

## **WRITING *WEB OF ANGELS***

### **The Calling**

Sometimes you're called to do something, at least that's how it's been for me as a writer. I can tell that a subject is knocking at my door because of the persistence of odd coincidences. If I ignore them, the calling might fade away for a while but eventually it just comes back stronger.

After writing my first two novels, and taking two trips to China where our children were born, I found myself the mother of a baby and a pre-schooler. Like most people, I've had some difficulties in my life, and old issues resurfaced with the changes in my life at that time. I needed to do some growing and some healing. I found the internet was a wonderful (and to me, relatively new) tool I could use to connect with people who might be on the same path as I was.

Although I didn't know it when I began this journey, there is someone close to me who has Dissociative Identity Disorder (D.I.D.), better known by the outdated term, multiple personalities. I thought that D.I.D. was rare and that it manifested itself in the way I had seen in the movies and on TV, like *Sybil* or *The Three Faces of Eve*. However in chat rooms and forums I discovered on the internet, I kept meeting people who were nothing like those melodramatic portrayals. Yet they had D.I.D. Extreme and early trauma had caused them to split, but it didn't show in an obvious way.

Further, I discovered that I had an uncanny ability to tell when people switched from one identity to another (referred to as a different alter coming forward). Sometimes I could determine this moment by their use of a single phrase or word, sometimes just by a change in the speed of writing, other times I simply detected the change without any rational explanation.

About a year and a half after logging onto my first chat room, I found out that a person dear to me, and nothing like *Sybil*, is multiple (D.I.D.). My experiences online had prepared me for this discovery by showing me what D.I.D. is really like so that I could respond with some understanding, and make it my business to learn more.

In being called to this subject, I felt that the best way to tackle it was to do what I do best, writing fiction. A novel can get under a person's skin, giving readers the experience of another world from the inside, a world that is both universal and particular, understandable and exotic. I set the story in my neighbourhood to ground it in the reality I know best, as well as in ordinary family life. But I also decided to write my story around the discovery of a crime, which someone who had D.I.D. could be in a unique position to solve, not only in the sense of figuring it out, but in putting things right. A story like that conveys the emotional truth of what I know about people with D.I.D. They are hidden heroes. Unassumingly, they carry their extra burdens and make certain that life is better for the people around them than it had been for them.

The world of D.I.D. was a challenge to portray. The call was irresistible, the energy fierce. Yet how to channel it? I wish I could say that the words flowed, but if God was dictating, I was hard of hearing. It's taken me longer than any other book to write, draft after draft wearing out two laptops! At times I thought of giving it up, but the call was too strong.

## Police

The biggest challenge for me in writing this novel, and one that I left until the eleventh hour, was interviewing police for research which would allow me to write the climax of the novel. It was something I'd never done before: first person research. I'm actually pretty shy (though people never think so!). Cold calling—oh my God. But I got on the phone to the Child Exploitation Section of the Toronto Police Service's Sex Crimes Unit. Nervously, I explained the purpose of my call to a detective who was brusque but did give me some basic information, telling me that my character would do best to contact the local police station.

My local station's website encouraged contact and had an online email form. This time I got a reply from a detective in youth and family services. I typed up my questions to have on hand for our phone call, and we spoke at length. I visited the local station, which gave me a better sense of the police at work and the differences between uniformed officers and detectives. I noticed their sense of humour; I saw the workout room where stress could be relieved; I photographed the station's hockey team plaque and a poignant poem by the wife of a deceased officer. I even saw the holding cells (green bars), the block for women, and the separate block for men, either of which could also be used for youth. The cells were empty, but I saw a man waiting to be processed, sitting slumped on a bench. The interview rooms for criminals were windowless, bleak, secure, furnished with only a chair. The rooms the police use for interviewing others, victims, witnesses, etc., were also quite stark, which is why they have a specific offsite location, like the one I describe in the book, for interviewing kids, especially those who have been abused. The detective at my local station gave me a specific contact name at the Child Exploitation Section and I also spoke at length on the phone with this new contact. Only the officers from the Child Exploitation Section are authorized to view child pornography online with the goal of searching for identifying clues that will lead to the rescue of children and the arrest of perpetrators.

All the officers impressed me with their thoughtfulness, understanding and care for victims. They emphasized the importance of seeing that everything is done by the book, so that the criminals would not get off on a technicality. The detective I spoke to at my local station was passionate in the feelings she expressed about perpetrators. The detective at the Child Exploitation Section was initially more reserved, but became more open as we spoke, maybe because I became more relaxed or perhaps as she began to realize that I knew what I was talking about and that I cared about this subject as much as she did. After I wrote the relevant chapters, she vetted the material for accuracy. Both of the officers said that they dealt with stress by talking to fellow officers.

I was interested in the different perspectives that I got from each of the officers. This was true, as well, when I spoke to a social worker at Children's Aid and to prosecuting attorneys. Each of these people had a profound commitment to saving children from abuse. They also shared a deep frustration about the challenges they face in getting perpetrators off the street. This probably explains why they each had a somewhat different notion about the proper process at every step, even down to the best way to interview a child informant. Their goals were the same, their concerns equally fervent for every child, but each had staked a certain ownership over the most effective way to do this.

Another thing that struck me was that so much more is known now about crimes against children than it was when the new friends I was meeting in internet chat rooms had been kids. One of my friends had called the police in the 1970's when her parents were fighting, hoping that the officer would ask her some questions, and ultimately discover her bruises, and investigate further, but that didn't happen. Now the internet, while providing a network and market for the loathsome crime of child pornography, is also the best tool for revealing the crime and its perpetrators. Most of the survivors of child abuse that I now know were taught that they would not be believed and that the police were their enemies. The fact is that every officer I contacted wanted nothing more than to see victims free and healed, and the perpetrators stopped.

However, the police still aren't well informed about D.I.D. That is no fault of theirs, but simply reflects public ignorance, including mine before I started on this journey. The officers I spoke with said that they'd never encountered any child or survivor who was multiple. Given that a history of child pornography and prostitution is so prevalent among those with D.I.D, I'm sure that they have and simply didn't know it.

### **D.I.D.**

The TV show, *The United States of Tara*, produced by Stephen Spielberg, has done a great service in bringing D.I.D. to the public eye and generating interest in it, while at the same time, unfortunately, perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions about it (rather like the first TV shows with African-American characters). Consequently the show is viewed with a mixture of gratitude and distaste by the people I know who have D.I.D.

I have spoken with twenty-five people in depth who are multiple. Of them eighteen are also survivors of child porn. For half of those, both parents had been involved in the porn and abuse. My knowledge of these people is very different from that of a clinician who sees a person for an hour or two, once or twice a week. For five years, until my children were both in school, I was in daily contact with them. I didn't come online as a mental health professional or as a researcher: we were all on a path of healing and growth. We interacted as friends and acquaintances and fellow survivors of life's adversity. We talked about our search for answers that were not in the least hypothetical: what is evil; when you've known it intimately, how is it possible to trust in light and love? Serious subjects to be certain, but we also talked about diapers (which can be quite serious when they explode!), recipes and other lighter topics. These chat rooms had rules designed to keep them safe. The moderators were experienced and had no hesitation in banning anyone who attempted to use the room for any malicious purpose. Eventually I also moved from an online friendship to one that was "3D" with some people. We became close friends and met in person, getting to know each other's partners and children, too. We still speak on the phone regularly and visit each other despite great distances.

A lot of the people I now know struggled with the realization that they were multiple because they weren't like Sybil or Eve. They have varying attitudes toward the term D.I.D. Many have families, kids, jobs, friends, relationships and a lot of diverse interests and talents. They lead a normal looking life while carrying the extra burden of their secrets both past and present: the horror of being tortured and raped before they could read; the needs, fears, and conflicts of an

inside horde. They don't see themselves as disordered or ill; most have no hankering to integrate (become a singleton). They just wish to be understood. The word "freak" often came up as in "people will think I'm a freak" or more often "people will think we're a freak." They live as multiples and in the chat rooms refer to themselves as "we" meaning all of that person, and "I" speaking only as the one personality who was forward at the time. But some have enough difficulties in life that they feel validated by a medical diagnosis and view themselves as disabled.

All of them put a great deal of effort into covering up the fact that they are many within one. There were often discussions about who they had come out to. It reminded me of hearing gay and lesbian friends discuss how it could feel dangerous to come out. Often only a spouse and a couple of close friends know, sometimes nobody but a therapist. The instinct to hide also came out of the "don't tell" threats of perpetrators. The chat rooms are a relief because in that anonymous environment, folks can speak as themselves without smoothing over the differences between alters (also referred to as parts, people, folks, or insiders and outsiders).

They mostly laugh at the idea of a "host" or original person. All of their alters are real; the personality(s) who presents to the outer world is just another alter with the job of looking normal.

One of the things that I found hard to understand initially, but after a while got a sense for, is the inside landscape of D.I.D. This is the internal (mental) world where alters live when they aren't forward. The alters that feel bad live in bad places, the ones that feel better in good places, and all of this evolves as healing takes place. Some of my friends have internal meeting rooms where alters meet, share opinions, and come to decisions. Other people prefer to envision an outdoors landscape.

I often say that people with D.I.D. are the same as singletons except that they are more so. For example, people don't always feel their age. They can be one way at work and another way at home. They can daydream or fantasize. But for multiples, these different ways of being are accompanied by a full complement of faculties and senses: each alter has individual consciousness, tastes, and opinions. They vary in age and their inside life is real, interacting with the outside life. Sexual identity is also more variable among people who are multiple. It's common for women to have male alters and vice versa. Therapy isn't just therapy with an adult, but with all these people. It's family or even village therapy. This also makes relationships with significant others complex and interesting. Living as multiple is a work of art: old and young, male and female, having a taste for jazz, classical music, rock, country, punk, opera, and playdough. But this art is covert.

I also met alters who were taught by abusers to take pride in strength and to despise sadness, love and other such "weaknesses" within them. As a result, internal division kept them more compliant. Their systems (the whole of the alters in a body) are divided between "nice" and "mean" alters. The meanness is directed inward as persecution of other parts of the whole. What would be merely internal conflict among singletons, for them is internal war. However the reality is that the so-called mean alters took on the hardest parts of the abuse. In their own way they try to keep everyone from getting into trouble. These persecutor parts are also protectors, with a dignity and even nobility that came through when the truth finally surfaced.

Everyone in the system has a job that makes it possible to survive. With healing, everyone can have a part in a life that is thriving.

There isn't a 'type' of family that gives rise to D.I.D. The people I met came from rural and urban areas, from working class and professional families, from families that the whole community knew were violent to those that were respected and honoured in their communities. Most came from homes that put up a good front, although as children they often had few if any toys, and weren't allowed to have posters or to decorate their walls, barred from anything that would express individuality or creativity or freedom. Yet as adults they were teachers, professors, social workers, nurses, counsellors, artists, biologists. Most of them had been to college. Some had post-graduate degrees.

In the chat rooms there is a lot of joking about the funny aspects of D.I.D., like being dressed professionally except for the brightly coloured socks with duckies, unseen under sedate trousers. Abilities come and go, depending on who is forward and new found abilities and interests emerge as alters make their presence known. Time management takes on a whole new meaning when the twenty-four hour day has to be divided among various adults, teens and children who share one body and one life.

Losing time, ie not knowing what happened or for how long when another alter is out, is much more subtle for people than it is usually portrayed. Some have the experience of "coming to" after hours or days with no idea of what had happened in the interim. But for most people, rather than total ignorance, there is a vague sense of time passing on the outside when someone else is forward. Or there can be a clear awareness of what is happening but without the ability to control or affect it. Interestingly, people with a lot of alters and a complex internal landscape are less likely to lose time. They appear to have a more highly developed system of internal communication, whereby relevant information is passed forward.

There are also spooky things associated with D.I.D.: a talent for finding lost objects, or knowing information about people before they speak. I learned that it's common for light bulbs to go out when people who are multiple are around them, and electronics often go wonky.

The greater the depth of abuse people have known, the more likely they are to have a strong spiritual connection, often speaking of angels, which provide not only comfort but a source of wisdom that I can't rationally explain and which, to be honest, I believe to be a connection with the source of goodness and love, whether people call that Creator, God, the Light, Spirit, or Universe. It is amazing that so many people who have been sold as children become adults who devote themselves to raising their children safely. It is amazing that despite growing up as the target of evil, the human spirit still finds its way to the light. It speaks to my deepest belief that we are here to learn and love and make the world a better place, one that is more loving and compassionate.