

Radical Gentleness

The Transformation of the Inner Critic

Newly written for this book

“It’s like I don’t deserve to feel this happy.”

“I hate this weak, sad part of me.”

“Why do I always have to be so stupid?”

No matter what kind of inner work they do, at some point people always encounter an experience that can be called the Inner Critic. This is often (but not always) a voice, often (but not always) harsh and attacking, that often seems to come when the person is close to some positive new steps, or touching on an inner vulnerability. This so-called Inner Critic seems to delight in crushing the small, the tender, the new and positive. No wonder that almost every method I have ever heard of treats the Inner Critic as something to be conquered, pushed away, perhaps even belittled or criticized in its turn. (For a notable exception, see *Internal Family Systems Therapy* by Richard Schwartz.)

When the inner world includes harshness, lack of acceptance, judgment (as in being judgmental), it becomes an unsafe place for a positive healing change to happen. Aspects of ourselves that might have bloomed into what they needed to be, instead are crushed and go into hiding. Obviously this is a sad state of affairs. But there are no true villains or victims here. Everyone inside is doing their best to help us... as we will see.

“A Part that is Criticizing Right Now”

This harsh attacker has been called “the Inner Critic,” but I would prefer to call it “a part that is criticizing right now.” As always, we want to use our language in a way that opens to the possibility of change. Yes, criticizing parts can change – I’ve seen it happen plenty of times. So let’s call it “a part that is criticizing right now.” Once we use this kind of language, we may even find ourselves getting curious about what might be getting it so critical. We have made a crucial shift, from seeing this part of us as *essentially critical*, by its very nature, to seeing it as in a temporary state that has come about for a good reason.

This is parallel to the shift we make when we stop labeling another person as essentially bad and start seeing their behavior as understandable from a certain point of view. When I see the mess in my daughter’s room, I can think of her as “lazy,” or I can remember how hard it was for me to hang up my

clothes when I was her age. This shift in perception will profoundly affect my behavior with her. It doesn't mean I'll stop wanting her to clean her room – but it will change what I say to her, how I say it, how she perceives me, and ultimately the quality of our relationship.

A Process View

When people first hear that Ann and Barbara are suggesting that Focusers might be compassionate to their Critics within, they are dubious. It's as if we are suggesting that they love an abuser. Being compassionate to a criticizing part feels equivalent to being glad that it's there, making our lives a misery.

But again, this assumes that aspects of ourselves are fixed, unchanging. “Once a Critic, always a Critic.” This is why I suggest the language: “a part of me which is criticizing right now.” This shift in language parallels a profound shift in consciousness. There has been an assumption, built into our current language and worldview, that we are made up of units which do not fundamentally change. As Gendlin teaches (see *A Process Model*), we do not have to see ourselves as made up of units which then interact with each other, but rather as *processes*. Process and interaction are *first*.

In the inner world, and from a Focusing point of view, this is clear: when you sit with *anything*, it changes. Sit with something in you that is fearful, and it changes to being excited, or worried, or angry. There is an evolution in the feeling life that is unpredictable in advance, but makes sense in retrospect.

Why then, do experienced Focusers report an Inner Critic that appears to be the same, year after year? Still criticizing, still saying the same nasty phrases? Because there has been something missing, until now, in the quality of attention given to this criticizing part.

Can I Trust Myself?

The experience of an inner critic is deeply based in a lack of trust in a natural unfolding process that has a life-forward direction. If people have, as Freud thought, a fundamentally wild and primitive side that must be kept under wraps, then an inner criticizer/controller becomes crucial to any civilized person. (Freud called these two parts the “Id” and the “Superego.”) If emotional states and behaviors do not evolve naturally of themselves into something more positive, then change must be imposed.

The tragedy of the inner criticizing process is that a part of us has come to lose trust in another part of us. As one young woman put it, “I have a part of me that's very angry with me, my behavior, my choices. It says, ‘You're totally out of control, I don't trust you to make good choices.’”

And we see, over and over again, when we peer with compassion into the

soul of a part of us that is criticizing, that it believes it is helping us. It has to help by criticizing because it fears that the other part of us which it is pushing or holding back *has no other hope of changing*. This is important, and we will return to it.

Identifying a Criticizing Process

You might think it would be obvious when a criticizing process is going on. But most of the time we are involved in this criticizing process without being aware of it as such, because we are identified with one of the inner characters in the drama. We find ourselves saying things like:

“This is stupid.”

“I have to stop being so wimpy.”

“I feel inadequate.”

“I shouldn’t be feeling this way.”

An inner criticizing process correlates with any of the following activities:

(1) The use of pejorative language, like “stupid,” “wimpy,” “inadequate,” and similar critical labels is always a sign of a criticizing process. See the next section for more on this.

(2) The use of prescriptive language such as “should,” “ought,” “have to,” “need to,” and their negatives – “shouldn’t,” etc. – usually indicates a criticizing process.

(3) The attempt to change yourself, or a part of you, is probably the sign of an inner criticizing process, especially if there’s an assumption that the change has to happen for you to be OK. No wonder the world of self-help is so full of inner critics! It takes a big leap of awareness to understand that personal growth must start with self-acceptance, not self-criticism. (For a refreshingly different approach, see the excellent *I Know I’m in There Somewhere* by Helene Brenner, a book based on the idea that self-acceptance is the road to change.)

Definition: An inner criticizing part is any part of you that believes that you or another part of you has to change in order for you to be OK.

Truth in Labeling

As we’ve seen, the inner criticizing process often shows itself through the pejorative language we are using to label our experience. This process can be hard to recognize, and therefore hard to deal with. We can be so identified with the part of us that is labeling another part of us, that we don’t recognize the labels we are using as weapons in a war. They feel like “the truth.” But they are not.

Recently I was the Companion to a Focusing session in which the person who was Focusing was spending time with an inner “something” that didn’t

feel like talking. She was describing this “something,” as we do in Focusing, saying, “It’s small and hard, like a lump... It wants me to be here, it’s glad I’m paying attention... It wants me to be here, but it doesn’t want to talk to me... It feels like a selfish, dominating part...” Whoa! Do you see what happened? From simple direct descriptions like “small and hard, like a lump,” the Focuser has moved through empathy with its point of view (“It wants me to be here...”), and then the pejorative language begins. “Selfish” and “dominating” are not simple descriptions. They are levers – devices to pry out a resisted change. They are from a point of view – and it’s not the point of view of the part being described.

In this case I responded: “You’re sensing something in you that’s calling the small, hard part ‘selfish’ and ‘dominating.’ You might want to acknowledge *that* part as well.” The Focuser, used to this kind of shift back into Presence, was able to do this, and reported: “Yes, that part of me can’t understand how something could want my awareness and not want to talk. It really wants this thing to talk.”

What a big difference! We’ve gone from “It feels like a selfish, dominating part...” to “[Something in me] really wants this thing to talk.”

And consider this: whenever you find something in the inner process, in your own Focusing or someone else’s, and that part doesn’t want to talk, doesn’t want to come out, doesn’t want to reveal itself, chances are, 99 times out of 100, it doesn’t feel safe, and it doesn’t feel safe because there is another part of the Focuser lurking, ready to criticize it.

So when pejorative labels are used in inner descriptions, they’re usually signs that another part is present, hiding in identified position, making the process unsafe and also itself unheard.

Presence Is the Opposite of Criticizing

The environment in which an inner criticizing process can begin to transform is Presence. “Presence” is what Barbara McGavin and I call the ability or state of *being with* any inner experience, with interested curiosity and without judgment.

Presence is in many ways the opposite of the inner criticizing process. In Presence, we are able to turn toward whatever we feel, whatever is going on in us, with gentleness, with trust in its underlying life-forward direction. In Presence, we are not trying to change what we find, but only to hear it, so that it can find its own change if it needs to. (See the introduction to “Facilitating Presence” in this volume for more.)

The inner criticizing process isn’t Presence, *but it needs Presence*. If we criticize the critic, we are perpetuating the problem. This is a subtle and very important point, so let me say it again: *If we criticize the critic, we are*

perpetuating the problem. Making this part of us wrong for being as it is, means becoming *its* critic – and that simply moves the same dynamic to another level. Almost all approaches to dealing with the Inner Critic are of this type: they marginalize the criticizing aspect, in effect scolding it for being so critical, and ultimately exiling it.

There are two problems with this type of approach. The first problem is that it doesn't work. Pushed away, the Inner Critic always comes back. As we later come to understand its origins and purposes, we will see why it has to come back, stronger than ever, if it is pushed away.

The second problem has to do with the dynamics of *exile*. When aspects of our inner experiencing are pushed away from awareness, they do not really disappear. They function implicitly; that is, they are extremely powerful without being in awareness, which makes our lives feel even more unpredictable and out of control to the part of us which does remain in awareness.

An example of this: Quite a few years ago my good friend R. came to me greatly upset. How could I have done that to her? What? I said. I had no idea what she was talking about. She reminded me: at a conference, I had called out to her as she was leading the group in an exercise, telling her to do it differently. It had felt hurtful to her; she had heard criticism and anger in my voice. I only remembered trying to be “helpful.” But, respecting her viewpoint, I did some Focusing and invited something in me that might have had feelings about R. to come into awareness. Sure enough, there was something in me that had been carrying critical feelings about her, from long ago in our history. Because I hadn't been aware of them myself, they had come out in public, evident to her and probably to everyone else, but not to me!

I no longer want to be the last one in the room to know what I am feeling. That's why I do Focusing, and it's why I do Focusing with an Inner Relationship emphasis – because I am inviting back the exiles.

You cannot “get rid of” any of your feelings, no matter how much something in you may want to. You can only send them underground. In exile, parts of us become wilder, darker, lonelier, crueler. When they return from exile, or act from exile, they are not a pretty sight. (See “The Dog Story” in this volume for a metaphorical illustration of this.)

So let's not exile the inner criticizing process! Pushing it away just makes it easier for other people to see it and puts it outside the sphere of Presence, which is where its transformation could happen.

Presence Language with an Inner Criticizing Process

Presence language starts with the words “I'm sensing...” and goes on with “something in me that...”

Someone who says “This is stupid” would change this to “I’m sensing something in me that says this is stupid.”

Most people experience a big difference between those two sentences. (You might take a moment to notice what difference you feel.) Usually, the second one brings a feeling of more space, more distance without losing connection, a larger perspective. I am reminded that I am more than this, there is more to me than this. It becomes possible to *turn toward* the criticizing part, and toward any other part, with interested curiosity. Focusing on these inner aspects becomes possible.

Presence language is a reminder to take the space that Presence gives, to remember that we are more than the struggle inside us. From that place of “more,” there is a possibility of change.

Presence Language and a Criticizing Process – An Example

Sam had an action block. He was ready to move forward with his business plan but somehow he never got around to making the phone calls or finishing the brochure. When he sat down to do a Focusing session with me, he invited the part of him that didn’t want to move forward.

“It’s like a tenseness in my stomach... Well, actually it feels like clenching, holding real tight.... And there’s fear... I’m scared to let go.”

To support Sam in finding Presence, I reflected back his words using Presence language.

Ann: “*You’re sensing something in you* that’s clenching, holding real tight, scared to let go.”

Sam: “Yeah, it’s a part of me that’s scared to let go. The world is a scary place, it says. It feels like myself as a little child, when I first found out how harsh the world could be.”

Notice that Sam took the invitation into Presence language; after I reflected back, “You’re sensing something in you... scared to let go,” he said, “Yeah, it’s a part of me that’s scared to let go.” This perspective allowed him to feel into that part of him more deeply, to sense that it felt like him as a little child.

Ann: “You’re sensing that it feels like you as a little child, getting hurt for the first time.”

Sam: “I get so hard on myself sometimes.”

I wasn’t sure how this connected with what Sam had been saying. But Focusing is like that sometimes; what comes next is connected but not necessarily in a logical sequence.

What I did know was that his sentence “I get so hard on myself sometimes” needed to be unpacked – he was identified with both sides of an inner struggle, and I wanted to invite him into Presence with those sides.

Ann: “You’re sensing something in you that gets hard on something else in you.”

Sam: “It’s like I have this voice that says, ‘You have to. You don’t have a choice.’ But letting go feels like standing over a huge abyss.”

Again, Sam took my invitation, in that now he’s describing these two inner combatants in two different sentences, and each one is felt as more separate from him. In the next thing I say, I want to support that separation (and connection).

Ann: “You’re sensing something in you that feels letting go as standing over a huge abyss. And you’re sensing something in you that says, ‘You have to.’ And both are there.” (See “Standing It” in this volume for more about this kind of invitation and its reasons.)

In the rest of his session, Sam was able to listen with compassion to each of these sides of his process. What behaved at first like a criticizing process (“I get so hard on myself”) evolved into a part of him eager for him to succeed. And the part of him that felt so scared needed to be kept company as we would be with a frightened child. When that part felt heard from Presence, rather than pressured and criticized, it began to relax. And when the impatient part felt that its concerns were heard, it also began to relax.

None of this could have happened without Presence.

Sensing How It Feels in the Body

We know that Focusing is a body-oriented process. But what that means in practice is open to interpretation. (See “Body? What Body?” in this volume.) In the session we just reported, Sam had a tenseness in his stomach, clenching, holding tight... Clearly a body sensation. But this wasn’t the criticizing part. For him, the criticizing part showed up as a voice. (“It’s like I have this voice that says, ‘You have to. You don’t have a choice.’”)

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that a part which criticizes has not been understood to be something that could be focused on, felt into... because it often does not appear as clearly located in the body as the other parts of us, the ones that it is trying to control or change. (“I have this cold rock of dread in my stomach... And I’m trying to get it to loosen up... I shouldn’t be feeling that way...”)

Sometimes the criticizing part *is* experienced in the body. When it is, it is often felt as a constriction or narrowing or binding of some kind.

“I’ve got a lot of anger, I can feel it like heat and energy pouring through my shoulders and arms. And I’m also feeling this band across my chest. It feels cold, dense. It’s saying to the anger, go away. You can’t be here. It isn’t safe.”

In being with criticizing parts in a Focusing way, we need to be open to any modality they may use to communicate their presence. Voices (auditory)

and images (visual) are just as likely, if not more likely, as body sensations (kinesthetic). As always, if we do experience these parts of us as voices or images, we need to keep on being aware in the inner middle body, so that these experiences stay grounded in present awareness.

A Part that Criticizes Is Really Afraid

When I first began experimenting with inviting my Focusing clients to bring compassion to their inner criticizing parts, I encountered an interesting kind of resistance. People didn't want to be compassionate, because it seemed to them that this part of them was "mean," "cruel," or "angry." "It wants to hurt me," they would report. "How can I be compassionate to that?" From my experience with Marshall Rosenberg's Non-Violent Communication, I knew that a human being behaving as those inner parts were behaving could be seen as trying to meet legitimate needs. (In ways, Marshall would say, that were "tragically unlikely to succeed.") I wondered how to understand the behavior of this inner criticizing part in a way that would invite the Focuser's compassionate understanding. How could we understand what was going on, if we looked at it from *its* point of view? And it always came down to this: the fearsome critic was afraid. It was attacking so fiercely because *that* was how afraid it was, that something would go wrong, that something wouldn't get fixed, that other people would be critical, etc.

I began to wonder: What if all inner criticizing parts are really afraid?

They don't feel or look or sound afraid, usually. They sound angry, or authoritarian, very sure of themselves, sure that you are wrong and they are right. But what if the more sure and authoritarian they sound, the more scared they are, really, deep down?

I remembered a time when I was in my 20s, living in Chicago, and my roommate and I were painting our apartment. A rickety ladder was standing in the hall, and Leone's goofy cat Frostbite decided to leap onto the paint shelf. Ladder, cat, and all went crashing down to the floor, and an unearthly yowl arose. We went running over. Poor Frostbite was caught by the tail, entangled in the ladder. I went close to help him get loose, and instead of welcoming me, he attacked me. Ouch! Some gratitude! But it didn't take long for me to forgive him. *Of course* he attacked me; he was terrified, panicky, trapped, and desperate. All I had to do was see the desperation instead of the attack, and my compassion opened up easily, despite the claw marks on my hand.

The same was true of the inner criticizing process. If I wanted to help a Focuser have compassion for a part of them that was critical, what I needed to do was invite the Focuser to consider that the criticizing part might be afraid. This always worked. In fact, it worked so reliably that over time I

wondered if there might be some kind of universal law at work. Eventually, Barbara McGavin was able to show me that a part of us that is criticizing is a part needing to *control*, and that fear and the need to control are two sides of the same coin.

The part that is criticizing often doesn't like to admit that it is afraid. To do so would be to show its vulnerability, and of course it doesn't want to do that. But there is a whole raft of synonyms for fear: from panic and terror at one end of the scale to worry and concern at the other. A part that is controlling/criticizing is often willing to admit that it is worried or concerned. And for it to say that it is worried is already a big difference from being on the attack.

The Fearful Criticizing Process – An Example

Here's an excerpt from a session in which a woman with a chronic illness was deeply honest with herself about what her illness was saying – and this brought up a criticizing process. After spending time connecting with the bodily feel of her symptoms, and using Presence language (“I'm sensing... something in me...”) to remind herself to *be with* rather than *be in* the feelings, she reported this:

“I'm sensing this part of me that isn't sure it wants me to get well. It's afraid if I get well, I'm going to forget everything I learned in this time. *Another part says I shouldn't feel that way, that's bad.* My symptoms are saying to me, ‘If we go away, you're going to go back to being unconscious.’ Something in here thinks that I have to be sick or ill to have a sane life. *And something in me is scared when it hears that.*”

Notice that in those six sentences, she is hearing from two parts of herself. I've put in italics the sentences that report what the “criticizing part” is saying and feeling. It starts by saying the other part of her “shouldn't” be feeling the way it is feeling. This is the familiar critical voice: judgmental, using “should” and “ought.” But a few sentences later, she realizes that this part of her is scared.

We can empathize with this scared part. Of course! It can be scary to realize there's a part that *wants* the painful symptoms that one is experiencing. No wonder this scared part gets anxious and tries to stop those experiences the only way it knows how: through judgment and blame.

Even though we (from Presence) are aware that hearing exactly what is here is the fastest way to allow it to transform – and there's nothing to be afraid of in hearing what is so, because it already *is* so – there is often a part, as in this case, that is scared to hear it, doesn't want that to be true. A part of us that is trying to suppress another part often *behaves* critically. But its *feeling* is worry, fear. And this is important: to make the distinction between the

actions which a part of us is taking or urging another part of us to take, and the feelings that are behind its behavior. If we get caught up in the behavior, the actions, we are caught up in a warlike struggle. But if we can sense beneath the actions to the feelings driving those actions, we are much closer to the potential for transformation.

Empathy with the Fear

Once we are compassionately aware of the fear (worry, concern...) in this part of us, we can give it empathy for what it's afraid of. Empathy can often be expressed with the help of phrases like "no wonder" and "of course." This manner of speaking helps to carry and convey the attitude of understanding how *it* feels from *its* point of view.

A man who was starting out to be a meditation teacher was Focusing on a difficult area of his life. Suddenly he reported: "This part of me says, You have no qualifications to be a meditation teacher, because you're so screwed up!" We'd often done inner work on the criticizing process, so I just said: "Wow, it must be really scared about something!" He sensed into it with the possibility that it might be scared, and reported: "Oh... It has a belief that if I'm teaching I have to present myself as having no problems myself."

I suggested he say to it, with empathy, "No wonder you'd be feeling scared or worried, if you believe if I'm teaching I have to have no problems myself."

I saw his body relax even before he reported: "I'm feeling a big relief all through my stomach and abdomen. A strong tightness there just let go."

Notice how the sentence starting with "no wonder" is warm and empathic, without agreeing in any way with the limiting belief held by that part. It acknowledges the feelings ("scared or worried") and their connection with the belief ("if you believe...") without validating the belief itself. This tends to result in a loosening, a freeing up, around the belief, which is often experienced as a physical release.

The Not-Wanting

There is something that this part of us which is criticizing right now is not wanting. And, paradoxically, it often doesn't want exactly what it is predicting. It says "You'll be a failure" or "You are a failure" and failure, as it turns out, is exactly what it doesn't want for you.

This may seem frustratingly illogical, but actually it's a very natural human process. Imagine a parent calling to a child who is going out the door in the wintertime. "You'll catch your death of cold!" Why would a parent predict that a child would die? Obviously, the parent wants the child to do something: to put on some warmer clothes, perhaps. So that statement isn't

really a prediction of death. It's really a request with an expression of strong feeling attached: "Please put on warmer clothes, I'm so worried about you!" From this perspective, we understand that "You'll catch your death of cold" is actually an expression of what's *not* wanted.

Is it possible that every time our inwardly criticizing parts predict our doom, or our failure, they are actually speaking of what they *don't* want! What an idea!

It can be a powerfully transformative process to invite a criticizing part to reveal what it is not wanting. In particular, as Barbara McGavin and I have discovered, it helps to invite it to let us know what it is not wanting to happen *to us*. That sounds like this: "I'm inviting it to let me know what it is not wanting to happen to me." Phrased this way, the invitation validates the protective nature of this part of us, and therefore is likely to be a welcome invitation to it.

If you connect first with the fear-type emotion of the criticizing part (fear, worry, concern...), it is rarely difficult for it to begin letting you know what it's not wanting to have happen to you. Without that emotional connection, this step can be more difficult, sometimes impossible. Sensing *its* (fear-type) emotion is a key step; then comes sensing its not-wanting.

The Not-Wanting: An Example

Thea was Focusing with an aspect of herself that she called "resistant." It had a harsh tone, and when she connected with it, she heard, "You're never getting anywhere. Give up." It didn't feel fearful, and at first she found it hard to imagine that it might be afraid, but she decided to try taking it on faith that a criticizing part must be afraid, and see what happened.

She sensed in her body, and saw a dark lurking figure, glowering in a corner. "I'm wondering if you might be worried or concerned," she offered it. There was a slight sense of agreement, not much, but a little. Empathizing with what it might be going through, she invited, "I'm wondering what you might be not wanting to happen to me." Images and words began to flow: *abused, punished, dishonored...* "Punished" felt like the crux of it. She let it know she heard it. "I really hear that you're not wanting me to be punished."

There was a slight sense of release... and she decided to offer it empathy. "No wonder you're feeling worried," she said to it, "if what you're wanting is for me not to be punished." There was a lightening in the sense of this place inside, a relaxing. Thea was able to stay with it and sense more.

The Wanting

Just under Not-Wanting is Wanting, what this part is wanting for you to experience or feel. The good news about criticizing parts is that their Wanting

is usually quite accessible, once the Not-Wanting has been heard. (We'll talk about the exception to this below, in the section on "Severe Inner Criticism.") And by the time a part is willing to tell a Focuser what it's wanting, it rarely feels critical anymore. It often feels like a concerned protector. This is another reason to let go of the term "Critic" and name this part by the way it is behaving, changing its description as its behavior changes.

Let's follow the example of Thea, just given, into Wanting. Staying in contact with a part of her that was criticizing, sensing that it's not wanting her to be punished, Thea feels a lightening when she acknowledges that. She takes time and senses a readiness in that part to allow its Wanting to be sensed into. The image of being punished is still with her, what is not wanted, and now over that image comes another one, of being... "embraced with pride" are the words. "It wants me to be embraced with pride," Thea reports.

Thea's Focusing partner invites her to sense what that part is wanting her to be able to *feel* from being embraced with pride. Getting in contact with the Wanted Feeling is/brings a deep level of awareness that can be quite transformative. Thea invites the body sense of what that part wants her to be able to feel from being embraced with pride. There is a bodily sense of warm... protected... connected... This is deeply satisfying to feel, and Thea stays with it for quite some time.

Yes, this is the same part that Thea first encountered saying, "You're never getting anywhere. Give up"! Like the parent who says, "You'll catch your death of cold" while really meaning "I'm worried about you, I want you to be safe," the very part of us that seems to be attacking is actually a supportive protector. But it needs to be taken through a process that allows its protective side to emerge.

Review of the Process So Far

- (1) Becoming aware that an inner criticizing process is happening
- (2) Coming into Presence with all aspects of experiencing, including the inner criticizing process
- (3) Noticing how the inner criticizing process feels in the body, or how it presents itself, as sensation, voice, image
- (4) Sensing if it might be afraid or have some form of fear such as worry or concern
- (5) Inviting it to let me know what it's *not wanting* to have happen to me
- (6) Inviting it to let me know what it's *wanting* for me to experience or feel

The Criticizer and the Criticized

In the following examples, I invite your curiosity about who is this "I" that the speaker is identified with. Is it Presence? Is it the criticizing part? And

if neither of those, then who?

“I feel bad about messing up my life.”

“My inner critic is huge, and I’m so small.”

“A critical voice is calling me ‘stupid,’ and that feels true.”

“A critical voice is calling me ‘stupid,’ and I’m telling it to shut up and get out of here.”

“I feel ashamed.”

In all our talk about a part that criticizes, we have been ignoring another key character in the drama – the part of us that is being criticized. If I identify myself with Presence, the state of being able to be with anything that arises, then it is clear that I am not the one being criticized. Robert De Niro’s character in the movie *Taxi Driver* says, “Are you talking to me? *Are you talking to ME?*” Who is the criticizing part talking to? Who is it criticizing? Me?

When I am in Presence, I don’t feel criticized.

So, if there is an experience of being criticized by a criticizing part of me, then that must be another part of me that also needs to be acknowledged, the one that feels criticized, and has feelings about that: anger, rebellion, guilt, embarrassment, shame.

We can be *identified* with the criticizing part, as in “This is stupid,” or we can be identified with the criticized part, as in “I feel inadequate.” We may be identified with the criticized part yet have some awareness of what is happening, as in “A critical part has showed up and is telling me I’m never going to get anywhere with this.” Rarely are we in Presence with this criticizing process. If we were, we might say something like this:

“I’m sensing something in me that’s being critical of this other part of me, and I’m also sensing the part of me that’s feeling criticized.”

Coming into Presence is the first and most essential step for shifting out of the deadlock between criticizer and criticized. To find Presence when “you” are under attack, remember that you are not the target, you are not the one being criticized. *Something in you* is being criticized by *something in you*.

The part that’s feeling criticized can be called the reacting part. Barbara McGavin and I have identified three styles or modes that this reacting part assumes from time to time.

(1) **Collapsing.** This is an attitude that says, “You’re right, I am that bad, and I feel so bad about it.” This may be a difficult part to detect, if we are identified with it. It can feel like the truth, simply the truth. The queasy hollow feeling in the stomach (or some other unpleasant body feeling) may feel like no more than I deserve. Barbara McGavin and I used to call this part the “Critic’s Victim,” before we decided that the word “victim” was too much of a pejorative label itself. But sometimes “victim” is exactly what this part

feels like, even to itself.

The felt experience of shame is the territory of this collapsing reacting part. If something in me is ashamed, then there surely is another part of me shaming it. The same is true of guilt and embarrassment. “I feel guilty” can become, in Presence language, “Something in me is feeling guilty, and something in me is saying I should feel guilty.” We will then be able to sense into and hear the not-wanting and wanting in each one.

(2) **Rebelling.** This reacting part says, “I am NOT!” or “I *won't*, and you can't make me!” It often has a stubborn teenager quality to it. In fact, the relationship of the reacting part to the criticizing part is often like the relationship of a teenager to a parent, with all the comedy and drama that entails.

The criticizing part is controlling, pushing, managing (of course, as we have seen, for its own good reasons). The reacting part is something in us that doesn't like being controlled, pushed, or managed. (And who would?) When the two come head to head, sparks fly... and the body is the battleground.

(3) **Escaping.** When it feels itself under attack, something in us may respond by running away, escaping. Experientially this could be going blank, forgetting, getting confused, going to sleep, etc. Behaviorally, this escaping reacting part could be the part of us that indulges in what are called “escapes”: watching TV, playing computer games, eating too many snacks, etc.

One indication that you may be *identified with* the Reacting Part is if you find it difficult to sense the fear, worry, or concern in the Criticizing Part. If you find it hard to imagine or feel that this criticizing part of you is anything but angry, harsh, mean; if it seems really big in relation to you; if it's hard to empathize with it at all – this is a very reliable sign that you are actually identified with the recipient of that criticism. You feel it is criticizing *you*. Which means you are not in Presence – which is good news, because once you get into Presence again, things are going to feel a lot better!

Being in Presence will enable the Focuser to *be with* both the part that is criticizing and the part that is reacting to the criticism. Each side will have an emotional quality, a not wanting, and a wanting, that need to be felt in the body in their own timing, and acknowledged and heard. This way lies healing.

Severe Inner Criticism

Some experiences of inner criticism are especially hard to understand with the benevolent analogy of worried parents predicting what they don't want to have happen to a beloved child. “It hates me.” “It wants me to die.” “It's so vicious, it wants to tear me apart.” Of course we need to facilitate

disidentification from the “me” in these statements. Still, how can we understand the force of this seeming inner hatred?

In our body of work called *Treasure Maps to the Soul*, Barbara McGavin and I have come to see that the nature of trauma can lead naturally to this kind of harsh criticizing process. Put simply, when overwhelmingly frightening or painful events occur at a time when there are not resources to handle them, either from within or without, the emotional process becomes frozen – unprocessed – and encapsulated in a part that is then exiled from awareness. Various other parts take on the job of keeping this so-called dangerous emotional “stuff” out of awareness.

So there are two main types of inner criticizing process, or two ends of a continuum, depending on how severe is the trauma, or how much fear there is in the system of what may be contacted or felt. At the lighter, less severe end of the scale, we have an inner criticizing process that is more easily felt as protective, that reveals what it is wanting *for us* without too much fuss. At the more severe end of the scale, we have a harsher criticizing part that is driven by a profound fear of what may be allowed to be felt if it doesn’t do its job. In this case, the not-wanting is more complex: we have the not-wanting of the criticizing part, which is for something not to be felt, and we have the not-wanted feeling that it doesn’t want felt. Ultimately, both need to be contacted in a felt bodily way, but it is counterproductive to rush this process; retraumatizing can occur. Go slowly, and respect any inner signals from parts that need to stop and come back to the process later.

A Harsh Inner Critic – An Example

George said he had been experiencing a harsh inner voice all week, saying to him, “You dumb shit! You can’t make a difference! Don’t you know any better than that? You’re powerless!”

He had been determined to turn around a situation in which a sales promotion wasn’t doing well, by writing a well-crafted email to a carefully selected mailing list of key people. He was proud of himself for taking action. But then there were *no* responses to the email. As soon as he realized this, the inner attack started.

When George acknowledged and brought awareness to this inner attacker, he sensed it as a “dragon-creature” with big wings, and its emotion was anger. “It’s furious with me!” I invited him to sense what might be getting it so furious. “It’s furious that I dared to think I could be powerful. It doesn’t want me to be powerful.” However, it wasn’t George’s powerful actions that enraged the dragon, but the fact that they hadn’t worked. “It wasn’t a problem while I was writing the email and sending it out. It was only after it didn’t work that I started hearing what a dumb-ass I was.”

It was unbearable to some part of George that he took powerful actions that were rejected. “It’s like I can hear those people whispering, who does he think he is, thinking that important people like us would respond to his silly little email.” As he sat with the feel of all this in his body, a memory came from junior high school days: He had written in the yearbook of a very popular girl that he liked her. Later she had come up to him and insulted him cruelly in front of her friends. “They must have teased her about what I wrote,” he says now. At the time, it was devastating.

George sits with the body feel now of the memory of that devastating rejection. That memory is joined by others, other times, other rejections. He is staying with the body feel as these memories come, getting a sort of inner permission to feel it as much as he is feeling it. “It’s like a punch in the stomach,” he says. “No... it’s like after a punch. Like nausea and not enough air.” He stays with that feeling, acknowledging it.

“This is what that dragon was not wanting me to feel,” George says. He acknowledges both: the feeling itself, just as it is right now, and something in him not wanting him to have to feel it. Slowly a peacefulness grows in him. “It’s not so bad,” he says. “I was afraid it would be worse.”

“Yes,” I reflect, “something in you was afraid it would be worse.”

Richard Schwartz’s Manager and the Treasure Maps Controller

Our conception of the criticizing process is very close to the conception of the “manager” in Richard Schwartz’s finely worked out Internal Family Systems Therapy. A manager is a type of part that “tends to be highly protective... and interested in controlling the environment to keep things safe” (*Internal Family Systems Therapy*, p. 46). Managerial parts may be perfectionistic, striving achievers, biting critical taskmasters, worriers, sentries... “The point to remember is that the primary purpose of all managers is to keep ... the feared feelings and thoughts from spilling over the inner walls, so that the system remains safe and the person is able to function in life” (p. 49).

In *Treasure Maps to the Soul*, Barbara McGavin and I call the critical type of part described in this article a “Controller,” because it may or may not criticize, but it always feels desperate for an inner control. There is much more in both Internal Family Systems Therapy and *Treasure Maps to the Soul* than can be described in this brief paper, but the main differences are in the way of working with the parts: *Treasure Maps to the Soul*, as a Focusing-based method, uses contact with the bodily felt sense as a central part of the change process; for IFS the body sense is used as an anchor, and change comes in other ways.

A Glimpse of Possibilities

I used to cringe when someone, in a workshop, let's say, raised a complaint or a dissatisfaction. As a peace-loving Nine (on the Enneagram), I wanted to avoid conflict at all costs. Anger was the scariest emotion I could encounter. Now I turn toward angry complaints with delight. I'm excited about encountering the real person who is feeling the anger, and finding out what that person's needs are. It's because of Focusing with my own inner criticizing parts that this has changed.

It's possible to imagine a state where we cannot be criticized, either from within or from without. I'm not talking about being closed to information or feedback. We would be open to receiving information, and to taking in feedback and making changes. But none of it would make us feel bad about ourselves, our essence, who we really are.

If you can't imagine such a state, you're not alone. Many people who are tormented by inner criticism have a hard time picturing a time when they'd be truly free of it. Don't fret; this brave new world is not something we can think our way into; it's the result of process. Doing Focusing as described in this article, turning toward inner criticizing parts with compassion each time they arise, and when they feel ready inviting a sense of what they're not-wanting and wanting, will bring lasting and deep change.

