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THE ENERGY MEDICINE OF
SELVES

“Sometimes the function of illness is deeper than having something wrong and getting rid of it . . . To catch a glimpse of the forces of the psyche and the unconscious motivation behind illness is astounding.”

Brugh Joy, M.D.

Rather than thinking of yourself as one monolithic person, imagine you are made up of different people. Anyone who has ever said, “A part of me wants to do this, but another part of me wants to do that,” knows about these inner parts. To say “a part of me” is not just a figure of speech, it is a reflection of psychological reality. These parts are not an abstract idea, they are as real as any person, and they exist in everyone. Like the eyes in a peacock’s tail, these many selves are discrete, shimmering components of the personality and the psyche.

Selves are natural and normal. Everyone has them. They express themselves freely all the time in the various roles we play in our lives.

Some of these selves are familiar and acceptable to us. Others lie buried, banished from our lives. These buried selves carry a key to the psychodynamic component of body symptoms. When a part of us has been neglected too long, it emerges through the body as if it is rattling the bars of a cage, crying, "I must express myself. LET ME OUT!" If we do not hear the tugs and calls of buried selves, they eventually poke through the physical form as illness or other difficult conditions. Like great whales, they must come up for air from the waters of the psyche.



THE CONSCIOUS BODY PROCESS—A SIMPLE STORY

Emily, the branch manager of a local bank, slunk into my office with her head pounding.

"It's been a long day, lots of pressure and decisions," she explained. "My head throbs at the end of a day like this."

"Something inside you is trying to get your attention," I said, "as if it is tugging at your shirtsleeve, saying, 'Please come find me.' I guarantee that whatever this 'someone' is, it will enrich your life and may even heal your body."

She screwed up her eyebrows. "Shouldn't I just take my usual pill?"

"That is up to you," I answered. "But wouldn't you rather handle the headache without putting a chemical into your body, just using natural means?"

"What's involved?" Emily asked.

“We’re going to assume that energy needs to shift so you feel like a different ‘you.’ Your headache might lessen or even disappear.”

I instructed Emily to lie down and relax. Then I said, “Tune into the headache, into its energy. Do you get any image or message?”

“I’m sensing something yellow. What on earth is that?”

“Your unconscious is percolating,” I answered. Stay with the yellow and notice whatever happens next.”

“I’m feeling loose. That’s weird, I’m feeling silly and frisky.”

“Why don’t you let that energy fill your body for a moment?” I encouraged her.

“You’re kidding.”

“It was not my idea, Emily. The notion of friskiness came from your headache. Why don’t you trust your body and try it?”

“All right,” Emily said as she rose. She put her arms in the air and took a few dance-like steps side to side.

“You look a little frisky,” I said.

“Yes, I feel it,” she smiled. For a few moments we frolicked. We grinned and laughed together. Then I asked, “How is the headache?”

“Good grief, it’s gone,” she said. And it stayed gone for the rest of the hour.

That whole process lasted five minutes. It has taken me a decade to be able to work with a symptom so succinctly and to use the same approach with any illness.

SELVES AS AN ELEGANT ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE OF HEALTH

In the early 1990s I was combining myofascial techniques with dialogue as I worked with clients' musculoskeletal aches and pains, rashes, and headaches. Over several years patterns emerged, and I wondered if the same dynamics would apply to more serious illnesses. I explored conditions ranging from insomnia to excessive weight, panic attacks to arthritis, colitis to cancer. One overriding theme ran through every symptom—there was a vibrant presence of living, breathing inner selves that wanted to be heard.

The world of selves has been vividly brought to life by the pioneering work of clinical psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone, authors of *Embracing Our Selves*. The Stones discovered that “we are profoundly affected by an array of inner voices that shape our attitudes about who we are and who we should be. These selves call out to us constantly in our daily activities, in our moods, in our dreams, and in our relationships.”

Most of us are familiar with the outer family into which we were born, but what is fascinating to consider is that we have an inner family as well. Learning about this inner family is an insightful component of personal growth because some the members of this inner family are in control of our behavior and our feelings.

PRIMARY AND DISOWNED SELVES

Hal and Sidra Stone call a predominant part a “primary” self. Every primary self has an equal and opposite part that the psychologist Carl Jung called the “shadow” and that the Stones

call “disowned.” For Emily, the part carrying out responsibilities is the primary self, and the part that wants to frolic is disowned. Whatever the disowned self may be—and we will meet many—it holds gifts beyond measure as it offers an entirely different view of life, a distinctly different set of options, and a vibrantly different energy in the body.

A primary self maintains control by handling life and operating in our best interests. It fears that if we act a different way, life might not work anymore, we might lose our job, or people might not like us. A primary self can be deathly—sometimes literally—afraid to let a disowned self take a place in our life.

THE SELF BEHIND THE SYMPTOM

Max had an itchy, scaly rash for two years that began on his wrists. Soon it spread to his arms. He consulted a dermatologist who attributed it to stress and gave him cortisone shots to stop the itching. But Max did not feel stressed. He was a vivacious, happy, upbeat man, spiritually astute, always looking on the bright side—at least that was the persona, the primary self, that he showed to the world.

When we explored his rash with the Conscious Body process, another side of his personality appeared. It cried, “I’m not happy at all. I feel hopeless, both at work and in the marriage.” Max had been unaware that beneath his effervescent exterior laid a part of him that was gravely sad.

Max willingly let himself feel his sadness. When he returned the following week, the two-year-old rash was 100 percent better.

A year later the rash reappeared. As we worked with it, the rash guided Max to a young part of himself that had felt

bewildered by sexual energy in his household. Max's mother had lacked clear boundaries and had flirted with the young boy. In session, Max experienced the confusion, sadness, and anger he had felt. He also clarified what was normal and what was out-of-bounds in his own sexuality now. He dove to these depths in himself, and the rash cleared up again.

A disowned self is the perfect prescription for what ails us. No one enjoys a headache, but instead of knocking it out with aspirin, we can look for the disowned self. Rather than treating a body symptom as something to eliminate, we can welcome the burgeoning life that a disowned self represents.

DIAGNOSTIC PRECISION

Common sense or a good therapist can often pinpoint the underlying cause of many symptoms. Yet if improvement is elusive, specific details of the inner story hold the key to healing.

Once I wondered why I got the flu. It seemed logical that I needed time off from my busy schedule, but when I did a Conscious Body process, the self behind the flu spoke. To my surprise, it wept about the fact that I was moving to a new home. I got well the same day. I ascended from conjecture—"I need time off"—into exactitude—"I don't want to move"—and found the precise healing energy for the condition. The mystery was no longer a mystery. And just by acknowledging the disowned self, without changing any action, the symptom healed.

This differs from guessing the inner cause of an ailment by the effect it is creating. Some people feel they become ill because they needed to change their lives, and the illness

becomes their guide—it slows them down, it connects them with loved ones, it teaches them to receive. These are precious gifts of any illness. But we are talking about a different level of inner work in which we discover the gift of illness at another level, one that is often surprising and quite precise. When Conscious Body is taken seriously, it becomes a partner in the diagnostic process.

EACH SYMPTOM IS UNIQUE AND INDIVIDUAL

If you share a symptom with any of the examples here, you may wonder, “Perhaps my own headache is related to my need to play,” or “Perhaps my rash stems from my own need to get angry.” It is better not to generalize but to approach each symptom as unique. One rash might unearth sadness, another straight-talking anger. Carl Jung said, even though he had developed sophisticated systems for understanding human psychology, he did not try to fit clients into any preconceived mold. He treated each client as if he were starting from the beginning without assumptions. Physical symptoms are best approached with the same latitude.

TIME FRAME

Time frames for healing, if healing comes at all, vary. Sometimes healing happens quickly because a person can unearth and fully express what was being held inside. In these cases, pain can dissolve instantaneously or a rash can disappear within twenty-four hours. Just separating from a primary self and bringing in a disowned self solves many health problems.

Other situations take more time. One client likened the search for the self behind a body symptom to an archeological dig. As he dug down in levels, he unearthed civilizations. Sometimes he took out the little brush or pick and delicately extricated the treasure, and sometimes he brought out the tractor and took mounds away.

New pain and chronic pain follow the same laws. It takes courage to look within and discover long-standing issues behind chronic pain or serious illness. Freshly discovered selves may deviate radically from long-held beliefs and behaviors. This requires time to integrate.

The harried businessman whose heart disease reveals the desire to spend time with his family faces major lifestyle and attitudinal changes for healing to take root. The woman with ovarian cancer who discovers she thirsts to be selfish and not take care of others needs to return to this over and over again. A person who has lived a lifetime with repressed anger must keep letting the steam out. Each of these people needs to keep taking the “pill” of the disowned self for its energy to permeate their systems.