

## **BOOK REVIEW: *Myself and the Other Fellow: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson***

### **Jekyll and Hyde Revisited ....**

For years the analogy of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde has been used to describe the experience of alcoholism. All addicts know that experience of themselves as good human beings with values and commitments. Then it is as if another person comes and takes over, and in sheer willfulness destroys what the addict values the most. This compartmentalization creates incredible distress and erosion of the self because of the experience of powerlessness. It is this experience that is so difficult to explain to disbelieving families, public, media, and even scientific community. Early in my training it was pointed out that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote the story to illustrate the experience of alcoholism. It was a literary example of what clinically we called the addictive personality shift. In recovery circles, Ernie Larsen's phrase, "the addict who is driving your bus," comes to mind. In these days we understand better from neuroscience the notion of the hijacked brain and from trauma research the internal fragmentation so key to the addictive process.

When Stevenson wrote the book, it was in part out of the experience of losing a friend to a long bitter struggle with alcoholism. He actually wrote the book (64,000 words) in three days in what he later was to describe as part of an altered state coming from a dream. The book was an immediate best seller and precursor to what we now see as the detective solves mystery genre. This book, along with *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, placed Stevenson in the middle of 19th century literary circles along with Henry James, Mark Twain, and others.

While people know the story, few have read the book. In Jekyll's final notes, he describes his efforts to go without taking the potion which caused the change. His efforts to stop intensify as he lives with the fear of having done things for which he can be imprisoned. He realizes how dangerous his use of the potion is. He makes the classic promises that if he can just get past this crisis he will now stop. And, of course, he fails.

Those of us who work with sex addiction have heard many stories of how alcohol and sexual behavior would go together. Usually embedded in the story was the realization that the most compelling and the most dangerous was the sexual part when the addict "took over the bus." A careful reading of Jekyll's last letter reveals his description of "drinking and bestial avidity," yet by far the sexual part has larger significance for Jekyll.

His biographer, Claire Harman, had access to earlier versions of the manuscript and discloses that Stevenson muted “significantly the story’s sexual content.” Even watered down, Jekyll’s long final suicide note clearly sees sex as the major player in the scenario of Hyde and Jekyll.

Claire Harman’s book *Myself and the Other Fellow: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, is a well written biography which picks up the compartmentalization that typified Stevenson’s thinking throughout his life. For the clinician the book is a good read if you like literature and like to speculate about disassociation and creativity in a great man’s life. More importantly it is another example of how cultural metaphors sometimes are eloquent about clinical truths. Finally note how it has served as an example of how easy it was to point to the alcoholism and overlook the sex. It reminds one of that phrase out of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous which describes in part “some of us cried out for sex, never seeming to get enough.”