

# Multiple Personality: Multiple Personality Multiple Personality Multiple Personality

## An Outcome of Child Abuse

by Margo Rivera

### Susan's story

It is the early 1950s. A baby is adopted at eight months old. She is a lovely little girl when she arrives at her new home, healthy, curious and bright. A year later she is in the hospital, frightened, malnourished and bruised. The doctors tell the children's aid society not to finalize her adoption because they suspect the child's state is the result of abuse and neglect, but she is sent home and does not go back to that hospital until twelve years later when she is taken there by the police to have a medical exam because she has told her school principal that she has been beaten and raped by her father for years.

She is found by the hospital to be "non-virginal" and is charged with the crime of "sexual immorality." The court-appointed psychiatrist and psychologist are not certain about whether she is telling the truth about being abused. In any case, they can see that she is angry and upset, and she is remanded to the adolescent ward of a large psychiatric hospital for an indefinite period of time. No one acknowledges the abuse she has endured, and she is treated with a strict program of behaviour modification and injected with drugs or strapped into pack baths whenever she explodes in frustration.

This is Susan's story. With individual variations, it is also the story of many other women as well. It is a story that tells of the torture and oppression of a little girl because she is a little girl. It also tells of

resistance, constant and courageous resistance. Susan never stopped saying no all the while she was forced to submit to the will of those who were bigger than she was and had much more power than she had. She resisted in many different ways. She fought back; she ran away. She tried to tell a neighbor who was kind to her what was happening in her home. The neighbor brought her home to her parents and told them the lies their daughter was spreading about them, and she was beaten severely. She told her favorite teacher who asked her if she was sure she wasn't imagining it. The next year she told the school principal who told her to let them know if it happened again. She told him again, and this time he called the police, who charged her for a sexual offence that is no longer on the books and brought her to a maximum security juvenile detention facility to await trial.

How does a child manage to survive such a life, betrayed on every side? Some children don't, and they are killed by their tormentors, or they commit suicide. Susan survived. She had a talent for splitting herself into pieces that saved her life.

### Susan's therapy begins

I was working as a therapist in a treatment centre for children who were sexual abuse victims and their families when I received a phone call from a woman who said her name was Susan. She asked me if I would see her in therapy. This was

unusual in this particular child abuse program. Clients were always referred by their social workers, and many of them were mandated into treatment by court orders. So, Susan's direct approach was unusual, the first in a series of unusual events.

Susan sounded quite straightforward on the phone but in person presented a very different picture. She was extremely rigid, was so anxious that she could barely speak, and to enable her to relate to me at all, I had to move my chair right in front of hers, bend my head forward and speak very quietly to her with no more than six inches between our faces.

Within this context she began to tell me her problem which was basically, as she put it, "People are coming out of me and I can't keep them in and I think they are doing bad things." Susan had been aware of the presence of other people inside of her for most of her life, but she was feeling that the people were increasingly out of control. She was losing big chunks of time during each day, spending many hours at home locked in the storage closet, rocking back and forth, and every night, between midnight and two a.m., she would leave the house and return at seven in the morning, unaware of where she'd been or what she'd done.

Susan and I were talking about how we might work together when she seemed to drift off for a couple of seconds and suddenly grabbed my hand. I was startled, as this was completely out of character,

something Susan, who could not so much as meet my eyes, would just not have done. But here she was clutching my hand very tightly in both of hers and stammering, "Sarah scared," in a child-like voice. Sarah told me she was scared all the time, that there were bad people all around her and that she stayed in the closet whenever she could. She rocked back and forth and said she wanted to talk to me in the closet, not out here in the open where someone might get her.

Suddenly her hand jerked out of mine, and she moved back out of my reach growling, "Get away, get away." This behavior also seemed odd coming from Susan, who was painfully polite. I started to get the picture. I was beginning to meet some of Susan's people.

I asked who was there and received a sideways, suspicious look. "I'm Robert, and I'm just here to get rid of Sarah. I don't want to talk to you." I said I'd be glad to talk to him, and his voice got louder and he half-shouted, "Darren just sent me to get rid of that sucky Sarah before she does something dumb like sucking her thumb outside the house. I'm not talking to you." Then again there was something like an empty space for a moment and Susan was back, blinking her eyes. When she realized where she was she became painfully embarrassed, thinking she had fallen asleep while we were talking. She was entirely amnesic for the episode.

This was my first introduction, as far as I know, to a woman with multiple personalities, and it was the beginning of a journey for Susan and for me that has had a profound impact on both of us. Though my experience of working as a therapist with sexual abuse victims had challenged me to look critically at the issue of gender power relations, I was still largely blind to the sexual terrorism that is part of the daily lives of women in a patriarchal society such as ours. Then I met Susan and all the people inside Susan. Susan's experience of a woman's lot was extreme; it was outside the boundaries of the socially sanctioned sexism that most women experience. It would be easy, you would think, to rationalize the kind of sadistic and ongoing abuse Susan endured as exceptional and keep some distance from it like that. But I couldn't do it. I found that reaching out from deep within myself every day to a woman who was suffering as much as Susan from this vicious and

DON IS DARREN RUER MAD HE SAYS HE HATES YOU  
HE KEEPS YELLING IN MY EAR. THE LIGHTS ARE FLASHING  
AND EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE AT A DISTANCE ITS HARD TO KNOW  
WHAT IS CLOSE AND WHAT IS FAR I FEEL DARRENS  
ENERGY IT IS STRONG HES MAD HE SAYS WERE NOT A GOOD  
GIRL BECAUSE WERE NOT A GIRL AND THATS THAT  
AND FUCK OFF MARGO MIND YOUR  
OWN BUISNESS YOU HAVE NO RIGHT  
NO FUCKING RIGHT. ILL HURT  
HER EVERY TIME YOU SAY IT ILL  
HURT HER AND ILL KEEP ON HURTING  
HER

Now Darren you know she's <sup>a girl we</sup>  
all know that ~~NO NO NO WERE~~  
NOT A GIRL

Y/3 dog to a girl/ Margo say so



FUCK OFF  
SARAH

WE'LL SHOW MARGO  
WERE NOT A GIRL ~~W#~~  
ARE NOT GIRLS  
I SEE GIRLS I  
SEE BLOOD LOTS  
OF FUCKING BLOOD

Some of Susan's personalities clash [as shown in this written document] over the difficult issue of "Am I a boy or a girl?"

brutal abuse forced me to acknowledge, for myself as well as for her, what it is like to be a woman in a culture that debases us. This enabled me to reclaim some of my own disavowed, misinterpreted or forgotten experiences of sexist domination — very different from those Susan endured, yet connected for all that — and renew my own resistance to that oppression.

### **Susan divides herself into several people**

When Susan was still a baby lying in her adopted mother's lap, Darren came and took over Susan's body for the first time. Darren was stronger than Susan. He could bear to feel her mother's fingers thrusting in and out of the vagina. He didn't scream, as Susan did, even when it hurt, and sometimes, if he was very quiet and strong, she let him have the bottle of milk she held in her other hand. Sometimes she didn't. Susan called Darren regularly when she discovered she could go away from her body.

When all his attempts to placate Susan's mother failed, Darren began to rebel. By the time her father started assaulting Susan, when she was about four years old, Darren had grown into a ferocious fighter who would explode with rage when anyone abused him.

At this point, Susan had to create new people to come and be in her body because Darren was so angry and fought back so hard that they were in danger, especially from her father, who threatened to blow her to pieces with his gun if she didn't enjoy the daily episodes of vaginal and anal rape he forced on her. So Karen came to be with her father. Karen told the others, "It's alright. I'll take care of it. That's what girls are made for." She could pretend that she liked what her dad did, and she always had a little smile on her face.

Others came regularly as well. Sarah was a little girl who loved to be close to people. She would crawl into mom or dad or grandpa's lap for a story and cuddle up to them. When they started to do bad things she called for Karen and left quickly. Erin came to help them hurt themselves, so they could die and go to God who would take care of them. Erin walked out in front of cars, threw herself down the cement cellar stairs, cut herself with knives, scissors and razors, hurt herself time and time again, but somehow

she always survived. Robert joined Darren because they needed more boys for Susan's mother, who liked boys much better than girls and provoked them and enjoyed watching their wild tantrums. Robert helped Darren fight their battles, both inside and outside the house. He also became a compulsive fire-setter and learned to steal food from stores to supplement their meagre diet.

When Susan went to school, the rage and frustration that she felt from her treatment at home unleashed itself outwards. Darren came often and beat up other kids. Susan and Sarah couldn't understand why the other children didn't like them, and they tried again and again to make friends.

This was Susan's life until she was a teenager. When she was finally removed from her home and then got out of the hospital a year later, she was placed in a foster home. She created one last person to teach her how to act in the normal world. Vicky told Susan the important thing was to work hard and competently. Being close to people didn't matter; just treat them coolly and politely and build a successful life in which you don't have to depend on anyone but yourself. With Vicky's help, Susan, who had barely learned to read and write when she was living at home, did very well academically in high school and carried two part-time jobs in the evenings and on Saturdays. She encouraged Darren and Robert to participate in all the school sports, and their fierce competitiveness made Susan a valuable, if not particularly popular member of every team. Though she never felt comfortable with the other teenagers, she made a place for herself and tried to forget about her past and ignore all the different people inside of her while, at the same time, using their special skills every day in the different areas of her life.

Though she was tense and conflicted and always felt like she was sitting on a volcano that might erupt at any time, Susan managed not too badly until she got married and had a baby girl. Then she began to lose her hard-won control. She would find herself in strange places with no idea how she had gotten there, and she couldn't account for hours of each day. Darren emerged again, now a strong and vicious young man, and Susan was terrified that he was hurting the people he especially despised for what he perceived as their weakness — children and women

especially — during the times that were lost to her. The others made themselves felt again as well, and they each had pressing and contradictory agendas. They were always quarrelling inside her head, and Susan had terrible headaches all the time.

### **Just what is multiple personality?**

Once considered a rare and exotic phenomenon, or discounted as an artifact of the imaginations of a few gullible clinicians and their confabulating clients, multiple personality is now being recognized as one of the effects of incest and child abuse that is not all that uncommon. Probably because more little girls endure the severe and ongoing incestuous abuse that is almost always part of the childhood of a multiple, nine times more women than men have been seen in therapy with multiple personalities. 97% of them have been physically and/or sexually abused, usually both, and they develop an average of 8 to 13 personalities in response to the trauma (Putnam et al, 1986).

A high innate capacity for dissociation and a history of severe and ongoing trauma in childhood without any intervention that is protective and healing are the factors that predispose a particular child for developing multiple personalities as a defense mechanism (Braun, 1985).

The childhoods of multiples are characteristically brutal. When a particular abusive experience becomes unbearable, the highly hypnotizable child simply exercises her capacity for self-hypnosis to go to sleep, as it were, and allows another person to emerge from her who can handle the situation better. Since extreme pain and stress are bearable for restricted periods of time, the defensive dissociation and switching from one personality to another provides some relief from the pressure and enables the child to stay alive and to respond to a destructive environment in an adaptive way.

If the hypnotizable child is exposed to an overwhelming traumatic event, she may well respond with a single dissociative episode. She then learns that the painful event can be forgotten. If she is repeatedly exposed to severe stress, dissociation becomes the preferred defense. She links dissociative episodes together. Similar memories of trauma and adaptive re-

sponses are chained, and they begin to take on a life of their own, functionally separate by amnesic barriers from different response patterns to different types of traumatic events (Braun, 1986).

By adolescence, the highly hypnotizable child who has been continuously exposed to inconsistently abusive situations has developed personalities who are more and more invested in separateness. The differences between them are pro-

are different in the alternating states of consciousness. They experience themselves as different people; most of the time they are not aware that they share one body.

Multiple personality is only the extreme point on the continuum of dissociation, that is, the breaking of the association of one state of consciousness within an individual from another. Most individuals use dissociative defences to

degree rather than in basic nature from the less extreme forms of dissociation that are very common (Putnam, 1987).

### Therapy for multiple personality

The multiple's familiarity with self-hypnosis is one of the most helpful resources in the long, arduous and painful but often very successful and liberating healing process. Another resource is a



*Susan's selves-portrait*

nounced in terms of values, skills, memories and also in terms of physical and even neurological characteristics. One personality may be clearly right-handed, one left-handed and one ambidextrous. One may have a severe allergy to wheat, and another may be a cookie lover who shows no allergic response to the flour. EEG's are different; psychological test patterns differ radically (Braun 1983). Their cognitive processes, memory and physiology

some extent during times of stress, and "trancing out" or daydreaming is a frequent and often pleasureable part of life. Most people experience also themselves as very different in response to different stimuli and in different contexts. The severe fluctuations experienced by individuals with multiple personalities and the amnesia that blocks their awareness and their ability to generalize across the separate states of consciousness differ in

therapist who understands the problem, and it often takes a woman with multiple personalities a long time to find one. Multiples who present themselves for psychiatric intervention endure an average of almost seven years of treatment with a variety of incorrect diagnoses and counterproductive strategies before their problem is recognized, and further trauma is often experienced from errors of commission and omission in treatment

(Putnam et al, 1986; Ross et al, 1987). The history of professional incredulity towards reports of incest and child sexual abuse is well known. Women with multiple personalities, because their personalities tell different and contradictory stories about their histories and their symptoms, and because the abuses they describe are often multiple, bizarre and sadistic, encounter the most defensive disbelief from professionals who do not wish to acknowledge that such horrors happen (Goodwin, 1985).

The core of the therapy usually consists of going into a self-induced hypnotic trance and reliving, in the character of each of the personalities, the significant traumatic events in her or his life. The therapist guides this process and eventually helps the multiple integrate all her memories into a gradually developing central consciousness, so she can reclaim her life experience. Though essentially a process of "making the unconscious conscious" with the attendant increase in awareness and control, it is not straightforward psychodynamic psychotherapy. Tremendous anxiety, rage and terror emerge at each new stage of the process, making a deep and reliable connection with the therapist, not only during sessions but at other times as well, necessary to avoid the pitfalls of suicide, violence toward other people and mental breakdown and collapse of functioning. The process of therapy for adults is often long and difficult. Children who are seen with multiple personalities heal much more quickly as long as they are protected from further abuse.

Though the treatment often takes a long time and the reliving and remembering are an extremely painful experience, very promising results can be achieved by individuals with multiple personalities who complete therapy with a practitioner who is experienced in this area. In a thorough follow-up study of 52 people who were reassessed regularly for five years after the final fusion of their personalities, 51 of them had not relapsed into multiplicity, and there was clear evidence of greatly decreased suffering and improved quality of life (Kluft, 1986). This is good news for people with multiple personalities and their therapists alike. The suffering that is so distressing can be alleviated and the strengths that are so apparent can be not only accessed but acknowledged

and enjoyed.

## Healing the Fragmentation

Susan came into therapy, and for three years she and all the people inside her told the stories of their lives, reliving the experiences of abuse again and again until the memories were a part of one central consciousness, rather than locked separately into each of the separate personalities. It was a frightening, painful and extremely agitating process, but Susan's strength and determination, which enabled her to survive a childhood of almost unimaginable torment and oppression, saw her through the reliving and integrating of those experiences. Integrating Darren, for example, meant working therapeutically with the rage that was directly connected to the acts of brutality perpetrated on Susan and her consequent desire to hurt others in the same way. It also meant uncovering the excruciating pain of continually attempting to reach out, to adapt, to connect, only to be tricked and tormented and betrayed in new and surprising ways every time. The therapeutic process was not about getting rid of Darren (Susan's first articulated goal for her therapy) or any of the personalities. Her therapy enabled Susan to be free of the compelling urge to hurt other people, but she retains Darren's ability to see brutality and oppression and respond to it with anger. Over the course of the three years, the dissociative barriers between the Darren who was angry and vengeful and the baby Darren who would put up with anything to be fed and loved were eroded. The barriers between Darren and the others, who were young and vulnerable or adolescent and curious or mature and socially responsible were also broken down, as the various personalities became acquainted with each other and, very gradually, began to understand each other's positions and appreciate each other's strengths. Now Susan struggles to hold these different and sometimes contradictory emotional states and points of view in one central consciousness and live creatively within the complex reality that results.

"The personal is political," that maxim of feminist praxis, was an integral part of Susan's therapy. By placing her suffer-

ings within the larger framework of social oppression, Susan, after a great deal of processing, was able to take her history less personally while at the same time reclaiming that history. This was for her a liberating answer to the haunting question of the abused child — why me? What is there about me that causes the people who are supposed to care for me to hate me and hurt me? In combination with recovering her own particular brutal past, Susan came to understand that it was *not* just her, that she shared her oppression with other women, and to some extent, with all women. This realization eased considerably the shame that pervaded her sense of herself, and it also spurred Susan on to action. She began to work for social change, and this work became an important component of her self-healing process.

Susan has now healed some of the most severe splits that caused her to live life on the run, from herself and from other people. But she is learning that there is no final escape from the struggle, no new identity she can comfortably assume to replace the divided self she created in terror and rage in her childhood. Her past is always part of her present. The world she now lives and works in is the same world that tortured her. Though she has more power than she did as an infant and as a child, she still must face every day living within and challenging the contradictions of a society that has not changed all that much since she was a little girl.

Multiple personality is a feminist issue. It is girls and women primarily who endure the sort of abuse that Susan did and develop multiple personalities as a consequence. It is also an issue for feminism because the Susans of this world have a great deal to teach those of us who are working with them as therapists and all of us who are working to advance the struggle to end sexist domination. The quality of Susan's resistance, that determination to transcend both the oppression she was subjected to and the incorporation into herself of the values and practices of the oppressor is the kind of force that needs to be at the heart of our work — both in the treatment room and in other political arenas — to restructure and transform the oppressive social and political structures that hurt children like Susan — and all the rest of us.

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## EMPOWERMENT AND THE LAW

### Strategies of Third World Women

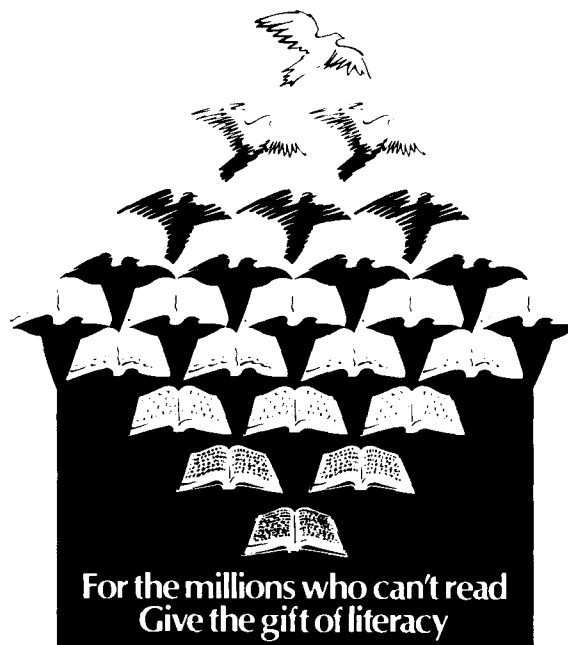
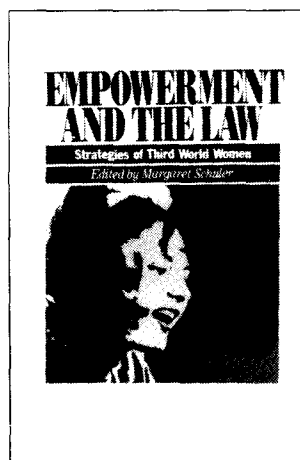
Edited by Margaret Schuler

This book is a compilation of papers by Third World Women on the various ways in which the law creates and maintains the oppression and exploitation of women. These papers are based on research and analysis of constitutional, religious, labour and family law, as it intersects to reinforce patriarchal structures and women's subordination within them.

**Empowerment and the Law** is also about women's empowerment through knowledge of the economic, legal and political systems of their societies. And it is about strategies for changing the "double burden of being poor and being female" and learning how to access the resources of their countries and benefit from development programs.

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