



Intentional Presence: Parts Overview #2

The Information Parts Communicate (And Why It's Important to Listen)

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The first article in this series explored how different parts of our reactive awareness affect our behavior. This article continues that exploration by examining the inner information that parts communicate—including emotions, needs, desires, memories and beliefs. Learning to work skillfully with the information parts communicate is a key to living a more conscious, authentic, and fulfilling life. (If you're new to intentional presence, you might want to read the first article in this series—Parts Overview #1: Understanding Parts and How They Affect Your Behavior—before proceeding to this one. It's available at www.intentionalpresence.com.)

Imagine that you're at a family gathering and your mother starts criticizing you in front of a group of family members. Faced with her criticism, a part of you might feel embarrassed and want to leave the room. Another part of you might feel angry and want to say something mean and critical in return. Yet another part of you might start lecturing you inside, saying things like, "You know, she's right; you never stick to anything and your career has been a total failure. You need to focus, buckle up, and try to make something of yourself."

What causes this sudden flurry of inner voices? Your **SUBCONSCIOUS MIND** has just activated three **PARTS**¹ of your **REACTIVE AWARENESS** in rapid fire: an embarrassed part, an angry part, and a critical part of you urging you to work harder. Parts bring us an amazing capacity that we often take for granted: the ability to experience multiple emotions, **NEEDS**, **DESIRES**, beliefs and viewpoints at the same time.

Parts Aren't the Same Thing as Emotions

People sometimes ask, "Why do you refer to an emotion like anger as an angry 'part' of you? Why don't you just call it anger?" One reason we use a different name to distinguish parts from emotions is that parts carry much more information than emotions alone.

When your **SUBCONSCIOUS MIND** activates a part in response to one of your daily experiences, that part's intense emotion might be the first piece of information you notice. But as you shift into a state of quiet, calm, non-judgmental observation (see **MINDFULNESS**, **OBSERVING AWARENESS**) and observe this part of you long enough, you'll discover that it's communicating lots of other information besides emotion, including physical sensations, physical symptoms (e.g., a sudden headache), thoughts, beliefs, symbols or images, memories, needs and desires. The psychologist

¹ Definitions for terms in **BLUE** throughout this article appear in the glossary at www.intentionalpresence.com.

Carl Jung called parts “complexes”—an apt name for parts of our PSYCHE that carry a complex network of INNER INFORMATION.

What if emotions were just information to help you navigate your daily challenges with more awareness, ease and grace? How would your relationship with your emotions change if you could see them that way?

Parts Carry Important Information for Navigating Your Daily Challenges

You’re probably not used to thinking of the emotions, needs, desires, and viewpoints that parts communicate as inner information. Many of us have been trained to see intense emotions as negative or destructive energies that should be avoided at all costs. But what if emotions were just *information* to help you navigate your daily challenges with more awareness, ease and grace? How would your relationship with your emotions change if you could see them that way?

Intentional presence views parts and the information they communicate as creative, natural, and enlivening elements of the psyche. Among other things, the information parts carry can help you to:

- Get clear on what you want and need in any given moment,
- Resolve action blocks and identify limiting beliefs,
- Make better-informed decisions,
- Solve longstanding problems,
- Create innovative works of art, inventions, products, theories, ideas, and
- Realize more of your unique potential.

The diagram that follows will give you a feel for the complex network of information parts carry. This example involves a common BEHAVIOR PATTERN: failing to ask for what you want or need. Below is some of the inner information that a man we’ll call “Phil” reported as he explored different parts of his reactive awareness that were driving this limiting behavior.

DEFINITION

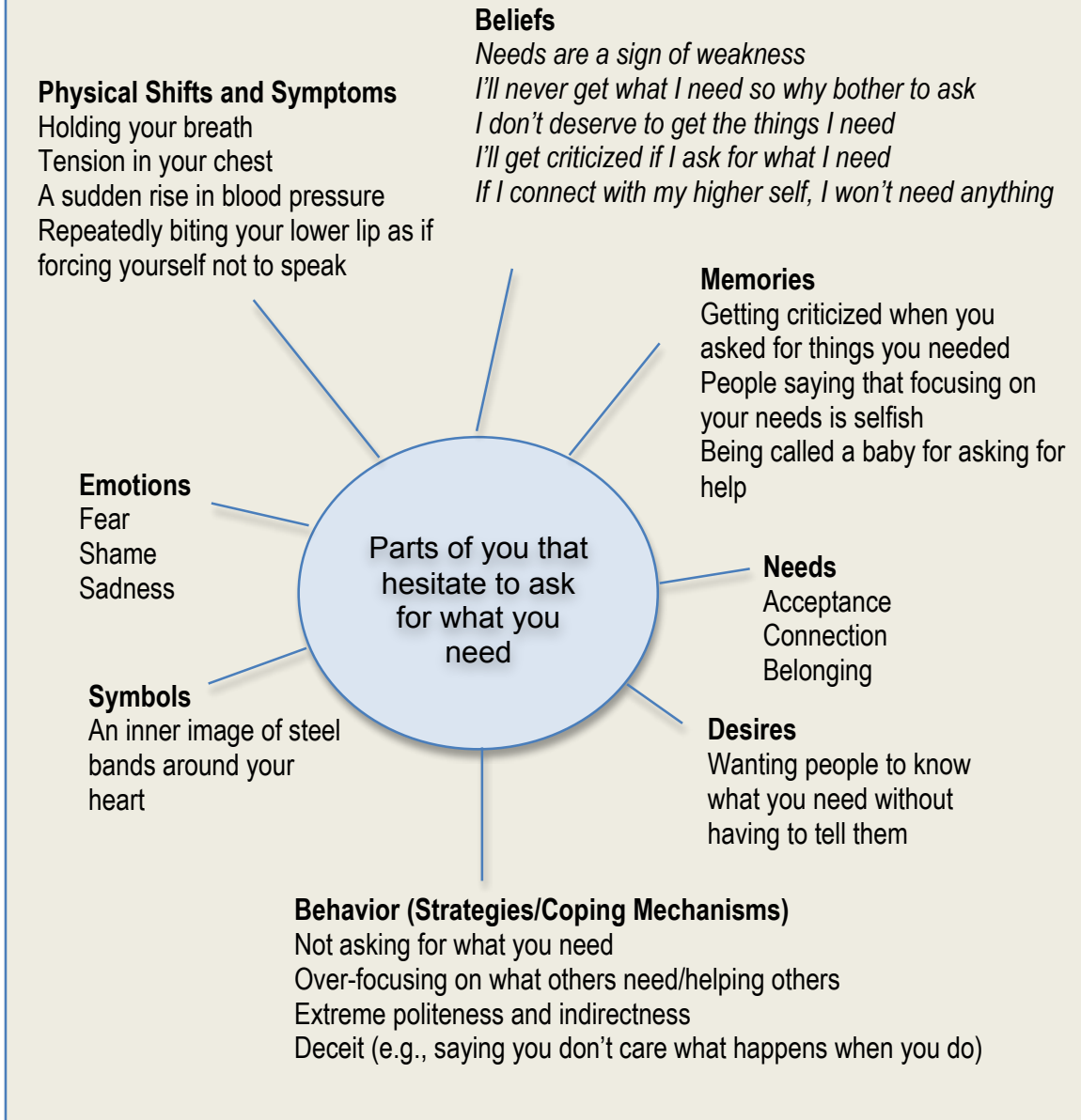
Inner Information (n).

Data that different parts of our reactive awareness communicate to the CONSCIOUS MIND in response to our daily experiences. Examples of inner information include physical sensations, physiological changes, and symptoms emotions, memories, thoughts, beliefs, symbols, needs, desires, intuition, and dreams. Inner information unconsciously motivates our actions, but we can also use it to *consciously* guide our decisions about what actions to take in response to a given experience.

Equivalents:

Phenomena (William James); psychological phenomena (Jung); contents, mental contents, psychic contents, or the contents of consciousness (psychology); spectrum of experiences, core material, core organizers (Hakomi); the building blocks of experience; (Sensorimotor Therapy)

APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION THAT PARTS COMMUNICATE



Understanding Parts Is a Key to Loving Ourselves

The poet Robert Bly once said that we spend our life until we're twenty deciding what parts of ourselves to put in the bag, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again.² It took me decades to realize that pushing down different parts of myself wasn't helping anyone's cause—least of all mine. The world had conditioned me to think of emotions as negative and destructive. American culture influenced me see needs as a sign of weakness, and Eastern religion taught me that desire was the source of all suffering. Strangely, a flower was one of the first teachers that helped

² Robert Bly, *A Little Book of the Human Shadow*, p. 18

me to embrace a more affirming view of parts of myself that I had previously stuffed in a bag and tried to ignore.

One day while staring at a flower, I became completely enthralled by the fact that no part of a flower seems extraneous, wrong or unnecessary. For some reason, I was filled with absolute wonder that each part of a flower has a function that contributes to its wellbeing. While staring at this flower, I started to think, “Why would nature give me emotions, needs and desires if they were bad, destructive, or unspiritual? No part of anything in nature is wrong or bad or unnecessary.”

Why would nature give you emotions, needs, and desires if they were bad, destructive or unspiritual? No part of anything in nature is wrong or bad or unnecessary.

This simple but deeply mystical experience brought a profound shift in perspective. Instead of seeing parts, emotions, needs, desires, and beliefs as negative, unspiritual hindrances, I began to explore the positive function of parts and the inner information that they communicate.

Each Piece of Inner Information Plays An Important Function

In time I began to realize that just as every part of a flower has a purpose that contributes to its growth and wellbeing, every bit of inner information that parts communicate is useful as well. It’s only when we ignore or repress this information—or don’t know how to work with it skillfully—that it can create problems in our lives. Below are brief overviews of some of the functions that different types of inner information play within the whole of our consciousness:

Emotions: Emotions communicate our needs—either needs that arise in the present moment or needs from past experiences that never got met and are still calling out to be fulfilled. For example, when a part of you feels overwhelmed, the emotion of overwhelm might signal a need for balance or support from others. Anger at someone who’s routinely critical of you could communicate a need for appreciation, respect, or non-judgment. If you don’t listen to your emotions, you can’t know what you want and need and love, and without knowing that, it’s going to be hard to realize your own unique potential.

Emotions also fuel our desires and help to bring them into manifestation. For example, my desire to teach people self-awareness skills is partly driven by the sadness and anger I feel that my brother and sister didn’t have access to basic self-awareness training—training that might have helped them to avoid early and tragic deaths related to their emotional challenges.

Emotions can also serve as indicators of limiting beliefs that we’ve picked up in the past. For example, if you tried to ask for things you needed as a child and people routinely ignored your requests, you could have formed the belief: *it’s a waste of time to ask others for support; people won’t help you, so it’s better to just fend for*

yourself. This belief can drive overly self-reliant actions that leave you with a persistent sense of sadness, loneliness, or exhaustion. In such cases, emotions serve as important roadmaps: following an emotion down to the belief that's generating it is an important first step in shifting unfulfilling behaviors driven by unseen beliefs.

Needs: Needs are universal requirements for our survival, wellbeing, and growth that all human beings experience. Nature programmed all human beings with the same set of universal needs, and these needs are important motivators of our actions. Here are a few examples:

- Our needs for food, shelter, and physical security drive us to seek employment.
- Our needs for love and connection drive us to form friendships, find mates, and start families.
- Our needs for self-actualization, contribution, and helping others drive us to find new ways to realize our unique potential.
- Our needs for contribution drive us to find ways to help and serve others.

Many of us have been taught to believe that needs are “unspiritual” or a sign of weakness. Intentional presence sees needs as creative, life forward, and generative forces. Repressing and judging our needs, and lack of skill in requesting support to meet our needs, is what gets us in trouble, not needs themselves.

Intentional presence sees needs as extremely creative, life forward and generative forces.

Those of you with religious or philosophical leanings might even consider needs as sacred, since God/nature endowed us with them. Given that the needs for love, understanding, appreciation, and connection are common to all cultures, races, and times, some spiritually informed psychologists theorize that needs can even be considered as an aspect of the **SOUL** itself.

Beliefs: Beliefs form automatically in response to our experiences. We can't stop our inner belief-making process; it's hard-wired into our **PSYCHE**. Beliefs fueled by emotion, memories, and other inner information are powerful, creative energies. They're so hypnotic that they can make temporary and changeable situations look like permanent, unchangeable realities. For example, a part of you that believes that it's hopeless to create a better relationship with your mother can prevent you from seeing actions you could take to begin moving in that direction.

One of my spiritual teachers used to say that it's impossible to function in the world without beliefs. Frankly, although some people claim to operate at a level beyond the mind or beyond beliefs, even the belief that beliefs are illusions is a belief! Once

formed, our beliefs often operate below the level of our conscious awareness, but they still actively shape our experience.

Many approaches to psychology and spiritual awakening pay little attention to the power of beliefs in shaping our reality. Intentional presence considers beliefs a prime motivator of our actions, and believes that every human being should learn skills for surfacing and shifting limiting beliefs.

Memories: It's standard knowledge that to create a new reality, we have to believe

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in that possibility, infuse that belief with emotion and passion, hold a picture of the result we want in mind, and keep taking actions towards that goal. But few of us realize that memories of past events act like pictures that can keep the same reality in place for years on end. We reviewed an example of one such belief in the first article in this series: a man brutally raped by several black boys in his youth formed a belief that all black people were dangerous. The intense fear accompanying his experience, coupled with the picture in his mind of that horrific event kept his belief strongly in place. In time, this man became a Ku Klux Klan member and set a goal to rid his local area of blacks, Jews, and anyone else unlike himself. It wasn't until years later that he realized that

this painful memory and the beliefs it had created were fueling his hatred and terror of people unlike himself.

Desires: Our desires strongly motivate our behavior. Desires are urges to do something that we believe will meet a specific need or needs in our lives. Conflicting desires held by different parts of ourselves can also fuel procrastination and keep us from taking action, even when a part of us strongly desires to act. Many psychologists ignore the role of desire in the psyche, and some spiritual teachings assert that desires are the cause of suffering. Intentional presence believes that judging, ignoring, and misunderstanding inner information like needs and desires is what causes suffering, not inner information itself.

Working Skillfully with Inner Information Is a Key To Outer Transformation

Most of us already know that inner information like emotions, needs, desires, beliefs, and memories shape our experiences and drive our actions, and yet few of us have been taught how to work with this information skillfully. I spent years in organizations that spent millions of dollars on trainings to help leaders become more open-minded, collaborative, flexible, compassionate, motivated, emotionally balanced, etc. Unfortunately, these trainings rarely effected deep change, because they seldom addressed the elements of peoples' *inner experiences* that motivated their outer experiences.

Inner information like emotions, needs, memories, desires, and beliefs are powerful motivators of our behavior. If you don't understand why an angry part of you keeps getting activated and what it needs to stop being angry, that part will continue to arise again and again. Learning new ways to work with the information parts communicate is a key to changing repetitive, unconscious behavior and living a more conscious and purposeful life.

Why Do Parts Take Us Over?

One reason we often see parts and the emotions, needs, and desires they carry as negative is because parts and their intense emotions can take us over and cause us to do things that we later regret. To see parts and inner information they carry in a more positive light, it's important to understand why nature has designed them to completely eclipse our conscious awareness as needed. To understand one important reason why parts **TAKE OVER**, let's return to an example we explored earlier:

One common reason that parts take us over is because we've repeatedly refused to listen to or act on the information they communicate.

Imagine again that you're attending a family gathering and your mother starts criticizing you in front of others. One part of you feels angry and wants to say something mean and critical right back to her. Another part of you thinks that it would be hurtful and impolite to yell at your mother in public and doesn't want to do that.

Let's also imagine that based on your personal values, your conscious intention is to refrain from yelling at your mother in public, and to discuss incidents like this afterwards. But despite this noble intention, the angry part of you that hates being criticized rises up and lets your mom have it right in front of the whole family.

Anytime you do something like this that contradicts your conscious intentions, a part of your reactive awareness has "taken over" and is temporarily driving your actions. One common reason that parts do this is because we've repeatedly refused to listen to and/or act on the information they communicate.

The effects of ignoring the inner information that parts communicate often build up slowly over time. For example, the first time your mother criticizes you in public, your angry part is likely to have flooded you with anger. Emotions communicate needs, so if you took the time to listen to your anger, you might have discovered a need for respect. The word respect means different things to different people, but let's say that for you, a part of respect is non-judgment, and your mother's public judgments are not meeting that need.

Emotions and needs are creative, life-forward energies, and when they're ignored or repressed, they tend to eventually erupt on their own. So let's say your mother criticizes you in public another four or five times, and you don't talk to her about your need for respect and non-judgment. To try to bring this situation into balance,

and get an important need of yours met that's now fueled by a lots of pent-up emotion, the angry part of you "takes over," and its anger **POURS OUT** in unconscious and unintentional ways. Sadly, this causes you do the same thing to your mother that she did to you: now *you're* the one publicly criticizing *her*.

Avoiding this type of "taking over" requires several steps:

1. Acknowledging and listening to emotions,
2. Identifying the needs behind your emotions, and
3. Taking calm, considered actions to fulfill the needs you've identified.

Parts Take Over to Help—Not to Get In Our Way

Over a hundred years ago, the psychologist Jung observed that different parts of the subconscious mind could take over and cause us to do things that we don't consciously intend. He saw parts taking over as nature's way of attempting to bring balance to our psyche and to our daily lives. For this reason, Jung called the process of taking over "compensation." Among other things, Jung saw parts taking over as an attempt to meet more of our needs, fulfill more of our potential, and expand the range of strategies we use to fulfill our needs, desires, and potential.

Jung's mentor Freud influenced the world to think of the unconscious as something dark, evil, and dangerous. After parting with Freud, Jung introduced a view of the subconscious mind that's much more inspiring, and I believe much more accurate. Here's a small quote about the process of compensation that illustrates his affirming view of subconscious parts of ourselves:

The principal function of the unconscious is to effect a compensation and to produce a balance. All extreme conscious tendencies are softened and toned down through a counter-impulse in the unconscious.³

Jung saw the process of parts taking over as not only positive and purposeful, but critical to the process of **INDIVIDUATION** and **SELF-ACTUALIZATION**. He observed that using such a narrow range of **STRATEGIES** to deal with challenging situations—like perpetual politeness with a critical mother—not only keeps us from fully being ourselves, but in many situations, keeps us from realizing our unique potential. Jung discovered that bringing the subconscious awareness of parts to the awareness of our **CONSCIOUS MIND**⁴ —a process that he called the *transcendent function*—quicken the process of individuation and self-actualization.

³ Carl Gustav Jung, "The Importance of the Unconscious in Psychopathology" (1914).

⁴ Jung called this little known human capacity—the ability to bring inner information from subconscious parts of ourselves to conscious awareness—the "transcendent function."

I get really excited when I read Jung’s ideas about this because it so closely mirrors my own experience. Learning to work more skillfully with the information parts communicate not only quickened my ability to grow, but it also made the process easier, more understandable, and more enjoyable. I can say without reservation that learning to work with the information parts communicate has supported more rapid psychological and spiritual growth in me than any other skill I’ve ever discovered.

Listening to Inner Information: A Key to Living from Our Whole Self

Learning to impartially listen to and work with the information that parts communicate not only quickens and eases the process of personal growth, but it’s also a key to living in greater wholeness. When we side with one part of our self (e.g., a polite part) and judge and repress another (e.g., a part that’s angry), we’re not respecting, honoring, or even *utilizing* the whole of our consciousness. Ignoring any part of our consciousness not only causes us to abandon a part of ourselves, it causes us to turn our back on part of our potential.

When we side with one part of ourselves and judge and repress another, we’re not respecting, honoring, or even *utilizing* the whole of our consciousness.

Needs, emotions, and desires are vital and creative energies, and the longer we ignore them, the more emotionally charged they become. In time, the angry, sad, ashamed, or fearful parts of us carrying different needs we’ve ignored burst out and say or do things that completely contradict our personal values and/or our conscious intentions. One reason this happens bears repeating: emotionally charged parts of us don’t take over because they’re negative, bad, lower, or unspiritual—they take over is because *we’ve ignored the information they’re trying to communicate.*⁵

Unseen Beliefs Often Block Us from Listening to Inner Information

What causes us to judge and hate different parts of ourselves and ignore or repress them—an act that’s the polar opposite of the self-love that we all know is so essential to our wellbeing? In many cases, unexamined beliefs cause us to side with one part of ourselves and repress another. For example, the belief that emotions are “negative” or “unspiritual” can cause us to ignore angry, sad, or fearful parts of ourselves and the information that they’re trying to communicate.

Paradoxically, judging and ignoring such parts of ourselves only makes them angrier, sadder, and more fearful—and more likely to explode against our will. We’ve all heard cases in which someone that neighbors described as “such a nice guy” walked into a post office and gunned down innocent victims. Unfortunately, our beliefs that emotions, needs, and other inner information are bad, wrong, or unspiritual contribute to a significant portion of the violence, suffering, and limitation in our world.

⁵ Siding with one part and ignoring another (a process often referred to as “identifying” with a part) isn’t the only reason parts take over, but it’s an incredibly common one.

How Working with Parts Supports Spiritual Growth

The insights we gain from listening to the information that parts carry is essential to our spiritual growth, because it helps us take actions that meet more of our needs and desires, express more of ourselves, and realize more of our unique potential. As we learn to collaborate with different parts of our consciousness instead of ignoring them, they don't have to resort to taking us over and driving us to do things that contradict our values and intentions. As a result, we narrow our "integrity gap"—the difference between the truth we talk and the truth we walk. Narrowing this gap is a key aim of most spiritual teachings, and learning to work with parts skillfully is one of the most important tools I've found for supporting this goal.

I warmly invite you to learn more about the skills that intentional presence teaches for working with emotions, needs, desires, beliefs and other information that different parts of your consciousness continually communicate. As Jung observed over a hundred years ago, gaining these skills quickens and eases the journey in which we are all engaged: learning to love and express more of our unique selves and realize more of our unique potential.

Try It For Yourself

If you'd like to explore some of the principles and practices this article has explored, you're welcome to try the following experiment, either alone or with a friend:

1. Notice and name a part of you that's pushing strongly for an outcome—an outcome that feels like something you consciously want to do (e.g., finding a new job, moving to a new location, losing weight, improving your health, etc.)
2. Now see if you can name a part of you that doesn't want to do that. This is likely to be a part whose inner information you've ignored because you've been unconsciously pushing it away. (For example, a part of you that's afraid of getting a new job or a part of you that opposes your ideas for losing weight.)
3. Take a moment to listen to the emotions, needs, and desires of the part that opposes the action you consciously want to take.
4. See if there's some small action you can take that might meet the needs and desires of the part you've been pushing away.
5. Notice how you feel after acknowledging this part, listening to the inner information it communicated, and finding a potential action to meet the needs and desires it communicated. Do you notice anything different inside as a result of doing this? The shift you notice might be physical, emotional, mental or even what you perceive as "spiritual."

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