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Jerome Burne interviews John Kent

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You know when you're faced with a tricky decision and you say "I'm in "two minds about this", what exactly do you mean? Is there really a second mind and if so does it exist all the time or only occasionally? And when you've done something out of character, usually bad or embarrassing, you might say, "I wasn't myself." But if you aren't yourself, who are you?

Such questions might not seem out of place in a philosophy seminar but they are also the kind of questions that keep coming up as soon as you get involved in a psychotherapeutic technique that's new to the UK. Called Voice Dialogue, it originated in the States as a way of getting in touch with those parts of our personality that are usually kept hidden away.

The results can be startling and revealing. You may realise that you've got a much bigger and richer inner life than you ever thought possible. It can also create those "Ah ha" moments when the reason for something that has been making your life a misery becomes blindingly clear. It may reveal why the rows you have with your partner follow such a grimly predictable pattern and, most importantly, how to change it.

The basic idea is that we are not just sometimes in two minds or selves but that we actually have lots of them. "The name of the game is conscious choice," says John Kent who is a Voice Dialogue facilitator. "Those selves that we are not aware of often have a strong influence on us. But once you start talking to them and become more aware of them you begin to develop the capacity for more conscious choice as to how strong an influence they have on your behaviour."

However getting in touch with these black sheep of your psyche can be frightening and that's where a facilitator comes in. "Your disowned selves have been banished for a reason," explains John. "Your primary selves, the front we show to the world, regard them as a threat which means we often begin by experiencing them as shameful or monstrous. So I make it possible to get in touch them in a safe and non-threatening way."

So what exactly happens? "You start by sitting opposite but fairly close to the facilitator," explains David, a massage teacher in his forties who has been seeing John. "Then you talk about what is happening in your life. Like recently in a session I was having this feeling of being short of breath with a tension in the middle of my chest. So John suggested I talk to it. Voice Dialogue is about what presents right now.

"So I moved my chair. It sounds simple but just moving to a new position that feels right for you at the beginning of a dialogue can change your state. Immediately I had this rush of energy and felt excited.

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I started talking to a self that wanted to make things happen. I called it “Ready to Go.” But then just as fast my energy level suddenly dropped and all the excitement drained away.

“I shifted again to talk to this new part and had a revelation. I felt I had to squat on the chair this time and out came a quite different self who was squashing my energy down. I’d never been aware of him before. I called him “The Sitter on the Lid”.

“As we talked it became clear he was a big part of me and he kept my go-getting part down. Now that I’m aware of him the reason for lots of things about my life has become much clearer.”

While various therapies such as Gestalt and Psychosynthesis also make use of inner selves and sub-personalities, one of the big ideas of Voice Dialogue is that they are real with their own needs, opinions and perceptions. What this means is that if you aren’t aware of them, like David and his Sitter on the Lid, they are going to take over at times and the result can be a big surprise.

This is what happened to John some years ago when he was travelling with a girlfriend in Japan and he had a shocking encounter with one of his own black sheep “My self that’s on display is pretty rational, calm; back then I thought that really who I was,” he says. “My girlfriend and I had been arguing for days and suddenly I was chasing her around the flat. I really wanted to strangle her. She locked herself in the bathroom and I kicked the door down. Of course I was mortified and did a lot of apologising. I probably said I wasn’t myself.”

Now John has given that angry and violent lost self a voice, christened him Killer and brought him into his mental family. “He’s actually really valuable. Not to strangle people but there have been times when having his energy and courage was really useful.” The point about doing Voice Dialogue is not to fix or change those selves but to get in touch with them and handle them more consciously. “Each one can bring you gifts,” says John.

Voice Dialogue is the brainchild of two married Californian therapists, Hal and Sidra Stone, both now over 70. When they first met 40 years ago their take on psychology couldn’t have been more different. He was a traditional Jungian therapist concerned with symbolism and the collective unconscious, while she was a classical behaviourist, a self-confessed “Skinner groupie” who believed all behaviour was based on reward and punishment and that an inner world was a myth.

Recently they discussed the way that Voice Dialogue can change the experience of ageing. “If you haven’t established a relationship with your various selves,” says Sidra Stone “your inner critic can rip your heart out in the ageing process. There’s a basic feeling of stuckness as you age if you haven’t developed the flexibility to explore different selves.”

But Voice Dialogue can also have benefits much earlier at the beginning of a relationship. “People often feel drawn to someone who has their personal disowned selves out there on display,” says John. “It makes you both feel great; you complement each other; you feel more whole being together.”

But what happens after the first rush of infatuation? The relaxed attitude to life you so admired in your lover at first can begin to grate if you are more of a go-getter. This is where Voice Dialogue can make a big difference.

A facilitator can create a safe space where both of you can give those scary or shameful selves a voice. Instead of you both getting stuck in defending your corner and hurling accusations at one another - "You're so uptight"; "You're so hopeless" - you can each discover your own disowned, uptight or hopeless side.

"It can catapult relationships into a new dimension," says John. "Instead of grinding through familiar routines of blame and denial, you've suddenly got a whole new set of players to deal with."

In fact recovering lost selves and giving them a voice is just the first step. John's ultimate aim is to help you carve out some sort of psychic centre where you aren't just reacting as a Killer self or a Doormat self, a Pusher or a Pleaser or any of the other selves that commonly turn up. Exactly who "you" are then is probably best left to the philosophers but when being in two minds or more becomes normal you get many more possibilities of how to behave.

But what if you are perfectly happy with your primary selves? Is there any point in doing Voice Dialogue "Why wouldn't you do it?" asks David. "I've watched people doing a session in a workshop and afterwards their faces are just alight, like a kid in sweet shop. They can't believe how much they contain. So much more variety is open to them than they had ever believed possible."