



*You  
Are the  
One*

*You've Been Waiting For*

APPLYING  
INTERNAL FAMILY  
SYSTEMS TO  
INTIMATE  
RELATIONSHIPS

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# *Acknowledgments*

The words in this book are well earned. I have had relationships with many people that could be considered intimate, and I have learned from all of them. Some of my best teachers have been the clients who have allowed me to experiment with their internal and external families and who have challenged my parts. I'm grateful to them all.

My first wife Nancy taught me a great deal about intimate partnerships and suffered while I was learning. My second wife, Jeanne, while having benefited from that learning, has also helped me to find and heal many more parts—making me realize that this intimacy thing is a life-long process, and I'm so grateful to her for putting up with me.

A lot of the ideas in this book were the product of discussions with IFS senior trainers as we explored how to bring IFS to couples. There were many such contributors, but in particular I want to thank Toni Herbine-Blank, who has an amazing intuition for these issues, and Susan McConnell, who is wise about all kinds of things.

Finally, for much of my career, I have mostly worked with heterosexual, cisgendered couples. That has changed in recent years, although the examples in this book reflect my observations from the majority of my clinical time. I do feel that many of the insights and practices are generally valid regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, and I also acknowledge that those reading this book who are not heterosexual and/or cisgendered may feel that this book does not adequately give voice to the dynamics and often highly challenging cultural constraints of their intimate relationships.

# *Introduction*

The time will come when, with elation,  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror, and each will  
smile at the other's welcome and say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was your self.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you  
all your life, whom you have ignored  
for another . . .

**DEREK WALCOTT, *COLLECTED POEMS 1948–1984***

It's my first session with Kurt and Marissa. Marissa breaks the early tension by stating that they are desperate and I may be their last hope. They have been miserable for four years and have gone through three other marital therapists as well as several weekend retreats for couples. Religiously they practice the communication skills they have been taught and sometimes find them helpful in the moment, but the structure falls apart once either of them touches a sore spot in the other. In therapy they have even found livable compromises to several chronic issues, but their overall dissatisfaction with each other hasn't really changed.

Kurt concurs, adding that he feels helpless and despairing. He'd had many relationships but waited to marry until he felt totally sure that he'd found the right partner. He says, "We were so in love, have so much in common, and are both intelligent. Why isn't this working? I've always succeeded in my life. When I find something I want and work hard to get it, I succeed. When I face a problem head-on, I can solve it. This marriage thing is my one big failure."

There are many couples like Kurt and Marissa. Earnestly battling the demons that our culture and its relationship experts implicate, such as poor communication and lack of empathy, they feel bloodied and beaten by their inability to make it work. They alternate between blaming each other and themselves for not being able to bring harmony into their homes and satisfaction to one of the most important relationships in their lives.

What if the premise itself is to blame? What if there were no way that Kurt and Marissa could succeed, no matter how perfect their communication or how much they compromised and empathized? Couples are told that if they could just accommodate each other enough, they would be happy. Each partner is asked what they need from the other, and therapy is designed to find ways that each can change to meet the other's needs. What if there is an essential flaw in this accommodation premise that sets up couples to fail?

I believe that there is. Conditions exist within each partner and in the context of their lives that, if left unchanged, will preclude finding the intimate, mutually supportive, and respectful connection they crave. This book will describe those conditions and offer a clear path to changing them. It will help couples replace the controlling, dependent, possessive, or distant relating they have come to expect and dread with something I call *courageous love*.

When each partner has courageous love for the other, many of the chronic struggles most couples face melt away because each partner is released from being primarily responsible for making the other feel good. Instead, each knows how to care for their own vulnerability, so neither has to force the other into a preconceived mold or control the other's journey.

Courageous love involves accepting all parts of the other because there is no longer a need to keep the other in the confining roles of parent/redeemer/

ego booster/protector. The other senses that acceptance and freedom, which feel wonderful and unusual to them. They come to trust that they don't have to protect themselves from you and can keep their heart open.

Thus this ability to care for yourself emotionally permits the intimacy you seek because you have the courage to allow your partner to come close or get distant without overreacting. With less fear of losing or being hurt by your partner, you can embrace them fully and delight in their love for you.

Is this a far cry from your experience of relationship? Are you thinking, *That sounds nice, but where am I going to find someone who is evolved enough to treat me that way?* You may not have to look as far as you think. If you and your partner can take what I call a *U-turn* (you-turn) in your focus and begin to relate differently inside yourselves, you will each find that courageous love becomes a spontaneous way of life rather than something you must strive to achieve. You will also find that your partner doesn't have to take care of you because there is so much support you can get from yourself.

In our second session, I proposed to Kurt and Marissa that they take that U-turn, and they reacted the way most couples do initially. Marissa said, "I'm willing to look at my part in this, but what about the way Kurt digs at my self-esteem? It's a rare day when he doesn't find something to criticize." Kurt was equally resistant: "Am I supposed to work on myself, so I just accept Marissa's lack of interest in sex? Do you expect me to be okay with a sexless marriage?"

What I propose in this book is a hard sell in Western culture. We are primarily oriented toward getting from our partners what we need to feel good and don't believe we can get much from ourselves. We want to transform the source of pain in the outside world rather than the source within us. That external focus—and the therapies of accommodation that subscribe to it—will only provide temporary relief at best from the inner and outer storms that gradually erode the fertile topsoil of our relationships. There is another way, and we will explore it in this book. Before we do, however, let's further examine the problems with this accommodation premise.



## THE THREE PROJECTS

For reasons that will be discussed at length in the pages to come, your partner cannot succeed in making you feel good in a lasting way. For example, if you have had a hard life filled with rejection and loneliness, their love can only temporarily lift the cloud of worthlessness and self-loathing that will return whenever they are away or in another mood. If you enter the relationship expecting them to be that kind of redeemer, inevitably you will be disappointed at some point.

Our Western culture, and many of the relationship experts in it, have issued us faulty maps and improper tools. We've been told that the love we need is a buried treasure hidden in the heart of a special intimate partner. Once we find that partner, the love we crave should flow elixir-like, filling our empty spaces and healing our pain.

When that love stops flowing, even momentarily, we get scared and go to work on one of three projects. The first two of these are designed to get our partner back into that loving redeemer role. The third project is to give up on that endeavor and find alternatives.

The first, and most common, project involves directly trying to force our partner to change back. Some of us get out the blunt saws, scalpels, or dynamite in an attempt to break through the crust surrounding their heart. We plead, criticize, demand, negotiate, seduce, withhold, and shame—all in an effort to get them to change. Most partners resist our crude attempts to perform open-heart surgery on them. They sense the implicit criticism or manipulation behind these change attempts and become defensive.

The second project is to use many of those same crude tools on ourselves. First we strive to figure out what our partner doesn't like about us and then try to sculpt ourselves into what we think they want, even if that is a far cry from our true nature. We use self-criticism and shame to cut out parts of our personalities or pounds off our bodies, hoping that if we please them, they will love us. Because this self-transformation project isn't authentic, it usually backfires, too.

The final project kicks in once we give up on getting the love we crave from our partner. At that point, we begin to close our heart to them and

(1) search for a different partner, (2) numb or distract from the pain and emptiness enough to stay with the original one, or (3) numb and distract enough to live alone.

All of these are exiling projects. In the first, we try to get our partner to exile the parts of them that threaten us. In the second, we work to exile the parts of us that we think they don't like. In the third, we exile the parts of us that are attached to them. As I will discuss later, whenever a relationship creates exiles, it will pay a price.

Although couples enter therapy complaining of all kinds of issues, usually it isn't hard to discern some combination of these three projects behind their dysfunctional patterns of interaction. This is because most of us carry inner vaults full of pain, shame, and emptiness; and most of us know how to deal with these emotions other than to numb or distract from them until we finally get the love of that special other person.

## **ROMANTIC RESCUE: DEBBIE'S STORY**

Best-selling author Debbie Ford describes her own struggle with her inner worthlessness in this way. "By the time I was five years old, I was all too familiar with the voice in my head telling me that I wasn't good enough, that I wasn't wanted, and that I didn't belong. Deep inside I believed there was something wrong with me, and I went to great lengths to conceal my flaws."<sup>1</sup> This statement could have been made by any number of my clients or by me. Each of us then must find ways to manage all that inner angst until we find the person whose love, we have been taught, will make it disappear.

When Debbie was a child, her angst-managing strategy was to use charm and good grades to keep a steady stream of approval flowing into her to drown out the negative voice, until that no longer worked. "When I couldn't find someone to validate me or tell me I was okay, I would sneak across the street to the nearby 7-Eleven and buy a package of Sara Lee brownies and a bottle of Coca-Cola. That dose of sugar really seemed to do the trick." When she was twelve, however, Debbie's parents decided to divorce, and the pain and shame of that sudden event ignited all the burning emotions

she had been containing and added to her deep-seated fear that she was flawed, damaged, and had been dealt a bad lot in life.<sup>2</sup>

A version of that plaintive question, “Won’t that special someone come and love me?” dwells in most of us and drives our treasure hunts and crude attempts at open-heart surgery. In those dark moments we feel so bereft, so despairing, so alone that some kind of romantic rescue seems like the only real solution. Many messages we get from friends, family, and the media reinforce our attachment to that elusive solution.

Debbie continued to use achievement and perfect appearance to keep her head out of the inner morass of self-loathing but found that they weren’t enough. “I began trying to quiet the constant internal noise by drowning myself in drugs. I was hypnotized by the continuous internal dialogue, by the story I told myself over and over again about how I would never make it, how I would never have the love, security, and inner peace I so desperately desired.”<sup>3</sup>

Predictably, her frantic search for respite led her on a series of treasure hunts. “In my twenties, I added men to my prescription for pain relief. Unfortunately, my relationships with men always seemed to backfire. They began with a high that held the promise of salvation and ended with a low that left me deeper in the hole than when I began.”<sup>4</sup>

That last sentence summarizes the experience of most of us. We feel intense elation when we find our designated redeemer who will love us and prove that we aren’t worthless after all—who will provide the salvation we’ve been seeking.

The problem we will explore in this book is that our partner can no more cleanse our sense of unworthiness than can food, drugs, achievement, or perfect appearance. Consequently, they will disappoint those desperate parts of us, leaving us deeper in the hole of hopelessness and despair, at which point we will initiate one of the three projects discussed earlier.

## BECOMING THE PRIMARY CARETAKER OF YOUR PARTS

Fortunately, there is a way to unload the pain and shame that drive these patterns. The first step toward that goal is to shift your focus. Like Debbie, most of us scramble to avoid our inner life and keep our attention fixed on external solutions that include finding or changing a designated redeemer. I try to get couples to do a complete U-turn in their focus, moving them toward, rather than away from, the inner worlds in which they fear to tread.

When people listen deeply inside, they encounter a host of different feelings, fantasies, thoughts, impulses, and sensations that make up the background noise of our everyday experience of being in the world. When people remain focused on and ask questions of one of those inner experiences, they find that it is more than merely a transient thought or emotion. Within each of us is a complex family of subpersonalities, which I call *parts*.<sup>5</sup> These parts are the reasons we can simultaneously have so many contradictory and confusing needs. The American poet Walt Whitman got it right in “Song of Myself”: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes).”<sup>6</sup> So do we all contain multitudes. Thus, the Oracle of Delphi’s admonition to “know thyself” should really be to “know thyselfes.”

I call these often-quarreling subpersonalities parts because when I first started doing this kind of work, that is how my clients referred to them. “Part of me wants to stay married and faithful, but another part wants to be free to get laid every night of the week with a different woman,” a client might say. Another would report, “I know I’m successful at my job, but there’s a part of me that says it’s only a matter of time until my wife finds out how stupid and incompetent I really am.” The critical voice that harangued Debbie Ford with so much self-loathing is an example of one common type of part called a *protector*, which tried to keep her from taking risks by running down her confidence. The more vulnerable inner childlike part that believed her critic and, as a consequence, felt worthless and empty is an example of a type of part I call an *exile*.

When I first started doing this kind of work, I was amazed to find that if I could establish a safe, accepting atmosphere in our sessions, clients could

have inner discussions with their parts. In a powerful state of internal focus, they could dialogue with their parts about what motivated them to react in such irrational or self-defeating ways. As they listened to their parts' stories, what at first seemed irrational suddenly began to make sense as many parts let the clients know that they were stuck at points in the past when the behaviors or beliefs were understandable and even necessary.

You can become your own healer—the special person your vulnerable parts have been waiting for. When that happens, your partner will be released from the redeemer trap and its accompanying projects, and true intimacy will be possible.

In the past, this wasn't necessarily good news. It meant logging countless hours in a therapist's office, with the two of you speculating together about how you were hurt during your childhoods. Through those insights, you expected to feel less vulnerable, but you often didn't make much progress toward that goal. Fortunately, those days are over because it is now possible to quickly discover the source of your pain and shame and to pump it out of the parts of you that carry it. In the process, those parts come to trust and welcome you as their healer. Then they can love being with your partner.

## THE SELF

As clients learn to separate from their extreme emotions and thoughts (their parts) in this way, I find that they spontaneously tap into a calm, centered state, which I call their *Self*. I can sense when this happens in a session because it feels as though the very molecules in the atmosphere have shifted radically. My clients' faces and voices change, growing softer and more tranquil, and they become more open and tender, able to explore their parts without anger, defensiveness, or disdain. In accessing this state of Self, clients are tapping into something deeper and more foundational than all these conflicting inner warriors—something that spiritual traditions often call “soul” or “essence.” One aspect of this state is what many therapies call “mindfulness.” In this state of Self, clients realize that they already know how to take care of their inner exiles on their own and that

those parts don't need salvation because they were never bad to begin with. I refer to this state of Self as *Self-leadership*.

## **SELF-TO-SELF INTERACTION**

I found that when I helped each partner access this state of Self, a dramatic shift occurred in their interactions with each other about problems in their relationship. Their dialogues would be completely different from their usual ones, which were so protective and parts dominated. Even when discussing emotion-laden content, partners could hold a respectful and compassionate tone and were able to listen without defending themselves. Creative solutions, which were so elusive in previous attempts, would emerge spontaneously and without intervention from me.

## **SPEAKING FOR PARTS**

It wasn't that the feelings of clients' parts were absent from the exchanges—oftentimes they were talking about very strong emotions. It's that, because they remained a little separated from their parts, they could speak for those powerful feelings rather than being flooded by them and speaking from them. For example, in the past, Michael would have said to Marcia in a charged, judgmental voice, "I hate the way you interrupt me when I'm trying to make a point." When I was able to help him hold Self-leadership, he said, "When you interrupted me, it triggered an angry part of me that thinks you don't care about my feelings." Michael's tone remained compassionate, and he was able to stay curious about what was happening to Marcia that made her interrupt.

This book is designed to help you do two things that will make a remarkable difference in all your relationships, particularly your romantic ones. The first is that you—your Self—will become the primary caretaker of your exiles so that your partner can be their secondary caretaker. When that is the case, your protectors can abandon all their projects, and you can enjoy your partner for who they are, not what you want them to be. Ironically, in

turn, your partner will be better able to drop their guard enough to become vulnerable and reciprocate the love that you seek. The second thing you will gain from this book is that, increasingly, you will be able to interact with your partner from your Self, which not only will resolve, or make far less potent, the long-standing issues between you but also foster the sense of intimacy and deep connectedness that is sustaining to both of you.

I don't want to imply that achieving these goals will be easy. Many beliefs and forces in Western culture run counter to them, and we each carry personal baggage that makes it harder. It will take work, some of which may need to be done with a therapist. This book is designed to reorient that work—to help you work smarter instead of harder.

Let's begin by examining some of the cultural factors that make intimate relationships so challenging.