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How to Survive a Business Trip When You Have Multiple Personalities

What might seem like an easy task to most can be a Herculean challenge for someone with dissociative identity disorder.

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Illustrations by **Caroline Brewer**

The phone rang in my cubicle at the insurance company. It was Ron, from the Boston office. A brokerage north of Albany wanted to sell our policies; could I get the PowerBuilder system installed on their computers and go up for a two-day training session?

“Sure,” I said, pleased. People invariably complimented me on my user manuals and classes, because I explained things clearly. That made me feel good.

But as soon as we hung up, his words imparted a different feeling. *North of Albany*. A three-to-four-hour drive from Manhattan. *Two-day training session*. A hotel. My eyes darted about, then latched onto the IN-BOX, OUT-BOX signs on the stacked metal trays as if to a life raft. Somehow, I got myself to the ladies’ room.

Barricaded in a stall, I started to shake and moan. I stifled the moan but allowed the shakes to continue. After what was probably only five minutes, they wound down. The terror was gone too.

Walking back to my cubicle, I realized this was going to be complicated. I could maintain my imperturbable office persona as long as there was no disruption to my routines outside of work. Being away from my own apartment — stuffed animals and dolls on the bed, homemade macrobiotic food and cookies in the refrigerator, the familiar toilet — was going to be a challenge.



I’d known since I was a teenager that something was wrong with me. It wasn’t normal to talk to faces in the mirror that were not my own. Or to sense that kindly, invisible people floating in the atmosphere were watching over me, understanding me better than real-world people. Or to feel

separated from the rest of humanity by a ground-to-sky Plexiglas wall no one else seemed aware of. At the same time, I knew that, except for the few times in my 20s when I wound up in a hospital, I appeared normal. I'd excelled in school and had friends and boyfriends. Now 54, I lived alone and was successful in two careers: weekdays as an IT business systems analyst, weekends as a librarian. I worked seven days a week to pay for therapy, but also because I didn't do well with alone time. Working kept me in the here and now.

At 46, when I found out I had multiple personality disorder, or MPD (subsequently renamed dissociative identity disorder), I'd been horrified. That bizarre-sounding diagnosis couldn't apply to me. But my shock quickly turned to relief: There was an official name for my condition. While it would be another few years before I found a therapist experienced in treating multiplicity, just reading clinical literature that documented some of my perceptions helped take away the feeling that I was an alien species.

I learned that "alters" was the term for the other selves I often felt. Some alters can be fairly well-developed, some are fragments, and some have specific administrative tasks to make sure the system as a whole functions as seamlessly as possible.

I came to see how the partitioning mechanism of MPD is helpful to a child who lacks other means of escaping a distressing situation, which in my case had been ongoing emotional trauma, not the sexual abuse most often associated with MPD. But the divisions become a liability when the child grows into an adult and no longer needs to keep knowledge and feelings sealed off in order to survive. That made sense. Nothing bad was happening in my life anymore, yet I still perceived danger everywhere.

Looking back, I realized there had been clues.

In my 20s, after my discharge from the hospital, I moved into a halfway house and started a house newspaper. On the masthead, I listed myself and two other residents who helped put it together. Under their names came four that belonged to no one: Ellen Willow, Winifred Stone, Dorothy Emily Quinn, Laura Emily Mason.

Ellen Willow was a name I'd often called myself when I was a teenager, but I didn't know who the others were. The names had just flowed from the tips of my fingers as I was typing.

Wondering whether there had been additional clues, I sent for my hospital records. In them, I read, “At times she felt that she had a different real identity; sometimes she was Ellen Willow and sometimes Wendy.” The diagnosis was listed as schizophrenia.

I had no idea who Wendy was, and though I’d been aware of Ellen since I was 15, I’d never considered that she was an alter. I hadn’t known the concept. I had known, however, that we’d glided into and out of each other. I could be Ellen Willow one minute and Vivian the next. I/we had functioned smoothly in one body, no matter that I lived in Brooklyn with a family I wished I weren’t a part of and she was a 15-year-old orphan who lived in Nebraska. Whenever I wrote a poem, I signed it Ellen Willow. When I wrote ordinary things — a note to my mother saying I would be home late, a birthday card for my cousin — the signature sometimes came out Vivian, sometimes Ellen Willow. No one questioned it; my mother and aunts thought Ellen Willow was just a pen name.

In my 50s, when I started therapy specifically for MPD, more of my inside “family” came forward. One of them was Wendy, 6 years old, chatty and precocious. Her main function was to protect another 6-year-old, Emily, who was perpetually in search of a mother. Wendy told my therapist she was named after the character in *Peter Pan*. There was also teenage Lisa, who had taken my place at my sweet 16 party years earlier, when I’d felt awkward and unable to talk to my guests. Now I understood how I had suddenly been transformed into a gracious hostess, as if a fairy godmother had touched me with her wand. But I recognized Lisa’s darker side too. Her main function was to take away pain, which she sometimes did by making elaborate plans for suicide, sometimes by escaping into psychosis. I heard myself tell my therapist she was named for the mentally ill girl in the book and movie *David and Lisa*. There were others with names, including Almost-Vivian, whose job was to act as an interface with the world, and some without names. There were also less complicated alters, whom I thought of simply by their function, like the Behavior-Police, the Nurse, the One-Who-Curses-Cars, the Business-Person.

Most illuminating was what I read about the boundaries between alters. Some are solid, blocking knowledge and feelings from crossing in either direction, while others permit leaks both ways. Still, others are one-directional, allowing knowledge and/or feelings to flow in one direction but not the other. That explained why Wendy, insulated from feelings herself but aware of what everyone else was feeling, was able to report to our therapist in a dispassionate manner the anguish the others were not yet able to voice to him. The different types of boundaries make the

condition more nuanced than the flamboyant portrayal in popular media, where multiples may be shown “waking up” in a strange place, not knowing how they got there. That does happen, but it is not the typical experience and had never happened to me. Therapy for MPD involves rendering the barriers unnecessary by working through the traumas that originally created them, then fostering mutual understanding, respect and communication between the alters.

None of that was on my mind, however, as I walked back from the ladies’ room, so distressed by the thought of being away from home that I was in survival mode.

My apartment was a refuge, the only place I could let everyone inside me get their turn for “body time,” unhindered by the Behavior-Police. I could go from coloring with Crayola markers to screaming aloud in terror to reconciling my checkbook to becoming paralyzed with pain to talking in nonsense syllables, all within the space of an hour. I called this essential part of my day “putter time.” It enabled me to rebalance and recharge before my next foray into the world. But it could happen only within the safety of my own walls. Hotel walls wouldn’t work.

Almost-Vivian took control, picked up the phone, and dialed. “Hi, Ron,” she said, mimicking the Business-Person’s voice. “It’s Vivian again. I was wondering whether I could conduct the training by conference call. That’s how I did it with one of our sales offices last month. I’m tied up with an actuarial project.”

“That was our own company,” he said. “For an outside organization, it’s better PR to go in person.”

I hesitated for only a second. “OK. I’ll call them to arrange it.”

Seconds after we said goodbye, Lisa began making fatal plastic-bag plans. I thought of going to an emergency room, but they might not release me when she became less dominant. Almost-Vivian thought we’d be OK now if she could get us out of the office.

“Going to lunch,” I called over the cubicle wall.

“Have a good one,” came the answer.

At a fast-health-food restaurant, Almost-Vivian began to plan. Instead of a plane, train, or rental car — the usual options in my company — I would drive my nine-year-old Volkswagen Golf. It

had a familiar odor. My maps and tapes were in the door pocket, the radio was set to my stations. With 85,000 miles on it, all driven by me, my car was a place where everyone felt comfortable. To avoid triggering Emily, who didn't like public restrooms, we would take our portable toilet: a large soup pot lined with a heavy plastic garbage bag, some kitty litter, and a toilet seat. It was all packed, complete with a roll of Charmin, in my summer bungalow in Westchester County, an hour north of the city. We would stop there on the drive up.

Back at the office, I arranged to give the demo the following Wednesday and Thursday, then chaired a meeting for the actuarial project. At 5 o'clock, I said goodbye to my colleagues and began the three-mile walk to my apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Walking kept me off the subway, where, if someone bumped into me, it set off the One-Who-Curses-Cars. But more important, it was another way of rebalancing. While my body traveled forward, threading through crowds and negotiating crossings, I gave those inside free rein. First came someone who was afraid to stray far from our apartment. Almost-Vivian told her we would ask Jeffery, my therapist, to call us at the hotel. Soothed, she retreated. *Right-foot, left-foot.* The Business-Person returned. She made a note to call the brokerage to find out what was needed to make our IBM software run on their UNIX machine. *Right-foot, left-foot.* Someone felt she was being annihilated and started to scream. The Behavior-Police pushed the scream inside, but it was too big, and I felt like my body would explode. *Right-foot, left-foot.* Almost-Vivian decided we would bring a map to our next session with Jeffery, to show him our route. We would also snap a photograph of him, develop it in the one-hour shop, and take it on the trip. These ideas were comforting, and the scream inside subsided. *Right-foot, left-foot.*

The following Tuesday morning, I prepared a snack for the car ride and wrapped uncooked vegetables to bring to the hotel, where I'd arranged for a room with a kitchenette. I packed a steamer pot, knife and some cookies, then loaded everything into my shopping cart and wheeled it to the parking garage a block away.

The first hour's drive felt OK — I was going to the bungalow I rented every year, and by now it seemed like home. But after I picked up the toilet there, I was going away, into nothingness. I popped *The Secret Garden* audiobook into the cassette player, and the narrator's warm voice filled the car: "When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle,

everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen ... ” I was immediately transported.



Putnam County, the sign said. I changed to classical music on the radio and watched the vista of trees, still mostly green, accented by early autumn bits of red, yellow and orange. Someone marveled at how cars were powerful enough to climb steep hills, and how roads connected places. You could get anywhere with a map.

Dutchess County. The radio was staticky. I turned it off and returned to *The Secret Garden*.

Columbia County. I had to pee and scouted the side of the road for a large-enough grassy area. I pulled over, climbed into the back of the car, and lowered myself onto the pot. When I was finished, I closed the bag with a twist tie, readying it to throw into the trash bin when I stopped for gas. Then I got out to sit on the grass and eat.

I reached the hotel by late afternoon and set about unpacking the shopping cart, making the room into a home. I put the cooking pot and utensils on the kitchenette counter, food in the fridge, demo handouts on the desk, *Angela's Ashes* on the night table, and Rocky and Jan, my miniature Teddy and Raggedy Ann, on the pillow, alongside the flashlight.

Once I'd eaten and washed the dishes, there were no more routines to ground me. Suddenly, I realized I was alone in the room. If no one could see me, did I exist? I felt disconnected from

Jeffery, from everyone I knew. Disconnected from myself as well. The Business-Person wasn't accessible. All I knew was that I was supposed to give a demo and training session to seven people the next day. I flipped through the handout packets, bewildered by the terminology and diagrams. How would I know what to say? I wanted to die and decided to lie down with a plastic bag over my head. Housekeeping would find me in the morning.

Before I could do that, the Nurse came out. She knew that if I could feel connected to familiar objects, I would become calmer. Safe under her watchful eye, I sat on the floor and emptied the contents of my backpack. Jeffery's photograph. The coupons he made on index cards, one for Wednesday, one for Thursday. Each said, "I'm with you right now and I won't forget you." There was also my cell phone, last Sunday's *New York Times Book Review*, and whatever junk had accumulated over the past few weeks. I started organizing and began to feel better.

In the morning, I listened to *Sesame Street* as I cooked oatmeal. The hotel had slipped a newspaper under my door. The headlines helped orient me as an adult. I dressed in a business-casual outfit, put the training handouts, cookies and Rocky into my backpack, and drove to the corporate park where the brokerage was located.

I heard myself give all the proper responses. "Would you like some coffee?" my clients asked. "No, thank you, but I'll have some tea." "How was the drive up?" "Fine. The Taconic is a beautiful parkway." "Is your hotel room comfortable?" "Very. It even has a kitchenette."

The Business-Person remained in control all morning. Unaware of anyone else inside me, she guided the class through drop-down data windows, commission schedules, and error-checking routines. She didn't know how to socialize, though, and sitting around the lunch table was a bit problematic until Almost-Vivian took over. Several times during the meal, I slid my hand into my backpack and gave Rocky a squeeze. As if on cue, the Business-Person reappeared for the afternoon session, which went well too. In fact, the class agreed I had covered everything so thoroughly, they didn't need a second day.

The message reached everyone inside: We could go home tonight! What's more, we had done a good job. We contained our exuberance until we got into the car and pulled out of the parking lot. Then, with the window rolled up, I gave out a yell. "We did it, guys! We did it! Yay, Team!"

It would be another 10 years of intense therapy sessions several times a week, with Jeffery as an empathic witness to the feelings and stories of my alters, before I considered myself healed. That didn't necessarily mean integration, although many of my alters had blended on their own. It meant feeling safe in the world, able to do ordinary things with a minimum of disruption. It meant being able to engage fully with others, not just on the surface, but through and through. No more Plexiglas wall. To those who knew me, the change was observable, but subtle. A colleague at work said, "You seem different lately. More sparkly." To me, it was huge. Now, when I wake each morning, I no longer have to strategize about how to get through the day. I simply look forward to whatever it might bring.

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