

No Bad Parts

Healing Trauma & Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Expert Dr. Dick Schwartz

At the 2022 Next Practice Institute Annual Gathering, Dick will lead the week-long track Working with Different Parts of the Self

“I am very grateful that Dick has continued to spread the word of IFS around the world. Watching him do IFS work with people is a heartwarming and deeply connective sight to behold. I believe we need IFS now more than ever before. His work offers each of us nothing less than the cultivation of kindness, wisdom, and empowerment if we’re willing to look within. Doing this work allows every single part of us a moment in the sun. In giving our attention to the parts that need it most, true healing happens. As the compassion grows within us for our very selves, slowly but assuredly it affects the world at large, supporting our efforts to grow and shift toward a world of less divisiveness, strife, and needless suffering. We see that our delicate and brilliant humanity is shared among us all.”

– From the Foreword written by Alanis Morissette

RICHARD C. SCHWARTZ, PHD
Foreword by Alanis Morissette



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Introduction

As a psychotherapist, I’ve worked with many people who came to me shortly after their lives had crashed. Everything was going great until the sudden heart attack, divorce, or death of a child. If not for that life-jarring event, they would never have thought to see a therapist, because they felt successful.

After the event they can’t find the same drive or determination. Their former goals of having big houses or reputations have lost their meaning. They feel at sea and vulnerable in a way that’s unfamiliar and scary. They are also newly open. Some light can get through the cracks in their protective foundations.

Those can be wake-up call events if I can help them keep the striving, materialistic, competitive parts of

them that had dominated their lives from regaining dominance so they can explore what else is inside them. In doing so, I can help them access what I call *the Self*—an essence of calm, clarity, compassion, and connectedness—and from that place begin to listen to the parts of them that had been exiled by more dominant ones. As they discover that they love the simple pleasures of enjoying nature, reading, creative activities, being playful with friends, finding more intimacy with their partners or children, and being of service to others, they decide to change their lives so as to make room for their Self and the newly discovered parts of them.

Those clients and the rest of us didn’t come to be dominated by those striving, materialistic, and

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competitive parts by accident. Those are the same parts that dominate most of the countries on our planet and particularly my country, the United States. When my clients are in the grip of those particular parts, they have little regard for the damage they're doing to their health and relationships. Similarly, countries obsessed with unlimited growth have little regard for their impact on the majority of their people, or the health of the climate and the Earth.

Such mindless striving—of people or of countries—usually leads to a crash of some sort. As I write this, we are amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It has the potential to be the wake-up call we need so we don't suffer worse ones down the road, but it remains to be seen whether our leaders will use this painful pause to listen to the suffering of the majority of our people and also learn to collaborate rather than compete with other countries. Can we change nationally and internationally in the ways my clients are often able to?

Inherent Goodness

We can't make the necessary changes without a new model of the mind. Ecologist Daniel Christian Wahl states that "Humanity is coming of age and needs a 'new story' that is powerful and meaningful enough to galvanize global collaboration and guide a collective response to the converging crises we are facing.... In the fundamentally interconnected and interdependent planetary system we participate in, the best way to care for oneself and those closest to oneself is to start caring more for the benefit of the collective (all life). Metaphorically speaking, we are all in the same boat, our planetary life support system, or in Buckminster Fuller's words: 'Spaceship Earth.' The 'them-against-us' thinking that for too long has defined politics between nations, companies and people is profoundly anachronistic."

Jimmy Carter echoes that sentiment: "What is needed now, more than ever, is leadership that steers us away from fear and fosters greater confidence in



Espana II by Jim McManus, Mobius featured artist

the inherent goodness and ingenuity of humanity.” Our leaders can’t do that, however, with the way we currently understand the mind because it highlights the darkness in humanity.

We need a new paradigm that convincingly shows that humanity is inherently good and thoroughly interconnected. With that understanding, we can finally move from being ego-, family-, and ethno-centric to species-, bio-, and planet-centric.

Such a change won’t be easy. Too many of our basic institutions are based on the dark view. Take, for example, neoliberalism, the economic philosophy of Milton Friedman that undergirds the kind of cutthroat capitalism that has dominated many countries, including the US, since the days of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Neoliberalism is based on the belief that people are basically selfish and, therefore, it’s everyone for themselves in a survival-of-the-fittest world. The government needs to get out of the way so the fittest can not only help us survive, but thrive. This economic philosophy has resulted in massive inequality as well as the disconnection and polarization among people that we experience so dramatically today. The time has come for a new view of human nature that releases the collaboration and caring that lives in our hearts.

The Promise of IFS

I know it sounds grandiose, but this book offers the kind of uplifting paradigm and set of practices that can achieve the changes we need. It’s full of exercises that will confirm the radically positive assertions I make about the nature of the mind so you can experience it for yourself (and not just take it from me).

I’ve been developing IFS (Internal Family Systems) for almost four decades. It’s taken me on a long, fascinating, and—as emphasized in this book—spiritual journey that I want to share with you. This journey has transformed my beliefs about myself, about what people are about, about the essence of human goodness, and about how much transformation is possible. IFS has morphed over time from being exclusively about psychotherapy to becoming a kind of spiritual practice, although you don’t have to define yourself as spiritual to practice it. At its core, IFS is a loving way of relating internally

(to your parts) and externally (to the people in your life), so in that sense, IFS is a life practice, as well. It’s something you can do on a daily, moment-to-moment basis—at any time, by yourself or with others.

At this point, there might be a part of you that’s skeptical. After all, that’s a lot to promise in the opening paragraphs of a book. All I ask is that your skeptic give you enough space inside to try these ideas on for a little while, including trying some of the exercises so you can check it out for yourself. In my experience, it’s difficult to believe in the promise of IFS until you actually try it.

We’re All Multiple From Chapter I

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.

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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. 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.

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.

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.

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. ■



Dr. Dick Schwartz is a Mobius Senior Expert and a renowned psychotherapist who created Internal Family Systems. IFS is one of the fastest-growing therapeutic approaches in the United States. Developed in response to his clients' descriptions of experiencing various parts of themselves – many extreme, IFS is a non-pathologizing, hopeful framework. It is considered revolutionary by experts worldwide including Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, and Gabor Maté, known for his ground-breaking work in addiction.

Dick began his career as a systemic family therapist and an academic. He earned his Ph.D. in Marriage

and Family Therapy from Purdue University, after which he began a long association with the Institute for Juvenile Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and more recently at The Family Institute at Northwestern University – he is an associate professor at both institutions. He is co-author, with Michael Nichols, of *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*, the most widely used family therapy textbook in the United States.

In 2000, he founded The Center for Self Leadership. He has published over fifty articles about IFS and other psychotherapy topics, along with several books including *Internal Family Systems, 2nd Edition* (2019); *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual: Trauma-Informed Treatment for Anxiety, Depression, PTSD & Substance Abuse* (2017); *You are the One You have Been Waiting For* (2008); *Introduction to Internal Family Systems Model* (2001); and the audio book published by Sounds True: *Greater than the Sum of Our Parts* – which is read by Dick and includes a collection of his guided meditations to meet and work with parts.

His latest book, *No Bad Parts*, published in June 2021, offers the reader a chance to discover, listen to and heal their own parts against the backdrop of understanding how parts work meets greater societal needs.