

Sybil: Sixteen People All in One

A Case Study

The usually gentle schoolteacher burst into hysterical tirade. Her fists clenched with rage, the teacher began shouting wildly, "men are all alike. You just can't trust 'em. You really can't."

The other woman in the room watched with amazement. Cornelia Wilbur, a psychoanalyst, had been treating Sybil Dorsett for three months. Never had she seen this quiet young woman in such a state. Gripped by an eerie feeling, the doctor suddenly asked, "Who are you?"

"Can't you tell the difference?" was the reply. "I'm Peggy."

It was during this exchange that Dr. Wilbur first learned that Sybil Dorsett had more than one personality. Cases of multiple personality were not unknown. The three personalities of Chris Sizemore had already been well documented and used as the subject for a movie, *The Three Faces of Eve*. But nothing in medical history prepared the therapist for the revelations that came in the months ahead. Her patient was not simply a dual personality, part Sybil and part Peggy. As time passed, more and more selves emerged, until there were finally an astounding 16.

Sybil, herself often shy and withdrawn, alternated with aggressive Peggy and sophisticated Vicky. Mary was a plump, motherly type, while Vanessa had the flair of an actress. Among the others were baby Ruthie and even two energetic young men, Mike and Sid.

Sometimes Sybil's other selves emerged in the midst of a session, as when Peggy first appeared. Often one would come to take Sybil's place for an appointment. On more than one occasion, two would show up at once; Mike and Sid were usually together.

About a third of Sybil's life was spent in the guise of other personalities. Of these periods Sybil had no recollection – "blank spells," she called them. But during such blank spells, some remarkable events took place. Sybil had actually met with Dr. Wilbur but could not remember such meetings taking place. Sometimes she would wake up in strange places without any idea of how she got there. While in fifth grade, she was completely unaware of ever having left the third grade.

And although Sybil was unaware of her other selves, they were quite aware of Sybil's presence. Peggy claimed that Sybil never got angry. Vicky thought it was appalling the way Sybil worried all the time and did not enjoy life. Mary took care of practical matters for Sybil. And all complained that Sybil didn't feed them enough.

Dr. Wilbur decided that she had to treat each of Sybil's selves as a separate person. Then she had to bring them into her patient's consciousness if Sybil was to become whole. Together – the doctor, Sybil, and the multiple selves – delved into the past.

What emerged was a childhood of terrible suffering. Sybil's mother had a breakdown shortly after her child's birth and remained in a depression for four months afterward. This depressed state soon increased her anxiety. Sybil, in turn, felt that something was wrong in her life. Moreover, Sybil's mother had physically tortured her only child for years. A washcloth stuffed down her throat and a broom handle to her back were commonplace occurrences to the young child.

Her father, distant and busy with his work, accepted his wife's explanations for Sybil's bruises, her dislocated shoulder, her fractured larynx. There was no one to whom Sybil could turn. And there was nobody who turned to her. Her grandfather who live upstairs, her teachers, her doctor, and others never tried to discover what was really being done to this child.

Repressing her anger and fear, Sybil created other personalities as defenses and outlets. Peggy, for instance, was an assertive self who denied that Mrs. Dorsett was her mother (enabling Peggy to hate her). Vicky was the confident personality who had the courage to be adventurous. But none of Sybil's selves ever became closely involved with anyone. The danger was too great.

It took a long time for Sybil to face and accept all her personalities. Doing so involved dredging up many painful memories, such as of her beatings and the death of her grandmother. She had to let herself feel many repressed emotions. After eleven years of caring and intensive therapy, Peggy and Vicky and all the others were gone. Instead, one whole Sybil was able to face the future with joy and confidence.

Multiple Personality Disorder (Dissociative Identity Disorder): a defense mechanism by which a person creates other personalities to face realities that appear unbearable.

- Person has two or more distinct identities that alternate control of her consciousness and behavior.**
 - Each personality may go by a different name and have different memories and a different history.**
 - Usually the result of severe and chronic child abuse.**
 - To protect herself from the brunt of the abuse, the person creates another personality.**
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