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Foreword by Alanis Morissette



Healing Trauma &
Restoring Wholeness with
**THE INTERNAL FAMILY
SYSTEMS MODEL**

No Bad Parts

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No Bad Parts

 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

If a factory is torn down but the rationality that produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a government but the patterns of thought that produced the government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves.¹

ROBERT PIRSIG

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with those we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.²

GUS SPETH

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depth of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.³

THOMAS MERTON

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ABOUT SOUNDS TRUE

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PRAISE FOR NO BAD PARTS

FOREWORD

I remember the moment I was formally introduced to Dick Schwartz's Internal Family Systems (IFS) work. I had flown to Asheville, North Carolina, in the midst of a second bout of postpartum depression to address the many underpinnings of my overwork, over-giving, and chronic overextension. This lifestyle has become increasingly normalized and celebrated even as it continues to wreak havoc on our physical, emotional, and relational lives. I was there for several days with Bryan Robinson, a seminal voice in work addiction recovery. I was deeply committed to looking at the elements of my internal world that kept me frozen yet frantic on life's increasingly quickening treadmill. I distinctly remember looking at Bryan at one point in the middle of a deep inquiry and asking him, "What is this, Bryan?" "This is Internal Family Systems," he said. I smiled at how graceful and deeply kind and all-embracing this work was. And how much more easily I could find my seat of awareness as I dialogued with many different parts within, some of whom have been yearning for attention for a very long time. It was in doing IFS work that I found an anchor, a place of warm neutrality and curious witnessing, a self-compassion that had been nearly impossible to will myself into offering to my own psyche.

I have been a "parts girl" since as far back as I can remember. I have always been obsessed with our complex, fragile, multitudinous, and fascinating human condition. When I started to work with IFS, I was buoyed by the idea of returning to our birthright of wholeness through offering attention and care to each "part" of myself as it adorably,

horrifyingly, ceaselessly, and sometimes painfully presented itself. It was encouraging that my angry part and my mother part and my artist part and my financially responsible (or irresponsible!) part and my free-spirit part could somehow bring wisdom to me if I but opened my heart and my curiosity to them. Each part—as scary or illuminating or mysterious as it may appear to be—could offer wisdom and solace and vision. I came to see these internal parts as messengers. Dialoguing with them could offer helpful guidance and insight. The whole system of my many “selves” could thereby integrate into my everyday personality and life. These parts could even dialogue *with* and *among* each other, facilitated by my highest Self. In doing so, there would emerge clarity, ideas, or answers to seemingly insurmountable, complicated questions about my life. These answers would come fast and furious as I communicated through words, writing, movement, and art with the many parts within, even and especially the parts that scared me the most.

In my internal world, I encountered my own murderous rage, my shame, terrors, depression, aches and yearnings, humiliations, and grief. In addition to these “dark” or “bad” parts that seemed to want to doom me to repeated patterns and painful habits, there were equally “light” or “good” parts that also required my courage to open to the visionary parts; the generous parts; the intelligent parts; the leadership parts; the gifted, sensitive, empathic parts. Some parts seemed easier to dialogue with than others. Some felt riskier and downright threatening to embrace. The deeper I went into Dick’s IFS work, the more his words and teaching rang liberatingly true. That each part, however harrowing its acting-out, however hidden, confusing, or painful, had the best of intentions and held helpful messages for me. Without fail, *each* part, whether an exile, manager, or protector, had profoundly kind and wise insights for me from my highest Self, if I but took the time to be there with them.

In the process of becoming more and more familiar with IFS, a rich sense of spirituality emerged. It was the soulful reward for allowing this curiosity to ever so slowly open up my bound heart. I saw that this Self that dialogues with all the egoic parts *is* my/the soul. Dwelling in this awareness allowed me to have a direct, physically felt sense of god/love/spirit/compassion. I came to see that the true dialogue began when I found this “seat” of Self. I would recognize it when I would begin to feel the agendaless-ness of the IFS “eight Cs”: creativity, courage, curiosity, a sense of connection, compassion, clarity, calm, confidence.

What had felt daunting to me my whole life—going within to take responsibility for or inquire about my urges, compulsions, triggers, and reactions—slowly became somewhat exciting. Dick Schwartz took all the Jungian and shadow work I have done to a whole other level of healing.

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.

Alanis Morissette

San Francisco, California

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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 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.”¹

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 the inherent goodness and ingenuity of humanity.”² 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.

PART ONE



Internal Family Systems

CHAPTER ONE

We're All Multiple

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

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

In other words, all of us are born with many sub-minds that are constantly interacting inside of us. This is in general what we call *thinking*,

because the parts are talking to each other and to you constantly about things you have to do or debating the best course of action, and so on. Remembering a time when you faced a dilemma, it's likely you heard one part saying, "Go for it!" and another saying, "Don't you dare!" Because we just consider that to be a matter of having conflicted thoughts, we don't pay attention to the inner players behind the debate. IFS helps you not only start to pay attention to them, but also become the active internal leader that your system of parts needs.

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

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

This approach makes sense if you view these inner obstacles as merely irrational thoughts or extreme emotions that come from your unitary mind. If you fear giving a presentation, for example, you might try to use willpower to override the fear or correct it with rational thoughts. If the fear persists, you might escalate your attempts to control by criticizing yourself for being a coward, numbing yourself into oblivion, or meditating to climb above it. And when none of those approaches work, you wind up adapting your life to the fear—avoiding situations where you have to speak in public, feeling like a failure, and wondering what's wrong with you. To make matters worse, you go to a therapist who gives you a diagnosis for your one, troubled mind. The diagnosis makes you feel defective, your self-esteem drops, and your feelings of shame lead you to attempt to hide any flaws and present a perfect image to the world. Or maybe you just withdraw from relationships for fear that people will see

behind your mask and will judge you for it. You identify with your weaknesses, assuming that who you really are is defective and that if other people saw the real you, they'd be repulsed.

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

Queer Eye star Jonathan Van Ness¹

A Brief History

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

We can’t blame this sort of thinking solely on religion, however. Generations of philosophers and politicians have asserted that primal impulses lurk just beneath the civilized veneer we present to the world. While Freud contributed important insights regarding the psyche, many of which are compatible with IFS, his drive theory was highly influential and pessimistic about human nature. It asserted that beneath the mind’s surface lies selfish, aggressive, and pleasure-seeking instinctual forces that unconsciously organize our lives. Dutch historian Rutger Bregman

summarizes these underlying assumptions about human nature here: “The doctrine that humans are innately selfish has a hallowed tradition in the Western canon. Great thinkers like Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Luther, Calvin, Burke, Bentham, Nietzsche, Freud, and America’s Founding Fathers each had their own version of the veneer theory of civilization.”³

Willpower and Shame

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

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

Because this willpower ethic has become internalized, we learn at an early age to shame and manhandle our unruly parts. We simply wrestle them into submission. One part is recruited by this cultural imperative to become our inner drill sergeant and often becomes that nasty inner critic we love to hate. This is the voice that tries to shame us or attempts to outright get rid of parts of us that seem shame-worthy (the ones that give us nasty thoughts about people, for example, or keep us addicted to substances).

We often find that the harder we try to get rid of emotions and thoughts, the stronger they

become.

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

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

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

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

Parts Aren't Obstacles

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

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

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

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

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

'The ego' is often spoken about as if it is some sort of self-existing thing that at times takes us over—some nasty, super unspiritual, ignorant little person living inside—and causes us to act in really unevolved ways creating unending messes in our lives and getting in the way of our progress on the path. It is

something to be horribly ashamed of and the more spiritual we are the more we will strive to ‘get rid of it,’ transcend it, or enter into imaginary spiritual wars with it. If we look carefully, we may see that if the ego is anything, it is likely those very voices that are yelling at us to get rid of it.⁸

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

Later we’ll look more closely at some of the ways people practice spiritual bypassing—a phrase coined by John Welwood in the 1980s. Jeff Brown explores the phenomenon in depth in his film *Karmageddon*: “After my childhood, I needed the kinds of spirituality that would keep me from allowing the pain to surface.... I was confusing self-avoidance with enlightenment.”⁹ In fact, one central message in the canonical story of the Buddha’s awakening is that thoughts and desires are the primary obstacles to enlightenment. As he sat in meditation beneath the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha was assaulted by a series of impulses and urges—lust, desire, fulfillment, regret, fear, insecurity, and so on—and it was only by ignoring or resisting them that he was able to attain enlightenment.

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

Why would you want to converse with thoughts and emotions? They can't talk back, can they? Well, it turns out that they can. In fact, they have a lot of important things to tell us.

How I Came to Learn About Parts

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

The only problem was the approach didn't work. I did an outcome study with bulimic clients and discovered with alarm that they kept bingeing and purging, not realizing they'd been cured. When I asked them why, they started talking about these different parts of them. And they talked about these parts as if they had a lot of autonomy—as if they could take over and make them do things they didn't want to do. At first, I was scared that I was looking at an outbreak of Multiple Personality Disorder, but then I started listening inside myself and I was shocked to find that I had parts too. In fact, some of mine were fairly extreme.

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

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

At first, I tried to get clients to relate to these parts in a way that would shut them out or get them to stop. For example, I suggested ignoring the critical part or arguing with it. This approach just made things worse, but I