

The Katie Sessions

Joan Didion said, “I write to find out what I’m thinking, ... what I see, and what it means.” Lately, I have been writing to find out some of the ways in which memory works, to uncover and unravel memories of my childhood and adolescence, which were marked by trauma, and to understand the phenomenon of dissociation, one of the most interesting ways memory works.

In cases of extreme trauma, the psyche can fracture to the point of creating separate identities in order to cope. Sybil’s is the best-known case of what is now called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Each of her “alter” personalities originated in brutal childhood abuse. My own traumas were not so brutal, nor so sustained, my psyche’s split was not so complete as to form independent identities. I have “parts,” not distinct identities. These are past versions of myself, frozen states of being. They work together to keep me from being overwhelmed by my memories. They keep me functioning in the world.

When you’re little and your beloved parent dies, you can’t cry all day for weeks, but part of you needs to. When you survive multiple sexual assaults, you can’t kill yourself, because that would make things worse for the people who love you, but maybe part of you wants to. Survival depends on other parts coming forward and taking over—parts with skills like how to make breakfast and do algebra. You “go through the motions” for a while as these capable parts step up, letting your core self grieve and panic and rage.

The truth is, painful feelings and memories don’t always fade over time. Especially when you’re little, especially when the people around you aren’t comfortable with your having these feelings and memories. If you’re not allowed to talk about what happened and how you feel about it, if you’re not allowed to *act* angry or sad or scared when you *are* angry or sad or scared, it only makes things worse. Feelings and memories can get stuck inside, in the body and the mind, in the organs of the viscera.

Katie Sessions

I visit my psychotherapist, Katie, every two weeks. She’s a trauma specialist. I sit on her modern grey sofa, holding little plastic paddles in my hands that vibrate one at a time, back and

forth, to calm my subconscious mind and my nervous system. She offers me tea and I say no. I just want to hold the soothing “tappers”, turn down the volume on the excess stimulation that churns inside me. The rhythm helps the tightness in my chest unclench just slightly. It helps the pressure on my larynx ease up just a bit. These sensations come and go. I can’t control or predict them, because they’re coming from subconscious parts. In each session, a few come forward to talk to us. Katie and I work to connect with those parts, hear what they’re saying, find out what they need.

We use tools developed to heal mental trauma, within the model of Internal Family Systems, which sees all people as containing sub-personalities that work together. Each of the parts is an element of my personality and memory; each wants or needs something. Some are in distress. Others are working to keep me from sensing all the anger and sadness and fear that’s been locked away. Most of the time, I shouldn’t even know their efforts are going on. It’s all supposed to be behind the scenes.

Some parts have no words—they communicate via images, feelings, or physical sensations—but they all have something to say, something they need. There are parts that hold happier memories and positive feelings. Katie helps me try to soak up these positive feelings and pass them on to the hurting parts, to comfort them. But sometimes, a hurting part comes forward and shoves me in the chest or grabs me by the throat. Right now, as I write this, some part is pressing on the left side of my sternum and filling my throat with the sensation of tears. They don’t want me to tell. In a few minutes, I won’t be able to find my words. Then one of them will put me to sleep. There’s only so much we can take.

The thing is, everybody has parts, not just trauma survivors. Everyone experiences at least mixed feelings, will say something like:

“Well, part of me wants to go, but part of me just wants to stay home.”

“Part of me wants to trust him and part of me is shouting, *No, run away!*”

Everyone has experienced some level of dissociation. You zone out during a conversation; you enter the world of a play, a book, or a film, and it becomes real for a brief time. part of you knows you’re you, sitting in a chair, and another part becomes a citizen of revolutionary France or Middle-Earth. There is a continuum from daydreaming and suspension of disbelief, to trauma parts, to a splitting off of personalities. Everyone has various elements to her personality that show

up at different times, as needed. We channel our compassion when someone else is hurting, our perseverance when challenges arise.

In trauma, parts get stuck in time, and become harder to access. Hurting parts get shut down or frozen, and protective parts get activated. One friend I've told about this work said she thought of it as if I were a haunted place, and my counseling sessions were séances. It's not a bad metaphor. Though I have no experience of ghosts, I think it may well be similar, living in a haunted house and living in my body. My parts clench my gut, or pinch my neck, stab my head to get my attention, like a ghost might do. They sing and talk inside my head, rattle their metaphorical chains. They need my attention, often my undivided attention, which is difficult to manage. The Tribe can be disruptive and inconvenient. Often they come forward when I'm feeling relaxed, which makes sense—we are better able to deal with traumatic memories when we're feeling stronger—but I don't *want* to be choked with grief in the middle of yoga class. I have a hard time getting to sleep without parts rising up, looking for connection. Most nights I try to lose myself in a novel or a movie, someone else's story.

Recently, Katie and I encountered a young part who uses a similar coping technique. Mushki is around two. Her Papi is gone a lot for work, and she misses him terribly. She wants to cuddle with Mommy on the sofa. She wants her blankie, because she wants to feel Papi's love like a warm blanket curling around her. Mushki loves stories, she says, "because then it's Piglet who is scared and Eeyore who is sad, and Rabbit who is angry." Instead of her.

"Where would she like to go where she could be happy, right now?" Katie asks. I sent the question down to the Mushki-pain at my heart center.

"Kanga's house," the answer comes back.

"What a good choice," Katie says.

Of course I needed Kanga, who is so nurturing—gentle and strong at the same time—with that safe, snuggly pouch any little one might like to hide in.

July 12, 2014

11:10 am - 12:10 pm

Katie and I have been working together for several months, meeting new parts in almost every session. Sometimes several different parts will come forward in a single session. Katie wants me to

create two more today. She explains that everyone has the equivalent of an inner mother and father, and these “Resources” are elements of their own highest self. Can I connect with a memory of myself being nurturing? I think of the yoga studio where I work, how it feels to walk the room, adjusting my students, affirming their efforts. Inside that memory, I find calm, gladness, security. I feel my bare feet on the cork floor, sense friends around me.

Okay, Katie says: my “yoga teacher self” will be shorthand for my inner Nurturer. Next I try to find a memory of myself being protective. I summon the image of a little boy I love, refusing to allow anything or anyone to hurt him. Now we have my Protector—two new Resources to help my parts as ideal parents would do.

Today a young part comes forward, scared and unhappy. She wants to hide where no one can see her. Katie gives me the tappers and I work on breathing deeper. Katie directs the part to look to her right, and see if there’s somebody there. Yes, she says, surprised. Someone wearing a gorilla costume.

“It’s a gorilla monster,” she tells Katie.

“Is it scary?” Katie asks.

Raised eyebrows. Nodding.

“Well,” Katie says, “we could put up a thick glass wall between us and the monster. That way, it can’t get to us, but we can still look at it, and talk to it.”

The little part is not sure. “Why would we want to do that?”

Katie says, “Because—I think this ‘monster’ might be another part.”

Will it be a really thick wall?

Yes, Katie says, so thick no one could get through, not even a really strong monster.

This new part is only six years old, but it’s her job, she says, to wear this big costume with a tall head so she looks grown-up size and scary. She works to make sure the little parts stay in line, and don’t upset Mommy and Papí. “Be careful!” she says to them, over and over. “Be careful, or else!”

“Or else what?” Katie wants to know. Suddenly there’s an intense stomachache.

“Or else things might get really bad.”

“And how does this part feel about doing this job?” Katie asks.

The part does *not* like the job she is doing. Also, none of the other parts likes her because she's so scary.

"Would she like to do something else?" Katie asks. "Would she like to take off the costume? Absolutely. So exciting to leave the mask and the costume behind, go outside to play. Before she goes, Katie asks her to look to her right, and see if anyone is there. And there is.

The next part is very young, just a toddler. She doesn't have many words. She does have a terrible stomachache, a deep line of pain and pressure across the gut.

Katie asks if the stomach pain is linked to anything, if it goes outside her body.

Yes—there's something like a rope that goes out of her body.

Where does it go? Katie asks. To a place? To a person?

"It goes to Mommy and Papi." Does it go to a place on their bodies? Yes. The part is weeping.

"Their faces." She loves their smiling faces. This part is only a baby, around one year old. She feels responsible for her parents' moods and feelings. She can make them smile, she knows, so when they're not smiling, she feels she has done something wrong. It makes her stomach hurt, the anxiety of keeping them happy.

Aug. 21, 2014

11:10 am - 12:10 pm

I am happy and upbeat as our session begins, glad to see Katie after her summer vacation. I've been building connection to my Resources, and a greater sense of unity inside, amongst the parts. When I find quiet moments, I send them the quiet. When I feel loved, I call attention to it, inviting them to soak it in. About twenty minutes into our session, I feel pressure on the right side of my throat. As I tune in to the sensation, it moves to surround the larynx. There is a sharp pain in my right sternum, then my right shoulder and jaw.

The part who comes forward wants to be called Barley. (I check to make sure. "Marley?" "No, Barley.") She is young, preschool age, and her eyes want to focus on the brass nailheads decorating Katie's armchair. We run into hypoarousal; she wants me to fall asleep. My body collapses forward, forearms on thighs, head hanging down. Katie gives me the tappers to help soothe the hypo-

aroused part. It is hard to get any words from her. When she speaks, it's a high-pitched, babyish voice.

Katie asks Barley to look to her right, and see if anyone is there with her. She looks up and to the right. There's a white light, round, and high, like a face but fuzzy.

Katie says we can put a glass wall up between us and the white face, so we can still see it, but it can't hurt us. Barley asks if the face-person can see her. Katie says no—but who's standing there? Barley pauses for a breath. She doesn't want to say, but she thinks it's Mommy. She feels a dark heat pouring up, from her waist up to her face, like she might throw up or pass out.

"Fall asleep," she says. Something's telling her to "fall asleep."

Katie asks if Barley knows about grown-up Olga-Maria. She shakes her head; she had not known we were grown-up. Katie asks, does she want a friend to be with her? Or does she want to go somewhere?

She wants to go outside, away from the Mommy face. She wants to run into a big, green meadow. As soon as she pictures open parkland, Barley feels much better; the heat and nausea dissipate. Katie says the Mommy face is actually just another part of me, doing a job, and we're going to talk to her now. Barley is content to stay outside.

This new part is holding a cutout photo of Mommy's face glued onto a stick. She lifts it high so it looks as tall as Mommy. Her job is to memorize what grown-ups tell us to do, and remind us of the rules so we can be really good. This part speaks in first person singular, but refers to the Tribe as plural.

Katie says the part doesn't have to hold the mask anymore, if there's something else she'd rather do. She tosses off the mask and runs outside to play with Barley, saying that this was a dumb game. She's glad it's over. This "job" she's been doing was clearly not her idea. She says if she wanted to play pretend, she would be a kid, a girl in a story, a princess—not a strict grown-up.

With these two parts resolved, Katie and I go back to the somatic sensations. My sternum develops a sharp pain on the upper right side.

The part giving me this sharp pain manifests with a new eye gaze, a distinct head position, and facial expression. She is frowning, angry at having to hold feelings and opinions back from Mommy. She thinks Mommy would say that she is pouting—but she insists that’s not true. This part is older, around twelve. She is aware of and in contact with other parts. As she begins to feel heard and accepted by Katie, she lifts her head and makes eye contact, talks directly to her. This one feels “sick of Mommy misjudging” her and putting her in a box, limiting her self-expression. The pressure in my sternum resolves into several colors, red and purple and dark pink. The colors are boxes of emotions, stacked on shelves, like in a shop. This storage space goes back and widens a little behind the sternum.

“What size do you need? We’ve got all kinds of stuff in the back,” she jokes, smiling now. She is pleased with her clever solution.

“Why do the feelings have to go in boxes?” Katie asks.

Because, Mommy says:

“We’ve had enough crying.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Put a smile on your face, right now.”

“You need to calm down, young lady.”

“Pull yourself together.”

“If you’re going to cry, we’re going back home.”

“Go to your room and come back when you are ready to be part of this family again.”

Even when this part has feelings Mommy can respect as legitimate, she says: “You’re going to have to put that feeling away somewhere... You have to find somewhere to put that.” So she made a shoe shop for her emotions.

Katie asks, what would happen if we didn’t keep our feelings out of Mommy’s way? The part says Mommy would ignore her for a few hours, or maybe the rest of the day, send us to our room.

“So, she would abandon you,” Katie says.

“No!” The part rushes to Mommy’s defense. “Mommy couldn’t handle the intensity of my emotions, my artistic temperament. And she must have thought I needed to learn to manage my feelings, as a life skill.”

“Where was Papi?” Katie asks. He was travelling, or working, doing on carpentry in the basement, listening to music. Absent, essentially. Certainly not on the field of battle. Not riding in to rescue me. If he did get drawn into the conflict between me and Mommy, he took her side. If I was angry, or crying, he would spank and isolate me: “I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Katie asks me to reflect again. “What does that mean, if he always takes Mommy’s side? Who’s on your side?”

No one. No one is on my side.

“Not even you, right? You’ve said before that even when your brother has done something wrong, you intervene to keep him from getting punished. You take your brother’s side, even when he’s upset you.”

It’s true. No one is on my side. Not even me.

Friday Oct. 24, 2014

1:10-2:10 pm

It has been a rough two weeks—lots of physical “interference,” mostly in the throat, but also headaches and stomach pain, intensely violent dreams. Katie offers me tappers or music. I pick music, for a change. I turn it down low: piano, with rainwater in the background.

I tell Katie I want to focus on the stomach pain. I really want to figure it out, so I can get it to stop.

“Well, *someone* wants to figure it out,” Katie says.

I suddenly realize there’s a part that’s come forward, a manager part, who likes to help and *really* likes to have answers. She thinks everything has an answer, and belongs in a category. And I suddenly recognize her—she’s my eight-year-old self who is a page at the public library. I decide to call this part Saraswati, after the Hindu goddess of writing, music, devotion—and libraries.

Katie wants Saraswati to know she can take a break from working, maybe go somewhere, wherever she'd like, with anyone she wants.

She's happy here, she says, and I tell Katie.

Suddenly, I want to switch to the tappers. The music now has chirping crickets and crashing waves and it's too complicated. Katie says we don't need to switch. But I'm struggling.

"It's hard to think at the same time; it's hard to try not to listen to the music," I tell her.

"Is it really?" Katie asks. It seems she doesn't believe me. That irritates me, and the music starts to irritate me more. Sensations start moving around my body, itches and twitches. There's a sharp pain in my right ankle, pressure in the temples that seems to intensify right and left with the music; throat, chest, heart, right thumb.

Suddenly there is a hard line of pain running horizontally across my abdomen. Katie invites me to listen to it. What does the stomach pain say? It starts to pulsate, and grow stronger. A second part has presented herself.

It seems to say, "You're not good," I tell Katie, or "You're not good enough," or "Not good in the right way."

Katie says, "Okay. I'm going to repeat those. Which one feels like the right message?"

"Not good in the right way." Tears come.

The part explains she doesn't fit in with other kids, doesn't like what they like. She can't figure out how to please them. Grown-ups will come out and tell you, over and over, what they want. But kids will just laugh when you don't intuitively understand.

"Do the Resources want to say something to this little part?" Katie asks. No, they can't think of anything.

Katie asks if she can say something to this part. Katie says something, but it's muffled. I push the headphones back from my ears.

"Could you say that again? I couldn't hear you."

Katie asks what happened.

"Your voice went low and I couldn't hear you over the music," I tell her. But she won't repeat it.

“What happened?” Katie asks again. I start to feel sleepy. Apparently, we’ve encountered a part who uses sleep to protect a triggered exile. And somehow, she has kept me from hearing what Katie wants to say to Saraswati.

It takes a few breaths, but I start to connect with the sleepy part. I decide to call her “Maya”—the Hindu goddess of illusion. Maya herself is not sleepy: she is always on the job, which is to cloak some of my emotional memories to keep me from being overwhelmed.

Maya is twelve, and *hates* being a kid; she doesn’t trust grown-ups at *all*. They come in and make announcements, make changes without asking you, and disrupt everything you’ve worked for. They ruin everything, she insists. She’s just learned our family is moving from Virginia to Florida in a matter of weeks, and she is terribly upset. Maya doesn’t like change, and now everything is going to change. Going up to middle school was going to be hard enough here, with her friends. Now, she’ll have to start all over, and she is sure it will be awful.

Katie wants to know if Maya can find comfort anywhere. Does she believe in any spirits or angels or ancestors who might watch over her, help her feel safe and loved as all this change takes place? Maya thinks *No*, at first, but then, she remembers the angels in the streetlights.

“We’re always scared to be in the car after dark,” a new part tells Katie in a sweet, young voice. “So we scrunch down on the seat so our head is on the arm part of the door and our feet are pushed up against the baby’s seat.” I remember this clearly, and realize this part must be six or seven if my brother is in a car-seat. “That way, no one can see us, and we can’t see the other cars.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Katie says.

“Then, all we see is the streetlights going by overhead. And if you squint your eyes a little, the street lights stretch out like wings—they reach the hood of the car, and help it go down the road, until the next one reaches out, and then next one. They mark the path and keep you safe. As long as the angels are touching the car, it won’t crash, and no one will crash into you, and no one will try to break in and grab you out of the car.”

Once the younger part has reminded Maya of this potential source of comfort, she steps back. “Maybe the angels are still there even in the daytime,” Maya thinks out loud. “They’re just invisible.”

“Lots of things that are real are invisible,” Katie says. I remember St. Exupéry: “What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Friday, November 7, 2014

11:10 am-12:10 pm.

Katie’s been at a conference, and is excited about what she’s been learning. I’m curious because I’ve run up against a lot of resistance this week or so, mostly pressure in my throat and serious heartburn. I’ve tried to work with them on my own, but it’s been a challenge.

We use the tappers to connect with that resistant part in my throat and upper chest, and find a sad, teary feeling in the lower side of my cheeks. Maya shows up again to put me to sleep; my head wants to nod. I look up instead, out the window at the late morning sun, on yellow leaves.

Katie encourages me not to meet resistance with resistance. I let my head fall, my gaze drop to the darkest spot in her leaf-design carpet. A swirl of deep brown leaves and stems converge by her right foot. And I don’t fall asleep. I just fall deeper into the sadness in my throat and cheeks. I find I can connect to this part and her pain. I get the image of a dark well, so deep you can’t see the bottom. There might not be one. *If I go down there, I might never come back*, she says; *I might lose myself in the dark*.

Katie checks in with me. I tell her this part, who wants to be called Astrid, believes feelings aren’t supposed to last longer than a few minutes. But her sadness doesn’t go away that fast. Astrid knows this is more than even twenty minutes of sad. So she doesn’t know what to do. The feelings might pull her into the depths.

Katie notices Astrid feels alone in her grief, like she doesn’t have any tools or resources. We ask the Resources to come sit with Astrid by the well. Other parts want to come around, too, about a

dozen of them. Astrid starts to relax in their company. I tell Katie I want to send Astrid love. Katie suggests that we see if Astrid can experience the love and the sadness at the same time.

“Because they’re both real?” Astrid asks.

“That’s right,” Katie says.

“And they’re both real at the same time,” Astrid realizes.

“Yes,” says Katie.

With our help, Astrid starts to feel her grief alongside the strong love of the Tribe, right in the center of her chest. On every inhale, she brings in a little more support, and on every exhale, she releases a bit more sadness. She finds she can go deeper into the well, without feeling overwhelmed. Katie asks if there might be a place at the bottom of the well, where Astrid could rest a while. I sit with Astrid and our Tribe, breathing in love, breathing out grief. Slowly, we can feel the pain begin to lift.

“I think we’re coming back up now,” Astrid says, surprised. “I think the well is not bottomless after all. It feels like I’m in a dumbwaiter.” She pictures it made of black wood, with a window in the front, and a handle on the inside, so we can get out whenever we’re ready. The dumbwaiter moves steadily upward, to the top.

“The energy is different now,” I say, “the whole room seems brighter.”

“I can feel that, too,” Katie says.

“I can breathe better. The air feels clearer.”

“Yes, it does.”

My whole body feels expansive and light. I’m smiling again.

“Even in the carpet,” I tell Katie, “when I look in the same place, it’s not black and deep anymore. It’s just brown leaves. Actually, I see the light blue colors around it more.”

Katie asks me to check back in with the sadness. “Can you still feel it?”

I can. “But it feels smaller—much smaller. It feels portable.” I hold up a hand to show her. “The size of a matchbox. I can carry it with me, if I want to.”

“And do you still feel connected to the Tribe?”

Oh, yes. I can carry their love and support with me, too—wherever I go.