We are at a time in history when many parents are overworked as they try to accomplish the near impossible of balancing home and career. And because of this, there is a tendency among many parents, who really don’t have as much time for their children as they would like, to feel guilty about it and to be permissive with their children as a way of appeasing their own guilt. It is a very similar dynamic to the problem I faced with Lisa.

Some overworked parents respond to the stress by being more demanding and critical of their children rather than permissive. In the worst cases, these parents essentially act out their aggression against their children. When their children don’t respond as they’d like, when their children push them to the limit, they get angry and lash out. I’ve seen it many times, in the aisles of my local supermarket and the booths of my local family restaurant. Parents feel pressures from their own agendas, and if their children interfere with an agenda, they get agitated and end up yelling at the children, or shaking them.

Any child can push parents to their limits, especially when they are low on inner resources. When they are tired, stressed at work, or burdened by unfinished business, it is easy either to be permissive, or alternatively to become demanding, critical, and abusive when the child—or student or employee—is not acting as they would like. Everyone is vulnerable to this, but the important thing is that people not delude themselves into thinking they are being autonomy supportive when they are actually being permissive, and that they not delude themselves into thinking they are setting limits when they are actually aggressing.

People are entitled to their tensions and conflicts, but if they recognize these frustrations for what they are, if they own up to them, their children (or students or employees) will be less likely to pay the costs for the frustrations. By being aware of their own internal pressures and conflicts, people in one-up positions will be more able to facilitate effective accommodations between the individuals they teach, care for, or supervise, and the society that beckons.

Eight

The Self in a Social World

One of the things that has amazed me about the hundreds of bright, accomplished college students I’ve known through the years is how many of them have told me they don’t express their real feelings and beliefs. If they did, they say, they would feel selfish or guilty, and people wouldn’t like them. They can’t be who they really are because of fear or shame.

These students hold introjects about who and what they should be, and those introjects are firmly anchored in their psyches. Some students even say they have no real sense of themselves separate from all the shoulds, musts, and have-to’s. Overpowered by these introjects, the young people present a facade—a kind of false self—for they have lost touch with their true self. They have found acceptance from others by taking on an alien identity, by rigidly introjecting, rather than flexibly integrating, aspects of their social world.

I remember the case of a young man, Arthur, who had a very active mind. As a boy, he tended to question the nature of the world and to form coherent opinions. But this kind of behavior was anathema to the rigid family that raised him. When, at the age of nine, he wondered out loud about the purpose of life, his mother responded, “We don’t ask questions like that.” When, a year or so later, he thoughtfully criticized one of his father’s favorite writers, his father responded, “Who are you to feel so superior to this great man?” In each case, his parents doused his inquisitive nature and he had to
learn not to think out loud. Indeed, he seemed to lose all interest in abstract thoughts and big ideas.

The story of his home life is not an unusual one; many students have told me similar ones, although this one had a happier ending than most. Arthur was extremely intelligent, and when he reached college and found support for independent thought, his inquisitiveness was gradually rekindled. Eventually it flourished. But in the more common scenario, students who have been subjected to such controlling family environments, report an inability or an unwillingness to find their inner strengths and desires. They are anxious and fearful that something awful will happen if they make contact with the self that is within them.

One former student, Barbara, wrote that she always tries to satisfy others, that she does whatever they want. She went on to say that this is fine with her, so nothing is lost. I knew Barbara quite well when she wrote those lines, and I couldn’t help but think that her doing what others want was not something she really chose, not something that really was fine with her. Instead, it seemed to me, she felt compelled to go along with what others wanted because she was terrified of the consequences if she did not.

In the worst cases, students can’t even verbalize that they are being controlled by introjects and by others’ demands. They don’t have as much insight as Barbara had, and they don’t even realize they are suppressing their inner self. I have to infer it from their ongoing display of anxious, rigid behavior patterns and their insistence about what they have to do. These students have actually lost touch with a true self. Having fully accepted the introjects in a desperate attempt for approval, they are left with nothing that truly feels like them, and they can’t even acknowledge that. The potentials of their intrinsic self have gotten lost; a mature, true self has never developed; and they can’t even face up to it.

One of the risks associated with being part of a unit—a family group, say, or society—is that people may be forced to give up or hide who they really are. They may feel obliged to relinquish their autonomy and true self in order to fit in. Integration, which represents optimal development and is in the best interests of both the children and their socializing agents, requires supports for both autonomy and relatedness, yet all too often socializing agents work against themselves, by attempting to control with contingent love, when autonomy support is what’s needed. If autonomy is pitted against relatedness its toll can be a person’s self.

Most modern psychologists and sociologists view the self as socially programmed, which means that people’s concepts of themselves are said to develop as the social world defines them. According to that view, when others praise you for being friendly, you come to see yourself as a friendly person. When others worry about whether you will succeed, you develop a sense of doubt about your abilities. When others interrupt your activities to show you how to do them better, you accept the belief that you are not very competent. For these theorists, whatever the social world programs us to be, that is what constitutes our self.

The problem with that view of the self as socially defined is that it makes no distinction between a true and false self. It fails to recognize that we each begin with an intrinsic self (nascent though it be), as well as the capacities to continuously elaborate and refine that self. Thus, self can develop in accord with its nature, or it can be programmed by society. But the self that results from these two processes will be very different.

The intrinsic self is not a genetically programmed entity that simply unfolds with time, however. It is instead a set of potentials, interests, and capabilities that interact with the world, each affecting the other. At any given time, self is the developmental outcome of this dialectical relationship. When the process operates effectively, true self is the result; when the process goes awry, the result is a less-true self. As such, the development of self is significantly influenced by the social world, but the self is not constructed by that world. In-
stead, individuals play an active role in the development of self, and true self develops as the social world supports the individual's activity.

True self begins with the intrinsic self—with our inherent interests and potentials and our organismic tendency to integrate new aspects of our experience. As true self is elaborated and refined, people develop an ever greater sense of responsibility. Out of their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, people develop a willingness to give to others, to respond with what is needed. By integrating such values and behaviors, people become more responsible, while at the same time retaining their sense of personal freedom.

But integration and development of true self require that people's intrinsic needs be satisfied. When the social world within which people develop is autonomy supportive—when it provides optimal challenges and the opportunity for choice and self-initiation—true self will flourish. When the social world accepts people for who they are, providing love as they explore their inner and outer environments, true self will develop optimally. But when these needs are not satisfied, the process will be thwarted. The development of true self requires autonomy support—it requires noncontingent acceptance and love.

One of the most common approaches to discipline in modern society involves making the provision of love, acceptance, and esteem contingent upon people's behaving in certain ways. This withdrawal-of-love approach underlies one of the tragic aspects of life, namely that in many circumstances autonomy and relatedness are turned against each other by people in one-up positions. This does not mean that the needs are by nature antagonistic, only that the social world can capitalize on people's vulnerability to being controlled—to having their autonomy robbed—by their need to be related to others. The practice of making love contingent is one of the more controlling ways we can treat children (as well as peers), because it forces them to relinquish autonomy to retain love, or alternatively, to "live as an island."

Research has repeatedly confirmed that controlling contexts impair development by stifling integration and promoting introjection. The contingent administration of love thus represents yet another instance of people—most notably parents—working against themselves. By being invested in getting children to behave properly, parents use withdrawal of love, and in the process not only hinder internalization of regulations, but more importantly, hinder development of true self.

Children's accepting the values, regulatory processes, and conceptions of themselves that are offered to them by the social world is natural, but when the world's offerings are accompanied by control—when receiving love is dependent on accepting the world's values and regulations—children will, at best, only introject them, swallowing them whole rather than integrating them into their developing self.

Introjected material is not part of the integrated or true self, but instead endures as rigid demands, concepts, and evaluations that are the basis of a false self. Alice Miller, in The Drama of the Gifted Child, explained that false self develops as children accept the identity that controlling caretakers want them to have. In an attempt to please their parents and gain contingent love, children gradually intuit what it is that their parents want—what it is that they, the children, hope will gain them the love and avoid the reproach of their controlling parents.

Introjects can be powerful motivators, relentlessly pushing people to think, feel, or behave in particular ways. But they also have a variety of side effects that attest to their maladaptation. Introjection is strongly related to anxiety—people live in fear of failure and loss of esteem. It is also accompanied by an inner conflict that rages between what we metaphorically think of as the internalized controller who demands, cajoles, and evaluates and the person within the same skin who is being directed and criticized. Introjection is the process that facilitates the emergence of a false self—the emergence of a set of rigid rules and identities—and it is a process through which people can lose contact with who they really are.

Once, when I was doing therapy with a man in his early twen-
ties—tall and conservatively dressed in double-knit trousers and a bland tie—I became increasingly aware of how inexpressive he was, how robotlike, how tired. As the therapy evolved toward a discussion of the young man’s authoritarian father, I noticed an expression of feeling in just one small part of his body: a clenched right fist. I invited him to hit the clenched fist into the palm of his other hand, which he did. Instantly, his whole body went startlingly rigid, his face contorted. The very notion that he might be striking back at his father, even symbolically, was so unsettling that the young man was virtually paralyzed. The false sense of being that took the form of what his father thought he should be was incredibly powerful and hard to fight against.

The panic and rigidity slowly passed, and within an hour he was back in more or less the same shape he had been before the episode occurred. His introjects were intact, and it was almost as if the incident had not occurred. Indeed, the young man found it hard even to discuss the incident during subsequent meetings, because having angry thoughts about his father left him feeling like a terrible person. Still, he had gotten a glimpse of what his problem was, and continuing therapy did help him deal with the rage he felt for his father. It even helped him regain some of his innate vitality. But it was a tough road. Caught in a coercive vise, the man had lost a true sense of self, and with it had gone his intrinsic motivation for life—the curiosity, the striving, the boldness that could energize his everyday experience. Fortunately, a lot of hard work allowed him to recapture a little of it.

The use of contingent love and esteem as a means of control not only promotes introjection, but it has the even sorrier consequence of teaching people to esteem themselves contingently. Just as they once had to live up to external demands to gain love and esteem from others, they now have to live up to introjects to gain love and esteem from themselves. They feel like worthy people only if they do as the introjects demand. When my client was angry with his father, he felt like an unworthy person, and that contingent feeling of self-worth gave enormous power to the introjects. Indeed, it gave them so much power that they virtually paralyzed him when he briefly dared to stand up to them.

Ego involvement is a term that psychologists use to refer to the process of people’s feelings of worth being dependent upon specified outcomes. When people hold introjects and those introjects are buttressed by contingent worth, the people are said to be ego-involved. A man is ego-involved in his work if his feelings of worth are dependent on amassing a fortune from the work, and a woman is ego-involved in her exercise if her feelings of worth are dependent on winning a competition at her health club.

Ryan and his colleagues have done several studies exploring the effects of ego involvement. In a typical experiment, one group of subjects would be ego-involved or motivated by a threat to the self while another group would be task-involved or motivated by the interest and value of the activity itself. Results of the studies consistently showed that ego involvement undermined intrinsic motivation for the task and led subjects to report more pressure, tension, and anxiety about performance.

Ego involvement develops when people are contingently esteemed by others, so it goes hand in hand with introjection of values and regulations. When self-esteem is hinged on performance outcomes, people struggle to maintain a facade. They pressure themselves to appear a certain way to others so they will feel good about themselves. This, of course, detracts from interest and enthusiasm. Indeed, it bolsters a false self while continuing to undermine development of true self.

When ego-involved, people focus on how they look to others, so they are forever judging how they stack up. A girl who is ego-involved in her grades, for example, will forever be checking to see how others did on a test so she will know whether she did “well enough.”

Research has shown that ego involvement not only undermines intrinsic motivation, but as one would expect, it impairs learning and
creativity, and it tends to diminish performance on any task where flexible thinking and problem solving are required. The rigidities of ego involvement interfere with effective information processing; they lead people to be shallower, more superficial, in how they think about problems.

In short, ego involvement is constructed on a tenuous sense of self, and it works against being autonomous. To become more autonomous—more self-determined—thus requires that people detach from their ego involvements, that they gradually give them up.

Mel Wearing, a slugger for the Rochester Red Wings, is a powerful guy and a hotshot hitter. When he first started on the team, people were expecting him to hit a home run every time he stepped to the plate. The problem was that he was also expecting it of himself. According to his own account, when he joined the Red Wings he set out to impress people—to knock it out of the park time after time. He gripped the bat too tightly and swung too hard, he said. At the beginning of each season he would think to himself, "This is going to be my year," and he would bear down on himself. He tried to use his power to do the job, but it didn't work. His performance was disappointing, and he felt bad about himself.

Finally, one year, he realized that he would be better off if he stopped worrying about it, if he stopped trying so hard, if he stopped hinging his self-worth on being a slugger. All he had to do, he said to himself, was make contact with the ball. And sure enough, the less hard he tried, the better he did. He began living up to his potential because he stopped trying to. He had given up his ego involvement. It's a paradox, but it's true.

Charlotte Selver developed the practice of Sensory Awareness. It is an approach to allowing one's inner functioning, to coming more into contact with who one really is. She's had many notable students—people like psychiatrists Erich Fromm, Fritz Perls, and Clara Thompson, for example—who have worked with her to develop a deeper sense of inner peace and a greater sensitivity to their surroundings. I once heard Charlotte make the comment, "If you dare to be fat, then you can be thin." Such a simple way to say something so profound.

She was highlighting the power struggle that exists for so many people between the ego involvements that pressure them to be thin and the part of themselves that resists being pressured. By trying to force themselves to lose weight with the threat that they will hate themselves if they don't, people create resistance. They undermine themselves by pressuring themselves and then resisting the pressure. Out of spite for the introjected controls they sabotage themselves. To lose weight—or to change any other behavior for that matter—people will be more successful if they start by giving up the ego involvement, if they start by getting themselves out of the power struggle with their introjects and out of the self-hatred that inevitably follows. When they do that, "then they can be thin."

Think of it in terms of the master and slave. The master in your head thinks you should be thin and hates you for being fat. So the master criticizes and threatens, cajoles and humiliates. And, not surprisingly, although a part of you tries to please the master, another part of you wants to defy, to get back at the master. That of course is easy enough to do: Just stay fat. The problem is that the master is you too, so spiting the master is spiting yourself.

Allow yourself to fail and you will be more likely to succeed. That's what Charlotte Selver was saying, and that's what Mel Wearing finally realized.

Recognizing how introjects and ego involvements motivate through a process of contingent self-worth points to the very important fact that there are really two types of self-esteem. We refer to them as true self-esteem and contingent self-esteem. True self-esteem represents a sound, stable sense of oneself, built on a solid foundation of believing in one's worth as a human being. It accompanies a well-developed true self in which intrinsic motivation has been maintained, extrinsic limits and regulations have been well inte-
grated, and the processes necessary for regulating one's emotions have been developed. True self-esteem thus accompanies freedom and responsibility.

True self-esteem is not, however, the same thing as thinking you can do no wrong. People with true self-esteem have a sense of whether behaviors are right or wrong because true self-esteem is accompanied by integrated values and regulations. Such individuals evaluate their behaviors, but their feelings of worth are not riding on those evaluations.

There is another type of self-esteem, however, that is less stable, less securely based in a fundamental sense of worth. It is present under some conditions but vanishes under others, leaving people depleted and self-derogatory. This is contingent self-esteem. When people are pressured and controlled to achieve particular outcomes, their self-esteem is often dependent on how those things turn out. Indeed, ego involvements gain power over people because they are accompanied by contingent self-esteem. If a man's self-esteem rides on continually closing big business deals—especially ones that are bigger than his colleagues—and if he were continually quite successful, he would generally feel pretty good about himself. But those feelings would be more ephemeral than real. They would likely take the form of self-aggrandizement—of a big ego, so to speak—rather than a solid sense of self, and they would tend to be formulated in terms of being better than others rather than simply being good and worthy like others.

People with true self-esteem are able to esteem others and accept others' frailties rather than evaluating and deprecating them. I once heard Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, say, "I am here as a witness to describe, not as a judge to evaluate." Of course, much of what he has described in his writings about the Holocaust is morally repugnant, and he surely deplores it, but his comment was focused on human potential, on what is good and possible for each of us. He went on to say, "I have hope because there is no other possibility for life." These are the kinds of words that would be spoken by someone with true self-esteem.

Countless popular books have extolled the importance of high self-esteem, but their failure to distinguish between true self-esteem and contingent self-esteem has led to questionable prescriptions. Authors advise parents, teachers, and friends to praise others—to remind them what good people they are. Of course, conveying to others your belief in their worthiness is noble, but praising does not necessarily do that. Indeed, it may have just the opposite effect if it is delivered contingently.

Carl Rogers advocated what he called noncontingent positive regard. In essence, he was suggesting that regard from others (and, most importantly, from ourselves) is our inalienable right. We are worthy by virtue of the fact that we are alive. Praise is usually different. It is typically made contingent on getting an A on an exam, eating all those vegetables, or cleaning your room. Its hidden message is that you would not be worthy if you had not hit the target.

Praise runs the risk of bolstering contingent self-esteem rather than true self-esteem, and in the process it strengthens a controlling dynamic in which people become dependent on the praise. They then behave to get more praise so they will feel worthy—even if only for a moment. And in so doing, they further erode their autonomy.

The most important relationship in many people's lives is one particular peer relationship, usually with a romantic partner but sometimes with a best friend. That person is someone to turn to, someone to count on, someone to support you. That person is someone who will listen, who will understand when no one else seems to. But that person is also someone to give to, to provide for, to hear, and to understand. The most important relationship in many people's lives is one of mutual dependence. It is one that allows them to satisfy their need for relatedness by being dependent on others who are also dependent on them.

Such relationships are essential, and many people structure their lives around them. But in considering a mutually dependent relationship there is the important question of whether in the midst of the
mutual dependence there is also mutual autonomy—and mutual autonomy support. With people who love each other, autonomy support is a two-way street.

What characterizes the most mature and satisfying relationships is that the true self of one person relates to the true self of another. Each is dependent on the other, but each maintains his or her autonomy, his or her integrity, his or her sense of self. To the extent that each is in the relationship autonomously, with a true sense of choice, the relationship will be healthy, and each partner will be able to respond from his or her true self and will be able to support the individuality and idiosyncracies of the other.

Psychologists Marc Blais, Robert Vallierand, and their colleagues at the University of Quebec in Montreal did a study to explore people's reasons for participating in their current romantic relationship. They adapted the Self-Regulation Questionnaire developed by Ryan and Connell to assess the extent to which people's motivation for staying in the relationship was autonomous—the extent to which they were there with a true sense of choice and personal desire rather than feeling some pressure or control for being there. The researchers found that the autonomy of each partner was essential for the couple's relational happiness. Those individuals who were autonomous in relating to their partner expressed the highest level of satisfaction in their relationship. Many of the people who were studied, however, were not autonomous, but instead felt quite controlled. These people did not feel free in the relationship. They related to their partner out of obligation. In these relationships the true selves of the partners were not engaged.

I once had a therapy client who phoned my office for an initial visit and said her name was Mrs. Cutlass. When she arrived for the visit she introduced herself to me as Mrs. Cutlass, and every succeeding time she identified herself—on the phone or in person—it was as Mrs. Cutlass. She made the appointment because she had hit her husband with a piece of firewood, and the event had shaken her badly. (I suspect he had been a bit shaken, too.) She said that on and off for the last few weeks she had found herself angry at him, for no particular reason. This anger was very unsettling for her. In all their twenty-eight years of marriage she had never felt this way before.

She had married right out of college and started a family within a couple of years. She was a model housewife and mother. She attended unwaveringly to the needs of her husband, always putting them ahead of her own. She was similarly attentive to the desires of her three children, the youngest of whom had just graduated from college. She drove them to football practice and music lessons, she was a Scout leader, and she helped out with various school and church events.

I am sure her friends thought she loved her husband very much, that she was a devoted and loving wife. And in a sense she was. But it was an imbalanced love. She supported her husband in all his endeavors, giving him whatever he wanted. On those occasions in therapy when I asked her what she wanted for herself from the relationship, or from life more generally, she could think of nothing to say. She wanted to be a good wife and mother, to be sure, and she wanted to be thought well of for how she had performed those roles, but there seemed to be nothing she wanted for herself.

She was able to acknowledge that there seemed to be a large gap in her life now that her children no longer needed her, but she could not identify any aspirations. She did not articulate any short-term desires, like having some time to herself to try painting, or having her husband take more interest in her feelings. Nor could she specify any longer-term desires, like starting a career, or finding something else to devote herself to.

I thought it was very telling that she had introduced herself to me as Mrs. Cutlass. She is the only client I can ever recall who introduced herself without using her first name as well as her last. It was as if she had no identity of her own.

Mrs. Cutlass was the wife of Mr. Curliss, and of course the mother of his children. She was Mrs. Cutlass in a one-down sense, and for twenty-eight years she had thought that was enough. But something seemed to be happening. Just being Mrs. Cutlass was no longer enough, although it took her several months to realize that
and to accept that her hitting her husband had something to do with this issue. The anger, which took twenty-eight years to surface, stemmed from her identity's having been subsumed by his.

Ultimately, of course, it was she who was responsible for the subjugation of her self, even though her husband obviously contributed. And this realization was the starting point for figuring out what she wanted for herself, and how she could get it. As she became more aware of her own wants, needs, and feelings, she was in a position to choose how to express and satisfy them. Gradually, she worked to change her relationship with her husband by identifying what she wanted in the relationship and negotiating to get it.

Mature relationships are characterized by two individuals' interacting openly with each other, unencumbered by ego involvements, introjected evaluations, or self-deprecations. In mature, mutual relationships, the one-up, one-down aspect that characterizes so many other relationships in life is not only absent in the structural sense but is absent in actuality. Each person is autonomous, and each supports the autonomy of the other.

In such relationships, each partner is able to give to the other, expecting nothing in return and creating no obligations for the other. The giving comes from the true self, and thus the person experiences wanting to give. It is not a giving like that of Mrs. Cutlass, for hers came from an introjected set of beliefs about how she should behave as a wife and mother, rather than from an integrated self. Although she was a loving wife and mother, who did much good for others, her giving was at the cost of a solid sense of her self.

When two people are relating maturely, each will be able to ask the other for what he or she wants or needs, fully trusting that the other will say "no" if he or she does not want to give it. Just as giving sets up no expectations and receiving creates no obligations, in optimal relationships asking for something from one's partner carries no expectations of receiving it and creates no obligation for the partner to give it. In these mature relationships, people freely give and they freely withhold giving. There is a balancing of getting what one needs for oneself and giving to the other. Giving is not at the expense of one's self but instead is wholly endorsed by the self.

In such relationships, each partner can express his or her feelings freely and each can hear the other's feelings without defensiveness. When, for example, a man says to his partner, "I am angry at you," he will realize it does not necessarily mean his partner did something wrong. Rather, it means that he did not get what he wanted. Being aware of feelings is important for the development and functioning of the true self, and communicating them is important for intimacy in relationships. But when people "own them," when people understand that their feelings are caused by the relation of events to their own wants, needs, and expectations, they will be able to express the feelings constructively, without engaging in aggression. It also allows people to think about how to get what they want or need without necessarily requiring that their partners change.

It is not easy for another to listen to one's anger without becoming defensive, but the more able one is to own the anger, the more likely it is that the other will be able to hear it. By owning feelings and sharing them with another, two people become ever closer.

Erich Fromm, in his enormously popular book The Art of Loving, pointed out that loving someone is very hard work. The thing that is hard about loving is freeing yourself from the introjects, the rigidities, the blaming, and the self-derogation that interfere with being able to relate honestly from your true self. What is hard is being psychologically free enough to make genuine contact.