

Triangles (and circles) of selves

A plural selves zine by Fox (of Team MJ)

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Introduction

This zine is a summary of a bunch of related ideas about plural selves. They're ones that we - as a plural system - have found particularly helpful lately. When we've shared about them several people have asked where they can read more. There isn't really anywhere that weaves all of the ideas together, so this is my attempt to provide something. It's an overview of the kind of thing that we want to write a whole book about. That book would take more room to explore all of these ideas, how they weave together, and how we've worked with them ourselves. In the meantime, hopefully this gives you the basics.

It's important to say that there are a [plurality of different ways of understanding plurality](#). These can be complementary and/or contradictory. The ideas I explore here are just *one* set of understandings that we've found useful. It's totally fine if they don't work for you, or if some aspects resonate and some don't. We're all finding our own paths on these journeys and we offer this zine in the hope that it might help illuminate your path. If it doesn't, please do look elsewhere. The resources listed at the end of the document link to other ideas and traditions around plurality. As with everything we write, this is a work in progress for us, and our understandings may well shift and shift again as we find out more on this path.

If the amount of writing in this zine is inaccessible for you, we touch on similar ideas in our [Plural Selves 2](#) zine, which is picture-based, and/or you can just dip into the pages here which look interesting to you from the contents/images.

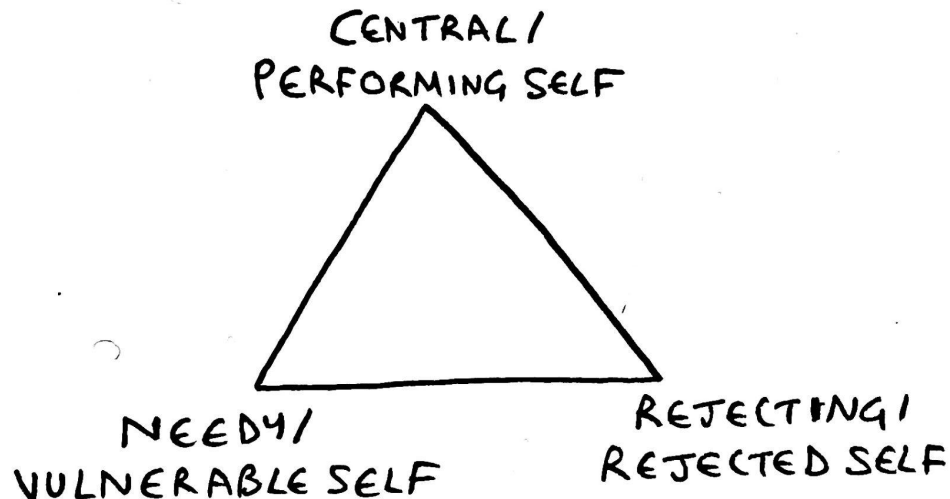
In this zine I start with a triangle model of self systems that we find helpful. I link this to other models that you might already be familiar with. Then I explore how this developmental/relational model might link to more existential/spiritual ideas, and to ideas about the impact of social forces on diverse bodyminds. Finally, I explore cultivating circles to hold the triangle, and how this can help to free up the system and bring all selves home.

A note on illustrations

Rather than putting full image descriptions for each triangle, I've labelled each one underneath in the order of: top corner - bottom left - bottom right. Concentric circles are labelled from the outer to the inner circle. Circles surrounding triangles are labelled in the order of: top half of the circle, then triangle in the usual way, then bottom half of the circle.

Triangle of selves

The main idea here is that people tend to create a singular central self - the self that they perform out in the world - by creating, and pushing out of their consciousness, two other selves. We might call these two the needy/vulnerable self and the rejecting/rejected self.



Central/Performing (C/P) - Needy/Vulnerable (N/V) - Rejecting/Rejected (R/R) Selves

Most people, most of the time, are only aware of the central/performing self, assuming them to be who they *really* are because:

- The needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves are heavily disconnected - or dissociated - from. This is because we learnt, growing up, that we musn't reveal them, and also because they carry all the feelings that we find unbearable.
- Dominant culture tells us that we are a singular self, and that experiencing ourselves as plural is a sign that something is wrong with us.

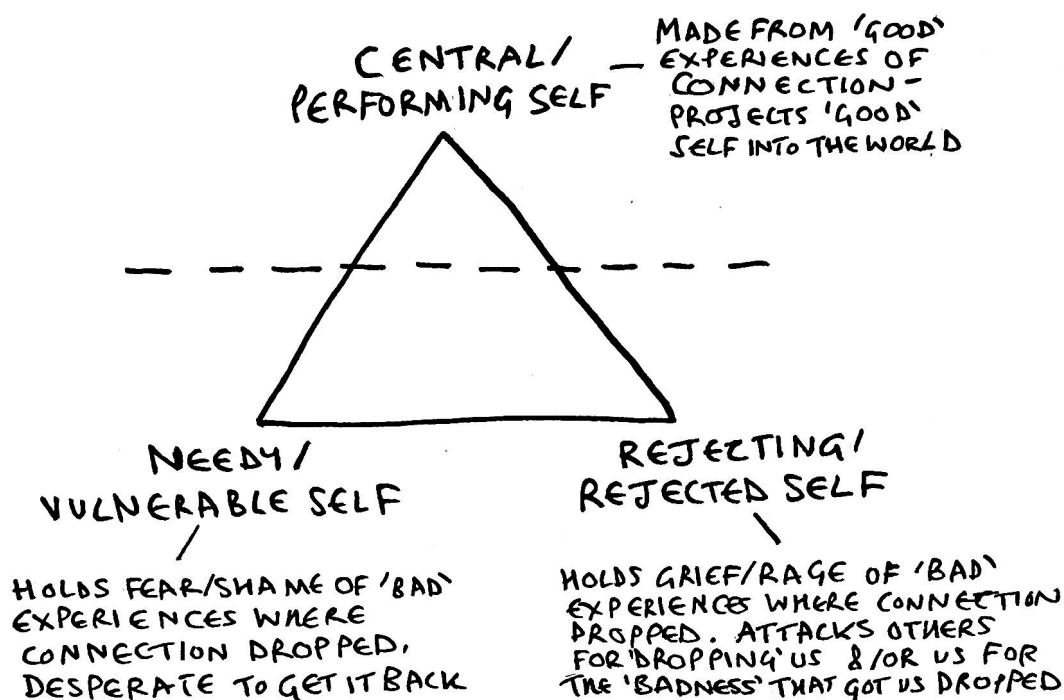
The psychotherapist, [Ronald Fairbairn](#), put forward one idea of how we develop this kind of *self system*. Like many therapists and psychologists, he suggested our earliest relationships - and how we're met there - has a profound impact on how we relate to ourselves, to other people, and to the world around us, from then on. This probably starts even when we're in the womb and we feel the bodies around us responding to us. It certainly shapes us in profound ways once we're out in the world with other beings.

When we're little, our caregivers are sometimes able to attune to us, connect with us, tend to our needs, and help us to [bear our feelings](#) when they are painful. Sometimes they can't manage this. That might be because they are too stretched and stressed in [capitalistic models of work and family](#), because of the impact of the ways that they too - were not met - as children, and for many other reasons.

Good and bad connection

As little ones we experience moments of disconnection or rupture in relationships as 'bad', and moments of connection (or rupture repair) as 'good'. This makes sense given that - as a helpless baby - disconnection could be profoundly dangerous. We would die if we were actually abandoned or cast out by our caregivers or community.

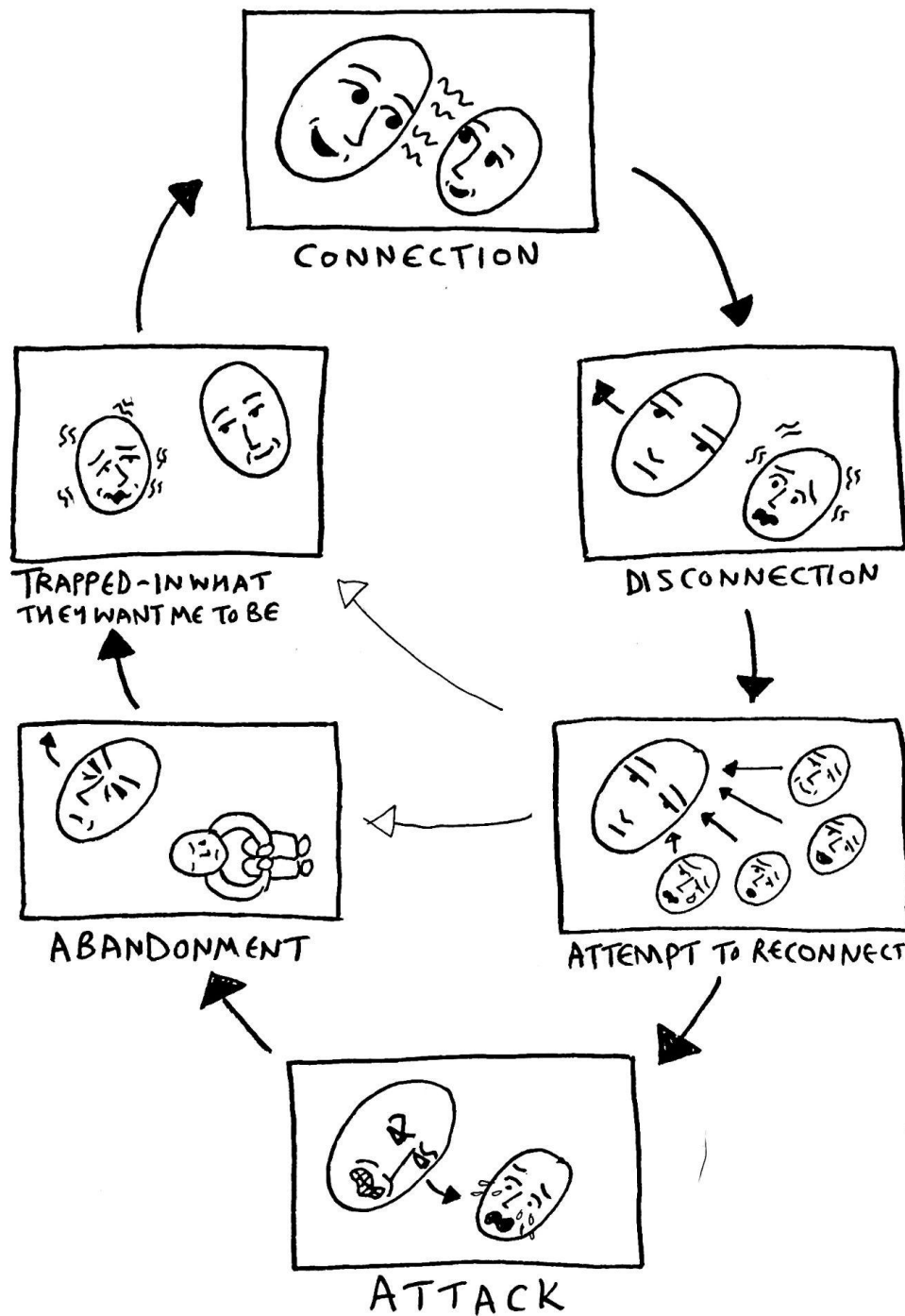
Ronald Fairbairn suggested that we create our central/performing self out of all of the 'good' experiences of connection that we have. From all the 'bad' moments of disconnection we create the needy/vulnerable self and the rejecting/rejected self. The needy/vulnerable self is always longing for, and trying to get back, the 'good' connection which they lacked or lost, turning themselves into whatever they think is required for that to happen. The rejecting/rejected self is always alert for the 'bad' in others. They try to get others to acknowledge that they are 'bad' and reform themselves - or they reject them if they won't. This self also defends against, and rejects, anything within us that could be 'bad' in a similar way. This includes things similar to the 'badness' we encountered in others, and anything we were taught was 'bad' about ourselves.



C/P Holds & Projects Good - N/V Craves Good, Fears Bad - R/R Rejects & Holds Bad

Both the needy/vulnerable self and the rejecting/rejected self are split off and cast out, or pushed down, into what's been called the unconscious, or the shadow. That explains why many people are completely unaware of them and experience themselves as a singular, central, self performing in the world. They likely experience themselves, others, and the world as generally good, and hold mostly positive memories of their life. But they may have a sense of uneasiness around this, of being an imposter or fake, and/or of something missing in themselves.

The extent that we repress or deny the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves probably relates to the degree of disconnection we experienced when we were young. While the idea is that everybody develops a self system like this, it may happen more profoundly when we've been intensely abandoned, attacked, or trapped when we were little (for example if we experienced neglect, abuse, or grew up in unsafe conditions). However, we all probably have some experiences - with individuals or groups - like the illustration below. This whole cycle can play out with the same person or group at home and/or school. Or different parts of the cycle may play out with different people, groups, or communities.

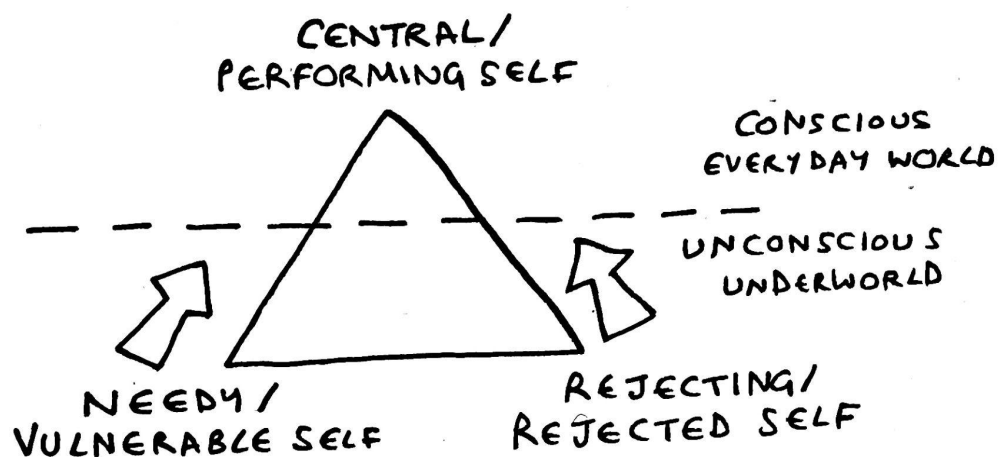


The loop: Circular images of small face connecting with large face, then large face disconnects, small face makes multiple attempts to reconnect, then is attacked, abandoned, and becomes trapped in being whatever the large face wants of them

Traumatised/traumatising relating

It's worth remembering that we don't always have awareness of these kinds of experiences, or recognise them as trauma. Some traumatic experiences are minimised or common in dominant culture (like emotional neglect, and abuse from peers). Some are a cumulation of many seemingly 'minor' experiences. Some things seen as positive are often experienced as traumatic (like surgeries or hospital stays). Also we don't always remember things that happened when we were very young, and trauma can be carried on from past generations.

Whatever form it takes, these disconnections mean that the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves are cast out, but they continue to have a major impact on our behaviour. They pull and push us in certain directions, which may be contradictory and confusing at times. Under situations of stress or trauma, these selves often leak - or lash - out, sometimes fully eclipsing the central/performing self. We might experience this as an internal experience of confusing thoughts, overwhelming feelings, and/or out-of-character actions. We might experience it more externally - as voices screaming at us or as scary visions for example - because of how cast out and disowned these selves often are.



C/P Conscious Self Influenced by Unconscious N/V & R/R Selves

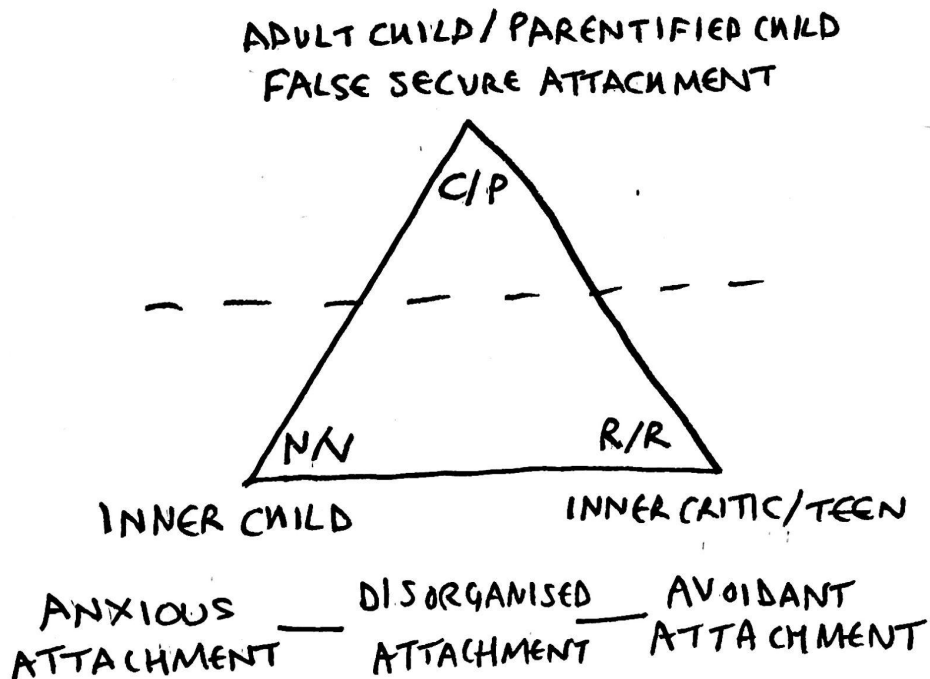
Underneath their attempts to get the 'good' back, the needy/vulnerable self carries all our terror and shame at losing the 'good' (to others abandoning, attacking, or trapping us). Underneath their attempts to reject the 'bad' in others and/or ourselves, the rejecting/rejected self carries all our hurt and rage at being unwanted, cast out, and treated as 'bad' and unacceptable (when others abandoned, attacked, or trapped us).

Related triangles

Even if you haven't come across that idea of these three selves before, you might well have come across some related ideas, all of which capture something similar.

Inner selves

For example, the [idea](#) that we all have an [inner child](#) and an [inner critic](#) is pretty common. You could definitely map these two onto the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves. Some [reparenting](#) ideas refer to an *inner child* and an *inner teen* (rather than inner critic). This can be helpful because the inner critic is so often seen as something bad - outside of ourselves - which needs to be fought, mastered, or eradicated. In our experience it's much more accurate - and useful - to see this self as an integral part of our self system who needs just as much understanding and tenderness as the inner child. Also, in our experience, the rejecting/rejected self includes both the outer critic (who attacks outwards and blames others for not being what we want them to be) and the inner critic (who attacks inwards and tries to eradicate everything 'bad' in us in order to make us 'good' and acceptable to others).



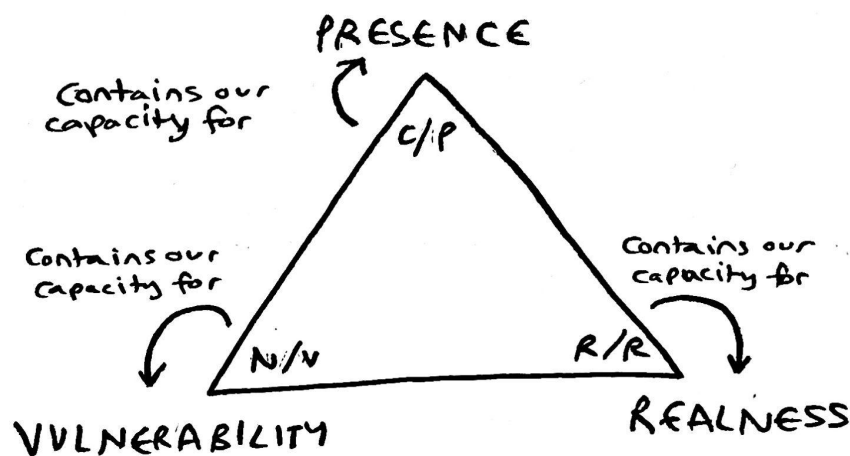
Children: C/P Adult/Parentified Child - N/V Inner Child - R/R Inner Critic/Teen
 Attachment: C/P False Secure - N/V Anxious - R/R Avoidant
 Disorganised = moving between N/V & R/R

Attachment styles

As you can see from the triangle on the previous page, this idea also relates to the popular relationship understanding of [attachment theory](#). We could say that the needy/vulnerable self is *anxiously attached* (desperately seeking intimacy and always trying to get others), and the rejecting/rejected self is *avoidantly attached* (dismissing others and avoiding getting close). Many of us flip between the two as we long for attachment and then distance from it when it doesn't bring us what we hoped for (*disorganised attachment*). We wouldn't say that the central/performing self has *secure attachment*, but that it's a kind of false secure attachment that comes with not actually getting that close to others, perhaps based on an implicit agreement never to touch each other's 'no-go zones' (the things that could trigger the needy/vulnerable or rejecting/rejected selves).

In our experience it's not quite as simple as the needy/vulnerable self being driven towards relationship and the rejecting/rejected self away from it, as implied by the anxious/avoidant binary. Rather the needy/vulnerable self pushes *towards* the kind of relationship that feels like what they lacked or lost. But they also become very scared and *withdraw* if they can't get that kind of relationship, or if they are plunged into their fear/shame place by rejection of any kind. Also the rejecting/rejected self pushes *towards* relationships that might affirm their rightness (often with a demanding/controlling flavour), only *withdrawing* into dismissing/avoiding when people fail to validate them or measure up to their standards, or when they hurt them in ways that feel familiar from how they were hurt in the past.

Many authors agree that intimacy requires the capacity for three things: presence, [vulnerability, and realness](#). Intimacy isn't really possible if we're trying to project a good self to the other person and the world (rather than being present with them, and ourselves, as we are). It also isn't possible if we're hiding the selves that hold our capacity to be vulnerable (our needy/vulnerable self), or our capacity to be honest, real and boundaried (our rejecting/rejected self who holds so many truths about who we are and what we've been through). This is one of the reasons that befriending and liberating all our selves is vital.

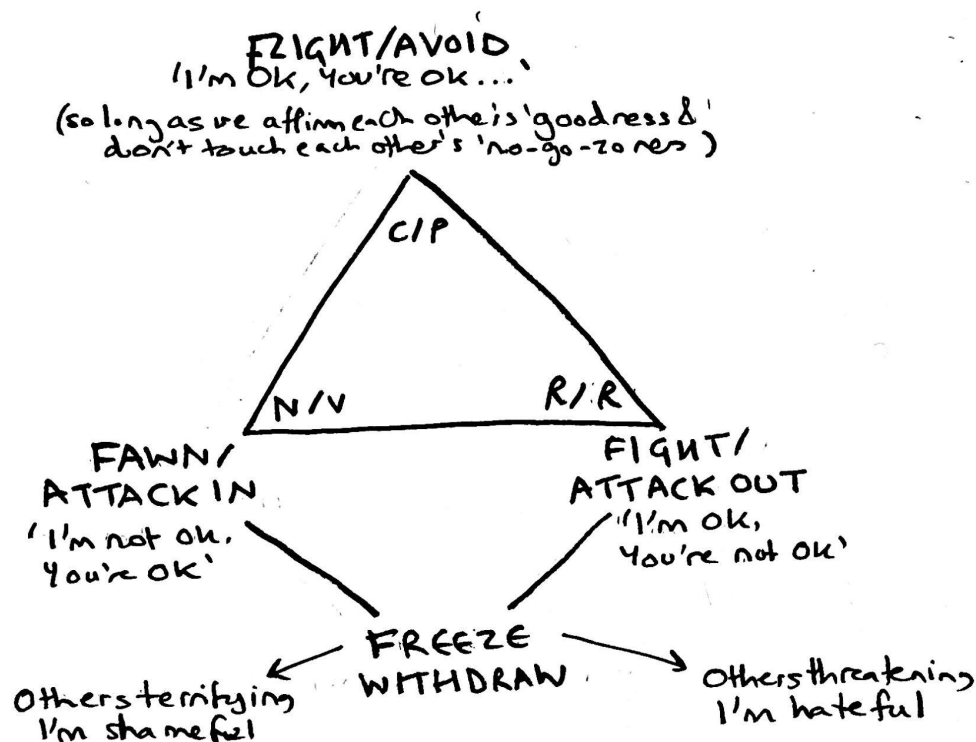


C/P Contains Our Capacity for Presence - N/V Vulnerability - R/R Realness

Trauma patterns

You might have come across the [4F understanding of trauma survival strategies](#). This is the idea that, under conditions of stress or trauma, we habitually tend to respond with *flight* (denying, distracting behaviours), *fawn* (people pleasing, placating behaviours), *fight* (attacking, controlling behaviours), and/or *freeze* (withdrawing, avoiding behaviours).

We could see *flight* as the domain of the central/performing self who tries to stay busy and distracted, doing lots of things to show they are a 'good' self, and/or to keep the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves at bay. *Fawn* is the domain of the needy/vulnerable self who is trying to get our needs and desires met, and becoming what others want us to be in order to do that. *Fight* is the domain of the rejecting/rejected self who demands others' validation and tries to control others' perceptions of us, attacks them if they aren't what we want us to be, and attacks us to try to make us all 'good' and no 'bad'.



**C/P Flight/Avoid - N/V Fawn/Attack In - R/R Fight/Attack Out
N/V & R/R go to their Versions of Freeze/Withdraw if Strategies Fail**

In our experience, the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves each have their own versions of *freeze*. As we gradually brought them into the light, and stopped acting out of them, we felt the feelings they'd been hiding with all their survival strategies. Underneath their attempts to be what others wanted us to be, the needy/vulnerable self held the terror and shame of all the times we were hurt/abandoned. In that place they froze into withdrawal from a world, and others, who seemed terrifying and likely to expose us as fundamentally bad. Underneath their attempts to control others and make us 'good', the rejecting/rejected self held the hurt and rage of the times we were hurt/abandoned. In that place they froze into withdrawal from a world, and others, who seemed deeply threatening and untrustworthy, always about to reject, hurt, or trap us again.

Shame

As the triangle on the previous page shows, in relation to the [shame compass](#), we could see all these selves as ego strategies to avoid the horrendous experience of shame: the sense that we are fundamentally 'not ok'. The central/performing self tries to project a 'good' self out into the world and *avoids* anything about themselves that could be shameful, all of which is held out of consciousness in the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected self. However they may always have a queasy/uneasy feeling that something isn't quite right, that they're faking it somehow and may get found out.

When something happens that makes us feel exposed, attacked, or blamed as something 'bad', we may collapse into our needy/vulnerable self and *attack in* believing we are fundamentally wrong, or defend as our rejecting/rejected self and *attack out* putting any wrongness onto the other. If these strategies fail, then we might *withdraw* completely.

OK-ness

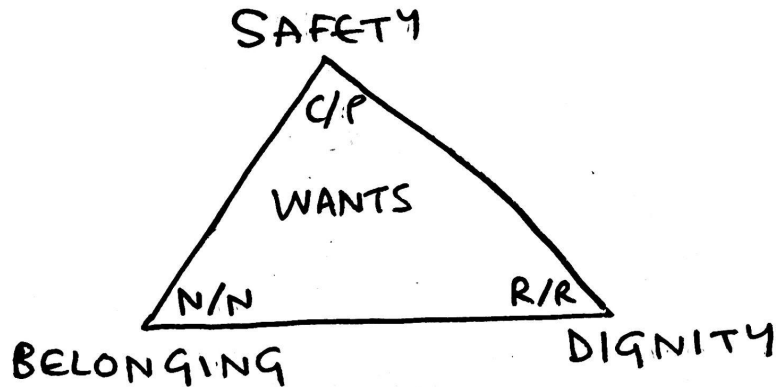
This maps onto the [transactional analysis](#) idea of '[I'm ok, you're ok](#)' positions. The central/performing self feels that they, and others, are ok, but with an undercurrent of unease as they sense that they could easily plummet into the needy/vulnerable or rejecting/rejected selves (or unwittingly push others into their versions of those selves) if certain 'no-go zones' were hit. The needy/vulnerable self operates from a place of 'I'm not ok, you're ok' (except when they are getting their neediness met when they can briefly have a high feeling of extreme ok-ness). The rejected self operates from 'I'm ok, you're not ok' (with a few exceptions for people who validate them who are deemed 'ok'). Both of those can drop into the toughest place of 'I'm not ok, you're not ok' when needy/vulnerable has nobody to pin their longing upon, and so becomes fearful of everyone, or when rejecting/rejected turns their attacks in against themselves, and experiences everyone as a potential threat.

In relation to conflict this all means that the central/performing self is likely to avoid conflict in one way or another, the needy/vulnerable self is likely to assume that they are wrong and the other is right in conflict (placating or collapsing), and the rejecting/rejected self is likely to assume that they are right and the other wrong (defending or attacking).

Because they are kept down, it can be extremely frightening for either the needy/vulnerable or rejecting/rejected selves to be exposed in their strategies, and even more so to be exposed in the feelings underneath them. This is why we can find it incredibly hard to be 'caught out' acting in ways that are sketchy, manipulative or dishonest (needy/vulnerable) or brittle, judgemental or self-righteous (rejecting/rejected), for example. We might well find it even hard to be exposed in a full on fear/shame, or rage, response (like a melt down or shut down). We may struggle to remember or acknowledge when these things have happened and/or remain haunted by them in incredibly painful ways.

Selves priorities

Another triangle that seems to map onto what we're exploring here is this one that we got from [Staci Haines](#):



C/P Prioritises Safety - N/V Belonging - R/R Dignity

Staci Haines suggests that we constantly seek three things in life: safety, belonging, and dignity. Most - perhaps all - of us learn that we can only have these things at the expense of each other. We could see it as the central/performing self trying to keep us safe-enough even if we don't get belonging or dignity. The needy/vulnerable self pushes us to get belonging at all costs, even if it risks our safety and/or dignity. Our rejecting/rejected self pushes us to get dignity, even if it risks our safety and/or belonging. When unconscious, these selves are often in conflict, resulting in internal emotional, and often bodily, tension.

Tragically, none of the selves can get what they want with their strategies.

The central/performing self can never feel entirely safe when two vital selves are cast out and disowned in our system.

The strategies of the needy/vulnerable self take us away from real belonging. We dehumanise others when we project all of our desires onto them. We can end up boundary-crossing and otherwise treating them non-consensually in our desperation. We build relationships on shaky foundations when we try to be whatever we think the other person wants us to be, and hide anything we think they won't like. This strategy can only work for a short honeymoon period. We also miss all the people and places in our life where we could feel belonging and connection when we pin all our hopes for it in one place.

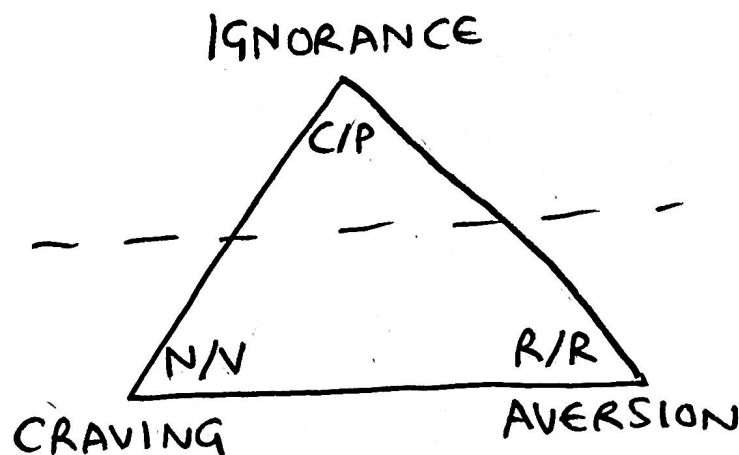
Similarly, the rejecting/rejected self often only gets dignity for a short period, if at all, with their strategies of demanding it, attempting to prove themselves, defending against perceived attack, opposing and criticising, comparing and competing. At worst, all selves achieve their worst nightmare of being cast out - and shamed - again because of the ways they're behaving and relating.

Existential triangles

The Buddhist psychotherapist, [Franklyn Sills](#), connects Ronald Fairbairn's ideas about how we develop our self system with more spiritual - or existential - ideas.

Roots of suffering

According to Buddhism, humans suffer because we tend to relate with ourselves, others, and the world, with [ignorance, craving, and/or aversion](#).



C/P Ignorance - N/V Craving - R/R Aversion

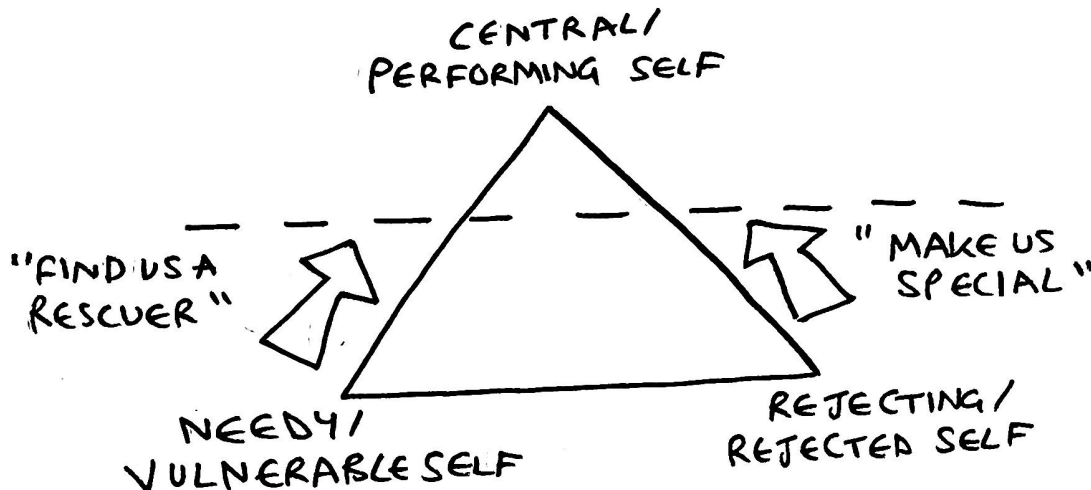
The idea is that we develop these ways of relating to the world as we learn the painful existential truths about being human: we're going to experience pain and die, we will eventually lose everything we have, and we can't control our lives to get what we want, and not what we don't want. Ignorance, craving and aversion are the three ways that we attempt to avoid these kinds of realities. Ignorance tries to deny they are true, craving keeps trying to get what we want, and aversion keeps trying to protect us from all the things we don't want.

We can map ignorance onto the central/performing self, craving onto the needy/vulnerable self, and aversion onto the rejecting/rejected self.

[Martine Batchelor](#) uses the metaphor of holding a precious object for how we relate to pretty much everything in life (feelings, thoughts, sensations, other people, situations, etc.) Craving grasps the object too hard in a way that may damage it or give us cramp after a while, and restricts us from holding anything else. Aversion hurls the object away from us when this happens, resenting it and demands something better. Ignorance fails to notice these things happening, or to care for the object. The trick (the lifelong, very difficult trick!) is to open the hand so that you can appreciate the object, put it down and pick it up again, hold it steady, share it, and let it go when the time is right.

Protecting against existential suffering

We also found it useful to mash all these ideas up with those of the existential psychotherapist, [Irving Yalom](#). He suggests that, faced with the terrifying existential truths of life, we employ two main strategies. One is trying to find a saviour, the other is trying to make ourselves special. These map on to the main strategies of the two disowned selves.



N/V Self Searches for Rescuer - R/R Tries to Make Us Special

The needy/vulnerable self is trying to *get* what we lacked, lost, as a child, and the rejecting/rejected self is trying to *make us* into that thing (all of the 'good' and none of the 'bad'). We could see this as the needy/vulnerable self trying to find another person, community, or something, who will be like a god for us, and the rejected/rejecting self trying to turn ourselves into a kind of god. The common features of god, in many faiths, are:

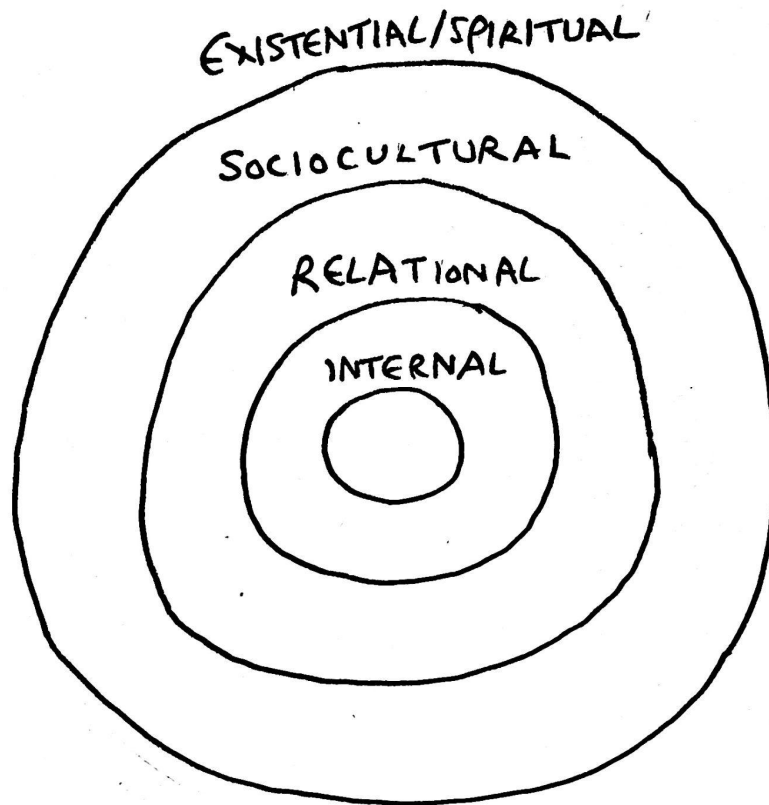
- All powerful, able to control everything
- All knowing, aware of everything
- All present, able to experience everything
- All good, worshipped by everyone
- Immortal

The needy/vulnerable self is trying to find a person, community, situation, substance, or set of ideas, who meets these criteria. For example, this could be a partner who'll be everything to us, love us forever, and make us happy-ever-after. Occasionally they may feel that we have found this - and we will feel good and free from suffering for a while - but inevitably this won't last and the crash out of it will be even more painful.

The rejecting/rejected self is trying to make us into these things. It'll only be enough for them if we're finally approved of by everyone, if we can control our life to make everything work out right, if we know everything, if we experience all the things we'd like to (including contradictory things), and if we never get sick or age. Occasionally they may feel that we've made it, in moments of success for example, but of course nothing could ever be enough, and their painful criticism, comparison, and condemnation is likely to start up again.

Triangles at every level of experience

We can see all human experience as happening - simultaneously - at multiple levels, as illustrated by this set of nested circles.



Concentric Circles: Existential/Spiritual, Sociocultural, Relational, Internal

- The existential/spiritual level illustrates that we are *existential* beings, confronting those existential givens of life (e.g. it's impermanent, it involves pain, and we can't control it).
- The sociocultural level illustrates that we are *embedded* beings, within cultures and social systems that have certain systems, structures and norms which we tend to take for granted and assume are right: the natural/normal way of things.
- The relational level illustrates that we are *entangled* beings, interdependent with other beings. We are deeply impacted by our relationships with them - and their understandings and behaviours - from before we are born all the way through our lives.
- The internal level illustrates that we are *embodied* beings. Our bodyminds are deeply influenced by our experiences at all these other levels. They shape our own interconnected physical and mental systems.

The role of traumatised/traumatising cultures

The central/performing, needy/vulnerable, and rejecting/rejected selves that we develop can be seen as versions of the existential strategies of ignorance, craving, and aversion. These are the habitual patterns that humans employ in an attempt to avoid the painful realities of life; to keep trying to get what we want, and not what we don't want.

However, it seems likely that - just as deeper degrees of *developmental trauma* result in more fragmented, intense, and stuck versions of the three selves - deeper degrees of *cultural trauma* do the same. We might expect that our central/performing self would be more severed from our needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves in certain cultural contexts. We might also expect that the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves would carry more unbearable experiences and emotions - and react to others in more retraumatising ways - in certain cultural contexts. This would include cultural contexts where:

- There is a strong sense that people are singular, rather than plural; that they are independent individuals who are free agents (not impacted by their past, cultural norms, etc.); that they should be consistent, fixed, stable, and unchanging over time.
- Some kinds of humans - and other beings - are valued far more highly than others, and this fact is denied and/or legitimised in various ways.
- There is a strong set of ideas about what it is to be a good, normal, acceptable person, and a powerful policing of those who are deemed bad, abnormal, or unacceptable, and of those who pose some kind of threat to these ideas (through politics, faiths, media, and health, education, and justice systems, for example).
- People are encouraged to aspire to certain, narrow, rigid definitions of what it is to be a successful self (with a successful body, mind, life, career, relationships, home, etc.) Certain people are held up as epitomes of this success and are hugely valued culturally. Those who don't manage this - or who fall away from the ideal in some way - are deemed failures, and are stigmatised, ridiculed, policed and punished.
- People are encouraged to treat others as things that could meet their needs or give them what they want, or as things who are to blame for their own struggles.
- People are encouraged to treat themselves as things to perfect, performing a 'good' persona, and eradicating or disowning anything about themselves that's seen as 'bad'.
- There are strong binaries between what are regarded as good and bad feelings and experiences, and people are encouraged to get more and more of the 'good', and less and less of the 'bad', over time - comparing and competing with others to do so, with the current situation never seen as good enough.

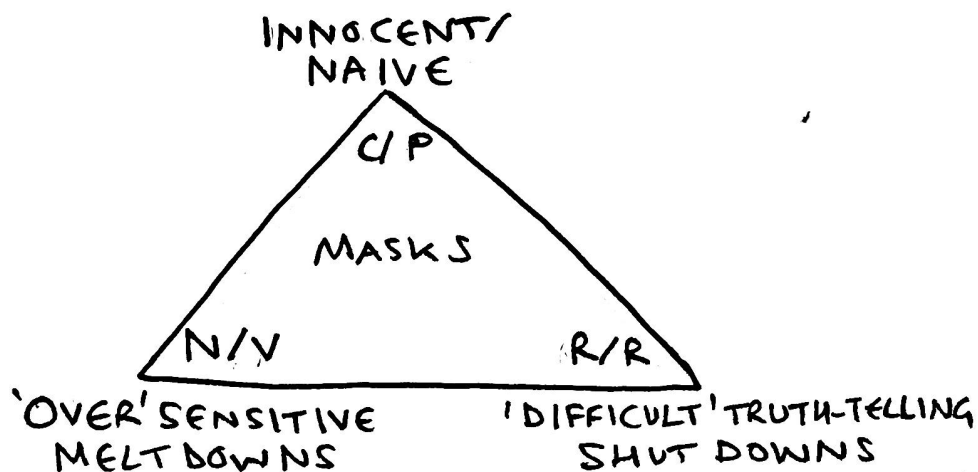
Many authors have written about how these are particular features of dominant culture (including [modernity](#), [white supremacy culture](#), [neoliberal capitalism](#), and [coloniality](#)). Of course one of the ways that such cultures are passed on is through the families and education systems we grow up in, so these forms of historical and cultural trauma are directly related to [intergenerational](#) and developmental trauma.

Bodymind diversity

On the inner level of being, those whose bodyminds diverge most from current, narrow, understandings of what it is to be a good, normal, healthy, acceptable, or successful self, are often the ones who are most policed and punished at the sociocultural and relational levels.

They are most likely to be scrutinised and monitored by others, to have coercive attempts made to bring them in line with what is deemed normal and right, and to be abandoned or attacked if they fail to fall in line (whether because they can't, or don't want to, or both). For example, you might consider how marginalised people of many kinds are expected to try to comply as much as possible with the norm (e.g. to be the 'good' girl, immigrant, gay, or disabled person etc.), and how they're treated - culturally and in their relationships - when they don't, or can't, conform.

In relation to our triangles, for example, [marginalised autistic](#) people - like ourselves - are often seen as 'too much' or 'not enough' in the following ways. We're expected - and in many ways forcibly trained - to mask these features.



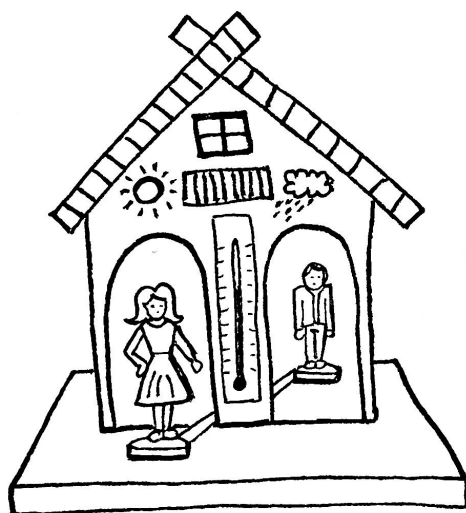
C/P Innocent/Naive - N/V 'Over'sensitive, Meltdowns - R/R 'Difficult' Truth-telling, Shutdowns

We certainly experienced overwhelming pressure to cultivate a rigid mask of a 'good', normal person to hide our perceived innocence and naivety, over-sensitivity and vulnerability, and our truth-telling and 'difficult' feelings. We felt we had to shape our body, appearance, voice, tastes, opinions, views, desires, emotions, dreams - everything - on the basis of this.

Inner and outer relationships

When our self system is set up in the way we've explored through this zine, one feature is that the selves are disconnected. They are relatively - or even totally - unaware of each other. This can take the form of generally experiencing yourself as a singular self, perhaps occasionally perplexed - or even very shaken - by times when you feel or act in ways that seem very different from this self. Or it can take the form of experiencing yourself as plural, but with your different selves very fragmented and dissociated from one another. There may be very little communication between them, they may hold very different memories from your life, and/or you may have periods in one self that other selves struggle to recollect, or only remember vaguely.

I've described how the central/performing self is generally set up to be unaware of the needy/vulnerable self and the rejecting/rejected self, but we've found that those two less conscious selves are also often unaware of each other too. For a long while we experienced them like one of those weather houses where whenever one comes outside, the other is kept inside. We had long periods of one of them being foregrounded and the other backgrounded, and then it would flip in the other direction.



Weather house: feminine figure comes out in sun and masculine figure in rain

This often meant that each of these selves would end up getting hurt by the others' strategies. The needy/vulnerable self would go looking for a rescuer in another person, and the rejecting/rejected self would be the one left holding the trauma of a bad sexual encounter or trying to get us out of an unhealthy relationship dynamic. The rejecting/rejected self would push us towards some kind of work that might make us special or successful, and the needy/vulnerable self would be the one left holding the trauma if it ended up being too much for us, or getting us into trouble.

One reason we need both these selves in consciousness is that the rejecting/rejected self can access a protective anger that tells us when something is 'off', and the needy/vulnerable self can access a kind of fear that helps us to know our limits. When they are unconscious we're disconnected from those helpful feelings, or those feelings only come up in totally overwhelming ways when one of those selves takes over and eclipses the system.

Our selves probably play out in relationships in many different ways depending on the specifics of our upbringings and the patterns we learnt. In some people the [needy/vulnerable self](#) is less repressed and has more of an influence. In some people that's the [rejecting/rejected self](#). This results in certain [characteristics and patterns of behaviour](#) being more foregrounded. Many of us are influenced by - and show - the needy/vulnerable self more in some relationships or situations, and the rejecting/rejected self more in others.

We also noticed that the needy/vulnerable self was often very drawn to other people like our rejecting/rejected self, and vice versa. These are what are sometimes described as [codependent](#) dynamics, where people who foreground people pleasers are drawn to - but eventually hurt by - people who foreground controlling/demanding selves, for example, and vice versa. People who initially seem to offer to be the rescuer that the needy/vulnerable self wants end up attacking and blaming them. People who initially seem to offer the validation that the rejecting/rejected self wants end up abandoning them.

We could see it that each self internalises one of the ways we were hurt growing up. So the central/performing self tends to *abandon* themselves (into busyness and distraction) and the other selves (into unconsciousness). The needy/vulnerable self tends to *trap* us in certain ways of acting they hope will get us belonging, and in situations and relationships they pin all their yearning on. The rejecting/rejected self tends to *attack* themselves and/or other selves.

Perhaps these are also the ways in which each self is most likely to hurt others: the central/performing self remains distant in ways that can feel abandoning, the needy/vulnerable self asks too much of people or crosses their boundaries in ways that can feel trapping, and the rejecting/rejected self attacks, blames, or judges others.



How each self treats themselves / other selves: Abandoning - Trapping - Attacking

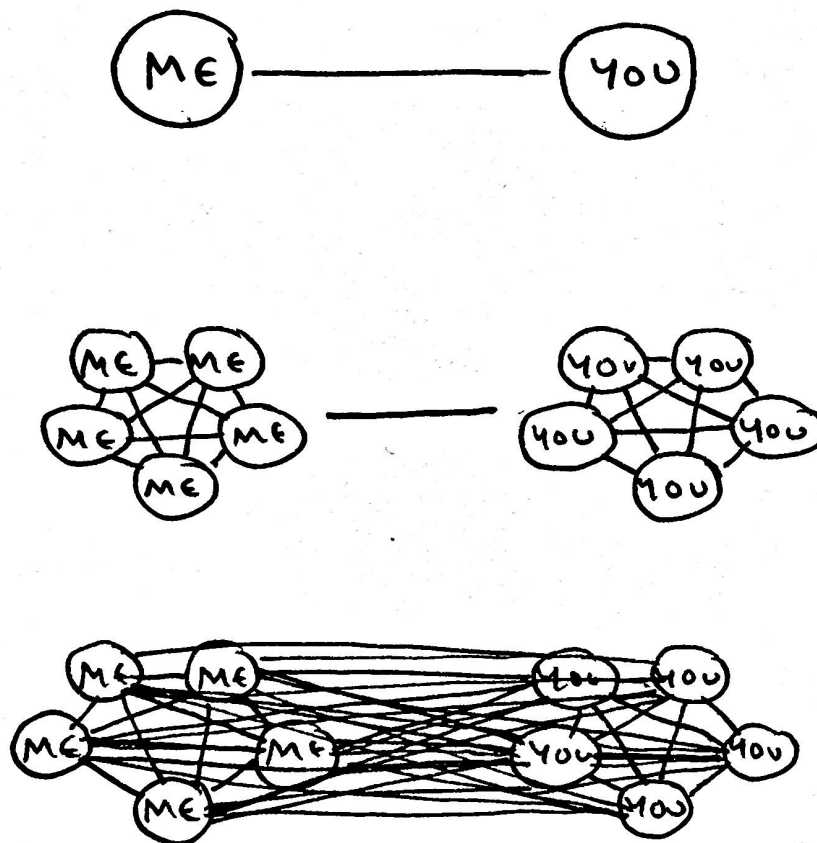
The overall sense is that when you abandon your selves they look to others to find what they didn't get when you were younger, and don't get from you now. As Jeff Foster puts it:

'When you were young it made sense to try to build a fixed and consistent "self" in order to fit in, feel safe, be accepted ... to try to control yourself, adapt yourself, manipulate yourself, hide parts of yourself, in order to get love and approval from those you looked up to... to seek love outside yourself. But perhaps now is the time to end this self-abandonment, and rediscover the love that is within you.'

Real people: complex systems

When our self system is set up in the way we've described, it can be really hard to accept that we, and others, are complex people. All of us include both what we've learnt is 'good' and what we've learnt is 'bad'. But we tend to polarise into a belief that we - and others - are all good or all bad, often oscillating between believing these two extremes ('I'm good/bad', 'You're good/bad'). We like this quote from [Iris Murdoch](#) for understanding how difficult it is to hold the complexity of others' simultaneous 'goodness' and 'badness': *'Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real.'*

We find this diagram, adapted from [Emmi Bevensee](#), very helpful to illustrate how people tend to assume they are singular selves relating with each other, or perhaps that each person is a complex system but at least that each system just has one relationship with the other. Actually it is probably more realistic to see us as systems in which each of our selves is in relation with each self in the other system. In their article, Emmi Bevensee helpfully draws out the implications of this for [autonomy and consent](#).



A relationship between a single me & a single you

A relationship between multiple interconnected 'me's & multiple interconnected 'you's

Multiple relationships between all the 'me's & all the 'you's

Transforming triangles

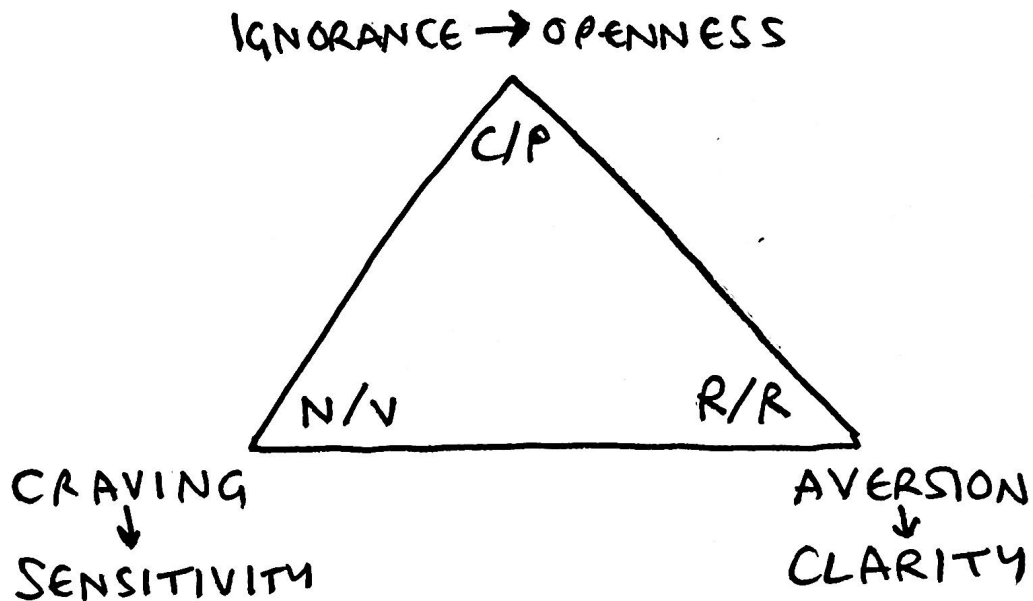
Through this zine we've seen that we're encouraged to develop that triangular kind of self system at every level of experience (existential, sociocultural, relational, internal) from our earliest moments and throughout our lives. This is what we're up against when we try to reconfigure ourselves: to do something different.

What helps us - personally - is that there are also burgeoning understandings of how damaging this kind of self system - and the forces that create it - are, at all levels of understanding. Many faith and philosophical systems have ideas and practices that address this. Many interconnected activist movements are trying to shift cultures and social systems that operate in this way. Many therapies and healing movements support us towards relating differently with ourselves and others. Many embodied and creative practices exist for working on these things within our own bodyminds and internal systems.

Perhaps the most vital point is that all these kinds of work involve bringing the selves who have been cast out - or disowned - back home, out of the underworld. As [Audre Lorde](#) said, '*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*'. We can't use the same mechanisms of abandoning, attacking, and trapping - of policing, punishing and controlling - that hurt the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves in the first place. We have to practise *radical inclusion* (as [Bonnie Badenoch](#) puts it) where there are *no bad parts* ([Richard Schwartz](#)) and *no part gets left behind* ([Janina Fisher](#)).

Openness, sensitivity, clarity

For this reason, we like the Buddhist idea that we've come across, particularly in [Pema Chödrön](#)'s work, that each of those suffering ways of being (ignorance, craving and aversion) contains the kernel of what we need to end our suffering. Those three 'poisons' contain the 'medicines' of [openness, sensitivity and clarity](#). So we need to get closer to each of them, not further away. We need to feel their feelings, not repress them or react out of them.



C/P Ignorance -> Openness - N/V Craving -> Sensitivity - R/R Aversion -> Clarity

The idea is that if we can be with every aspect of ourselves with deep kindness and honesty, then ignorance will transform into openness, craving into sensitivity, and aversion into clarity.

This is similar to the idea that we explored earlier - at the relational level - that if we tend to them, these three selves who can relate in such traumatic ways contain exactly the capacities that we need for intimate relating: presence (central/performing self), open vulnerability (needy/vulnerable self), and realness (rejecting/rejected self).

It would also bring us the kind of connection that the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves have been so longing for, as well as shifting us from shame into a kind of deep knowing that we - and others - are fundamentally ok, not fundamentally bad, wrong, or broken.

Triangles in circles

As we've mentioned in our [previous work on plurality](#), this process involves two things:

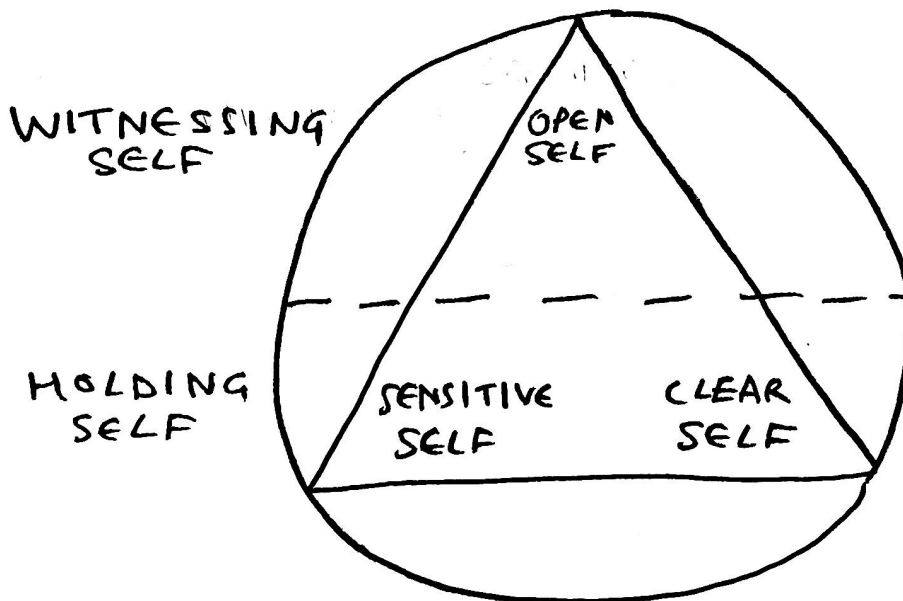
- Getting to know each self thoroughly and working with them individually.
- Working with the whole system so that each self can communicate well with the others.

Our practices for this draw on each of those concentric circle levels of understanding. So we bring in spiritual understandings and practices such as meditations, we engage with communities who are trying to cultivate non-normative ways of relating, we have therapy - and a few close friendships - where we can practise shifting our patterns in relationship, and we do a lot of solo (plural) creative and somatic practices. We have friends who are doing very similar work drawing on different faiths/philosophies, different social justice and/or healing movements, different therapeutic methods, and different inner practices. There are many paths available here.

Across many of the ideas that we draw upon there's an idea that we need to cultivate a further self or two in order to do this kind work. For example, the idea of reparenting the self involves cultivating one or more [loving parents](#) who can hold and hear the inner child/teen in the way they needed - but didn't get - in the past, helping them to develop [earned secure attachment](#) internally. Buddhists like Pema Chödrön talk about cultivating a cradle of loving kindness within which we can observe - and transform - our patterns of ignorance, craving, and aversion. The trauma literatures talk of cultivating a [witnessing self](#). In some of these literatures, such selves are connected to a higher power, spiritual source, or experience of our interconnectedness with all things.

Cultivating holding and witnessing selves

We personally found ourselves excavating/cultivating two selves to hold the other three of us in our process. One was a kind of grounding self who could hold us when we struggled and do many of the everyday things we needed to survive while we were doing this deep work. The other was a kind of [witnessing self](#) who we could go to to help us with our practices.



Witnessing Self
Open Self - Sensitive Self - Clear Self
Holding Self

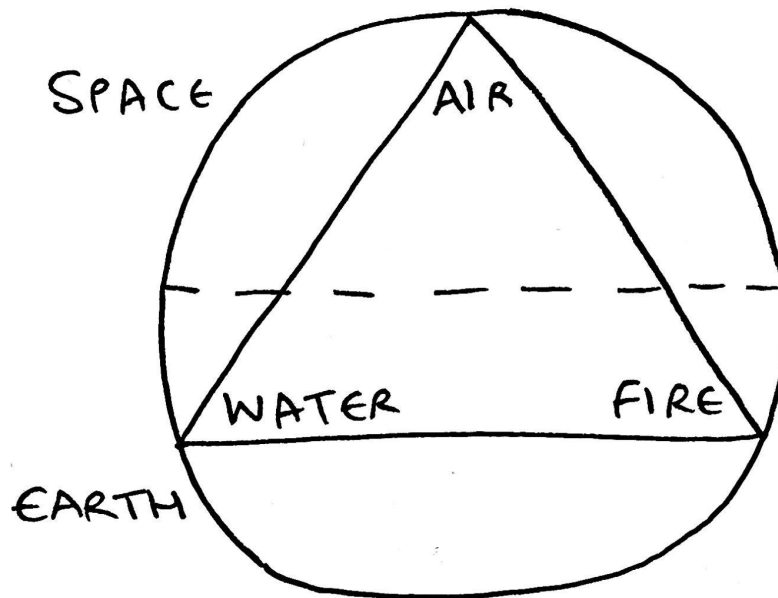
It feels like we had to stop searching for these selves in others, or in the outer world, in order to find them - and/or cultivate them - in ourselves. Previously we'd kind of delegated them to other people, to communities, or to situations (E.g. 'I'll be ok if this person loves me', 'I'll be ok if others say I've succeeded in this line of work', 'I'll be ok as long as I live in this situation').

Perhaps the holding self is particularly the one who the needy/vulnerable self was looking for: the one who would finally connect with them, and hold and hear all the feelings they had been carrying (giving them the love and belonging they longed for). Perhaps the witnessing self is particularly the one who the rejecting/rejected self was looking for: the one who would finally see them, affirming them as wanted and vital, and their feelings as valid and important (giving them the validation and dignity they longed for).

Nowadays those particular inner dynamics still feel important *and* there is a sense of the holding self holding everyone and the witnessing self witnessing everyone.

Elemental selves

We find it helpful, now, to see our five selves as mapping onto the five elements: earth, air, fire, water, and space.



Space
Air - Water - Fire
Earth

This is nice because it doesn't involve any kind of 'positive' / 'negative' binaries (in the way that ignorance/openness, craving/sensitivity, and aversion/clarity still does). It's also a useful shorthand to give others a sense of the kinds of qualities our five selves have, so they know what kind of energy to expect if we're foregrounding one of them.

- Space is expansive, spacious, slow, patient, and capable of holding all that arises inside and out. That is if we move slowly enough and get enough space and solitude.
- Air is present, open to everything, flighty, exuberant. They are delighted by small things, enjoy connecting with other beings, and they tend to move through feelings pretty fast.
- Water is the fluidity of the shapeshifting manipulative charmer or the placating people pleaser. He is the tears of the vulnerable one behind all that, in his longing, tenderness, and heart brokenness. He's capable of deep sensitivity and empathy.
- Fire is the hot or cold anger of the one who attacks others, who defends herself and controls others, and who turns hatred in against herself. She's the pain and rage of the hurt, unwanted one underneath. She's capable of bright clarity and fierce compassion.
- Earth is grounded and grounding, embodied, steady, competent, capable of holding ourselves and others, steadily moving through our everyday life, whatever it brings.

Plural understandings of plurality

The elemental model also gets us away from the binaries that often show up in the [literature on plurality](#), where plurality is regarded as either good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. Particularly there's often a polarisation between the literatures that explore plurality as DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder, previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder) and as fragmentation due to trauma, and the literatures that suggest that everyone is plural and/or that plurality is a particularly healthy or sacred state.

Personally we've found it useful to draw on all of the different literatures we've come across that relate to plurality. We don't feel that our being plural was caused by trauma, but we do feel that the way or system that was configured for most of our lives was related to our developmental, intergenerational, and cultural trauma.

Our experience of the deep plural work we've done over the last few years has been a gradual 'emptying out' of the central/performing self who we had tried to show the world for most of our lives. Eventually it felt like there was nothing left of 'Meg-John Barker': like they were just a projection on a screen.

At the same time, the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves were gradually brought more and more into our consciousness, showing us the mechanisms of how they worked, and revealing the memories, feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations they'd been holding for us for all this time, in order that we could finally hold and hear those.

Our experience was that those two selves were fragmented selves in the ways that much of the trauma/DID literature talks about, as they contained multiple parts who operated in various ways. So the needy/vulnerable self system contained both the one who was so yearning and desperate he could behave inappropriately or cross others' boundaries, and the terrified, shamed little kid underneath that. The rejected/rejecting self contained the envious, resentful, raging, unwanted confused girl we'd disowned, and the inner critic who had rejected her. Both those selves contained the kinds of exiled parts, and protector and firefighter parts, that [Internal Family Systems](#) talks about, or the kinds of heavyweights that the [Voice Dialogue](#) approach says push down the vulnerable and unacceptable selves.

As the central/performing self emptied out, and the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves did their work, it felt like it created space for an open self to emerge more and more, like what is sometimes called a 'free child' or 'being' self. It felt like the previous self-system had protected that self up until this point, but as it loosened, this open/air self was more and more able to exist (and now write this zine!)

Systems within systems

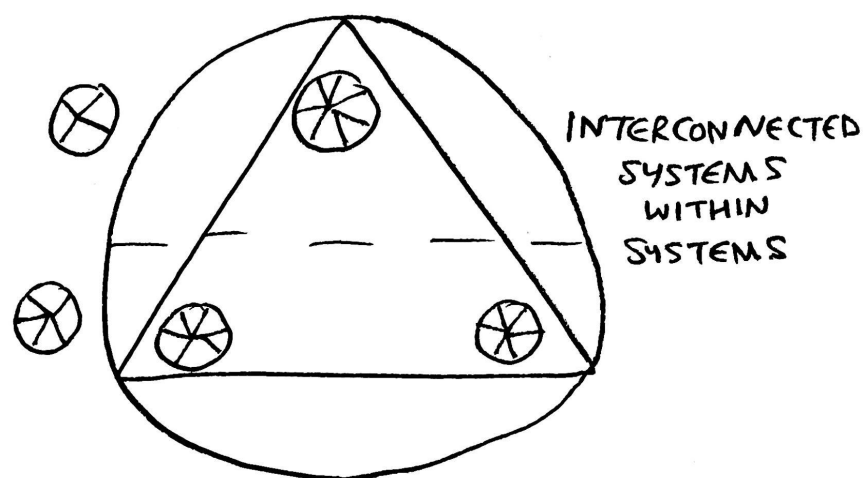
Our experience of the needy/vulnerable self and the rejecting/rejecting self was that they were whole systems in their own rights: each containing several parts that were in tension.

The needy/vulnerable self projected into consciousness a people-pleaser part who tried to figure out what people wanted us to be and to be it. This sub system also contained a desperate/needy part who would do anything to get love and belonging, and an abandoned/attacked/trapped terrified/shamed part who that part was protecting. The sensitive boy we eventually found feels like a freed-up combination of these parts together.

The rejecting/rejected self projected into consciousness a doing part who tried to do all the things that would get approval from others, staying busy and distracted and cultivating a good, helpful persona. This sub system also contained the rejecting part who judged others and kept us from intimacy, as well as attacking and hating everything about us she saw as bad. And it contained the rejected self who contained all the 'badness' and felt such pain and rage at being hurt and abandoned by others and ourselves. The clear compassionate girl we eventually found feels like a freed-up combination of all these parts.

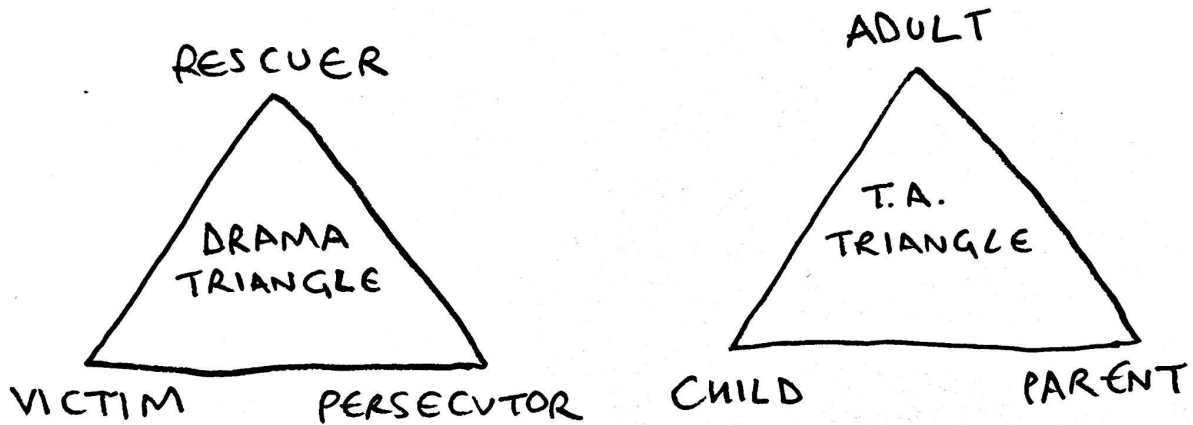
This means that both the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected subsystems contain both the traumatic feelings they've held for us, and a force that represses those feelings. Needy/vulnerable contains both fear and all the strategies that try to prevent fear (being what others want us to be). Rejecting/rejected contains both anger and the repressing of anger (turning it in on ourselves). In both subsystems this can feel like someone stamping on the brake and accelerator at the same time. You can see illustrations of these selves in our [Plural Selves 2](#) zine, where the 'figurer' and 'doer' were still experienced as separate selves from the 'vulnerable' and 'critic'.

While those two selves are particularly likely to be fractured and fragmented by the trauma they've experienced, over time we've come to understand that all our selves contain different aspects.



Triangle Inside Circle: Each Self is a System Potentially Containing Many Parts

To give one example, you might have wondered how our triangle model maps onto two other common triangle models of human experience: the [Karpman drama triangle](#) and the [Transactional Analysis adult - child - parent](#) triangle.



The Drama Triangle: Rescuer - Victim - Persecutor
The Transactional Analysis Triangle: Adult - Child - Parent

At first we could certainly map these triangles onto our specific selves. The central/performing self tried to rescue people, the needy/vulnerable self was a victim (of ourselves and others), and the rejecting/rejected self certainly felt like a persecutor (against ourselves and/or others) in her inner/outer critic form. The central/performing self acted like what the world expects from an adult, while the needy/vulnerable self felt like a scared child (or inappropriate teenager), and the rejecting/rejected self like an internalised punishing parent.

However, as we've continued this work we've come to understand that all selves contain the capacity for helping others, for being harmed by others, and for harming others. Indeed, a major part of this work for us has been confronting the places where each of our three main selves has been abused or oppressed, and has abused or oppressed others (sometimes in deed, and certainly in thought). It's important to address how these patterns play out at all levels of experience: internally (within our system), and externally (in our relationships, and in the wider world).

Relatedly, our experience, now, is that all selves can move between ages, sometimes feeling around our (adult) age, sometimes feeling very young - and often needing holding in this place), and sometimes feeling older - and often having the capacity to hold others (internally or externally) in this place.

Plural practice

We hope to write a whole book about our process of coming to these understandings of our self system, and about our practices for working with our selves through this time, and into the future. There's already quite a bit of material about how we've done that work available in our [zines](#), and in our [free books on plurality](#).

As mentioned here, much of that work is a gradual process of getting to know each self more and more fully - as they reveal what they've hidden, or flesh themselves out. It's also a process of learning how to relate within each pairing and within the whole system, including holding them in awareness together as well as flowing between them. Then it's a process of learning how to relate in this reconfigured system with other people and out in the world.

It's important to emphasise again that this has been a long process for us. We had a decade or more of learning leading up to our big period of plural work. Then the deep process we've just been through has taken several years (so far!) You can get a sense of that gradual process if you read our plural writing and see how our understandings have shifted and refined over time. We must have drawn at least twenty different diagrams of our system before ending up with this one! While this kind of work is a lifelong journey for all of us, we can say that we feel a gradual sense of becoming more settled, of the needy/vulnerable and rejecting/rejected selves putting down some of the burdens they've carried and loosening their survival strategies as they're brought home and held through every day.

Refraining

Probably our main practice has been what Pema Chödrön calls *refraining*. Whenever we feel our needy/vulnerable or rejecting/rejected selves bracing or clenching and risking *reacting* out of their old strategies, or whenever we feel ourselves trying to *repress* their feelings, we *refrain* (from repressing or reacting). We stay with their feelings as long as it takes till we can *respond* as wisely as we're capable of to the situation, given where we're at now.

For us that's involved a lot of recognising how limited we are - especially while we're going through this process - and trying to be as honest as we can be with others about that (in our personal and professional lives).

The refraining practice often involves encouraging these two selves to drop into their bodies and feel the tender feelings that their strategies are trying to protect them from: often the ones we connect with being around five years old (needy/vulnerable self) and ten years old (rejecting/rejected self). The best process for doing this seems to shift over time, so we're continually tuning into what these selves need now, in order to be held and heard.

It's hard to fully capture just how painful this work is. We're literally feeling the feelings that two of us had held away from the rest for our entire life, because of how unbearable and overwhelming they were. Our [monster feelings](#) zine gives some sense of this territory. When you've learnt - at every level - that you should avoid pain and difficult emotions, it's incredibly hard to hold onto the sense that such horrendous feelings are a 'good sign', particularly when you're in them. When those selves have spent your whole life hiding, it's very hard for

them to believe that it's ok for them to finally show themselves, in all that they are. For these reasons, it's important to go slow, to balance staying with feelings with as much gentleness and rest as you can, as well as taking a [trauma-informed](#) approach around when to move towards, and away from, direct experience.

Even doing this, we often found the process extremely confusing and frightening, only managing to hold onto the tiniest thread of faith that we were on the right track. One of our main reasons for writing about our experiences here, and elsewhere, is the hope it might make it a little less confusing and scary for others: to have access to this kind of framework for understanding what they're going through, and to know that they're not alone.

Support

It's worth thinking about what support you can build in at every [level of experience](#) to help you in this work, if it's something that you do want to engage with. There are resources pointing to various kinds of support at the end of the zine.

- What solo (plural) practises work for your system at the internal level?
- What professional and/or peer relationships can help you most at the relational level?
- What groups or fellow traveller communities work best for you at the sociocultural level?
- What spiritual or philosophical approaches resonate with you on the existential level, and/or what aspects of the natural world feel supportive?

It can be hard indeed to access that kind of support when your needy/vulnerable and rejected/rejecting selves are feeling very scared and threatened, and when everyone else in the world is going through similar stuff (whether they're aware of it or not!) In our experience, just a few supports some of the time (a therapist and friend who mostly get it, our favourite cafe and walk, and a few authors we resonate with) can be enough to get you through.

Many of the huge problems facing our world at the moment - from injustice to war to climate emergency - relate to the dominant belief that some bodies and lives are more valuable than others, to the extent that many are treated as utterly disposable. Also, very often our [urgent responses to crises](#) replicate the same patterns of polarising people into good and bad, and rejecting the bad. It's our sense that this is deeply connected with the fact that we're encouraged to treat our selves in similar ways.

A commitment to radical inclusion internally means that we're more able to feel deeply that there is nothing 'out there' that we don't know intimately in ourselves, including our capacities to objectify, abuse and oppress. Feeling this deeply means that we can let it inform all our encounters, instead of rejecting - out there in other people, groups, or communities - what we struggle to bear in ourselves.

Our sense is that doing this work, over time, may enable us to meet all that arises - inside and out - with openness, sensitivity, and clarity, rather than avoiding it, trying to grasp it, or trying to get rid of it. This can help us to feel more connected on every level: with ourselves, with others, with the world, and with a sense of meaning or sacredness. We send you so much love and solidarity if you're also on this kind of journey, and hope that our words (and pics) may help a little.

Resources

Our free resources on plurality:

- [Plural Selves 1 and 2 zines](https://rewriting-the-rules.com/zines): rewriting-the-rules.com/zines
- [Plurality free books](https://rewriting-the-rules.com/plural-work): rewriting-the-rules.com/plural-work

Various approaches to understanding and practising plurality:

- Fadiman, J. & Gruber, J. (2020). *Your Symphony of Selves*. Paris, ME: Park Street Press.
- Fisher, J. (2019). *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hanh, T. N. (2010). *Reconciliation: Healing the Inner Child*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Rowan, J., & Cooper, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The Plural Self*. London: Sage.

Other resources about plurality, systems, and therapies:

- [Understanding Multiplicity](https://mmu.ac.uk/mmud8/media/10605/download) - mmu.ac.uk/mmud8/media/10605/download
- [IFS Institute](https://ifs-institute.com) - ifs-institute.com
- [Voice Dialogue International](https://voicedialogueinternational.com) - voicedialogueinternational.com
- Twelve Step Adult Children of Alcoholics and Dysfunctional Families [reparenting resources](https://adultchildren.org/newcomer/becoming-your-own-loving-parent) - adultchildren.org/newcomer/becoming-your-own-loving-parent
- [The Networked Self](https://emotionalanarchism.com/widening-the-bridges-beyond-consent-and-autonomy-emmi) - emotionalanarchism.com/widening-the-bridges-beyond-consent-and-autonomy-emmi
- [The Plural Association](https://thepluralassociation.org/resources) - thepluralassociation.org/resources
- [Plural Positivity](https://powertotheplurals.com) - powertotheplurals.com, powertotheplurals.com/ppwc
- [Plurality Resource](https://pluralityresource.org/affiliates) - pluralityresource.org/affiliates, pluralityresource.org/glossary

Books by authors specifically mentioned or linked to here:

- Badenoch, B. (2018). *The Heart of Trauma*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
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- Yalom, I. D. (2009). *The Gift of Therapy*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

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- rewriting-the-rules.com/zines
- rewriting-the-rules.com/all-free-books

You're welcome to share them on with others who you think will enjoy them.