

Characterful Leadership

How well do you know and lead your inner team?

By Dr Nelisha Wickremasinghe

*Most of us can identify one or two inner voices that contribute to our internal dialogues or 'self-talk'. A very common voice is that of our critic who, to different degrees, warns, drives, reprimands and punishes us. The inner critic and other voices – many of whom we pay little attention to – can be understood as **characters** who represent our different and often conflicting needs, desires and yearnings.*

When working well together, our characters collaborate like a high performing inner team which is both emotionally mature and healthily productive. However, problems arise when we disregard, ignore or silence some of our characters whilst allowing others to control and dominate.

In the external world we experience the negative repercussions of marginalization and discrimination when the 'unheard' and 'unseen' members of a team or family become angry, disengaged, manipulative and destructive. The same happens in our internal world when our inner characters feel ignored, repressed or disowned.

Of all our characters, it is perhaps our shadow characters (we could call them our 'shadow cabinet') who represent the traits, behaviours and desires that our ego self has rejected and who exert most influence in our life. Meeting, understanding and accepting our shadow characters reduces their intensity and frees us to see and hear a multitude of other characters who offer diversity of perspective and purpose, and who enable us to appraise and understand our experiences more fully.

When we are in constructive dialogue with our inner team, which begins with meeting our shadow characters, we experience greater internal equilibrium, awareness and self-compassion which enables us to nurture and grow our external relationships at home and at work.

Understanding character

It was Sigmund Freud who set the stage for an everyday psychology of character. In his version of the drama, the *id*, representing our animalistic, pleasure-seeking self, battles for supremacy with the *superego*, our moralistic, critical, and conscientious self. Our *ego*, the 'diplomat,' attempts to mediate between the two in order to adapt to the demands of living and achieving in a civilised society. However, it was Freud's estranged colleague, CG Jung, who significantly advanced the idea of multiple selves, which he called 'complexes' and which,

*"interfere with the intentions of the will ... produce disturbances of memory...appear and disappear according to their own laws [and] can temporarily obsess consciousness or influence speech and action in an unconscious way."*¹

Complexes, said Jung, behave like independent beings yet they do not always or even usually suggest pathology. We *all* possess complexes, also described as characters, subpersonalities, ego states, parts or 'selves' and together they form our *character*. Character is, for the Jungian analyst James Hillman,

*"the partial personalities who stir your impulses and enter your dreams, figures who would dare what you would not, who push and pull you off the beaten track, whose truth breaks through after a carafe of wine in a strange town. **Character is characters**, our nature is plural complexity."*²

Our ego self, which most of us call 'me' and which is concerned with how we should fit in with social norms and expectations, is but *one* member – albeit the most well-known – of a *commune* of characters all eager for recognition and place in our life. Character is indeed *characters*.

The birth of character

Most of our characters emerge in early infancy and childhood as *adaptive* responses to help us cope with specific problems or challenges. So, for example, my 'people pleasing' character might have developed as the best response to deal with peer-group challenges and my 'hyper competitive' character might have developed to help me get attention at home. Yet as I grow and am increasingly 'socialised', my people-pleasing and hyper-

¹ (Jung, 2001)

² (Hillman, 1999)

competitive characters may become deeply hidden in the shadow of my ego self who is independent and poised.

Some of our characters are familiar to us. We know their moods and behaviours and we know how and when they make their appearance. For example, we know that we feel and behave differently at work than we do at home or in the pub and we tend to incorporate these familiar characters into our ego, accepting them as part of the coherent complexity that is ‘me’.

However, there are also parts of ourselves that we are less familiar with or less willing to accept as ‘me’. These characters represent aspects of our self and experience that we do not wish to remember, acknowledge or accept, such as the misogynist, the creep, the whining loser, or even the brilliant artist, for in our shadow we can also hide the ‘gold’ in our nature.

In extreme cases, the disowning of our characters can manifest as a *dissociative personality disorder (DPD)*³, in which our selves appear as distinct personalities that do not communicate or cooperate. A renowned case is that of the fictional character Dr. Jekyll and his ‘alter’ self, Mr. Hyde. The terrible consequences of Jekyll’s inability to experience Hyde’s personality and behaviour as belonging to *him* are well known.⁴ However, whilst DPD is more recognized today, it is still a rare disorder and should not be confused with the ordinary experience of multiple selves common to us all.

Acknowledging and paying attention to our multiple characters is not an indication of ‘madness’ – quite the contrary. In dialogue with our selves we start to develop a deep sensitivity to the complexity, intelligence and mystery of the human psyche⁵. Our characters are a *resource* and can contribute productively in our lives when their messages are understood and when the conflict between them is diminished.

Inner conflict

Our inner conflicts occur between different and often competing ‘parts’ of our self (our characters) who, like real people, frequently vie for attention, love, approval and control. However, because most of us are working hard to maintain a consistent and coherent ego – which is the character we present to the world – we find it very difficult

Conflicting Characters

Inner conflict and the appearance of our characters can be felt in life experiences which disturb, confuse and challenge us. For example:

An executive is referred for coaching because his unpredictable angry outbursts are creating tension and confusion in his team. He is not normally like this and staff feel unable to cope with what they experience as his ‘mixed messages’.

A friend decides to give up a stable and lucrative position in the financial sector to run a bed and breakfast in Pembrokeshire.

A colleague describes feeling ‘out of sorts’. Usually she’s a high energy creative, but she has run out of ideas, worse she has lost her sense of purpose and direction. Working in the education sector is not what it used to be.

A coaching client says he is known as a ‘people pleaser’ – a generous man always willing to help and develop others. Yet, he confesses that he is conflicted, unhappy and often tormented with feelings of guilt because underneath this visible and cultivated persona he harbours grudges, resentments and sheer dislike for the people he works with.

A woman proclaims strong feminist values that reject childbearing and motherhood, *and* she experiences jealousy and deep sadness every time she is around her sister’s children.

to acknowledge, tolerate or integrate these contradictory parts of us that also want to be known.

Thus when other characters *do* emerge (as they will) we deny or ignore their attempts to communicate and contribute in our lives. But our characters don’t go away. Their existence is experienced in our feelings of ‘being in two minds’, ‘being torn’ and ‘acting out of character’. Or in our impulsive behaviours, our dreams, memories and yearnings. (see *Conflicting Characters* above)

Integration, belonging and self-creating

The exploration of how each of our characters *belongs* is, as described in Jungian or depth psychology, the work of *integration* and it involves meeting – or aspiring to meet – the full cast of characters who influence our being.

³ Also known as multiple personality disorder

⁴ Jekyll’s dissociative states are a drug induced psychosis.

⁵ (Watkins, 2000)

CG Jung called this process *individuation*⁶ which represents the movement away from the culturally constricted versions of who we *should* be towards the expansive, characterful versions of who we *are*. I call this *self-creating*, which is the process through which we loosen the grip of ‘shoulds’, ‘musts’ and ‘oughts’ in order to re-create truths that are more *personally* relevant and meaningful. In doing so we become less the passive recipients of other people’s truths and more the author of our own.

Self-creating is *not* about improving ourselves in line with social expectations or becoming a ‘better’ person as defined by our family and behind that, our culture. It is about becoming more of who we already are – revealing, releasing or realising that within us that seeks expression and fulfillment.

However, this is not an easy undertaking, because the characters whom we have hidden or denied have a feral quality. They do not live by the rules our ego has so diligently adopted or speak the language of logical reason – and neither do they wish to. Yet, we need not fear them. If we approach slowly, with an open mind, humility and compassion, we *can* engage in dialogue with them and we *can* learn how to benefit from their perspectives and ways of knowing.⁷

Meeting our shadow

Whilst some of our characters exist as faint and silent figures that occasionally appear in our dreams or yearnings, others are more accessible to consciousness. The more prominent cast of characters, often referred to as our ‘shadow’, are members of our internal team who refuse to be ignored. If we do not acknowledge and involve them in our lives, their disruptive retaliations will get in the way of us hearing and ‘seeing’ our other characters. Just as with dominant deviants in our team or family we need to manage our shadow energy with compassionate skill so that we can make time and space for others who are less vocal or demanding.

Our shadow goes by different names – the dark twin, the double, the disowned self, the dog in the cellar, the alter ego, the id and the repressed self. We all have a shadow made up of multiple characters who carry the traits, behaviours, desires and ideas that our ego deems unacceptable and therefore disowns. This does not mean

that the shadow is ‘bad’, just different from the ego. Also, much of what is unique about us, including our talents and potentials, is hidden in our shadow. As mentioned earlier, this is the ‘gold’ in the shadow and self-creating involves re-finding and realizing the potential hidden here.

Meeting our shadow is, as Jung described, a process of ‘making the darkness conscious’. In doing so we discover alternative versions of truth and reality that enable us, amongst other things, to relate to our shadow with compassion and understanding. No longer do we feel ashamed and embarrassed by these characters, but tolerant of their infantile demands and expressions. How else could it be? For our ego has locked up these parts of our self and starved them of growth. Our shadow characters have not had opportunities to mature and, as Robert Bly suggests, every part of us that we do not love will eventually become hostile to us.⁸ Thus, our shadow characters, born of rejection and fear, are the most openly hostile of our characters, for they have had to assimilate and carry powerful desires and needs without guidance or instruction.

The analyst Molly Tuby⁹ gives examples of how we meet our shadow characters every day:

- In our exaggerated feelings about others (I just can’t believe he would do that! She looks disgusting in that outfit!)
- In negative feedback from others who act as our mirrors (This is the third time you’ve been late and not called.)
- In our repetitive interactions with others which are difficult, unsatisfying and troubling
- In our impulsive and ‘unintentional’ acts (I didn’t mean to do or say that)
- In situations when we feel strong emotions such as humiliation and shame

In all these examples our *threat brain*¹⁰ pulses because it senses the disruptive force of our shadow. Thus these experiences can make us feel anxious, ashamed, guilty or fearful. In these moments many of us try and get rid of such feelings through defensive strategies such as denial and repression, not realising that what we are doing is

⁶ (Jung, 2001)

⁷ For a discussion on rational and imaginal ways of knowing see (Wickremasinghe N. , 2021)

⁸ (Bly, 1986)

⁹ (Tuby, 1963)

¹⁰ That part of our emotion system which is alert to and responds to danger (Wickremasinghe N. , 2018)

denying and repressing characters who are trying to *communicate* and *contribute* – and regardless of our attempts to suppress them, will continue to do so. Thus our ego and shadow become stuck in a battle of *denial-repression-eruption* where the only expression of our shadow is forced (erupted) and problematic.

If, however, we were able to acknowledge and dialogue with our shadow characters we would start to understand their various needs and motivations and be better able to offer them a *place* in our lives. When we do this our shadow energy becomes a creative force.

Leading our inner team

In their book, *Embracing your Inner Critic*, Hal and Sidra Stone suggest we learn to ‘parent’ our inner selves by “becoming the responsible agent for that self”. This involves all the helpful characteristics of parenting such as guidance, affirmation and kindness that our centred ego can offer, but it also assumes that the ego knows more and better and doesn’t sufficiently emphasise the *humility* and *mutuality* required in our encounters with our inner characters, especially with our hostile shadow.

Furthermore, whilst some of our shadow characters may be immature children, others are not. Our adolescent or adult characters are liable to feel patronised and controlled if we approach them as a parent who knows best. Think, for example, how difficult it is to parent a teenager who is trying to separate from parental control and trying to establish independence and identity. Or, how inappropriate it is to ‘parent’ a hapless partner or eccentric friend. The same is true in our relations with our shadow. What *is* required is that we start to *lead* our inner team, paying attention to their differences and skilfully managing the dominant and sometimes disruptive members.

The leadership of our inner team involves synergising the diversity and energy from as many characters as we can, so that we become stronger than these divided parts of our self can be alone.

- First we must cultivate a *centred ego* though noticing our emotional reactions and practising ways to stay open and receptive in times of turbulence and challenge.
- Then we need to nurture a *relationship* with the talented yet deviant shadow members of our team,

Understanding our Inner Conflicts

We can learn about our inner conflicts by observing how we respond and relate to conflict in the external world.

How do I approach and engage in conflict?

How do I relate/react to people who are different from me?

In what ways might I ignore, reject or belittle certain perspectives or contributions from family, friends or colleagues?

What triggers a threat brain reaction in me?

who threaten to disrupt the whole. This will involve asking non-judgemental questions such as ‘what do you want?’ ‘what do you need’ and ‘what can you offer?’¹¹

- When our shadow characters are included and respected – which we will *feel* in ourselves as greater equilibrium – they will quieten to make way for our other characters, each of whom we need to listen to and take seriously.

There are likely to be similarities between how we currently respond and relate to *external* deviants and to conflict at home or at work, and how we respond and relate to our *internal* deviants, and inner conflicts. In developing a centred ego we become more aware of, and less reliant on, defensive strategies to protect ourselves from difficult encounters (see Understanding our Inner Conflicts above).

Self-Compassion and Warm Awareness

Of all the practices that help us grow towards maturity, greater wisdom and equilibrium in our lives, self-compassion is the most important. It is also a quality of leadership that enables others to flourish. Research shows that the *less* self-compassionate we are the more likely we are to be critical and judgemental of others. Our inner critic sets standards and rules for us that leak out in our relationships be they at home in our parenting and partnerships or at work in leading and managing. We may *think* we are being tolerant and kind towards others, when in fact our high standards and punitive mentality are negatively influencing our perceptions and judgements.

Warm awareness grows when we learn to soften our inner critic and extend kindness to all our characters.

¹¹ (Rowan, 1990)

This involves being able to tolerate and eventually accept our own and others' flaws and frailties. Warm awareness is receptive, curious and imaginative whilst cold awareness is judgemental, defensive and overly dependent on rational ways of knowing – and given that most of our characters do not communicate through or with the intellect and rational modes (preferring non-verbal, imaginal and intuitive forms of expression) warm awareness also creates the *climate* and *conditions* for productive encounters with our inner team.

Growth, maturity and the inward turn

Most of us aspire to healthy growth and maturity in our lives, yet how many of us take time to reflect on what growth and maturity *involve* beyond eating well, going to the gym and striving for work-life balance?

In this paper we have looked at how acknowledging and accepting the forgotten, repressed and denied parts of ourselves can contribute to our growth and ultimately to a more characterful life in which the rich complexity of our internal world is given attention and respect.

I have used the idea of *characters* to understand the unconscious forces that influence and direct our life and I have suggested that growth and maturity involve becoming conscious of at least some of these forces by carefully attending to their pattern and impact – which we can do by noticing, staying receptive to and being curious about our emotions, feelings and thoughts.¹²

The purpose of this 'inward turn' is not to dismiss our external relationships or our main character, the ego, but to *support* them. And we can only do this when we better know ourselves – the *whole* cast of characters that take part in our life. When we fear, deny or try to repress their involvement they become disengaged and isolated or, as in the example of our shadow characters, disruptive and vengeful towards our ego. The 'mid life crisis' is an example of our besieged ego crumbling under the weight of unmet or falsely met needs.

Yet it is our ego, whose job it is to lead us in the external world, who must also lead us in the internal world. In contrast to the *constructed* individual, group or system that adheres to given rule and norms, the *creating* individual, group or system is observant,

Characterful Conversations

Have a conversation with a couple of your own characters whose voice you may not choose to hear that often. Ask:

What do you need?

What do you want?

What can you offer?

Can you listen to them without judgment or fear?

curious, receptive and sensitive to the *polysemic* nature of relationships and context. The centered, wise ego will take the inward turn, gather together our disparate characters, negotiate their needs, integrate their knowing and, in doing so, enable our whole self to flourish.

Characterful leadership – of ourselves and in our families and our workplaces – aspires to create *belonging* where diversity and difference are actively encouraged and where commitment to people, purpose and projects is neither controlling nor compliant.

¹² (Wickremasinghe, N. 2021)

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Author Information

Dr Nelisha Wickremasinghe is the founding director and lead practitioner at the Dialogue Space, an Associate Fellow at Oxford University, Saïd Business School and undertaking further doctoral study and research in Psychoanalytic clinical practice at Exeter University.

Nelisha works as a psychologist, family therapist, educator and organisational change consultant, and has worked across diverse contexts of human development for 30 years. She is the author of two books, *Beyond Threat* and *Being with Others* and is a regular contributor to *Psychology Today*.

For more information: www.thedialoguespace.co.uk
 Contact: nelisha@thedialoguespace.co.uk
 For reprints contact: info@thedialoguespace.co.uk
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