

CHAPTER 3

The Self

Looking, observing, listening, heeding, understanding, feeling with, communicating, loving—we can do all this with our parts. But who is doing the looking? The listening? The loving? Esoteric spiritual traditions have various names for the seat of consciousness. Quakers call it the *Inner Light*; Buddhists call it *rigpa*, meaning Buddha mind or Buddha nature; Hindus call it *Atman* or the Self; 13th-century German theologian, philosopher, and mystic Meister Eckhart called it the *Godseed*; and Sufis call it the *Beloved* or the *God within*. (For an extensive discussion of how the Self of IFS relates to these aspects of spiritual traditions, see Schwartz & Falconer, 2017.) In IFS terms, the key to mental balance and harmony is to access our seat of consciousness, which we call the *Self*. The plural mind revolves around the Self, and when parts lack access to its centrifugal force, they get into tugs-of-war and threaten to fly off in all directions. In contrast, they center like clay on a potter's wheel once they have access to the Self.

We are all born with a Self. It does not develop through stages or borrow strength and wisdom from the therapist, and it cannot be damaged. It can, however, be occluded or overwhelmed by parts. We call this *blending*. When a part blends fully, we see the world through its eyes. When a part blends partially, its perspective influences us. When polarized parts blend, we live in the midst of an ongoing debate and have no peace of mind. But when parts unblend, the Self is immediately present and available. When the Self accepts and loves parts—perhaps a child who was terrorized into submission, or an angry teenager who was exiled for standing up to persecution—those parts transform back into who they were meant to be. The Self-led mind is self-righting and has plenty of room for all feelings, views, and parts. In addition, the Self is not a passive observer. Once

parts differentiate, the Self is a compassionate, collaborative leader that can be active or still as needed. Though the Self has been known and named in spiritual traditions all around the world for centuries, and most of us can remember at least a few spacious moments of inner peace that denote the Self, for many therapists it remains the most challenging concept of the IFS model. In this chapter we explore the Self in greater depth.

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THE "I" IN THE STORM

As soon as extremely polarized protectors stand down, clients consistently shift into openhearted curiosity and know just what to say or do to help extreme parts. This shift involves an inner presence that observes and interacts with parts but is not a part. Although many therapies and religions speak of a nonjudgmental true self, they describe an essentially passive, witnessing state of mind. In contrast to this view, therapists who have used IFS over the past three decades verify that everyone can access the active, compassionate leader we call the Self, which is characterized by clarity, perspective, compassion, and other qualities that constitute effective leadership. This is true no matter how severe their symptoms or how initially polarized their internal system.

When the Self is differentiated from parts, people experience what we are calling a *Self-led state of mind*. In this book we present various strategies that promote the differentiation of parts from the Self (see also Anderson, Sweezy, & Schwartz, 2017). Clients whose parts are willing to differentiate describe feeling centered, calm, and light, with a pervasive sense of well-being. They demonstrate confidence and openheartedness. They have a greater sense of choice. Many also gain access to an exhilarating sense of connection to others and the universe, similar to the state described by experienced practitioners of meditation and spiritual seekers who use psychedelics.

As a doctoral student, psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (2008) searched for the source of human happiness. After interviewing many people, he concluded that any activity, including sports, auto mechanics, art, reading, and even housecleaning can bring a sense of fulfillment if the activity helps the person to access a certain state of mind, which he dubbed *flow*. The flow state of mind is characterized by confidence, deep concentration, and a lack of concern for reward beyond the activity itself, along with the sense of mastery and well-being, of stepping out of the constraints of time, of losing self-consciousness, and, finally, of transcendence. Csikszentmihalyi inferred from his research that flow is a universal, positive human phenomenon. Buddhists are circling the same phenomenon when

they talk about mindfulness, as are IFS practitioners who talk about Self-leadership and being Self-led.

Nevertheless, the Self we find in IFS encompasses a strange and wonderful duality. In the *Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model* (2001), I (RS) elaborated on the dual nature of the Self as either an active inner leader or an expansive, boundaryless state of mind. To comprehend this duality, think of light: Quantum physics has demonstrated that the photons that make up light sometimes act like particles and sometimes like waves in a pool of water (Zohar, 1990). Similarly, the Self can be experienced either as an "I" or an expansive sense of space and energy. For example, when we interact with our parts or with other people the Self is a bounded individual, but when we are instead with our parts (or with other people) the experience of being "in Self" is expansive and inclusive—paradoxically, a kind of "no self" state of mind. As IFS therapists, our primary job is to help clients access this prized state of mind in both forms; our secondary job is to get out of the way as our clients become healers of their own inner families.

THE NATURE OF THE SELF

Some spiritual teachings differentiate between a "higher Self" and a more mundane executive self, which Freud (1923/1961) termed the *ego*. But our clinical experience using IFS argues against this dichotomy. What Freud called the *ego* is, in our view, a collection of manager parts. The Self of IFS interacts with parts and is also transcendent. As an entity, it is available to hear competing perspectives, to nurture, and to problem-solve. As a wave, it is one with the universe and other people as if, at that level, all waves overlap in ultimate commonality. Parts find the relationship with the Self incredibly reassuring, but to reap the benefits of being with the Self, they must first risk differentiating from and noticing the Self—a frightening prospect for many protectors. This shift in a person's center of gravity and identity from parts and their burdens to essence (Self) signifies enlightenment in most spiritual traditions. When we see through the eyes of parts, the world looks very different than when we see through the eyes of the Self.

SELF-LEADERSHIP

Our core Self, the soul that is revered in spiritual traditions, encompasses curiosity, compassion, calm, confidence, courage, clarity, creativity, connectedness, and kindness. It is, however, easily obscured by protective parts

who take over when we get terrified or feel shamed. When protectors take over, we identify with and feel dominated by their beliefs about, for example, how dangerous the world is or how weak we are. Even when we get a peek at our connection to something bigger than ourselves, or glimpse our true inner goodness and strength, these often feel like exceptions to reality. Although we don't easily view spaciousness as our birthright, it is who we are and we can live from that place even while we go about our daily activities or when we are in conflict with someone else.

In the Self-led state, we manifest precious qualities such as open-hearted interest in and intuitive wisdom about how to relate with the people around us. We can't, however, command ourselves to be curious rather than contemptuous of our vulnerable parts. We can't force ourselves to feel compassion, no matter how much we believe in its benefits. So how do we get there? How do clients get there? When clients are willing to focus inward and seek guidance about how best to separate extreme parts with their distorted emotions and thoughts, their Self is released and the qualities they need to be good leaders show up spontaneously. In IFS we have the client focus first on what we call a *trailhead*. This is an emotion, image, inner voice, thought, physical sensation, or impulse that, when brought into focus and followed, will lead to a part.

The trailheads we find and follow in therapy sessions are usually the manifestation of a part in distress. We ask the client how she feels toward the target part from which the emotion, image, voice, etc., emanates. If other parts of her are afraid of it or dislike it, we ask those parts to relax and make room so we can get to know the target part. If reactive parts cooperate and relax, the client immediately feels calmer and more curious. Since these feelings automatically emerge as soon as parts separate, we access the Self-energy that is already there, and we don't have to ask the client to make an effort to feel any particular way. The one caveat in this process is that it requires at least some willingness to find out if the Self exists and some curiosity when experiencing the Self. Without willingness and curiosity, we may view experiences of the Self as delightful aberrations or illusions, unattainable in everyday life. If we have no idea who we really are, we cannot consistently be that person. The more we trust the Self to be there, just beneath our parts, the better we are able to access it.

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AN EXAMPLE OF MEETING THE SELF

Following is an example of introducing a client to his Self. Javier had always felt oppressed by and scared of his inner critic. When he focused on the critic in this session, he found it in his head and declared, "Oh I hate listening to this!"

THERAPIST: Would the part who hates listening to the critic be willing to relax for a bit and let you listen—not to give the critic more power, but to get to know it and help it move out of its job?

[The therapist does not assume any gender for parts, so defaults to "it" until clients indicate otherwise, if they do.]

JAVIER: Well . . . okay.

THERAPIST: How do you feel toward it now?

JAVIER: I wonder why he does this to me?

[The client indicates a gender.]

THERAPIST: Ask him.

[The therapist follows the client's lead.]

JAVIER: Hmm. He started off menacing me like this gigantic version of my grandfather. But when I asked why, he suddenly looked like a child.

THERAPIST: How do you feel toward him now?

[Javier looks calmer and more confident.]

JAVIER: I feel sorry for him. He says he wants me to do everything perfectly so no one will criticize me. I wonder if he knows how unproductive it is to act like the man who used to beat me up.

THERAPIST: Is he getting that?

JAVIER: He looks sheepish. He didn't mean to cause a problem. But he doesn't believe he can stop.

THERAPIST: Would he like to stop?

JAVIER: Yes.

THERAPIST: What is he concerned would happen if he stopped?

JAVIER: If I'm not perfect, I'll be criticized and rejected.

THERAPIST: So he protects parts who were hurt that way in the past?

JAVIER: Hmm . . . yes. It seems like he does.

THERAPIST: If we could heal those parts so they were no longer so vulnerable to rejection, would he still need to criticize you?

JAVIER: Well, he doesn't think that's possible.

THERAPIST: Ask him how old he thinks you are.

JAVIER: Ten.

THERAPIST: Tell him how old you really are and see how he reacts.

JAVIER: He's shocked. He can't believe it. He thought I was still a weak, scared kid.

THERAPIST: How does he respond to you?

JAVIER: He doesn't know what I want.

THERAPIST: What do you say?

JAVIER: I'm here to help.

THERAPIST: Would he like your help?

JAVIER: He asks what will happen to him.

THERAPIST: He'll always be a part of you, but once he doesn't have to protect this boy anymore, he'll be free to choose a new role. What would he want to do if he was liberated from this job?

JAVIER: Mainly he wants to rest. But he doesn't know me well enough to trust me.

THERAPIST: Fair enough. What do you say to him?

JAVIER: I ask him to give me a chance to earn his trust. . . . Okay. He's willing to try that.

After this exchange, the critic gave Javier permission to go to the 10-year-old he protected, who was stuck in scenes in which his volatile grandfather was attacking him. Because Javier took over and knew just how to relate to the boy, the therapist mostly served as a witness. This is common in IFS therapy because the client's Self knows how to love and help parts. Even people who have never been nurtured in their lives know how to take care of their parts once they access their Self. Just as our bodies are equipped to heal physical injuries, we are equipped to heal emotionally.

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A POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

The idea that our essence is pure joy and peace, and that we can lead and heal from that place runs counter to what most of us are taught. Various negative views of human nature have permeated Western culture, particularly after St. Augustine asserted that desire is a curse embedded in human nature (Schwartz & Falconer, 2017). Although Augustine's Christian forebears believed that we are born blessed, Augustine chose to focus on a Biblical allegory of minor importance at the time, which his contemporaries considered embarrassing (Greenblatt, 2017). In this tale God shames and exiles a couple (Adam and Eve) for disobeying an order and eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In blunter terms, God punishes the couple for enjoying sex. For Augustine personally, this tale of "original sin" was probably most compelling because it captured his own long struggle to deny his libido and obey his Christian mother. Bemoaning the independent life of his penis (which he reportedly enjoyed with gusto for many years), he popularized the notion that desire drives humans from

blissful ignorance to powerless suffering, and must therefore be handled with Sisyphean self-denial (Greenblatt, 2017).

Other pessimists on the topic of human nature have used the lens of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to put a scientific cast on the story of original sin, positing that our nature mirrors the competitive, winner-take-all environment in which we evolved. This idea, too, has been hugely influential. Freud argued, and behavioral and evolutionary theories of psychology teach, that we are motivated to expand our gene pool by maximizing pleasure, illustrating how psychology echoes both the Christian narrative of the Fall and the scientific narrative of the "selfish gene" (Dawkins, 1976).

In another twist, attachment theory in developmental psychology asserts that our basic nature is dependent on the parenting we receive (Ainsworth, 1982; Bowlby, 1988). If we were fortunate enough to have reasonably good parenting during certain critical periods in our early development, then we are likely to come out of childhood with enough ego strength to function. But if not we're out of luck. We are doomed to remain broken until we have some kind of corrective reparenting experience from a therapist or significant other. According to this perspective, we need to internalize or be taught morality, empathy, and respect, and our most valuable qualities don't exist unless they are nurtured in external relationships—implying that we, as therapists, must try to give clients what they lack, while they must internalize us.

This myth of environmental dependency dominates our learning theories and our educational system, underestimates clients, pulls for unnecessary dependence, and overburdens therapists. If we are inherently weak or severely damaged by trauma then we must rely on therapists to be our good attachment figures. The relationship with the therapist is supposed to help us develop an ego that can self-regulate. In IFS, we rely on the relationship with the therapist to help us release our already developed and undamaged Self so that we can Self-regulate and Self-nurture, as we are equipped to do. This is not to imply that the therapist–client relationship is unimportant in IFS. On the contrary, as we describe in Chapter 6, it is extremely important. (See also the chapter I [RS] wrote on this topic in the book *Internal Family Systems Therapy: New Dimensions* [Sweezy & Ziskind, 2013] and much of what Dan Siegel has written in the last 20 years, including his 2012 book, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*.)

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THE RESOURCES OF THE SELF-LED PERSON

The sections that follow describe the qualities of the Self that are most relevant for healing. Oddly enough, they all begin with the letter C.

Curiosity

In addition to containing many possibilities, the beginner's mind is full of wonder. We are born inquisitive, and we naturally continue to be curious when we are not busy judging. When we face another person's anger, we can be curious if our vision isn't occluded by past experience and activated parts. When we ask what happened, the angry person will sense interest rather than fear and judgment. If we don't feel defensive, we can wonder what inner injury the angry part is protecting. Curiosity is at the heart of IFS therapy. The Self brings agenda-free interest to inner voices, sensations, feelings, and thoughts—and to external relationships as well. In all arenas, pure, guileless curiosity disarms. When we are interested, even our own inner demons (contemptuous, racist, misogynist, self-attacking parts) sense the safety and opportunity to lead the way to the hidden treasure of vulnerability.

Calm

Many people, especially those who have experienced trauma, feel constantly tense, like a tightly wound spring. This ongoing state of arousal predisposes them to overreact to challenging people and events. Self-leadership, in contrast, is characterized by a pervasive calm that is both physical and mental. Clients who embody the Self are more even-keeled and resilient. The Self can relieve protective parts of adult responsibilities and outdated fears. Clients who have lived in a state of inner frenzy can achieve true equanimity. Clients who have been torn between the extremes of emotional overwhelm and a sense of numb deadness can experience the natural flow of emotion coming and going in waves. And when the waves get high, they can trust their ability to return to the Self-led state after the storm subsides because their Self has become an active leader that notices and comforts its activated parts. Just as external human systems are less polarized when led by respected, trusted leaders, internal systems that trust Self-leadership are calmer.

Confidence

We can take it as a sign that the wounds of our exiles are not healed when current slights echo accumulated hurts, and inner critics attack inside as other protectors jump to the barricades to defend us from others. The Self short-circuits this cycle by doing something completely unprecedented for the inner system: validating and comforting its exiles. We are born with the capacity to heal. Bacteria and viruses interfere with healing in the body. Beliefs and overwhelming feeling states (burdens) interfere with healing in the psyche. The Self has an infectious air of confidence, conveying to

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protector parts that it is safe to relax because instead of trying to “let it go and move on” (the typical protector advice that encourages people to abandon and isolate their burdened young parts), injuries can be healed. The Self’s confidence ignites an exemplary cycle: Exiles unburden, the system becomes less delicate and less reactive, and protective parts are more inclined to trust Self-leadership. Words like *grounded* and *solid* describe the effects of the Self’s confidence, and that confidence offers a platform of stability as we encounter challenges in the world.

Connectedness

In a letter in 1950, Albert Einstein wrote:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

The Self naturally has the sense of connectedness Einstein wrote about. Rather than needing to strive to feel connected, as we access our Self we just feel connected. In addition, because the Self wants to connect with parts and other people, even those whom we have previously feared or demonized, it motivates us to connect. Connectedness links with calm and confidence to echo something much bigger, sometimes called the *divine*.

Clarity

Clarity is the ability to perceive situations without the distorting effects of extreme beliefs and emotions (burdens). Our vision is clear when we see through the eyes of the Self, and it is distorted when we see through the eyes of extreme parts. Some distortions are weird and radical; others are mundane and common. We know that the thin person with anorexia who sees a fat person in the mirror is wildly off course, but when we cannot remember our perfect lover of yesterday because we feel disappointed, we may not be aware of our grave perceptual distortion. When we are blended with protective parts, we lose access to curiosity. Rather than being open to discovery, we fill up with the preconceptions, expectations, and visual distortions of our parts. When our parts step back and we look through

the eyes of the Self, inner monsters suddenly look like scared teenagers. In addition, we no longer fear our outer enemies because we can see the pain that drives their extremes.

Creativity

Scientists, inventors, and artists often describe inspiration emerging fully formed after hours, days, or even months of conscious, rational puzzling and consideration. Our experience with clients confirms that we can tap into creativity once inner noise diminishes and the Self rises. When manager parts who crowd our awareness are finally able to relax, we can suddenly problem-solve with spontaneous, out-of-the-box thinking that inspires more creativity as well as great pleasure and relief. When the part who says "I have no idea what to do next" steps back, clients spontaneously say, "I'm going to try this." Thus, therapists need not supply clients with missing interpretations, insights, suggestions, or directives because once the client's Self emerges, the client has access to creative solutions that are on target and surpass any suggestion another person could offer.

Courage

So far in this chapter we have emphasized the calm, compassionate, nurturing side of the Self, but when needed, the Self can also be forceful and protective. Indeed, martial arts release this side of Self-leadership. Though accepting and openhearted, the Self is not detached or passive in the face of injustice. Oppressors attack Self-led people because their energy undermines the oppressors' control. For the same reason, abusive adults attack qualities of the Self in children. Most clients who have been severely abused report being punished for showing spirit, spontaneity, and independence. In response, their protectors banished the Self from body and mind. For this reason it takes tremendous courage to go toward terrifying places in the psyche.

At the same time, a client need not have an extreme history for protectors to fear that Self-leadership will lead her to break out of denial and take risks they find unacceptable. Many protectors are reluctant to step out of their roles because they believe the person would be weak and passive without them. Protectors always have intense fears about allowing clients to open the door to the exiles they locked away years ago in inner basements, prisons, and caves. When a client says he is afraid to do something in the inner world, we know a part is speaking. But once the part perceives the fearless nature of the Self in the inner world, including with emotional pain, shame, rage, and terror, its fear subsides.

Of course, in addition to curiosity, calm, confidence, connectedness, clarity, creativity, courage, and compassion, the Self manifests many other

qualities: for example, perspective, joy, patience, kindness, gratitude, persistence, equanimity, playfulness, and especially love. Nevertheless, for the purposes of learning and teaching IFS therapy, the eight C-words suffice well to capture the healing essence of the Self.

Compassion

When you try IFS with clients, you will be as amazed to watch what happens as they get some separation from parts they hate or fear, especially angry and frightened parts. Out of the blue they will suddenly say, "I feel so sorry for this part! I want to help it." That inherent desire to help parts (or people) who are suffering signifies compassion. It springs from connectedness, the intuitive understanding that we cannot be separate. You are me, and I am you. Inevitably, your suffering affects me, and your joy is also mine. For most people this is not a conscious thought; they just feel drawn to do something "meaningful" with their lives. From the IFS perspective, compassion is not a muscle that needs developing; it is an innate quality of the Self that gets obscured by burdens and needs to be released.

Whereas empathy involves *feeling with* another person, compassion involves *feeling for* another person, which motivates concern and the desire to help. While exploring compassion and empathy, neuroscientist Tania Singer (personal communication, November 2017) made a surprising discovery. Having expected to find that these two emotions use the same neuro pathway in the brain, they found instead that compassion uses reward circuitry whereas empathy (the experience of *feeling with*) uses pain circuitry. Although empathy can therefore overwhelm us with pain, a proportional dose enriches compassion. As a result, in IFS we don't ask parts to stop feeling strongly, but we do ask them to separate enough so that they don't overwhelm us with their strong feelings. When we are not able to attend to our exiles, we find it hard to tolerate the suffering of others. But when our exiles separate and communicate rather than overwhelm, the Self is present, protectors don't get activated, and we have compassion for our own parts as well as for other people who are suffering.

The Self in Action

Most of us are quite self-absorbed because our parts are stuck in extreme emotional states and carry extreme beliefs (we call these *burdens*, as we discuss in the next chapter), which keep us feeling separate from other people, from nature, and from the earth. Burdens cause us to ruminate about changing the past, being secure, or having pleasure. Or they just keep us in our heads with random thoughts. As T. S. Eliot wrote, "We are distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty of meaning."

Many spiritual traditions view this inner chatter as a product of what Freud called the ego. But the IFS perspective is different. When we help our distracting parts relax and our exiles unburden, all this activity and noise inside drops off and we have access to the courage and clarity of the Self, which shifts our perspective. Having been released from the optical delusion that we are all separate, we see injustice clearly, we fear for our environment, and we are oriented to take action. Aware of the interconnectedness of everything, we move from being egocentric to being socio- and species-centric, bio- and earth-centric. Our compassion and our Self's awareness of connectedness move us to social or environmental action according to our individual abilities and resources. As Parker Palmer (2004) wrote, the soul (the Self) is "that life giving core of the human self, with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness . . . when we catch sight of the soul, we can become healers in a wounded world—in the family, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and in political life" (p. 2).

Where parts attune to the extremes of other parts, the Self sees the exiled pain beneath extremes and wants to understand its origin even while opposing extreme behaviors. Action led by the Self is more effective over time than parts-led action because its compassion-infused message is better able to slip past opponents' protectors and touch their Selves. In contrast, righteous, caretaking, or power-seeking parts polarize with each other, magnifying danger in the short run and giving rise to a hopeless sense of burnout and cynicism in the long run.

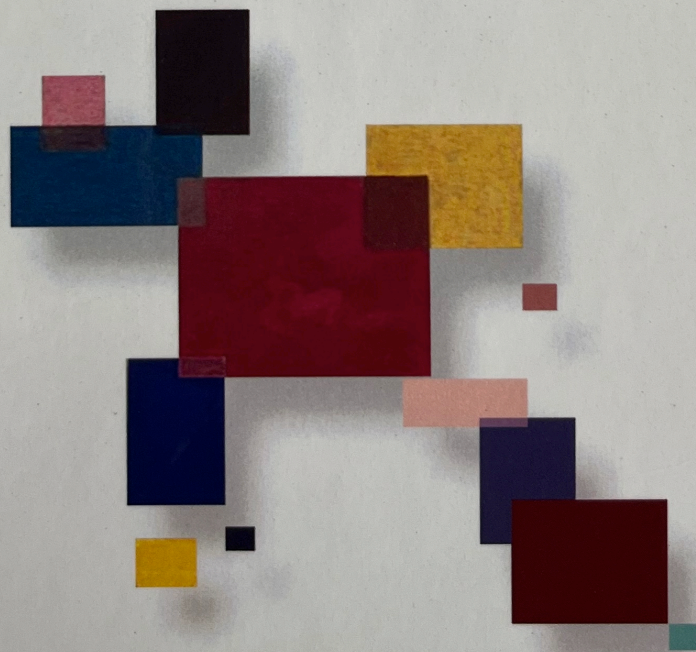
When needed, the courage, clarity, and confidence of the Self allow us to act forcefully and boldly while remaining calm and creatively flexible in the face of consequences. Indeed, the perspective of the Self gives us the systemic wisdom we need to anticipate consequences. I (RS) used to believe that the Self had no agenda, but over time I've realized I was wrong. The Self is not attached to any agenda, but it does have the intention and ability to bring healing, harmony, balance, and connectedness to any system it encounters. The larger goal of IFS is simply to give us all more access to our Selves and to bring more Self-energy to our planet.

CONCLUSION

The Self has its own chapter in this book because it is the centerpiece of the model. IFS asserts that the Self exists, cannot be damaged, can often be accessed quickly, knows how to heal, moves to correct inner or outer injustice with an open heart, and becomes the good attachment presence for parts and people alike. With this perspective, the process of therapy may be challenging, but the plan is clear. Every bit of guidance and every clinical example in this book aims to help you and your clients access the Self.

INTERNAL
FAMILY
SYSTEMS
THERAPY

SECOND EDITION



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