

Poetry of the Self

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Abstract

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) concept of Self is by its very nature difficult to describe. Intellectual definitions while important often leave something of the essence of Self missing, poetry on the other hand offers a window into the essential nature of Self. Poets from Robert Frost to Rumi have been drawn upon to express this subtle quality of Self in the human experience.

In the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, the concept of Self is central to both the overall theory and to effective practice of IFS therapy, which focuses on “Self Leadership”. Describing the nature of the Self, however, remains a constant struggle, because it is not a concept first defined and then applied to human experience, it is rather an experiential condition that we attempt to describe. The traditional approach to defining Self in IFS can be found in (Schwartz, 2003). Intellectual language, however, is limited in its attempt to describe Self because the intellect is much better suited for the articulation of theoretical concepts rather than giving expression to nuanced qualities of human experience. Poetry on the other hand excels at giving expression to human experience, it is for this reason when offering trainings in the IFS model I have often chosen to use poetry as means for deepening understanding of the nature of Self.

Schwartz defines the Self as: “A core of a person which contains leadership qualities such as compassion, perspective, curiosity, and confidence.” (Schwartz, 2003) He also states that: “Self-led people were able to hold their center, knowing that it was just a part of them that was upset now and would calm down eventually. They became the “I” in the storm.” This parallels Carl Jung’s description of self as “that center of being which the ego circumambulates.” (Singer, 1973, pp. 271-272)

The poetry that best reflects the nature of the Self is often poetry coming from poets who are reflecting on the essence of life and/or with a spiritual or mystical orientation. The qualities of the IFS Self are often found in references to the spiritual nature of the heart or the soul. This is especially apparent when reading Stephen Mitchell’s book, *The Enlightened Heart* (Mitchell, 1993), which is an anthology of sacred poetry. In his introduction while discussing the nature of the heart he offers several poems that express with great clarity and conciseness the experience of Self. The first by Robert Frost:

*We dance around a ring and suppose, but the
Secret sits in the middle and know.*

(Robert Frost, as quoted in Mitchell, 1993, p. xv)

More than two thousand years earlier, Chuang-tzu, Chinese Taoist master describes the same experience but from the viewpoint of having identified with Self rather than the parts.

*When we understand, we are at the center of the
circle, and there we sit while Yes and No chase
each other around the circumference.*

(Chuang-tzu as quoted in Mitchell, 1993, p. xv.)

Our parts dance around our center engaged with the activities of life making judgments, reacting with “yes” and “no”, to all kinds of experiences. In our Self we find a place of knowing, a place where we can observe the dance of the different parts of ourselves without either being dominated by or having to cast out various parts of ourselves.

In his pondering the nature of Self and how to describe it, Schwartz has himself come up with a somewhat poetic means to describe self through what he calls the eight Cs of Self Leadership: “calmness, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, creativity, courage, and connectedness.” (Schwartz, 2003) This alliterative condensation of the nature of Self provides us with a core set of qualities we can explore in other poetry.

Perhaps the most direct description of Self as seen in the IFS comes from Walt Whitman, the American poet, in his poem “Song of Myself.” Here the difference between our

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experience of the world from the place of parts coping in everyday life and the place of Self comes to life:

*Trippers and askers surround me, people I meet,
The effect upon me of my early life or the ward
and city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies,
authors old and new.
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments,
dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or
woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-
doing or loss or lack of money or depressions or
exaltations,
Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of
doubtful news, the fitful events;*

*These come to me days and nights and go from
me again,
But they are not the Me myself.
Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I
am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating,
idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an
impalpable certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will
come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and
wondering at it.*

(Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 4, in Van Doren, 1977)

“Both in and out of the game, watching and wondering at it.” This condition of observing and even being “in” the game of life, yet apart from the “pulling and hauling,” is a description of the state of being in Self. The “pulling and hauling” the “fever of doubtful new,” is a fine representation of “parts consciousness,” the struggle of our state of mind that characterizes our lives when we don’t have access to Self. When we are able to access Self we stand “...amused, complacent, compassionating, idle and unitary.” In this phrase are the qualities of quiet joy, compassion, an acceptance of things as they are, a deep place of ease and “impalpable certain rest.” It is amazing that Whitman could capture so much psychological and spiritual wisdom in these few lines.

People have been attempting to understand and describe the experience of Self for many millennia. Much of the poetry describing the Self emerges out of spiritual traditions as poets attempted to express the nature of the essence of humanness. Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), a

famous Sufi poet and mystic revered by those in his religion of Islam as well as Christians and Jews, describes beautifully the experience of our various parts and how, when one is in the Self they are all welcome.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

(Barks, 1997)

This passage reflects a core philosophy of IFS, that each part has a positive intention for the person and that we should “treat each guest honorably.” A central characteristic IFS therapy is that all the parts are treated with respect and that when we see from the Self they can be “invited in” and seen as able to make a valuable contribution to the system.

Self In Mystical Poetry

The mystical poets, however, take us beyond the more functional awareness of our parts to expressions that capture the transformational magic which happens when we connect deeply with Self. When seeing Self from the spiritual perspective the qualities go well beyond the traditional psychological discussion to describe experiences of joy, love and the very source of life giving energy. Rumi says:

*When you do things from your soul,
you feel a river moving in you, a joy.
When actions come from another
section, the feeling
disappears.....
Don't insist on going where you think
you want to go.
Ask the way of Spring.
Your living pieces will form a harmony.*

(Barks, 1987, p.44)

In this poem we are introduced to several key aspects of the Self. A direct parallel with IFS "your living pieces will form a harmony" describes the impact of living from a place of Self Leadership where we find a balance and harmony in the way our parts are able to express themselves in our lives. Within this harmony, however, we also find joy - A river of joy. This sense of joy is a deep and peaceful feeling of well being which characterizes the experience of living from the self. This feeling does not exclude our sadness, anger, or fear etc., but the joy arises when we are able to embrace these parts of ourselves and allow them to find their natural balanced home in our lives.

With the "Way of Spring," Rumi refers to another nuance of our experience of self. The way for spring refers to the state of mind where we feel a sense of renewal of sense of life awakening and growing in us and through us. This quality of the heart also appears in the mystical tradition of Christianity. Hildegard of Bingen refers to this as the greening power. She writes:

*"Those who breathe this dew
long for heavenly things.
They carry within, refreshing,
fulfilling, greening love,
With which they hasten to the aid of all
(Uhlein, 1983 p.69)*

Hildegard of Bingen refers to the experience of Christ as the Spring and that by opening to this spirit of what she calls "greening love" will pour forth, a love which doesn't float off into a place of transcendental bliss, but rather "hastens to the aid of all". This type of love expresses itself through healing engagement with the world. This is the quality of Self, engaged with life. When the parts are asked to step back and clear the space for the Self, then the response of the person towards their parts is one of compassionate concern to help them. This compassionate response flows automatically. It is not coming from some part of us feeling it should be a good caring person now; when the Self in the foreground, the feeling arises automatically.

Dante expresses how this love flows in to us when we open the place of self, a state that has a kind of purity which comes as the parts are separated out.

*"The love of God, unutterable and
perfect,
flows into a pure soul
the way that light rushes into a
transparent object.
The more love that it finds,*

*the more it gives itself; so that,
as we grow clear and open,
the more complete the joy of heaven is.
(Dante, as quoted in Mitchell, 1993, p. 68)*

The flowing in of the compassion of the Self is well known to anyone who has done IFS therapy. One of the beauties of IFS is that in doing the work it is so clear that the wisdom and compassion arise from the person's own inner being and what the therapist does is simply to help open the space for that compassion and wisdom to come forward. When the parts are separated out what naturally flows in are the qualities of Self. My experience has been that when people are in this Self the nature of the wisdom and compassion seems to come from a place much greater than an individual, one might say from a of divine wisdom and compassion.

The type of joy and love that is felt in the Self is one that can be present with all aspects of life, with all of our parts. Tagore, the Indian mystic philosopher expresses it well:

*Let all the strains of joy mingle in my last song...
The joy that makes the earth flow over the riotous
excess of the grass,
The joy that sets the twin brothers, life and death,
dancing over the wide world,
The joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking
and waking all life with laughter,
The joy that sits still with its tears on the open red
lotus of pain, and
The joy that throws everything it has upon the
dust, and knows not a word.
(Tagore, 2003, p. 58)*

Poetry of the Parts of our Selves

There is a danger with the spiritual poetry of the Self that we get the idea that we should somehow find ourselves in the constant state of peace, of joy, of Self. The reality is that most of the time our consciousness bounces around from parts, to Self, from less aware to more aware and back again. The sense of this flow of consciousness is beautifully in poetry. Pablo Neruda expresses it in his poem "We Are Many:"

*Of the many men who I am, who we are,
I can't find a single one;
they disappear among my clothes,
they've left for another city.
When everything seems to be set
to show me off as intelligent,
the fool I always keep hidden
takes over all that I say....*

*What can I do?
What can I do to distinguish myself?
How can I pull myself together? ...*
(Pablo Neruda (1974, p. 98)

Stanley Kunitz, poet laureate of the United States, also captures this flow of consciousness:

*I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.....
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!*
(Kunitz, 2000, p. 217)

How do we pull the scattered tribe together? The understanding that IFS has, offers a pathway to Self through the therapeutic process, but also through the insight it offers to the way we move through everyday life. This knowledge is really not new, however. More than four thousand years ago the ancient Indian philosophy of the Mundka Upanishad was describing the phenomenon of Self, its mystery and its beauty:

*Self is everywhere, shining forth from all beings,
vaster than the vast, subtler than the most subtle,
unreachable, yet nearer than breath, than
heartbeat.
Eye cannot see it, ear cannot hear it nor tongue
utter it; only in deep absorption can the mind,
grown pure and silent, merge with the formless
truth.
As soon as you find it, you are free, you have
found yourself;
you have solved the great riddle; your heart
forever is at peace.*

*Whole, you enter the Whole, Your personal self
returns to its radiant, intimate, deathless source.*
(Mitchell, 1993, p. 4)

The beauty of the IFS therapy is that it offers new ways to connect with Self, but it is poetry that begins to give us words to express that experience.

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