

CHAPTER ONE

We're All Multiple

We were all raised in what I'll call the mono-mind belief system—the idea that you have one mind, out of which different thoughts and emotions and impulses and urges emanate. That's the paradigm I believed in, too, until I kept encountering clients who taught me otherwise. Because the mono-mind view is so ubiquitous and assumed in our culture, we never really question the truth of it. I want to help you take a look—a second look—at who you really are. I'm going to invite you to try on this different paradigm of multiplicity that IFS espouses and consider the possibility that you and everybody else is a multiple personality. And that is a good thing.

I'm not suggesting that you have Multiple Personality Disorder (now called Dissociative Identity Disorder), but I do think that people with that diagnosis are not so different from everybody else. What are called *alters* in those people are the same as what I call *parts* in IFS, and they exist in all of us. The only difference is that people with Dissociative Identity Disorder suffered horrible abuse and their system of parts got blown apart more than most, so each part stands out in bolder relief and is more polarized and disconnected from the others.

In other words, all of us are born with many sub-minds that are constantly interacting inside of us. This is in general what we call *thinking*, because the parts are talking to each other and to you constantly about things you have to do or debating the best course of action, and so on. Remembering a time when you faced a dilemma, it's likely you heard one part saying, "Go for it!" and another saying, "Don't you dare!" Because we just consider that to be a matter of having conflicted thoughts, we don't pay attention to the inner players behind the debate. IFS helps you not only start to pay attention to them, but also become the active internal leader that your system of parts needs.

While it may sound creepy or crazy at first to think of yourself as a multiple personality, I hope to convince you that it's actually quite empowering. It's only disturbing because multiplicity has been pathologized in our culture. A person with separate autonomous personalities is viewed as sick or damaged, and the existence of their alters is considered simply the product of trauma—the fragmentation of their previously unitary mind. From the mono-mind point of view, our natural condition is a unitary mind. Unless, of course, trauma comes along and shatters it into pieces, like shards of a vase.

The mono-mind paradigm has caused us to fear our parts and view them as pathological. In our attempts to control what we consider to be disturbing thoughts and emotions, we just end up fighting, ignoring, disciplining, hiding, or feeling ashamed of those impulses that keep us from doing what we want to do in our lives. And then we shame ourselves for not being able to control them. In other words, we hate what gets in our way.

This approach makes sense if you view these inner obstacles as merely irrational thoughts or extreme emotions that come from your unitary mind. If you fear giving a presentation, for example, you might try to use willpower to override the fear or correct it with rational thoughts. If the fear persists, you might escalate your attempts to control by criticizing yourself for being a coward, numbing yourself into oblivion, or meditating to climb above it. And when none of those approaches work, you wind up adapting your life to the fear—avoiding situations where you have to speak in public, feeling like a failure, and wondering what's wrong with you. To make matters worse, you go to a therapist who gives you a diagnosis for your one, troubled mind.

The diagnosis makes you feel defective, your self-esteem drops, and your feelings of shame lead you to attempt to hide any flaws and present a perfect image to the world. Or maybe you just withdraw from relationships for fear that people will see behind your mask and will judge you for it. You identify with your weaknesses, assuming that who you really are is defective and that if other people saw the real you, they'd be repulsed.

"When people asked me if I was ready for my life to change, I don't think I really understood what they meant. It wasn't just that strangers would know who I was. It was this *other* thing that started to happen to me: when I looked in their eyes, sometimes, there was a little voice in my head wondering, *Would you still be so excited to meet me if you really knew who I was? If you knew all the things I have done? If you could see all my parts?*"

Queer Eye star Jonathan Van Ness¹

A Brief History

The mono-mind perspective, in combination with scientific and religious theories about how primitive human impulses are, created this backdrop of inner polarizations. One telling example comes from the influential Christian theologian John Calvin: "For our nature is not only utterly devoid of goodness, but so prolific in all kinds of evil, that it can never be idle . . . The whole man, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, is so deluged, as it were, that no part remains exempt from sin, and, therefore, everything which proceeds from him is imputed as sin."² This is known as the doctrine of *total depravity*, which insists that only through the grace of God can we escape our fate of eternal damnation. Mainstream Protestantism and Evangelicalism have carried some version of this doctrine for several hundred years, and the cultural impact has been widespread. With "Original Sin," Catholicism has its own version.

We can't blame this sort of thinking solely on religion, however. Generations of philosophers and politicians have asserted that primal impulses lurk just beneath the civilized veneer we present to the world. While Freud contributed important insights regarding the psyche, many of which are compatible with IFS, his drive theory was highly influential and pessimistic about human nature. It asserted that beneath the mind's surface lies selfish, aggressive, and pleasure-seeking instinctual forces that unconsciously organize our lives. Dutch historian Rutger Bregman summarizes these underlying assumptions about human nature here: "The doctrine that humans are innately selfish has a hallowed tradition in the Western canon. Great thinkers like Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Luther, Calvin, Burke, Bentham, Nietzsche, Freud, and America's Founding Fathers each had their own version of the veneer theory of civilization."³

Willpower and Shame

The emphasis on willpower and self-control permeates American culture. We think we should be able to discipline our primitive, impulsive, sinful minds through willpower. Countless self-help books tell us it's all a matter of boosting our ability to control ourselves and develop more discipline. The concept of willpower, too, has historical roots—namely in the Victorian Era with its Christian emphasis on resisting evil impulses. The idea of taking responsibility for oneself and not making excuses is as American as apple pie.

Sadly, our worship of willpower has been used by politicians and pundits to justify increasing levels of income disparity. We're taught that people are poor because they lack self-control and that rich people are wealthy because they have it, despite research to the contrary. Studies show, for example, that lower-income people become empowered and productive once they are given enough money to cover their basic survival needs.⁴ However, the very real fact—especially considering the economic effects of the current pandemic—is that the rug could be pulled out from under most of us at any moment, and that threat keeps the survivalist parts of us humming.

Because this willpower ethic has become internalized, we learn at an early age to shame and manhandle our unruly parts. We simply wrestle

them into submission. One part is recruited by this cultural imperative to become our inner drill sergeant and often becomes that nasty inner critic we love to hate. This is the voice that tries to shame us or attempts to outright get rid of parts of us that seem shame-worthy (the ones that give us nasty thoughts about people, for example, or keep us addicted to substances).

We often find that the harder we try to get rid of emotions and thoughts, the stronger they become. This is because parts, like people, fight back against being shamed or exiled. And if we do succeed in dominating them with punitive self-discipline, we then become tyrannized by the rigid, controlling inner drill sergeant. We might be disciplined, but we're not much fun. And because the exiled (bingeing, raging, hypersexual, etc.) parts will seize any momentary weakness to break out again and take over, we have to constantly be on guard against any people or situations that might trigger those parts.

Jonathan Van Ness tried and failed at drug rehab several times. "Growing up around so much 12-Step, and seeing so much abstinence preached in rehab and in church, I started to take on an idea that healing had to be all or nothing, which has really not been my truth. I was trying to untangle sexual abuse, drug abuse, and PTSD, and it was something that for me wasn't conducive to a never-ever-smoking-weed-again approach. . . . I don't believe that once an addict, always an addict. I don't believe that addiction is a disease that warrants a life sentence. . . . If you ever mess up or can't string a couple of months together without a slipup, you're not ruined."⁵

There are 12-Step approaches that aren't so locked in to the rigid beliefs that Van Ness encountered, and the groups can be a wonderful context for people to be vulnerable and receive support. Also, the 12-Step admonition to give everything up to a higher power can often help inner drill instructors lighten up or even surrender. The larger point I want to make here is that any approach that increases your inner drill sergeant's impulse to shame you into behaving (and make you feel like a failure if you can't) will do no better in

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internal families than it does in external ones in which parents adopt shaming tactics to control their children.

Don't think that this critique of willpower reveals that there's no room for inner discipline in IFS. Like children in external families, we each have parts that want things that aren't good for them or for the rest of the system. The difference here is that the Self says no to impulsive parts firmly but from a place of love and patience, in just the same way an ideal parent would. Additionally, in IFS, when parts do take over, we don't shame them. Instead, we get curious and use the part's impulse as a trailhead to find what is driving it that needs to be healed.

Parts Aren't Obstacles

The mono-mind paradigm can easily lead us to fear or hate ourselves because we believe we have only one mind (full of primitive or sinful aspects) that we can't control. We get tied up in knots as we desperately try to, and we generate brutal inner critics who attack us for our failings. As Van Ness notes, "I spent so much time pushing little Jack aside. Instead of nurturing him I tore him to pieces. . . . Learning to parent yourself, with soothing compassionate love . . . that's the key to being fulfilled."⁶

Since most psychotherapies and spiritual practices subscribe to this mono-mind view, their solutions often reinforce this approach by suggesting we should correct irrational beliefs or meditate them away, because those beliefs are seen as obstacles emanating from our one mind. Many approaches to meditation, for example, view thoughts as pests and the ego as a hindrance or annoyance, and practitioners are given instructions to either ignore or transcend them.

In some Hindu traditions, the ego is viewed as working for the god Maya, whose goal is to keep us striving for material things or hedonistic pleasures. She is considered the enemy—a temptress much like the Christian Satan—who keeps us attached to the external world of illusion.

Buddhist teachings use the term *monkey mind* to describe how our thoughts jump around in our consciousness like an agitated monkey. As

Ralph De La Rosa notes in *The Monkey Is the Messenger*, "Is it any wonder that the monkey mind is the scourge of meditators across the globe? For those trying to find respite in contemplative practice, thoughts are often regarded as an irritating nuisance, a primitive agitator sneaking in through the side door. . . . In meditation circles, some unintended consequences of the monkey metaphor prevail: that the thinking mind is a dirty, primitive, lower life form of no real value to us; it's just a bunch of garbage on repeat."⁷

De La Rosa is one of a number of recent authors who challenge the common practice in spirituality of vilifying the ego. Another is psychotherapist Matt Licata, who writes,

'The ego' is often spoken about as if it is some sort of self-existing thing that at times takes us over—some nasty, super unspiritual, ignorant little person living inside—and causes us to act in really unevolved ways creating unending messes in our lives and getting in the way of our progress on the path. It is something to be horribly ashamed of and the more spiritual we are the more we will strive to 'get rid of it,' transcend it, or enter into imaginary spiritual wars with it. If we look carefully, we may see that if the ego is anything, it is likely those very voices that are yelling at us to get rid of it.⁸

The collection of parts that these traditions call the ego are protectors who are simply trying to keep us safe and are reacting to and containing other parts that carry emotions and memories from past traumas that we have locked away inside.

Later we'll look more closely at some of the ways people practice spiritual bypassing—a phrase coined by John Welwood in the 1980s. Jeff Brown explores the phenomenon in depth in his film *Karmageddon*: "After my childhood, I needed the kinds of spirituality that would keep me from allowing the pain to surface. . . . I was confusing self-avoidance with enlightenment."⁹ In fact, one central message in the canonical story of the Buddha's awakening is that thoughts and desires are the primary obstacles to enlightenment. As he sat in meditation beneath the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha was assaulted by a

series of impulses and urges—lust, desire, fulfillment, regret, fear, insecurity, and so on—and it was only by ignoring or resisting them that he was able to attain enlightenment.

That being said, the ubiquitous, Buddhist-derived practices of mindfulness are a step in the right direction. They enable the practitioner to observe thoughts and emotions from a distance and from a place of acceptance rather than fighting or ignoring them. For me, that's a good first step. Mindfulness is not always pleasant, however. Researchers who interviewed experienced meditators found that substantial percentages of them had disturbing episodes that sometimes were long-lasting. The most common of those included emotions like fear, anxiety, paranoia, detachment, and reliving traumatic memories.¹⁰ From the IFS point of view, the quieting of the mind associated with mindfulness happens when the parts of us usually running our lives (our egos) relax, which then allows parts we have tried to bury (exiles) to ascend, bringing with them the emotions, beliefs, and memories they carry (burdens) that got them locked away in the first place. Most of the mindfulness approaches I'm familiar with subscribe to the mono-mind paradigm and, consequently, view such episodes as the temporary emergence of troubling thoughts and emotions rather than as hurting parts that need to be listened to and loved. Why would you want to converse with thoughts and emotions? They can't talk back, can they? Well, it turns out that they can. In fact, they have a lot of important things to tell us.

How I Came to Learn About Parts

I started out like everybody else thinking the mind is unitary and I trained as a family therapist for years (in fact, I have a PhD in the field). As family therapists, we didn't pay much attention to the mind at all. We thought the therapists who mucked around in that inner world were wasting their time, because we could change all that simply by changing external relationships.

The only problem was the approach didn't work. I did an outcome study with bulimic clients and discovered with alarm that they kept bingeing and purging, not realizing they'd been cured. When I asked them why, they started talking about these different parts of them. And they talked about

these parts as if they had a lot of autonomy—as if they could take over and make them do things they didn't want to do. At first, I was scared that I was looking at an outbreak of Multiple Personality Disorder, but then I started listening inside myself and I was shocked to find that I had parts too. In fact, some of mine were fairly extreme.

So I started getting curious. I asked the clients to describe their parts, which they were able to do in great detail. Not only that, but they depicted how these parts interacted with each other and had relationships. Some fought, some formed alliances, and some protected others. Over time, it dawned on me that I was learning about a kind of inner system, not unlike the “external” families I was working with. Hence the name: Internal Family Systems.

For example, clients would talk about an inner critic who, when they made a mistake, attacked them mercilessly. That attack would trigger a part that felt totally bereft, lonely, empty, and worthless. Experiencing that worthless part was so distressing that almost to the rescue would come the binge that would take clients out of their body and turn them into an unfeeling eating machine. Then the critic would attack them for the binge, which retriggered the worthlessness, and they found themselves caught in these terrible circles for days on end.

At first, I tried to get clients to relate to these parts in a way that would shut them out or get them to stop. For example, I suggested ignoring the critical part or arguing with it. This approach just made things worse, but I didn't know what else to do than encourage them to fight harder to win their inner battles.

I had one client who had a part that made her cut her wrists. Well, I couldn't stand for that. My client and I badgered the part in one session for a couple of hours until it agreed not to cut her wrists anymore. I left that session feeling drained, but satisfied that we had won the battle.

I opened the door to our next session and my client had a big gash across her face. I collapsed emotionally at that point and spontaneously said, “I give up, I can't beat you at this,” and the part shifted, too, and said, “I don't really want to beat you.” That was a turning point in the history of this work, because I moved out of that controlling place and took on a more curious approach: “Why do you do this to her?” The part proceeded to talk about

how it had needed to get my client out of her body when she was being abused and control the rage that would only result in more abuse. I shifted again and conveyed an appreciation for the heroic role it played in her life. The part broke into tears. Everyone had demonized it and tried to get rid of it. This was the first time it had the chance to tell its story.

I told the part that it made total sense that it had to do that to save the woman's life in the past, but why did it still have to cut her now? It spoke of having to protect other highly vulnerable parts of her and it had to control the rage that was still there. As it talked about all of that, it became clear to me that the cutting part wasn't living in the present. It seemed frozen in those abuse scenes and believed that my client was still a child and in grave danger, even though she wasn't anymore.

It began to dawn on me that maybe these parts aren't what they seem. Maybe, like children in dysfunctional families, they are forced out of their natural, valuable states into roles that sometimes can be destructive but are, they think, necessary to protect the person or the system they are in. So I started trying to help my clients listen to their troublesome parts rather than fight them, and was astounded to find that their parts all had similar stories to tell of how they had to take on protective roles at some point in the person's past—often roles that they hated but felt were needed to save the client.

When I asked these protective parts what they'd rather do if they trusted they didn't have to protect, they often wanted to do something opposite of the role they were in. Inner critics wanted to become cheerleaders or sage advisors, extreme caretakers wanted to help set boundaries, rageful parts wanted to help with discerning who was safe. It seemed that not only were parts not what they seemed, but also they each had qualities and resources to bring to the client's life that were not available while they were tied up in the protective roles.

Now, several decades and thousands of clients later (and thousands of therapists doing IFS around the world), I can safely say that this is true of parts. They can become quite extreme and do a lot of damage in a person's life, but there aren't any that are inherently bad. Even the ones that make bulimics binge or anorexics starve or make people want to kill themselves or murder people, even those parts when approached from this mindful place—this respectful, open,

curious place—will reveal the secret history of how they were forced into the role they're in and how they're stuck in that role, terrified that if they don't do it something dreadful will happen. And, that they're frozen in the past, during the traumatic times when they had to take on the role.

Let's pause here to explore the spiritual implications of this discovery. Basically, what I found is that love is the answer in the inner world, just as it is in the outer world. Listening to, embracing, and loving parts allows them to heal and transform as much as it does for people.

In Buddhist terms, IFS helps people become bodhisattvas of their psyches in the sense of helping each inner sentient being (part) become enlightened through compassion and love. Or, through a Christian lens, through IFS people wind up doing in the inner world what Jesus did in the outer—they go to inner exiles and enemies with love, heal them, and bring them home, just as he did with the lepers, the poor, and the outcasts.

The big conclusion here is that parts are not what they have been commonly thought to be. They're not cognitive adaptations or sinful impulses. Instead, parts are sacred, spiritual beings and they deserve to be treated as such.

Another theme we will be exploring in this book is how it's all parallel—how we relate in the inner world will be how we relate in the outer. If we can appreciate and have compassion for our parts, even for the ones we've considered to be enemies, we can do the same for people who resemble them. On the other hand, if we hate or disdain our parts, we'll do the same with anyone who reminds us of them.

**IFS helps
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Some discoveries I made about parts:

- Even the most destructive parts have protective intentions.
- Parts are often frozen in past traumas when their extreme roles were needed.
- When they trust it's safe to step out of their roles, they are highly valuable to the system.

Burdens

Here's another key discovery I stumbled on: parts carry extreme beliefs and emotions in or on their "bodies" that drive the way they feel and act.

The idea that parts have bodies that are separate and different from the person's body they are connected to may seem strange or preposterous at first. Let me interject here that I am simply reporting what I've learned over years of exploring this inner territory without judgment regarding the ontological reality of that data. If you ask your parts about their own bodies, I predict you'll get the same answers I'm covering here.

For a long time, I didn't know what to make of this discovery. Regardless, this is how parts describe themselves—that they have bodies and that their bodies contain emotions and beliefs that came into them and don't belong to them. Often, they can tell you the exact traumatic moment these emotions and beliefs came into or attached to them and they can tell you where they carry what seem to them to be these foreign objects in or on their bodies. "It's this tar on my arms" or "a fireball in my gut" or "a huge weight on my shoulders," for example. These foreign feelings or beliefs (sometimes described as energies) are what I call *burdens*. It turns out that burdens are powerful organizers of a part's experience and activity—almost in the same way that a virus organizes a computer.

It's important to note here that these burdens are the product of a person's direct experience—the sense of worthlessness that comes into a child when a parent abuses them; the terror that attaches to parts during a car accident; the belief that no one can be trusted that enters young parts when we are betrayed or abandoned as children. When we are young, we have little discernment regarding the validity of these emotions and beliefs and, consequently, they get lodged in the bodies of our young parts and become powerful (albeit unconscious) organizers of our lives thereafter. These we call *personal burdens*.

Some of the most powerful personal burdens are similar to what attachment theory pioneer John Bowlby called *internal working models*.¹¹ He saw them as maps you developed as a child of what to expect from your caretaker and the world in general, and then from subsequent close relationships. They also tell you things about your own level of goodness and how much you deserve love and support.

There is another class of burdens that are called *legacy burdens* because they did not come from your direct life experience. Instead, you inherited them from your parents, who got them from their parents, and so on. Or you absorbed them from your ethnic group or from the culture you currently live in. Legacy burdens can be equally if not more potent organizers of our lives, and because we've had them so long we marinate in them, so it's often harder to notice them than the personal burdens we took on from traumas. In this way, legacy burdens can be as prominent and unnoticed as water to a fish.

Parts Are Not Their Burdens

This distinction between parts and the burdens they carry is crucial because many of the world's problems are related to the error that most paradigms for understanding the mind make: to mistake the burden for the part that carries it.

It's common to believe that a person who gets high all the time is an addict who has an irresistible urge to use drugs. That belief leads to combatting that person's urge with opioid antagonists, with recovery programs that can have the effect of polarizing the addictive part, or with the will-power of the addict. If, on the other hand, you believe that the part that seeks drugs is protective and carries the burden of responsibility for keeping this person from severe emotional pain or even suicide, then you would treat the person very differently. You could instead help them get to know that part and honor it for its attempts to keep them going and negotiate permission to heal or change what it protects.

Then you would help the person heal by returning to the now liberated "addict" part and help it unburden all its fear and responsibility. *Unburdening* is another aspect of IFS that seems spiritual, because as soon as the burdens leave parts' bodies, parts immediately transform into their original, valuable states. It's as if a curse was lifted from an inner Sleeping Beauty, or ogre, or addict. The newly unburdened part almost universally says it feels much lighter and wants to play or rest, after which it finds a new role. The former addict part now wants to help you connect with people. The hypervigilant part becomes an advisor

It's as if each part is like a person with a true purpose.

on boundaries. The critic becomes an inner cheerleader, and so on. In other words, it's as if each part is like a person with a true purpose.

No Bad Parts

If the title of the book didn't trigger this question for you, I'll ask it directly now: What are we to do with parts that have committed terrible violence? What about those that have murdered or sexually abused people? Or parts that are determined to kill their person? How in the world can these be good parts in bad roles?

As I did IFS with clients it became increasingly clear that the burdens that drove their parts were rooted in early traumas, so in the late 1980s and early 1990s I came to specialize in the treatment of those who had suffered complex trauma and carried serious diagnoses like borderline personality disorder, chronic depression, and eating disorders. I also became interested in understanding and treating perpetrators of abuse because it became clear that healing one of them could potentially save many future victims in turn.

For seven years I consulted to Onarga Academy, a treatment center in Illinois for sex offenders. I had the opportunity to help those clients listen to the parts of them that had molested children, and over and over I heard the same story: While the offender was being abused as a child, one of their protector parts became desperate to protect them and took on the rageful or sexually violent energy of their perpetrator and used that energy to protect themselves from that abuser. From that point on, however, this protector part continued to carry that burden of the perpetrator's hatred and desire to dominate and punish vulnerability. The part also was frozen in time during the abuse.

Thus, the kick in molesting a child came from being able to hurt and have power over someone weak and innocent. These perpetrator parts would do the same thing in their psyches to their own vulnerable, childlike parts. This process—in which protectors in one generation take on the perpetrator burdens of their parents while they were being abused by those parents—is one way that legacy burdens are transferred.

As we healed their parts stuck in early abuse, their perpetrator parts unloaded their parents' violent or sexual energies and, like other parts, quickly transformed and took on valuable roles. During this period, I had the opportunity to work with other kinds of perpetrators (including murderers) with similar findings. I remembered that famous Will Rodgers saying, "I never met a man I didn't like," and I realized that I could say that about parts. I ultimately liked all of them—even the ones that had done heinous things.

Now, decades later, I've worked with countless clients (as have other IFS therapists around the world) and I believe it is safe to say that there are no bad parts. Spiritual traditions encourage us to have compassion for everyone. This aspect of IFS actually helps make that possible. IFS operates from the radically different assumption that each part—no matter how demonic seeming—has a secret, painful history to share of how it was forced into its role and came to carry burdens it doesn't like that continue to drive it. This also implies clear steps for helping these parts and the people they are in to heal and change. It brings hope to the hopeless.

The Self

In those early days of helping my clients listen to and form better relationships with their parts, I tried out a technique from Gestalt therapy involving multiple chairs. Basically, a client sits in one chair and talks to an empty chair across from them, and for IFS I had them imagine that the part they were talking to was in that empty chair. And because the parts got to speak, too, there was a lot of hopping back and forth, and to make it all work I ended up with an office full of chairs. I watched clients shift around the room, being their different parts, and it actually helped me learn a lot about the patterns among the parts. Then one insightful client suggested that moving from chair to chair might be unnecessary and that they could do the same work by just sitting in one seat. That method went fine for that particular client, and when I tried it out with others, they found they could do it that way too.

My main goal was to help my clients form better relationships with their parts. Some of the patterns I kept seeing with individuals were similar to what

I witnessed as a family therapist. For example, a bulimic kid would be speaking with their critical part and all of a sudden, they'd become angry at the critic and yell at it. In family therapy, let's say this client is a girl talking to her critical mother and she gets mad and shouts at her mother. In such cases, we're taught to look around the room and see if anyone is covertly siding with the girl against the mother—for example, the girl's father is signaling to her that he disagrees with the mother too. This is when I'd ask the father to step back out of the girl's line of vision, she'd slowly calm down, and things would go better with her conversation with her mother.

So I started using this "step back" technique with individuals. I'd have them ask other parts to step aside so that pairs of parts could really dig in and listen to each other. For example, I might say, "Could you find the one who's angry at the target part [in this case the critic] and just ask it to step back for a little while?" To my amazement, most clients said, "Okay, it did" without much hesitation, and when the part was off to the side like that, my clients would shift into an entirely different state. And then other parts would step in (a fearful part, for example) and the more of them that stepped back to allow the client to speak, the more mindful and curious the client would become. The simple

act of getting these other parts to open more space inside seemed to release someone who had curiosity but who was also calm and confident relative to the critic.

The Self is in everybody.

When my clients were in that place, the dialogue would go well. The critic would drop its guard and tell its secret history and the client would have compassion for it and we would learn about what it protected, and so on. Client after client, the same mindfully curious, calm, confident, and often even compassionate part would pop up out of the blue and that part seemed to know how to relate internally in a healing way. And when they were in that state, I'd ask clients, "Now, what part of you is that?" and they'd say, "That's not a part like these others, that's more myself" or "That's more my core" or "That's who I really am."

That's the part that I call the Self. And after thousands of hours doing this work, I can say with certainty that the Self is in everybody. Furthermore, the Self cannot be damaged, the Self doesn't have to

develop, and the Self possesses its own wisdom about how to heal internal as well as external relationships.

For me, this is the most significant discovery that I stumbled onto. This is what changes everything. The Self is just beneath the surface of our protective parts, such that when they open space for it, it comes forward spontaneously, often quite suddenly, and universally.

Your Turn

So that's my introduction to IFS. It makes a certain amount of conceptual sense to many people initially, but until you've actually experienced it, it's hard to fully get what I'm talking about. So now it's your turn. I'm going to invite you to try an exercise designed to give you a start on getting to know yourself in this different way.

Exercise: Getting to Know a Protector

Take a second and get comfortable. Set up like you would if you were going to meditate. If it helps you to take deep breaths, then do that.

Now I invite you to do a scan of your body and your mind, noting in particular any thoughts, emotions, sensations, or impulses that stand out. So far, it's not unlike mindfulness practice, where you're just noticing what's there and separating from it a little bit.

As you do that, see if one of those emotions, thoughts, sensations, or impulses is calling to you—seems to want your attention. If so, then try to focus on it exclusively for a minute and see if you can notice where it seems to be located in your body or around your body.

As you notice it, notice how *you* feel toward it. By that I mean, do you dislike it? Does it annoy you? Are you afraid of it? Do you want to get rid of it? Do you depend on it? So we're just noticing that you have a relationship with this thought, emotion, sensation, or impulse. If you feel anything besides a kind of openness or curiosity toward it, then ask

the parts of you that might not like it or are afraid of it or have any other extreme feeling about it to just relax inside and give you a little space to get to know it without an attitude.

If you can't get to that curious place, that's okay. You could spend the time talking to the parts of you that don't want to relax about their fears about letting you actually interact with the target emotion, thought, sensation, or impulse.

But if you can get into that mindfully curious place relative to the target, then it is safe to begin to interact with it. That might feel a bit odd to you at this point, but just give it a try. And by that, I mean as you focus on this emotion or impulse or thought or sensation and you notice it in this place in your body, ask it if there's something it wants you to know and then wait for an answer. Don't think of the answer, so any thinking parts can relax too. Just wait silently with your focus on that place in your body until an answer comes and if nothing comes, that's okay too.

If you get an answer, then as a follow-up you can ask what it's afraid would happen if it didn't do this inside of you. What's it afraid would happen if it didn't do what it does? And if it answers that question, then you probably learned something about how it's trying to protect you. If that's true, then see if it's possible to extend some appreciation to it for at least trying to keep you safe and see how it reacts to your appreciation. Then ask this part of you what it needs from you in the future.

When the time feels right, shift your focus back to the outside world and notice more of your surroundings, but also thank your parts for whatever they allowed you to do and let them know that this isn't their last chance to have a conversation with you, because you plan to get to know them even more.

I hope you were able to follow me in that journey and that you got some information. Sometimes what you learn can be quite surprising. And for me, these emotions, sensations, thoughts, impulses, and other things are

emanations from parts—they are what we call *trailheads*. This is because when you focus on one, it's as if you are starting out on a trail that will lead you to the part from which that thought, emotion, impulse, or sensation emanates. And, as you get to know that part, you will learn that it isn't just that thought, sensation, impulse, or emotion. Indeed, it will let you know that it has a whole range of feelings and thoughts, and it can tell you about the role it is in and why it does what it does. Then it will feel seen by you and you can honor it.

That's what I started to do with my clients in the early 1980s and an entirely new world opened up in the process of doing that. It reminded me of high school biology class when we looked in the microscope at a drop of pond water and were shocked to see all kinds of little paramecia, protozoa, and amoebas scurrying around in it. When we simply turn our attention inside, we find that what we thought were random thoughts and emotions comprise a buzzing inner community that has been interacting behind the scenes throughout our lives.

In this exercise you may have noticed that by simply focusing on one of your parts, you were separating (*unblending*) from it. In other words, suddenly there was a *you* who was observing and an *it* that was being observed. As I said in the introduction, you'll find this type of separation in mindfulness practices, and it's a great first step. Then you took the next step when you explored how you feel about it and noticed what other parts feel about it. When you feel angry or afraid of it, that wouldn't be the Self, but other parts that are still blended with the Self.

If you were able to get those parts to step back and open space, it's likely you felt a shift into more mindfulness. From my point of view, your Self was being accessed through that unblending. The simple act of getting other parts to open space brings the Self forward, and a lot of meditation works by simply getting you to that more spacious, emptier mind and enabling you to feel the sense of calm well-being that fills that space.

But instead of simply observing what most traditions think of as the ego or as mere ephemeral thoughts and emotions, in this process you turn

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toward what you're observing and begin a new relationship with it, one that involves a lot of curiosity. Ideally, you can continue to deepen the relationship, and parts really appreciate it when you do that. Usually, they've been operating by themselves in there without any adult supervision, and most of them are pretty young. When you finally turn around and give them some attention, it's like you're a parent who's been somewhat neglectful, but who's finally becoming more nurturing and interested in your children.

Exercise: Mapping Your Parts

Now I'm going to invite you to get to know a cluster of parts that have relationships with each other. To do that you'll need a pad of paper and a pencil or pen. Again, focus inside and think of another part—not the one you just worked with, but a different one that you'd like to start with this time. The trailhead could be any emotion, thought, belief, impulse, or sensation.

As you focus on this new part, find it in your body or on your body. And now, just stay focused on it until you get enough of a sense of it that you could represent it on the page in front of you. It doesn't have to be high art—any kind of image is good. It could even be a scribble. Just find a way to represent that part of you on a blank page. Stay focused on the part until you know how to represent it and then draw it.

After you've put that first part on the page, focus again on that same one in the same place in your body and just stay focused on it until you notice some kind of a shift and another trailhead—another part—emerges. And when that happens, focus on that second one, find it in your body, and stay with it until you can represent it on the page also.

After you've drawn that second one, go back to it again and stay with it until you notice yet another shift and another trailhead emerges. And then shift your focus to this new one, find it in your body, and stay with it until you can represent it on the page. Then, once again we'll go back to that third one, focus on it in that place in your body,

and just stay present to that until still another one comes forward. And then shift to that one, find it in your body, and stay with it until you can represent it.

You can repeat this process until you have a sense that you have mapped out one complete system inside you. When you feel you've done that, shift your focus back outside to your surroundings.

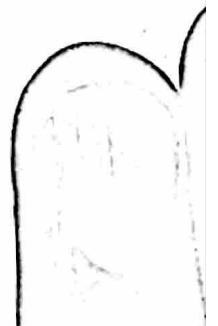
It's likely that what you found is one *clove of the garlic*, as we call it in IFS. You might be familiar with the onion analogy used in psychotherapy—you peel your layers off and you get to this core and then you heal that and you're done. Well, in IFS it's more like a garlic bulb. You have all these different cloves, each of which has a handful of different parts inside that are related to each other, and maybe are all stuck in one place in the past. As you work with one clove, you'll feel relief from the burdens it contained, but you may not have touched other cloves that revolved around other traumas. So this mapping exercise is designed to bring forth one of your cloves—one subsystem within you. Feel free to continue and map out other cloves.

Now I'd like you to hold your page a little bit away from you, so extend your arms with your pad of paper all the way out and look at these four or five parts you've represented with a little perspective. How do the parts relate to each other? Do some protect others? Do some fight with each other? Is there some kind of alliance in there? As you start to form some answers, make a note on your drawing to represent them.

Now I want you to look at the parts again and explore how you feel toward each of them. When you're done with that, think about what this system needs from you. Finally, take a second to focus inside again and just thank these parts for revealing themselves to you and let them know again that this isn't the last time you'll be talking to them. Then shift your focus back outside again.

I recommend this exercise for many contexts. For example, if you have a pressing issue in your life, go inside and map it out and some of the answers

will come to you—either about what decision to make or about what parts are making it so difficult. Mapping your parts is another way to separate from them, as well, because often we're quite blended with more than one.



CHAPTER TWO

Why Parts Blend

In IFS, we use the term *blended* to describe the phenomenon in which a part merges its perspective, emotion, beliefs, and impulses with your Self. When that happens, the qualities of your Self are obscured and seem to be replaced by those of the part. You might feel overwhelmed with fear, anger, or apathy. You might dissociate or become confused or have cravings. In other words, at least temporarily you become the part that has blended with you. You are the fearful young girl or the pouting little boy you once were.

Why do parts blend? Protective parts blend because they believe they have to manage situations in your life. They don't trust your Self to do it. For example, if your father hit you as a child and you weren't able to stop him, your parts lost trust in your Self's ability to protect the system and, instead, came to believe they have to do it. To make the parallel to external families, they become parentified inner children. That is, they carry the responsibility for protecting you despite the fact that, like external parentified children, they are not equipped to do so.

Parts often become extreme in their protective efforts and take over your system by blending. Some make you hypervigilant, others get you to

overreact angrily to perceived slights, others make you somewhat dissociative all the time or cause you to fully dissociate in the face of perceived threats. Some become the inner critics as they try to motivate you to look or perform better or try to shame you into not taking risks. Others make you take care of everyone around you and neglect yourself.

The list of common protector roles in traumatized systems could go on and on. The point here is that these symptoms and patterns are the activities of young, stressed-out parts that are often frozen in time during earlier traumas and believe that you are still quite young and powerless. They often believe that they must blend the way they do or something dreadful will happen (often, that you will die). Given where they are stuck in the past, it makes sense that they would believe this.

Some of us are blended with some parts most of the time and we are so used to it that we don't even think the beliefs we consequently hold are extreme. We just have a background sense that we are a fraud, that we shouldn't fully trust anyone, or that we have to work constantly to avoid becoming impoverished. We may not even be consciously aware of such beliefs—yet those burdens govern our lives and are never examined or questioned.

Other parts only blend when they are triggered—someone rejects us, and suddenly we are awash in shame; a driver cuts us off, and we're flooded with rage; we have to prepare for a presentation, and we have a panic attack.

We know that they're overreactions, but we have no real idea as to why we get so upset. And because we never ask inside, we just go around thinking of ourselves as touchy, angry, or anxious people.

**Like the sun,
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It's important to remember that regardless of how blended we are, the Self is still in there—it never goes away. In ancient times, when there was a solar eclipse and it suddenly got dark because the moon blocked the sun,

people would panic, believing the sun had disappeared. Like the sun, the Self can be temporarily obscured, but it never disappears. When the moon passes by or clouds dissipate, the sun shines as brightly as ever. Similarly, when parts unblend, the Self's nourishing energy is readily available again

and the parts are comforted to sense the presence of such a strong, loving inner leader.

Blended parts give us the projections, transferences, and other twisted views that are the bread and butter of psychotherapy. The Self's view is unfiltered by those distortions. When we're in Self, we see the pain that drives our enemies rather than only seeing their protective parts.

Your protectors only see the protectors of others. The clarity of Self gives you a kind of X-ray vision, so you see behind the other person's protectors to their vulnerability, and in turn your heart opens to them.

Self also senses the Self in everyone and, consequently, has a deep sense of connectedness, as well as a strong desire to connect to the Self of others. This sense of connectedness has a spiritual element to it that we'll explore later in this book—we feel connected to Spirit, the Tao, God, Brahman, to the Big Self. We feel that because we *are* connected to it.

When we blend with burdened parts, we lose all sense of this connectedness and feel separate from one another and from spirit—alone and lonely. Here is another parallel between inner and outer systems. After they are burdened, our parts feel lonely and disconnected from one another and from our Self. They don't realize they are all affected by what happens to each other and are loved by Self. Neither do we.

Thus, finding blended parts and helping them trust that it's safe to unblend is a crucial part of IFS. As you might have discovered in the mapping exercise, the simple act of noticing parts and representing them on a page often creates enough separation from them (enough unblending) that you can have a different perspective on them. Like the view of a city from thirty thousand feet, you can see more clearly the roles they take on and how they operate as a system. Once you're out of the trees, you can see the forest.

Not only can you see them better, it is easier to care about each of them when you are above, rather than in the middle of, their crossfires. When you unblend enough from the parts that hate your fear, for example, you suddenly see that it's not a bundle of irrational neuroses but a frightened little child-like part who needs to be comforted. You have compassion for

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only see the
protectors of
others.**

the little guy and want to hold rather than scold him. You find that holding parts actually works—you're no longer plagued by fear.

Many spiritual traditions stress the importance of loving, or at least having compassion for, yourself. IFS tells you precisely how to do that. For example, Kristin Neff and Chris Germer have brought a large and wonderful movement to the public called Mindful Self-Compassion, based on some Buddhist practices that are quite compatible with IFS. IFS makes such practices a little more concrete by helping you extend care and nurturance to specific parts that are suffering or are former enemies, and you can notice how they react.

Also, whereas some traditions teach that you have to build up the muscle of compassion with specific practices, with IFS, the Self is already buff with compassion. It merely needs to be released, not strengthened. Daily practices can be useful in helping parts trust that it is safe to release compassion, and that can be expedited by getting to know and addressing their fears about doing so.

In fact, most meditations can be seen as unblending practices. Whether you mindfully separate from thoughts and emotions by noticing them from a place of calm acceptance or by repeating a mantra that puts them to sleep, you are accessing the Self. As those meditations help you have more calm, confidence, clarity, compassion, courage, creativity, curiosity, and connectedness in your life (more on these eight Cs in a little bit), your parts come to trust your Self more to lead inside and out. IFS offers a particular approach to meditation that you can experience in the next exercise.

Exercise: Unblending and Embodying

This is a brief meditation that I do a version of each day, as do many people who follow the IFS path. I encourage you to try it out as a daily practice.

Get comfortable and, if it helps, take deep breaths. Then start by focusing on and checking in with whatever parts you are actively working with. To do that, see if you can find each of them in or around

your body and get curious about how they're doing. That is, ask each if there's anything it wants you to know or if it needs anything—like you might with a child that's in your care.

As you're getting to know it, at some point help it get to know you better—the you that's with it now—since most of the time these parts don't really know you. Instead, they've been interacting with other parts in there and they often believe that you are still a young child.

Often this is their first encounter with you—the you who's curious about them and cares about them. So let them know who you are, even how old you are, since they often think you're much younger. Let them know that they're not alone anymore and see how they react. You can ask, if you like, how old they thought you were. You can even ask them to turn around and look at you.

After you've checked in with the parts you've begun working with, you can open space and invite any other parts that need attention to come forward and just wait and see what trailheads—thoughts, emotions, sensations, impulses—emerge. In a similar way, get to know these new ones and help them get to know you.

This next piece is optional and may or may not happen. Revisit each of them one at a time and invite them to relax and open space inside, so you can be more in your body. If a part's willing to do that, you'll notice a palpable shift in your body or your mind toward more spaciousness and peace in that place where the part seems to reside. If that doesn't happen, don't despair, as they may not know you well enough yet to trust that it's safe to do that, and that's fine.

If they do separate, notice that more embodied, spacious sense of who you are and the qualities you feel when you're in that place. What's it like in your body and mind now? Notice that spaciousness, the sense of well-being and enoughness—that you are enough. Also notice the feeling like there's nothing to do right now and everything is okay. Some people spontaneously feel a vibrating energy running through their body, making their fingers and toes tingle. This is what some people call chi or kundalini or prana, but in IFS we call it Self energy.

I'm inviting you to get a felt sense of what it's like for you, your Self, to be more embodied. If you can become somatically familiar with this state, then you can notice when you're there and when you're not as you go through your day. Any departures from that state are usually due to the activity of parts that have blended to some degree and are giving you distracting thoughts, blocking the flow of energy, closing your heart, making you feel pressure in different places, et cetera. You can notice those activities and then reassure the parts doing them that they don't have to—that it's safe to unblend, at least for the duration of the meditation. Afterward they can jump back to attention if they really want to. I have found, however, that through this practice, parts gradually increase their trust that it is safe and beneficial to let the Self embody. They also trust that the Self is remembering and checking on them—that it's being a good inner parent. All of this Self-leadership helps them step out of their parentified roles and consider unburdening.

In the next minute or so, I invite you to shift your focus back outside. Before you come back, though, thank your parts either for letting you embody more or, if they didn't, for letting you know they were too afraid to do so just yet. Then come on back when it feels right.

The Four Basic Goals of IFS

1. Liberate parts from the roles they've been forced into, so they can be who they're designed to be.
2. Restore trust in the Self and Self-leadership.
3. Reharmonize the inner system.
4. Become more Self-led in your interactions with the world.

This kind of unblending doesn't have to be limited to twenty-minute sessions. It can become a life practice. As I go through my day, I notice how much I'm in my body—how much of my Self is present. I'll check my heart to see how open it is, feel whether my mind is also open or if I have a strong agenda or pressured thoughts, gauge the resonance of my voice when I talk, feel whether or not that vibrating Self energy is flowing, examine whether there is the physical tension in my forehead or weight on my shoulders (which is where my managers hang out), et cetera. These are some of my markers, and I encourage you to find your own.

After practicing many years, I can check those markers quickly and then ask any activated parts to relax, separate, and trust me to embody. Because my parts trust me now, most of the time I'll quickly notice changes in all those qualities and places in my body. There are a few circumstances where that is still a challenge, but that simply means that I still need to heal some parts that get triggered by those situations. When you can be present with your parts in the inner world this way, you can lead more of your life in the outer world from this place.

In this meditation, I had you tell your parts how old you really are. When I have people ask that question (i.e., "How old do you think I am?"), maybe 70 percent of the time the answer is in single digits. Often the number that comes back to you is the age you were when the part was forced out of its valuable state and into the role that it's in now. It's like once the part took on that role, it focused on the outside world and never looked back at you—it didn't notice that you grew. So, many parts believe they are still protecting you as a young child. In many cases, how old you are now is a big revelation to these parts—many don't believe it at first.

The goal of this updating process is for your parts to realize that they aren't the Lone Rangers they thought they were in there. Instead, as they come to trust you—your Self—as the inner leader, they are greatly relieved and can become who they are designed to be. They may grow a bit older or younger or stay the same age, but universally they transform into valuable roles.

More About Parts

Before we go any deeper into this work, I want to make sure I'm clear about what I'm calling parts. As I discussed earlier, parts are typically mistaken for the extreme roles they are in. As a consequence, we just end up fighting, shunning, or disparaging them.

There is a parallel with other people here. After being traumatized or repeatedly humiliated, people often behave in extreme ways—they have addictions, rage, or panic attacks, become narcissistic or obsessed. Our culture and psychiatric establishment usually respond to this with pathologizing and monolithic diagnoses. However, through the heroic efforts of Bessel van der Kolk and others—like Gabor Maté in the field of addictions—this tendency has begun to change, and we can see those extremes as the product of their traumatic or neglectful histories, from which they can be released. As I'll note repeatedly, neither parts nor people are inherently flawed or destructive.

We all have these parts. And they're all valuable until they become burdened and are forced into distorted roles by what happened early in our life.

IFS begins a process that allows them to totally transform back into their naturally valuable states. When that happens, not only does the part come out of its extreme role, but you now have access to its qualities and resources that you couldn't connect with before.

Parts are little inner beings who are trying their best to keep you safe.

It turns out that parts aren't afflictions and they aren't the ego. They're little inner beings who are trying their best to keep you safe and to keep each other safe and to keep it together in there. They have full-range personalities: each of them have different desires, different ages, different opinions, different talents, and different resources. Instead of just being annoyances or afflictions (which they can be while in their extreme roles) they are wonderful inner beings.

It's the natural state of the mind to have parts—they are not the product of trauma or of internalizing external voices or energies. It's just the way we're built, and that's good because all of our parts have valuable qualities and resources to give to us.

Thus, the angry part isn't a bundle of anger. If you listen to it with an open mind, you'll hear it has a lot to be angry about, but it also has fear and sadness and is just trying its best to keep you safe by being angry. Remember that parts have different desires, ages, emotions, and opinions, so they're like little inner people, and because most are quite young, they're more like inner children.

When you were young and experienced traumas or attachment injuries, you didn't have enough body or mind to protect yourself. Your Self couldn't protect your parts, so your parts lost trust in your Self as the inner leader. They may even have pushed your Self out of your body and took the hit themselves—they believed they had to take over and protect you and your other parts. But in trying to handle the emergency, they got stuck in that parentified place and carry intense burdens of responsibility and fear, like a parentified child in a family.

That's why it really helps them to realize that you're not that young age anymore. They stay stuck, however, not because they're not sure how old you are, but because they live in the past—frozen in time in the traumas that you experienced. That's why they still think they have to protect other parts who were hurt by those experiences, too, and are carrying the burdens—the extreme beliefs and emotions—from those times. They feel alone with all that pressure and terror. The simple act of turning your focus inside and beginning to listen and talk to them and let them know they aren't alone—because *you* are there to care for them—is quite radical and so welcome to that inner orphanage.

Five Things to Know About Parts

1. **Parts are innate.** Infant researchers like T. Berry Brazelton report that infants rotate through five or six states, one after the other.¹ Maybe those are the parts that are online when you're born and the others are dormant until the proper time in your development when they're needed and they kind of pop out. For example,

those of you who have kids might remember that evening when you put a compliant little two-year-old to bed and the same child woke up saying *no* to virtually everything the next morning. That assertive part debuted overnight. So it's the natural state of the mind to have parts.

2. **There aren't any bad ones.** As you get to know them, you'll learn their full range of personalities. Most are young—even the ones that dominate your life and can be quite intellectual. After parts unburden, they will manifest their true nature in valuable qualities (like delight, joy, sensitivity, empathy, wonderment, sexuality) and resources (like the ability to focus, clear discernment, problem-solving, passion for serving others or the world) that you have new access to and enrich your life.
3. **You often have to earn their trust.** The fact that they are burdened suggests that you didn't protect them in the past, and you may have locked them away or exploited them by depending on their extreme protective roles, so they usually have good reasons to not trust you. Like feral children, they need your love and nurturing, but they don't trust it at first because of their history with you. Sometimes it takes you showing up in Self repeatedly and apologizing to them to regain their trust. Fortunately, they aren't actually feral external children, so this trusting process often doesn't take more than a few visits.
4. **They can cause a lot of damage to your body and your life.** Because they're frozen in dreadful scenes in the past and carry burdens from those times, they will do whatever they need to do to get your attention when you won't listen: punish you or others, convince others to take care of them, sabotage your plans, or eliminate people in your life they see as a threat.

To do these things and more, they can exacerbate or give you physical symptoms or diseases, nightmares and strange dreams, emotional outbursts, and chronic emotional states. Indeed, most of the syndromes that make up the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* are simply descriptions of the different clusters of protectors that dominate people after they've been traumatized. When you think of those diagnoses that way, you feel a lot less defective and a lot more empowered to help those protectors out of those roles.

5. **They are very important and deserve to be taken seriously.** If you can establish a new, loving relationship with them and help them transform, they become wonderful companions, advisors, and playmates. You find yourself wanting to spend time with them and hear what ideas they have for you. Their conflicts don't bother you much anymore, because you know they are just parts and you can help them get along—you become a good inner parent when necessary. And it becomes a lovely life practice just to spend time with them.

Session One: Sam

I've included several transcripts of IFS sessions with clients in this book so you can get a better feel of how the work I'm describing plays out in real time. If it isn't clear, I'm the transcribed party referred to as Dick, or just D.

I teach every year at a beautiful retreat center near Big Sur, California, called Esalen. This past winter, Sam Stern (who was running their podcast at the time) asked me to do an interview with him, and he gamely agreed to let me demonstrate IFS on him. It was his first experience of IFS. If you'd like to listen to the interview, check out soundcloud.com/voices-of-esalen/dr-richard-schwartz-internal-family-systems.

DICK: So what would you like to work on?

SAM: Well, you have this piece in your work about a trailhead, taking note of an area that might be juicy or interesting to work with. I got bullied when I was in eighth grade, and the way I experienced it was that it was bad. Yeah, I took it inside myself. It felt like it shut down some pieces of me.

D: Beautiful. So do you want to focus on the pain of that? Or the shame, or do you want to focus on the part that shut you down?

S: That one—the shut down one.

D: So go ahead and find that part of you that's shut you down and see if you can find it in your body, around your body.

S: What am I looking for, Dick?

D: A numbing part maybe. . . . Here's a way to do it. As you think about going to that thirteen-year-old boy in there, what comes up in terms of fear?

S: I don't feel fear. I can see that boy and he's soft or weak and I don't feel connected to him.

D: How do you feel toward him as you see you there?

S: I don't want to be with him.

D: Okay, so focus on that feeling like you don't want to be with him and ask that part what it's afraid would happen if it let you be with him.

S: Um, it looks to me like he's scared he's gonna get physically beat. Yeah, almost like maybe afraid of me.

D: Okay, but how are you feeling toward him?

S: I want him to toughen up. He should just lash out and defend himself.

D: Right. Tell that part we understand why he'd want that, but we're going to ask him to give us the space to try and help this boy a different way and see if he'd be willing to step back and relax in there a little bit.

S: Do I actually say something to him?

D: You don't have to say it out loud, just inside, and see if you can sense that part receding or relaxing.

- S: Yes, that angry lashing out part would be willing to step back.
- D: As it does, how you feel toward the boy now?
- S: A bit closer. Like my brother.
- D: Yeah, good. Okay, so let him know that you're there to help and see how he reacts to that news.
- S: Yeah! He feels good. Almost like he's more filled with life, and he's kind of peppy and cool.
- D: That's great. Yeah. Okay, so ask him what he wants you to know about himself and just wait for the answer to come.
- S: I'm getting that he wants to be on the baseball team. Now it's like we're friends. Yeah, he's opening up, and it's like we could have a really fun time if he slept over.
- D: That's nice. Okay, Sam, then go ahead and ask him to really let you get a sense of what happened to him to make him feel bullied. Just wait for whatever he wants to give you in the way of emotion, sensations, or images.
- S: He's saying that he was surprised. He was betrayed. He thought it was all cool between him and the guy, you know like they were on the same side, and then all of a sudden, he's calling to say he's going to beat the shit out of him.
- D: Okay. Does that make sense to you, Sam, that that would feel terrible?
- S: Sure.
- D: Yeah. So let him know that you get that. And whatever else he wants to give you and what it was like for him.
- S: I've done so much thinking about this that I'm having trouble separating out my assumptions around it from my memories of it.
- D: Yeah. So we're going to ask the thinking part, the narrating part, to give us some space, too, just like we did the others, and see if that's possible. See if that thinking part would step out too.
- S: Okay, it did.
- D: Then go ahead and ask the thirteen-year-old again to really let you know what happened and how bad it was.

- S: Just the rejection. I feel like I was there, and then I pulled back from it.
- D: Yeah. So find the part that pulled you back.
- S: He's afraid I'll feel too much. It'll be embarrassing. I'll judge myself.
- D: Is he afraid of that original tough guy? He would beat you up for having cried? [*Sam agrees*] So we don't have to keep going if that's too scary, but let's ask that tough guy to go into a contained room in there for a while. Just tell him we'll talk to him afterward and let him out.
- S: He gets that.
- D: Okay. So now see if the part who came in to pull you away can let us go back. I promise if they really let you go all the way with this, we can heal this bullied guy so he's no longer stuck back there. He'll no longer feel bad and then they won't have to worry about him. They just need to give us the space.
- S: Well, the tough guy says he'll stay in the room. Says he's ready. He's going to give us the space.
- D: Okay. That's great. See if you can get back to that boy.
- S: I don't feel like I'm with the boy.
- D: So there's another part in the way. Just ask whoever is blocking what they're afraid would happen now if they let you be with him.
- S: Not getting anything—getting more like an empty space.
- D: All right. So let me talk to the part directly. Okay, so you there? Are you willing to talk to me?
- S: Yes.
- D: Okay, so you're the part of Sam that's blocking him from being with the boy now, is that right?
- S: Yes.
- D: And what are you afraid would happen if you let him go back to the boy and feel some of that?
- S: Connecting to that weak boy would soften up the whole person.
- D: And what would happen then if Sam was softer?
- S: I'd have to change this whole person that I spent so much time constructing. I run a tight ship is what I'm trying to say. Everything works the way I do it.

D: I got it. All right, well, we don't wanna screw everything up for you. On the other hand, I think some of why you have to keep the ship so tight, of how hard you have to work, is probably because this boy is in there and you're trying to keep Sam away from him.

S: That's true.

D: And what I'm offering is the possibility of not having to work so hard because the boy is going to be feeling good.

S: Okay, but if I wasn't here, then how am I going to help Sam achieve, do everything?

D: I get that. So we won't do it without your permission, but if you're willing, I promise we can do what I just said, and you'll be freed up to do something else.

S: Yeah, well, if it'll ultimately be better for Sam, I'm into it.

D: All right, that's great. So if you don't mind going into the waiting room just till we're done and let me talk to Sam again. Sam, see if you can get close to the boy now.

S: Yes, I feel close to him.

D: Good. Let him know you're back and you're sorry that you let these parts pull you away. And tell him you're ready to know the rest of it. Everything he wants you to get about how bad it was.

S: Yeah. He feels really small. Younger than thirteen. Way younger. Yeah. Maybe like a two-year-old.

D: Okay. How do you feel toward the two-year-old?

S: Tender.

D: Nice. So let that part know, too, that you're with him and you care about him. And just see what he wants you to know.

S: I'm feeling a lot of love right now. I feel like my heart is opening. And, yeah, I'm feeling love toward the thirteen-year-old too. Like a tenderness, like a father.

D: Yeah. So let them both know.

S: It feels good. It feels really, really sweet.

D: Yeah, we can just stay with this for a while if you want. But also be open if there's something they want you to know.

- S: I feel the thirteen-year-old me. I see him and he's dressed in sort of the awkward clothes of a seventh- or eighth-grade boy. Feeling that he's not pubescent or developed enough. His clothes don't look right and he couldn't defend himself right. That, like, his bones feel brittle. I don't feel disgusted by him. I'm empathizing now.
- D: Let him know, and see if there's more he wants you to get about all that.
- S: He wants to be funny and popular and it hurt a lot. Being bullied smacked down that idea of being popular. Really shut him down. Yeah. And I'm thinking about how later when I developed, when I was nineteen and in college, and I figured out a way to be cool, how important that was to me.
- D: Of course. Just tell him you're getting all of this and see if there's more he wants you to get.
- S: Yeah. There's no mean-spiritedness to him. He's not angry. He's more "just don't hurt me," but still kind of optimistic.
- D: Good. But ask him if it does feel like you now get how much it did hurt. Or if there's more of that he wants you to get.
- S: Yeah, I'm accessing a more "dark night of the soul" type of feeling from him and the terror.
- D: Let him know you're good with that. You really want to feel it. As much as he wants you to. Does he feel like you really get how scared he was now?
- S: He says he does.
- D: Good. So, Sam, I want you to go into that time period and be with him in the way he needed somebody then and just tell me when you're in there with him.
- S: I'm there. I'm letting him know I'm a friend—a protector.
- D: Great. How is he reacting?
- S: He feels good. He has somebody on his team.
- D: That's right. Ask him if there's anything he wants you to do for him back there.

- S: He wants me to bring him into adulthood where you can have sex and do grown-up things. He's always been interested in being in that realm.
- D: Okay, we're going to do that, but first, does he want you to do anything with the bully or anything else back there before we take him out?
- S: No. He doesn't seem vindictive. It doesn't seem like he wants anybody beat up.
- D: All right. So let's take him wherever he wants to go. Could be the present, could be a fantasy place. Wherever he wants.
- S: He wants to be at Burning Man.
- D: Oh great! Okay. *[Pause]* How's he like it there?
- S: A little shy.
- D: Let him know that you're gonna help him learn the ropes there. And tell him he never has to go back to that bullying time again. *[Sam cries hard with relief]* Yeah. There's all the relief, right? That's great. Yeah. He never has to go back there. That's really great, Sam.
- S: Amazing, man. It's like tears of joy.
- D: That's really great. And he never has to go back, and you're gonna be taking care of him now.
- S: It's so great. It's like what he's always wanted.
- D: There you go. And ask now if he's ready to unload the feelings and beliefs he got back there that he's been carrying all this time. Ask where he carries all that in his body or around his body, throughout his body.
- S: Around his head. Around his head, around his hips and heart.
- D: Okay. Ask what he wants to give it all up to: light, water, fire, wind, earth, or anything else.
- S: Light.
- D: All right, Sam, so bring some light in and have it shine on him. And tell him to let all of that go out of his body, off his body. Just let the light take it away, no need to carry that anymore. Have him check his body, make sure he gets all of it out. Yeah. Just let it go

into the light. That's right. Tell him now to invite qualities into his body that he wants and just see what comes into him now.

S: Like a pride and kindness to others. Just like a good superhero type of feel.

D: Great. So how does he seem now?

S: Like my younger friend. But safe, you know, and strong.

D: That's right. So let's let all these guys out of the waiting room and have them all come in and see him now and see how they react. Let them know they don't have to protect him or they don't have to keep you away from him anymore, so they can start thinking about new roles.

S: I see curiosity and befuddlement on the tough guy's face. He's totally confused that he's not me.

D: No, he's not you. Make that clear to him. He was beating up that kid, which wasn't good, so . . .

S: Right!

D: He needs to think about a new role now. Ask him what he'd like to do if he really trusted he didn't have to protect you like he used to.

S: Well, he's saying he's so good at everything. Can he just choose? He's really, really high on himself. Really. He sees everything that's good that I've done in my life, he's taken credit for. Yeah.

D: He can think about a new role. He doesn't have to decide right now. So how's it feeling in there now?

S: It's feeling spacious. It's feeling interesting and different.

D: Yeah. Okay. So does it feel complete for now?

S: It does, and I'm interested about how I can get in touch with this tough guy to let him know that although he is not in control of the show, he's still important to me.

D: That's exactly what you gotta tell him. You don't have to work to get in touch with him—he's around all the time. Just focus on him and talk to him about it. So. Come on back. It's a beautiful piece of work, Sam.

S: Yeah. Thank you. I was not expecting that.

I wanted to include this session because it illustrates many of the basics of IFS. For example, I repeatedly ask different protectors to open space until Sam's Self emerges and he spontaneously says he feels closer to the thirteen-year-old exile. Then he witnesses how the boy was bullied and gets the parts that try to interfere with the witnessing to step out so it can be completed. Then I have him go to the thirteen-year-old in the past and bring him to a safe place (Burning Man), and the boy is then willing to unburden the emotions he got from the bullying. The boy unburdens and transforms. And finally we bring in his most dominant protector, the tough guy, to see that the boy doesn't need his protection and he can consider a new role. Throughout, his parts increasingly came to trust in Sam's leadership.

We went from unblending parts and releasing Self to witnessing, retrieving, and unburdening an exile, and then to helping a protector consider a new role. In addition, there was a point where I talked directly to a protector, a practice we call *direct access*. While many of Sam's protectors interfered at different points, they quickly were willing to open space once he and I reassured them. This isn't true for most people—it takes longer for their protectors to trust them and me—so don't be frustrated if your sessions don't move as quickly.

I also wanted to include this session because it's a great example of how so many boys (myself included) are forced to handle their wounds and, consequently, become dominated by tough-guy parts that disdain vulnerability in themselves and others. Sam was hardly a macho guy (he does a podcast for Esalen, for God's sake!)—yet that early bullying experience and his response to it had a significant impact on his life.

As a postscript, I want to include a message Sam sent me about six months after the session:

Personally, it was an extraordinary breakthrough for me. I've done a LOT of thinking (and feeling) about that part of me. The small boy inside of me is feeling a lot of healing and a lot of acceptance. I've done a lot of thinking about the "tough guy" and realize how deeply married I've been to him. I haven't "separated" from him,

so to speak, but am so much more conscious of his presence and my reliance on him after having apprehended, through your work, the way I've organized myself. I am curious about how he might function (as a creative? as a helper to others?) once I continue to release him from his duties as "the man!" I know, of course, that I have more work to do, and being a dad makes me want to do that.²