

## **Review of “Inside Out” by Dick Schwartz**

(founder of the Internal Family Systems Model; posted 7/2/2105 in the newsletter of The Center for Self Leadership)

I watched Pixar's new movie, “Inside Out”, through several different eyes simultaneously. Parts of me were caught up in the drama, excitement, and pathos of the story. I found myself crying at different points, and enthralled throughout. These parts of me easily identified with Riley, the story's protagonist, who as an 11-year-old girl is forced to move and becomes sullen on the outside but is hiding her inner sadness and fear. Those parts could also identify with Riley's parts that we come to know well because they share the spotlight with Riley as central characters and have their own trials and adventures.

Other parts of me were simply amazed. It was as if I was watching my life's work played out before my eyes in ways that I could never imagine creating. I came to the film worried that the five emotions would be the only inner characters, would be unidimensional, and would not evolve or change, both individually and in their relationships. Instead, (in keeping with IFS) each part was like a human being-- a full-range personality, albeit, like each of us, with a basic emotional temperament. Each part had the ability to feel and express many different emotions and to evolve from an extreme and rigid state to a non-extreme and valuable and flexible state. In addition, there were multitudes of other parts, who

were less central characters and were in roles comparable to our managers, firefighters, and exiles. There was actually a territory for exiles called "the Abyss" which included a delightful imaginary friend who had been left in the dust along with many childhood memories.

The most amazing plot line for me was the evolving relationship between Joy and Sadness. In the beginning of the movie, Riley is having a fine childhood in Minnesota and Joy is a big player in her life while the other key parts, sadness, anger, fear and disgust come and go naturally in response to events in her life. Then, when she's 11, the family suddenly moves to San Francisco.

Riley's parents are distressed and preoccupied and Riley's fear and sadness are triggered in a big way. Joy shifts into the role of what we call pseudo-Self and becomes a Self-like part, frantically trying to cheer up the others. Like a parentified inner child, Joy desperately tries to keep a happy mask on Riley's face so she doesn't burden her parents who clearly have little emotional bandwidth to deal with an unhappy child on top of all their other worries. Riley's mother praises her for being so upbeat and asks her to continue to do so.

As is true in internal families, parts polarize with each other in crises. Joy increasingly polarizes with Sadness and both become rigidly one-dimensional

and extreme. Joy is now an irrepressible cheerleader who has to resort to distorting reality to try to sell her upbeat message. But we also see the toll this takes on her-- her frustration and fatigue as she has to remain in this unnatural role to help Riley make it through her new life far from all she loved in Minnesota and full of new, scary kids. Sadness becomes a constant, burdensome downer that Joy has to drag around and contain, and who has the ability to turn core memories sad (blue) by touching them. This shows how much our managers have to strain and distort to keep us afloat and why they want to get rid of exiles who's emotions have become dangerously contagious.

Through a series of events however, it begins to dawn on Joy that Sadness can be useful. Sadness' vulnerability and honesty elicits nurturance and understanding from others, and Sadness' ability to empathize helps others when they are down in a way that Joy's cheeriness can't. Joy begins to get that the upbeat thing isn't always necessary, begins to respect Sadness, by the end of the movie, Joy hands over the controls to Sadness who is able to bring the family back together. Joy is relieved to be out of her unbearable responsibility and can be her relaxed, lovable self. Just like in external families, when parts come to see each others resources rather than each others extremes, they depolarize and collaborate. We are left with one big happy internal family that is

paralleled in the renewed happiness in Riley's external family.

The only aspect of IFS that isn't overtly represented in the film is the Self as an active inner leader or inner parent. It is clear by the end of the story that Riley and her parents are each much more Self led, and I'm not sure how I would have portrayed the Self as a character in the movie since Self is the seat of consciousness and not an image we can see when we do inner work. As one person in our post-film discussion suggested, when you watch the movie, you become the Self-- as if you are watching your parts interact and you want to enter and help them. I'm astounded that Peter Docter, who knew nothing about IFS when he wrote it with his team, had such amazing intuitions about many aspects of inner systems that have taken me 30 years to glean. The absence of a Self in Riley's system seems quite excusable.

There is an aspect of Riley's psyche that we don't include in IFS and is intriguing. Over time she seems to construct inner "islands" which seem to be structures in her mind that contain memories, emotions, and beliefs related to specific areas of her life. So she has family island, friendship island, hockey island (hockey is her passion), honesty island, and goofball island. These seem to be core pillars in her view of herself and of the world that are maintained by core memories. When they are intact

and functioning, Riley can turn to them as reminders that there is good in her and the world. As things get worse for Riley each of them begins to crumble, her mind becomes darker and more barren, and she resorts to an extreme, firefighter-like solution in her external life. The good news is that these structures are quickly restored as her inner and outer families reunite. It does feel correct to me that we construct such clusters that we come to call our self-concepts or our world views. Perhaps they are neural circuits that organize parts' actions. I agree with Jim Hopper of Harvard Medical School that this is an aspect worthy of further discussion in our community. It would have been interesting if, as I find with clients, the good islands don't just disintegrate but are also replaced with negative ones that drive her self-concept.

This film was so suffused with subtle elements of intra-psychic life that it will take several more viewings before I feel like I fully comprehend it. I loved that the central parts took turns using a control panel to organize Riley's behavior and sensations because that is the way I've always conceived of the way parts operate. I totally identified with the little managers with the vacuum cleaner who were cleaning any unnecessary memories out of Riley's memory banks. Similarly with the dream-makers and what it took to wake her up. In addition, the family dinner scene that included the parts of each family member were amazingly accurate portrayals of how parts interact

across people and trigger problematic inner and outer sequences of interaction. I've shown that clip to a number of audiences now and people immediately get it.

Finally, I hope and expect that this movie will be a big hit and as such will bring awareness of the existence of and new respect for parts. It will make our jobs so much easier because we can refer to the movie when we try to introduce the idea of parts to clients. In ways I never dreamed possible it can reverse the pathological way that parts have come to be viewed in our culture because of various theories of psychology and psychotherapy. Wouldn't it be cool if people stopped fearing or hating their parts and instead starting spending time inside getting to know and love them?

Yours Truly,

Dick