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## Preface

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**W**e fought every day for a year. I had wanted this man from the first time I saw him walk across a room. I married him, we had three great years, and then we could hardly move a desk or have a party without a struggle. Why did such a wonderful partnership have to deteriorate? We sat in a popular couples workshop and learned to take turns listening and speaking, but it didn't help. "It's just words," my husband said. He's not a psychologist—so I thought, "He just doesn't get it."

One day, in the middle of a fight, he just stopped. I kept going, feeling justified, upset, and needing to make him change, but he stayed steady, connected, open, and calm. What was this? If I was doing the usual arguing, defending, threatening, and distancing, why wasn't he?

He started a revolution in our relationship, which I now call "giving better back." It's giving better energy back, with less of the meanness, distance, or insult you feel is coming from your partner. So instead of, "You hurt me—you deserve the same back," it becomes, "You hurt me—I give you better back." I found that giving better back not only helped my marriage, it helped me. Not only was I freeing my husband from having to receive negativity from me, I was freeing myself from having it in myself in the first place. Giving better back became the guiding principle in my life and in my work as a psychologist specializing in couples therapy.

When I look back on it now and realize the immensity of what my husband started, I feel a deep appreciation for his goodness and wisdom.

Then my colleagues persuaded me to take a course in Internal Family Systems<sup>SM</sup> (IFS) from Richard Schwartz. Reluctantly, I drove myself three hours to a Connecticut classroom, thinking all the way, “I don’t need to learn anything new. I’m getting great results in my practice, and I like what I already know.” But I listened to Richard explain how we all have different parts within ourselves, how sometimes these parts have to become extreme and take over with their anger, judgment or pain, and how we can stop fighting them and restore our natural state of “Self Leadership.” I was stunned. I realized that thinking, “A part of me wants . . . a part of me feels . . .” is not just a figure of speech. It’s true—we do have different parts that think, feel, and act in distinctly different and even opposite ways. Sometimes, Richard said, they can get extreme and make us shop too much, be mean to the people we love, or feel immersed in isolation. But we can get to know our parts, hear the stories that have locked them into extreme roles, and free them from isolation and limitation.

Here was a model that recognized how stuck things could get, yet there wasn’t a shred of judgment for the most extreme behaviors—only understanding. There was a way to access calm, spacious resources far more powerful than any problem—be it hopelessness, grinding repetition of unproductive behaviors, or the deepest despair. These resources, which Schwartz calls “Self” or “Self energy” (1995, 2001, 2004), have the same limitless and immanent qualities described in religious domains, but there was no bypass or dismissal of psychological problems. I believe that we all have basic goodness, so it was great to know that even my most extreme parts, like the ones that get angry or isolated or feel superior or inferior, are essentially good, too.

Not wanting to give up my seasoned professional identity and become a beginner again, I stalled, asking abstract intellectual questions in the morning session, thinking to myself, “I’m intelligent. I can tell Richard a thing or two.” That lasted about

an hour (I'm sure Richard and my colleagues were relieved when it was over). After that, I entered the world of IFS and let it enter me, so that now the two don't feel any different. IFS taught me how and why giving better back works, and why it improved my life as well as my relationship.

Now the old, repetitive fights with my husband don't start as often or last as long. I remember a recent one in Costa Rica, the night before I returned to the United States. As we sat in the car with damp bathing suits, looking out at the surf and the setting sun over Playa Hermosa, I suggested that since I had come to Costa Rica six times in the past year to be with him while he looked for a piece of land, would he be willing to do something with me that I liked, that he wouldn't normally want to do, like take a couples workshop back in the States? I'm passionate about my work, and I enjoy the therapy and workshop environment. I wanted the man I love to join me there.

After all, for five days I had lived in his world. I remembered how we had driven up a mountain the day before to meet the brothers who owned it. We saw the four tall "hermanos" coming two by two on horseback over a ridge in the distance. They brought us to the edge of a field overlooking the Pacific and hazy green peninsulas stretching out to the South, and I thought, this is a great way to get to know the country. Then they entered a small path into the jungle, stepping over a big pile of fallen branches. Hmm—didn't they say that's where the snakes hide? I had my red rubber boots covering me up to the knees, but the rest of me felt very exposed. The brothers were all carrying machetes, ready to slice any snake heads that appeared, but they were twenty feet ahead. I found a way around the pile and then willed myself to step over every log on the path, fully expecting to see the gray diamonds of the *terciopelo* lunging out from their cool hiding places on the far side. There was a lot of jungle. Then there was a lot of open field, going uphill, under the bright equatorial sun. Nobody was complaining, so I kept quiet and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other until I made it back to the car and collapsed into the front seat. I just wanted to go to sleep, but I tried to maintain a dignified upright position while my husband

and the four brothers lined up on their haunches in the grass doing business and poking little holes in the ground with their machetes. I was beyond dehydrated—it took a whole day to feel like myself again. Surely, Monk could appreciate how I joined him and would be willing to take one little couples workshop.

Monk said yes, he'd do something with me, anything but a couples workshop. In that instant I started to lose my relaxed playing-on-the-beach feeling. Suddenly, I was in the past, twelve years old, sitting at the dinner table, with Mom on my left, Dad on my right, and sister Lana directly across. There was a bowl of creamy, homemade tomato soup in front of me, and I wasn't eating it. Mom asked why and I said I didn't like it.

Her face seemed to work for a second or two, and then she erupted out of her chair, yelling, "You are an ungrateful, hurtful, hateful child. I can never please you!" and pounded up the stairs to her room. Slam. The three of us sat there in silence, looking away from each other. Dad's eyes were blank and drained, and I knew I wouldn't get a big warm hug that night. We all knew from experience that she wouldn't come downstairs for three days, and it didn't matter if we knocked or pleaded or said we were sorry. She might want to go into the swimming pool in the middle of the night—and she couldn't swim. No one knew what to do. Dad just went to work the next morning.

Many years later, we realized that for my mother, making dinner meant sipping a lot of white wine and vermouth. An ER doctor who was trying to help her sounded impressed when he told us that she could walk and talk normally with a blood alcohol level almost twice the DUI limit! As I sat at that table with my sister and father, I kept very still on the outside so I wouldn't upset anyone anymore. On the inside, a shield was forming around my gut feelings so that I wouldn't know what they were and I wouldn't get hurt from expressing them.

When Monk said, "I don't want to do a couples workshop," he triggered this twelve-year-old part of me. It was as if I were a child, back with my family. All I could hear in my head was, "He doesn't ever care about my needs! It doesn't matter what I want." I didn't

know this was only part of me because its reality was consuming me. I couldn't notice the hurt twelve-year-old, and I couldn't be there for her.

I didn't show the hurt to Monk. Instead, angry parts immediately came out to accuse my husband of not caring and not being fair. And, of course, my angry parts stimulated his angry, attacking parts. Every word out of his mouth sounded as though he was cross-examining a hostile witness.

Several hours later, on a dirt road outside a reggae restaurant, I was finally able to recognize the hurt twelve-year-old within me. I met her where she felt trapped and isolated in that dining room. I felt her relax with my presence and my acknowledgment of her world. I was offering her the Self energy that Richard Schwartz had taught me about. I was doing for her what no one else had done—noticing her pain.

I emerged out of my narrow self-focus and saw Monk standing there in the dark, his shoulders tense and his face blank and hard. He was facing palm trees under the moonlight with the surf crashing fifty feet away, but he wasn't seeing or hearing any of it. He was in pain, too!

I was ready to give better back. I took a deep breath, gave up my angry attitude, and said, "I must have hurt you very much for you to be acting this way." His shoulders dropped and his face softened into its familiar contours. I felt my own tension go away, and I felt a rich, warm, grounded feeling in my center—our connection. I felt our love alive and breathing between us, and I knew I was where I belonged. My twelve-year-old's aloneness was gone, replaced by connection beyond what I ever could have dreamt of as a child.

From this example, you might be thinking that giving better back is all about nurturing and understanding, and not about assertiveness or standing up for your own needs. Giving better back is powerful both when it is compassionate and when it focuses on your needs. We'll learn more about the assertive aspects of giving better back in Chapter 6, "*Giving Better Back*" and Chapter 10, "*Feedback: The Other Side of the Coin*."

## About This Book

This book will show you how to change negative relationship cycles into positive ones so that you can sustain intimacy, creativity, and compassionate connection over time. As you will find out in Chapter 1, you have to turn it upside down—the intense pain you think your partner is causing is really your own. When this pain isn't so intense, you won't have to be immersed in it or so afraid of it that you have to ignore it.

Learning how your protector parts (Managers and Firefighters) work will help you understand what is happening when you and your partner get into cold or fiery standoffs. You'll learn how you can be *with* these important parts instead of *in* them, so that you can access your calm and creativity instead of locking onto limiting beliefs or extreme actions. There will be exercises to help you get to know your own protector parts. Even though you might regret how these parts make you act, you'll find out that they are trying to help you get away from pain inside you.

You will learn that creating lasting change in your relationship depends on finding your own hurt parts. You will have the opportunity to find out what hurts so much that you have to attack or distance from your partner. Once you recognize this pain, as I did when I found my lonely twelve-year-old, you won't be devastated when your partner does something that hurts or disappoints you. You'll be able to experience only moderate hurt and to choose how you want to respond instead of being propelled into anger, blame, or distance.

But it's hard to think clearly when you get tangled up with your partner. Sometimes reactions arise so quickly and powerfully that you can't stop them. If you are in couples therapy, your therapist can help defuse the situation. But at home, it's up to you. Giving better back is a tool that will help you at those times. You will learn how to turn the worst experiences between you and your partner into moments of intimacy, connection, and empowerment, benefitting both you and your relationship.

Choosing a partner is different from maintaining that choice over the years. You will learn that keeping choice alive means meeting the particular challenges that arise in your relationship. As you'll see in Chapter 7, *Keep Your Choice Active and Alive*, choosing a partner is choosing a specific path of growth for yourself. Meeting the challenges particular to your union will propel your growth in certain directions and not others. In short, who you choose is how you grow.

Have you ever wondered why some people choose safe partners, some choose exciting ones, and some choose partners who offer deep emotional connection? In Chapter 8, *Different Parts Choose Different Partners*, you'll learn how your different parts determine the blend of safety, excitement, and fulfillment in your relationship, and the challenges you face when you make an unbalanced choice.

Some of the biggest problems in couple relationships involve anger, contempt, arguing, distancing, hopelessness, punishing, forcing, and addictions. In Chapter 9, *Caution: Firefighters at Work*, you'll learn that these behaviors are actually attempts to find a solution. Understanding the logic behind these extreme behaviors will help you identify them in yourself and will help you have more compassion when your partner demonstrates them.

Giving feedback to your partner is important. If you hold back your perceptions, your relationship can wither away. In Chapter 10, you'll find out how to give effective feedback, what to expect in response, and how to stay calm, confident, and clear no matter what happens.

Don't worry about getting your partner on board with the ideas in this book. You can do a lot on your own to wake up the love in your relationship. Do your best and see how your partner responds—you might find that your partner responds with more love than you ever thought possible.

I hope that the ideas and the exercises in this book will help you improve your relationship. If you want to seek a couples therapist for additional help, Chapter 11 will tell you what to expect in IFS couples therapy. Both lay people and couple therapists themselves

can learn about how couples therapy can be a creative, easy, fluid process.

Some readers may be wondering if all this applies to abusive relationships. Would you still need to recognize your own pain, give better back, choose the challenge, and give feedback if your partner was abusing you or your child, physically or emotionally? There are different levels of abuse and different situations which require different actions. At the very least, if your partner is abusing you or abusing a child, you must consider leaving the relationship, at least temporarily. Once you are safe, you can decide whether to apply the ideas in this book to improve the relationship or leave it.