



Non-Dominance: The Key to the Secret Self

No, it's not some kind of kinky sexual practice; instead, non-dominance is one of the hottest trends in psychotherapy today. It can uncover aspects of the self that have been buried for years. But are the secrets it's capable of uncovering sometimes better left hidden?

by Kanna Wermz

Olivia C. vividly remembers the moment of her latest “nervous breakthrough.” She was in her Saturday afternoon experiential art class. “The name of the class was ‘Honor the Artist Within: The Advanced Course,’” Olivia explains. “I had already completed the Beginner/Intermediate course, and that was tough enough. But this course was harder, not only technically more difficult but much more emotion-inducing.

“On the afternoon of my breakthrough I’d been participating in a Non-Dominant Extremity exercise and was in the process of drawing a picture of my family of origin, using a pencil held between the first two toes of my right foot. The drawing started out as a reasonably representative depiction of a perfectly normal, wholesomely dysfunctional family. It was my intention to put my whole family in the picture, with everyone playing their usual roles: the enablers, the disablers, the shamers, the blamers, the detachers, the codependents, the codeine-dependents, the pity-partiers, the stinkin’ thinkers, the people pleasers, the incesters, the incestees, the care-takers, the butchers, the bakers, the candlestick-makers, and the dog. But then suddenly the drawing took a bizarre turn.”

Here Olivia pauses, momentarily overcome by the memory. After gentle encouragement — a shoulder rub, an affirmation or two, an aromatherapy session — she continues. “Suddenly I realized the ‘family’ I was drawing was not that group of lovable misfits I spend every Thanksgiving with. In fact, they weren’t even *people*. They were primitive, hairy, apelike creatures. All at once I was overwhelmed by brutal images...visions of gang rapes, bloody battles...a life lived in trees...eating grass and leaves and grubs....My consciousness returned to the classroom and I

realized I was screaming, kicking my feet in all directions, trying desperately to throw down my pencil, but it was stuck between my toes....” Her voice trails off and the tears are coming in earnest now. After another affirmation, a mental clearing-and-releasing process, a modified high colonic, an application of a Bach flower remedy and a bite of a banana, she is ready to speak again.

That Saturday wasn’t the first time that seeking the “artist within” had led Olivia to terrible secrets. In the previous Artist Within course she had taken, the emphasis had been on the use of the non-dominant hand.

The Non-Dominant Hand craze began a few years ago, spawning more than just a hot trend in art classes; it gave rise to a whole new discipline in psychotherapy. The theory has it that using one’s non-dominant hand for drawing, writing, masturbating, etc. can bring out hidden aspects of the self. Very often, long-forgotten memories of childhood, or even of past lifetimes, are dredged up. Indeed, this seems to be the case with most subjects who practice non-dominance. Psychoneurologists differ in their opinions on why this is so, but generally speaking, it has to do with the left-brain / right-brain / back-brain trichotomy. In layperson’s terms, utilizing a hand one is not accustomed to using activates parts of the brain that may have been dormant, frequently giving rise to old memories.

In Olivia’s case, using her non-dominant left hand brought out horrible and long-suppressed memories of abuse at the hands of her Uncle J.P., a traveling ant-farm salesman who often stayed at her family’s home. “When everyone else was away, he would tie me to the couch and

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make me watch him eat ants," she recalls. "He would consume an entire ant farm at a time, saving the queen till last. And he always ate the queen with particular relish...Heinz Sweet Relish, I believe it was. There was a malevolent gleam in his eye as he finished her off."

The recall of her ant-eating uncle was terrifying enough, but Olivia chose to continue with the course. Further use of her left hand led her to the even more terrible realization that she was also a victim of Multiple Personality Disorder. She ended up writing a book about it, printing the entire work with her non-dominant hand. Those who have been able to decipher the work say it is shocking, powerful and heartfelt.

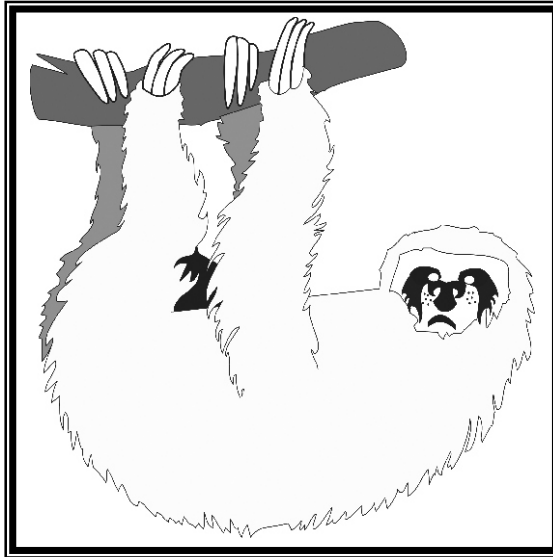
Most people who had been through the trauma Olivia had suffered would not have gone back for more. Almost certainly they would not have ventured back to the advanced Artist Within class. But Olivia intuitively felt that there was more self-discovery to be done. Having mastered the use of her non-dominant hand, she felt she needed to explore her other extremities. She did a lot of inner work to ready herself for the course; in spite of this, she was not entirely prepared for the simian memories she uncovered.

What happened to Olivia that day? We asked psychoneurologist Sarah Toanun, Ph.D., LCDC, BFD of the Houston Institute of Sci-olism. Dr. Toanun explains that Olivia's experience is not at all uncommon in people who participate in Non-dominant Extremities exercises. "What occurred," says Dr. Taonun, "is that use of the non-dominant extremity, in this case a foot, activated the Primate Brain, which in turn stirred up memories of a past life or lives as a so-called 'lower' primate: an ape or monkey. Using the foot to draw or write can open a floodgate of these primal memories. Some people access memories of lives as even less-advanced primates: lemurs, aye-ayes, bush babies, pottos and the like. Others experience recall of lifetimes as still 'lower' species...otters, bears, virtually any creature that uses its feet as 'hands.'"

Common as the non-human species recall experience may be, it can also be dangerous, Dr. Toanun warns. "Many people are horribly traumatized by seeing themselves as something other than human," she explains. "A person with an already fragile sense of self can be devastated by seeing themselves as a tree sloth. And then

the question remains: what does a person do with these memories? How can the images be integrated into one's life in a constructive manner? I strongly feel that all Non-Dominance exercises should either take place only in a therapy context, or at the very least, all art and writing classes utilizing Non-Dominance techniques should be taught only by licensed therapists."

The emotional danger to the person reliving the memories is only the half of it, Dr. Toanun adds. Others around the person could be placed in physical peril. "Think of Olivia and her experience in that art class. What if her pencil *hadn't* gotten stuck between her toes? With all of Olivia's kicking and flailing around, that pencil could have been transformed into a dangerous projectile. It could have put somebody's eye out. It could have given someone lead poisoning. The personal injury attorneys would have a field day with this."



Caveats aside, the Non-Dominance industry seems poised to grow. The concept has really taken hold with baby boomers, and classes, seminars, meetings, support groups and trade associations are springing up all over the country to meet the need. The marketplace has been flooded by a host of books, experiential workbooks and trade journals. All four major television networks have announced plans for movies-of-the-week on the subject. Non-Dominance is *hot*.

The trend hasn't stopped with humans either. More and more Companion-Animal Therapists are working with cats, dogs and other species in Non-Dominant Paw, Hoof or Claw development. So far, the results seem to parallel those seen in human subjects, and according to some animal therapists, this has opened up yet another "Pandora's Barks." Animals can suffer just as intensely as humans from sudden recollection of past traumas, believes renowned animal and plant psychic Petti Banter. Is it fair to subject our furred and feathered friends to a devastating experience they may be ill-equipped to handle? Banter thinks not.

The bottom line on Non-Dominance, says Dr. Toanun, is that it is a valuable tool in the right hands. But placed in non-credentialed hands or feet, that tool becomes a dangerous weapon. She advises anyone considering the Non-Dominance experience to seek out a licensed therapist who is fully certified in Non-Dominance Therapy. "This is your life we're talking about," she says. "And it's simply not worth devastating your life just to be able to pen the Book of Kells with your left hand, or to paint the Sistine Chapel with your foot." ■