

An IFS informed guide to
TRANSLATING PEOPLE



A step-by-step guide
to understanding and meeting
each other from the inside

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Translating People

This guide aims to help create an understanding of ourselves and each other from the inside.



As always, in my writings, Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a big part of the view I present. You do not have to know IFS to read or understand this guide and even if you do not agree completely with the view, you might still find the steps and examples of translating people helpful.

In this guide I will focus on: (1) understanding what underlies the (often harsh or avoidant) words and actions of other people, (2) becoming aware of what happens inside of ourselves as a response and (3) how to reply with compassion and curiosity.

The focus is primarily on our close relationships and family, but it can be applied in all aspects of life.

Reading a short article the other day, by the founder of Internal Family Systems (IFS) Richard Schwartz, in which he focus on compassion shortly after the traumatic events at 9/11, I got the notion to write a short guide on how to translate other people and responding to the underlying meaning or vulnerability instead of to the protective outer layer that most people speak and act through, especially in conflicts.

When we react to threats and conflicts – *as individuals, as families, in romantic relationships, in the workplace, as companies, as politicians, as societies, groups, countries* – we are acting, reacting, responding to protect ourselves.

But what very often happens is the opposite of what we need and want: We end up escalating the conflict and we start attacking and stop listening to each other.

When we get into conflicts in our romantic relationships, for instance, we really want to be seen and understood – *we want connection* – but end up getting the opposite; we end up pushing each other away, other-ing and feeling the separation that we all fear at a deep subconscious level.

That is; get the exact opposite of what we wanted.

That is why I am writing this guide, to hopefully help you make conscious choices in your relationships and in the world, by understanding the protective systems of human beings and by getting curious about your own.



Disclaimer: It is important for me to say that I do not represent the IFS Institute in any way. The IFS view and my IFS educations are a big part of my understanding of human beings, but so is my Family Therapist education, my theoretical and practical knowledge about attachment, the body, trauma, child development, the nervous system, New Danish Parenting and much more. What I present here comes from many places and from my own life and my work with clients. I only represent myself and you are welcome to not agree with some or any of what I write and only take what you can use from it, because we can only hold our own truth.

If you already know a lot about IFS and about trauma, feel free to jump ahead down the the examples and the 3 steps further below.

Okay, now I think we're ready

In the IFS view, which comes from IFS therapy, we view the mind as multiple. In a way you can see the human mind as an internal family (hence the name Internal Family Systems – IFS for short) just like we have an outer family system, society systems and world systems.

In IFS we call the members of our inner system *Parts*. Part of me want to write this guide for you and another part of me wants enjoy the beautiful sunny weather that we have today in the early summer here in Denmark, so I made the compromise of sitting right outside in the sun with my computer and my notes.

As human beings we never have just one mind about something. We consider back and forth, we cannot decide between different options and have have to make up our mind, that is; come to some inner agreement between our parts and their conflicting ideas and beliefs. We can sometimes react with extreme emotions and behaviors and then afterwards (or at the same time), shame and criticise ourselves for feeling or behaving the way we do. And we can react in ways we know are not good for us (like pleasing, over/under eating, isolating) or in ways that we know are not good for others and our relationship to them (like raging, scolding, shaming, attacking). Still sometimes we cannot help or stop ourselves reacting and feeling the way we do. It can almost seem like an outside force is sweeping us away and we cannot control ourselves or the urge inside can be so strong that we cannot help it. Parts try to control and parts take over. And the more we try to fight it, the stronger the polarisation becomes both in our internal and in our external relationships.

We all have parts. This is not a bad thing and it is not a sign of pathology. It's normal and natural for all human beings and our parts are trying to help us stay alive and function in the world. When they do so in ways that are actually hurting us, our relationships or others, there is always a good reason – and a good intention – behind it. Our parts are stuck in and reacting from a place in the past, but get triggered by people and events in the present. This happens when our parts carry burdens from earlier wounding and trauma. This happens to us all – as human beings, as families and as societies.

In the IFS view we believe that the inner system is naturally led not by our parts but as the inner parent; the *Self*. This is the core of who we are, our connection to the greater conscious; our soul. There are many ways to think of – and name – the *Self* – depending on our belief systems and spirituality. But among other qualities the *Self* can be felt as an open heartedness and a spaciousness inside. IFS names the 8 *C's*: *Compassion, Creativity, Curiosity, Confidence, Courage, Calm, Connectedness and Clarity* as qualities of *Self* and this is a space from where we have no agenda other than that of healing and creating balance inside and out. It is a state of being. And it is a state that we are rarely (if every) in 100 percent, as our parts help us be, do and interact in the world and in our relationships in different ways.

What we work towards in IFS therapy is therefore not to get rid of parts and be 100 percent in *Self*, but to be more *Self-led* and parts-informed and to heal the burdens from the past that our parts often carry, so that they can react from a present and congruent space rather than from pain and trauma of the past.

Layers of parts

Human beings are many layered and much of our behavior and feelings comes from our subconscious. The things that our conscious mind does not know and remember is known and remembered below the level of consciousness by our parts and by the body.

Therefore we cannot always figure things out with our thinking and cognitive knowing, and we do not need to figure things out to connect to (and heal) our pain, we just need to be open and curious to what is. When we do this, we dip our toes a bit deeper.

In IFS we view our parts that carry burdens as two layered: There are two types of protective parts (top layer) and there are Exiles (deeper layer). The top layer is the faces we show the world and underneath is the pain and vulnerability that we have learned to hide away because of our personal history, family legacy and the rules and norms of our society.

For instance we have top layer parts that make sure everything goes smoothly, that we do our job right, that we look right, say the right things, get into the right educations, hide behind a smile, clean up the house and so on. Or that make sure we don't try, that we hide away and don't succeed.

These parts *can* be very helpful, but when burdened they have a "*Never again*" or an "*Or else...*" to what they do.

"I will never let them see me cry again" – Hides away vulnerability because of previous hurt.

"I have to clean up the house or else they will see what a bad mother I really am" – hides away feelings of not being good enough under perfection.

"Never again will I let a man hurt me" – shuts off emotion and connection to other people. Shutting off the heart to protect.

"I have to wash my hands ten times in the right way or else I will spread bacteria and virus that can kill someone" – rituals that seem without reason often stems from early pain, blame and feelings of guilt and responsibility that does not belong to us and that we could not – and cannot – control.

And we have other top layer parts that jump the rescue if all else fails, to keep unwanted feelings (the pain and burdened beliefs our *Exiles* carry) out of consciousness. These protectors numb out or lashes out at other people without much consideration for the consequences.

Apathy, feeling nothing, drinking, taking drugs or eating to not feel, anger that is not congruent with the situation, urge to escape or fight, are all protective *solutions* that takes us away from feeling the underlying pain and vulnerability of our *Exiles*.

Exiles are the vulnerable (often young) parts of us that carry the pain and burdens from the past. Our close relationships and what happens to us through our lives – and especially in the first years of life – shapes how we think, feel, react and many of our symptoms later on. In this way the past is not just the past, but part of us and when traumatic things happen (both when our boundaries are crossed and when we are left alone without the regulation and loving connection we need from our caregivers), the overwhelm of these situations or relationships is stuck in us like energy bottled in with nowhere to go. In this way trauma is not so much what happens to us, but how we are met in it (or after) by others (and later also ourselves). *Are we seen with loving eyes? Are we believed? Heard? Witnessed? Helped?* This makes the difference between our inner system closing off; the energy getting stuck inside, or if it can pass through us and be released in much the same way as animals shake after their (often many) shock and near-death experiences.

What is too painful or overwhelming is carried by our vulnerable parts that are then exiled into the deep caves of our unconscious. These parts carry the traumatic experiences and the beliefs of unworthiness, shame, being unlovable, not good enough, alone, fear of death and separation, that, even if most of us are not conscious of them, control how we live our lives and how our protective parts act and react. In this way our protectors are making sure we survive and live – but often in accordance with what ones was (what the Exiles carry) not to what is – and their main job is to keep the burdens of the past out of our conscious awareness and to help the pain of the past from happening again = they protect.

The problem with this is that they can keep us at very rigid ground and that the very thing they try to avoid is often what ends up happening because of their rigid and often polarised roles.

In IFS therapy we befriend and help our protector parts; we listen to and help unburden and heal the vulnerable parts that carry our pain from the past, so that at whole system can slowly reorganise itself, be more flexible, more present and *Self-led*.



Why is this understanding of the internal system important to know about?

Because understanding and trusting that there's meaning in the madness — that there is always a good reason and a good intention behind the behavior of other people (and ourselves) — opens us up to be curious with ourselves and others. Being open and curious is of course the opposite of being closed off and protective.

It opens our hearts.

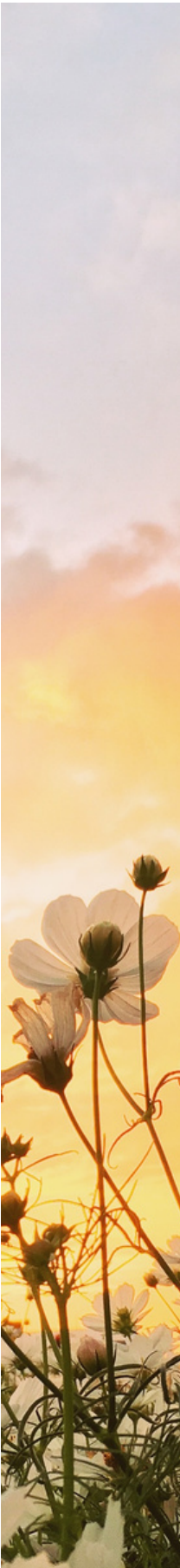
Examples

Now that we have looked the layers and protective systems of human beings, let's look at a few examples of how this can play out and how both IFS therapy and the three steps of translating other people can help make a shift.

Like most couples, Taylor and Alex, a couple in their mid thirties, fight about many different things, from how to raise their two children, to who cleans the kitchen, to Alex's many business trips and the differences in their intimate needs. And like most couples there's a pattern in how they fight, no matter the topic, as it is often the same underlying needs and therefore the same protectors that get triggered in their relationship.

Taylor and Alex came to therapy to work on their relationship and specifically on how to communicate without ending in a fight and not speaking to each other for days.

(Like all clients mentioned in this guide, this couple has given me permission to use them as an example. Their names have been changed).





Here is first an example of a typical fight in the beginning of therapy and after this follows an almost identical example where (in this case) Alex can stay openhearted enough to listen and respond with curiosity.

Example 1 (before therapy):

Taylor (in an annoyed tone): “Why is it so difficult to unpack your suitcase? You’ve been home a week now and it’s still standing in the hallway!”

Alex (sarcastically): “We’ll maybe I need to be ready to get away from all of your nagging.”

Taylor (angrily): “Oh so I am nagging you, huh!”

Alex (in a dismissive tone): “What else would you call it?”

Alex walks away into the kitchen, but Taylor follows.

Taylor (angrily): “What I would call it is being someone who cares about our family and the house we live in together! Someone who apparently have to deal with everything alone here!”

Alex (in a cold voice): “Since I am clearly not good enough for your majesty, I will get out of your way.”

Alex walks off.

This is an example of two protectors reacting to each other instead of listening.

For Taylor an angry protector is dominating and for Alex a sarcastic dismissive one.

Even though they are speaking through their protectors and not listening to what the other person is really saying, in this example you are still able to spot the Exiles: In Taylor's case a part that feels alone in taking care of everything. And in Alex's case a part that feels criticised and not good enough.

Example 2 (after therapy):

Taylor (in an annoyed tone): “Could you at least put your dirty dishes in the dishwasher instead of leaving them on the counter that I just cleaned? I am not a service organ!”

Alex notices the dismissive part about to lash out in response, and takes a moment to unblend, that is; make some space inside before responding.

Focusing inwards Alex notices that the part feels like it's in front of the face and in the right hand. It's kind of making a motion to erase anything unpleasant going on in the relationship.

Alex places a hand on the heart and breathes slowly for a moment, calming the reactive part. Whispering on the inside: “I know” to the pain bubbling up underneath from the feeling of not being good enough.

This only takes a moment as Alex has tried this a few times in therapy. The pain is not yet healed, but there is an inner connection, helping the part to feel safer. It relaxes back enough for Alex to feel more open.

From this space Alex can listen behind the accusing words and hear the pain behind them.

Alex (feeling more curious): “I’m hearing that it’s really annoying for you that I put my dirty dishes on the counter right after you cleaned. That it feels like I take you for granted. Is that right?”

Hearing this response softens Taylor’s angry protector somewhat and the vulnerability can shine through.

Taylor: “That’s exactly what it feels like. Like I’m all alone.”

Alex: “That was never my intention.”

Here, because Alex was able to unblend and listen, they could both soften.

It is not always that easy to get a vulnerable response from the other person. Especially in work situations and relationships that are not close family, we don’t have to get to these places. We don’t have to be all open, but we can still speak and especially listen from an openhearted space inside of ourselves.



Let's take an example from the workspace

Jo loves her job, but she is sick of being harassed by her co-worker Jeff. After having been in IFS therapy and getting to know her own parts, it is easier for Jo to listen, respond and to set appropriate boundaries.

Jeff: “Hey Jo, I’m gonna need you to finish this for me before you go today.”

He dumps a bunch of work in her desk.

This would earlier leave Jo momentarily paralysed, unable to respond, while Jeff walks off, leaving her with his work. Jo would be on the verge of tears but end up doing the work and resenting her job.

Jo takes a moment to breath and focus inwards. She notice what parts come up for her. The paralysing part is in her face. Out of a sense of shame it immobilises her to avoid the overwhelm of tears coming from a young Exile.

Jo sends a deep breath to the parts and they are able to relax back and give space to a more Self-led response. She can now notice anger from another part, but it doesn't overwhelm or take over.

Jo is now able to listen behind the words.

Jo (calm and collected): “I can hear that you would like me to take on some of your workload, so that you don’t have to stay longer.” ... “And I am not going to do your job for you.”

Jo is not asking into the vulnerability of Jeff or exposing her own. That would not be appropriate at her workplace and with this unsafe co-worker. What she feels is anger; the boundary that is very appropriate in the present situation. She is setting that boundary by saying no (speaking for her angry part) and the anger settles as Jeff walks off with his work or becomes more clear if he is not respecting her boundary.



Now let's end with a parent and child example

Monica's young daughter Sylvia kept “throwing tantrums” when Monica said no to all her many requests in the supermarket.

Monica would get annoyed, say no and call Sylvia spoiled. And Sylvia would cry angrily and throw herself on the floor while everyone in the supermarket seemed to be watching and judging.

After working with her parts in IFS therapy, Monica is able to listen and respond to Sylvia in a more *Self*-led way.

When possible, she now goes shopping before picking up Sylvia from kindergarten, because it is too much for Sylvia after a long day with a lot of inputs to process. Some days, though, it is not possible.

In this example Monica and Sylvia are in the supermarket waiting in line to pay and Sylvia is face to face with rows of candy and chocolate.

Sylvia: “Mom I want this!”

Holding up a chocolate bar and a bag of gummy bears.

Monica (preoccupied with the groceries): “No Sylvie, put that back.”

Sylvia (in a higher pitch): “But I want it!”

Sylvia is ready to throw herself on the floor, almost crying.

Sylvia (crying): “I want the candy!”

Instead of responding right away, Monica stops herself and focus inwards on the frustrated part of her. She notice the part having a lot of opinions of both her daughter and her own abilities as a mother. The part seems to be in her head and is overwhelmed by an underlying feeling (from an exile) of hopelessness.

Acknowledging the parts through her thoughts for a few seconds, Monica is able to unblend enough to focus on her daughter from an open heart.

Monica: “I can see that you really want the candy, Sylvie! It looks so good huh, with all the colours and I know you love chocolate!”

Sylvia is looking at her mom for a moment, her tears stopping.

Sylvia (crying again): “YES! Can I have it?!”

Monica takes a deep breath, still feeling her heart open.

Monica (from an open and grounded space inside): “No, I won’t let you have candy today.”

Sylvia cries again, but less so and without throwing herself on the floor.

Monica comforts Sylvia as she cries.

Monica: “I know you really wanted the candy and felt sad that you couldn’t have it.” ... “Come, help me pack up our food.”

They go to the register together.

In this situation, Sylvia does not get what she wants, but because Monica is able to unblend from her annoyed part and the underlying feeling of hopelessness, she is able to meet Sylvia where she is — she really wanted the candy — instead of scolding her for wanting it. When Sylvia is met in her wanting (and her feelings), she is seen, and actually getting the candy is not as important.



Okay, now that you have a pretty good picture of what translating other people can look like, let's have a look at the three steps:



1. Translating people

Step one is listening with curiosity (instead for judgment and preconceived ideas of the other person). This sometimes means starting with step 2 (see below) if we are already triggered (or feeling judgemental and/or unsafe). When triggered we both react and listen from our own protective parts, not from an openhearted *Self-led* space. If this is the case, just slow down and notice yourself.

It's not either *Self* or *Part* — it's not either open or closed.

Is there a little bit of opening inside of you? Is there a bit of heartfelt curiosity?

Connect to the other person from that space and welcome the parts that are also present to listen in.

Listening with curiosity is an openhearted position as opposed to an investigative listening from the head. Our parts are still welcome and needed as we saw in the example with Jo at her workplace.

When we listen with an open heart, we are not listening to respond, to be right or from a position of having to necessarily understand completely or agree with the other person.

We are listening to *get to know* and to *connect* (inside and out).



And we know that there is *always* a good intention. This intention is not always towards us, but for themselves; to protect.

When met with anger from a protector, know that a protector is always protecting something or someone inside. Listen for that pain and vulnerability (of the Exile). Know that it is there. Always.

When we cannot talk from these vulnerable places inside, there is always a good reason for that (it is a smart system protecting to survive). When we cannot talk from these vulnerable places it is because it does not feel safe enough in the present – most often because it was not safe in the past.

In case of Tyler and Alex there was a lonely part that felt like it had to do everything. This part was young and had taken on a lot of responsibility in childhood. And there was a part that did not feel good enough, which had, especially in the teenage years, been met by a strong disappointed part of Alex's father.

In the case of Jo there was an ashamed paralysing part and an overwhelm of tears from a part that had not been met and regulated in childhood.

In the case of Monica there was a hopeless part and a feeling of not being a good enough mother, that came from feeling that she had to preform and be "the right way" in order to be loved in childhood.

So as you see there is a meaning behind our reactions. These vulnerable exiled parts with strong feelings and beliefs are triggered by present events and relationships, and our protectors do what they can to help.

In this first step we simply listen to the words of the other person.

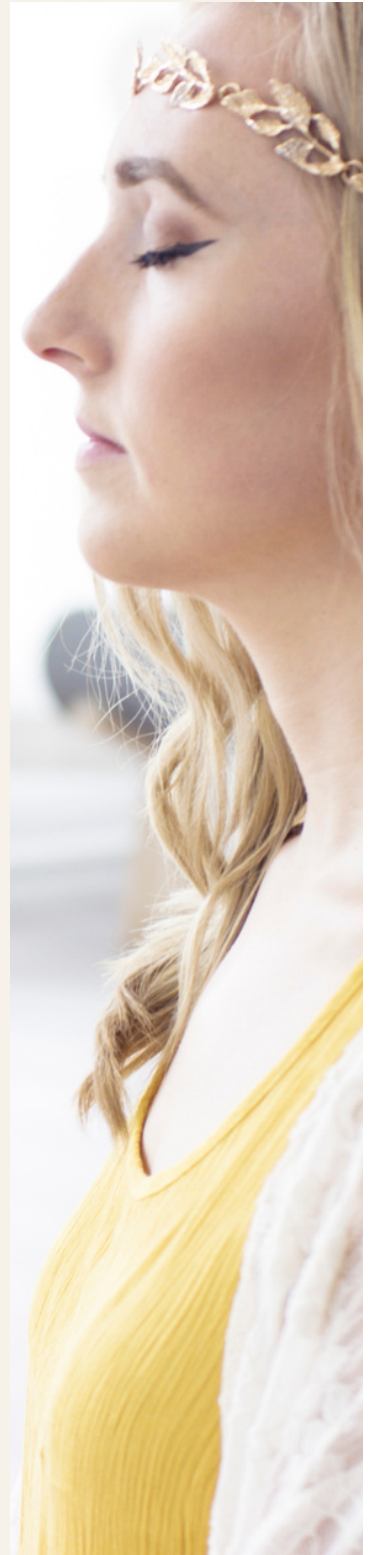


2. What happens in me?

Now that you have listened to the other person, it is time to check inside. As in the examples, there might be parts of you reacting strongly or feeling triggered, perhaps pressing on to respond. Wanting to fight or scream, wanting to fix, wanting to comfort, wanting to run away or close off.

Notice that. Notice *how* you notice it. Perhaps it's a thought, a voice, a sensation, a feeling, an image. Just notice it. Be still for a moment.

What does the part (or parts) need from you right now? Maybe just to be felt and acknowledged. Maybe a hand on your heart or a deep breath so that it can feel you there.





Notice the part. Be with it for a moment if needed. This will help it unblend just a little. If the part has something to tell you in that moment, listen.

Then ask it to give a bit of space so that you can be present.

Promise to return to it if this is true for you.

Does the part need you to do or say anything in relation to the other person?

If it feels difficult getting to know your own protectors this way, there are many meditations, exercise, articles, books and podcasts that can help. Have a look in the IFS store, check out IFS groups on facebook or have a look at my articles on medium.

And of course I can only recommend finding an IFS therapist to work with.

3. Respond with curiosity

This step is about responding with acknowledgement and respect of the protector and what it might be protecting. It is a step towards getting to know the pain under the protector. In the family — with our children and romantic partner — getting to know the Exile and pain may be appropriate, in other cases it is not. Be respectful either way.

When we respond and name what we hear, it is important to do so in a respectful, acknowledging and open-ended manner. We want to avoid judging and defining the other person.

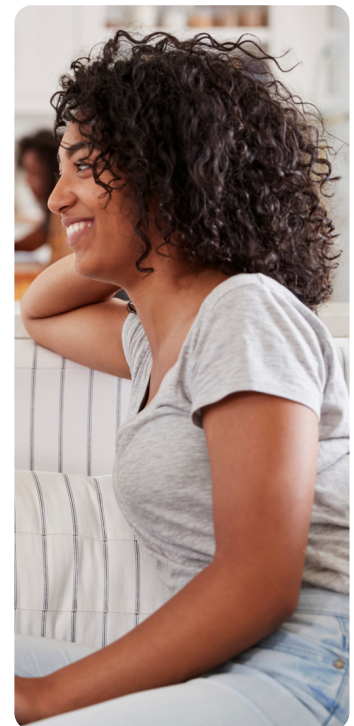
If the other person shares any vulnerability, we show compassion, respect boundaries and we do not use what is shared against the person in later fights and arguments. Doing so is extremely hurtful and it is poison for the relationship.



You have now (1) listened to the other person, (2) checked inside, noticed activated parts and helped them unblend a little. In step 3 you respond to the other person with curiosity from an openhearted space and, if needed, speak for your part(s).

"What I am hearing you say is that... Is that right?" — is a good framework to use, as it helps you speak from yourself, not about the other person and you check with the other person if you're getting it right. With this framework it is very difficult to define the other person and even if you are not getting it right, there is an open curiosity from you and there is a chance to correct what was not heard right. Being seen is one of the most fundamental things for human beings and not being seen is what a lot of our trauma stems from. Therefore seeing or trying to see the other person is an act of compassion and love.

Knowing our boundaries and respecting the boundaries of the other person is an important part of social interactions. And checking in with our parts before responding helps us do this, as we begin to notice our own boundaries in relationships. (This can take time to re-learn). In this way we begin being more *Self-led* rather than led from our parts, which again helps us respect the boundaries of other people.



Here's a few more short examples of responding with curiosity

Responding to a partner: “I am hearing you say that you are really angry at me for coming home so late again and that it feels like I care more about work than you and the kids. Like you are not important. Is that right?”

Responding to a young child: “I can hear that you say no no no because I said no to you. Is that right?” ... “And I imagine that the voice that says no no no might help a sadness that's hiding underneath. Is that what it feels like?”

Responding to grandparents: “What I am hearing you say is that it is really hurtful for you that I don't come by with the kids more often. It feels like I don't want you to have a relationship with them and that you are just a burden to us. Am I getting that right?”

Depending on the openness from the other person and the relationship in general, when the other person feels heard and seen, we can ask if they want to hear what comes up for us.

For instance Alex could now speak for the dismissive part and the underlying pain, if and when Taylor is ready to hear it.

That's it

Now take a moment to notice yourself on the inside. Take a few breaths.

How are you feeling? How does this new learning land with you?

If you are completely new to the concepts for IFS and parts, it might be a lot to take in. Some things might not completely make sense to you right now. That's okay. Take your time. You can read through it again in a little while or click into some of my articles on Medium explaining the concept of parts and *Self* at greater length.

What does land for you? What makes sense that didn't before?

Perhaps you are imagining having conversations like this with someone you often get into conflicts with? Your partner, a child or perhaps someone outside of your family? Notice if this (perhaps new) understanding of human beings – both yourself and others – softens anything inside of you?

What do you notice? What has changed or shifted, if anything?

Now it is your turn!

What is your first step into this way of communicating with other people and with your own parts? What seems possible right now in trying it out a little?

Perhaps it is just beginning to *listen for the underlying vulnerability* without having the pressure to respond in any kind of openhearted way. And of course we cannot always respond openhearted.

Perhaps trying this out in a safe environment with your partner, a friend or child.

Or perhaps getting to know your own inner system of parts and how they sometimes can respond from a place in the past to relationships and situations in the present.

If you want to write me about your experiences with translating and understanding people, or if you have any thoughts or questions about any of it, perhaps something doesn't make sense at all, perhaps something makes a lot of sense for the first time or perhaps it is difficult to apply it to some of your relationships or see any vulnerability at all behind the heavy armour of some people, don't hesitate to write me.

You can write me via Instagram, via Facebook, via my website or directly via email: anna@annavinentz.dk



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