

Connecting Doors

By Catherine Klatzker

Two women stand talking in muted tones at the sidewalk gate as I approach on my first day of Group. They wave to the woman striding behind me, and for an awkward instant, I think they are waving to me. We all introduce ourselves; I am the newbie joining an ongoing group of survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I have never met others with my history, and my awkwardness heightens. After a moment, the licensed facilitator, Dorothy, opens the arched door, our signal to enter, and we all choose our places to sit in her home office. One couch, three chairs—for five of us—and Dorothy has her own. I pick the chair directly opposite the door, a watcher nook, and we wait for one person. The size of the office necessarily forms us into a contorted circle.

The heavy arched door is always latched after the last person arrives, so it is still unlocked when Joanne turns the handle and breezes in. Her arms balance lurching notebooks, two bags, a Starbucks cup of something hot, and a snack as she struggles to get inside and lock the door.

Joanne turns, her eyes drill into me, and she says, “You’re sitting in my place.”

One of Joanne’s notebooks sprawls open on the carpeted floor where it has fallen. With her youth and dark hair, Joanne can easily be mistaken for a Gen X daughter of mine. A scarf flops open over the two sweaters she wears; a tattoo snakes up beneath her collar. She has torn jeans, Dr. Martens, dazzling rings on her fingers—and those eyes, her dominant feature. My shoes already nestle under the chair where I’ve gotten comfortable in my cropped pants and nondescript oversized shirt.

I know I will be sharing my history of abuse for the first time today with someone other than my regular therapist, and I am positive there will be no need to mention my alternate identities, parts or “multiple personalities.”

Yet here they are, springing through my inner doors.

Something inside me rattles up against my ribs and flutters in happy recognition, leaps with joy in response to the alternate identities in Joanne’s realm. My child parts instantly find Joanne’s, who are clamoring for attention! It is wild. I have never imagined such an improbable event, that my parts will dance with happiness to find another person’s parts in the vicinity. Joanne walks in the door and our child parts—our tangled, alternate identities—surge and find each other in mutual elation.

I don't immediately know quite what is happening. Before Joanne says another word, though, I know her. I just know her. I recognize where she is, that I have been there, and I know the terrain; it is familiar. She is kindred to me.

"It's just that I usually sit there," Joanne says, backtracking. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"I'm happy to move." My words come too fast, I feel giddy as I smile and sweep my things to the couch and move over. My heart races, my face feels hot.

Inside, I feel happy. Equally puzzled and unaccountably happy. *Someone* is happy.

Dorothy settles everyone to begin background statements, for my benefit as the new member. I listen with the part of myself sitting on the couch, rehearsing what to say when it's my turn.

The rest of me feels like my inner, alternate parts are on a playdate with Joanne's inner "kids." A first meeting of kin. I have never heard of such a thing. I sigh.

It comes as no surprise when Joanne reveals she has a diagnosed dissociative identity disorder, DID. Dorothy starts to tell me what DID is, and I say I know.

Doors open. Which doors? The ones we build with wood, and shape, and paint, and invite selected others to shelter within? Or the inner doors where invitations fly out to the vulnerable among us?

Who goes through, and who leaps with pure joie de vivre to greet you?

Over time, it's clear that Joanne is loved by the Group members who have known her for a few years and accompanied her through a grueling aftermath with her abuser. When she speaks of her alternate identities, her parts, and shares their thoughts, the other women are interested and kind, as one is to a bright, delusional child. They hang on her every word when she describes her inner "personalities," and watching them, it seems to me they are every bit as thrilled as with an irresistible Reality show. I see that they don't believe DID is real, although they know it is real to Joanne. I am deeply distrustful of allowing anyone in Group other than Joanne to know about my own DID. I know their curiosity is idle, not helpful; I have no interest in being labeled by anyone, in becoming a spectacle and sidetracking our serious work on the PTSD we all suffer.

When I speak in Group of the childhood abuse that still contributes to panic attacks and disabling flashbacks, I gird myself for the ordeal. I command myself to not cry, to tell my story

honestly and be done. The woman to my left comments how distant and cold I sound when I speak of that abuse, how “dissociated” I look. Her words shake me, and I feel judged for protecting myself from a flood of emotions that will also be judged. *How else can I be, and live?* It is like being told your resting face is your mean face. My protective face is my cold, unfeeling face, a latched door.

I think, *don't talk to me about dissociated—I'll tell you about dissociated, and this is not that because I'm still here talking to you. I know dissociation.* But I do not say that. I think I cannot “out” myself to potentially dangerous people in this safe place.

Week after week, we enter and lock the arched door to find and speak our truths. In another meeting I disclose that when I'm alarmed, I keep quiet. I am not holding back: When parts of me are terrified, I disappear. This can easily be recognized in a group that, by definition, shares experiences of abuse for therapeutic purposes, yet this information threatens another woman in Group, and I am verbally taken down for suggesting that each of us brings a level of fear with our stories into the room. That she is “in the same boat” with the others in Group is insulting to her, and she is explicit, without saying the word, that I am the crazy one. I tell myself again that “outing” my DID is out of the question.

That intention dissolves when Dorothy asks if I have time lapses, an obvious DID question, requested as easily as asking for my phone number. My DID is even more exposed as I drop hints any traumatized person can interpret: a history of past cutting, medication for flashbacks of PTSD, my disorientation when I find no easy path between emotionally based and physically based realities. It doesn't strike me that I haven't told my parts to keep quiet until, one day, when an alternate identity speaks up in Group.

Joanne announces she might need to leave our circle, that her new work schedule is becoming impossible. She'll try to change it, but she isn't hopeful. My child part blurts out, “It will be *devastating* if you're not here!” She pleads with Joanne to not go, and tears roll down my face as she talks in her younger, higher voice. I don't wipe my eyes because I don't want to acknowledge crying. I pretend to not notice, because then maybe no one will. I never intended for anyone to see my little girl part begging to not lose her friend(s). I am instantly mortified that she has spoken up. Everyone else is stunned by my atypical eruption, my affect is so radically different. I have done exactly what I cautioned myself to avoid.

The window blinds are closed. The only light beams from a floor lamp to my right and a desk illumination behind Dorothy in the corner. A gurgling sound floats out from behind the pocket door to the powder room, toilet tank water with a mind of its own.

Dorothy steers the conversation away from my outburst. This is not a DID group, it is a survivors of childhood sexual abuse group. The distinction is made. It is obvious to Joanne, and maybe to others, when I shift and say, “Of course, you'll do what's best for you, and that's what I want,” an obvious personality switch back to my adult self.

Stigma is real, yet disclosure in Group of my parts appears less earth-shattering to others than to me. I expect disbelief, shame, rejection—violent repercussions that do not happen. It is three days before I can acknowledge the courage it has taken my child part to speak up, expressing my/our deep feelings, and “outing” me.

Even though my alternate identities are more subdued after eight years with my regular therapist, I feel their eagerness as we anticipate seeing Joanne every Tuesday, and Joanne reports the same phenomenon with hers. In Group, she has moved her seat next to me on the couch, and we always sit together after that first meeting. I feel a warm glow as our parts get together with each other. The luxury of their playdates allows me to know they are safe, to attend to the business of Group without dividing my attention. My parts go ahead and make friends without me, and I just tag along, unable to reach out and connect on my own.

The other women do not know this is happening, and I know they won't understand. I wonder if the way my brain erased my early memories has also stunted other normal feelings, my failed connection to others. Without specific memories, do we grieve as deeply as when I lost my mother? *Even that is lost*, I think, without questioning how happily my parts play with Joanne's parts in the same room.

Before long, Joanne and I meet regularly outside of Group for coffee and for long walks. “Do you mind if I take the corner?” she asks when we enter coffee shops. Joanne is asking for *my* seat, where I usually plant myself in public places, and I agree, a little distracted by the sameness of our defenses, reminding me of how a cat often chooses the highest perch in any room—her lookout where nothing can sneak up from behind.

Our parts find each other instantly, yet many times, we say almost nothing, and I understand that something else is happening just barely beyond my reach—a companionship, a rapprochement of some sort: friendship among parts that had always been alone.

I had not understood or appreciated how isolated my alternate identities had always been.

I speak of this to my therapist, and he appears a little astonished that my child parts are getting together with Joanne's. He does not question my experience. I try to mention it to my husband. He doesn't grasp what I am saying, and I drop it. This experience is too outlandish, more so than DID itself. If people knew, it would simply confirm my craziness in a neurotypical world. I savor it in private. I am only now, over ten years later, becoming ready to address the stigma of mental health bias and my history of DID. Who, indeed, makes the doors that shut us off and separate us from “normal”? Have I done it to myself? Have I prevented all those parts of myself from connecting to anyone, to everyone?

The Group for survivors of childhood sexual abuse wanes and tapers off after about fourteen months. Despite one or two heavy-handed members and Dorothy's incapacity to attend to DID, I am grateful to have encountered others who grapple with similar sequelae of trauma, and a few of us stay in touch for a while. When Joanne has a small dinner party at home, every guest finds a ball of Play-Doh at our places, and it is just so Joanne, a pleasantly considerate gesture. We roll the clay around and poke and shape it as we talk to each other about politics and recipes and dogs. Our parts are happy.

Joanne and I were profoundly isolated and alone in our DID microcosms, and then we weren't.

When you are multiple, it feels risky to be "outed," to be known. Who makes the door and who goes through it? What ushered us across this unlikely, suddenly permeable membrane?

My parts are now a background presence, no longer individuated. Yet, something inexplicable reawakens when I see Joanne, and I know this because of physical signs in my body, the leaping welcome out my chest, the comfortable companionship off to the side of where Joanne and I visit quietly. When I notice this, I am thankful. We connected, and we learned something about that connection, following our inner children through fortified portals.

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