate, and interact to varying degrees. They can even carry on complex interactions without the “adult” being aware of what is happening. (See our note “Internal Family Systems” for additional comments).

In this middle zone of partially dissociated parts it seems like the memory/memories are stored in a package along with an accompanying ego state. More of the experience of being the six year old boy is stored as opposed to just one vivid memory that occurred when you were six years old. At one end of this middle zone, it feels like little more than a particularly intense “regular” memory. If you know what to look for, you can see/feel a faint “shadow” of a child ego state accompanying the memory. I think this is a very common phenomena but most people don’t even “see” it because they don’t know how to interpret/understand the subtle aspects of the experience that indicate something more than a “regular” memory is connected. At the other end of this middle zone, it feels like the complete experience and ego state of a child from your past is present in a very real way.

As I mention in my notes “Theophostic[®], What is Unique?”, Dr. Smith’s training, demonstration, and manual included new insight (for us) into the frequency and importance of dissociative phenomena². One of the most important realizations for us was that mild dissociative phenomena are very common. With this new awareness we were able to see what had been there all along, and became aware of the presence of dissociated parts/pieces in many of our clients. In fact, I think most of us have internal dissociated parts that carry childhood memories and emotions. A lot of people talk about their “inner child.” My thought at this time is that many of these people are perceiving these internal dissociated parts that carry childhood memories and emotions.

An especially common phenomena is to have the painful emotions from a memory carried by dissociated parts. If you ask me about this memory, I will reply “Oh, yes, I can remember that happening” but any of the particularly painful emotions carried by dissociated parts will be

²Dr. Smith discusses dissociation briefly in the 2000 edition of Beyond Tolerable Recovery (pp. 98-102, 148-9). Dissociation is addressed at much greater length in the advanced training seminar and manual.

missing. These emotions will not be accessible unless something triggers or facilitates the dissociated parts to connect and bring them forward.

Prior to the last year and a half of working with Theophostic[®] healing I had absolutely no awareness of any kind of dissociative phenomena in my own life. The first experience challenging me to consider dissociative phenomena in my own life came one night as Charlotte and I were trying Theophostic[®] with me. We were working on my feelings that the Lord doesn't come to me or help me when I get stuck, even though I am asking Him for help, guidance, and comfort. We connected with an amazingly deep and intense place of feeling betrayed and abandoned: "I can't do it. I am stuck and alone. I want help and am asking for help but nobody is helping me/going to help me." I felt like I was "2%" adult in the passenger's seat and 98% angry, discouraged six year old in the driver's seat. A small voice/place in my head was the fully rational 38 year old adult, still holding on to "This isn't true. I know the Lord is good and that He is with me even though I cannot perceive Him. There are reasons He limits his intervention, allows evil in our lives, etc." A much, much louder voice/place was yelling/feeling "You don't keep your promises, Lord. You betray and abandon me. You don't come to me or help me when I need you. Come down here and fight like a man. I HATE you God (and language and thoughts that were more graphic and toxic)." I was very shaken by the clarity and incredible intensity of these thoughts and feelings. I can clearly remember thinking "This must be kind of what it feels like to experience demonic manifestation in my thoughts and feelings or an internal dissociated part being triggered – this is certainly as close as I ever want to get!" As the clock crept past 1:00 a.m. and I was still stuck in this place of flaming anger, deep discouragement, and painful loneliness I remember thinking "If this little guy is still driving in the morning we will have to call all our patients and cancel their appointments. There is no way I can function as a licenced physician if this kid is in the driver's seat." I was still holding on to some degree of denial because I was still thinking "This must be kind of like having an internal dissociated part triggered and connected, but that certainly can't be happening to me, so it must just be something that looks and feels like it."

I had a second potent experience of an internal dissociated part sometime around January of 1999 after the first five or six sessions in which Charlotte facilitated Theophostic[®] ministry for me. Each of these sessions had been powerful and had resulted in important changes in my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This reality was steadily sinking deeper and deeper into my heart and mind, and this eventually had profound effects on how I worked with my personal collection of sins, dysfunctions, weaknesses, and blind spots.

There were some that were painful but that I could at least look at, talk about, and work on – certain things made me more anxious or angry than might be expected, certain people seemed to get under my skin in a special way, certain problems seemed to be particularly difficult for me to solve, certain things I did were mildly selfish or inconsiderate, etc. All of the items in this category met the following criteria: I felt like there was a real chance of doing something about them and they were bearably painful. There was another category that I was vaguely aware of but that I tried (in some subtle and barely conscious way) to avoid seeing or thinking about – "I get along with people when I am working, but in casual context I talk too much, I am pressured, restless, anxious, and just irritating to be around. I get on people's nerves and they don't like to be around me. This is why I haven't had any close friends for most of my life. I have tried unsuccessfully to change these things for more than thirty years." I felt like I couldn't look at this stuff – it was too painful and also felt hopeless. I couldn't conceive of how it could be different. "What am I going to do about it? This is the way I am. To 'See' it will just hurt more and make

me depressed.”

One day I was gently poking around the edges of my dysfunction catalogue. A clear, strong, distinct thought suddenly came into my mind: “If we have a tool that works this effectively, this quickly, this consistently, then it is safe to look at all this stuff. We can afford to acknowledge and deal with anything we can find.” It was like this place/part in my mind ran the feasibility study software again, now that the numbers had changed. Before, the cost of lumber was \$1.25/foot and we couldn’t afford to do the project. Theophostic® was making lumber available at \$.25/board foot, and this reality had fully connected after five or six dramatically successful practice sessions. “We can afford to do it now – go ahead.”

This thought was so clear and distinct that it was almost an audible voice. It was the most potent experience I have ever had of an internal “voice” (as opposed to an external, audible voice as one would experience with auditory hallucinations). Subjectively it felt like it came from inside, but from somewhere “other” than my usual adult self/ego state. It was not just clear and strong, but also distinct and even independent/autonomous in some subtle and odd way. I think this was the second experience that challenged me to consider the possibility that dissociated parts were a part of my internal defense system.

Another profound experience of dissociative phenomena in my own life is that kindergarten and first grade are missing. Thanksgiving 1999 Mom and I were discussing the “I’m too stupid” case study, and she commented “That really would have set you up for feeling stupid when you couldn’t read because of your dyslexia...” She continued to talk about my years at Oakton grade school, mentioning a number of details. I began to feel strange as she described more of the details from kindergarten and first grade. Eventually I blurted out: “I know you and Dad think the dyslexia stuff affected me so much, but I have no memory of anything you’re talking about.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I thought, “My gosh, it’s true. I don’t remember anything she is describing.” I almost said something like: “Mom, you know I never went to Oakton. I went and stood in the playground before school started for a couple days and then they transferred me to Central.” I had the strange experience of cognitively realizing this wasn’t true, even as it felt so true that I almost spoke the words. I argued with my mother about where I had gone to first grade, and I didn’t fully believe that I had gone to Oakton for the two full years of kindergarten and first grade until Mom found my report cards and I read them myself. This experience is described more fully in another case study (see forthcoming “Repression, Denial, and Dissociation: ‘Where did kindergarten and first grade go?’”).

Now I can see a lot of more subtle evidence of internal dissociated “child” parts in my life. If something triggers an intense angry or anxious reaction the pitch of my voice will change. For example, when I am connected to an internal dissociated part that is an anxious child, my voice will get high and squeaky (embarrassing to me and very annoying to others). My vocabulary will change, especially the vocabulary of my thoughts. Often I will edit before I speak, but the internal thought first comes as “Stupid poo poo head – shut up!” instead of “You are being completely unreasonable. I don’t think you are being honest with me or yourself,” etc. My facial expression will become that of a frightened or angry child, with wide eyes and that “overwhelmed” look. Most significantly, I feel like a kid/child inside. As I have become more aware of all this and have come to understand it much better, I can now quickly and easily see all these indicators and recognize – “Yes, I feel like I am six years old, on the playground, and frightened.”

Seeing, recognizing, and understanding this phenomena makes it much easier to understand the “strange” ego states I find myself in when something really triggers me: “Oh. I know what’s going on. I’m six years old, on the playground, and feeling frightened and powerless.” When I can recognize that a dissociative part is being triggered it is much easier for the adult part to navigate the situation appropriately: “I hear you little buddy. Your feelings are legitimate and important and we will listen to you and take care of them as soon as we have some space. In the mean time you need to take your hands off the steering wheel and let me drive (figuratively).” When I can recognize that a dissociative part is being triggered it is also much easier to attribute the emotions to the real source (old memory being triggered) and to let Charlotte help me instead of blaming her for “making me feel this way.”

Seeing, recognizing, and understanding these phenomena have tremendously facilitated my healing work. It makes it much easier to find and connect with missing emotions (the piece that is usually “missing” in my healing work). Many times we have been working on something that should logically be very important but that appears to have no emotions attached. I either feel a vague, distant numbness or nothing at all. We use the simple eye contact technique that Dr. Smith showed us and that we have found so effective for dissociative disconnection. Charlotte does this and makes a simple and gentle request such as “Can I talk to the little boy who felt so unsafe on the playground every day?” Within seconds, feelings are stirring, and within minutes they are connected. We can then move on with the healing work that is not possible until all the pieces are present.

Post note 6/16/01: In “Repression, Denial, and Dissociation: ‘Where did kindergarten and first grade go?’” (forthcoming) I discuss how repression, denial, and dissociation can all be affecting the same memory/set of memories. I am becoming increasingly convinced that this is actually the usual state of affairs. Looking carefully at this current case study, I can now see that repression, denial, and dissociation were all present, even in the examples other than “kindergarten and first grade are missing”. Denial: many of the memories were accessible - I could look at them if I chose to do so, but I chose not to. I chose to look away. Denial was keeping this stuff almost completely out of awareness. The importance of the memories was also downplayed. Repression: repression was affecting many of the memories, since they were “repression style” modified when I did look at them. Painful details were vague and hard to remember, the pain that was present was muted, important connections and implications were obscured. Dissociation: dissociative part(s) were managing this system to some extent. They were clearly involved in deciding to change the policy. The most intense painful emotions were completely dissociated, coming back suddenly, with the clarity and intensity of the original event when the part carrying them connected, and then leaving just as suddenly when the part disconnected.

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