

## Getting a grip of your selves

By Ruth Ostrow

"I JUST can't cope," a friend was complaining over the phone. "It has all gotten too much for me. I feel small, I feel fragile. I just can't do it any more."

The problem, she said, started a few weeks ago when she was given an extra work project. She kept procrastinating and then, because she felt so guilty about not working, turned on late-night television to give herself some mental relief. Which had become addictive.

Then because she was so tired in the mornings from sitting up watching bad movies and infomercials about steak knives, she couldn't do her morning run. So her body was seizing, which was making her mind seize further. Meanwhile, the pressure of the unmet deadline was mounting. So what did she do?

"I found myself in the milk bar buying chocolate. And then the next day, I bought my first pack of tobacco in two years. I know it's self-defeating behaviour but I can't stop."

I felt like I was listening to myself. I've done the same thing many times over when faced with university assignments and deadlines. In times of stress, it's easy to do the opposite of what most sustains us and then find ourselves on a downward spiral, which for me involves lots of daytime telly and Tim Tams.

But I knew exactly what to say to my friend. I have been reading a most wonderful book -- Jean Houston's *The Hero and the Goddess* which explores the complex and often self-defeating world of the human psyche through myths, symbolism and Jungian archetypes.

The ancient Greeks believed people were polyphrenic by nature -- that is, we each have multiple selves within us, some of who are mature while others are not. Unlike modern Western philosophy which tends to focus on the ego-based "self" (and embraces monotheism), the Greeks saw themselves more as walking schizophrenics.

But rather than viewing this as dysfunctional, they considered it normal. And getting to know these facets of the self was viewed as crucial to mental health. So, too, did they believe in many gods and goddesses -- as mirrors of their complex inner worlds.

A renowned academic and psychologist, Houston talks about Homer's mythical hero Odysseus being undermined continually on the high seas by his crew -- who symbolised the various parts of the hero's personality: "Each of us contains, as part of our polyphrenic crew, a wide and willing group of players: child, parent, worker, dreamer, lover, trickster, ecstatic, melancholic, follower, leader ... and the myriad gods." Some sub-personalities help us, others drive us crazy.

In the Greek system, my girlfriend would not be "unable to cope". It would be that a facet of her persona had hijacked the mothership -- probably her inner child who was feeling small, fragile and panicky. By talking to this facet of the self gently and with respect, one can regain control of the vessel.

This ancient Greek philosophy formed the basis of many modern psychological systems including transactional analysis, developed by Eric Berne in the '60s,

which professes that there are three main sub-personalities living within us: parent, adult, child.

These are subsequently split into further personalities: for instance the parent can be nurturing parent or critical parent, the child can be the free child (blissful, creative) or adapted child (unhealthy, petulant, damaged).

In the transactional analysis model, my friend's adult would be sitting mute while the adapted child played up and the critical parent went into anger mode, telling the child off. "No wonder you can't cope. You are an idiot for staying up all night and neglecting your duties", thereby driving the child deeper into despair -- and rebellion against the inner parent.

One of the latest New Age derivatives of this system is called voice dialogue, the product of doctors Hal and Sidra Stone. Clients talk to their various personas to see what's up and coax themselves to behave. A patient stands at various places in the room or sits on different coloured pillows, to talk to the rule-maker, perfectionist, vulnerable self, lazybones and others. The question is: "Who's running the show? Which parts are asleep and why?"

The grand conductor of all this is the aware ego, much like the adult of transactional analysis, the higher self or silent witness of Buddhism. It's the unifying force. A dispassionate self, a wise entity who hears and knows all things, who doesn't sit in judgment but who can bring us back to balance.

I reminded my friend that she is a very capable person who has often survived her challenges. She was coping and would continue to cope. We both accepted that eventually her adult/wise-woman would re-emerge, turn off the telly, tuck the frightened child into bed and get a good night's sleep -- as it had done many times before.

Our less desirable sub-personalities will always come and haunt us from time to time. There is no need for alarm. Only when the poltergeists overstay their welcome and start throwing plates, is it time to call in the ghostbusters.

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