

# Our Plural Selves: No Cause for Feeling Like a Fraud

Presented by Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., on October 26, 2017 | Hosted by the Wellesley Centers for Women

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*The following is the transcript from an October 2017 presentation given by Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. A recording of this presentation is archived at [wcwonline.org/video](http://wcwonline.org/video).*

Layli Maparyan: I'm Layli Maparyan, the Kathryn Stone Kaufman Class of '67 Executive Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women. And I am pleased to welcome you, all of you here, as well as those of you online, to this Wellesley Centers for Women lunchtime seminar. In Facebook COO's Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*, she writes that she first heard of imposter syndrome, the fear that we must not actually deserve any praise we receive, in a 1991 speech given by Dr. Peggy McIntosh. In the 1980s, Peggy, a senior research scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women and founder of the National SEED Project, began writing about the "Feeling Like a Fraud phenomenon" and she is still building on this scholarly work. Today, Peggy will discuss her newest paper, "Our Plural Selves: No Cause for Feelings of Fraudulence." Today, she will explain her two-part interpretation of fraudulence, a feeling she considers both deplorable and applaudable. "It is deplorable for any group or person to be made to feel that they don't belong, but it is applaudable for any group or person to recognize that they are surrounded by fraudulent forms of ranking and judging." This paradox is no more complex than our experiences in general. Peggy feels that holding both positions is part of the truth of our plural psyches. We do not have singular identities. We have plural identities and we should not be persuaded to formulate a simplified identity. Peggy McIntosh is widely known for her writings on issues of equity and privilege as they relate to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In addition to her work on fraudulence, her work on white privilege has gained widespread acclaim. Her groundbreaking 1989 paper, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," is one of the most cited works on the topic around the world. In addition to her work as senior research associate at WCW, Peggy is founder of the National SEED Project, which stands for Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity, which she co-directed with Emily Style for 30 years and she is a former associate director at the Centers. Now please hold your questions until the end of her remarks and join me in welcoming Dr. Peggy McIntosh.

PM:

So wouldn't it be wonderful if Layli were giving this lecture? I can hear you're all ready for 40 minutes of Layli. Thank you Layli for your crystal clear understanding of those original papers.

This is the fourth paper on Feeling Like A Fraud. For the first, I was angry when I heard women pulling their punches with regard to speaking in public at a big conference in Wisconsin on "Women in Education." It angered me that all these highly placed women who were presidents or deans or, in my case, directors of a project that seemed significant - they were apologizing and starting off with words like, as they took the mic they'd say something like, "you may not agree with this but,..." or "I just have one thing to say." or, one woman said, "I really don't know what I am talking about, but here goes." And I thought women will never make into the boardrooms of the United States if we can't stand at the podium and deliver the goods without hedging. And

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then I said, “Peggy, you work at a center for research on women. Supposedly we put women at the center. So ask a question: What are these women doing with their apologies? What are we doing with these hedging ways of speaking?” I thought, “Oh, there’s a reason to it.” If I say “you may not agree with this but,...” I am saying, “Liesl (a woman in the audience), I am not trying to persuade you. You are real. I am real. We can talk later. But my aim is not rhetorical to persuade you to my point of view.” Ah, I said, women are hedging their speech in order to strengthen the social fabric before it can be torn by rhetoric, the skill of persuading other people to believe in what you believe. So then I thought, okay, I should write about this change of heart, change of perspective. On the one hand, I understand that we’ve been pushed down many times and it’s good for us to get our act together. On the other hand, we’re really good at making the social fabric and we’re using a public speaking opportunity to do that and I love that. So which do I want to say? Both. You’ll hear much of both in this talk. There’s a wonderful thing I read recently by a woman who said, “If a woman had written Robert Frost’s Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood, it would go this way: Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I took both!”

For that first talk, I wasn’t sure I had a topic exactly so I sent an Interoffice Memo. TO: Jean Baker Miller. From: Peggy McIntosh. Subject: Do you ever feel like a fraud? Instantly I got back from her in the next reply - those were manual mail days so.. The next day I got Interoffice Memo. From: Jean Baker Miller. To: Peggy McIntosh. Subject: I feel like a fraud all the time. By the time this had occurred, this exchange, her work had already been translated into 19 languages and she was loved, loved, for her idea that there is no such thing as the self, there is only the self-in-relation. Nobody is self-made. I thought, well, I have a real topic then if Jean is feeling like a fraud and I perceive women even given the podium are feeling like frauds. There’s a wisdom to that. So I wanted to say, “We mustn’t let them make us feel like frauds.” Who is “them”? It’s any group that is making any other group or individual feeling that they don’t belong and that they are fraudulent. And then, I also wanted to say “How smart we were to see how artificial the podium and the mic are and how they elevate sum at the expense of others. So then I said I also want to say this “Let us continue to spot fraudulence in the public roles we are asked to play.” Like a person who knows what she is talking about! We were renouncing that role. So which did I mean? I decided I meant both. And for that I would have to make a Mobius strip. So to make a Mobius strip, you just twist once and put it back together. Now I can run my fingers over both exhortations without changing sides. It is the one sided Austrian Mathematician genius discovery of the Mobius strip.

Then the next time I decided I should write on feeling like a fraud, was to answer my question “What is it that allows me to know I am feeling fraudulent?” I decided there was a baseline, a baseline sense of self and when I departed from it, that’s when I felt fraudulent, especially rising up in public places. But I heard lots of enthusiasm for that topic. Many people said “I want to hear what makes you know that you are feeling fraudulent.” I couldn’t organize the talk. I just couldn’t write the outline. I couldn’t get it outlined. Finally I realized for me, the outline is itself a fraud. It’s a fraudulent form. Roman Numeral I, followed by a capital letter, and followed by, let’s say little numbers, and then other little numbers, and a place for everything and everything

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in its place. I felt that's a fraud for me. My genre, my mode of getting my thoughts together is to write a list. My genre is the list. As soon as I thought that, my second paper exploded into a picture of my house and I wrote it as a tour, taking people through the rooms of the house, and explaining what I felt about fraudulence in each of the rooms. You will not be surprised to hear looking at me that it was the kitchen where I felt least fraudulent and most accepted in my own home and the others carried pretense of some kind, necessary conventions. But the kitchen with the kitchen table was the place where I felt most at home.

The third one was on trying to come into better - come into conflict more comfortably. I felt like a fraud when coming into conflict because conflict seemed to me too simple. So the final paradox of that paper, the Mobius strip was, "On the one hand, I am not up to the fray. But on the other hand, the fray is not up to me." Fighting was too simple for the way I perceive the world.

Now, today, the fourth feeling like a fraud paper, I hope Jean would have liked this. I think her colleagues at the Stone Center are reaching for this direction and I will read some of their writings. What I now feel is, I'd like to take Jean Baker Miller's brilliant analysis of how there is no such thing as a self, there is only a self-in-relation, and turn it inward and say that, in my case, my psyche is composed of all that relational stuff right inside this one body.

Now, I made a Mobius strip that covers this one. I have to acknowledge that I am a soloist with regard to things like this: I get on the plane alone, I buy the ticket alone, I sit in the traffic jam alone, but inside my body there all these different connections, roiling around, making themselves felt. So, on the one hand, "I am singular" Physiologically, each of us, I think, is a unitary body. I am singular, but inside I have many selves. On the other side, "I am plural, with regard to psychology, sociology, and politics." And here politically, I mean with regard to anything connected with power. That's what I mean by politically. So once again, twist, and you've got a Mobius strip.

William James said that for him the value of an idea resided in how many different places it could take him. And I find that the idea of having plural selves takes me to many places. James himself was very plural. He wrote a book called *Our Pluralistic Universe*. And in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he described a whole lot of different ways of being in relation to what one thinks of the divine. So I take some of my cues from him. He entertained the idea of a pluralistic universe with plural selves which had many different ideas in them. And he was very fond of people who had trouble making up their mind. So I think he would like to have read this cartoon in which Lucy challenges Charlie Brown. She says, "Charlie Brown, You are wishy-washy." He says, "Why do you call me wishy-washy?" Lucy says, "You are standing on a cliff with your mother and your father. You have to push one of them off. Which do you push off? Which do you push off the cliff?" Charlie Brown hesitates. She says "Wishy-Washy!"

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Once in the National SEED Project which Emily Style and I co-directed for 30 years. Emily would you be so good as to stand up so people can see you? We created an exercise which was a mistake, but we didn't know it at the time. We were called on it by a member of the group who was preparing to lead a SEED Seminar in his school. We asked, so that they could trade views with each other, we asked all of the "white people" to line up on one side of the room and all of the "people of color" to line up on the other side of the room. Genetey Shin, Korean-American man, strode to the end of the two lines and said, "I refuse to repudiate my mother, who is white, or my father, who is Korean." You can imagine, we made a different sector for people who wanted to identify as bicultural, biracial, and we learned from that. We had been sort of pulling Charlie Brown on him - which side are you going to be on. He said I will not be split by that. He had a plural sense of self.

At Berea College, I met three African-American students. They felt that white students do not accept them as American. The white students were not embracing them as just as American as the white students were. So they were happy to go on an exchange to Ghana where they had high hopes of being embraced for their Africanness. It didn't work out that way. They told me they were deeply disappointed. The Ghanaians did not see them as connected with Africa. What was I to do? What my intuition told me was necessary that I was seeing them - that I must express I saw them as whole, each of them, as a whole person. So I told them, you are not a defective variant of anybody else. You are whole. You are complex. And you are the way of the future. You are the way of the future. Did that help? I don't know. But I wanted them to validate the pluralness of their selves and we parted on good terms, I know that. You never know when you are helping people, who are in trouble with their self image, whether you are doing any good. But I felt they had been persuaded by oversimplification of identity to feel that they were stateless persons, people without a country. I wanted to say that the country is you. You are complex. You are not a defective variant of anyone else. And you are the way of the future. I think Wellesley has made just wonderful strides in bringing in students who are likewise the way of the future who have complex identities and histories.

I once gave a talk at the University of Denver, in 1976, in which my department members, 30 of which were men, dared me, well, sicked on me the topic of "rugged individualism." The year was 200 years after our founding so it was 1976 and we were meant to be honoring the development of the United States. The English Department and American Studies, in which I taught, were asked to create a lecture series on major themes in American development. And these men, smirking, gave me the topic of "rugged individualism." They knew I would not be comfortable with this macho topic. On the other hand, my dissertation was on Emily Dickinson, and I feel she was a rugged individualist. So, I couldn't decide what to say. I then put 20 chairs in a semicircle on the stage of the auditorium. And I labelled each one with a part of myself. I labelled the central chair as "Central Self," but then one was "Mother of 7 and 9 year olds," one was "Reader of Field and Stream in the Dentist's Office," "Granddaughter of a Fundamentalist" - a Virginian woman who was brought up in a slave holding family. She was born just after Emancipation, but she was accustomed to former slaves still on the property, still working the

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tobacco fields. So I put down my twenty identities and I spent the whole hour of the lecture jumping back and forth from seat to seat, talking with other aspects of myself. At the end, one student said - these were the days when students talked to us by our first names- so this student said "I can't believe that Peggy has that many voices in her head" My darling colleague, John Livingston a historian, said "I can assure you that Peggy has that many different voices in her head and more." The other thing the students asked was "what was the 'Central Self'?" And I said and I say to you know because I still can't answer the question, "I'm not sure. You'll notice it didn't say much of anything. But it had a slightly bigger chair. I think of it, perhaps, as a mediator between the others that were arguing with each other and I think it corresponds to a meditative space that I always feel in my head. It's lateral, it crosses my forehead and it is a meditative space which has no words. I think that the Central Self is a little like that." Well, the students loved that talk. The way they like the Invisible Knapsack paper because it is short, they liked this because it was active. And I also think that they like the idea that I was giving them implicit permission as a faculty member for being plural in their minds, inconsistent.

Now why would I make a fool of myself jumping back and forth between chairs for a full hour. It is because I believed, even then in '76, at some level I believed the psyche is plural. And I will not simplify myself to come to an opinion about rugged individualism or even three opinions. No, 20 - all experience based. So I had begun, back then, to study my interior life as well as my relational self in the public world, I was studying the relations inside. We've all got them, I believe. Every student at Wellesley, every staff member, every person in this room has plural selves. If that is useful to you, good. If not, fine. I go with William James - it is good to stay with ideas that will carry you a great distance.

So another piece of this exploration of the interior complexities came when I read about the interview of the director of Admissions at Harvard, Bill Fitzsimmons. The interviewer was saying, "Mr. Fitzsimmons, what are the best qualities you are looking for in a student whom you will admit to Harvard? He said, "Well, I really can't say. It is very complicated. Everybody brings" - you can hear I am warming to this - "everybody brings a complex personality to the admissions process. And I can't say." Some might say that he was just hedging. But I don't think so. I think he was being entirely honest. Finally the interviewer said "Well, you've listed a lot of good things that make for a good student, so could you just pick ONE that is the attribute that makes the student most desirable for Harvard?" And he said "I can't pick just one." and then he said this lovely thing: "All good things are related to all good things." You could read it as evasion. But I read it as a deep philosophical comment - that picking favorites is very hard to do.

Why does this matter to the field of psychology? I know that in the schools I've attended and that my grandchildren attend, they're not seen as very complicated. The professors are allowed to see ourselves, the teachers are allowed to see ourselves as complex, but imagining that complexity in a child is quite rare. I think education would improve if the teachers did believe in our pluralness.

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My grandchild was 10 a year ago, and I said, "Tobias, it makes me angry that educational experts don't interview kids on their experience of school." So yes, he believed that, but he doesn't have to read educational literature, so he didn't know the truth of it. But I said, "Could I interview you for a few minutes on your experience of school?" He said, "Sure." So I said, "Could you talk for a few a minutes on your experience of school?" "Well," he said, "the food's no good. I like my friends. Now, about teachers, I'm gonna make a diagram for you. There are the mean teachers, then there are the nice teachers - they do a lot for kids, but they don't get us. And then," and he searched for words, "then there are the understanding teachers and they don't blame me." He's the most popular kid in the class, and a jokester. He's the class clown and I am sure he disrupts with his wit the class and he was saying that the understanding teacher, this rare, rare bird, doesn't blame him, can see that he is bored silly by most of the school day.

So a year later, recently I said to him, "Tobias, I have been telling people about your comments on school." And he said, "What are they saying?" So I said, "They think you are brilliant about the kind teachers who don't get you." "Well I've been thinking about it. I have something else to say. I have two categories of mean teachers now." He said, "There's somebody who is a good teacher, but mean. Then there's somebody who is just mean and they hate the school, and they hate the kids, and they hate the books, and they should retire!" Then, he said, "I have another category of nice teachers too." So he said, "The nice teachers do a lot for kids, but they don't get us. But I have found" - this actually cracked me up - "I have found, if you work with them, and you explain to them what is happening in the class, they can improve!" I said, "I love the way you are sorting. Keep sorting. Taxonomy! And you are relating to all these different folks, with your own ability to see plurally." I don't know what he is going to say at 12. But that's an example of plural consciousness in a child and I think it is quite wonderful that he is willing to give the benefit of the doubt to lots of clueless nice, white teachers who don't understand the politics of the classroom. And he's willing to help out if they can be helped.

So the kids are much more plural and complex than most teachers or professors think.

Does it help those of you who are professional psychologists to think of yourself as having plural aspects and your clients as having plural selves. I think maybe it takes the pressure off you as therapists if you're therapists - the pressure off you to help your clients come to a sense of identity. You are saying: I'm complicated, you're complicated. You need to choose when to deploy which one of yourselves, when to deploy one of yourselves, in order to survive, but you are more complicated than any skill you deploy.

For myself, I am not extrovert, I am not introvert. I am both. I am a skeptic and a believer. I'm sentimental and stubborn and knowing and ignorant and centered and unstable. That package is okay. I have the privilege of not being held to account for all of my stubborn mistakes or ignorances - that's part of white privilege - being allowed to be pretty eccentric without penalty from other whites. I am not talking about being Sybil the subject of Flora Schreiber's book on the schizophrenic who has 16 personalities. In the first edition of the book, her image was

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cracked. He face was filled with cracks. I am not talking about that. Sybil wasn't aware that she had all those selves in her. I am talking about becoming aware of the many selves in us, consciously - consciously plural. I heard a wonderful comment from a Latin American woman in a seminar on developing personality. She said, "At home, I wait on my husband. I make him his breakfast just as he likes it. I make sure his clothes are together and his briefcase is packed. I am his servant. But then I go to school and in the kindergarten, I AM A TYRANT!" That is a very candid explication of double roles and owning both. There was no resentment in the way she described waiting on her husband, but it was just really different from the way she described her tyrant self.

Nancy Mairs' obituary in the New York Times included a profound statement on the ambivalence of having two opposing feelings at the same time. She was dying and she knew it, and she wrote in 2016, "To view your life as blessed does not require you to deny your pain. It simply demands a more complicated vision, one in which a condition or event is not either good or bad, but is, rather, both good and bad, not sequentially, but simultaneously. In my experience, the more such ambivalences you can hold in your head, the better off you are, intellectually and emotionally." In my experience, the more such ambivalences you can hold in your head, the better off you are intellectually and emotionally. I thought that was very great as a description of the usefulness of conscious ambivalence. Unconscious ambivalence, which I also specialize in, results in all kinds of unfinished business, procrastination, apology, remorse, and so on. People feel apologetic about not being single-minded and clear and getting through the day's agenda without problems. I am not that person.

This talk takes off from Jean Baker Miller's work. And, as you might know, she said to her biographer, Christina Rabb, about her theory, "This changes everything." I believe that is right and what we do, if we take her whole relational paradigm and turn it inside, then all that richness that she was writing about is in all of us and manifests itself in a kind of complex living, that if you are lucky enough to be allowed it, opens many doors to insight. The psyche itself can be seen as plural and the phrase "I'm of two minds about something" is literally about two of yourselves. I think it is highly intelligent to be of two minds about lots of things, so I say good for Nancy Mairs, good for Jean Baker Miller.

Some of Jean Baker Miller's staff have already been going into ideas like these that I am presenting. For example, Jan Surrey quotes Carl Rogers on how a client in therapy, "discovers previously unknown parts of himself or herself" (1980). So if therapy can take you into chambers of the mind and heart that are unfamiliar to you, but are in there, that's a great gift. That was Jan Surrey, a one time Stone Center member, who was quoting the therapist Carl Rogers. She also has this great quote - I'm sorry. I'm straying from my topic here, but I like it that Carl Rogers said, he was coming off the Freudian: here's the couch. Here's the therapist with the notebook. The client is laid out on the couch, speaking without seeing anybody. Carl Rogers said, "No, good therapy is knee-to-knee with the client." Now you could read that sexually, but I'm sure he didn't

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mean it, I'm sure he didn't mean it that way. It was just chair-to-chair with the client. Blessings on Carl Rogers.

Then Jan Surrey writes of the capacity for open, evolving, not-closed psyches. Here are some of Jan Surrey's words: "flexibility, responsiveness, receptivity, creativity, activity, and change through connection. The connection can be with others, but can also be with inner parts of the self. We can mine that internal cast of characters for what they bring." I call themselves, talking.

Judith Jordan, also of the Stone Center, comes close to this when she writes about reconnection with "rejected aspects of ourselves - disavowed aspects of ourselves." There's a cast of characters in there, waiting to be tapped, waiting to be consulted on their life. She discussed self-empathy, self-empathy as "embracing more than before" of ourselves. I was pursuing that kind of line of thought in 1990 when I wrote "the multicultural globe is interior as well as exterior. The multicultural worlds are in us as well as around us. But early cultural conditioning trained each of us as children to shut off awareness of certain groups, voices, abilities, and inclinations, including the inclination to be with many kinds of children. So, continents we might have known were closed off or subordinated within us." I feel these lost continents can be found, inhabited, needn't be colonized, but can be learned from.

And Maureen Walker, of the Stone Center, referred to Starhawk's statement that there are prisons and battlefields within the self. I feel these too and I feel them as an authentic aspect of pluralness - prisons and battlefields within the self. There is a part of me that owned whiteness and several parts of me that resisted and still resist awakening to what it means to be white. It is more comforting to close the heart and seek comfort.

But in 1990, I posited that there is a kind of lobotomy in whites who choose the ignorant path. I wrote "I would guess that white oblivion about, and inculturated denial of, white privilege acts as a psychological prison system for us and it costs white people heavily in terms of preventing our human development. Walking obliviously through our own racial experience may perpetuate the imprisonment of the heart and the intelligence in a false law and order of tyrannizing denial about who, what, and where we are. So the societal systems out there of color and crime may reside also in our psyches as we have been trained to put them, but not to see them. And in those psyches of ours, the equivalent of bad race relations, or white supremacy, damages the civic health and balance of the soul."

Emily Style wrote about the liberal arts curriculum in a very inclusive and profound way when she said that all the liberal arts disciplines are assumed to be learnable by us. That is, plural propensities in us can be developed by curriculum that is liberal and varied and that is bolstered by distribution requirements that say, "Yes, in order to leave Wellesley, you do need to have done something to fill out that propensity in you to learn this or that thing you might think you should avoid. So Emily Style in her essay of 1988, "Curriculum As Window and Mirror," saw the curriculum as relating to a self-in-relation and quoted people who said we needed the liberal



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arts to make us into "well-rounded people" - that means we're potentially whole even though we haven't studied this or that.

Then Howard Gardener describes multiple intelligences - that fits with the theme of this paper. Brain research, like old fashioned phrenology, describes multiple regions of the brain with different and overlapping functions in each of us. I respect Margaret Mead's coaching of her daughter not to feel that she had to have a favorite color or a favorite book. She told her daughter, moreover, that one could be equally in love with two people at the same time. William James describes varieties of religious experience. John Dos Pasos describes the U.S. as an enormous mosaic. Wallace Stevens writes Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, all emanating from him. Fourteen lenses for seeing the blackbird. Walt Whitman stuffed all of his multiplying and encompassing poems into one huge poem - Leaves of Grass. In the course of which, he wrote, "Do I contradict myself? Then I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." Audre Lorde self-description is as "poet, warrior, woman, lesbian, black, activist, mother, sister." This is plural identity.

I will circle back to Freud and Jung. If you look at - they founded the field of psychology, however, if you look at the way they did it, they were plural from the start. Freud: Ego, Superego, Id. Jung: Four psychological types, endless number of archetypes that could come into your imagination and take it over, a theory of anima possession and animus possession in men and women respectively. These guys were pluralizing the idea of the self. So I'm just doing more of what they started.

Thank you.