

One Secret of Graceful Aging

SEPARATING FROM PRIMARY SELVES

by Sidra Stone, Ph.D.

I remember my first pair of really special shoes. They were perfectly delicious—a buttery, chocolate colored suede—and whenever I wore them, all was wonderful. But now, more than sixty years later, I wouldn't expect to be walking around in the same shoes or in any shoes that resembled them. They would not longer fit my circumstances—to say nothing of the fact that they would no longer fit my feet.

And neither would the personality—or primary selves—that worked for me at that time still be appropriate. Our primary selves drive our psychological cars—their rules and expectations determine how we live our lives. Why should any of us expect the primary selves that we developed early in life to still work for us? Why should they still fit our lives any more than the shoes we wore or the cars we drove?

One of the secrets of aging is to know this very important fact of life. The primary selves that worked for you in earlier times are no longer appropriate. The older you get—no matter what you do to avoid it—your strength and stamina will eventually diminish and your body and your rational mind will become less flexible.

Primary selves that depended upon limitless energy, good health, a strong body, agility, power, speed, beauty, youth, instant recall and totally up-to-date knowledge—or on being indispensable to others—face real challenges! There are also some selves—like some shoes—that simply do not fit properly in the later stages of life.

Let's look at some common primary selves and see what this might look like.

Susie was a “Good Girl”. She learned how

to follow the rules, to do whatever she was told, not to make a fuss, not to demand any attention, or be a bother to anyone. But now she is older and it is important that she gets some attention. Susie needs to tell her doctor about a lump she's found in her breast, but when the doctor asks her how she's doing, this “Good Girl” primary self automatically tells the doctor “everything is just fine”. She can no longer carry her heavy suitcase but her Good Girl does not wish to ask for help because that would make her a bother to others. If she waits for someone to notice that she needs help, Susie might wait forever as people hurry by. I know a woman who waited to call “911” until after 9:00 AM so that she wouldn't bother them. She had fallen the night before and had lain on the floor for six hours waiting until her Good Girl felt it was the “proper” time to call.

It's time for Susie to integrate a self that she has disowned for her entire life—the part of her that can ask for what she needs even if this might inconvenience others. Her mother had been so self-centered and demanding that Susie vowed never to behave in that way. So for Susie and all the Good Girls of the world, the later years are a time to learn to care for themselves rather than others and to ask for—and accept—help when it is needed.

Susie's sister, Dorothy was her opposite. Her primary self was a rebel. Her way of dealing with a demanding mother was to fight. Whatever she was supposed to do, she did the opposite. This Rebel self had great ideas—she thought outside the box and was very amusing and quite attractive to others.

As she gets older, Dorothy's rebellious primary self begins to present problems: she automatically resists all requirements. She refuses to do what is necessary to protect her health. She is grossly overweight and has multiple medical challenges. Unlike Susie, Dorothy's primary self glories in the discomfort she causes those around her and takes pride in her resistance to the suggestions of others.

Dorothy could use some of Susie's Good Girl at this point in her life. She could use a little of the Good Girl's self-discipline and respect for the rules. It would help her to deal with her current health challenges if she could seek out the wisdom of others and follow their guidance.

Dan was a Responsible Father. When his own father died, Dan was only 9 years old, but he was now the man of the house. He took great pride in his new role and fulfilled it beautifully. He was the Responsible Father to his mother and to his siblings; later in life he was Responsible Father to his wife and his own children. He was even Responsible Father at work. In fact, it was the Responsible Father who had lived Dan's life.

Now nobody in his family needs him in the same way as before. The Responsible Father is out of a job. If Dan stays identified with this Responsible Father, he has two ways to proceed. One is to feel unnecessary, and unwanted—he may even begin to think that there is no longer any reason to live. A second way for the Responsible Father to proceed is to continue to do as before—he can find new areas in which to be responsible even though it is no longer natural and may require an inordinate amount of effort at this time of life.

Looking at this from a growth orientation, we see that now Dan has the opportunity to separate from this Responsible Father and to begin to reclaim the selves that he needed to disown earlier in life. He has the chance to discover

what it is in life that would give him pleasure. He has a chance to explore his own creativity, to take up golf or snorkeling, to read the historical novels that he'd never had time for, to study a foreign language, or perhaps take a romantic cruise with his wife.

Angie's mother always seemed to be busy and, by the time she was only three years old, Angie knew that the most important thing in life was to be productive, to never waste a minute of precious time. So, in order to be loved and appreciated in her house, she developed a primary self of Pusher.

Much to her mother's delight, Angie became a world class Pusher. When she was younger, this was a source of great pride—she could get more done than anyone else she knew and this made her special to her family, her friends, and her associates. Most important, it made Angie special to herself.

But now Angie is older, her mother has been dead for many years and the stress of a constant busyness is beginning to wear her down. Now it's hard for her to keep abreast with the Pusher's demands. So Angie spends a good deal of time worrying about her advancing age and her inability to get things done. In the eyes of her Pusher, she is no longer a worthwhile person. According to her Pusher, she is now incompetent, no better than the others who—in the eyes of the Pusher—aren't as productive as they should be.

If she wants to enjoy the remainder of her life, Angie needs to take over the wheel of her psychological car from her Pusher. It's time to take back her judgments of the "lazy good-for-nothings" of the world, integrate her Beach Bum, learn to relax and start taking an afternoon nap without guilt.

Gary's father was a perfectionist and very judgmental of anyone who didn't match up to his

expectations. Nothing ever seemed to please him and his family never knew when he would burst into a tirade about their inadequacies. So Gary developed an Inner Critic that tried to protect him from his father's devastating criticism. His Inner Critic tried to get there first—to criticize Gary before anyone else did so that he could correct his mistakes thereby avoiding the pain and humiliation of a very public judgment.

Gary's Inner Critic enforces the major rule of his Perfectionist: "No mistakes! Thou shalt be perfect in every way."

Now Gary is older, he can take this opportunity to make his own rules. How about: "You don't have to be perfect. Just do what you can do." If he keeps the rule of perfection as the foundation of his life and the Inner Critic remains one of his primary selves, life will be a total nightmare. There is nothing more devastating than an oversized Inner Critic as you age. Each time Gary would forget a name or an appointment, each time he would look in a mirror, each time he would try to stop the aging process and get more control over his life, the Inner Critic would pounce on him. He needs to integrate other selves that will balance the Inner Critic—perhaps a spiritual self, an unconditionally loving grandmother, a nurturing mother, or a protective father.

Each of our primary selves brings us something special. Each has its own area of expertise, a certain kind of knowledge. We need this. We don't want to lose their gifts. But we need something more, more than any single self can bring to us. Our primary selves bring us knowledge but the Aware Ego process, as it embraces opposites, brings us wisdom, a wisdom that comes from living life completely in all its complexity and carrying the paradoxes and contradictions.

As we grow older, we can make use of our changing circumstances to move away from

the primary selves of our youth. The selves are basically inflexible, and the older we get, the more inflexible they become. Their solution to all vulnerability, and to any new challenge, is to do more of the same, more of what they do. So a Pusher's solution is to do more, a Responsible Parent searches for more responsibilities to assume, and a Rebel finds more rules and requirements to rebel against. But the Aware Ego process is just that—a process—and as such it is changing, fluid and flexible.

As we lose the flexibility of our bodies and our minds, we can introduce more flexibility into our lives through the psyche and the soul. We can use this precious time to separate from our primary selves and bring back into our lives the many selves that—over the years—were left behind. We can live our lives increasingly in the flow of an Aware Ego process and we can make this a time for "coming home"!

To apply this in your own life, think about these questions:

1. What are your primary selves or—to put it another way—who is driving your psychological car?
2. Why do you think you developed these particular primary selves?
3. How did these selves work for you? What rewards did they earn or what dangers did they avoid?
4. How might these selves not work so well any longer?
5. Or, if they are still working, how might they not work as well in the future?
6. If you were to introduce just a tiny bit of the disowned self (which carries the opposite qualities) into your life what might it bring you?

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