

On the transformation of the Inner Critic

How to turn a bully into an ally

By Hanneke Elich and Robert Stamboliev, November 2013



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On the transformation of the Inner Critic

Would it not be perfect if we, as human beings, would not hesitate to demonstrate our strength, and say wholeheartedly what we stand for in life, and would not be embarrassed either to show our sensitivities and vulnerabilities?

Would it not be wonderful to just be in the world with open-mindedness and without prejudice, in order to simply let in 'that which is', feel it, think about it and discuss it with each other?

The view on human existence of Hal and Sidra Stone, the founders of Voice Dialogue, assumes that, in principle, this is possible. Essentially, we all know and possess the ability to be powerful: to fight, to please, to structure, to be emotional, etc. And we have all come into the world as unprejudiced, open-minded and sensitive beings – which means that fundamentally we are vulnerable. This vulnerability can very well be taken care of from an early age on. We can be given shelter lovingly and be protected whenever we feel scared, insecure or threatened. In this way both the vulnerable and the powerful aspects of our selves can develop simultaneously.

Voice Dialogue would like to contribute to this: that we may experience our versatility and express it. That we may switch at all times from serious to playful, from confrontational to empathic, etc. We can learn to 'dance with our polarities', as it were.

In this article, we will briefly explain in section 1 how the development of those many-sided

aspects within us, called 'Sub-personalities' or 'Selves' in Voice Dialogue, takes place. Here, the Inner Critic plays a distinct and special part. In section 2 we will describe which levels of consciousness and which types of transformation can be found within Voice Dialogue. Finally, in section 3, we will show extensively how the Voice Dialogue facilitator can help a client to come into contact with the Inner Critic (subsequently called 'Critic'). At this point it will become visible and tangible what system of Selves is being maintained, and how these Selves have started taking care of our vulnerabilities. A step-by-step approach by the Voice Dialogue facilitator enables clients to accept their Selves, as well as learn how to take care of their vulnerabilities. This will help them to let go of customary patterns more easily, which in turn will lead to a neutralization of the role of the Critic. And so, what was experienced as a real bully at first, will now be able to transform into an ally...

We are assuming here that the reader is aware of the basic knowledge and skills a Voice Dialogue facilitator must possess in order to enable a client to come into contact with different Sub-personalities. The six steps that we will discuss, which lead to a transformation of the Critic, have been developed by Robert Stamboliev. He has laid theoretical foundations for these steps in a number of workshops and applied them during facilitation. This article elaborates on issues that presented themselves in these workshops.

1. The Voice Dialogue theory of personality and the role of the Critic

Most of the time, our development from child to adult does not take place in a predominantly positive way, as described in the introduction. The ideal situation, in fact, would be as projected in this scheme:

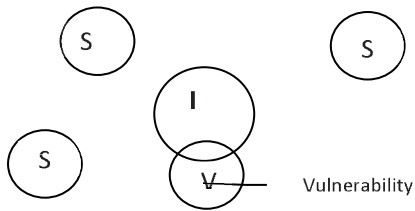


Figure 1. I am looking after my Vulnerability and all Selves are allowed to exist.

In this article, we will use Petra as a case in point and an example to learn from. She is a 42 year old woman, successful in her job as coach, trainer and advisor; she is the mother of her own two children and two children from her husband's previous marriage. From time to time she is bothered by a critical voice; in this article we will come back to this at length. It has become clear that she knows a number of her own Selves quite well. Let us assume for the moment that her life goes like clockwork and that she has free access to all the Selves within her. At times, she would then be a good and responsible mother, and at other times a spontaneous child, enjoying life. On the one hand, she would be a brilliant professional – and on the other hand a normal working person who is sometimes lazy. From time to time she would be afraid or insecure for a moment: am I good enough as a mother, and do I develop myself enough as a professional? Those feelings would not scare her; they would make her vulnerable, but she would realize that they are part of life. She would listen to those voices



and understand what they are in need of, in order that she may take care of them. This is the first ideal picture: Petra (the Self) has different Selves at her disposal, she can switch between polarities. When vulnerabilities appear, she lets them in and calmly decides what she wants to and what she can do.

However, things work out differently most of the time. It appears that we develop some Selves quite well, but others much less. Moreover, for many of us to acknowledge and to allow that we frequently feel vulnerable, is quite a challenge. Vulnerability is an energy we prefer not to feel.

In Voice Dialogue terms, we call a well-developed Self a 'Primary Self' and the opposite, which has not been developed too well, a 'Disowned Self'. Vulnerability itself can become a Disowned Self, too, through the so-called Vulnerable Child. Furthermore, it is possible to look at vulnerability in a different way: each Primary Self contains itself a 'vulnerable area'.

Let us return to Petra and see what this team of Selves looks like in her case. For instance, the 'Standout' turns out to be one of her Primary Selves, whereas 'Enjoyment', by a professional and a human being, is the opposite here and rather disowned. Regularly, there are situations in which Petra feels insecure and finds that she

is not brilliant enough. However, she quickly buries these unpleasant feelings and just tries to work even harder at developing her skills.

In this way, the 'Enjoying Self' slowly disappears into the background, for it is exactly the behavior that the Standout does not like! And so the Primary Self takes on the job of protecting and guarding Petra: if she would just do her utmost to be brilliant she does not have to suffer from feelings of insecurity or fear.

Thus, the Primary Self will ensure that Petra does not have to feel vulnerable; this has become its duty. It shows how a vulnerable area can be closed off by a Primary Self. Most of this happens subconsciously.

In a scheme, it would look like this:

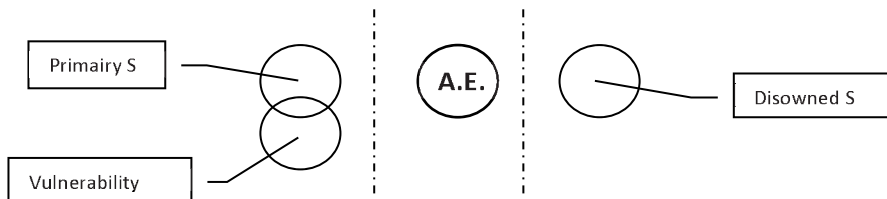


Figure 2. P's Primary Self (The Standout) takes care of P. and prevents her from feeling vulnerable (insecure; afraid; unpleasant feelings). The opposite becomes disowned (Enjoying). There is no A.E. (Aware Ego), hence the dividing lines. P. lives at the left side of the scheme only.

It holds true for each of us that, subconsciously, in the course of time, we can drift away ever further from our original impulses, also called 'archetypal energies' within Voice Dialogue. In fact, it is possible that we can 'converge' with the Primary Selves that we have been using

more and more. We will then say of ourselves: 'I just happen to be like this'. In our example, Petra says: 'I happen to be someone who is focused on quality'. The opposite – the lighthearted side – has gone underground and has become disowned.

The problem is that in this way we do not learn how to deal with our sensitivities and our vulnerabilities. And we will be confronted by this in an unpleasant manner at all kinds of moments in our lives. For instance, when we meet people who are living our disowned parts, we will disapprove of them! When Petra meets someone who is doing his job in casual manner, enjoys it and is not very preoccupied with becoming an expert, she will disapprove of this behavior through her Primary Self. A voice in Petra's head, too, will call out: 'be careful, beware, you had better not do this!', as soon as she herself tends to become lazy or starts to enjoy things. This is where the Inner Critic makes his appearance. It can meddle with everything Petra is supposed to do or not do. If, by chance, Petra is doing nothing at a given moment, and she catches a look by someone who disapproves of this, the same Critic will say: 'I told you so, don't do it!' This is exactly

what the Critic is doing for us: he is our watchdog! He watches over us, he indicates which rules we should adhere to in life. In this way, the Critic maintains the system: the Primary Selves must continue doing their work, and the Disowned Selves must remain hidden. And so he tries to make us 'strong' and guards us from weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In our example: Petra's Critic repeats again and again that she must be good and special. Her Critic's function is making the Standout continue doing her work. At the moment that Petra weakens and enjoys doing nothing, the Critic is immediately switched on, and stimulates the Standout to pick up where he left off. In this way Petra remains strong, in her own eyes (those of her Critic) and those of others. The Self that can enjoy or behave normally cannot be developed, becomes disowned. Being vulnerable and feeling vulnerable is repressed by this constellation.

We can draw up what happens in a scheme:

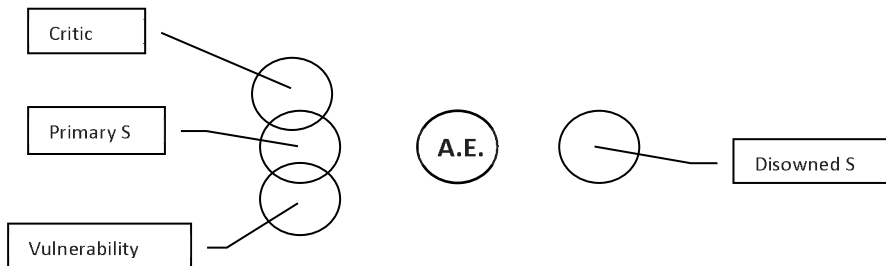


Figure 3. The Critic functions as a watchdog: he ensures that a vulnerable area within P. is closed off (be careful, don't sit there and do nothing – something unpleasant will happen). This causes disorders. He immediately switches on the Primary Self (the Standout), which keeps P. from feeling vulnerable. The opposite (Enjoyment) becomes disowned. P. is hardly conscious of this but she does notice that she is prone to repeating patterns of behavior.



It holds true for each of us that, subconsciously, in the course of time, we can drift away ever further from our original impulses

It is something new, to think and to talk about the Critic as a watchdog. In fact being a watchdog is mostly a function that the Critic is performing. The most important task of the Critic is drawing up rules of life, managing these, and making us adhere to them. Often it suffices to establish one or two very strict rules of life the client is adhering to: they are the keys to finding out which vulnerabilities are taboo, and they are directly connected with the Primary Selves that are keeping to these rules. So the Critic as a watchdog and the Primary Selves are in this together. If you talk to one (the Critic/Watchdog) you will very soon afterwards be talking to the other (one or more Primary Selves). New, too, is the manner in which the client will come into contact with his or her vulnerabilities. In fact, this happens quite organically by talking to the Primary Self. We already discussed how it takes upon itself to

protect the client – when you keep enquiring why it does that, you will touch a vulnerable layer automatically. So it is not true that you will discover where a client is vulnerable by talking to the so-called Vulnerable Child, a separate Sub-personality, only. But it is true that when a vulnerable layer is exposed within the Sub-personality, it often points to situations from the past, to painful experiences the child had to go through. One might say that the energy you are confronted with is in most cases a Child energy.

Sometimes, the space taken up by a Critic is so large, and the Critic is admonishing the client so often, that it makes sense to explore him more extensively. Instead of being the representative of a number of rules of life, as a watchdog, he has become a complete Sub-personality by himself. In this case, it will become clear that he is commenting upon almost everything a client

does or does not do. This makes him a heavy burden to be carried around. The result is that a client has very low feelings of self-esteem or suffers from depression. Such a Critic can completely undermine a person's joy of living.

In all cases it makes sense to investigate the way the Critic is performing his task. For there is a way to be liberated from his burden. We can become conscious of the role, place and function of the Critic in our lives, and of the other important Sub-personalities, from a so-called 'central position'. This position is called the 'Aware Ego' in Voice Dialogue. And this is also the aim of Voice Dialogue: the Aware Ego can be taught to notice which Selves are active

at which moment, can come into contact with them and accept them. From this position we have access to what is happening inside us, where and how we are touched and therefore feel vulnerable. We can choose how much of it we want to bring into the open. Petra can learn, from a central position, to become quiet and discover what the unpleasant feelings are pointing towards. She can learn to discern that her Critic is preventing these from coming to the surface, and she can perceive how her Standout is used to taking over at that point. It is possible to become aware of this and carry the responsibility for the vulnerable area from the central position. This will make the Critic calm down and enable him to transform.

The last scheme would then look like this:

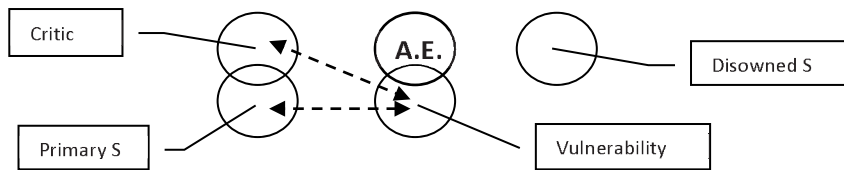


Figure 4. P's Aware Ego knows that a Primary Self (the Standout) is activated through the Critic/watchdog to prevent her from feeling vulnerable, and takes responsibility for it. The A.E. makes contact with the vulnerability and learns to take care of it. In this way, the Primary Self is allowed to work less hard, the Critic becomes more subdued, and room is created for contact with the Disowned Self (Enjoyment).

We will see how a Voice Dialogue facilitator can go through this whole process with the client after we have explained in more detail what we mean by 'transformation'.

2. Different levels of consciousness and of transformation

As we have said before, the development of an

Aware Ego is the aim of Voice Dialogue. When we start to know our Selves and learn to accept them, the Aware Ego will grow and a profound change may take place. We call this change a 'transformation' because it allows us to experience more wholeness, freedom, gentleness and inspiration in our lives. Such a transformation can take place at different levels:

- We observe the fact that incidentally, without any purpose or benefit we 'exist' in a certain manner. Nothing is needed, 'it is what it is'. We are, as it were, a silent witness of ourselves and observe a Self, for instance the Critic, who is talking to us: ah, my Critic is speaking! This level is called Awareness.
- We can become aware of all kinds of Sub-personalities that play a big part in our lives. We perceive that we feel at home when the so-called Primary Selves are at the helm. At other times, we feel uncomfortable and understand that Disowned Sub-personalities are stepping forward. It is possible to really get to know all these Selves, with their motives, fears and vulnerabilities. To come into contact with them at a profound level will transform us, which means that we will build up and maintain a different relationship with our Sub-personalities. The original power of a Sub-personality will not disappear; on the contrary, the primal energy will become available in a more pure form! We can also become aware of the power and the authority of a Critic (watchdog); we can understand and perceive how he puts the whole system in motion. When we are able to dance more freely with all kinds of Selves and polarities, from a central position of acceptance, the Critic does not need to become so forceful as before. His energy, too, will become softer instead of being severe and unyielding. He will still identify the sore spot, but with gentleness and compassion. He is sharp and objective, but not with the intention to attack or undermine. He helps to change us when it is necessary.
- At the very moment that we learn to separate ourselves from our Sub-personalities and we do not converge with them (let them take over) any longer, the above-mentioned Aware Ego is born. It is from this central position that we

learn to recognize who is behind the wheel and when. Now we have a choice, we can say: o.k. I have a Critic, but I am more than that. I choose myself when and how I want to listen to him. Just by mentioning the fact that the Critic is bothering us, by realizing what he is after and that in fact he shows us where we are vulnerable, something in our consciousness will transform. We realize that we can influence the vulnerabilities and take care of them...

So, Voice Dialogue is helping us in different ways to develop our consciousness: we learn to be aware of the energy, the thoughts and feelings that are connected to the different Sub-personalities, and to experience them. A Critic or watchdog may be a key element in this. Let us now find out which steps a Voice Dialogue facilitator can take in order to enable the Critic to transform from a bully into an ally.

3. Six steps to induce the transformation of the Critic.

The method which a Voice Dialogue facilitator will apply to help his client get to know his Critic (watchdog) and which can lead to transformation, involves checking the following six steps.

1. Make a distinction between the Ego and the Critic

To start with check with your client how it is to meet the Critic. It has to be clear that there is a position for the ego from which there is a separation. The Critic should not take over. If that happens than one should first work on building enough ego-strength. This can be done on the following way: through body awareness and grounding the facilitator encourages the client to really take the space and develop solidity and feel that physically. Then the client can visualize the Critic further away from the ego-position or put him in a

chair and move that chair further away. It has to be clear that there has to be a solid ego position from which to start and towards one can return. Usually this can be done without problems.

However, if this turns out to be difficult there may be a so-called Killer Critic. A Killer Critic can develop through trauma's for instance by abuse. It is a negative harmful energy nurtured by the instinctive force. When this force turns against oneself it becomes a Killer Critic. Intensive psychotherapy may then be necessary to develop enough self-esteem, often through transference with a therapist. Only after that the following exercise can be done.

This can appear in a milder form as well, but then paying attention to the ego-space usually does the job. When the necessary preliminary work had been done, working with the following steps give deepening, healing and liberation. Also for people who had a Killer Critic...

2. Check extensively what the Critic is telling the client.

As we have said before: the aim of the Critic is to keep the system of Primary Selves intact and avoid pain and punishment. He prevents us from giving our Disowned Selves a chance to develop. Usually, the Critic is very resourceful: he is very all-round and he pays attention to many different areas of life. So the facilitator is well advised to check with the client in what areas the Critic is active.

3. Choose one important rule of the Critic – this will push a Primary Self into action.

As we cannot investigate everything at the same time, the facilitator, after consulting with the client, will choose one rule which in the experience of the client is particularly bothersome. It is a statement that usually starts with a 'must': 'you have to...' The more

absolute the 'must' is felt to be, the stronger the rule will be. This rule is a gateway to a Primary Self. The facilitator strikes up a conversation with this Self, not in order to solve anything, but to get to know it better, like an interviewer. He stretches the rule, as it were, and in doing so reaches the Primary Self that is connected to it, with its specific emotions and energy.

4. Find out what fear lies underneath (to which the watchdog/rule is in fact pointing and which the Primary Self is carrying with it).

In the course of the conversation that the facilitator is having with the Primary Self of the client (which is still collaborating with the watchdog), a point will be reached at which the energy of this powerful Self is dwindling. Vulnerability will appear almost naturally. It will become clear why the Critic has such a strong hold over the Primary Self: what can happen if this Self is not heard, and consequently, what is the Critic so afraid of?

5. Invite the client to take care of the fear and the vulnerability (which the Critic tries to suppress through the Primary Self), from the position of the Aware Ego.

Back in the central position, the facilitator helps the client to consciously take care of the fears of the Primary Self, prompted by the Critic. Like a parent takes care of a child. The idea behind this is that it will reassure the Critic: if he himself and his fears are taken care of, he will become more willing and able to loosen his rules of life. The Primary Self, too, has to work less hard and can become more relaxed.

6. Identify which polarity is present.

After step 5, when the Critic knows he is being taken seriously and can soften up, the facilitator, together with the client, can have a look at the opposite that is at issue. Most of

the time, this opposite will present itself organically. Now that it is clear which rule, identified in step 3, and which Primary Self is all important, it will be easy to recognize what an opposite Self would be, which has not been allowed much space yet. In a subsequent session, this Disowned Sub-personality will have a chance to come forward step by step.

Let us now consider how the Voice Dialogue facilitator starts working with Petra's question.

Even though many things are going quite well in Petra's life, she is bothered by the Critic who always succeeds in pointing at something that can be improved. Petra thinks her Critic is talking too much, it makes her tired and she is always on her guard. In fact, at any moment she can be 'exposed' – even if this has not happened yet in reality. And therefore, she is not able to really enjoy the things that are going well.

The conversation with Petra's Critic develops as follows. The facilitator is indicated by 'F'. There are references to the 6 steps, with step 2 being summarized by B. Moments of possible transformation are indicated.

F: (2) *So, the statements your Critic makes frequently are: 'What is so special about what you are doing? You have to really excel and be brilliant.' Your Critic is commenting a lot on how you do your job and how you are functioning as a mother. What is an especially important rule for you?*

(3) Such a rule is in fact: you have to be excellent and special.

F: (3: this rule is now being further extended, stretched energetically) *How do you express Criticism?*

I often appear when she is busy. Then I tell her: you should have studied for a real profession. What did you accomplish in this coaching conversation? One of these days you will be exposed...

F: *Can you compare her to others?*
Yes.

F: *What is her position?*
Somewhere at the bottom, she is too strict with her children and she must pay more attention to them.

F: *You are keeping an eye on things?*
Yes, I punish her.

F: *How often are you there, during the week?*
During and after every coaching session, I do a lot of evaluation.

F: *What are you aiming at?*
I am keeping her alert, make her excel. (Now it is slowly becoming clear which Primary Self is being pushed into action: the Standout.)

F: *Is that important?*
Yes, otherwise she will take the easy way out.

F: *So what is of value to you, a standard?*
Precision, attention, deliver quality, be in control.

F: *How do you define quality?*
Doing things consciously, with dedication, that is how you add something to the profession; give them value for their money.

F: *With what kind of issues are you helping Petra?*
Developing herself, starting her own business, doing things her own way. I am pushing her to take on challenging jobs. I am making her step forward.

F: *How do you stimulate her?*

I tell her to prepare well in advance, logistically, too. To keep a critical eye on things always. Become more professional.

F: *How does it feel?*

Tense.

F: *When did you come into Petra's life?*

During primary school. I made sure she wanted to be good at playing tennis and making music. Invest and practice! Don't be average!

F: *What have you accomplished for Petra?*

Do a lot of wonderful things. Her colleagues are jealous. She goes to extremes.

F: *Did you think of all this yourself, or did you have examples?*

For instance, her parents were not average at all, either. Her father was rather vague and spiritual, thought about everything; her mother was a sparkling woman.

F: *What about your relationship with Petra, is she happy with your presence?*

No, I am being kept at bay.

F: *How do you feel about that?*

I am fighting with her a little bit, she doesn't always want to listen to me, but I am stubborn and keep coming back when she shoves me away.

F: (4: explore the underlying fear) *What is the worst that can happen, according to you?*

That she takes it easy and stops developing herself.

F: *Do you have an image of that?*

Yes, she is sprawling at the kitchen table at home. She is a petty-bourgeois housewife.

F: *What is so terrible about being bourgeois?*

She won't be noticed anymore, she will fade away (at this moment Petra's energy fades

away, too, and gradually she becomes more silent)...

F: *Do you keep an eye on how Petra's looks, as well?*

Yes, I keep her weight in check. She shouldn't become too Burgundian!

B: *What would be a worst-case scenario?*

That she would be inconspicuous, wouldn't be accepted any more, and would be sitting alone... (Again, Petra becomes very quiet: a moment of transformation of energy, from powerful to silent, and it continues...)

F: *Was she alone sometimes, in the past?*

Yes, in the middle of all the children at home she felt alone... (The vulnerable loneliness is felt quite deeply; this is a moment of transformation)

F: *Did you really help her?*

Yes, by making her visible.

F: *How are things now?*

I keep her going, so that she will be noticed and does not have to be alone.

F: *What do you need from Petra in order to relax? What things should she be taking care of? (in the direction of step 5).*

She can do something silly, devote time to herself, do something nice with girlfriends; she does not have to concentrate on work only.

F: (back to A.E.): *Can you feel the difference?*

Yes, pooh, pooh, I can feel it on my neck.

F: (5: how can Petra take care of the vulnerability from the A.E.) *It is happening now; you are carrying the pressure and the load with you, on your shoulders. Put it back in the spot you just gave it.*

Petra: I should do that more often, make room here for myself and put the Critic (and the Standout with him) back in his own chair.

F: *How are things now?*

Petra: More relaxed.

F: *Can you let the Vulnerable Child, which is afraid to be alone, know that you are there for her?*

Petra: It already helps that I know she exists! And that it is the reason why the Critic (and consequently the Standout) keeps going on... (Moment of transformation from the A.E.) (Sigh)... Finally I can define limits for myself, map out my own little space, as I am doing now.

F: (summarizes: 6) *The polarities obviously are: the Standout Petra and the Petra that Enjoys. Shall we invite the Enjoyer for a moment: can you be present sometimes?*
Yes.

F: *Do you have a message for Petra?*
Enjoy. Take on nice jobs.

F: *What do you look like?*
I am spontaneous and funny.

F: (In A.E.) *How are you doing?*
Petra: good that she could be there. Should happen more often. I liked it, it is a nice opposite.

F: (Asks Petra to stand on the spot of the Silent Witness and summarizes everything that happened. Back in A.E.) *Is there anything else you want to ask or say?*
Petra: I now realize how much energy this critical voice (linked to the Standout) is costing me. She definitely can, and may, do less. For example, I can still prepare quite well for my work, but I can put a limit to it, for instance how much time I spend on it. I can do it with more consideration for myself (transformation from the A.E.).

Short commentary

In the example a number of issues have become clear that were discussed in the previous sections:

- By means of the rule of the watchdog/Critic it gradually becomes clear which Primary Self is put into motion: the Standout.
- By speaking with the Standout extensively and asking what she is afraid of (and consequently, what the Critic is afraid of, too), Petra will automatically encounter a vulnerable layer.
- This vulnerable layer is connected to experiences that Petra went through as a child; the facilitator also calls it her Vulnerable Child.
- When Petra is asked to take care of the vulnerable layer from the central position, the first thing she says is: just knowing that there is a Vulnerable Child somewhere and that the Critic is guarding it, already creates more space! This is what the title of this article refers to: the Critic is no longer a bully but transforms and becomes an ally; he clears the road to being more open-minded and allowing all kinds of Selves to exist; he makes us free to say: I can choose, put limits, and enjoy for a change.
- The first exploration of the Disowned Self is also liberating. Actually, it is not necessary to implement the last step (6) and make contact with a Disowned Sub-personality. If Petra learns to deal with her vulnerability, the Disowned Sub-personality will come alive almost naturally. In a subsequent session Petra can come into contact with the part of her that can enjoy and discover that if she can involve it more, the Critic has to work less hard!

At the very moment that we separate ourselves from our Sub-personalities and we do not converge with them any longer, the Aware Ego is born.



Lessons for the facilitator

Although every session is different, the facilitator always uses the clear, underlying vision and structure of the method, that of the Psychology of Selves.

It goes without saying that the facilitator has first-hand experience of this working method and has counseled clients under supervision, before he will actually work with clients in a daily practice.

A facilitator can only give room to every voice in the client when he realizes that similar voices can be touched in himself. Sometimes we embrace these voices and recognize them, but at other times they refer to our own Disowned Selves. If we are not sufficiently aware of this, forms of transference may take place. In order to prevent this, a sound training and schooling in Voice Dialogue is a requisite, before starting work with what is offered in this article.

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