

Last Session (Therapy 5)

Dale Easley's blog

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Last week was my last therapy session for a while. It has been a worthwhile experience, with a resulting increase in self-awareness and reduction in anxiety. Right now, I'm mostly in a good place. There are still some areas of my life than need addressing, but they involve working with other people on things that have a long history. There's plenty yet to do, but I don't think that additional therapy makes their resolution any more likely. Instead, I'd like to reflect one last time upon the impact of therapy.

If you've been reading any of the previous blog therapy entries, you know that I've been working with Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS), an approach that grows out of mediation practices common to all the worlds great religions plus a fair number of non-sectarian approaches. (See, for example, Sam Harris' book *Waking Up*). Most of us experience multiple parts of our personalities that often seem to carry on a conversation in our head. In cartoons, they are sometimes depicted as an angel and a devil sitting on our shoulders whispering suggestions. In the worst mental illness, these voices take on a dominance and reality of their own. However, for most people, the multiple parts are there commented all the time to the point that we seldom distinguish them from each other. IFS helps guide us to distinguish and explore the parts, bring peace among sometimes warring factions, and understand each part's desire for us.

The part the has often dominated my life is one I call The People Pleaser. It developed when I was very young as part of a survival strategy, not conscious but very effective. I learned to read people and quickly determine what they wanted, at least people in positions of authority. People my own age were much more of a mystery. By the time I was in my early 30s, I was a Ph.D. and tenured professor who couldn't identify what he really wanted, only what hoop someone else wanted him to jump through. After I received tenure, I fell into one of the deepest depressions of my life. I began the slow process of seeking my own purpose and meaning. I still work on it.

Another part that has often dominated is one I call Dick Cheney. This part has often led to anxiety, being hypervigilant about identifying possible threats. This part, like the People Pleaser, seeks to keep me safe. He has often worked in tandem with The Critic, the voice that's constantly telling me I'm not good enough. The Critic definitely grew out of my relationship with my mother, who could not give praise without adding a "but..." Looking back, she seems to have

been worried that unconditional love would "spoil me." Between the two parts, anxiety and self-criticism was an everyday feeling for years. Therapy has had the biggest impact on my dealings with these two.

Meanwhile, another part, The Intellectualizer, tries to make sense of things, articulate my experiences, and distance me from strong emotions. This part has been one of the main ones enabling me to make a living. However, the suppression of emotion has come at a cost to other parts, such as The Angry Child and The Lonely Child. Through therapy I came to love and appreciate the latter, being alone, especially to read. The Angry Child was harder to appreciate. I had learned at an early age to suppress it, never showing anger while young. This part had carried the strong emotion for years, acting out through passive-aggression and irritability. I promised to listen to it more carefully. It is closely linked to The Boiling Pot, where I keep my most intense emotions and memories. I have missed the intensity of youth, and I was glad to find that it's still there inside me.

In recent years, the part that I've struggled with the most is what I've come to call The Anti-Marginalization part. Underlying it is a lot of anger and other intense emotions. For me, it is often linked to organized religion, especially the evangelical sort. It includes opposing marginalization due to sexual orientation, gender, race, etc. Growing up in the South, becoming more aware of marginalization has been a lifelong process, and I still get blindsided about my own insensitivity. That said, I've come to appreciate my anger at its base that provides the fuel for standing up and speaking out. This part constantly battles The People Pleaser, but I've managed to make peace by channeling the energy into attempting to do better.

So what comes next? I want to keep writing, go to more cultural events, travel more, and live more fully. I want to carve my own path rather than let someone else determine it for me. Even stating such things causes a bit of anxiety, certainly not a rational response and not enough to stop me. I hear parts calling this navel-gazing and selfishness. However, I believe that being able to love others requires learning to love yourself. A bit cliché, perhaps, but no less true.