Richard Schwartz: Inner conflicts

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Richard Schwartz co-authored, with Michael Nichols, *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*, the most widely used family therapy text in the U.S. Dr. Schwartz was Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for Juvenile Research and later at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. He developed Internal Family Systems [SM] in response to clients' descriptions of various parts within themselves. IFS is a nonpathologizing, hopeful framework within which to practice psychotherapy. In 2000, Dr. Schwartz founded the *Center for Self Leadership* in Oak Park, Illinois. CSL offers three levels of training in IFS, workshops for professionals and for the general public, an annual national conference, publications, and DVDs of Dr. Schwartz's work through its web site. IFS trainings and workshops are also being held in several European countries. Dr. Schwartz has published five books and over fifty articles.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Proactive Mindfulness* project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: *Dick, you facilitate a kind of inner exploration process that has some similarities to mindfulness, but is also different. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?*

Richard: Yeah Serge, good to talk to you again. The similarities are that, when I'm working with people, or helping them through this process, I'll have them notice what I call their parts. Otherwise we'd think these would be their emotions and thoughts. But, from my perspective, those emotions and thoughts aren't just ephemeral, temporary flashes from the mind. They actually are attached to, or are emanating from, what might be called sub-personalities, that I call parts, that are with us most of our lives. They constitute a lot of the inner voices we hear when we do thinking, and have lots of different feelings and thoughts.

As people notice a part, or more than one… Just in doing that, they are separating from it. That is what mindfulness does: It helps you notice rather than be in the middle of various thoughts and emotions. When you are able to do that, when you're able to separate from those thoughts and emotions, you sense this other place in you that has qualities like well-being and acceptance. I stumbled onto this place early on when I was helping people ... I'm a psychotherapist, so my career was spent trying to learn how to help people with their parts. They were describing these inner critics and the parts that want to make them binge, and the parts that feel so horrible.

In the process of having them focus on those parts, they would feel more separate from them, and they would enter the state that's now being called mindfulness, because I was seeing them as those parts and sub-personalities. It didn't make sense to simply observe them, which is what most mindfulness

practices advocate: To separate from you thoughts and emotions, and observe them, with acceptance perhaps. Instead, I would try to get my clients to actually begin to interact with them in a way that ultimately allows them to heal and transform. As people would do that, they would learn that these aren't temporary or ephemeral thoughts and emotions, but that they are connected to these personalities that have a lot to tell them… that they didn't even know because they hadn't been listening. As they listened, they began to have compassion for these parts of them, because many of them had been trying to protect them, sometimes in dysfunctional ways, at least for now. Ways that were necessary when they were young and more vulnerable.

A lot of these part are frozen in time: They're doing things that were necessary at one time in your life, but no longer are. As they were able to express compassion internally to these parts, the parts would soften and tell and show their secret history tot he clients.

What this process has in common with mindfulness is that separation. When you do separate, you do automatically access these qualities that ... for me have come to be known as the Self, with a capital S. Mindfulness from my point of view is a good first step, if you're wanting to heal something, or change the way your mind is thinking and feeling. But it doesn't actually produce the kinds of changes that I'm interested in.

Serge: *There's a lot in what you said. I want to try and articulate a few of the things that I heard. One is as about the similarity with mindfulness, in the sense of not getting lost in the emotion or the idea or the personality... but to be able to see it from a distant in a compassionate way. This being, in your approach, a first step, where there is also a processing of what is observed. And what is observed is something that very similar to commonplace experience of people having a "There's a part of me that wants this. There's another part wants that" conflict. Or the little angel and the little demon. Noticing that these personalities, if you actually process them, have a dialog with them, to understand them better… then something melts and something transforms.*

Richard: Ultimately yes. Sometimes it not quite that simple, but that's correct. If you think of these things as ephemeral thought and emotions, it makes sense to just observe the past passively. But, if you think of them as suffering beings, then its not compassionate to watch them parade by passively. That's the way I think of them.

If you think of your fear as a suffering inner being, it would make more sense to go to it and try to learn about it and comfort it, in a almost parental, caring, loving way. When you do that, you would find that, first of all, it would calm down. It might also show you where it got the fear originally in the past. It's actually possible then to have someone enter that time. Maybe hold that actual younger version of yourself, and comfort that part of you that's still frozen back there, which actually will allow for a transformation. Take that part of you out of where it's frozen in the past. It's more of an active internal re-parenting process.

Serge: *Yes, an active internal re-parenting process. You point out that, if you think of that part as a suffering being, the compassionate thing is to engage with it… as*

opposed to dismissing it, which is probably part of what has made it isolated and self-contained before.

Richard: Right. That's what I try to help people do. What I find is that, as people start to do this in a focused process, and interact with these parts, it all begins to adjust: emotions and thoughts, how to relate to them in a healing way. It isn't something I have to teach them. Having the focus back on the parts, but from a separate place, seems to release this inner wisdom. It's like compassion and curiosity. We have what we call the 8 Cs of self-leadership. Oddly enough all of these begin with the letter C. Other qualities included confidence, courage, curiosity ... I said curiosity. Clarity and connectedness, and I don't know if that's it, but ...
Anyway, those sort of spontaneously manifest in people when they separate from enough of these parts. When they're in that more " mindful" state then, as I said, they know how to heal their parts. They relate to them in a kind of comforting parental way. I don't have to do much more then keep them in that place, because it seems to be inherent in us, this wisdom about how to heal ourselves emotionally.

Serge: *Yeah. What you're talking about is that, in internals family systems, you're helping create conditions in which there is a functional, as opposed to dysfunctional, relationship between these parts. As the self begins to separate from the parts, the good qualities ... the confidence and all the other good qualities of the self, which are naturally there… emerge. This is a process that's very much self-directed with some help.*

Richard: Exactly, that's the way it works ... There's more to it. The actual therapy of it is somewhat involved, but that's the spirit of it. When people go to meditate mindfully, for example. Instead of considering the pesky ego or monkey mind in these sort of pejorative terms that these parts have been given by the spiritual community, which would make you want to slap them away… When you're mediating, if you think of them as parts of you that want and need your attention, but you want a little bit of a pause... If you were to go to these parts, and ask them politely to relax for a little while, so you can be in this other place for 20 minutes while you meditate… People have much better luck, and they don't have to work as hard to actually enter that meditative state.
There are mediation teachers that are using IFS this way, rather then them teaching people to either downplay or ignore their ego that's interfering.

Serge: *Right. It's there. It's question of what kind of relationship you want to have with it, and with its various manifestations. Not go into a one- up, one-down game. Or fighting them, and imposing silence.*

Richard: Exactly, yeah. The basic idea is that inner beings are like your outer children. They need that kind of care and respect. Too many systems have seen them as pesky irritants. Yeah, that's the idea.

Serge: *What strikes me there is the word respect that you used.*

Richard: Yeah, even with the parts of people that seem to be so damaging or destructive ... I was part of the *Mind and Life* conference in Europe in September. I talked to the Dalai Lama for about 15 minutes about this. He talks about there being destructive emotions and then constructive emotions… that you need to battle or have antidotes to the destructive emotions. I think that's a big mistake. Even the ones that are considered destructive, if approached mindfully, and asked from a place of curiosity about why they do what they do, will tell people often about their secret history of how they were, as I said, necessary at one time in a person's life. Actually, maybe even save their life. Now we're stuck in this role of make them enraged all the time, or whatever the emotion is.
Again, that fosters a kind of inner compassion. It's all parallel. If you can have compassion for parts of you that get enraged or that give you impure thoughts, then when you see people around you manifesting some of those same qualities, you don't have that same judgment for them. You can have compassion for them also. So it's all parallel: How you relate to these parts of you inside translates directly into how you can relate to the people around you.

Serge: *Yeah… And so, earlier, you had said that you see these personalities as suffering beings. You're articulating that it's not just what is traditionally perceived as suffering that you see this way, but also the angry, the rageful, the self critical parts that would normally be perceived as bad, as something that you want to get rid of… are also to be approached with that same compassion.*

Richard: Exactly. I was working with a spiritual teacher recently, who said that she got to know a part of her that would sometimes get so enraged it wants to kill her husband. Now, it's not good for her profile to be admitting that she has a part that wants to kill her husband, in the spiritual world. Too many people feel that way, that they should be ashamed of these parts. When in fact, if you go to them, and we did, with this person. We learned why it wanted to kill her husband, and there was good reason why it would want to kill somebody… from what had happened to her as a child. Then we could give it compassion, but also help it out of that role. Help it out of where it was stuck in the past.
They transform, and then they become these valuable energies that can help you be strong, but not in such an extreme way.

Serge: *Yeah, so that attitude of gentle curiosity and compassion and observing what is... You're saying that, in your experience, people are quite able to connect to that, to have that kind of internal dialog with a little bit of help.*

Richard: Yeah, it is quite amazing for most people. When they hear about it, some people feel like: "Well, I could never do that", or "I don't have that kind of imagination" or "I don't experience my life that way." But, once you get them to turn their focus inside, and focus on an emotion, and get out of their thinking minds… so we ask the thinking parts to step back… Just get into this mindful state, which probably what a lot of your listeners are already doing…. It's one very easy step to begin to engage their emotions and thoughts in conversation, and wait for an answer to come back from that place in their body or their mind, rather than

trying to think what the answer would be. Your listeners would be amazed at how quickly they can begin that process. Most everybody can do it.

Serge: *Let's imagine a typical question that somebody can ask themselves. Could be something about, "I'm feeling angry" or something starting from that place?*

Richard: If you're up for it, Serge, I could do a little piece of work with you for a second.

Serge: *Sure.*

Richard: All we have to do is have a starting point. Is there a part of you that you might want to get to know better, or begin this process with?

Serge: *I could start with paying attention to a physical sensation, a little tension in my neck.*

Richard: Perfect. Focus there on your neck. As you notice that tension, how do you feel toward it?

Serge: I'*m noticing that, instead of a feeling, what happened is I straightened up. I was a little hunched and I straightened up. As I straightened up, I had a little more sense of ease in it. If I take that little interaction as a dialog, it's as if I had asked it, "What do you want me to do?" and it said, "Give me a little more room."*

Richard: (Chuckle). Okay. Let's keep the dialog going. Are you open to it? Do you feel like your mind is open to get to know each other?

Serge: *Yeah... If I listen to it a little bit ... When you said, "Are you open to it? Is your mind open to it?" I felt a little tightening of it.*

Richard: Okay, good.

Serge: *As if it said you know like, "Yeah, but with some reason." You know? "I reserve the right to not be."*

Richard: Yeah, very good. Let it know, direct these words to that place in your neck. Let it know that you're curious about it. You want to get to know it better. Ask it what it wants to know about itself. Then wait for an answer, don't think of the answer.

Serge: *Yeah, so I'm going to use the words. So that they come from me.*

Richard: Good.

Serge: *I'm asking that part: "I'm curious to hear what you have to say. I'm curious to see what you want. I want to give you some room, to hear you…"*
What's happening is I'm noticing some tears in my eyes… a sense of being moved.

Richard: Okay, good. Stay with it. Stay with whatever comes.

Serge: *It's as if the part said, "I'm moved that you actually want to hear me."*

Richard: That's right. We're going to stay with it, and just keep reassuring it that you really do finally want to listen to it.

Serge: *Hmmm… Yeah, and so I have a sense of that little tension lifting.*

Richard: That's great…

Serge: *… in the back… And of my torso becoming straighter. A sense of… literally, that a weight has lifted. Kind-of, a voice that says, "Well, thank you" and maybe opening its arms… taking space in a gentle way.*

Richard: Very good. Keep going for while. Stay with it and see what happens.

Serge: *Yeah… It's like a sense of calm, and a sense of spaciousness ...*
And a clarity. Not clarity in a sense of something clearing,. Not abstract clarity, but like if there's a fog and it clears up.

Richard: Okay ... See if there's anything else this part wants you to know, or wants from you, or...

Serge: *Yeah, so I'm going to again ask it the question.*

Richard: Yep.

Serge: *"Is there something that you might want to tell me, or something you might want from me?"*
So I'm noticing again some tears coming up in the eyes. The sense is: "Come visit me this way more often?.

Richard: Okay. What do you say to that?

Serge: *Yeah. Yeah.*

Richard: It sounds like this is the beginning of a new relationship with it. There might be more it wants you to know as time goes on. The sense I get from how this is going is that it first wants to establish that you'll follow through. Ask it if that's right.

Serge: *"Is that right, that you want me to follow through?"*
In a way, what I was voicing out is about having a real relationship with it, as opposed to simply a chance encounter.

Richard: Yeah. It's probably worried that once the attention goes away, you'll ignore it and not keep talking to it.

Serge: *Which of course as you put it this way, brings a different relationship that I can with that tension. Then the tension becomes a kind of waving that says, "Hey, pay attention to me."*

Richard: Exactly right, that's exactly right. That's what a lot of physical and medical symptoms are. Our culture is designed to kill the messenger rather than listen to the message.

Serge: *Yeah, this is really a sense of having a deep respect for what happens. Including symptoms or manifestations that are not necessarily things that we normally value. Seeing it as a messenger, and having a lot of respect for that messenger, and following it.*

Richard: Yeah, and getting serious about it, like you did. Beginning a new kind of ongoing relationship with it.

Serge: *In this context, suddenly, what occurs to me is another meaning to that phrase, that name, "internal family systems". A sense that all of these sensations, emotions, personalities that we detect… A desire to have them part of a loving and connected family, as opposed to scapegoating, isolating them, and having them fight or reduce them to exiles.*

Richard: Exactly, that's totally the vision...

Serge: *Yeah*.

Richard: Maybe, just see, before you shift your focus away from that…. if it feel complete and it feels like, for now, this is what it wanted you to get, or if there 's anything else.

Serge: *I'm going to ask it. "Does it feel complete to you? Is there anything else that you might want?"*
I just had a ... hmmm… it is a kind of sense of satisfaction.
There was something else… that, from this place, it feels good to express a sense of satisfaction.

Richard: Great.

Serge: *Yeah, thanks.*

Richard: Well, thanks for taking the risk of doing that.

Serge: *That was a good example of what can happen. We had started that with the idea of inviting people to go on this kind of exploration.*

Richard: Right.

Serge: *It might be a good place to end. Do you want to see if there is anything else that you might want to add to this.*

Richard: Maybe I'll add a note of caution. There are people who mediate to get away from their pain, for example. If, instead, you turn *toward* these part often, it's opening the door to parts of you that carry a lot of pain, and have been longing to get access to you for a long time. That can be overwhelming at times for some people. It can be very distressing sometimes. It's good for your audience to know that that's a possibility as they do this exploration.
If that were to happen, it'd be good to have a kind of backup, therapist or something like that. To help them not overreact to that, and to actually work with it. There's some parts that's hard to work with on your own. You need ... I still need somebody to help me while I'm going certain places inside… So just that little note of caution.

Serge: *These are difficult areas, in the same way as in any other human endeavor. When we go to places we haven't gone that much before, and are difficult or dangerous, we benefit from having a guide.*

Richard: Exactly, that's right.

Serge: *Thanks, Richard.*

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