

Celeste

–

A child within a child

1

Uncovering dissociated child modes from infancy

- We are used to rescripting childhood scenes based on memories of middle childhood or adolescence.
- However early maladaptive schemas have their roots in very early experiences going back at least to infancy.
- These kinds of memories are much more difficult to access.
- But they can be accessed and we can work with them.
- I will illustrate this by taking you through a session of work with Celeste (38).

2

Demanding Parent or ...?

- Celeste (38) told me she had had a lot of therapy in the course of her life but she was still stuck in a powerful pattern that continued to put her in one unsatisfactory intimate relationship after another
- Despite being capable and active (in the corporate world) she was very unassertive with her romantic partners.
- There were prominent messages about what she "should" do - which sounded like a **Demanding Parent**.

3

... or Perfectionist Overcontroller?

- But demands can be **self-imposed** as part of a coping mode.
- Celeste was very perfectionistic.
- It was easy to see that Celeste's demanding voice was part of her **Perfectionist Overcontroller**.

4

And another overcompensator ...

- But her **Perfectionist Overcontroller** was not her only Overcompensator.
- Just as prominent was a mode in which she focused analytically on a problem and figured out how to fix it.
- This **Figure it out and Fix it** mode came across as mature and helpful, especially when she directed it at others.
- On the surface, Celeste's **Figure it out and Fix it** mode gave the impression of being caring and helpful - part of her **Healthy Adult**.
- But when in this mode she was completely disconnected from her emotions.

5

... or Protector Child?

- When I pointed out to Celeste that this was not the **Healthy Adult** it came as a surprise and a shock to her.
- But, as she took it in, she realized she had been coping like that since she was a little girl.
- We started to look at the developmental origins of the **Figure it out and Fix it** mode and the **Perfectionist Overcontroller** and began to uncover the **deep structure** of her mode system
- There were aspects of a **Protector Child** that went back to at least 4 years old.

6

Celeste's troubled start in life

- Celeste was born to a mother who had been depressed.
- When she was 2, her brother was born, and she felt "I had lost my mother."
- At age 3 her maternal grandfather, who was an important attachment figure, died suddenly on a visit to their home. We uncovered and worked with her unresolved grief for him.
- The situation was doubly painful for 3 year old Celeste because she also had to deal with a major change in the family.
- Her grandfather's domineering wife, her grandmother, came to live with them after that.

7

Behind her perfectionism ...

- There was a further upheaval when she was 6. They all left South Africa and went to live in Europe with this grandmother who was very punitive.
- When she came home from school her grandmother was only interested in whether she had been punished that day, not in whether she had received any stars for good performance.
- So there were many painful memories that little Celeste's **Protector Child** emerged to cope with.
- Now I am going to present some extracts from a session in which the way in which her coping patterns formed became clear.

8

What is the Protector Child protecting her from?

- Celeste started by describing some recent perfectionistic behaviour.
- She is living with her boyfriend because her own house has been flooded and he had been commenting on her obsessive tidying about the house.
- I ask her what would happen if she stopped this obsessive behaviour.
- Celeste comments "If I stop doing it, it will all end."
- We will find out what this means in a while.
- But meanwhile Celeste has found a way of preventing that catastrophe ...

9

Segment 0-1: 0m45s



- **Celeste:** It's the reverse of "It will all end." It's almost like I want to, want to make it so perfect that you couldn't face the possibility of not having it. So I don't want to move again; I feel like I've been homeless and I really would like to stay in his house rather than move to my own house.
- And if he, if I move to a bigger house I want him to come with me. So it's this whole thing of I-I, I want to make it impossible for him to back out because he, it's so unimaginably perfect... make it so perfect then you, you can't live without it. That's what it is.
- ... But then it becomes stifling and smothering.

10

- This is an interesting mode because
 - it has aspects of **Demanding Parent** in that it incorporates a lot of self-directed demands and shoulds.
 - It has features of **Overcompensation**. Her perfectionistic behaviour gives the impression that she is organized and everything is under control. No one observing her will see the **Abandonment schema** hidden in her **Vulnerable Child**.
 - There is a strong **Surrender** component in that she is completely focused on meeting the needs of the other person and pleasing them so they won't leave her.
- Whatever we call it, Celeste can now see that the impact of this mode on her partner is to push him away because he feels smothered.

11

- Celeste can also see how this pattern goes back to childhood and particularly to the birth of her brother when she was 2.
- It was then that she learned to be the "good girl" who was really helpful to her mother.
- I ask, "If I please my mother, what will happen?"
- **Celeste:** It's like, if she sees how helpful I am and how good I am ... I suppose she'll want me to do it more, she'll want me to help, she'll want me to be involved more.



Segment 00: m13s

12



- In his account of the theoretical principles of Emotion Focused Therapy, Leslie Greenberg introduced the idea of “marker guided” interventions.

- This means that the therapist is on the lookout for markers that point to a therapy task that needs to be addressed.
- For me, a coping mode is a marker that tells me to look for what is being coped with.
- So at this point I start to focus on what this “Being helpful” mode is protecting her from.
- Celeste had recently visited her mother who had commented on her behaviour as a little girl ...

13



Segment 0: 1m42s

- **Celeste:** You were very practical. You weren't unkind, you were just very practical that 'the baby needs a new nappy, Mom.'
- And – that's what it is – it's practically making the house nice, it's constantly – if I give you practical stuff to ease the load or make it easier for you – that's what it is.
- **Dave:** Then what won't happen?
- **Celeste:** Then you'll want me here, you'll want me around more.
- **Dave:** And if you want me around more then what?
- **Celeste:** Well then you won't leave me out.

14

- **Dave:** Okay, let us get to that: 'leave me out'. .. This is about not being left out – you do all this stuff ... just find the ...
- **Celeste:** It must be very hurtful because it's hard to see. I can see the .. 'Mommy, the baby needs a nappy.' I can see that helping my Mom but I, to see the alternative, if I didn't do it is almost hidden from me, I can't ...
- **Dave:** Right, and just notice what you're doing with your head.
- **Celeste:** Hm. I'm turning away from it.

15

- **Dave:** But that's good, because you're getting close to it now; that you are actually really successfully avoiding this.
- Ya, ya, and you're turning your head away; you're doing all this stuff, your energy is all here – you don't have to look at it...
- ... Now just take a deep breath and just connect with your body ... and maybe think about straightening your head up so that you're more aware of what you're turning away from [pause cut] or aware of what you're avoiding.

16

The payoff of successful avoidance ...

- Celeste's **Helpful Perfectionistic coping** has been very successful.
- Provided that she can keep it up, she feels safe.
- She doesn't have to worry any more about what it's there to cope with.
- We have some information about what lies behind the coping – some kind of child experience of being left out – but apart from that it's completely outside of awareness.
- But now, as I invite her to look at what this avoided experience is she begins to connect with it ...

17

Segment 1-1: 0m51s



- **Celeste:** I can't tell you a subject; I can tell you that it's just dark and umm unknown, um.
- **Dave:** Yes; that's a good start ... Let's acknowledge now there's something dark and just sense what it is that you can allow yourself to know about it right now. It doesn't need any words more than you've given me; maybe images, a felt sense.
- **Celeste:** Mm, the sense that I don't know when the darkness will end, like mm that it might be endless but if you go in there then you could never, maybe you would never come out, you wouldn't know how to get out again. And then I flip into cognitive thinking about it ...

18...

Segment 1-2: 1m11s



Dave: Well, that is terrifying... That there might be some dark place that you would go into and it would swallow you up and you'd never come out of it again ...You'd want to avoid that, wouldn't you?

Celeste: But what goes along with it is that once you're there nobody even, like that I won't be looked for, that once you – it's almost like it's this space where you get erased, that if you ended up in there you're never going to come out but nobody would even know you, you didn't exist anymore.

Dave:Right, right, right. ... So it's not just abandonment, it's annihilation.

19

Celeste: Ja, that's like... yoh that's actually quite hard, like they wouldn't even know you were gone, they would just carry on as if you never even lived; that you'd never even been there to start with. That's why it's so important to make my mark so that if I do end up there then they look around and go, she, she was here.

Dave: Right.... So you've really connected with... this terrifying place that's driving so much of it.

Celeste: Mm. It's, it's not only the going away, it's that if I went they wouldn't even... I wouldn't have been.

20

An early attachment trauma

- What kind of a child mode is this?
- It's certainly in the domain of the **Vulnerable Child**.
- But it's much more specific than that: A sense of being left, an **Abandoned Child**.
- But the precariousness about her very existence adds a further dimension: An **Annihilated Child**.
- If we look at this kind of experience from an attachment perspective, it suggests a very early developmental stage, before the sense of self is established...
- ...a time when the child's very sense of existence depends on the attentiveness of an adult.
- Can we find out more?

21

Segment 1-3: 1m38s



Dave:.... Now as you feel this terrifying prospect, can you stand back a little bit as if we could talk to this part of you that has this terrifying thought that you might just be erased and then you'd never have been, no one would have seen anything about you...

I'm thinking you might like to ask this part of you a bit about herself and where she comes from, how she got there.

Celeste: Er, it feels like she doesn't know – she just appeared ... and it's almost like she's just appeared in the space and ... there's no like you were invited here or you just one day – like almost a time travel where you landed in their space.

22

Dave: Mm, So does she know when she appeared on the timeline of your life?

Celeste: She looks about four, um, quite, er, ... not babyish, um, smart but not ... Ja, she's not, she's very bright and she's smart.

Dave: Right ... So this four-year-old that you can see is the one that's carrying this terror that she'll just be erased.

Celeste: Yeah. Sho!

- The annihilation trauma is completely dissociated and at this point it looks as if it belongs to the four year old.
- But the structure unfolds further when I ask her what she is in touch with now ...

23

Segment 2-1: 0m40s



Celeste: Just this overwhelming sense that I've got to leave a clue that I was here. .. Something, anything just so that they don't forget, that you don't disappear. ...

[Section cut here] It's like displacement, it's ... The people around you don't even know you're here but if you leave clues they might wake up or the others when they come looking for you might see that ... see that you were there; it's that sort of – I don't know if that makes any sense; when they come looking they'll see that you were here – because these ones are sleeping, they don't even know that you're there.

24

Further evidence for an very early attachment trauma

- This experience suggests an attachment trauma of a kind that would happen well before 4 years old.
- Celeste's comment that the people are sleeping, and that this puts her whole existence at stake is suggestive.
- I remind her of how her mother was depressed when she was born – "She was always sleeping," Celeste remarks.
- ... and of how what little care she was getting was gone when her brother was born. "I became invisible when he was born," Celeste responds.

25

An invitation to meet the Invisible Child

- At this stage in the session, my hypothesis is that the annihilation experience is from infancy. Her remark that her mother was "always asleep" is a clue here.
- So who is this four year old child that she sees?
- To help her connect ever more deeply to this displaced invisible part of herself, I invite her as her Adult self to look at this invisible child.
- I point out that she herself has turned away from her, not wanting to see her.

26

Segment 2-2: 1m55s

Dave: So would you look at this girl now ... and say: "I see you."

Celeste: I see you. ... Only she doesn't really want to be seen, ... she feels like I do want to be seen but you know what, whatever. ... Not defiant but ...

Dave: Mistrusting?

Celeste: Ya, like kind of Ya, I'm sure you see me but I've got things to do.

Dave: Ya, well, you've been looking away for all these years, why should she believe you now? But just get a sense of... really look at how isolated she's been, how terrified of being erased, how .. having nothing to hold onto.

27

Celeste: [Pause cut] There's a child in between that's saying: you know what? We figured it out. It's no problem, we don't need the ... , so I can't see the hurt child in between; I can just see the **Practical Child**. I can tell that behind the **Practical Child** there's somebody else but I can't see her.

Dave: Right. So you're seeing this four-year-old as the good girl who does all the stuff to keep the connection; right ...

But it's good to see her because you're just beginning to be aware of just how big this connecting through being good and helpful and creating nice experiences is.

28

Segment 2-3: 0m20s

Celeste: [Pause cut] It's almost as though she won't let me see the hurt child and the conversation that I'm having with her is that, well, you weren't there anyway, so, like I've done this so...

And what I want to say to her is: if I'd known you were there I wouldn't have left it up to you.

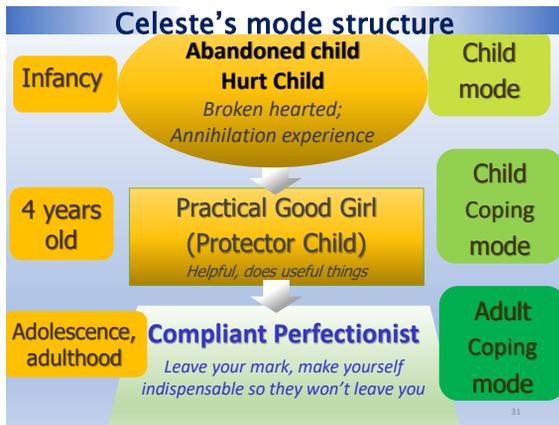
- So now the deep structure of Celeste's experience is emerging clearly.
- There is one Child **embedded** within another: a **Practical Child** who keeps attention away from a **Hurt Child** who is terrified of annihilation.
- I ask Celeste, as her Adult self, to look at the "Good Girl" and at what she is doing and why she is doing it.

29

Segment 3: 1m11s

- **Celeste:** It's a mask. And the more noise she's making the more I can see her heart's broken inside.
- **Dave:** Right. .. So now you know her heart's broken and you know she's terrified of being erased. You felt that today; and so just see if you can split that girl into two .. that the one with the broken heart who's terrified of being erased, just see her come out.
- **Celeste:** I can see her inside the middle of the **Practical Good Girl**....
... and it's, it's kind of funny because she doesn't... she's almost scared – the **Practical Good Girl** is scared of that thing that's inside.

30



After a while I say...

- "So we need to be able to get access to this child inside the **Practical Child** to say ... we're going to come and help you now ... and we're going to bring you the care that you never got ... or what you needed and still need."
- And quite a bit later I say, "Can you explain to her [the **Practical Child**] why this child whose inside her is so terrified of being erased?"

Segment 4: 1m12s



Celeste: Well, that little baby that you've got inside you, when she was born her Mom wasn't well and her Mom didn't know how to look after her - and so you kind of came along to look after her, but you were little too. ... And even though her Mom and Dad and everybody said they loved her, they didn't really know how to and she ended up feeling sad and alone.

And what I want to do is show her that she's not alone; that actually I can take care of both of you so that neither one of you is alone. And I need your help maybe a little bit, some of the time, to look after her because you're good at it.

33

Dave: Now just breathe into that. See what's happening, just let it in.

Celeste: What it, what it feels like to me is that - I mean if I came across two abandoned children I would never try and separate the older one from the little one because there's .. there's just, it's so much, its complex....

... In fact, God!- that's what I said to [Friend's name]

34

- The details of what she said to her friend are not important here.
- Just to note that the friend is also a mother and Celeste is talking about her approach to the relationship between her friend's two children which seems to mirror exactly her own internal world!
- Celeste then continues, looking at how she is going to reparent these two child parts of her.

35

Segment 5: 1m05s



Celeste: I feel like I can take the baby little bit by little bit, but not from her, but also grow the practical one to be not practical, to go and play and then she can come back and check that her baby is fine because she'll be worried... Until she learns and until the baby gets stronger then they can eventually play together and grow up. I don't know if that makes sense.

Dave: That sounds good, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Celeste: Because they're both damaged.

36

Dave: Right. But the four-year-old can't look after this baby, it's just absolutely too terrifying for her, and coping through being good. Ya, it's not what's needed.

Celeste: No, she needs to – No, she needs to go and play, even if it's for little pieces of time, and then she can keep coming back if she wants and checking on the baby to see that it's going alright.

Dave: Yes. ... So that seems like it should be like if a four-year-old is helping a competent mother then she doesn't have a lot of responsibility.

37

Setting up a corrective experience

- Celeste has a strong **Healthy Adult**.
- She has given a lot of attention to parenting her own child, now a teenager, in a manner that is quite different from how she was raised.
- She and her friend have together both been actively concerned about what it is to be a good parent.
- So now quite automatically, Celeste brings this perspective to bear on these two child parts of herself.
- It is as if she is rewriting the movie as she speaks setting up a new internal dispensation which will unfold in the future.

38

Following the process ...

- This is a healing process that has its own momentum.
- So the next step is to allow Celeste to focus again on what she is feeling.
- Only once she has checked in with what she is feeling now will the next step become clear.

39

Segment 6: 1m44s



Dave: So just come back to your body now and the sort of overall felt sense of this, how it's feeling in your heart.

Celeste: It's still feeling a little bit of like tight pressure, a little, but it's not heartbreak any more, it's like um .. a heaviness I guess. Umm...

Dave: Just breathe into that heaviness, just get a sense of what that's about in terms of what's happening there?

Celeste: I think that it's mmm just it's ... maybe a whole lot of compassion for ... for the little girl who had to end up taking care of the baby and ... it just doesn't seem necessary and it seems sad.

40

Dave: Right; so just spend a little time feeling that compassion for this four-year-old who was given this impossible task.

Celeste: It's quite an overwhelming feeling like to feel that – that a – ... I almost feel more sad for the four-year-old who almost had a double job; to take care of herself and the baby at once and that seems huge.

Dave: So just let that in; just let in what a terrible burden this was for this little child and how wonderful it will be that she can step out of that in due course and won't have to do it anymore.

Celeste: Ja. It feels um hopeful... lighter.

41

Segment 7: 3m22s



Celeste: Yes, I think I'm excited as well, a little bit. My heart's beating faster. Um, I'm quite excited to get to know the baby and to see it. It feels that she doesn't even have a face; I can't even see her face but I can see that she's the shape of a baby but I'm, I can't, she doesn't have a face or anything because she's been erased ... she's a silhouette of a baby. Um ... so I feel like I'm eager to get to know her and meet her and...

Dave: And how's the four-year-old doing?

Celeste: She's just waiting, not leaving, not staying, not going ... just ...

42

Dave: Is she holding your hand?

Celeste: No, she's just sitting there.

Dave: Would she like to?

Celeste: Okay, she does. In fact she actually wants to come sit on my lap. And then we can talk about babies and what they need and how to take care of her baby for her .. because it turns out she really doesn't even know.

Dave: No she doesn't. Four-year-olds are not meant to be mothers.

43

Celeste: No. Ja. ... Mm. And while she's sitting with me and I can point out the baby and you see what babies need, the baby starts to get a face and a blanket and become more real and so she and I can talk about, sit and point things out and ...

Almost like I'm showing her. Then I'm demonstrating as well, so I get to know the baby. Also I feel I need to tell her there's things that a Mom needs to do with children that sisters don't do; so there's going to be some of the jobs that I won't need her help for and, and that's, it's because it's a Mom job, not because she's bad at it.

44

Celeste: And then she wants to know, "What jobs?" And so I can just say to her, well, with time you'll see, I'll show you which are the Mom jobs and .. which are the sister jobs.

Dave: And just remind her that one of her jobs is to play.

Celeste: Mm. And that's what I want to say to her, sisters are so important and they're different from Moms ... and but they – the same important, the same level of importance and there's some jobs that are sister jobs that Moms can't do, like playing. She seems okay with that ... like it's okay to have a special job that only she can do but that it's not a huge...

45

Celeste: Um, and she doesn't feel like she's being fired or retrenched or something. ... She has a place, and that the baby does still need her ... and she needs the baby too, but it's not all her job.

Dave: That's very beautiful.

Celeste: Ya, that feels better. It does feel better.

Dave: Good. It's enough for today?

Celeste: Ya. Shew! ... It's quite amazing. Thank you.

46

Working with the deep structure of modes

- Celeste is a resourceful person with a strong **Healthy Adult** who
 - has a very good capacity for mindful attention and
 - has given a lot of attention to understanding the healing process.
- Many people cannot work as fast as this.
- But the process we have looked at here gives us a privileged window into the deep structure of the mode patterns that underlie her everyday experience and the way the process of schema healing can unfold.

47

- What started with what could have been seen as an **Unrelenting Standards** Schema and/or a **Demanding Parent** pressuring her to respond to lots of "shoulds" was an **Overcompensator** (but one with a strong **Surrender** aspect).
- This coping mode was however, also a kind of **Child Mode** – what I call a **Protector Child**. And which Celeste aptly called the **Practical Child**.
- The **Protector Child** needs help and eventually may need reparenting too.
- This takes a strong and well developed **Healthy Adult** that can take over the responsibility and allow the **Protector Child** to be a child again so she can grow up in a healthy way.

48

Redeploying resources from a discarded coping mode

- Celeste's comment that her **Practical Child** did not feel as if she has been "fired or retrenched" was insightful. It was also important feedback to me.
- The **Protector Child** is a part of the self. It is not an introject, a foreign body like a **Punitive Parent**, that can be sent away.
- It's role in the developmental process needs to be acknowledged and a way has to be found for the resources it carries to be reconfigured and redeployed.

49

Moving from surface structure to deep structure

- The initial mapping of EMSs and modes that we make during assessment for schema therapy provides a valuable starting place for guiding the work of therapy.
- However, as we use imagery and chairwork to identify and understand the different parts of the self...
- ... and as we look at each part as having a history and role to play...
- ... we are likely to find a more complex and richer deep structure emerging that calls for working in the kind of way illustrated here.

50