

Many Selves

by Bill Herbst

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Among the many illusions of bodily life ruled (or at least overseen) by an ego is the presumption that we are singular selves, that we are essentially one person, a unique identity, with continuity across all our different states of being. In this perspective, your “angry” self is the same as your “calm” self, your “hateful” self is the same as your “loving” self, and your “hungry” self is the same as your “satiated” self. What changes is your emotional state, but your central identity is permanent and unchanging.

I understand this orientation and am — to some extent — sympathetic to it. The idea of a single, multi-faceted self has much to recommend it as a unifying psychological overview. This is not, however, something that exists within the realm of “objective” truth. It’s not factual and cannot be “proven.” As a result, the notion of a singular, unified self can be reconsidered through different value lenses and for many different reasons. Among these is helpfulness, to cite just a single example. Are we always well-served to go with what our egos tell us, that we are one identity, and always the same?

I find it useful for myself to adopt a different perspective — to assume that I embody many different identities, almost like separate selves, although they may be related through various connections, like members of a family.

I see my identity as a podium with a microphone. And I imagine myself as having many different “ego selves” standing off to the side, each one wanting to come to the podium and present itself — its truth, its wisdom, its hopes and fears, its foolishness. Each self wants to tell its story. Who is the audience? Well, it’s certainly the external world of other people and circumstances, but, more importantly, the audience is also my own consciousness.

Each of my ego selves makes the same announcement upon taking its stand at the podium. *“Hello, I’m Bill — the one true Bill. All the other Bills here are just fakers, mere pretenders to the throne. I’m the one you should accept as ‘you.’”*

Now, when the audience is other people, whether or not they believe that assertion — that the identity speaking from the podium is “the one true Bill” — doesn’t actually matter much. Other people don’t seem to have trouble with the idea that there are many different “versions” of Bill.

For instance, when I'm doing a telephone session with a client, that person is paying money to interact with Bill the professional astrologer. That's the agreement, and my professional self is the one that goes to the podium. That's who I want to be during that experience. And yet, people often want more of me than that.

This comes up right at the beginning of the conversation. I press the green Call button on my iPhone, hear ringing in my earpiece, then the person picks up and says "Hello?" I say, "Hi. This is Bill Herbst." Almost invariably, the client responds by saying, "Hi. How are you?" This is where I get a little confused. From a professional context, the answer to that question is "Fine," because it's part of a two-stroke greeting, like a handshake — 1. How are you? 2. Fine. How I am *personally* is not part of the professional interaction.

However, my sessions are intimate experiences, and my saying "Fine" seems to me a bit impersonal and slightly off-putting. So, I may hem and haw a little and respond by saying, "Well, the appropriate answer is 'Fine,' but the real answer is more complicated." Especially if the client is someone with whom I've worked in the past, but even if it's a first session with a new client, the person almost always replies to that with, "No, I really want to know. How are you?"

This initial exchange leads to a couple minutes of me attempting to boil down my complicated life to somehow fit the context of limited time and energy in the conversation. What should I tell the person? How much? I struggle through this in almost every session. Why do I even allow it? Because it humanizes me and puts us on a more equal footing right from the get-go, and that's part of my approach to the work.

After a few minutes — five at the most — I re-direct the conversation by returning my professional self to the podium and shifting back to our agreed purpose (having an in-depth conversation about the client's life, with the aid of astrology). I've done this for decades, so I'm confident about making the transition smoothly. Sometimes, I may even explain to my client that it's a relief for me to have 90 minutes or so where I don't have to deal with my own crap — my personal fears, private doubts, physical pain, or emotional suffering. Happily for me, people seem to get that.

At times, I watch as different ego-selves fight over who controls the microphone at the podium. Usually, this pits one of my selves that is upset or even terrified (about one thing or another) versus a self that's calmer and OK. I'd like to say that I have a vote in this, but the truth of my experience is that I'm mostly just an observer to the process.

I'm not suggesting that my terrified self is always bad or wrong, nor that the calm and OK self is always good or right. Sometimes that's obvious in a certain

situation, but often not, especially in the larger context beyond the moment. If I'm freaked out in fear or distress, it's helpful to calm down in order to make strategic or tactical decisions about what to do to address the problem. On the other hand, if the problem I'm struggling with is my eventual death or the possible end of the world through abrupt, catastrophic climate disruption or nuclear war, my calm and OK selves are not invariably the best vehicle. "Calm and OK" is sometimes dangerously close to denial. My preference, when possible, is to live closer to reality than to comforting illusion or pleasant fantasy.

That said, life in the world these days — in the third decade of the 21st century, with the constant madness swirling all around us — is enough to drive anyone right into the pit of despair. The sense of helplessness in our inability to save the world from disaster is often overwhelming. Too much hard, scary, and unpleasant reality is simply not good for the psyche or the spirit.

Gradually over the past two decades, in fits and starts, and especially over the past five or six years, I've come to believe that the collapse of civilization and an accompanying catastrophe for humanity are now unavoidable, and that both were probably inevitable. Maybe I'm wrong about all this, but I trust the research that brought me to that conclusion. I wouldn't use a world like "comfortable" with that awareness of doom, but I'm secure in the belief that I'm not crazy.

I've steered away from *Hopium* — that curious blend of Hope and Opium so prevalent in our country, namely, believing the wishful fantasies that if only we do ABC — electric cars, wind and solar power, whatever — we'll avert disaster and save civilization. Nope. Sorry. All the so-called "green solutions" on the table are just sideways moves. Besides that, it's already too late to stave off the coming catastrophe. Collapse is a done deal. Shoot, even if we completely stopped burning fossil fuels tomorrow, the end of the aerosol masking effect alone would do us in. So, all hope of averting disaster is false, just pissing into the wind. I feel very strongly that my decision to give up such false hopes is accurate and wise (although any invocation of "wisdom" in this context feels ironic and very risky).

Meanwhile, I sit on my couch and look out my living room window, and my neighborhood still appears normal. People walk their dogs, talk on their smart phones, and cut their grass. I have no clear sense nor a firm prediction for how long that normalcy will last. Many different systems, including astrology, tell me about shit that's coming down the pike sooner than later — both in my own life and for us all in collective humanity — but overwhelming disaster hasn't hit yet, at least not like a volcanic eruption. That's not to say that it won't, but it hasn't so far.

The question for me becomes, "OK, *what now?*"

I don't trust, like, or believe in the binary choices of despair or denial, fear or escapism, terror or distraction. Something about those seems far too simplistic and wrong-headed. Both Chicken-Little-sky-is-falling hysteria and Eat-Drink-and-be-Merry-for-tomorrow-we-die hedonism are untrustworthy as responses. Also, those either-or choices don't work well, since they lead almost inevitably to boomeranging from one extreme to the other. Surely there must be a third way, a more nuanced and graceful path through the travail. The problem I'm facing these days, though, is that the alternatives I see offered, even by people I respect, just don't cut it.

Love, compassion, and joy (wherever we find it) are all worthy intentions and positive disciplines. Sadness at our individual and collective predicaments seems completely warranted and correct. Maybe that's all there is to do, but it doesn't feel sufficient. Damn it, love and compassion are just not enough.

I've learned from hospice care that humans cannot really grieve "in advance." Even knowing full well that a death is imminent does not let us truly prepare for it, at least not emotionally. Some things must be experienced for real, in actual life, before we can deal with them. I wonder if that may be what's happening now in America and globally. Many of us are grappling with how to prepare for what's coming, and there's simply no way to do that effectively. I'm sorry, but the survivalist advice to stock up on guns and ammo won't fly for me.

I think about all the human beings who lived on this planet before I was born. I imagine that they had lives like mine, with similar hopes, dreams, desires, ambitions, fears, and doubts. Most of them, however, didn't worry about the end of the world. Oh sure, some people did, but those percentages were tiny. My generation (Baby Boomers) and those that have come since are literally the first human beings to come face-to-face with the real possibility of the world ending.

The beginning and end of the world have always been big in the realms of cultural myth and story-telling. They exist as fables, both dream-like and nightmarish. But what we're living through now isn't mythic. It's the real thing.

Even if human beings are the cause (and, yes, we are), I think the very idea of the end of the world is more than any of us can handle.