Part I

A Place to be Myselves:
Multiple Personalities and Their Home Pages

In 1992, the advent of the World Wide Web created a strange new real estate opportunity. Cyberspace - that elusive non-space held within computers - began attracting homesteaders by the thousands; and the attraction has steadily increased. Web sites, composed of "pages" of HTML (hyper-text markup language) codes, have become the new real estate, the way to "own" a piece of cyberspace. As with any property, there is a desire to customize and personalize web sites, which is indicated in the language shift: a "web" site becomes "my" site, and "web pages" become "home pages." Home pages are all about remaking a corner of cyberspace into a personal, welcoming, "home" on the Web. Perhaps this trend would be more understandable if it stayed within the confines of real estate metaphors; if the people building "home" pages were those who did not own their own 3D, or "real" world houses, or if the pages took on more of a house shape, but they don't. Across the Internet, one finds a broad spectrum of home page builders and as wide a variety of page designs as there are people. Which leads one to question; what are people doing, or rather, saying (since home pages are, in their most basic form, text documents), on the Web that they cannot do or say elsewhere? Some people have attempted to explain this by calling home pages "vanity pages," and insisting that the pages are just ego-displays before mass audiences. If one looks beyond the surface, beyond the mass of "this is me and my dog" type pages, however, one finds something else entirely; pages created to help or explain, to offer support or advice, to tell the shameful secrets of life.

This depth of intent is especially true in the case of those who are survivors of abuse, particularly those with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), as it is commonly known, or Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), as it is now officially called by mental health professionals. DID is a coping mechanism for survival of severe childhood trauma or abuse. Dissociating, or compartmentalizing, the memories of abuse results in the creation of "alter personalities" who carry the memories separately from the "host" personality who carries on with day-to-day life. Those with DID (who often refer to themselves as "multiple" or "multi"), have views of Self and Identity which are necessarily quite distinct from that of the general populace. Personal home pages are an opportunity for people suffering under the social stigma of "mental illness," particularly that of DID/MPD, to explore their identities without fear of face-to-face social repercussions. Over and over, one sees sites belonging to multiples labeled by their creators as "safe spaces" and places where they are "free to be. . . ." For multiples, at least, the World Wide Web seems to be a safe and liberating "place." Among the many reasons listed by multiples for building a home page are: self-expression; as part of a "healing journey;" as a service and/or outreach; and as a record of their thoughts, opinions, and development. These issues were explored through an online survey, the results of which will contribute to this essay.

Multiple Personality Disorder was first diagnosed in the 1950's, at which time it was considered extremely rare. Professionals believed there might be one or two cases in the entire world. Since then, however, the number of diagnosed cases has been increasing rapidly[1], particularly since the recognition and definition of MPD as a coping mechanism of dissociation rather than of repression. For example, while repression modifies memories so that they fit into a person's history, dissociation, on the other hand, is "disconnecting" from the memory. The events come back suddenly, in "flashbacks," often accompanied by a sense of "this didn't happen to me." This is because the survivor of the abuse disconnected from the memories to such an extent as to completely isolate them, and sometimes to create alternate personalities (or alters) to carry them. Often, the part that is split off remains the age that the body was at the time of the abuse. These parts are commonly referred to as "child alters." Most multiples have a least one child alter. MPD was renamed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders:

Fourth Edition (*DSM-IV*) (1994: 487), as Dissociative Identity Disorder, the identifying symptoms of which are:

1) the presence of two or more distinct personality states;
2) at least two of the identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person's behavior;
3) inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness;
4) the disturbance is not due to physiological effects of a substance or a general medical condition.

Usually, there are more than two identities or personalities. Multiples often refer to their entire group of alters as their "system" of personalities, which can number as few as less than ten, or as many as over a hundred. The "presence of two or more distinct personality states" sharing the same body means that those with DID are living with what other people only play at in MUDs and chat rooms. As one survey respondent put it: "I am not anyone else in my body - the Self isn't about who's body you are in it's who you are inside. . . . Only you can define your Self and Self is constantly changing. . . . You can be anything you want on your home page." While others may play at it, multiples are literally exploring the reality of having multiple personalities online, and many of them are doing so through personal home pages.

There is a professional acknowledgment of the presence of multiples online, as evidenced by the existence of such sites as the *International Society for the Study of Dissociation (ISSD)* web site. Yet there seems to also be a professional incomprehension of why there are "suddenly" "so many" multiples online. As recently as July 1997, in fact, an editorial article at Mental Health Net questioned "The Prevalence of Multiples Online:"

Is DID really that prevalent online?? Does the online world somehow draw more people with DID to it? Is DID being diagnosed more often because of more accurate tests? What's going on here??
From our experiences, it seems clear that a little bit of everything is involved in the greater numbers of people who suffer from this disorder showing up online.

Mental Health Net is one of the leading online authorities on mental health issues. They award five star MHN award to other sites for excellence in mental health

issues and education. Even here, however, professionals are struggling to understand why multiples are online. The editor suggest the following reasons: because of "greater knowledge and education," for "information and support," and as an attempt to escape the "social fear" in the "real" world. It should not be surprising, however, to discover many multiples online. After all, the World Wide Web is touted as a place where you can "be anyone," so why wouldn't multiples want to make use of this freedom to explore their identities? This psychological phenomenon has been sadly neglected by sociologists in favor of studies on the ever-popular MUDs, which is part of the reason why I chose to focus my research on multiples and their home pages.

An important part of any home page's construction is the intent to share information. Among the survivor/multiple communities, this leads to a sharing of personal experience, links to other resources, and comments and opinions about the mental health system and the therapeutic process. This sharing aspect of home pages is what Thomas Erickson, in his essay "The World Wide Web as Social Hypertext" (1996:2)[2], referred to as "a new sort of search strategy." Mental health issues are simply not frequently discussed in the "real" world[3]. There are generally too many social stigmas surrounding mental illness for people to be able to use much "real" world networking to find information about DID. Online, on the other hand, once one finds a site about DID, one usually finds a list of links, and/or one of the increasingly popular "web rings." Web rings are chains of linked home pages on the same topic. There are at least a half a dozen such rings of MPD/DID sites, and many more for sites on survivor's issues in general. By "surfing" a web ring - following the links from page to page - one can find more information on DID in an afternoon than could be found in weeks of "real" world searching[4].

Home pages are not just a form of "portrayal management" as Erickson (1996:2) suggests. They are more than simply the Information Technology replacements for "cosmetics and clothing" (2) to which he compares them. Erickson (1996:3), argues further that "creating personal pages is not just an exercise in vanity publishing," but focuses mainly on the potentially negative aspects of web publishing for corporate and education professionals and students. For people like Erickson, a lot may depend on how the content of his home page is viewed. Strong opinions displayed on home pages may have a negative impact on current or future

employment, or they may spark angry retorts logged in a home page "guest book" or via e-mail. For the average person, however, this is not as much of a concern. One can, after all, delete guest book entries, delete or block e-mail messages, or delete the offensive page entirely. Despite the touted "permanence" of the World Wide Web, its elements are still potentially transient. What is there one day may be gone the next, simply by deleting or renaming a file, or by changing a link. It is not for this transience, however, that multiples are creating home pages. They are on the web to be seen, to tell the secrets they've been forced to hide in shame. As one respondent described it: "On our page we have started to tell our history. We are telling our story." Another said home pages provide "fulfillment of a need to stop the secrets and tell their story in a safe environment." It is as simple as that, and it is such a commonly expressed sentiment that has inspired web rings like Let the Truth Ring Out. Multiples' home pages are more than just "vanity" pages. They are resources and expressions of "selves" that are otherwise repressed and hidden.

One of the few sociologists who makes significant reference to MPD is Sherry Turkle. In chapter ten of her book Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (1996b), Turkle discusses MPD, and home pages, albeit the latter only briefly. Turkle's view (1996b: 258) is that assembling a home page is "the idiom for constructing a home identity" on the Web. She discusses the various items and links on a home page as being equivalent to the gifts and knick-knacks with which one decorates one's home. Despite her admission that "home pages on the Web are one recent and dramatic illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent" (259), she says very little about them, focusing instead on MUDs, and MUDders' experiences of identity.

Several of the points Turkle makes, outside of the context of home pages, are significant and applicable to this discussion of multiples and home pages. For example, Turkle (1996: 263) states that: "Virtual spaces may provide the safety for us to expose what is missing so that we can begin to accept ourselves as we are. We can use it [virtuality] as a space for growth." Turkle considers this only in the context of singletons[5] (non-multiples) exploring fluid identity, but this is one of the main reasons, as indicated by my survey results, why multiples are building home pages. It is not so much a case of "expos[ing] what is missing," but rather, allowing room for all the various aspects, or alters, to express themselves. A child

alter in one system described her home page this way: "I puts up what I likes to dos likes color an plays with me cputer an me kitties! I gots me profile page[6] at dhearts an that bees were I rites bout me" [sic]. This child alter shares an adult body of age 38[7]. Where, in the "real" world where the host personality holds a job and maintains a "normal" life, would this alter have a chance to express herself? Social expectations and norms are such that the host might very well lose her job if she happened to exhibit such childlike behavior frequently in the workplace. Yet it is generally accepted among the therapeutic community that *all* parts or alters need to be able to express themselves, as they understand themselves to be, in order to heal from the memories which caused them to become separate originally. This child alter's home page is an important outlet for self-expression, and because building a home page requires a certain amount of skill with HTML coding, it also becomes an opportunity for interaction and increased understanding between the host or other adult alters and the child alter they are assisting.

Home pages are also a way for alters to get to know each other. Some systems have alters who cannot communicate with other alters or in the "real" world because of the memories they carry. One respondent remarked on this possibility for home pages reducing isolation of parts: "some multiples have online personalities that don't "come out" in the real world too often. To these personalities, a personal home page is giving them the opportunity to create their world and have it look and act the way *they* want it to." There are really two or three issues intertwined here: freedom of expression, communication, and control of environment. The point is that home pages allow for exploration of all these things. Alters can learn about each other through reading the various pages each of them creates. Home pages are "growth spaces" for multiples.

Beyond personal growth, home pages can also be community outreach or service. This seems to be much more common among survivor and multiple communities than among the general populace. Turkle (1996b: 269), says "we work to know ourselves in order to improve not only our own lives, but those of our families and society." Judging by the survey responses, this idea of improving society, if only the cyber-society of multiples online, is very important to multiples.

"I also want it [my home page] to add something of value to the lives of the people who will be visiting."

"Somehow survivors have this inner need to find healing by helping others."

"I think [home pages] help people who visit to learn more about MPD/DID from people who are dealing with it in a warmer more comfortable way, rather than some mega corporation displaying info on a page."

"I think ideally, a personal home page should . . . provide a useful service to the online community."

As introspective as multiples home pages can be, they also look outward to the online community. Self-expression is important, reaching beyond self (or selves) to community and society is as well.

In Turkle's somewhat utopian discussion (1996b), this exploration of multiplicity online "encourages respect." She suggests (261-2) that:

A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. It makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others') inconsistent personae -- perhaps with humor, perhaps with irony. We do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit.

Ideally, this would be true, and perhaps Turkle believes it to be true within the limited context of multiplicity and MUDs. The ideal is not carrying over into the material world, however. Creating a home page is still generally viewed in one of two ways -- techno-geekish, or a way to impress friends and family -- even among the university student population. Either way, it still seems a "trendy" thing to do; to build a home page because "everyone" seems to be doing it[8]. Playing at multiple personalities online in MUDs and chat rooms does not make the veracity of MPD/DID any more accepted or discussed in the real world. Most sociologists' discussion of identity, including Turkle's, still take place through web based interaction, and usually via e-mail or e-lists. As much as Turkle might applaud the fluidity of identity for "normal" people, her view is still that MPD is an "extreme" (261). Her utopian views of respect and acceptance fall far short of reality. Multiples online are attempting to change that through their home pages, but society still has a long way to go before the boundary between "real" and "virtual" worlds can be erased and honest communication can travel between them. The reality of the Web still includes the fact that at some point, one must log-off and reengage in the "real" world.

There are problems inherent in the idealization of the Web and the freedom of home pages, some of which have already been discussed. The social stigmas of the "real" world are not yet being changed by people's activities online. Hatred and prejudice are also present on the Web. Multiples building home pages still have to consider the fact that anyone with an Internet capable computer could possibly view their site, and "anyone" includes perpetrators of abuse. Anonymous nicknames and page names do not eliminate harassment. Despite this, multiples generally view the Web and their home pages optimistically. Only two of the thirty-nine respondents to the survey expressed negative opinions of home pages. "I don't trust the Internet" was the reason one gave for not wanting to build a home page. The other said, "I don't want strangers knowing stuff about me unless I tell them personally." Neither respondent gave their name or email address, and both indicated that they were multiple. The majority of multiples online are still willing to trust the Web, to express themselves and even to try and give back to the online community, through their home pages. They are not ignorant of the potential risks of the Web; no multiple on a healing journey wants to be found by their abusers, or abused again by someone else. Yet the benefits of home pages exceed the risks for most multiples.

The vast frontier of web space is rapidly being colonized by personal home page builders, not just for vain or egotistical purposes, but also for networking, self-expression, communication, and community outreach. Multiples represent a significant portion of this online population. The *Divided Hearts* community alone easily numbers over one hundred regularly posting participants, many of whom have profile pages and/or full home pages[9]. I have illustrated many of the reasons why multiples build home pages, as well how they view other people's pages. These ideas of understanding multiples' and survivors' pages on the Web are also extendable to the singleton population. Home pages can be a creative outlet and a way for anyone to learn about the many facets of themselves which are never shown in the "real" world. Anyone who invests the time to make their home page reflect more than just their surface perception of themselves can reap the same rewards that multiples are finding online. Personal home pages can be an amazing resource and tool for the exploration of self and identity.

NOTES:

1. The Sidran Foundation says: "current research shows that DID (MPD) may affect 1% [1 in 100] of the population." From an online brochure on Dissociative Identity Disorder [12/16/98]
2. Erickson is a member of the Advanced Technology Group of Apple Computer Inc..
3. For an example of the perceived social stigmas surrounding mental illness, see the *Queen's Journal* Editorial, Nov. 3rd, 1998.
4. This view of home pages as resources was also borne out by my survey results, where 77% of respondents indicated that they found home pages "interesting" and "helpful," and 59% found them "inspiring."
5. "Singleton" and "monomind" are common nicknames among the multiple community for people with only one personality.
6. A "profile page" is a single, free, web page offered by the Divided Hearts (dhearts) Organization for those who regularly post in the ClubHouse message forums. . As of Dec. 18th, 1998, there were 98 profile pages listed.
7. Information about the host's age was provided when I inquired, via e-mail, if she would be willing to disclose it.
8. This is part of the attraction of web hosts like GeoCities (which boasts a homesteader population of 3 million), where you can build a home page in a few minutes by using one of their page-builders.
9. Twenty of the thirty-nine respondents to my survey are regularly posting members of the *dhearts* community.

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Survey Results

Overview:

I created the survey using a "form-mail reply" script available through www.susogi.net, a web host. The survey was located at the URL: http://www.susogi.net/Shaytar/survey1.html, and was available from November 2nd, 1998 through December 15th, 1998. The survey consisted of 16 questions, which were answered by a mixture of text, check box, and radio button methods. Invitations to take the survey were posted at five web-based MPD/DID forums: Divided Hearts, Healing Hopes, Mystical Children and Stone Roses, The Dandelion Dissociative Press Forum, and Transformations. It is only known for certain, however, that regular participants at three of the five forums responded, as there was no question on the survey which asked where they had heard about it. For reasons of privacy and anonymity, respondents were offered the option of supplying either their name and/or their email address, or neither. Of the thirty-nine respondents, only eight chose to remain completely anonymous. Most of those who included their email address also included their name. This indicates a general feeling of trust and safety among those who responded.

Demographics:

The breakdown of respondents' locations was as follows: thirty-six in the United States, two in the United Kingdoms, and one in Australia. Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated that they were survivors of abuse. Of that 77%, 61.5% indicated that they were also multiple. Only 10% of respondents were "singleton" (had only one personality). This represents a bias toward multiples in the survey results, but the intent of the survey was to ascertain multiples' opinions about home pages and identity. Following is a numeric breakdown of the results of **question 14**: "Are you: (please check as many as apply)," from which the survey demographics were obtained.

Survivor	30	Survivor and Singleton	2
Multiple	27	Confused	9
Survivor and Multiple	24	All of the above	3
Singleton	4	Maybe Multiple	2

Results:

The first question was simply, "do you have a home page?" Of the thirty-nine respondents, twenty-four answered yes, fifteen said no. Nine of the fourteen who said no also said that they would like to have a home page, but either had no time to make one, or felt they did not have enough information to put up an interesting page.

Following are the results of the radio button and check box style questions (#2/3, 5, 10, 12).

Question 2/3: "Do you consider Personal Home Pages to be "vanity" pages, as some people are now referring to them?"

ANSWER	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE %
Always	1	4
Often	1	4
Sometimes	11	39
Rarely	7	25
Never	4	14
No Opinion	4	14
TOTAL	28	100%

Twenty-eight of the thirty-nine respondents answered this question. Several of the eleven who did not answer gave responses like: "I don't understand the concept," or "I don't know what a "vanity" page is." These responses indicate that although most people are aware that home pages can be seen as egotistical or "vain," they do not consider all, nor even the majority, of home pages to be such.

Question Five was designed to further explore people's opinions of the purpose of home pages by asking them to choose as many attributes as they thought applicable from the following list.

Attribute	Number of Responses
Interesting	30
Inspiring	23
Helpful	30
Good only for their links	2
Good for "borrowing" graphics or ideas from	9
Displays of "ego" only	2
Other	7

Responses to "other" included: "amusing," "a great way for people to express themselves," "fun," "good info," "therapeutic," and "all of the above." The overwhelming response was that people considered home pages to be interesting, inspiring, and helpful.

Question Ten attempted to determine whether home pages were viewed as honest expressions of self and identity by asking whether respondents questioned the "truth that home page creators reveal about themselves."

Always	1	2.5%	Rarely	8	20.5%
Often	4	10%	Never	3	8%
Sometimes	15	38.5%	No Opinion	2	5%

Thirty-three of thirty-nine people (85%) answered this question. These responses indicate that people are not blindly accepting everything on the Web as truth, but they are willing to give home pages and their creators the benefit of the doubt.

Question Twelve investigated whether people view home pages as "a way of constructing collective and/or individual identity. Sixty-four percent (25 of 39) felt that they were. Five percent (2 of 39) said no, and the remaining 12 people (31%) did not answer the question.

Overall, these results indicate a general agreement with the thesis of this [essay](). Home pages are generally not seen as "vanity" pages. They are seen as "interesting, inspiring and helpful," and serve as tools of self-expression and community outreach. Multiples' and survivors' home pages are much more likely to express these elements than home pages of the general populace.

Personal home pages are an opportunity for people suffering under the social stigma of "mental illness," particularly that of DID/MPD, to explore their identities without fear of face-to-face social repercussions. Over and over, one sees sites belonging to multiples labeled by their creators as "safe spaces" and places where they are "free to be. . . ." For multiples, at least, the World Wide Web seems to be a safe and liberating "place." Among the many reasons listed by multiples for building a home page are: self-expression; as part of a "healing journey;" as a service and/or outreach; and as a record of their thoughts, opinions, and development. These ideas of understanding multiples' and survivors' pages on the Web are also extendable to the singleton population. Home pages can be a creative outlet and a way for anyone to learn about the many facets of themselves which are never shown in the "real" world. Anyone who invests the time to make their home page reflect more than just their surface perception of themselves can reap the same rewards that multiples are finding online. Personal home pages can be an amazing resource and tool for the exploration of self and identity.