FUGUE, DISSOCIATION, AND MULTIPLE PERSONALITY IN INCEST VICTIMS

Ron Romanik

University of New Mexico
Department of Psychiatry
Albuquerque, New Mexico

The following excerpts from a brochure written by an adult incest victim with multiple personality explain the flashbacks, low self-esteem, and interpersonal deficiencies which are the residue of her childhood sexual assault and which are intricately related to her.

"Sometimes . . . I remember I used to LIKE that mean person. I remember how that mean person TRICKED me. I keep seeing pictures of awful things. I just feel pain--inside and out. My bad behaviors are because I need something and can't say it. I need you not to touch me if I don't want you to.

I Need You to . . . Pretend it's happening to you. Remember I can't forget just because you want me to.

Please Remember . . . I get confused and angry about why you let this happen to me. I feel all alone. I don't know what I did that made this happen to me. I don't want to be BAD. Nothing makes sense in my world now except being SAFE."

This case report will briefly review the intersection of incest and multiple personality as described in the recent literature, and will present a case of documented dissociative phenomena that illustrates the abreaction of violent incest experiences under sodium amytal.

The definition of multiple personality chosen for this paper is the narrow one contained in DSM III. It states, "multiple
personality is the existence within the individual on one or more distinct personalities each of which is dominant at a particular time. Each personality is a fully integrated and complex unit with unique memories, behaviors, and social relationships, that determine the nature of the individual's actions when that personality is dominant. Other associated symptoms include depression, fugue, headache, amnesia, panic attack, depersonalization, and unexplained physical pain. Various theories have been proposed for the development of this state. Greaves' and Boor's review articles point to child abuse and a highly ambivalent environment as important ingredients since so many of the reported cases display these characteristics. Greaves also points out that torture and violent rape is a different experience from molestation by a stranger or classical patterns of coercive incest without overt violence.

Vicki Saltman and Robert Solomon emphasize multiple personality as a sequelae of incest on their 1982 report. The six cases in that paper further substantiate Rosenbaum's observation that of the 33 cases of multiple personality published between 1934 and 1978, there exists a high incidence of violent incest experience and traumatic sexual contact during childhood for these patients. Perpetrators were sociopathic, psychotic, alcoholic, or abusive in general.

At the 1983 annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, Frank Putnam reviewed the results of a detailed questionnaire he sent to many clinicians working with multiple personality patients. Of the 100 cases in the sample, 97 percent had traumatic childhoods; 83 percent were victims of sexual abuse; 75 percent were victims of physical abuse; 61 percent were severely neglected or abandoned and 41 percent were witnesses to extreme violence. The total number of types of childhood trauma correlated with the total number of personalities present and with the number of psychopathologic symptoms.

With this introduction, I will tell you about the patient, a 34-year-old divorced secretary named Arlene, who was self-referred to a walk-in mental health clinic with complaints of depression, hearing voices in her head, and amnesia. She had just been released from an inpatient unit after cutting her wrist in order to feel more "real." Other presenting symptoms included winding up in places without knowing how she got there, finding food in the refrigerator that she knew she hadn't purchased, and discovering clothing and hair grooming products that she couldn't remember buying. There was no memory for events that occurred before the age of nine. Previous psychiatric history revealed a suicide attempt and two three-month hospitalizations at 16. At that time, she described feeling that she was in someone else's body and that