

## **How I Became Real -- A Survivor's Perspective**

*Name withheld by request.*

Up until a few years ago, all my life was pretend. I did not realize it at the time. I never really participated in my life; living was much too serious to actually BE in it.

A few years ago I started to make changes in my life. I started to take chances and experiment. It seemed an agonizingly slow, gradual process, until I looked back on it recently when I first spoke to my brother after having no contact with him for 11 years.

I told him I had become real. I no longer felt like a two dimensional cardboard cut out, holding my place in the stream of life until such a future time in which I might decide once more to participate in the process of living. I have many genuinely close friends for the first time. I am highly respected and very active in my profession and my community. Since I have shared no memories or indeed communication of any kind with my family, my brother asked me how I achieved this. The following is my reply:

Becoming real? Listening to MY voices rather than voices outside of myself. Going down through hell, slowly coming back up on the other side of it. Patiently, endlessly, searching through twisted strands of false memories, real memories, memories implanted by other people, mistaken beliefs, terror. Testing everything out. Not once, not twice, but endlessly, until I found solid ground beneath my feet. Writing for records, researching, reading, talking. Studying how the brain works. Reading what different researchers have to say about the brain and memories. Reading literature from the False Memory Society. Reading the research Van der Kolk at Harvard did into how memories are stored. Exploring. Listening to parts in me. Shutting off tapes inside of me, set to endlessly replay negative messages. Daring to think the unthinkable and ask 'what if this is real?'. Finding out that some things are, some things are not real. Pushing the limits until I learned how to tell what is, what isn't real.

When I find my mind going blank, saying "what just happened?" When I find one pathway inside closed, finding another approach. And when that closes down, finding another. And another. Until the mind slowly loses its terror and releases its tightly held secrets.

Since my mind had so many years invested in hiding "what I am" from me, it had become very adept at fooling me and very slippery. When I would get too close, parts would send out a chameleon that would lead me away until I was hopelessly lost. Time after time. Infinite patience was required.

Not judging parts inside. When I feel a swell of rage, asking "why?" When I feel terror, asking "why?" When I find parts inside that I dislike, realizing they are some of the most grievously injured parts. Bringing them out into today where they can be healed.

Bringing lost parts trapped in the past into the present where they can look around and say, "I am in 2003." Letting more and more of the parts that I had shut out, join in until the orchestra that is 'me' begins to have a full sound rather than the thin one-dimensional sound of one instrument playing.

Asking 'why is my mind so different from other people's minds?'

Becoming real started when I frequently found tears streaming down my face for no apparent reason. In job settings I was fortunate that I faced away from other people, or I would not have been able to continue my job. Driving the car became problematical because it was difficult to see through the tears. What was particularly confusing was that as far as I could tell, I was quite happy and content with every aspect of my life.

I looked inside for inner helpers and started screaming.

I ended up hospitalized briefly.

Other people inside me started using my mouth to say things. They used a multitude of different voices; young, old, angry, terrified, male, female, animal. They started using my hands to write things. Things of which I had no knowledge and did not believe.

I listened to what the voices had to say. I argued with them. At one point I told certain voices I would rather die than listen to them. They stopped talking. My world lost all color.

After I experienced my first complete reliving of a traumatic event, I woke up the next morning and found that my mind was QUIET. I had never realized before how noisy my mind had always been, as if tuned to hundreds of different radio stations simultaneously.

What was interesting throughout all of this was that except for the brief hospitalization, I was fully functional, professionally, while all this was going on. I successfully hid it from all outsiders.

*Am I done with the process? Am I completely real? No. Will I ever be?* I have no idea.

*Is it too much work? Yes. Is there an alternative? Yes.* For me, the only alternative I saw was death. I found no other possible alternative. Once I ruled out a fast quick death, it was death by inches, as every day I shut down more and more.

*Why/how did I let go of this alternative?* With the help and immense patience of people outside of me, life once more entered, as slowly but surely as it had been leaving.

*Is life all serious and painful during the healing process?* No. My friends and I often laugh uproariously at the awkwardness much of this process entails.

It has been an interesting roller coaster ride these past years.