



Releasing Our Burdens

**A GUIDE TO HEALING
INDIVIDUAL, ANCESTRAL,
AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

Richard C. Schwartz, PhD
and **Thomas Hübl, PhD**

Book Excerpt

Praise for *Releasing Our Burdens*

“*Releasing Our Burdens* is a lantern that illuminates the complex path of healing layered trauma. This book is a living companion, offering an intentional interweaving of individual, ancestral, and collective healing. With compassion and depth, it gently guides readers through the heavy terrains of emotional pain, reminding us that both personal and collective integration are indeed possible.”

Dr. Mariel Buqué

bestselling author of *Break the Cycle*, creator of
BTC Generational Trauma Therapy™

“*Releasing Our Burdens* is a deeply integrative work that resonates with the truth that trauma does not live only in the individual, but in families, communities, and cultures. Richard Schwartz and Thomas Hübl offer an accessible roadmap for healing that honors both the psychological and somatic dimensions of trauma. Their collaboration is a gift to the growing field of trauma recovery.”

Peter A. Levine, PhD

author of *Waking the Tiger* and *Healing Trauma*,
developer of Somatic Experiencing®

“Dick Schwartz has been one of my greatest clinical teachers. His Internal Family Systems (IFS) model didn’t just change how I practice, it changed how I see people—not as broken or difficult, but as made up of parts, each with a role, each worthy of compassion. In *Releasing Our Burdens*, Dick and Thomas Hübl show us that our pain is inherited, collective, and relational—and so is our healing.”

Dr. Becky Kennedy

New York Times bestselling author of *Good Inside*

“There’s a revelation in these pages that speaks directly to our moment: healing is not only personal. It is collective, ancestral, and spiritual. It is the work of reconnection. For those beginning to understand that our burdens are shared and that healing must be communal, this is a necessary guide. Written with the steady, compassionate wisdom we’ve come to expect from these practitioners, this book invites us into a journey of reflection, one that gently asks: What am I carrying, and how might I return to the whole?”

Prentis Hemphill

author of *What It Takes to Heal*

“These two genius teachers help you to heal old pain and find new freedom. Their writing is personal and intimate, kind and helpful, and it feels like a master class in transformative practices as well as a sacred journey. They combine deep psychology, practical tools, heart-touching examples, clear seeing of our collective problems, and vast spiritual wisdom. A masterpiece.”

Rick Hanson, PhD

author of *Buddha’s Brain* and *Hardwiring Happiness*

“*Releasing Our Burdens* is not just ‘self-help.’ It teaches us to find harmony with everyone whose lives touch ours, extending connections not only around us, but backward and forward in time. This is an innovative, bold, and immensely helpful book. Read it to heal yourself, your loved ones, and the entire human community.”

Martha Beck, PhD

New York Times bestselling author of
Beyond Anxiety and *The Way of Integrity*

“Releasing Our Burdens is a profound offering in these times of cumulative overwhelm. Dick Schwartz and Thomas Hübl gently guide us into the space where individual, ancestral, and collective healing meet—where presence becomes a path to compassionate unburdening. This book honors the intelligence of our trauma responses while inviting us to metabolize legacy pain through connection and deep inner resonance. A timely, soulful integration of relational neuroscience, somatic work, and ancestral wisdom.”

Linda Thai, LMSW
trauma therapist and educator

“Brilliant and immediately helpful. These days we hear a lot about trauma. This compelling book actually shows how it can be healed. Practical, compassionate, and wise.”

Jack Kornfield, PhD
author of *A Path with Heart* and *All in This Together*

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Introduction

A couple of years ago, we hosted a distance program called “Connect. Restore. Reclaim.” with nearly 1,600 participants from all around our lovely planet. The attendees were mental health professionals, coaches, educators, alternative healers, bodyworkers, students, and others seeking to further their professional and personal growth. The topic of the program was trauma, specifically our different yet complementary approaches to healing trauma. *Releasing Our Burdens* is loosely based on the “Connect. Restore. Reclaim.” program and includes related, supplementary material. This book is rooted in our desire to work together again to offer something helpful in a world that many of us feel could use all the help it can get.

Why Another Book on Trauma? And Why Now?

It seems like every year sees dozens (if not hundreds) of new books on trauma. In one way, that’s strangely good news. For the past couple of decades, trauma has been receiving the attention it’s due. On the other hand, the boom in popularity in trauma therapy and trauma studies suggests something far less positive is afoot.

In short, we believe the world and its inhabitants are experiencing a metacrisis. It’s not just that we are all suffering from the threats and stress of climate disruption, systemic oppression, the alarming reemergence of fascism, and regional conflicts that continually

forewarn us of larger—even nuclear—war. But these and other global issues together create an ecosystem of crisis dynamics with unforeseen and converging risks. Our current metacrisis produces heightened feelings of uncertainty, fear, and division across populations, creating conditions where individual and collective trauma are regularly triggered and intensified.

At the same time, the sudden evolution of artificial intelligence and the increasing speed of information and global technology make it more difficult for our nervous systems to process our trauma and everyday anxieties. Humans have evolved over millions of years to handle episodic stress. We're incredibly adaptive; with a measure of safety, we can integrate external threats and our physiological responses to those threats with relative ease. Unfortunately, we're constantly bombarded with information and the need to keep up and respond in real time. Furthermore, those of us experiencing trauma have to deal with inner stagnations or blockages that make it more challenging for us to adapt. As a result, we experience even more pressure, exhaustion, overwhelm, fragmentation, and polarization.

We also suffer from disconnection—from nature, from hope, from one another, and from ourselves. This disconnection can inhibit our ability to recognize the metacrisis for what it is, causing us to overreact to threats or downplay them, along with the legacy burdens we'll discuss later in the book, and convincing us that other people are the problem and that we alone are responsible for our own healing and safety.

A Different Approach

One singular issue didn't cause our current problems, and one person operating alone has little chance to effect change when facing a metacrisis. We're all in this together, and we need to restore our sense of connection to regain and share our hope of building a more compassionate and sustainable world.

Even though scientists, philosophers, and Indigenous communities have long told us that systems are interrelated and interdependent, most of the world remains under the spell of an individualistic, linear worldview, in which we separate everything into particles. Upon close examination, it's clear to see that everything—the air we breathe, the food we consume, the traumas we believe are ours alone to bear—is affected, influenced, and generated by multiple causes and conditions, which means what we perceive as our individual issues have never been just ours alone.

That's not to say that some issues don't deserve individual focus. It's simply to point out that individual work alone is shortsighted and inadequate. We need to understand that the individual, collective, and ancestral dimensions of trauma are aspects of an interdependent system we are all part of and are all working through. In our view, there's no such thing as individual health. Every one of us is affected physically, psychologically, and spiritually by our ancestral inheritance and the environments and cultures we live in. There are always more forces than just our individual biographies at work.

This is why, as practitioners who have worked with thousands of individuals and groups to support the healing of trauma, we're both focused on collective unburdening and healing. Far too many contemporary approaches to therapy and recovery are still overly entrenched in an individual-based approach without fully incorporating recent developments in family therapy, as well as newer advancements in trauma research. The two of us are committed to expanding the map of healing. We strongly believe the next phase of trauma integration and recovery *must* include attuning to the collective, ancestral, and spiritual lenses in order to foster lasting, authentic, widely accessible, and generative change.

As more and more people commit to healing our individual traumas, we can navigate and reroute the metacrisis by fostering collective resilience and connection. Collective healing work provides

a framework for understanding how our collective traumas operate beneath the surface and how they can be addressed through intentional healing processes. One way we do this is by examining the traumas particular to our own cultures (for example, those generated and sustained by systemic racism) with the intention of becoming less inclined to participate in activities that keep that trauma active. As the maxim says, “Hurt people hurt people; healed people heal people.” It’s our view that both our hurt and capacity for healing depend upon an understanding of our inherent interdependence.

It’s true that our collective traumas have shaped our social structures, institutions, and cultural norms, influencing everything from education and healthcare to politics and justice. The good news is that addressing collective trauma can create systemic change and generate ripple effects that lead to healthier, more just social systems. Collective healing work can support leaders, activists, and community organizers in addressing the root causes of systemic issues with conscious, thoughtful approaches that prioritize long-term healing and transformation. In this way, we can all do our part to encourage humanity to reach its full potential and to address our shared metacrisis with more innovative and compassionate responses.

What to Expect from This Book

This book is meant to be accessible, with information that might inspire reflection and further contemplation. What we’ve assembled here isn’t just for therapists, coaches, and health practitioners, but for anyone seeking to understand trauma better, anyone motivated to further their own growth, and anyone desiring to take part in collective approaches to healing. No matter who you are, our intention is that you engage with this book wholeheartedly, deepen your understanding of trauma and interdependence, and expand your capacity for positive energy, connection, and post-traumatic growth.

All of us carry legacy burdens, which are related to ancestral traumas. “Burdens” are ongoing extreme feelings (e.g., shame, terror) and beliefs (e.g., I’m flawed, I’m unlovable) that are carried by parts as a response to past trauma and govern people’s lives. Legacy burdens are a specific type of burden that are inherited through family and culture. They can develop from direct interactions with caretakers (e.g., punishment for not behaving in an expected way according to your birth gender), messages received within family or societal culture (e.g., marginalization due to your race or ethnicity), or the epigenetic transfer of intergenerational trauma.

These have a tremendous impact on how we view and relate to the world and do our part in causing the world’s problems. Thankfully, we can free ourselves of these burdens and see ourselves, each other, and the world more clearly and with enhanced creativity and compassion. Because our individual, ancestral, and collective traumas are interwoven, we need to increase the map of our awareness and gather the tools and skills necessary to heal.

To that end, this book is meant to serve as an awareness-enhancing vehicle for individual and collective unburdening. We invite you to relate the content to your own experience and ask questions of yourself and the world you live in. Ideally, your reflections will reveal not only what you are most being called to heal, but also where you are being called to do your part in the greater restoration.

This book is a diversified journey through the various dimensions of trauma and healing—individual, ancestral, collective, and spiritual. Throughout this process, we’ll offer different approaches to healing and integration, namely personal reflections; meditations and related practices; and transcriptions of sessions with clients and course participants that unpack what our work looks like in real time (and hint at what it might look like for you, as well). We’ve also included a chapter from our esteemed colleague Fatimah Finney, who was a guest presenter in our course and who

graciously contributes her expertise in racial trauma and social location.

Before we dive in, it's a good idea to grab a physical journal or digital device for taking notes so you can keep track of your experiences as you work through the book. We recommend doing so if only to check in with yourself and incorporate what you've discovered in subsequent meditations and practices. Look for questions throughout each chapter for opportunities to use your journal. Like this book, your journal is there to help you dive deeper, integrate your experience, listen more skillfully, and use what you learn along the way for the benefit of all.

Two Approaches, One Goal

If you picked up this book (or, as more often happens these days, clicked a link to find out more about it online), chances are you already know a little about who we are. If not, take a quick look at the About the Authors page at the end of the book. All you need to know at this point is that we're both PhDs and leading practitioners with decades of experience helping people recognize and heal from their wounds, and we share a growing emphasis on group work and the importance of ancestral and social influences on trauma.

Throughout this book, we speak from the point of view of “we,” using this voice to express our shared experiences and views in a reader-friendly way. Occasionally (especially in this chapter), we'll pull our identities apart for clarification. To that end, you'll note some key terms employed in this chapter, which is meant to pair concepts with their originators (for example, “IFS” with Richard [Dick] and “presence” with Thomas). It's our intention that this chapter provides the foundation for understanding our work, together and apart, and will help you get more out of the material to come.

Thomas Hübl

In the last twenty-five years, I have led individual and mainly large-scale global group work to integrate individual and ancestral trauma. My overall approach is holistic and integrative, and my group process work is specifically rooted in the traditions of mysticism and the science of trauma. My approach in integrating meditation and contemplative practices has helped group participants access transpersonal states of awareness, which in turn empowers them to access larger fields of information and insight. Through my collaborations with scientists and psychologists, I incorporate the latest findings from neurobiology, trauma research, and systems thinking, applying current research to my facilitation of groups. I discuss this at length in the appendices at the end of the book.

In addition to relational and collective healing, I emphasize the cultivation of presence, embodiment, and ancestral healing. Each of these elements requires safe and compassionate spaces as well as a slow and patient process. I sometimes refer to this as “IAC Fluidity,” which emphasizes shifting seamlessly among three dimensions of trauma integration (**I**ndividual, **A**ncestral, and **C**ollective), depending on the context. This approach offers a framework to understand how we navigate and integrate layers of experience and relationality. We do this by:

- Engaging in grounding practices and creating inner space to support the integration of our individual wounds
- Becoming aware of the active role our ancestors play in our lives and how they influence our lineage, learning to heal inherited patterns, and reclaiming ancestral wisdom to increase ancestral data flow and relationality

- Expanding our collective awareness to align with larger systems, group intelligence, and the shared consciousness of humanity to facilitate the integration of collective wounds and foster collective post-traumatic learning and maturation

This dynamic interplay enables deeper healing, relational attunement, and the capacity to respond effectively to complex challenges. This approach is particularly relevant for trauma-informed practices and transformational leadership, where engaging multiple layers of awareness is crucial.

We engage in individual, ancestral, and collective healing as one shared system. When we work through this integration process, we can make fluid the frozen parts of ourselves, our ancestors, and our culture. By recognizing the trauma we carry within us, we can recognize—and become part of the healing—of the collective traumas embedded in our societies and nations.

Another emphasis of my approach is that the healer, therapist, or facilitator can take clients only as far as their own maturity and level of integration allow. In doing this sensitive and delicate work, the focus is on relating in the present, and specifically, the resonance between client and therapist. Relational attunement, precision, and offering one's safe and grounded nervous system allow the client to gently move into the possibility of restored and healthy relational experiences. Together, we can restore parts of ourselves that are frozen in time into mutual presence, which ultimately leads to a step-by-step integration of the unintegrated history or past trauma.

I view trauma healing as part of a larger process of spiritual growth and awakening. Practices like meditation and contemplation help us connect to a larger purpose, allowing us to see our trauma in a broader, more interconnected context. To that end, my approach bridges the psychological and the spiritual, as well as the individual and the collective. Ultimately, my intention is to support

a process that brings the fragmented parts of the self into a state of flow and connection, fostering a sense of wholeness and integration. Far too often, we try to split ourselves off from the past to try to rid ourselves of what we consider a disturbance. Too many of us walk around thinking things like, *Oh, that's the good part of me* and *That's the bad part of me*. We try to get rid of our nagging thoughts instead of including them in our wonderfully complex wholeness. In my work, I strive to help people restore the aspects of themselves that have been abandoned in the past.

Presence

Every healing process is based on presence. Presence creates safety; presence is contagious; and presence is seeing. When we are present, we are clear about what's happening in a process. It's not trial and error; the present moment is precise. I think, too, that precision is love. When we can connect the most universal to the most specific—the highest states to the most ordinary in life—that's love.

Although I emphasize presence in my work, I also respect the intelligence of the trauma response “not here, not now.” Being confused and not being present is intelligence too. As children, confusion, disembodiment, and absencing (the trauma response of splitting space and time to increase our capacity to be present) were often ways out of navigating overwhelming situations, which at the time meant that the smartest thing to do was to disconnect from space and time.

Practice

RELATING TO CONFUSION

I invite you to create a relationship with confusion or overwhelm. Give yourself permission to feel confused or overwhelmed. Whenever you notice that you lack your accustomed sense of clarity, stay with that feeling for a while. Sometimes confusion can give way to stress or agitation. That's okay. Honor whatever comes up. You can say, "Yeah, I'm a little stressed right now, and that's okay." Just bring some attention to it and let that be. When we are overwhelmed, we need some space and a slower pace to give our nervous system time to digest the experience. As adults, we often put a lot of effort into fighting confusion, into regaining a comfortable sense of clarity. Confusion doesn't usually feel safe or helpful, but see what happens when you give it a little space to simply be. Sometimes even a couple of slower breaths and a sense of your physical/emotional experience helps turn the confusion back into relatedness.

Over the long run, confusion and what could be called a habitual lack of presence can lead to difficulties because we need these parts to navigate daily life. Those aspects of ourselves that split off from the rest can become numb, retracted, or disembodied. Whatever the texture of that experience, those parts are no longer in the flow of time. They're frozen somewhere else. Much of my work is about finding ways to "melt" frozen parts and integrate them into the present flow of life.

Integration

Any good development work involves training and integration. We can hone our skills, refine our attunement, and train our bodies, but we can't train our bodies where we're not integrated. By integration, I mean restoring the sense of wholeness that is our birthright as human beings. This is possible by healing the sense of separation that brings about fragmentation and disparate parts. In this healing process, first we need to integrate our life energy to become more whole. After that, we can learn and train. We can ground ourselves deeper in the body, where our sensations become more open and aligned.

Trauma creates a disembodied two-dimensional aspect of us. Integration is actually a reintegration and re-embodiment. This is why we focus on relaxing deep into the body as part of any healing process. People sometimes try to force themselves into grounding, but it's not helpful without integration. We can practice yoga, tai chi, and other grounding practices, but these only go so far without integration.

In a trauma response, we split off the overwhelm and push it into a separate, unconscious space—like a bubble of information isolated from our broader awareness. Through gentle, conscious engagement, we can begin to reintegrate both the defenses and the content held in that bubble. As this material reenters the flow of our experience, it is digested and metabolized. What was once fragmented becomes part of a larger wholeness. The separate bubble dissolves and, in its place, maturity and a more expansive sense of Self emerge.

The Role of the Facilitator

In my process, relational attunement between the therapist (or facilitator) and the client plays a major role in healing and integration. Together, we learn to witness and hold the parts that have been fragmented, or perceived as separate, and we begin to attune to these

parts as we hold them in our compassionate awareness. For example, if an aspect of a client's energy is frozen or held in a four-year-old level of development, I match the energy of the client's nervous system to meet that frozen place. As this process unfolds, the client may begin to become aware of the absence of that part. This is what I mean by the presence—and practice—of attunement. We can learn to do this with one another as well.

Much of the learning around inner healing happens by participating directly in the process, by being in the room as an engaged witness and active listener. Besides the knowledge and skills we can acquire, when we're part of healing work, it has a direct transmission into our nervous system. When I'm part of the process, I'm an active participant. That teaches me and encourages me to be attuned and present and see my inner movements as I witness my process. How can I bring the quality of myself to the session? How can I be mindful of what happens for me as I witness?

In this work, the facilitator acts as a co-regulating agent, available to feel and hold the stress of the client or, in a group, participant. This is a key element in de-escalating stress. Just having somebody else in the room who feels you are important. Feeling *felt by another* is crucial.

In my work, we train our nervous systems to follow the internal movements of a client. Personally, I perceive an internal sculpture that sits within the client on an energetic level—a preformed space that holds traumatic energy and stores information in the client. When I get to know that internal sculpture, I learn how much connection the client has to it, as well as how many resources they have. From there, we work step by step as their system allows.

I see the nervous system as a time-travel machine. What this means is that my nervous system has the capacity to be open and integrated, so if I rest in what Dick calls "*Self*," then actually my nervous system can attune to every developmental level.

When somebody shares a problem or something they want to work on, my nervous system immediately begins tracking the range of ages in which that trauma occurred.

Let's say a forty-year-old presents a problem to me. While they speak, I track where the trauma resides in their body and at which level of development; then, through my precise attunement, I look to generate more space of emotional safety for them. My nervous system starts to ping the holding and defenses in their nervous system until there is a bit of resonance and a response, which leads to a sense of safety. This safety allows their nervous system to slowly open up and come into what I call a "mutual download," meaning their nervous system can download that information step-by-step back into a relationship.

From there, we can digest this information together in a safe relationship and mutual presence, which helps them process the content and begin to integrate it. We can see whenever someone touches their trauma layers because the person cannot stay in open relationship with us. In this state, the relational capacity is compromised, and the stress, emotions, or absence are experienced alone. That process happens at a certain level of age and development, or at a spectrum of ages (complex trauma), when the trauma layers were created. That is why attuned relationship is needed to bring relative safety back to the part that is hurt.

Together, we reflect their growing awareness of this new state so their nervous system can create and strengthen it. Healing is, therefore, a step-by-step movement of encountering the traumatized part and slowly onboarding it into the flow of the essential Self (one's core energy), which is mapped to the central nervous system.

Live Session

Like most of the edited live sessions included in this book, the following is from our "Connect. Restore. Reclaim." program.

I'm including it here because I think it illustrates much of what I just shared: a holistic approach that prioritizes presence, integration, ancestral healing, and the intuitive/attuned role of the facilitator.

Participant: Hi. Thank you for having me.

Thomas: Good to see you. Maybe tell us a bit about yourself so others can get some framing of your situation, and then let me know what you would love to work on.

Participant: I'm from Spain, and both my parents are Spanish, and they were born in the '40s, which is right after the Spanish Civil War. I think they both suffer the consequences from the civil war. My mother and her family went hungry. My father's father fought in the civil war and never ever spoke about it. It's something nobody in the family knows much about. I feel something about that has been passed down through my father. I feel that.

Thomas: When you say, "I feel that," how does that arise in you? What do you feel when you think of your father?

Participant: He suffered a lot from depression and was somewhat bipolar. Every time he had a depressive episode, I felt pulled down with him. I'm getting emotional thinking about it.

Thomas: Give yourself a little space for the emotion. The emotion is very welcome. It really affected you, and we want to give you space.

Participant: His suffering was evident for everyone. I feel he's very, very close. It's been very impactful for me.

Thomas: Maybe we can take a moment with this. When you speak about your father, how does your body feel? How do you feel emotionally?

Participant: I get something in the throat, my cheeks get hotter. Kind of an internal trembling, I guess, in this upper part.

Thomas: Right. Let's, together, feel a bit into the trembling that you feel. There's immediately a trembling, and you feel stress also coming up in your system that pushes the energy up. And maybe you can go to the trembling, if that's possible, and feel the trembling and then soften a bit.

Participant: I can feel also my back softening a little bit.

Thomas: Is the trembling still there?

Participant: Yes, but it's more internal now.

Thomas: Let's go one step deeper and connect to the deeper trembling and do the same. You can soften your sensing a bit so the trembling gets more space. How does that feel?

Participant: I don't know. I feel like there was a lot of space there.

Thomas: Right.

Participant: I don't know how to describe it. Like suddenly, I discovered a lot of space inside.

Thomas: You're saying from a tension, it started to become more spacious?

Participant: Yeah.

Thomas: That's beautiful. What happened with the tension that you had there? It's loosened up? It's still there?

Participant: It has loosened up, yeah.

Thomas: Okay. What's the quality when you see your father in the states he was in? When you look at him, do you feel you can see him? Do you feel you need to look away a bit because it's too much for you? How does that feel?

Participant: It suddenly felt like too much, but at the same time, I felt like I could know how he was feeling. Like I could sense it sometimes, even before he was speaking.

Thomas: Yeah, that's what I feel too. When you speak about it, I feel also that there's almost like a . . . you're very close to him, and you feel a lot about him. Maybe you can tune in a bit with your care for him. How you tried to care for him when you saw him in this state.

Participant: When I think about that, there's a lot of non-understanding. Why he was feeling so sad suddenly, for example.

Thomas: How old is that voice that spoke right now?

Participant: Oh, very young.

Thomas: Bring a little bit of attention to the young part that spoke now, and let it be young. We don't need to change it, but right now, you created an awareness that you're looking at your father from a young place. We consciously allowed it, but we are also conscious of it. It's not an unconscious young part. It's now become a more conscious young part.

Participant: That part got very distressed about it.

Thomas: Okay. Good.

Participant: Yeah, it wasn't understanding, and nobody explained what happened to him.

Thomas: Exactly. You're telling me, "I was very distressed when that happened, and nobody explained it to me, so I didn't have orientation." And see when you say that—and of course, you know I am here—see if you can feel that you've actually told me that right now? Or as you speak, are you feeling more separate and by yourself? Do you have a sense that I hear what you're saying?

Participant: No, I feel closed up.

Thomas: Exactly. I want us to consciously feel the closed-up part. Let it be closed up, but just become aware of how that feels. When you say, “I feel distressed,” and when you say, “I feel not oriented. Nobody explained to me what happened,” feel in yourself. Very good. We can feel that’s gone. We can just feel that.

Participant: Mm-hmm.

Thomas: How you needed to create your own space inside in order to feel more safe within. Then you can see what happens when you feel the closed-up part. If it stays the same, if it starts to shift, if the closed-up part is still as closed up or if something shifted, recognize that.

Participant: I feel like the arousal dropped a little bit, I think.

Thomas: You can again look at the relational dimension, if it’s still as closed up, if it’s relaxed a bit, if it’s still tight. What’s your sense?

Participant: There’s more space now.

Thomas: Let’s go to more space. So there’s a bit more space. Maybe there’s still a bit of a protection, but now we can feel a new state. A new relational state. When you say, “I feel distressed, and I feel disoriented,” it comes to me, and I hear the distress and the disorientation. You can look at how the relationship feels now, and there’s a bit more space when the young parts are not isolated anymore inside.

Participant: I kind of shifted to curiosity and to wanting to understand that level of distress.

Thomas: Slowly, we can shift to curiosity and your wish for orientation. That it's not just in you, but it becomes part of the relationship again. You know your curiosity can reach out again and start to be curious and also ask for orientation, and then in a relationship, you can start to grow. How do you feel now? What's happening in here?

Participant: I'm imagining if I was more in contact with my father now or understanding to see if something comes through. But yeah, nothing. I don't know.

Thomas: How do you feel now in your own body? How do you feel now in yourself?

Participant: More spacious, at least down the throat.

Thomas: And emotionally? Is there an emotion present?

Participant: Yes, but it's more calm, I guess.

Thomas: How does the relationship between you and me feel now? Is this open, is it still closed, is it more spacious?

Participant: I think it's more open. I can relate more.

Thomas: I feel that too. Like there's a bit more space in the room to relay. Do you want to go one step further in your exploration?

Participant: Yes.

Thomas: You said something before. Is there anything specific about your ancestors? Because my sense is that it would be good to see how the absence—your grandfather never talking about his experiences in the war—that seems a bit like a hole. Like a hole of information. I think maybe it would be good to go there if that's what you want. To explore that a bit more. Is that good?

Participant: Yeah.

Thomas: Okay. Let's do the same thing as we did with your father. There was a little bit of an opening and more space, so there's a little bit more perspective, and now we're looking at the absence of information from your grandfather. He never talked about it. I would be interested how that lives in your body, when you think about your grandfather being quiet. He was in the civil war, he never talked about it. What kind of feeling does that absence leave in your body?

Participant: The first image that came to me is like a big hole. An empty space.

Thomas: Maybe you and I can just feel together this empty space and feel the absence. Even if there's nothing, we're just both becoming aware of that empty space. We just feel that you don't feel, that there is some kind of emptiness, and we become aware of absence. And then see maybe what arises. If the emotion stays numb

or if there is an emotion that starts to appear. If it stays like a hole or anything else.

Participant: No. There's an emotion bubbling up, but I don't know how to describe it. It's like I get emotional.

Thomas: Just let it be there. If it doesn't have a word right now, just feel the emotion that comes up and we'll feel that emotion together. From a hole, it became an emotion. Is this emotion some kind of sadness or grief?

Participant: Yeah, it feels overwhelming. He would hold that for himself. It's sad that he didn't share, but that it's still there.

Thomas: Right. Maybe you and I can share the sadness that comes up and the grief. Maybe we, too, can share this a little bit and have a space that honors the sadness in your family system and the pain that comes with it. We create the space today that honors that grief. How does it feel when, today, we make a space for it?

Participant: Good.

Thomas: Yeah, it feels good. We are honoring together. We are honoring the pain that was never voiced in the system. There is just a recognition, even if it's silent at the beginning. My sense is just by honoring, without even understanding what it means, but just by honoring the unsaid dimension in your family system, something can relax a bit. A little bit of tension can relax. I would

like to see if that's true for you. Does it bring a little bit of a grounding?

Participant: Yeah. It's good. It's something that needed to be done.

Thomas: Exactly. The fact that you asked to be here today means there is a wish in your soul or in your being to bring that kind of relief to your system and also let something go. It's beautiful.

Participant: I think that's part of the burden for my father, like he also couldn't express sadness. That's another topic, but of course, it didn't help.

Thomas: That's right. You are the one in the family who has the space and strength to let that breathe and also share it so it becomes part of the collective intelligence, so it's a little bit released from its prison inside. How do you feel right now?

Participant: I feel grateful. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Thomas: You have a very beautiful way to tune in with yourself and listen to your inner world. You have a fine sensitivity, how you relate to yourself. I'm very happy that you're so courageous to show yourself here. It gives everybody a chance to learn something from your process. Maybe others have parents or grandparents that couldn't speak and couldn't relate to what happened to them, and only one or two generations later, like yourself, we find that we can really reflect and

bring some healing back into the system. I think that's what you're doing right now. Does this feel good, to leave it here?

Participant: Yes, here feels good.

Thomas: It's lovely to see you. Thank you so much.

Which aspects of Thomas's approach resonate with you? What is your understanding or experience of presence? Are you aware of any parts of yourself that are stuck or frozen in time?

Richard Schwartz

I started out as a young family therapist with a PhD who wanted to prove that family therapy could change everything. Early on, I was working with clients with eating disorders and found out that most of my original assumptions didn't hold water, so out of frustration, I started experimenting, mostly by asking my clients questions. In the answers that came back, they spoke of having parts that were plaguing them and had a lot of autonomy inside. This was a foreign concept to me. Like most people, I'd been operating on the assumption that everyone had one mind that contained multiple thoughts and emotions, so the idea that there might be multiple entities in my clients felt a little strange. I worried that I might be facing an epidemic of multiple personality disorders or something.

Even so, I kept asking questions and soon discovered that these parts had relationships with other internal parts of my clients, whether polarized or allied, enmeshed or disconnected, much like the families I'd worked with. I began to notice that I

had them too, and some of mine were as extreme as theirs. This is how I came to believe in “parts,” which other systems might call sub-personalities or ego states. In a way, none of us are all that different from people who are diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, now called dissociative identity disorder (DID). It’s just that our parts tend to be less disconnected than theirs. People with DID have usually been so horribly abused that their entire system has been blown apart.

It’s the nature of the mind to have parts. We come into the world with them, and every single one of them has value. They all offer resources and talents. Unfortunately, through trauma and attachment injuries, these parts are forced out of their naturally valuable states into roles that can be limiting or damaging in the present moment, even if they were necessary for survival in the past. Thus, parts are often frozen in past trauma scenes, and they carry the extreme beliefs and emotions that entered the system during the trauma (what I call burdens) that organize the way they operate. And parts that have taken on heavy burdens have the power to overwhelm you and make it hard to function in life. Yet, it’s important to remember that the extreme role a part plays is not who it really is, and once it unburdens, it will transform into its valuable, natural state.

Exiles and Protectors

There are essentially two common types of roles parts are forced into: exiles and protectors. I’ll talk more about the subtypes of protectors shortly. Exiles are hurt parts of us that we’ve locked away in interior basements and abysses. Generally, we try not to acknowledge these abandoned parts, and we fail to understand what we’re locking away with them. Additionally, the parts we exile usually find a way to pull us back down and screw up our life in some way.

PARTS AND RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

One major outcome study about Internal Family Systems (IFS) was with rheumatoid arthritis. Thirty patients with moderate to severe rheumatoid arthritis received sixteen IFS sessions and were compared to a control group that received educational sessions. The people in the IFS group got much, much better, with some going into complete remission. In the treatment, we had participants focus on their pain, get curious about it, and ask questions. We usually found there was a part using the pain to either get the patient's attention or sabotage other parts.

The polarization related to a lot of autoimmune problems is between a caretaking part that dominates their lives and other parts that are upset at the caretaker for never letting them take care of themselves. And those parts are the ones using the symptoms. Another polarization I've seen with cancer is between a workaholic part that won't let the person relax and other parts that hate it. Please note that having a medical issue doesn't necessarily mean your parts are behind it. For example, I have a predisposition for asthma and migraines. I'm usually fine, but if I find myself in a dusty room, I'll have an asthma attack. That doesn't have anything to do with my parts. On the other hand, if my parts really want to get a message across, all they have to do is press the asthma or migraine button.

We think that exiling our suffering is how we're supposed to move on from troubling emotions, beliefs, and sensations, especially those associated with trauma. That's a cultural message most of us receive—lock it down, throw away the key, walk away. For those

of us with a lot of exiled parts, the world seems dangerous, and we regularly feel vulnerable. For this reason, we also tend to have a lot of protectors. Protectors are simply those parts of us that are trying to keep us safe. Their work involves keeping our suffering exiles contained, and they do so in two ways.

One common strategy of protectors is to manage our life such that we avoid triggers because when exiles are triggered, they can burst out and overwhelm us. These types of protectors are managers. Managers make sure other people don't get close enough to upset us, or they manage our appearance and performance so we avoid critique and receive only accolades. Otherwise, we'd have to face the exiled worthlessness we feel deep down. So, managers are protectors that try to preempt anything that might upset the exiles.

But exiles have a way of breaking through anyway. When that happens, it can feel like a life-or-death emergency, so there's another type of protector called firefighters, who go into action immediately to douse the flames of our exiled emotions. Firefighters aren't concerned about collateral damage or the consequences to our body; they just know they have to put out the flames, no matter what.

When working with trauma, I start by honoring protectors. Protectors are really doing their best to take care of you, so they deserve lots of appreciation. I try to recognize them, find out what parts they're protecting, and then eventually get permission from them to work with those exiles. Healing exiles involves bringing them out of the past and helping them unload their extreme beliefs and emotions. If we do that, parts return to their naturally playful, loving, and creative natures.

Unburdening

IFS is a constraint-releasing process. Parts carry burdens, and those burdens block access to all sorts of useful information. A burden is an extreme belief or emotion that entered our system either from a personal event or by way of inheritance. Legacy burdens, which we'll

discuss more later in the book, are those that come from our lineage or culture. These extreme beliefs and emotions attach to our parts and drive them, almost like a virus. One of the primary goals in my work is to uncover burdens, release them, and access more flow.

The Self and Self-Energy

In working with parts and their burdens, I also discovered there's an aspect in each of us called the Self. With and through the Self, my work encourages dialogue with protectors and, eventually, exiles. We want to get to know these parts better, to help them. Instead of going around and around fighting with one part or another (such as the self-critic), we listen to them, befriend them, and find out what we can do to make their lives better. As a therapist or facilitator, it's not me that ends up doing this work; it's the client's Self. One of the distinctive things about IFS is our emphasis on the Self's ability to be the missing caretaker, the missing attachment figure our young parts have needed. This process frees up the protectors because they can see that somebody else is doing the job in a healthy way.

The Self is harder to define than exiles and protectors. People who do this work often describe the Self as who they “really” are underneath the surface of their protective array. Everyone has a Self. Think of it as your core being. It's the *you* that's naturally present when you feel safe, aligned, healthy, and connected. The Self isn't something you have to develop. It's naturally wise, strong, and resourceful.

When we're in Self, we embody Self-energy, which has eight particular “C-word” qualities: curiosity, confidence, calmness, compassion, creativity, courage, clarity, and connectedness.

The Four Goals of IFS

There are lots of practices out there that might help you become more mindful of your parts. Meditation is one of them. You get

better at noticing your thoughts and emotions, but too often, your awareness and your Self are sort of standing off to the side. You might become more accepting of your parts over time, but you don't really interact with them much. In IFS, we're interested in going beyond tranquil observation.

IFS has four specific goals in mind:

1. **Unburdening Parts:** We do our best to liberate all parts and transform them to fulfill their original design.
2. **Trusting in the Self's Leadership:** As the Self gets to know the parts and takes on more of a caregiving role, the parts gradually relax into relying on the Self as their leader.
3. **Reharmonizing the System:** The parts that were previously estranged or fighting with one another learn to work together and love one another.
4. **Manifesting Self-Leadership in the World:** This final goal is about bringing our Self-energy to the outside world for the good of all.

IFS in Practice

This is my model of transformation: helping parts leave their extreme states and become who they were designed to be. To do that, we must release their burdens and help them out of the past. And to do *that*, we must access the Self. Accessing the Self is a major part of IFS. Clients with extensive trauma histories are often afraid of the Self. They might know about it, but they are resistant to having it accessed. It can take a lot of negotiation with protector parts to reassure them that accessing the Self is worthy and safe.

A lot of other therapies seem afraid of their clients leaving the “window of tolerance.” When a client becomes triggered, the therapists act quickly to ground them (for example, by having them feel their feet on the floor) and return to present awareness. Unfortunately, this often sends an unwelcome message to the parts that are triggered, especially if those parts are exiles who already feel unwanted.

Instead, I relate to the scared parts directly. I say something like, “I see you’re really scared. You’re welcome here. It’s great that you’re here. I want to help, and it will be a lot easier for me to help if you pull back just a little bit so the other parts of you can come in and help you too.” Most parts are willing to pull back if they trust it’s in their best interest to do so, and in that way, they gradually become grounded.

Scared parts take over in the first place because their experience is that they have to totally grab you and not let go because you’re probably going to lock them back up again. But separating a little bit doesn’t mean getting locked up, and I make sure to tell the parts as much. When they get it, they tend to cooperate.

Let’s say there’s a hypercritical part in you that you normally try to drown out. In IFS, we’d assume that there’s another part who doesn’t want that inner critic to speak. Even so, the critic has something to say (often quite a bit) and it’s probably going to keep talking until someone (i.e., the Self) pays attention to it. To do that, we’d get the parts that don’t want the critic to speak to stand down for a little while. We’d ask them if they could step back just for a little while so we can hear what the critical part wants to say.

In this process, the Self might come forward and express curiosity about the critic, have compassion for it, and act in a clear and calm manner. We find out where and why the critic is stuck in the past. Who is it trying to protect? How old is that little person? How old does it think you are? This is how critics can gradually turn into cheerleaders or wise advisors.

The part that didn't want the critic to speak is a protector, and protectors need attention too. They have healing journeys as well.

What do you think about Dick's notion that our personalities are made of parts? Are you aware of any exiles or protectors in yourself? What words would you use to describe your true Self?

Embodying Self-Energy as a Therapist and Facilitator

If I can embody a lot of Self-energy, I can help my clients' parts feel safe and help them access their own Self. I literally feel energy vibrating through my body. When they access Self-energy, other people can feel it. Those C-word qualities (compassion, connect- edness, and so on) help their protectors feel safe, and it encourages them to access their own Self. My relationship with a client isn't the most important healing element. My Self-energy is simply a means to encourage them to access their own Self, which then becomes the primary healer of their parts. In my work, the client becomes their own primary attachment figure, providing themselves with a sense of emotional security, and I'm a supportive secondary caretaker along for the ride.

Sometimes working with exiles can go fairly fast when I bring in a lot of Self-energy. It took me a long time to be able to do that because I had to do a lot of unburdening in my own parts. Before that, they'd just block my Self-energy and get in the way of the process. Now that they don't so much, people can sense that, and it really helps when working with others.

My main focus is on accessing a lot of my Self, so I'm always checking in with those eight C-word qualities. If those aren't online, I look into getting my parts to open up more space. Basically, I notice how much Self-energy I'm feeling, and I notice how open

my heart is. Do I have a big agenda or not? How attentive and compassionate am I? I check all of that before I start, and if I can bring a lot of that Self-energy, it immediately helps the client's protectors relax more.

The main goal is to help these protectors open a lot of space, which then helps the client access a lot of Self because it's contagious. Then, when they're in Self, I help them begin asking their parts questions to get to them, I work to understand where they're stuck in the past, and ultimately, I have them go into those scenes and be with their exiles in the ways they needed at the time. Eventually, we update those parts and bring them back to life in the body in order for the person to enjoy connecting with all the wonderful qualities they didn't have connection to before.

How to Relate with Your Inner Critic

One part people in Western cultures often struggle with is the "inner critic." Typically, we fight with that hypercritical voice inside and try to quiet it, but if we instead get curious about it, find out what it's trying to protect, and honor that, the voice softens quite a bit. So the next time you notice your inner critic, try using a different approach and see if you can get to know it in a fresh way. Here's an exercise to help you do just that.

Practice

RELATING DIRECTLY WITH PROTECTOR PARTS

Take a few minutes to feel into your inner critic or another protective part you're familiar with that you'd like to get to know better. Listen to what it tells you (often repeatedly), but also pay attention to where it's located in or around your body. Notice how you feel

toward this part too. For example, most people don't like their inner critic, or maybe they're afraid of it. Some people depend on it.

Whatever thoughts and feelings come up about your protector part, know that they're coming from other parts of you. Ask those parts that are sending you those feelings to just relax a little bit so you can get to know the protector part you chose. Remind them that you're not going to let the inner critic take over; you just want to improve your relationship with it and get to know it differently.

If these parts agree to give you access to the protector, you can start by asking it some nonthreatening, open-ended questions: What does it want you to know about itself? What is it afraid will happen if it doesn't criticize you? What does it need to protect?

Whenever you ask questions of your parts, don't think of the answers. Just let them arise. Whatever the answers are, you'll learn a lot about what the part is trying to protect and how it thinks it must do so. Extend some appreciation for that. Let that part know you recognize its intentions are good. See how it reacts to that appreciation.

Another helpful question to include is to ask how old the part thinks you are. Again, wait for the answer. You're not asking how old *it* is, but how old *you* are. Chances are it thinks you're pretty young—single digits, even—because that's where the part it's protecting suffered a particular trauma. Go ahead and update it with your true age. Notice how it reacts.

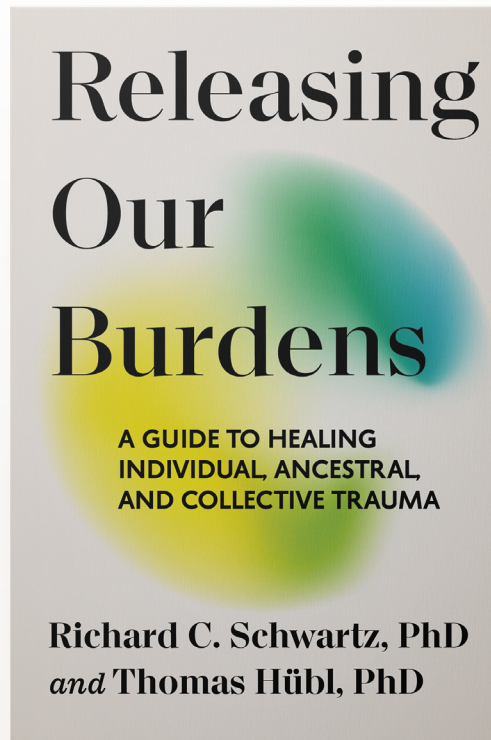
Finally, ask this part what it needs from you going forward. What kind of relationship would it like to have with you? How does it need you to show up for it?

When you've spent some time getting to know this part in this way and things start to feel complete, go ahead and thank your inner critic or other protector part for everything it told you and let you know. Make sure to remind it that this won't be the last

time you encounter it, and let it know that you're going to follow up with it later on.

As a last step, take a few deep breaths and return to the room and the present moment.

As a concluding note, I encourage you to have ongoing interaction with your parts. After you initially meet them consciously, it's valuable to keep doing so to nurture your relationships with them.



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