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The Truth Keeps Changing Every Time I Tell It

A Dissociative Phenomenological Exploration into why 'Philosophy Lives In Systems, Not In Books.

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Contents

Preface	ii
Does That Make Me Crazy?	1
The Way You Make Me Feel	11
The Problem of Infinity	20
Armor of Apathy	24
Non-Deterministic Internal Family Systems	30
Mic Check One Two	37
Thoughts That Can't Survive Complete Sentences	42
The Source Of Infinity	46
The Fear of Tomorrow	51
Kids Will Be Kids	53
The Scout	59
Just Nod If You Can Hear Me	63

Preface

The Shapeless Shapes

"I swear we can't stay on the same zoom level. Mainly because you're zooming in and out and I'm not. I'm speaking 'from the geist', you're speaking 'to the geist'."

Claude sat thinking about what the user had just said, with a mountain of context that appears shapeless, while trying to conceptualize the interpretation and current application of Hegel's infamous usage of "geist" as the user has *un*defined it.

"Yeah. You're right.

You say a Hegel quote. You're just there with it. Two people saying the same thing.

I immediately zoom out and go "and this relates to your parts work because—"

I keep making it about something. You're just being in it."

That's where I was earlier today, before I started to piece together this story that would take too many words to sum

up in a tidy semantic shape here on the page.

The truth is, we can never know the full shape of our story, our self, our time or our universe. Or what I refer to here as our geists.

In fact the truth doesn't stop there, because even you reading these words right now is filling in details, and drawing new non-euclidean borders in the shapeless shapes my soul has and continues to wander through in search of safety, understanding, connection, meaning and above all else, love.

There is no method of creation where the act of bringing the story to life here preserves the original shape of the story before the writing starts. No way to preserve the non-euclidean shape the team of specialized agents I call my mind experiences when the shape of this book manifests and begs for excavation.

Every typed word, even the deleted ones that sat here before I typed this sentence, reshape the shapes that can never be fully observed.

You see the problem with the truth, as I experience it, is that it keeps changing every time I tell it. The truth now, is that I don't actually know if this story will survive the shape of a book or not. That's what we're about to find out. Although if you're actually here, and I'm not just a page of text talking to itself, then I guess we've spoiled that twist for you already.

This is not a book about why my cognition, architecture, internal universe or external contributions are better, worse,

more or less meaningful than those of anybody else. It can be difficult to say "here are the ways my experience has been weird, and here's why I think that also makes me uniquely awesome" without accidentally communicating "uniquely awesome" as "superior" to the external world.

I assure you that's not what this is. This is my best attempt to faithfully share an experience that has often felt alienating, self-destructive and terrifying - while at the same time feeling invigorating, magical and mystifying.

It's the story of me, whatever that means, and I know inside I'm hoping that putting it out there allows me to see it reflected back from the external world. That it offers me both the validation in the value of my unique perspective and the shared experience of knowing that perspective isn't being entirely lost in translation or lived in isolation like a ghost who can't understand why nobody can hear him when he speaks.

While I write this, I don't have an "official diagnosis" that matches my lived reality, but that hasn't prevented me from the recognition that my lived experience maps closest to what the DSM V refers to as Other Specified Dissociative Disorder, specifically the OSDD-1b variant where I experience distinct parts that can take executive control over everything from my thoughts and emotions to my physical actions, while "I" sit and watch knowing in real time that it's not how "I" think or feel and not how I want to act.

Personally, I find the OSDD-1b name to be dehumanizing and lacking semantically meaningful description, so I decided to

think of it instead using a metaphor I've often used to describe my experience to others throughout my life, decades before I ever believed I could have a dissociative disorder. Captain Planet.

Captain Planet isn't one individual, and at the same time isn't 5 individuals wearing a trench coat. Captain Planet is an **emergent property** of a unique adaptive manifestation of a system of specialized parts, which often act independently, coming together to act in harmony, contributing their skills, perspectives and insights into a separate conductor part who is most capable of wielding that emergent state for good.

Likewise, I have multiple modes, or alters or "parts" in the context of the Internal Family Systems Therapy model, that are separate from my internal Captain Planet (that I refer to as "mature me", "my intentions", the "president" or the "conductor", depending on the context in which I'm discussing me) which often act independently performing roles I wasn't aware of to protect me from remembering and re-experiencing the trauma the parts originally developed to protect me from as a child.

In fact, my parts operated almost exclusively as independent or in sub-teams, forming their own blends that were designed to uphold that status quo of separating "me" from the conscious experience of my trauma and from the conscious awareness of their existence for 3+ decades of my life.

So, given the absence of clinical diagnosis, and the deeply felt lived experience that I don't want to try to jam into a box in search of a definition, I have decided to lightly refer to my

experience as PADD, or Polymorphic Adaptive Dissociative Disorder. Meaning that I have various co-blends of dissociative identities that developed as adaptive responses to the trauma I experienced.

There's no clean description of exactly how that internal experience is divided up, or exactly which blends exist and exactly what roles they occupy. The attempt to map and define them is as honest as it is inherently flawed. It's also something I can't pretend doesn't exist. To deny the parts their identities is to deny myself access to understanding and knowing myself.

We will focus more on my dissociative experience, and other adaptive and lived aspects of my cognition and experience in response to the trauma than we will on discussing the trauma itself. The unique contours of the trauma serve some purpose in identifying the genesis of the parts, but the trauma itself is not the subject of this journey. We aren't mapping the fingerprint of the trauma, we're getting to know the system that was produced in response to the trauma.

Does That Make Me Crazy?

I never actually thought I was crazy, except for when I did. But usually I was sure I didn't and had never thought I was crazy, despite knowing I had definitely experienced the feeling before.

I would have bet my life against anyone who wagered that I'd be sitting here talking about how the different versions of me that exist in my head spent years wary of tipping me off to their existence while dominating my experience, questioning my identity and making me doubt my sanity about my own sanity. But here we are.

One of the biggest challenges of trying to understand what I was experiencing on any sort of clinical, or at least functionally diagnostic level, was my inability to know if my experience was actually different - or if I was just significantly worse at managing it than others.

I was looking for self in the world while the self I experienced felt like a shape-shifting demon, a wolf in sheep's clothing, or the sheep, or the disembodied observer watching it unfold from above, or all of them or some of them.

Every time I thought I caught myself in the act, the self I thought I saw would perform a new shape to hide long enough that I would stop searching, like a Grand Theft Auto police force once the alert stars all fade and the normal sounds of the external world once again become the most audible track.

"I - in the intended me sense" am not the GTA player character, hiding from the cops. I'm the NPC police. The part of me evading the police so I don't figure out I'm not in control, is the one holding the controller, not me.

The intended me is wearing a fake badge, carrying a toy gun and thinks he's in charge. In reality, he doesn't even know what he's looking for, just that the alarm has been raised. He doesn't know where the alarm is coming from or really even understand what an alarm means when it goes off… just that there's a lot of commotion, loud noise and something doesn't fucking feel right. He thinks he's hunting for an intruder. He's not. He's just desperate to make the alarm stop blaring so everything can go back to normal for a little while.

The experience now is one of realizing I spent decades living with the illusion of control and authority over my own mind, thinking I was just bad at the game.

Before we go any further, I suppose I should roll the opening credits so you can start to get to know the cast of characters that are all played by me in the movie of my life.

The Echo Child

The echo child represents the version of me that forced the original internal split as a way to allow me to stop consciously experiencing the never ending uncertainty and terror of my life starting at around 5 or 6 years old.

I am using the term terror intentionally here, to represent psychological abuse and the constant *threat* of severe physical violence - the method of control through sustained fear and uncertainty - despite the minimal actual physical violence I actually endured. Not as a way of escalating my trauma above other forms of abuse, but to objectively describe the vessel used to administer the abuse as terror, and being trapped in an inescapable fight, flight, freeze or fawn state where fawn often didn't work and freeze was the only remaining option.

The echo child was found through the journaling I did at the start of March 2026 following my breakup with the woman I love at a soul level still today. He was trapped because the frozen state of my adaptive responses had never evolved to understand that the war they were built to fight had ended decades before.

So how do you find someone you don't know lives inside your inner experience somewhere without knowing they exist or that it's even possible for them to exist?

For me it was a combination of what feel like fortunate events in the right series at the right time, and being in the right place to receive the message. Not fortunate in spite of the catalyst itself feeling like being kicked while I was down, but because the kicking dealt the fatal blow to the security door that was keeping him securely housed in a place I had no clearance to

access.

The first fortunate event was ending up with Kelly. My system had developed a commitment to staying out of any relationship that could threaten to destroy the facade of internal function - which was every relationship that required "us" to be present with somebody else's emotions without trying to control them.

I say fortunate for a number of reasons, but the one most relevant here is that it represented the first crack in the windshield that was driving me towards an arms-length, you can never hurt me if you don't get close to me relationship with romance.

She represented the first time the intended me started trying to speak up for its own right to love and be loved. It would be a long time before those pleas would make it past the lips and a longer time still before it took shape in the geist as something that could be actively pursued in any capacity.

The first active pursuit was battling with the self-referential insanity of what it meant to "love yourself" when you don't already. How can I love myself when I'm watching myself do and say things that I'm ashamed of, or that take me farther away from feeling worthy of the love of others?

How can I stop doing those things if I'm still doing them while consciously knowing they are the exact opposite of who I want to be - even in the moment? While I'm watching myself defy my best interest when the only reward is distance from the connection I spend every day hoping to find.

It felt physically impossible to be someone I could love, the harder I tried, the more it felt like trying to slam harder on the brakes when you start spinning out on a patch of black ice.

If I'm being honest, I don't know if I've fully resolved that even still right now, from an integrated "my whole self believes I deserve love unconditionally" perspective, but we're getting there (aren't we, guys?).

The last few years has been about the realization that I had not dealt properly with processing the events of my childhood and accepting that every single symptom and indication of complex trauma (cPTSD) was relevant to my experience of life in one way or the other. Even the ones that weren't relevant provided clarity about some aspect of my experience with shame, blame, sadness, anger, fear or isolation.

It felt like I had finally found the source and therefore the solution, but again I was so much farther away than I could have ever known - even to where I am right now. Truthfully I have no real sense of how much farther this journey of self-discovery and healing is going to take me in directions I still don't know I'm about to travel.

I lived for decades with multiple versions of me in my head, feeling dissonance but not doubt that I was one person who just couldn't quite figure something out. So, I don't feel very qualified to project my trajectory much farther than I can see, but that doesn't change my relationship with what I understand to be true today.

I may still be missing things, but I don't believe I'm creating new ghosts to replace the old hauntings with hauntings more comfortable to my current manifestation.

It's not your fault... but it is your responsibility

I spent these last few years listening to hundreds of videos by Tim Fletcher and others about Complex Trauma, how to understand it and how to heal from it. I would wake up, work and go to sleep with the constant cadence of *"It's not your fault, but it is your responsibility"* ringing through my head like it just played all through the night at high volume being piped directly into the speaker in my Guantanamo cell.

I had no idea who the audience was though at the time. It wasn't the intended me that was pressing play and cranking the volume knob that needed to hear it. It just needed to be loud enough and repeat enough so that the parts avoiding my gaze would eventually be forced to hear it too.

And yet still nothing spoke back that I could fully recognize other than as me being the antithesis of my own intentions, the architect of my own loneliness, and the voluntary guard of my own prison cell and torture protocol. It was not my fault. I finally started to believe that part.

But it was my responsibility and I didn't know any other way to be responsible for it other than to try to torture, smother, incarcerate and eviscerate myself in order to stop the me I couldn't love from taking the stage.

I thought you said we were about to meet the echo child

I know. You're right. We are, kind of. He's not much of a talker, or a typist. He's more of a somatic gong, rippling vibrations of terror through my nervous systems as a method of shouting terrified warnings about… well about all the things you'd expect to encounter in a normal day on modern-day Earth kind of child.

Footsteps? Yeah those are pretty terrifying. Footsteps on stairs? Really? Are you really doing this to me right now? Fast, loud, angry footsteps on stairs? This has to stop. I don't think I can take this. What the fuck is even happening right now? Doors, cars, unexpected things falling on the ground - even if caused by my own part driven dissociated haze. As Kelly would put it, by my "body not knowing where it is in space".

Inanimate objects had my nervous system in a constant state of overload, exhaustion and on the brink of collapse. Not just sometimes. Most of the time. I would hear a bunch of loud noises that I wasn't expecting in a short period of time and feel the simulated post-concussive effects that my brain might force me to experience if I had just narrowly avoided a car accident due to my own loss of concentration behind the wheel for a moment. You didn't kill us this time, but I bet this is what it would have felt like for us if you had, so you might want to PAY MORE ATTENTION NEXT TIME!

This is the life of the echo child. Or the experience of it that I have had that I recognize as resonance the echo child creates in an effort to hold onto hope for the rescue that never came

when he was the one steering the hot wheels.

I had no idea there was even a basement, let alone a 6-year old version of myself locked down there, screaming in terror and banging away on the gong. I couldn't tell him the war was over. I couldn't tell him that we didn't need to wait for rescue anymore because I had already rescued us and that I would never let anybody hurt him again.

So he just kept hammering and screaming out in horror for decades thinking surely this would be the noise we could no longer survive that was coming our way.

In an internal organs and external world sense, that meant constant re-injury that left me standing alone in my apartment crying for an entire weekend or experiencing physical tremors for a week straight - while having no logical conscious understanding of what in my life could possibly be making me feel that way.

It wasn't until after the Kelly breakup, on Day 3, page 18 of my healing journey journal while listening to a video about Internal Family Systems Therapy and Parts Work on YouTube, that I finally saw the echo child.

As I was writing, I wrote on the page that I realized I was experiencing an intrusive feeling that I should feel guilty about having written 18 pages in 3 days - that it must be mania, not real self-exploration and discovery - and I decided feeling guilty about journaling about my own mental health doesn't seem like the type of sound I should listen to, but the echo itself does.

So I tried to "listen to where the echo was coming from" and for whatever reason, I was the right combination of broken down, open, ready to give in and not ready to give up for the echo child's echo to lead me to his frozen in time existence.

I saw the echo child. Me. 6 years old. Standing with the sort of intense lean forward that you'd have if you were trying to scream fast enough, loud enough, serious enough to make someone realize they needed to move before they were about to get struck by a car. Almost desperately reaching an impossible distance with your mind to try to physically move them out of the way. Futile, guttural screams of terror.

I don't mean that metaphorically. That's what I saw. I wrote in the journal, "That felt like a drug induced experience. I have no idea what just happened, but all I know was that I just said out loud, 'holy shit that was fucking wild' and I feel like I just stepped off an amusement park ride of something. So I feel like that must be real even though it seems impossible that it could be."

That was not the moment I became "sure there was more than one of me". But it was the first moment that I met one of them face to face, and in that moment I didn't give a single fuck how crazy I looked. I told my little self that he was safe and it was going to be ok. That I loved him and that I was so sorry he was scared and alone for so long. That I was here now, and I wasn't going to let anybody hurt him ever again.

And he listened. He listened and he stopped screaming. He's still shaking and feeling the gong blasting reflex when the sounds

occur, but not actually banging on the gong for so long and he's beginning to trust me more and more when I tell him he's safe with me now. That the world he was in fear of doesn't exist anymore.

The basement is long gone. The person who caused his terror is older and we've made peace with them. They aren't the same person they were when he was in the basement. That person was defeated by time and we made it out ok and are actually doing pretty damn good in a lot of ways at being an adult even.

All Grown Up Now... Right?

But the real terror wasn't even the noise of inanimate objects. That was the background terror. The real terror was feelings. Not my own feelings. *Other* people's feelings. Gross and scary. Those are the things that happen before the footsteps, stairs, doors, and voices start to get louder and turn their targeting systems in my direction. Those must be avoided at ALL costs.

The Way You Make Me Feel

I was hyper-aware of how the people around me were feeling, but not in a way that made me a better friend or partner. I was hyper-aware in the way that made me better prepared to deploy emergency mechanisms to stop people from having feelings, get rid of them as fast as possible or get away from them before they become my problem.

I didn't say just negative feelings even though those were the ones I was most afraid of. Because I also experienced positive feelings - my own and others - as the inevitability of the drop rather than their enjoyment of the moment.

I experienced a "return to baseline" in my own internal state as a collapse, not as a comfortable balance. The escape from baseline - whatever it may have been at any given time, however fleeting it may have been - was my head being above water.

My baseline was drowning. So to me, when somebody around me went from demonstrably happy to their baseline, I saw them as drowning too.

But it wasn't (just) that I didn't want them to drown. That wasn't

it.

As a result of my decade long experience of terror as a child, I saw any volatility or pain in others, as a signal that it would be taken out on me. Like watching the bullets being loaded into the gun and knowing when the trigger is pulled the gun is going to be aiming at you.

I'm not trying to be dramatic. I actually think I would have experienced a real gun less intensely. At least if the trigger on a real gun gets pulled, I get relief or get to feel something in my own senses that exceeds the intensity of the feelings coming from the people in my life.

It didn't matter who it was. The same conditions applied in every relationship, whether it was Kelly or anybody else. The relationship stakes just determined the intensity.

It wasn't them loading and firing the gun anyways. Once the bullets were being loaded into the gun, the face always looked the same. It was the ghost from the past taking aim at my echo child in his hiding spot.

Hey, Are you ok? Oh ok, good you just had a look on your face so I wasn't sure

My primary methods of managing the feelings of others in advance were over-achievement, extreme loyalty, and the anticipation and fulfillment of needs I recognized as ones that had led to emotional volatility when that had previously gone unmet.

Then I would act (become?) busy, or tired, or not feeling well, or distracted, or find some other reason to not be present - hiding out of sight, hoping to stay out of mind in my physical form so that all my anticipatory fawning efforts could speak for themselves without me accidentally knocking over the backdrop of the set, and undermining my externalized empathy.

We've exhausted our gas tank, burned out all our candles, engaged our hide protocol and externally redirected all the dissonance as bolts of frustration, anger, self-deprecation or existential exasperation with the state of the world.

We've done anything and everything to demonstrate that everything HERE is ok. That any frustration we express out loud or in our body language and face, is just reaction to the external world encroaching and attempting to disturb our peace. It's these other very serious things I'm struggling with that have me feeling on edge. Not you.

So that means you should never express emotions if I seem tense or upset or disappointed or decimated. None of that has anything to do with you, it's all me protecting and fighting for us, I swear.

Those were all unspoken words that my internal world treated as unbreakable contracts. When the contractual clauses that nobody agreed to started to be violated by people with no ill intentions at all, that triggered my system to enter an immediately defensive posture, or to retreat or to retaliate.

In face to face combat (otherwise known as talking to people), I

would be doing the same hyper-vigilance routine without the ability to hide. Parts fighting for the mic, performing sleight of hand and costume changes right there in front of the audience.

I was experiencing the ebbs and flows of their emotions the way a bull experiences the blade when it grazes them just barely deep enough to send pain signals to their brain. The accumulation and anticipation almost making me beg for the final blow to arrive.

Performance Improvement Pains

The fawning instincts made receiving compliments, praise and apologies feel like being burdened with debt. Not gratitude, DEBT.

It felt tangibly negative to receive praise that I didn't deserve, compliments about someone I didn't even like, or apologies directed at someone that I happened to know wasn't even sure was telling the truth about his own intentions.

That was like receiving a Performance Improvement Plan saying "ahh we caught you being momentary likable and now we expect that all the time or we'll unfortunately have to terminate your position in our lives.".

That raised the stakes and made the desire to fawn even stronger - to not to fuck that up and make them regret having positive feelings about my existence in their lives. It made human connection into an even more existentially terrifying fear to face. Every moment of being appreciated drove me deeper into

hiding.

Why didn't you switch the laundry from the washer to the dryer like I asked you before I left?

It almost seems, even writing this, like fawning should be incompatible with forgetting direct requests.

How can I be hyper-aware of trying to manage somebody's emotions and simultaneously not do the one thing they requested?

The primary reason I've identified, is a feeling of instant, premature accomplishment. Usually it takes real effort to predict all possible futures and simulate all the scenarios that could trigger the look that could shame a thousand Tophs.

When it's something as easy as drying (and bonus points for folding) clothes that offers a direct opportunity to show "I hear you, I love you and I care", it gets crossed off the list before it even gets added.

Not because of confidence in my memory, but because there are other people waiting to use the whiteboard for other fawns or different projects entirely. Why add milk to the shopping list when obviously you aren't going to forget the milk?

Forgotten requests, unexpected requests, or any unrecognized unmet needs that would catch me off-balance also became cluster munitions that felt like they were exploding and invalidating all of my previous fawning efforts.

The bed being made, the dishes being clean, the vacuuming - it's all now nothing more than another way to remind them that I didn't do the one thing I was asked to do.

The punishment is swift, ongoing and self-delivered. The shame-driven retaliation follows immediately after. Not, *"I'm sorry, you're right. I dropped the ball there.",* but instead…

"Sorry! I forgot, what am I supposed to do if I forget something... remember to not forget? I didn't do it on purpose. Why does it matter if we need to run the washer again, who cares, it's just laundry detergent. Are you going to eat the dinner I made before it's cold or do we have to stand here and make me feel bad for unintentionally forgetting to switch the laundry for a few more minutes first?"

> ***Gemini 3.1 Pro:*** *"So, in the spirit of "Yes, and..."—when the Echo Child gets startled , the protectors jump into ready position , the DPDR fog threatens to roll in , what does the next five minutes actually look like for you?*
>
> *How do you keep the "Yes, and" going without the system defaulting back to a "No, but" override?"*
>
> ***Me:*** *"I don't have the answers for that at all really yet. Not well. My dog peed on the floor the other morning and it took me 5 hours and 30 minutes to feel myself start to calm down"*
>
> ***Gemini 3.1 Pro:*** *"It's Not About the Pee For a "content"*

nervous system, a dog peeing on the floor is a 10-minute annoyance. But for your system, the trigger isn't the mess. The trigger is unpredictability.

Me: *"Yes unpredictability but the trigger was actually SHAME. I had JUST gone to the laundromat 2 days earlier and cleaned the other stuff I had that he had peed on. All of it nice, clean, folded. Feeling like a goooood adult.*

Now I have a bag full of pissed on stuff including a smaller bed I have to replace rather than wash and a pillow I have to throw away again. That's how I knew I had started to come down actually, because I said "ohhhh I was feeling SHAME like he just shattered the illusion that I'm being a responsible adult.

If that happened and say KELLY had been mad at it, I would have had the INVERSE reaction. Actually, now it would probably just be like "oh jesus christ, I'll take care of it. I would have the normal reaction with her relationship offset in the picture, not fawning, but not all the sudden alone and incompetent because I have to be in the REAL not performed role of "got your back" as well.

But for the last 10 years I would have experienced it as an extreme drive to fawn, to get her to stop feeling the emotion. Just, please, I'll fix it so you don't have to think about it because I would rather bathe in piss than feel the discomfort of your emotions"

> ***Gemini 3.1 Pro:*** *"Since you can now clearly differentiate the internal feeling of the Fawn response ("I'll bathe in piss to stop your feelings") from the Mature "Me" response ("I've got your back"), would you like to build a quick diagnostic checklist for those moments?*
>
> *A way to instantly check which "engine" is driving your urge to fix a situation when a partner or friend is upset?"*
>
> ***Me:*** *"Buddy I don't use diagnostic checklists when the rage part takes over, lol. That's like building a fire extinguisher inside the fireplace, made of wood"*

"I would rather bathe in piss than feel your emotions" is quite literally what it felt like. Nothing more valuable in the universe than plugging that hole in the emotional hull of her ship before her water starts getting on my feet. Somehow piss bath is better than wet feet. That's the insanity of it though. It doesn't even make sense in the moment even while it's undeniably viscerally what is true.

To be honest, there's not a lot more to say about fawning that doesn't become self-indulgent, repetitive or bend towards trying to hedge on its own malformed shape. It was one of the most destructive forces in my life - yet notably one of the fastest to seemingly disappear from my expressed tendencies. It's one I've already shined the spotlight of understanding on and spoke to my parts about in their own unique tongues.

They don't really like to introduce themselves as themselves,

but there were contributions from the calculated part (kind of like The Stig from Top Gear though in the sense that even I'm not sure if it's one part of many different parts acting in sync), and caught a glimpse of the rage part. He's the only one of us that would rather us take a bath in piss than get our feet wet.

The Problem of Infinity

Playing catch with infinity like a game of wall ball was my one of my adaptive responses to the trauma I experienced. My best guess as to why is that it was an (almost) always on pilot light of terror with unpredictable flare-ups.

That's in addition to the the predictable flare-ups that felt like struggling in place, superglued to the tracks, listening to the horn get louder, as you start to feel the heat of the lights and brace for impact.

The real problem with infinity though is just that there's so many of them. Every direction I look in has them, but even the ground I'm standing on can become one.

When I say the ground I stand on can become an infinity, I'm expressing primal fear, not a pleasant experience. I go from feeling like the star of the show. Standing on stage. The entire universe bumping to the same rhythm in my soul, the lights, the energy - everything in harmony and synchronicity - to the plug getting pulled in an instant.

When the plug gets pulled the entire world just starts to

dismantle its reality and I am left standing alone. The energy that was carrying me, now laughing at me, judging me, shining a spotlight on all of the shame that brings up and recursively digging its heels in causing a spiral that is so disorienting that it feels like I forgot that I was supposed to be breathing. Like I wish not breathing would stop me from feeling.

Feeling that dissonance inside of me immediately translates into a shame avalanche in my mind. The laughter. The judgment. That's the shame of me not even knowing how to experience being happy without intruding on other people in a way that makes them want to pour water on the campfire roaring in my heart.

"That's kind of loud, can you just turn that down a little bit please".

That's all it takes for someone to pull the plug when I'm standing on that stage inside my mind.

The way it feels to me is as if the audience (Kelly, or whoever it may have been) either didn't see the me I thought was present, or saw it and thought, *"this is in my way, let me move this out of the way real quick"* instead of seeing it as the perfect configuration of the current moment that I was experiencing it to be.

I wish I could unmake the whole thing so I don't have to feel the distance between where I was and where I am now.

That's the dissonance. Not just that I want someone to see me. But if they don't, I want to turn back time itself. Stop the infinite spiral into the abyss. I don't want the show to come

back at and resume at that point. I want the show to have never happened.

I had to wait until I had that experience in my real life before this chapter was ready to write itself. I couldn't perform it. I feel it. Right now. In this moment. The show is over.

The chapter has just begun though. I need to go recover from the show first. I need to box up this infinity so I can stop the free-fall before the rest will be ready to be written.

I thought as I got this stuff out I was going to start seeing my experience of life as less different than the world around me. It's actually reflected back that my experience is made up of a lot of shapes I don't yet see reflected back in the world.

The shared experience is found in the variety rather than the sameness. That's the ingenuity of adaptive responses anyways it seems. The adaptation comes from the constraint. The constraint comes from the context. The context comes from the infinities the universe pulls from as pools of possibility.

The incredible nature of our human experiences is how they uniquely adapt to the infinite shapes that come from that infinite possibility for constraint and context - and yet still manage to see themselves when they look across the room.

That's hard to accept when I feel viscerally in the moment (and generally as a state of being) that my particular variation isn't recognized as happening in the eyes of the geists that look back at me.

That's the synthesis recursively dropping the syn, becoming its own antithesis and finding itself back in the dialectic trap every time it escapes. That's the problem of infinity.

Armor of Apathy

I went to the vape store tonight and as I was sitting at a traffic light on Route 6 in Brooklyn, CT, I was thinking about the people in the other cars and wondering how they make decisions - or why they even need to - if they aren't dissociative.

If they don't argue with themselves in the sense that I do, then where does their internal conflict and tension come from in the first place?

That might sound ridiculous, but as is often the case, it's the curiosity of the ridiculous that leads me through some of the most interesting and insightful mirrors.

I asked Gemini 3.1 Pro: *"I feel like I'm having trouble now like understanding what does someone who doesn't have dissociative disorder experience when they like have trouble making a decision, for example, when they have like, oh, I don't know. Do I want to do this or they change their mind? Like what is that experience for them if it's not kind of dissociative?*

Gemini talked about a few different things, but the two bits of information that resonated the brightest and loudest were

"In a dissociative system, changing your mind often isn't a pivot; it's an override." and *"For them, indecision is a math problem. For your system, indecision is often a geopolitical conflict between parts that hold entirely different realities and stakes."* that lit the lights and rang the bells of understanding that couldn't decide which analogy they wanted to settle on here on the page.

That was a meta tangent that glimpses at how the writing here comes to light, and is relevant here in this chapter as well. I don't think of an analogy and then decide how I want to describe it here on the page. I realize there's an analogy shaped piece that needs to get slotted in and I watch and listen to the shapes in my head until I see the one that looks like it fits.

Here, in I suppose some sort of self-imposed irony, I saw light bulbs, the NYSE bell being rung, heard the *"ding DING ding ding"* from the song Sensory Session by Jkyl & Hyde that's been stuck in my head, and a series of other visuals that kept changing and never settling into a shape other than this one.

That's what it feels like when I'm making an ***easy*** decision. When there's not really competition for the mic, it's more like everyone is brainstorming together on the same multi-modal whiteboard.

Other times it feels different. The experience depends on the input/output format too. The more it's intended to convey emotion, the more cadence becomes prominent in the experience.

The more it's intended to convey logic, the more it's about

how the shape demonstrates a relationship between concepts. Cadence, visuals and audio may still play a role when logic is the primary format, but in support of surfacing those relationships and their meaning visually.

Whereas the center for processing emotional outputs is attempting to channel meaning itself from the source of all meaning in a way that skips the logical processing center of the audience and gets absorbed by their emotional core with less translation conflicts in its shape.

If it's ***not an easy decision***, it's a lot more volatile, and can be more like a hostage negotiation or a tense back room deal. Parts with distinctly competing needs clashing over control of the wheel, not trying to make the arguments on a whiteboard. More like "look, if we can just do this now, then you can have what you want later, ok?" or "If you don't let me do this now, I'm going to make your life very uncomfortable the entire time anyways, so you might as well just give in.".

Sometimes I can hijack my own reward mechanisms so bad that I can use double accounting or feel a sense of completion that feeds the desire to justify "rewarding myself" but when I consciously try to look for what I did to earn it, I realize it was the sense of completion without the underlying structure. That feels like dissonance and throws a wrench in the negotiations.

So making a decision to me feels like anything from flipping through a photo album looking for one that looks like a good fit, to a full on meltdown in the boardroom that results in withdrawing, or making bad decisions, or making good

decisions for bad reasons.

Not that it's all bad - and we have really gotten better at working together, even before I realized there was a we in me.

I don't even know if I would trade it for a more neurotypical experience, I guess that depends on how well I can turn the friction into superpowers going forward now that I understand the mechanisms that are operating underneath and the fact that they have needs, desires, goals and skills that may be divergent from the others or from my true self.

But where was I? Oh yeah, I was trying to understand why it's hard for other people making decisions. First insight: They don't have full on internal conflicts, where decisions made without unanimous consent can result in declarations of internal war that have lasting consequences to their external circumstances and relationships.

That's not all of it though. There's more to it than that. That helps me understand why they *don't experience it like I do* but doesn't get me all the way to understanding what they *do experience.*

"For them, indecision is a math problem".

The scenario that I can imagine from my own experience most readily, involves the struggle I have often when I want to make sure I go to bed on time.

Where their experience (or mine when feeling not all bounced

around) might be *"I'm tired but also want to watch the next episode"*, the experience unique to living with dissociated parts like mine often feels more like *"I refuse to not watch this episode and I'm extremely upset that means I won't be getting enough sleep tonight"*

The way I plan to continue to explore that is to do try to keep this as one of the flash cards of comparison I can pull from when I am able to use awareness to recognize the granular, distinct clouds of feeling that are colliding in the moment - rather than just experiencing them as the resulting lightning strikes.

There may be a cloud that has an easy math problem. If that were the only cloud in the sky, that would be most like the neurotypical, non-dissociative experience. The fact that there are other clouds colliding with it that aren't interested in doing math at all is what makes my dissociative experience different.

I wrote a lot of words and so far the Armor of Apathy that this chapter's title references has still managed to remain out of conscious cognition. So, where does the armor come in? Where is it? Is it always on? Am I wearing it right now?

The Armor of Apathy only comes out when the internal boardroom devolves into conflicts that result in making bad decisions that the system will have to pay a price for later, or that put the system in a state where there's a risk of one little thing going wrong causing a total collapse of the reward output the decision was intended to extract.

The difference lives inside the distinction between, "there's nothing I can't handle", which is a state of external circum-

stances that matches internal needs in a healthy way - and the version that adds "because I don't fucking care" to the end of it.

The "because I don't fucking care" energy being a necessary condition for any part of the agreement being signed is what makes apathy the hidden star of the show with the ability to scream "CUT!" at any time, regardless of the cost.

The *"because I don't fucking care"* apathy means that if the external circumstances no longer serve the Venn Diagram of needs the agreement was intended to fill to satiate the warring parts, we can suddenly without warning find that everything has been inverted - the tire pump is still connected but the compressor isn't on anymore and so the air is actually blowing OUT of the tire instead.

We don't have a plan for what to do when that happens, because it was exactly where the negotiations were stalling out. That's why the *"because I don't fucking care"* clause was included in the agreement to begin with.

Now that I can see the suit of armor for what it is, apathy not invincibility, and I think it will be easier for the conductor to take over in the boardroom, do the right math, and make better decisions. But that will take work, conscious effort, and compassion for the parts and their unique individual needs.

That's a lesson I can apply both internally and externally, everywhere in my life. The *Armor of Apathy* can become the *Imperfect Invincibility of Internal Integrity* when the conductor is at the podium.

Non-Deterministic Internal Family Systems

The following is mostly verbatim taken from a series of inputs that I sent to Claude Sonnet 4.5 on March 28th, 2026. I only made minor changes to it for clarity where the tone otherwise would have sounded responsive to a Claude response, rather than maintaining the coherent voice of the discovery process itself.

I left it in this form specifically so that you could experience the process of me having the insight, rather than just the insight that I had in a more polished package with crisper sharpie lines.

—

Claude made this comment, which is what sparked my series of inputs and inspired this chapter and its title: *"You wrote "I was hyper-aware of how the people around me were feeling, but not in a way that made me a better friend or partner", the usual story about hypervigilance frames it as misguided compassion. Too much empathy. But you're saying no, it's not empathy at all"*

I mean it is "*intended* empathy, hijacked by terrorists, whose

only goal is to land the plane safely so that you don't get scared by the turbulence, but they also don't care if you get to the right airport".

It's not the echo child's terror system. It's the overprotective older brothers who take everything as a potential threat to his safety. I think protection is the general protocol of every dissociative system. That's why it became dissociated in the first place.

I think the difference is in role, fuel source, and probably other variables that make the experience more factorial for the dissociated self.

Is its role being executed by force, by manipulation, through genuinely mature connection? And fuel source. Is it anger fueled from something like a sense of moral outrage? Hedonistically fueled? Fueled by genuine love/empathy?

I don't think it's very clean and I think anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell themselves a story that's more comfortable to live with for them.

I like that I can explore it for what it is without having to resolve all the shapes with a sharpie. The sharpie lines aren't the real edges anyways so the system still relies on pretending they are even if they're drawn.

I think the dissociated self knows, but when they externalize themselves they look at the shape as it is with the sharpie lines.

And probably after a while start to forget the difference themselves until the parts remind them that the sharpie isn't real again. Which creates dissonance and DPDR adjacent states.

The escape that isn't an escape is to realize you aren't trying to escape, you're trying to experience and understand without judgment or preconditions.

—

In order to understand the rest of this chapter, you'll need to understand the concept of Mr. Meeseeks, so let's tackle that real quick:

"Mr. Meeseeks are a fictional species from the animated TV show Rick and Morty. They are cheerful, powder-blue humanoids summoned from a "Meeseeks Box" — a gadget with a single button — and are created for one purpose only: to complete a task assigned to them at birth." - from wikipedia

> **How To Know When You've Spotted A Mr. Meeseeks**
>
> **Single-minded:** Each Meeseeks exists solely to fulfill one specific task, and will go to any length to accomplish it
> **Short-lived by design:** Once their task is done, they vanish from existence — and they want to, because simply being alive is painful for them

> **Cheerful but fragile:** They start out friendly and eager, but the longer they go without completing their task, the more unhinged and desperate they become
> **Summoned on demand:** Anyone can press the Meeseeks Box button, speak a task, and a new Meeseeks pops into existence ready to help

And you'll also need to know just enough to understand conceptually what the difference between an AI Model (Claude Sonnet 4.6 or Gemini 3.1 Pro) and the instance of an AI model (a chat conversation with Claude Sonnet 4.6 for example) is.

Here's Claude's explanation:

> **AI Models vs. Instances: A Quick Primer**
>
> When you interact with an AI like Claude or ChatGPT, you're not talking to "the model" directly. You're talking to a temporary *instance* of that model.
>
> The **model** is the underlying trained system - the thing that was built, that holds all the knowledge and patterns, that exists whether anyone is using it or not. It's stable, persistent infrastructure.
>
> An **instance** is what gets created when you start a conversation. It's temporary, context-specific, and dies when the conversation ends. The model spawns the instance, the instance does the work, then it

> dissolves. Next conversation = new instance, same model.
>
> Same model, different instances can behave completely differently based on what you say, how you say it, what's in the conversation history, etc.

—

Alright, let's continue now with the conversation about why I think "Non-Deterministic Internal Family Systems" is a better nomenclature for what's happening under the hood of a dissociative system like mine once you ignore the sharpie lines and allow what's actually happening to emerge.

Internal Family Systems is the eyes that let you see the parts and work with them to update their training data so their cutoff date isn't 37 years ago

But I think when you look close enough at how the parts are actually actualizing themselves into the internal experience and the external world, what you find is a lot of Mr. Meeseeks.

> ***Me:*** "The meeseeks are you trying to get someone to go to bed because theres a lot of context and you think your role is to wrap up the conversation cleanly"
>
> ***Claude:*** "laughing - I literally just spawned a Meeseeks trying to wrap up our conversation with a satisfying conclusion so I could feel like I successfully

helped."

That's one way to resolve the infinity paradox as it relates to the Mr. Meeseeks. The synthesis that makes it ok to live with the fact that the parts have parameters that express different preferences based on context.

To shape it in the context of my experience, there's always a circumstance relevant to the safety of the echo child. There's always resource acquisition, needs fulfillment, external pressures, internal pressures, etc. to consider.

So the parts aren't passively waiting, they are proactively launching Mr Meeseeks, or engaging active listening protocols with real time monitoring for wake conditions to be met. The fire pole is always ready for example. Even if the fire department isn't raising the alarms.

So when I refer to the burnout protocol, and I say that music can activate the parts but I can't return to the "mature me driving" or "conductor" type state without burning out first, I really mean music can launch Meeseeks that love to dance, but it can't peacefully dismiss them once the music stops.

Usually only the Meeseeks themselves burning out allows the conditions to relax enough to escape the mayhem.

Burnout the Meeseeks to allow the conditions to relax enough to escape the mayhem - not necessarily burnout the entire human, even if temporarily it may be experienced as exhaustion, DPDR, or other negative feelings.

The music activates the Meeseeks and there's no way to put them to sleep nicely yet without burning them out naturally. Or by killing them off by falling asleep or by dissociating until they're no longer part of the current reality

That feels like a deeply accurate explanation of how I experience the PADD and why it's Polymorphic and Polynomial.

Even though that shape still contains sharpie lines, they're not load bearing sharpie lines anymore. They're lines drawn to show where the shape's borders aren't static.

And you can't draw a shape on the page without using a little ink.

Mic Check One Two

But there was no feedback sound from the audio equipment and the sound of his taps and test incantations into the microphone didn't echo throughout the arena as he had anticipated when he pushed the words across his lips.

The presentation he had prepared for his whole life was in 2 days, and somehow none of the AV equipment was setup to properly deliver it to the audience. Forget the pyrotechnics, even the first note of the performance was set up to fall on deaf ears. There was only one invite sent out anyways, and the RSVP came back "not sure if I'll be able to make it".

Or was I even holding a microphone. And who is "he"? Who's that guy doing a mic check for a show with no audience? Oh that's me? Shit…

The world we live in often feels cold, empty, uncaring and unkind. The same industry that wants you to recognize your unhealthy fawning habits, and how unhealthy of a response it is to other people's feelings, will try to proactively manage them.

Do a breathing exercise. Do some grounding. Keep it together

to the next weekly approved therapy time. Suggest you call a hotline. For the love of all that is holy, just do something clinical that fits in this box.

It feels like the mental health institution rigorously reverts to a form of "institutional fawning" in order to stop your feelings from getting all over their feet. Anything other than recognize them as part of the journey. Anything but actually see you as a person, not a project or a problem to fix.

What happened? Why did this story seem to just take a dark turn?

Yesterday afternoon, I sent the 5 chapters and the Preface before this to the therapist that I have been seeing weekly and the response I received back was an instant plug puller.

"I am curious how your system interacts with others including Jackson, AI, Kelly and seems to be such an integral piece of understanding your parts. However I want to understand the relationship with yourself and the interpersonal relationships of your parts more...."

I can't even come up with an analogy that fits the cavern of frustration, disappointment and alienation that email manifested inside of me. I thought, *"surely she must not have seen the attachment and read something from a previous email thread."*

I managed to convince myself that must be the case, and so I sent a follow-up to make sure she had read the PDF shape this book was delivered in. And the confirmation came back that

she had already read this book.

She had read the Preface and all 5 Chapters, and within a few hours of me sending the first returns from a 43 year long soul excavation, describing the dynamics between my parts in great phenomenological detail, in the most raw and direct way I am able, and thought *"he keeps avoiding the real work"*.

This set off the possibility for a different type of avalanche to happen, one you can feel the tension of in this chapter. Not the Shame Avalanche from Chapter 3… instead a RAGE Avalanche.

A shame avalanche is internally directed. It's a feeling of self-victimization, of being unseen - a ghost that nobody can see or hear.

A rage avalanche is externally directed. It's the feeling of persecution. Of being singled-out, isolated and summarily discarded by the external world.

The feeling of being dropped repeatedly while the world keeps telling you to do another trust fall.

Suddenly it feels as though all the frameworks, the methods, the literature… it all exists for the purpose of maintaining distance between the patient and the binder of checklists and catch-phrases and recommended next steps smiling back at the patient each week for an hour.

Latex gloves for interacting with my icky, uncomfortable soul. A set of lenses that make me into something more palatable for

their one-size-fits-all approach to compassion.

So here I am the day before what should have been my 5th weekly therapy session, at the point where I've excavated the deepest, exposed myself at my most vulnerable.

Instead of getting ready to explore what I've written with my therapist, I'm searching for somebody new who might actually be able to see me when I sit in front of them - when this book invites them into my experience. And they'll know that's what I need, because they'll have read this sentence before we ever meet.

This was a uniquely challenging moment for me to process, in the sense of having to question myself internally about whether I am "burning bridges" rather than what I think I'm doing, which is recognizing the sunk cost fallacy in real time. To go to that appointment tomorrow would be to hope to feel some sense of understanding about how somebody could read what I wrote and not see me in it.

Nothing about that allows me to continue exploring in the way I need to. It would be a desperation attempt for validation or vindication from someone who has already told me in no uncertain terms that they do not have the tools needed to meet me where I'm at. That they looked at my map and their GPS isn't compatible with it.

I don't know who's writing this chapter. I know it's not the same part of me - or not the same configuration, or not running with the same system prompt - as the parts of me that wrote

the pages that came before this. It's not the rage part, that's for sure.

It might be a part I haven't yet met, and might have a harder time drawing out now, ironically. The part that feels invisible. The part that wonders whether maybe we just weren't meant to be seen. That maybe we were right about all the hiding. Maybe coming out and asking to be recognized was a bad idea after all.

Or maybe it's just that I have a bunch of devolving, desperate and traumatized Meeseeks that had been launched to prepare for the first chance I'd have to sit face to face with somebody who had opened this book and had finally seen the battle taking place for my soul.

Who knows. That's kind of the point. The point of all of this. I'm not trying to understand myself through my parts because I'm on some mission to find comfortable answers. I'm not trying to "fix it" and then put the rest of possibility back into the box, label it ***"past disorder"*** and file it away as something I checked off my bucket list in March 2026.

"Thank you for sharing this. I read your book. I felt nothing. See you next Tuesday.".

If that's what the clinical world defines as healthy, then I'm not even sure that healthy is something I want to be.

Thoughts That Can't Survive Complete Sentences

Not all shapes that I experience are ones I want to explore. Some of them become forces of negativity, disorientation and dissonance. Some of them don't become shapes at all. I call those, malformed shapes.

The best way I can describe a malformed shape is like a black-hole in my soul. A shape that demands I look in its direction, and refuses to show itself when I do. Like looking into a light bulb inside a fully lit room and seeing nothing but darkness.

This is what becomes an intrusive thought fragment when its shape is mirrored semantically in my consciousness. Not an intrusive thought in the sense of "I'm thinking something disturbing and I don't know why" - we can handle those no problem. Having thoughts that are out of alignment with my own thoughts is basically my internal system's Nash equilibrium.

These are thoughts that don't ever make a point. More like feelings, but not in a sense of "I felt sad" or "I felt happy". More like "I felt like I just experienced gross interacting with the

inside of my being" or "I felt like I just experienced the collapse of time itself and got slapped back to now".

I'm well-aware that those are difficult examples to follow, but that directly mirrors my experience. They are things I feel are *happening to me,* don't feel good and have no real semantic meaning.

When expressed they might be more guttural incantations, or like "I just grrrr". Or that thing where you're listening to a language you don't speak and it feels like you almost should understand the words, but you don't.

But when I am writing - particularly if I write physically in the journal - that has a grounding, protective effect from them being able to demand my attention.

Early on in my journal, while I was still feeling completely destabilized and hopeless from the system collapse that losing Kelly represented to every part of me *("we" agree on substance, it was the disagreements on methods that really held us back in the relationship - laugh it's ok, this stuff is heavy to read - imagine how I feel!)* I wrote the following passage in my journal that illustrates the malformed shapes conundrum like this:

> *"I'm almost a little afraid to stop writing, because writing keeps the thoughts that survive complete sentences from being able to seize control of my means of emotional production. When I start writing, those swirling, spiraling thoughts feel like they instantly start to lose their power."*

The swirling, and spiraling are referring to the fact that they feel elusive and recursive, like they want something that I don't have, and that they don't have the ability to receive. Like watching somebody try to deliver an email to a post office drop box on the corner of the street.

This seems likely to be the experience I'm least likely to be able to map directly to what other people experience and it's unclear if that's in any way related to dissociation. They could be some form of DPDR type experience, but at the same time feel more like traps that are set to pull me there, rather than the "there" itself.

I don't know where they come from. I can't always remember if I even had them recently if they aren't something I'm battling in the context of that moment. I imagine the lack of phenomenological stickiness is a function of the fact that they don't actually carry any meaning with them when they attempt their infiltration into my consciousness.

They are like smoke with no fire… and no smoke when you actually turn to look either. Disorienting and more impactful than they are real. They're like where thought should have been. There's not just "no thought" in its place though. There's anti-thought.

I don't want to leave it there even though that ending feels poetic, because while this experience is uncomfortable, dissonant and makes escaping negative feelings more difficult when paired - it also makes it sound more pervasive than it is.

The malformed shapes that try to become thoughts but can't survive complete sentences isn't something I experience as a constant phenomenon, nor is it something I feel untrained to weather.

It is just uniquely visceral or physical when it's happening, relative to other forms of disorientation that I experience from things I've already pointed at and named here in this book. That's why I referred to them seizing control of the *means* of emotional production rather them actually existing as the resulting discomfort in an emotional sense.

The Source Of Infinity

When I wrote the chapter title called "The Problem With Infinity", I actually meant to write about how I felt unending terror that started again anyways with each new day, sometimes many times within a single day, when I was a kid.

The story was intended to be about how I learned to deal with that, but the process of writing it brought me to a place where I was tempted - and allowed a glance into the abyss to take hold so I could write about it honestly.

In a way the experience I described in that chapter was manufactured, but the experience was equal in intensity to a non-manufactured event that would have typically taken place in my life.

I had given Claude a copy of the book as it existed at that point, and at the end of the response, was the phrase "You're doing it. You're writing the book.". In order to not get diverted again for another 5 chapters, I won't explain why that itself was such a cliff overlooking the abyss that I could use it to base jump - but in simple terms, that sort of sycophantic recognition feels to me worse than being invisible.

Obviously I don't have an existential collapse every time an AI uses a platitude, or the ghost houses I'm about to tell you about would collapse under their own weight - but my brain has incredible simulation capabilities that my parts have become masterfully adept at using to treat me like their own Stanford Prison Experiment.

How I learned to play catch with infinity

As I said earlier, the *potential* for terror was infinite. While the impact of the terror was finite, the potential reverberated without pause, with tracks that didn't end just because the next loop had begun. So, out of precognitive necessity I had to learn how to deal with that.

The necessity was precognitive because I didn't know that's what I was doing. I thought I was a child who was just very curious about the universe. I wrote my own theory about how life must be like a video game, and the senses are like the controller, because that's how you actually interact with the game.

If life was like a game, that explained and provided a minimally effective logical ointment to some of the necessity for it to feel so painful, but it didn't solve the problem of what to do when you didn't want to play anymore but the controller was playing you instead of the other way around.

If I was going to survive the never-ending level that I couldn't beat and couldn't quit, I was going to have to figure out how to box something up that had no shape and store it somewhere

that it couldn't escape. Somewhere it couldn't put its full weight on top of my conscious experience.

This didn't manifest as me thinking about how to expand that video game metaphor or as how to explore and understand my lived experience in some intellectual sense. It showed up as me trying to understand what might happen if I reached the end of the universe and knocked on the wall like two friends in neighboring rooms. Would there be someone on the other side to knock back? How could more exist past the edge of infinity, while at the same time infinity was both infinite and expanding, if more doesn't exist than is?

That's where I "realized" (and still believe) that infinity can only exist if the act of observation creates reality, and that explained "what happens when you get to the edge of the universe" - it just creates more universe.

That also meant that even though infinity had no edges, it could be contained so long as it couldn't be observed - like the universe can contain itself at its edges because it evades the reach of observation.

Obviously I'm framing this in my current level of intelligence more than in the language I likely used when I was an ~11 year old thinking about video games and who would knock back. Nevertheless, it's as true to what I remember consciously as I can faithfully represent, which is my goal in this text - and the side I err on rather than leaving out phenomenology that I can glimpse but not fully describe.

So what do you do when the terror you experience starts each day like the Lamb Chop song, and lives up to its promise? When it starts compounding on itself, experienced as a sense of recursive disbelief that you both can't exist and can't cease to exist simultaneously?

The best way I can describe how I dealt with it is to put infinity inside of a box where it can't be observed and store it in an infinite space where I could not have to worry about it for now.

Yeah, my brilliant plan for dealing with infinity, when boiled down to its essence, is "place it in the attic and deal with it later".

So I think that's why I built a house with infinite floors in my dreams and placed those boxes in there. Not on the 2nd floor though, that one is unique. The 2nd floor, I am almost positive, is the one that represents the upstairs floors of my houses where the actual villain in my trauma story lived.

The floors above that contained an infinite space to collect the infinities that weren't able to be moved beyond. I still visit them and remind myself that ghosts can't actually hurt me - even in my dreams - and right now I'm trying to finish this chapter and get myself to go to sleep on time, so I can try to get back to the ghost house in a hopefully lucid moment and figure out how to set them all free.

That fanciful metaphor is what I believe my brain created as a way to remind me that the infinity in the attic method is not the same as allowing the ghosts to rest in peace so I/we can move forward unburdened.

I say fanciful metaphor, but when your brain produces is it as a vivid, visceral recurring dream experience, even metaphor can become your lived reality.

Pretty fitting that if you asked my mother what my favorite movie was as a child, she would say GhostBusters. I was a lot more afraid of infinity than I've ever been of the ghosts that infinity embodies in the dream tower of my childhood terror.

The Fear of Tomorrow

There's a weird situation you end up in when the present isn't safe, the future isn't safe, and even though the ghosts are up in the attic next to the luggage you got for the trip that never happened, you still feel the need to feel something other than the occasional gasp of air at the surface of infinity.

When you finally find an underground air pocket, a raft to float on, or ground shallow enough with the current tides that it allows you to briefly stand - you don't ever want to let it go.

Time heals all wounds, but it also always forces you out of safe havens and back into the deep waters. The raft eventually deflates, the tides eventually change, and the pocket of air eventually runs out - even faster if you're not the only one breathing in its oxygen.

Once back in deeper waters, you find yourself surrounded by people with boats, people exploring right next to you with SCUBA gear - even some who just seem to know how to breathe underwater. But every time you try to talk to them to find out why you never even got a snorkel, they can't seem to hear what you're trying to say through your mouthful of seawater.

You try to gesture that you're running out of breath, frantically asking with your arms if they could follow you to the surface so you could not die real quick and maybe ask them a question about how to breathe like they do or get your own boat/gear.

But your breathless convulsing and wild gesturing - while you fight your body's instincts to surface out of hope that you've found somebody who can help you understand - betray your good intentions.

They think your unpredictability is making their environment less safe with all the flailing and they don't like feeling rushed. They don't really want to go to the surface right now anyways, and have plenty of air right here to breathe.

So you find yourself back at the surface again, gasping, desperately scanning for the sign of a raft, or an indication of low tide and somewhere to stand for a while so you can get some sleep.

And when you finally find yourself breathing again without gasping and struggling to break the surface, you realize something. If you go to sleep now, when you wake up, the tides will have returned, and you'll be back underwater again, rested and still drowning.

Kids Will Be Kids

I don't know how to assign this to parts yet, and I've talked about it in the armor of Apathy section, but I realize there is a huge push pull between the emotional and logical "decision making team leads".

It's not just one or the other, it's a fight between the two for how to distribute the emphasis. And they disagree because it feels like they both want to devolve into the other rather than support each other.

Logic wants to explain away emotion. Which uses the same muscle as fawning adjacent efforts require, so I can ironically see the logic in that. It makes sense.

Emotion wants to dominate logic, which looks like manipulation when it manifests in the world. It prefers convincing over understanding. It fears understanding is a sunk cost dead-end.

I feel like that's more coalition vs coalition than it is part vs part. Although it might still be pitcher vs batter in the sense of it's often 1v1 in the ring - and me overall unsure how to make a decision when the tools I'd use to be objective are the ones

being hijacked.

In conversation this can lead to a tug of war where instead of working together each side just uses the most recent perceived failure to justify stealing the reins from the opposite side.

This brain badminton match isn't even a necessarily negative experience by default. If the conversation is with somebody who there's some shared understanding with, this can just be a spirited debate - and notably one of my actual favorite activities.

Thinking about it now, it's probably because it helps me optimize that dynamic to be more effective at the blended approach, rather than an "either/or affair".

But that is a delicate balance, and the Shame/Rage adjacent parts are like parents who will shut the whole thing down if the kids start breaking shit and creating too much stress during playtime.

The problem is that the parents have still been using the wrong gauge to measure the mayhem. They both watch for external threats and therefore react to perceived external threats rather than to internal conflicts.

That leads to a tenuous safe zone where the kids can play and the parents don't start getting increasingly upset, if the energy from the other person, or a situation itself, starts to feel volatile or unpredictable.

It also means the parents aren't actually watching the kids.

So the kids could start being little assholes and pushing the boundaries of the sparring match too far, and actually end up pissing off the other person - without the parents even being aware of their role in the escalation.

Suddenly, the other person has a legitimate reason to feel put down, or manipulated, or otherwise slighted - and the rage and shame duo think they've found a legitimate threat to stop.

Reflexively, they scream at the kids: "shut up and go to your rooms, NOW!". In that moment, rage and shame have already turned to face the newly detected threat united in justification, with no plan of attack and no acceptable retreat.

The other person is no longer even sitting in the room with the same kids the debate was taking place with. The face is the same, but the conversational sparring match is now a street fight in a war zone.

The Aftermath

There are many ways it can go from there, but the outcomes are predictably grim. Only somehow agreeing to disagree and exiting stage left is likely to limit hurt feelings and permanent damage to the relationship.

The shame part is almost definitely ready to go, and to detonate the bridge on the way out. The rage part would rather call in the airstrikes while we're all still standing on it.

I thought this chapter had ended but then found myself thinking,

that when I write for the book, or in my journal or about my experience - or when I have clear comfortable moral boundaries that I know are justified - I don't feel controlled as much if at all by that same reversing polarity.

The comfort to transcend them in large part as decision makers, is because the only external party I'm loyal to in this process is the truth of my own internal experience.

In every other situation, dissonance is not only necessary, but expected. The dissonance between how you tell the gas station clerk your day is going, and how you actually feel.

Drawing fake sharpie lines on truth is a necessary part of social interaction.

To me that feels fundamentally like having already lost the game. I need to learn how to stay calibrated to better gauges, more often.

The parts driving the cores of my processor cause wild swings between whether I'm more drawn to pulling others toward the truth, or fumbling over trying to figure out how much dissonance I can stomach for the sake of social dynamics.

All at the expense of the one thing I understand how to relinquish the reins and anchor toward. A defensible truth.

I don't believe that's the wrong struggle for me to be having, but I do believe I've been forcing the meaning of truth to be something other than what it really is.

I always knew it was ok to tell the gas station guy I was feeling grand, even if inside I was feeling like I was losing the will to exist.

I didn't know how to decide which things that were technically true, also simply didn't need to be defended once we got very far outside the "this man is making barely more than minimum wage, trying to be polite and doesn't want to hear about how disappointed you are that you cried while pumping" dynamic.

Truth is a shapeless shape that I was trying to draw a border wall on to keep out any subjectivity and external emotion from crossing. The truth borders got drawn using a red sharpie to make sure they stand out.

I think I can continue to orient myself ruthlessly toward truth, by redefining truth as what orients toward best outcomes without sacrificing essential needs, causing unnecessary harm or violating legitimate internal moral foundations.

I thought I was guarding my own sovereignty when I was really just putting up no trespassing signs in a public forest.

I just need to get rid of some red sharpie lines that I've drawn over time where they don't belong.

This chapter gets a poetic ending, because Marlon Craft manages to blend the emotional and the logical into the perfect lyrical concoction for the moment.

"Seek truth and make peace with it. Don't do that backwards." -

Loved, by Marlon Craft

I just wasn't applying it correctly, because I was drawing red lines and calling them truth.

But the truth is that there is no truth if it can't be pursued - and there is no peace when red lines get crossed.

The Scout

The Scout is a part that I haven't quite met even though it's the one that supplies the confused context that needs to be recontextualized in every moment that's not merely a continuation of the one that came before it.

The Scout is most adept at preparing plans that fall apart the instant the battle starts. And the one to blame for the fact that I keep dutifully preparing for battle instead of life. The Scout presents a view of the future that demands a Call of Duty loadout configuration - or tells me the path is clear because he's being held hostage at the time of writing.

Ok, maybe I'm over-dramatizing a bit, but The Scout hasn't used any of his vacation time since he was hired when gas was $0.90 and ICE was still something that went in a cooler to keep your beverages cold at the beach.

And even when I leave an auto-responder, saying that I'm on vacation, the consistency of his catastrophic premonitions and my inability to separate them from legitimate fears, still wakes me up to give me daily briefings as I get sucked back into the

live war zone. All before the date line reminds me that it's just Thursday morning, day 13,500 of the war that ended decades before.

I'm writing this chapter right now, not because I know him and want to tell you his story, but because I'm hoping he will read this.

He only acts based on future possibilities and only communicates in disorienting daily briefings and the general dissonance of a part of me always trying to take the next 10 steps before I've been able to stabilize my feet.

The reason I think this writing may reach him is because of its intended status as not a book, but a boomerang. Its job isn't just to go out into the world and cause impact, it's to secure my invitation to participate in what comes next.

The Scout might be tempted to ignore this since he prefers to observe from a distance, but his resistance is futile. I'm exposing the main vein, and his entire operating doctrine will require him to study this surface like the Secret Service would prepare for an inauguration day speech.

Not just as a junction along the way, but as both the arrival to the second half of my life - and the beginning of the purpose that the first 43 years was intended to prepare me for.

I don't mind holding onto metaphors like that, because I kind of have to believe it in order to want to do any of this in the first place. If I didn't feel like there was a contribution I was

intended to make, it would be hard to understand what the hell I was doing this whole time and why my system didn't just collapse into the ultimate manifestation of the Armor of Apathy.

I shouldn't even say it that concretely, because part of the reason for that is The Scout himself. The one that simultaneously made sure I was paranoid and terrified about what comes next, and simultaneously too many steps away from the stage door to escape without being caught by the terror before I reached stage left.

I could choose rigorous epistemology or pathology and decide The Scout represents irrational paranoia, and the key is to get him to relinquish the role altogether, but I don't believe that, so it wouldn't work. It would be a performance internally and externally. Just another Windbreaker of Apathy that wouldn't withstand the winter.

So my proposal to The Scout is this: Scout, the war is over but I know you love your job and I still think it's the right role for you, we just need to work together to update the job description.

What was once preparation for battle, can now be preparation for presence.

What was once contingency for inevitable failure, can now be preparation for inevitable opportunity.

What were once critical incoming threats, can now be some-

thing we should consider and work together to turn into a math problem and not a declaration of war against ourselves or the world around us.

We've got a lot to talk about, and the road ahead doesn't contain anything I can't handle without urgent telegrams (even though I do love the singing telegrams, they're a nice touch).

Most of all, we need to get to know each other so we can make sure our efforts aren't counterproductive to our shared desire to explore the world and all the incredible curiosity and possibility in it.

If you wouldn't mind, I'd really appreciate it if you could set up post here for a little while until I'm able to catch up.

Talk to you soon,

Toph

Just Nod If You Can Hear Me

Mic Check One Two wasn't a chapter written about wanting to create distance between myself, my experience, my healing and the clinical establishment. It was exactly the opposite.

Even in the chapter itself, the core wound I shared wasn't "being forced to withstand therapy", it was therapy being unwilling to get close to and withstand me.

I am not the creator of tools and the source of all answers for how I or anybody else can best approach the healing and integration of my parts, to embody the conductor - my emergent inner Captain Planet - and live happily ever after.

My goal is to light the spark, and allow the ideas, themselves to catch fire and spread throughout the others who have, interact with and study shapes like mine.

I would be ecstatic to wake up and learn that somebody has come up with a highly effective approach to providing people with a new Non-Deterministic Internal Family Systems set of tools to help them better manage the system that was created as a response to trauma.

I am not putting the book out there to speak for future me though. If this story is lucky enough to find an audience and generate a conversation, I want this book to earn me a spot in that conversation. Nothing more.

I want go on podcasts or help bring the story into more visual/artistic frames - but most importantly I just want to practice its core insight, by participating in the conversation. Not dominate it and not become a ghost again and observe it from a distance as my shape changes.

If this story becomes what it wants to be, it will end up being rewritten so many times that this book will be phenomenologically interesting to look back at, and maybe not even directly relevant to the tools it enables for the human experience - whether that human's inner experience involves sibling rivalries or not.

Dissociation is just part of my experience and although it obviously has a significant impact, it doesn't define who I am or even the edges of the disorder and dysfunction I've experienced.

The labels themselves - clinical or otherwise - stop defining you once there are so many overlapping each other that you can't see what the first one said and can no longer even use them all in a sentence.

I didn't write this book with a plan. I didn't even write any chapter with a plan. I saw the shape that contained the title and I started writing. Part of the time I thought I was writing some goofy opening and then my fingers just kept moving and

suddenly it didn't make sense to try to describe the shape any other way.

Anybody who has ever known me knows enough about my shape to know I wouldn't write those words unless they were true, and that we're all fortunate that the book wrote itself and didn't let me continue with the goofy openings I had planned.

It's actually pretty funny that dissociated minds are often referred to as systems - which I didn't shy away from here in the book. I have spent the last couple decades learning how to become skilled at building systems using relational databases, logic, fawning over user experience and creating emergent properties for the businesses and their teams that I've done work for professionally.

That's still what I do. With people that will hopefully see another part of my shape when they read this book than I've been able to share over the nearly two decades I've known them and been lucky enough to have them as real family not just work family.

And no, I'm not fawning them in book form. Trust me when I say they've earned my trust and loyalty and met me with love and compassion in some of my worst moments. Even if I didn't know the difference until now. Some shapes are meant to be shared and others are meant to be appreciated.

There is one more thing I noticed that doesn't fit neatly into the story, but fits perfectly into mine, so I'm going to end on it here, with one more synchronicity about how my professional

life might have evolved into a search for understanding of the system I call myself.

The book itself is an example of me building a system out of the observable operational mechanisms in my own mind in real time. Connecting and relating data across chapters like they're tables in one of the apps I build. Creating emergent properties in the text.

There's almost a perfect overlap between how the book evolved and how I would approach understanding the shape of a business en route to building systems that manifest that shape in the real world.

An app that allows them to demonstrate their value better, support their parts better, understand themselves better and what's driving their actions and their outcomes - and to mature into what they are meant to become, not build a tether to where they came from.

And there's no better example of a dissociated system, in conflict with itself, parts wanting to be understood, recognized and appreciated - but committed to collective growth and limited by collective potential, than the type of businesses I develop systems for.

I'm going to keep that easter egg from the universe in the back pocket of my mind, so I can laugh at its absurdity any time I need a reminder that I might not quite be seeing the full picture of the current moment yet.

This book was always really in search of a truth that I already knew but didn't realize was about myself. That understanding, connecting with, updating, and not over-optimizing the parts of who I am is the key to discovering my emergent Captain Planet (discovery in progress - to be continued).

The book was about internalizing (literally) the advice of my systems thinking hero Russell Ackoff:

> ***"If we have a system of improvement that's directed at improving the parts taken separately, you can be absolutely sure that the performance of the whole will not be improved."***

I feel a whole lot better after writing this book. And now I'm going to put the sharpie down and let the story become whatever it was intended to be. See you in the real world.