



Introduction to the

**INTERNAL
FAMILY SYSTEMS
MODELSM**

RICHARD C. SCHWARTZ, PH.D.

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Dedicated to
Regina “Reggie” Goulding
1954–2001

May her spirit continue to guide us.

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Chapter One

THE INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS MODEL

Have you ever heard someone say, “Before I can love someone else, I have to learn to love myself” or “My problem is that I lack self-esteem” or “I didn’t want to do it, but I couldn’t stop myself”? Who is the Self that we need to learn to love and esteem, and why is that so hard? Who is it that makes us do things we don’t want to do? Will we be forever hounded by the critical voice in our head that calls us names all the time? Is there a better way to deal with the sense of worthlessness that sits in the pit of our stomach? How can we turn down the noise inside that keeps us anxious and distracted?

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) Model has a set of answers to questions like these that helps people begin to relate to themselves differently—to love themselves. It offers specific steps toward more control over impulsive or automatic reactions. It can transform your inner critical voice into a supportive one and can help you unload feelings of worthlessness. It is capable of helping you not only turn down the noise in your mind but also create an inner atmosphere of light and peace, bringing more confidence, clarity, and creativity to your relationships.

The IFS Model does this by first getting you to focus inside. By “focus inside,” I mean to turn your attention toward your thoughts, emotions, fantasies, images, and sensations—your inner experience. This is a big step for most of us because we’ve been trained by our culture to keep our eyes fixed on the outside world, looking out there for danger as well as for satisfaction. That external focus makes sense because we have a lot to worry about and strive for in our environment, but there’s another reason many of us don’t enter our inner world—we’re afraid of what’s in there. We either know or suspect that deep within us lurk memories and feelings that could overwhelm us, making us feel horrible, impeding our ability to function, making us act impulsively, changing the way we relate to people, and making us vulnerable to being hurt again. This is particularly true if you were ever humiliated and made to feel worthless or if you have suffered losses or traumas in your life. To avoid revisiting any of that, you make sure you’re always active or distracted, never giving the painful memories an opportunity to bubble up. You organize your life in ways that ensure nothing happens to trigger any of those dreaded memories or emotions. You strive to look and act acceptably, work hard to prove you’re valuable, control how close or distant you get in relationships, take care of everyone so they’ll like you, and so on.

Roger considers himself a competent professional, so he can’t believe the way his mind goes blank every time his boss walks into his office. He can’t stand the fact that her mere presence makes him feel so young and stupid. He has given himself pep talks before she comes in, has tried breathing exercises, and has criticized himself for being so fearful, but nothing works.

Susan is very invested in making sure her children like themselves, so she hates the way she sometimes “loses it” with her son. Every so often he’ll do something small—leave his clothes lying around or come home late—and she finds herself yelling at him as if he’d just killed the cat. She often feels her strong reaction coming on, yet she just can’t stop herself. Afterward she’s wracked with guilt and hates herself for it, but it keeps happening.

Despite all he’s accomplished, David is plagued by an underlying sense that he’s worthless. People constantly praise him and tell him what a great person he is, but he can’t take it in. He puts on a good front for others, but inside he’s convinced that if they really knew him, they’d be disgusted. Intellectually, he knows he’s well liked and he tries to convince himself of that, but the powerful feelings of worthlessness persist.

Kim can’t control her eating. She’s tried different diets, worked with nutritionists, and exercised like crazy, yet when the urge for sweets takes over, she’s powerless. She detests the inner voice that seduces her into going to the refrigerator for pints of ice cream, but she can’t resist its siren song.

Margot complains that she’s only attracted to men who are bad for her. Plenty of nice guys are interested in her, but she only feels the chemistry with charismatic men who wind up treating her badly and rejecting her. She feels “doomed by [her] heart to a life of heartache.”

What do all these people have in common? All of them were clients of mine who came to me because of an emotion or impulse they couldn’t control. Not only that, but they fought with it constantly and were furious with themselves for not being able to control it. The uncontrollable impulse was bad enough, but

the relationship they formed with it—their frustration with it and with themselves for having it—permeated their self-concept and made them feel worthless. I find this is often true. The way we relate to a troublesome thought or emotion not only doesn't succeed in controlling it but also compounds our problems. As Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, “If we become angry at our anger, we will have two angers at the same time.”

To better illustrate this idea, let's use an analogy to human relationships. Let's think of your anger as one of your children. Suppose you had a son whom you couldn't control—say he threw tantrums every night. That would be bad enough, but suppose that because those tantrums drove you crazy, you constantly criticized him and tried to keep him locked in his room for fear that he'd embarrass you in public. You stayed home on weekends to make sure he didn't run away and felt like a terrible parent because of his behavior. Suppose also that all of your reactions just made the tantrums worse because he sensed that you'd like to be rid of him. Because of the way you relate to your son, the problem comes to consume your life. The same is true with our extreme emotions and irrational beliefs—they're difficult enough, but the way we try to handle them often exacerbates them and makes our lives miserable.

It may seem strange to think of having a relationship with a thought or emotion, but we can't avoid it. They live with us, and we have to relate to them one way or another. Just as with difficult people in your family or work environment, how they affect you and how you interact with them will make a difference. Consider how you feel toward your various thoughts and emotions. Maybe you like the inner voice that reminds you of all the things you

need to do and strategizes how to do them. You listen to it and use it as motivation; you relate to it as if it were a valued assistant. What about when you start to relax and that same voice becomes stridently critical, calling you lazy and telling you the sky will fall if you don't get back to work? How do you like it then? What do you say back to it? If you're like most people, you argue with it internally as if it were an oppressive boss. "Get off my back! Can't you let me sit still for even one minute? Lighten up!" Or you try to drown it out by watching TV or having a few drinks. The part of you that wants you to achieve makes for a wonderful servant but a terrible master, so you have a love/hate relationship with it.

We have ongoing, complex relationships with many different inner voices, thought patterns, and emotions that are similar to relationships we have with other people. What we call "thinking" is often our inner dialogues with different parts of us. Let's take another example. Think of someone you love who has died. How do you feel toward the grief you have about that person? Maybe you fear being overwhelmed by it and hate the way it brings you down. You try to keep it locked up somewhere in your psyche and avoid anything that might remind you of the dead loved one. You also get impatient with it: "Why do I still feel this way after all this time? I thought I'd already worked through all that." You try to turn it into an intrapsychic exile. Yet, like an exile, it keeps popping back up, overtaking you when you're not looking and throwing internal coups.

What about the part of you that gets extremely defensive when you argue with your intimate partner? In the middle of the fight, you suddenly become that part—seeing your partner through its eyes; taking on its distorted, black/white, blame/guilt

perspective; stubbornly refusing to give an inch; and saying nasty things. Later you realize you were out of line and wonder, “Who was it that took over and behaved so obnoxiously? That wasn’t me!” How do you feel toward that inner defender? If you’re like most people, you don’t like some aspects of it, but you feel so vulnerable during a fight that you rely on it for protection. You let it take over because you believe that without it your partner will blow you away. Your anger becomes like a tough bodyguard you like having around but wouldn’t invite to dinner.

All the people I have described in this chapter came to me at war with themselves. They were knotted in dysfunctional inner relationships and, not surprisingly, their outer relationships paralleled their inner ones. By changing the way they regarded and interacted with their thoughts and emotions, they found that not only did the problem they brought to therapy improve dramatically, but, in general, they felt less inner turmoil, liked themselves more, and got along better with the people in their lives.

What was the direction of that change? They moved from hating, fearing, arguing with; trying to ignore, lock up, or get rid of; or giving in to and being overwhelmed by those feelings and beliefs—to becoming curious about them and listening to them. That initial curiosity often led to compassion for their emotions and thoughts, and attempts to help them.

I’ll give an example from my own life. Whenever I had to give a presentation to an audience before I knew this new way of relating to myself, I’d become extremely anxious about how people would like it. As a child, I’d been humiliated in school, so a part of me is stuck in the past, each time certain I’ll be humiliated

again. The ironic thing about emotions like these is that they often create exactly the situation they fear. When the anxiety took over, I wouldn't be able to prepare well and would come across as insecure and inarticulate, so I got the very feedback that my anxiety feared I would. Because it had such a negative impact on my performance, I had good reason to consider the anxiety my enemy. Whenever I'd begin to feel it, I'd try to reassure myself, "Don't worry—you know what you're talking about, and no one wants you to look bad. Besides, even if you bomb, it's not going to be the end of your career." That kind of rational self-talk would work only briefly; then the anxiety would creep back in, so I'd get frustrated and escalate my self-criticism. "Why are you such a wimp?! Why can't you be like all those other people who do this with no sweat?" I'd have running inner conflicts like that up until the presentation. My talk generally would go fine, but I'd spend the next week picking apart every stupid thing I said or smart thing I forgot to say. The whole thing became a terrible ordeal that I dreaded.

Now I've learned a way of relating to my anxiety that makes such events interesting challenges rather than dreaded ordeals. Instead of attacking or ignoring my anxiety, I try to get into a curious state, focus inside on it, and ask it some questions. As I focus on the feeling, I notice that it seems to emanate from a knot in my gut, so I focus there while asking internally, "What are you so afraid of?" and then quietly await an answer. Within seconds I hear a weak "voice" (it's not really a voice as much as a thread of thoughts) spontaneously emerge from the murky depths of my mind and say, "I know I'll fail and be embarrassed again." Next, images from my past come to me—scenes of what

happened in school long ago. Suddenly I'm filled with empathy and affection for that shy young kid who was shamed so severely and publicly for being unprepared. In my mind's eye, I hold that boy and remind him that I'm there and that he's not the one who has to do the presentation. I let him know that no matter what happens, I love him. He immediately calms down, and I sense the knot in my stomach release. That whole interaction takes less than a minute and I'm good to go, but that's because some years ago I spent several hours really getting to know that anxious part of me and changing my relationship with it. Now a quick reminder is all it needs.

It might sound strange to ask questions of an emotion, but have you ever felt angry or sad and not known why, and then after a day or so the answer just emerges from inside you? IFS offers a way to expedite that process, which helps you learn not only what your emotions are upset about but also how you can help them calm down and can find out what they need from you. It's a form of self-soothing that is easy for most people once they get the idea. The difficult part is to feel curiosity about or compassion for emotions or beliefs that you are used to hating and wanting to get rid of.

This may seem preposterous at first glance. Why would you want to focus on and try to feel compassion for the critical inner voice that makes you feel small, the paralyzing fear that freezes your brain in high-pressure situations, the anger that can suddenly hijack your mind and hurt others, and the sensitive part of you that's easily hurt and makes you feel worthless? It makes common sense not to go there and, instead, to try to lock all those thoughts and emotions out of your consciousness so you can avoid feeling

bad and can function well. That's what we've been taught to do with difficult emotions and beliefs. But if that approach worked, you wouldn't be reading this book.

That approach is based on the misconception that our extreme emotions and beliefs are what they seem to be. If your anger, fear, self-hate, and sense of worthlessness are merely disturbed emotional states or learned irrational beliefs, it makes sense to try to use your "willpower" to lock them out, argue with them, or counter them with positive thoughts. It makes sense to form an authoritarian, coercive, or dismissive relationship with them because they seem like the enemy within. An unfortunate byproduct of that approach, however, is that you will form similar relationships with people around you who embody qualities of those enemies inside you. You'll become critical of or impatient with anyone who seems fearful, self-deprecating, ashamed, or aggressive.

In these pages, I hope to help you realize that your emotions and thoughts are much more than they seem—that those emotions and thoughts emanate from inner personalities I call *parts* of you. I'm suggesting that what seems like your explosive temper, for example, is more than a bundle of anger. If you were to focus on it and ask it questions, you might learn that it is a protective part of you that defends other vulnerable parts and is in conflict with the parts of you that want to please everyone. It might reveal to you that it has to stay this angry as long as you are so vulnerable and self-sacrificing. You might also learn that it has other feelings, such as fear and sadness, but that it feels as though it must stay in this role of being the angry one to protect you. If you asked it to, it could show you scenes of the point in your life

when it was forced into its protective role. It might even show you an image or representation of itself, such as a dragon, volcano, or tough adolescent kid. Most importantly, it can tell you how you can help to release it so it is no longer stuck in this rageful role. With your help, it can change dramatically into a valuable quality so that you're no longer plagued with a bad temper and instead, for example, have an increased ability to assert yourself appropriately.

That last paragraph may have triggered a part of you that's saying, "This sounds really weird. He's saying I have all these little people inside me who can talk back to me. What does he think, that I'm Sybil?" I don't blame you for being skeptical. I was, too, when my clients initially began talking to me about their parts, but it's one of those things that's difficult to accept until you've experienced it. Until you focus inside, begin intentional conversations with your emotions and thoughts, and are surprised by the answers that come, this will be very hard to believe. I'm not asking you to take it from me—I'm simply inviting you to keep your mind open to this possibility and do your own exploring. Find out for yourself if what I'm saying is possible—that you can help your inner antagonists become your allies. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies."

It is this understanding of our disturbing thoughts and emotions—that they are manifestations of inner personalities that have been forced into extreme roles by events in our lives—which leads us to relate to them differently. It's easy to have compassion for an inner teenager who tried valiantly to protect you in the past and who ended up frozen in time in that angry role, or for a little boy who is terrified to be humiliated again. With this

understanding, we begin to reverse the dysfunctional internal relationships we have formed with many different parts of us and that our parts have formed with one another. As our parts feel more accepted and less threatened or attacked, they transform; once we kiss them, our frogs become princes. As a bonus, we find ourselves more accepting of, and less reactive to, people who used to bother us. We can relate to them with compassion because we're able to do that with the parts of us that resemble them. Sometimes we find that those people transform, too—or at least that our perception of and relationship with them transforms.

Think of how your work environment would be altered if the leaders in your organization related to themselves differently. If they hate the parts of themselves that want to slow down and enjoy life, they will be impatient with workers who aren't as driven as they are. If they want to get rid of their own insecurity and anxiety, they'll create an atmosphere in which people fear for their jobs if they show vulnerability. If they attack themselves for making mistakes, everyone will pretend to be perfect. If they fear their own inner critics, they'll fear the judgment of others and let people become exploitive. On the other hand, if they can relate to those parts of themselves in caring ways, that compassion and acceptance will permeate the company, making it much easier for all the employees to relate compassionately to their own parts and to one another. The same process applies to your inner family.

This new way of relating to yourself can't be forced. It doesn't work to command yourself to be curious about these parts of you or pretend to feel compassion for them. It has to be genuine. So how do you get to that point? This raises the question of who the "you" is who relates to your parts. Who are you at your core?

The most wonderful discovery I have made is that as you do this work, you release, or liberate, what I'll call your Self or your True Self. I find that as people focus on—and, in the process of doing that, separate from—their extreme emotions and thoughts, they spontaneously manifest qualities that make for good leadership, both internally and externally. It seems that we all have qualities like curiosity, compassion, calmness, confidence, courage, clarity, creativity, and connectedness at our core. It's the soul that spiritual traditions talk about but that most psychotherapies don't know about. Your Self gets obscured by all the fear, anger, and shame—all the extreme emotions and beliefs that are pumped into you during your life—so you may not even know it's there.

If you're like most people, you have only caught glimpses of your Self. Maybe your constant inner conversation with and among your parts stopped suddenly when you "lost yourself" in a creative or athletic activity, in the beauty of a sunset or the innocence of children at play, or in a dangerous activity like rock climbing that requires total present-centered awareness. You might remember those experiences as brief moments of complete joy and deep peace. Perhaps you had a fleeting experience of connection to something bigger than yourself and the sense of well-being that accompanies that awareness. You may have dismissed those episodes as anomalies in your otherwise roiling and noisy stream of consciousness and may have assumed you are the noise rather than the peace that lies beneath it. But what if that peaceful, joyful, connected state is who you really are? How might that change your self-concept? And, what if, in addition to having brief peaceful and joyful moments, it were possible to be in that state for long periods of time while going about your daily

activities or even while you're in a conflict with someone? Finally, what if, while in that Self state, you not only felt good, but you spontaneously manifested qualities like guileless curiosity, open-hearted compassion, clarity of perception, and intuitive wisdom about how to relate harmoniously to your parts and to the people in your life? If all that were true, your life could be very different. I have good news for you: all of that is true.

This book is based on an approach to psychotherapy called the Internal Family Systems (IFS) Model, so named because it's as if we each have a family of parts living within us. An IFS therapist first helps a client to focus on and get to know the parts that protect him or her. Then the client asks those parts to relax, to separate their feelings and beliefs from the client in order to open more space inside. As this happens, clients spontaneously report feeling calm, curious, and compassionate—the qualities of Self—toward their parts. I don't have to ask a client to try to feel that way; those qualities just naturally emerge, as if released, when parts relax and separate.

For example, Ted is afraid of his inner critic. As long as he can remember, he has felt oppressed by its constant judgment. When he focuses on it, he finds it in his head and says he hates it. I ask him to change his focus to the part that hates the critic and ask it to separate itself from him. That angry part agrees to do so. I ask Ted how he feels toward the critic now. In a calmer, more confident voice, he says, "I wonder why it feels the need to do this to me." He says his image of it has changed, too. At first it looked like a giant, menacing figure of his father, but now it has shrunk considerably and looks quite a bit younger. No longer intimidated by his critic, Ted begins listening to it tell him about

how hard it works to get him to perform perfectly so that no one will criticize him. Also, it believes that if it makes him feel terrible, he'll be prepared for negative judgments from other people. As he listens, Ted feels increasing gratitude for its attempts to protect him, as well as empathy for how much fear of rejection he senses that it carries. When Ted tells the part he feels that way, the former cold-blooded tormentor breaks down and weeps while Ted holds it. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us."

Once released from his fear, Ted knew what to do to help his critic. Very little leading was needed from me after his anger separated; Ted took over and seemed to know just how to help it. That is a common occurrence in IFS therapy. Just as our bodies know how to heal physical injuries, it seems that we all possess an innate wisdom for healing ourselves emotionally. The difficulty is in accessing that wisdom. IFS provides clear, practical ways to do that and helps you bring more Self into your life in general. It offers a new, uplifting self-concept, a clear and effective way of understanding and working with your troublesome emotions and thoughts, and a method for bringing more Self-leadership into your daily life so you spend more time in, and relate to others from, a state of deep peace and joy. The first step toward those goals is to help you become aware that you are much more than you have been taught.

EXERCISES

Becoming aware of inner family relationships

Take a few moments to think about the relationships you have formed with your different thoughts, emotions, or inner voices. The following is a list of parts that most people experience and sometimes feel oppressed by. After you read each one, consider how you relate to it—how you feel toward it, what you do or say inside when you experience it, how successfully you've exiled it from your life, and how much your relationship with it affects your life.

sexual thoughts or urges

*the inner voice that criticizes your appearance
or performance*

*anxiety that freezes your mind
in high-performance situations*

the urge to eat or drink too much

jealous or possessive feelings about your partner

yearning for intimacy

*worries that flash worst-case scenarios
in your mind about the future*

grief about someone who has died or left you

a nagging sense of worthlessness

*the voice that tells you that you're not working
hard enough and won't let you relax*

*fear that keeps you from taking social risks
and inhibits your liveliness*

the urge to care for everyone and neglect yourself

*the anger that surges forth
when you feel hurt by someone*

sensitive feelings that can be easily hurt

*loneliness that comes up when you're
not distracted or with people*

*competitiveness that makes you feel bad when you learn
that others are doing better than you*

the need to be in control of everything or everyone

an underlying sense of incompetence

the happy or "together" mask you hide behind

*the perfectionist inside you that can't allow
any mistakes or blemishes*

judgmental thoughts you have about other people

*the inertia that makes you sit in front of the TV
or lie in bed*

*a sense of hopelessness that makes small tasks
seem overwhelming*

dissatisfaction with your place in life or your achievements

the belief that you have been victimized in life

I expect you found at least a few thoughts or emotions on the list that you have trouble accepting and instead wish you were rid of. Maybe you have gotten rid of some of them to the extent that you don't experience them very often and don't think of yourself as that kind of person. Pick one item from the list that you had a strong reaction to and think about how hard it would be to change the way you relate to it. Can you imagine approaching it with curiosity and trying to listen to it rather than scolding it or shooing it away? Curiosity is often the first step because until you have heard its reasons for being the way it is, you'll have trouble feeling compassion for it. What fears come to mind as you contemplate this kind of change in your inner relationships?



Contemplating who you really are

What are your fundamental beliefs about human nature? Are we, at our essence, selfish and aggressive, or have you had personal experiences that contradict this view? How might your view of yourself change if you accepted the idea that your core Self is inherently good, wise, courageous, compassionate, joyful, and calm? Take a few minutes to imagine how your life would be different if you had more access to those qualities on a daily basis and trusted that this calm, joyful Self was your true identity. Think about what might change in relationships with key people in your personal life, in your work or school life, and in future choices you might make.

Contemplating your multiplicity

Try on, for a second, the idea that your thoughts and emotions emanate from discrete personalities inside you. What fears arise as you consider that possibility? People often have fears that come from the association to conditions like schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder (now called dissociative identity disorder), or from the creepy idea that autonomous entities exist within us—that we are not fully in control of ourselves. If you can put aside those fears for a second, consider what might be good about having parts. What would it be like if you knew with confidence that your most repulsive or disdainful thoughts or feelings were coming from little parts of you rather than being the essence of your identity? How would it feel to disclose shameful feelings to others if you could say “Part of me feels . . .” rather than “I feel . . .”? What if you totally trusted that those parts were different from your true Self and that you, as that Self, could help them to transform?

Chapter Two

THE SELF

For you to move in the direction of releasing your Self, you first have to know it is there. If you don't have any idea of who you really are, you can't become that person. You will disregard any fleeting experiences of Self as aberrations or illusions and will adhere to the limiting self-concepts you've been taught. When asked how he created the magnificent David from a block of marble, Michelangelo is reputed to have said, "I knew he was in there and just needed someone to let him out." If you know you have a magnificent essence that's encrusted in calcified emotions and beliefs, you can set to work on releasing that essence. If you don't know it exists, you resign yourself to experiencing life through a protective covering.

In this chapter, we will explore this idea of the Self because it is the centerpiece of the IFS Model and is the hardest piece for most people to fully accept. The idea that at your essence you are pure joy and peace, and that from that place you are able to manifest clusters of wonderful leadership and healing qualities and sense a spiritual connectedness, runs counter to what you've learned about yourself. A variety of beliefs run through our culture

regarding human nature, and none of them is terribly uplifting. The most obvious of these is the doctrine of Original Sin, started by St. Augustine and promoted by much of Western Christianity since his time. According to this notion, because of the Fall—Adam and Eve’s transgression—humanity has been cursed to be born in sin and to have a base, selfish constitution. According to that perspective, our passions are evidence of our ongoing sinful state. We must spend our lives controlling passionate emotions and impulses, and reminding ourselves of our basic sinfulness. While many contemporary Christians have moved away from that position, it has had a huge impact on Western culture’s beliefs about people. Those beliefs didn’t exist in Christianity before St. Augustine and, in fact, many early Christian leaders subscribed to the opposite belief, which might be called “Original Blessing.”

Another hugely influential position draws from Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin’s view of human nature corresponds closely to Original Sin, but with a scientific cast. He posited that our selfish nature is the product of our genes, which program us to fight for survival in a competitive, hostile environment. We can see these cultural myths of the Fall and the “selfish gene” reflected in some of our most influential psychologies. For example, Freudian, behavioral, and evolutionary psychologies teach that everything we do is designed to maximize pleasure or to expand our gene pool. This view of ourselves as fundamentally selfish or sinful leads to harsh, punitive methods for controlling our parts and other people.

Then there’s developmental psychology, which maintains that our basic nature is dependent on the kind of parenting we received. If you were fortunate to have “good enough” parenting

during certain critical periods in your early development, you emerged from childhood with a certain amount of “ego strength.” If you didn’t, you were out of luck. You remain defective and pathological until you have some type of corrective reparenting experience from a therapist or significant other. This perspective—that if we have any valuable qualities, they had to have been pumped into us from the outside world—is another prevalent and influential one. It’s the basis of the theories of learning that dominate our educational system. We think we must be taught morality, empathy, and respect because those values are not inherent in us. This philosophy teaches us to look outside ourselves to get our needs met, and it encourages therapists to try to give their clients what they believe the clients lack rather than help them find those qualities within themselves. These views of ourselves as environmentally dependent, bereft, and ignorant lead us to search for the right “expert” to solve our problems and lead helpers to take on a pedagogical or parental role. We are discouraged from taking a leadership role with our parts and in our lives.

Journey to the Self

It may help you entertain the possibility that what you’ve learned about yourself is wrong if I briefly describe my own journey to that conclusion. When I first began to work as a therapist in the late 1970s, I held the view that I had to give my clients crucial insights and suggestions. The fact that they had problems indicated to me that they were lacking something and were paying me to provide it for them. I also had absorbed from the culture a cynical picture of people—and of myself—as basically self-serving and fear-driven, and, from my clinical training, the view that people were bundles

of pathology. I wasn't open to the possibility of the Self, although I had had glimpses. Like many other young people in the sixties, I had experimented with meditation to find respite from my inner cacophony. While focused on my mantra, my mind quieted down and I sensed other dimensions of myself, but I had no framework for understanding them. Also, I was an athlete who, on the football field and basketball court, had occasionally entered that delicious flow state in which my mind was still and my body could do no wrong. Like most people, however, I was mostly consumed with finding ways to counter the undercurrent of worthlessness that ran through my psyche. I believed the inner voices that told me I was basically lazy, stupid, and selfish. That's who I thought I really was.

I was led to knowledge about the Self later in my therapy career through witnessing what happened to my clients as I helped them explore their inner worlds. At that time, in the early 1980s, I was a zealous family therapist who believed family therapy had found the holy grail by using systems thinking to understand and change family structures. Like most family therapists at that time, I had little interest in my own or my clients' intrapsychic lives. I thought there was no need to look inside people when all you needed to do to solve their problems was get them to change their relationships with other family members. My clients, however, didn't cooperate. I suffered what Aldous Huxley called "a slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact." That fact was that no matter how well family relationships were reorganized, people's inner lives still had tremendous power over them.

Out of that frustration, I began asking clients what kinds of thoughts and feelings were keeping them stuck in old

ruts. I had several clients at that time who began talking about different parts of them as if those “parts” were autonomous voices or subpersonalities. For example, a lovely young woman I’ll call Diane spoke of her pessimist voice and her critic, which accompanied her every positive action with their songs of doom and gloom. She said she had other voices that argued with these predictors of failure and still others that would just feel ashamed and incompetent. She considered the shame and incompetence to be the “real Diane.” As a family therapist, I was intrigued by these inner battles. I began asking Diane and other clients to try to alter them in the same ways in which I’d been trying to change conflicts in families. In other words, as described earlier, I began to focus on Diane’s relationship with her thoughts and emotions.

It seemed that Diane and many other clients could actually converse with these thoughts and feelings as if they were real personalities. I had Diane ask her pessimist voice why it always told her she was hopeless. To my amazement, she said that it answered her. It told her she was hopeless to keep her from taking risks and getting hurt—in other words, it was trying to protect her. This seemed like a promising interaction. If this pessimist really had benign intent, Diane might be able to negotiate a different role for it. Yet Diane wasn’t interested. She was angry at this voice and told it to just leave her alone. When I asked her why she was being rude to the pessimist, she went on a long diatribe, describing how that voice had turned every step in her life into a major hurdle. It then occurred to me that I was not talking to Diane but rather to a different part of her that constantly fought with the pessimist. In an earlier conversation, Diane had told me about an ongoing war inside her between a voice that pushed her to achieve and the

pessimist, which told her that her efforts were hopeless. It seemed that the pushing part had jumped in while she was talking to the pessimist.

I asked Diane to focus on the voice that was so angry at the pessimist and ask it to stop interfering in her negotiations with it. Again to my amazement, it agreed to “step back,” and Diane immediately shifted out of the anger she had felt so strongly just seconds before. When I asked Diane how she felt toward the pessimist now, it seemed as though a different person answered. In a calm, caring voice, she said she was grateful to it for trying to protect her and felt sorry that it had to work so hard. Her face and posture had also changed, reflecting the soft compassion in her voice. From that point on, negotiations with the pessimist were easy.

I tried this “step back” procedure with several other clients. Sometimes we had to ask two or three voices not to interfere before a client shifted into a state similar to Diane’s, but we got there nonetheless. I began to get excited. What if people could get extreme voices to step back simply by asking them to, not only in negotiations with other parts but also with family members, bosses, anyone? What if the person who was left when the parts stepped back was always as compassionate as Diane and these other clients had become?

When they were in that calm, compassionate state, I asked these clients what voice or part was there. They each gave a variation of the following reply: “That’s not a part like those other voices are. That’s more of who I really am—that’s my Self.” Without knowing it, I had stumbled onto a new way of helping people access the Self that so many spiritual traditions described, but I didn’t realize this until years later. At the time, I was simply

thrilled to have found a way to make therapy so much more effortless and effective for my clients as well as for me.

This serendipitous discovery in the early 1980s—that as I helped clients separate from their extreme emotions and beliefs, they would immediately and spontaneously shift into their Self—was confusing as well as thrilling. In several cases, they would suddenly demonstrate a kind of ego strength I never suspected they had. Some of these clients not only hadn't had good enough parenting when they were very young, but also had been tortured and deprecated on a daily basis. Some had never been held or comforted in their lives. Their childhoods had been nightmares of fear and degradation. So where could they have gotten these qualities that were springing forth? There was no way they could have absorbed these qualities from the abusive people on whom they had depended when they were children.

I began questioning the assumptions of developmental psychology and learning theory. I wondered, *Is it possible that we are born with such qualities and don't need to obtain them from our environments? How could it be that our psychologies, philosophies, and religions have so thoroughly underestimated human nature?* It was only after several years of testing this possibility with scores of clients—and finding over and over that once their parts separated, they spontaneously embodied qualities of the Self—that I released my ingrained cynicism and fully embraced the exciting conviction that there was much more to us than we had previously thought.

Since I could find so little in Western psychology to confirm these optimistic observations, I began looking elsewhere. I learned that the kind of Self I encountered in my clients was described by various spiritual traditions around the world.

The secret of the gods

According to an ancient legend, there was a time when the gods were trying to decide where to hide the secret to peace and joy. They didn't want humans to find it until they were ready to appreciate it. One god said, "Let's hide it on the highest mountain." Another said, "No, it would be found there too soon and too easily." Another god suggested hiding it deep in the densest forest, but that location was rejected for the same reason. After many other suggestions and rejections, the wisest god said, "Hide it in the human heart—that's the last place they'll look." The gods all agreed, so that's where they put it.

The gods were very wise. The last place we look for peace and joy is inside ourselves. We search everywhere else: in intimate relationships, careers, purchases, travel, gurus, self-help groups, and the grace of God above. Yet over the centuries in different parts of the world, small groups of people have looked inside and have found the secret that the gods hid. They are known as the esoteric or mystical branches of all the world's religions. (As used here, the term *esoteric* does not refer to something exotic or "far out." Instead it comes from the Greek *esotero*, which means "further in." Esoteric traditions are those that have looked further inside people, in contrast to conventional, exoteric religions.) Though they use different words, all these groups say the same thing: we are sparks of the eternal flame, drops of the divine ocean, manifestations of the absolute ground of being. But because we don't look inside, we have little awareness of who we really are. Once we learn to hold awareness of who we really are, we find peace and joy.

As I explored the writings of some of these esoteric schools, it gradually dawned on me that through interacting with people's

parts in ways that allowed the individuals to separate from their emotions and beliefs, I had accidentally come upon a simple way to help people access the state of consciousness that those traditions sought through meditation and other techniques. I had stumbled onto the secret of the gods.

Who's there when you step back?

Actually, the process of focusing on a part of you and asking it to “step back” is similar to forms of meditation in which people separate from and witness their thoughts. For example, a popular form of Buddhist meditation called *vipassana* involves simply witnessing each thought or emotional state that arises. The more you notice—step back from—rather than become or identify with your thoughts and emotions, the more you relax into being the “you” who is not your thoughts and emotions. Many traditions speak of this as being a “state of emptiness,” of “no-self.” What they often mean is no ego or conditioned mind, what I call “no parts.”

Knowledge of this special place within us is not limited to Eastern traditions. Thomas Merton, one of the most significant Christian scholars and writers of the twentieth century, wrote:

If we enter into ourselves, finding our true self, and then passing “beyond” the inner “I,” we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the “I am” of the Almighty. . . . Our inmost “I” exists in God and God swells in it. . . . Hence the Christian mystical experience is not only an awareness of the inner self, but also . . . it is an experiential grasp of God as present within our inner self. (quoted in Pennington, 1993, p. 119)

Merton developed a meditative practice called *centering prayer* that has become widespread among Christians in the West due in large part to the efforts of Father Thomas Keating, who agrees that “God and our true Self are not separate” (1997, p. 127). The Quakers call it the *Inner Light*. The Buddhists call it *rigpa*, or *Buddha Nature*. Hindus call it *Atman* or the *Self*. Meister Eckhart called it the *Godseed*. For Sufis, it’s the *Beloved*—the God within.

Whether you believe it is God inside you or simply a higher level of consciousness, there is consensus among traditions around the world that such a place exists within us and that it is not difficult to tap into. The words used by different traditions to describe the Self state—*inherent wisdom and compassion, a sense of freedom, lightness, release, stability, lucidity*—are some of the qualities my clients report and display when their parts step back and their Self is released. People have known for centuries about this peaceful state that I am calling the *Self*. The more I explored this spiritual territory, the more I felt the way Ralph Waldo Emerson did when he said, “All my best ideas were stolen by the ancients.”

But that state is not the exclusive domain of spiritual explorers. Other nonspiritual practitioners have also recognized the benefits derived from turning down the mind’s noise. For example, Betty Edwards, author of *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, found that people can draw much better than they believed possible when in that state. Tim Gallwey, who wrote *The Inner Game of Tennis*, sparked a wide variety of books that describe how much better athletes perform when in this state. The developer of biofeedback, Elmer Green, found that when people achieved the theta brain wave state—a place of deep relaxation,

full of imagery—they could produce remarkable control over physiological processes that were considered uncontrollable. That discovery led Eugene Peniston to train chronic alcoholics to achieve theta. The finding that they quit drinking opened the field of biofeedback training to treat a wide range of disorders. This state has been called “flow” by researcher Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, who found that it characterized the experience of all kinds of creative and high-performing people.

Thus it seems clear that this mindful state of Self is not just a peaceful place from which to witness the world nor just a state to which one can go to transcend the world; the Self also has healing, creative, and performance-enhancing qualities. When my clients entered this Self state, they didn’t just passively witness their parts—they began to actively interact with them in creative and healing ways. Diane and the others began relating to their parts in ways that the parts seemed to need. These clients began to bring forth their emergent compassion, lucidity, and wisdom to get to know and care for these inner personalities. Some parts, such as Diane’s pessimist, needed to hear from her that, while at one time in her life she had been very hurt and had to withdraw, it no longer needed to protect her in that way. Subpersonalities such as the pessimist seemed like inner trauma victims, stuck in the past, their minds frozen around a time of great distress. Others needed to be held, comforted, loved, or just listened to. We are so used to fighting and wanting to be rid of parts like these that we have no idea who they really are.

The most amazing thing of all was that once in that Self state, clients seemed to know just what to do or say to help each inner personality. It gradually became clear that I didn’t have

to teach them how to relate differently to these thoughts and emotions they were calling parts; either they would automatically begin doing what the part needed, or they would begin asking questions that would lead to ways of helping the part. My job was mainly to try to help clients remain in the state of Self and then get out of their way as they became therapists to their own inner families.

The Self-Led Person

I was also finding that when clients accessed their Self, they began relating differently to the people around them in addition to parts within them. It seemed that before they began doing IFS work, most clients had parts that didn't trust the leadership of their Self in the outside world. These parts jumped in to handle many kinds of external experiences because they believed they had to protect the system. They were like parentified children who don't trust that their parent is capable and, consequently, bravely take on responsibilities for the welfare of the family that are beyond their capacities.

As this changed—as these protective parts began to trust the clients' Self to lead more in the outside world—either my clients' relationships became more harmonious or they found the courage to leave relationships that had been exploitive. They became less reactive in crises and less overwhelmed by emotional episodes that used to do them in. During such episodes, they would report that they now understood that a *part* of them, not *all* of them, was upset, so rather than blending with the part, they would notice it and then try to comfort it. They didn't always succeed in calming it down, but just the awareness that they were

not the part helped them remain more centered. They could wait until the storm blew over, secure in the knowledge that their Self would reemerge—that the sun would shine again.

After you get to know your own Self, you can sense when some degree of Self is present in people around you and when it's not. A person who is leading with the Self is easy to identify. To rephrase a joke, you get the impression that "the lights are on and someone is home." Others describe such a person as open, confident, and accepting—as having presence. You feel immediately at ease in a Self-led person's company, sensing that it is safe to relax and release your own Self. Such a person often generates remarks like, "I like him because I don't have to pretend—I can be myself with him." From the person's eyes, voice, body language, and energy, you can tell you are in the presence of someone who is authentic, solid, and unpretentious. You are attracted by the Self-led person's lack of agenda or need for self-promotion, as well as by his or her passion for life and commitment to service. Such a person doesn't need to be forced by moral or legal rules to do the right thing. He or she is naturally compassionate and motivated to improve the human condition in some way because of the awareness that we are all connected.

Whenever I begin describing the qualities of a Self-led person, it triggers parts of me that feel inadequate. While at times I can embody some of those qualities, more often I'm a far cry from that person. I believe one of the mistakes that some organized religions make is in holding up the image of a saintly person as a model of what their followers should be, yet providing little practical advice on getting there other than by using willpower or prayer. As a result, people feel chronically inferior and become

angry at their emotions and thoughts that aren't so evolved.

To avoid that pitfall, it's important to remember that very few people are constantly and fully Self-led. On the rocky road of life, we are all, to varying degrees, rejected, humiliated, abandoned, and traumatized. We all have pools of pain and shame, and protective strategies that are reinforced by our culture. We all come to distrust our Self and put on a range of masks. Until those pools are fully drained and our protectors fully relax, Self-leadership will be fleeting at best. We move into Self-leadership by degrees, slowly accruing moments of inner and outer flow, gradually finding that we are not obliterated when we keep our heart open in the face of anger or that the sky doesn't fall when we pause our constant worrying, and finding that we can comfort hurting inner children rather than being overwhelmed by them or exiling them. Margery Williams Bianco (1999), in the children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit*, helps us with the long-term perspective:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day . . . “Does it happen all at once, or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

The IFS Model presents a path toward becoming more real—toward increased Self-leadership. It helps you learn how to break less easily, soften your sharp edges, and not have to manage yourself so carefully. It is not always an easy or quick path, but most people begin feeling much better long before their hair is loved off and their eyes drop out. It's also true that once Self-led, your appearance matters much less and you know that you can't be ugly.

Few people come to me asking for increased Self-leadership, however. They come because they feel oppressed by people or situations, or by their emotions, thoughts, or symptoms. As they access their Self to untangle the knotted inner relationships related to those oppressions, they find that not only do the problems they entered therapy for improve, but, as a bonus, their overall outlook and functioning do as well. They have more Self in their lives.

Qualities of the Self

Let's continue to examine the qualities of the Self. As we've discussed, there is agreement among the world's esoteric traditions that such a state exists in us. In most of those traditions, however, messages suggest that language is inadequate to capture this concept of Self. That may be so, but because different people describe similar experiences and display similar qualities when in that state, we can describe aspects of those experiences and qualities. To clarify this discussion, I find it useful to differentiate between what people report while meditating—while being reabsorbed into the ocean—and what people are like when their Self is actively leading their everyday life—while being a separate wave of the ocean.

It is that oceanic state which seems so difficult to describe. People report feeling as if they have no boundaries, are one with the universe, and lose their identity as a separate being. This is accompanied by a sense of spaciousness in body and mind that can provide an experience of great contentment as well as moments of bliss. People often feel a pulsating energy or warmth running through their body and may sense light in or around them. As they deepen their meditative practice, people encounter different levels and stages, which the different esoteric traditions have explored and charted. Ken Wilber's work provides a good summary of those ascending stages of consciousness. My purpose here is less to acquaint you with those ethereal realms than to help you bring some of that awareness, spaciousness, and energy to your daily tasks and relationships. What qualities do people report and display when they live in the world while holding the memory of who they really are? What are the characteristics of Self-leadership?

I don't know the full answer to that question. After twenty years of helping people move toward greater Self-leadership, I can describe what my clients exhibit as they increasingly embody Self. As I sifted through various adjectives to capture my observations, I repeatedly came up with words that begin with the letter C, so now we will travel the eight Cs of Self-leadership.

Calmness

A pervasive sense of physiological and mental calm accompanies Self-leadership. Many people, especially those who have experienced traumas, feel constant tension in their body, as if they contain a tightly wound spring, which makes them hypervigilant

and agitated. If you're like them, this state of physical arousal makes you overreact to other people and prevents you from ever truly relaxing. Your mind reflects this aroused state, with thoughts and urges jumping around, to use the Buddhist metaphor, like a hyperactive or drunken monkey.

As you embody your Self, you will be relieved to find far less activity in your body and mind. As a result, you will react to triggers in your environment in less automatic and extreme ways. The monkeys in your mind become mellow, basking in the reduction in worries and responsibilities that comes with trusting your Self to handle the world. In the face of anger, you aren't overwhelmed by the common fight, flight, or freeze impulses and instead maintain an inner equanimity. Many people appear to be calm on the outside but internally are a frenzy of activity. Many of us have been trained to hide our distress behind a calm, thoughtful exterior, but that is being frozen, not calm.

This is not to say that Self-led people walk around in a Buddha-like state of serene detachment. They ride on the roller coaster of life like everyone else. It's just that, for them, the ride that used to produce a white-knuckled clinging more often becomes interesting and sometimes painful or joyful. Where they used to be totally absorbed by each emotion or totally cut off from each one, they now experience the waves of feeling but also hold a calm center that is never totally washed away—the center of the cyclone, what I call the *"I" in the storm*.

Clarity

I define clarity as the ability to perceive situations without distortion from extreme beliefs and emotions—in other words,

seeing through the eyes of the Self. As someone who has worked extensively with eating-disordered clients, I have seen how powerfully parts of us can affect our perceptions. When a rail-thin anorexic client looks in the mirror, she literally sees a fat person. But that is only an extreme example of the kind of distorting we do all the time. For example, recall a time when you were infatuated with someone. Perhaps you became oblivious to conspicuous red flags. Then, when that same person did something hurtful, it's likely that all you could see were the person's flaws, and you wondered what you used to like about him or her. A traditional story illustrates this point well:

A man whose axe was missing suspected his neighbor's son. The boy walked like a thief, looked like a thief, and spoke like a thief. Soon the man found his axe while he was digging in the valley, and the next time he saw his neighbor's son, the boy walked, looked, and spoke like any other child.

In other words, we rarely take a fresh, open look at a person or situation because we so quickly and automatically jump to conclusions based on previous experience and current desire. As the expression goes, "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." I had a client, Bill, for example, who was desperate to get married. A part of him immediately rated every woman he met as a potential mate or not. In addition, Bill felt he had been rejected by his mother at an early age, so a protective part sized up every potential mate as like Mom (that is, dangerous) or not. To complicate things, Bill had always hoped to be accepted by

his mother, so another part of him wanted the potential mate to be like Mom and would not let him feel attracted to women who were not. Every woman he met unwittingly stepped into his radar system with all its conflicting categories, and her qualities were distorted or ignored accordingly. The women he dated complained about getting many mixed messages and stated that he didn't really know them. They were right.

For Bill to really know any of these women, he would need to get all these parts and their projections to step back and let his Self experience the women. When that is possible, we have what the Buddhists call "beginner's mind," a perspective in which many possibilities exist because of the absence of preconception and projection. In contrast, the expert's mind is overflowing with beliefs that limit perception and possibility. Our parts often think they are experts on the world. The Self always has a beginner's mind.

Curiosity

In addition to containing many possibilities, the beginner's mind is also full of wonder about the world. If we don't prejudge things, we are perpetually curious. Like an inquisitive child, we are full of innocent interest in people and their reactions. If people are angry at us and our view of them isn't clouded by feelings connected with others who have been angry at us in the past, we become curious about their anger. When we ask them about it, they will sense no fear or judgment in our question—just innocent interest.

This kind of curiosity is at the heart of the IFS approach. It is how the Self relates not only to people but also to inner voices. When we are able to become nonjudgmentally interested in even our most despised inner demons (such as contempt, racism, and

self-hate), we find those internal dialogues to be enlightening and transformative. The Buddhists call this kind of nonstriving, open curiosity toward our inner thoughts and emotions *mindfulness*. Many of their practices are designed to help people become more mindful.

That kind of pure, guileless curiosity is disarming. People and parts of us sense that they no longer must protect themselves because they see that we intend only to try to understand them. Since all they usually want is to be understood, they have no reason to remain angry or defensive. Instead, they are often glad to tell their story and feel heard by a person who is not trying to change them. In this book, this is what is meant by the term *witnessing*—asking about and listening to a person or part with genuine curiosity and with the intent to achieve the next quality: compassion.

Compassion

When your view of people is not distorted by the parts of you that fear or need them, you are not as affected by the ways they protect themselves. Then your curiosity can lead you to see behind their anger or distancing and learn about the hurt they are protecting.

To clarify what is meant by compassion, I want to contrast it to pity and to empathy. With pity, you see someone suffering and you feel sorry for him or her, but at the same time a part of you is glad that person isn't you. Your mind is busy thinking of reasons you wouldn't make the mistakes he or she made that led to the suffering. Pity involves both a protective distancing and a measure of condescension. Your sorrow for the sufferer comes from a place of separateness.

When you feel empathy, you see a person suffering, and

because you have a certain level of self-awareness, you know a part of you suffers in the same way, so you identify with the sufferer's pain. At some level, that person is the same as you. Empathy opens your heart and produces a strong desire to help the person. The danger with empathy, however, is that if you identify too much, you will feel a pressure to relieve the other's misery. You can't tolerate your own pain, so you can't stand for the other to spend any time suffering. The other common consequence of having too much empathy is to distance from the other person because his or her pain makes you hurt too much.

When you feel compassion, you see a person suffering, you feel empathy for him or her, and you know that the other has a Self which, once released, can relieve his or her own misery. If people relieve their own suffering, they learn to trust their own Self, and they learn whatever lessons the suffering has to teach them. Compassion, then, leads to doing whatever possible to foster the release of the other's Self rather than become the other's healer. With compassion, you can be open-heartedly present with sufferers without feeling the urge to change them or distance from them. This kind of Self-presence will often release their own Self. (There are, of course, situations in which the other's Self cannot be released while he or she is overwhelmed by physical pain or illness. In those settings, the compassionate thing to do is to treat those conditions first while also holding the intention that relief leads to more Self-leadership.)

Also, as you become increasingly Self-led—increasingly aware of the ocean and not just the waves—the sense of separation between you and others is reduced. The desire to help people who suffer, as well as those who create suffering, arises spontaneously

with the increased appreciation of our interconnectedness. It arises from an intuitive understanding that the suffering of others affects you because, at some level, the other is you. (For most people, this is not a conscious thought—they just feel drawn to do something “more meaningful” with their lives.) These lines from a poem by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) capture the compassion that arises from awareness of interconnectedness:

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs
as thin as bamboo sticks, and I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda. I am the 12-year-old
girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the
ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving. . . . Please
call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the
door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.
(pp. 123–124)

Confidence

One reason Self-led people can remain calm and clear in the face of anger is because they trust that no matter what the offended person claims happened, it doesn't mean they are bad or are going to be permanently harmed. We are defensive not because someone is attacking us but rather because the attack is likely to provoke our inner critics, which in turn trigger the worthlessness and terror we accumulated as children. Whatever slight we receive in the present triggers an echo chamber inside us of all the similar hurts we've accumulated from the past. Contemporary events are not what we fear—it's the unending reverberations we'll have to

endure that scare us. We dread any incident that confirms our worst fears about ourselves.

As people heal their vulnerable parts, their critics relax and their defenses drop. They feel Self-confident in the sense that their Self has healed those parts and has shown its ability to protect them or to comfort them if they are hurt again. When that's the case, you become less susceptible to former provocations because those things no longer set off your inner echo chambers of past hurts. Instead, you react to the present situation, which may indeed involve danger or pain, with the confidence that you can handle or repair whatever happens. Without overreaction, you take steps to protect yourself and, if the interactions are hurtful, afterward you nurture any of your parts that were hurt.

This is the opposite of our socialized tendency to lock up those hurt parts in our effort to “let it go, don't look back, and just move on.” As a result of that philosophy, not only do we accumulate increasing burdens of pain, but we also abandon and isolate the hurting childlike parts of us instead of nurturing them. This strategy leads to less and less confidence in the Self, more vulnerability to the slings and arrows all around us, and, consequently, more protectiveness and sense of being a separate, isolated, lonely individual.

Confidence has another meaning as well in reference to the Self. The knowledge that we're part of the ocean and not just an isolated wave brings with it what might be called a sense of grace. Grace is hard to define and, in Christianity, has traditionally been seen as a gift or blessing from God. In this book, it is associated with the trust that, as one client put it, “I am loved and am love. No matter how bad things seem, it's all okay and will work out

the way it should.” With this kind of confidence in the essential goodness of life comes an openness to the beauty of the world and a desire to experience that beauty in each moment. It is hard to stay in the present long enough to experience beauty if you lack this kind of confidence because you will be consumed with future plans for your survival or gratification.

People with this kind of confidence are charismatic (yet another word that begins with the letter C), not in the sense of being flashy, clever, or powerful, but in the way the Greeks originally used the word to mean “having the gift of grace.” Self-led people possess the charisma of authenticity.

Courage

Clarence Darrow once said, “The most human thing we can do is comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The Self has the courage to do both.

One might think that the Self’s “it’s all okay” sense of grace would lead to a detached passivity and acceptance of the injustices of life, but that’s not the nature of the Self. The clarity of the Self makes it hard for people to deny injustice and ignore suffering. The compassion of the Self leads people to resist tyranny and fight for the oppressed. The words of the Self bring hope to the hopeless. The energy of the Self seeps into the cracks in the tyrant’s walls and gradually erodes them.

Consequently, oppressors attack people whenever they show any signs of Self-leadership. Abusers know that this is the way to control people, which is why virtually all my clients who have been severely sexually abused report that any time they acted in a spirited, spontaneous, or independent way, they were either

verbally or physically punished. As a result, they came to fear the Self and keep it out of their body.

Thus, rather than making people passive, confidence and grace have the opposite effect. If we don't fear attack because we aren't as vulnerable, and if we trust that we can handle the consequences, courage is much more accessible to us. If we know that everyone is a wave in the same ocean, we will challenge injustice without judgment. While so far we have emphasized the compassionate, nurturing side of the Self, it is important to remember that the energy of the Self can also be forceful and protective. The martial arts cultivate this protective side of the Self.

We can be forceful without judgment because we know that no matter how an oppressor behaves, he or she has a Self, and our goal is to elicit it, not to further burden him or her with our judgment. As Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed it, "We must realize that the evil deed of the enemy neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is. An element of goodness may be found even in our worst enemy." Elsewhere he wrote:

[Nonviolence] does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. . . . it avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. . . . if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate, I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in a broken community. I can only close the gap in a broken community by meeting hate with love. (King, 1994, pp. 211–214)

Courage is not only about being a voice for the disenfranchised. It often takes more courage to recognize the damage we do to others and try to make amends. Clarity helps us to see what we have done and, if we have confidence, to understand that mistakes don't mean we are bad people. We will have the courage to listen to the other's story with curiosity, apologize sincerely, and ask what can be done to repair the damage. The Self-led person not only has the courage to act but also the courage to be accountable for acting.

As a client's Self emerges, he or she increasingly demonstrates another aspect of courage—the willingness to go toward his or her pain and shame. Clients' internal journeys often involve entering the most frightening places in their psyches. There they often wind up witnessing events in their pasts that they had tried to minimize the impact of or forget entirely. In turn, this witnessing often leads to a clearer view of key relationships in the outside world and the determination to change those relationships. These changes sometimes involve financial and emotional risk. It takes courage to look and courage to act on what we see.

Creativity

Many scientists, inventors, and artists report that their inspirations emerged suddenly and fully formed from their unconscious intuition rather than as a result of the labors of their rational minds. Researchers trying to increase creativity in people use techniques like biofeedback to quiet the mind's inner noise and access deeper states (Tony Schwartz, 1995). As writer Anne Lamott (1994) says, "You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind.

The rational mind doesn't nourish you. You assume that it gives you the truth, because the rational mind is the golden calf that this culture worships, but this is not true. Rationality squeezes out much that is rich and juicy and fascinating" (p. 112). My experience with clients confirms this. They begin to tap into a kind of creative wisdom as their inner noise diminishes and their Self arises. Solutions to longstanding problems emerge, often involving lateral, "out of the box" thinking that was not possible when they were dominated by parts of them that had so many rules about their lives and relationships. It seems that the Self has an innate wisdom about how to create harmony in relationships, whether those relationships are with people around them or with parts inside them. The Self automatically knows how to nurture others and has the clarity, compassion, and courage to do so.

In addition, as people are released from the grip of their inner critics and their concerns about the approval of others, they feel an increased desire and ability to enter what has been called the "flow" state in which creative expression spontaneously flows out of them and they are immersed in the pleasure of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They often begin to feel a sense that they are here to make some type of contribution, and they experience great relief as they move in the direction of making that happen.

To reiterate one theme of this book, however, just quieting the mind is rarely enough. To allow for real Self-expression requires the courage to release all the creative parts we have locked in inner containers. Anne Lamott (1994) knows this:

But you can't get to any of these truths by sitting in a field smiling beatifically, avoiding your anger and damage

and grief. Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. We don't have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not to go in to. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in—then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home. (p. 201)

Connectedness

As we increasingly embody Self, we will feel a growing sense of connectedness to all the Selves around us. Since it seems to be the nature of the Self to want to strengthen all those connections, people often find themselves spending more time with others in whom they can sense the Self. Correspondingly, they often drop relationships and activities that take them further from sensing those connections.

Lamott's last line above, "And that moment is home," also applies to what you feel when you make a Self-to-Self connection with someone. There is the thirst-quenching sense of finally meeting someone who knows who you really are. There is also the relief of being able to drop the heavy masks with which we try to impress or hide from one another and instead to allow the light of our Self to shine. Author Joan Borysenko (1999) describes a Self-to-Self experience she had with a man she had gotten to know who was dying of AIDS. After a rambling conversation,

Sam looks into my eyes, "I have never felt more peaceful, more safe." I am weeping, safe also in this larger

sense of Self, the spiritual self. Sam holds my hands, says something to the effect of how my children must love me, how lucky they are. I stumble over words, know that he has caught a glimpse of something inside of me that is not usually available, even to the people I love the most. It is the relationship between us that has lifted the bushel off the Light. I am my Self only because he is his own Self in this moment. The chatter and doubts and ruminations of ego are gone. We have seen the God in one another. Neither of us cares how we look, how clever our words are. We don't even care if the world ends here and how. We are whole and the story is told. Our lives have had purpose and meaning in this one precious moment. (pp. 164–165)

These sacred, memorable moments are far too rare for most of us. For the Self-led person, however, such connections are not only desired, they are also more possible. This is because Self in one person is a magnet for Self in another. Perhaps a tuning fork is a better metaphor. When you are in Self, the vibrations will set off the other's Self. When in the presence of Self in someone else, your defenses relax as you sense that you won't be judged or controlled, and your own Self naturally arises. Since you are not as afraid of getting hurt, Self-to-Self connections are more possible because you have confidence that you can quickly repair any damage from rejections.

In addition to increasing your connectedness to other people and to your parts (horizontal connectedness), you are likely to feel increased connection to the oneness of the universe or of nature.

I find that people begin to feel more vertically connected to Spirit and to the Earth as their parts relax and their Self is released, and they are drawn to activities and people that further open those doors. The words of eminent neuroscientist Francisco Varela (quoted in Jaworski, 1996, pp. 189–190) capture this state of connectedness:

When we are in touch with our “open nature,” our emptiness, we exert an enormous attraction to other human beings. . . . And if others are in the same space or entering it, they resonate with us and immediately doors are open to us. . . . This state—where we connect deeply with others and doors open—is there waiting for us. It is like an optical illusion. All we have to do is squint and see that it has been there all along, waiting for us. All we have to do is see the oneness that we are.

These are the eight Cs of Self-leadership. There are other C-words, such as consciousness, contentedness, and constancy, that I considered including but believed they were adequately covered in the list above. Other important qualities of the Self, including joy, humor, forgiveness, and gratitude, aren't thoroughly covered above.

A different long list of C-words describes people when their Self is buried beneath the noise and emotion. Some of these include: closed, confused, clouded, clogged, congested, chaotic, cowardly, cautious, compliant, complacent, conceited, computer-like, critical, confronting, craving, cruel, cynical, contemptuous, controlling, coercive, commanding, cocky, compulsive, colluding, conquering, crafty, clever, and crazy.