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Building on a Foundation of
Relationships

Featuring an interview with
GAINS advisory board member Ross Ungerleider
and Jamie Dickey Ungerleider: *Fostering Empathic Medicine*

Special sections on group process, trauma, and current research

Regular features on therapy, education, parenting, and the latest in the
field of Interpersonal Neurobiology

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Beginnings: Differentiation during the Formative Years

Lisa Firestone

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Differentiation ultimately means being human to the fullest extent, that is, becoming an independent person who functions primarily in the adult mode, lives with integrity, and has an inclusive worldview.

The Self Under Siege: A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation
(2013, R. Firestone, L. Firestone, & J. Catlett)

How much of our identity or “self” is truly representative of our own wants and goals in life and how much does it reflect the wants and priorities of someone else? Are we following our own destiny or are we unconsciously repeating the lives of our parents and automatically living according to their values, ideals and beliefs? These questions are worth considering when contemplating how the “self” is originally formed and how, during their formative years, children begin to evolve as unique individuals.

What is the “self?”

Philosophers, neuroscientists, and psychologists have long debated the nature of the “self.” Many contemporary Eastern thinkers argue that our perception of “having a self” is an illusion. A number of Western psychologists contend that the “self” can only be understood in the context of the social environment. Commenting on this ongoing debate, Daniel Stern (1985) asserted, “Even though the nature of self may forever elude the behavioral sciences, the sense of self stands as an important subjective reality, a reliable, evident phenomenon that the sciences cannot dismiss” (p. 6). In *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Stern (1985) explained how through repeated interactions with the mother or primary caregiver, the infant’s “emergent self” gradually evolves into a “core self,” then a “subjective self,” and lastly, a “narrative self” which emerges around three years of age.

In *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology*, Dan Siegel (2012) emphasizes the interpersonal nature of the self, defining the self as “a term signifying an internal sense of identity, sometimes including one’s body, personality, or membership in relationships or groups. There are many ‘selves’ of a healthy individual” loc. 8015]. He uses the term “selfing” when describing “the emerging creation of a self, [which] may reveal, in fact, how the *self* is a plural verb rather than a singular noun. We are always unfolding (a verb, not a noun) and we are finding our sense of self in connections to others” [loc. 1900].

Factors that Contribute to the Development of the Self

In a recently published book, *The Self Under Siege: A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation*, my father, Robert Firestone, co-author Joyce Catlett, and I describe myriad obstacles—environmental, societal, and existential—that interfere with the process of becoming a differentiated self. From birth on throughout our lives, we are affected by the impact of interpersonal stimuli that are either favorable or damaging to the development of the self.

The project of becoming a self, recognizing our separateness from our parents or caregivers, and evolving our own personal identity is the most crucial during our first two years of life because of our immaturity and

vulnerability to inputs from our immediate environment. Developmental psychologists and neuroscientists emphasize that the development of the neonate's brain and personality is "environmental-dependent," that is, the growth and development of the self are completely dependent upon inputs from the environment, specifically upon stimuli from other human beings. Contact with another person, or persons, is one of the prerequisites for the development of the self. Basically, it is impossible for the newborn to begin to develop a self or identity in a vacuum. The self emerges only in relation to another person or persons.

In an optimal home environment, infants encounter attuned responses from caring adults that promote a feeling of safety and help them develop the ability to regulate their emotions. Gergeley (2007) observed that attuned parents or caregivers "repeatedly present their infants... with empathic emotion displays that imitatively 'mirror' their baby's momentary affect-expressions (including the empathic mirroring of negative affect displays as well)" (p. 61). Ideally, parents would be able to

provide their children with a secure base from which to explore their world as they grow and develop; they would also be warm, affectionate, and sensitive in feeding and caring for their offspring, and offer them control, direction, and guidance.



To the degree that children assimilate their parents' positive qualities, this identification becomes an integrated part of the personality, which we refer to as the "*self system*." The *self system* consists of the unique characteristics of the individual, including biological, temperamental, and genetic traits, and his/her harmonious assimilation of the parents' positive attitudes and traits. It is also made up of the special wants, desires, goals, and values that hold special meaning for the individual as well as the specific manner and means that he/she utilizes to fulfill these goals. The effects of ongoing psychological development, further education, and imitation of other positive role models throughout an individual's life span continue to contribute to the evolution of the self system.

Parents' warmth, nurturance, and ability to repair inevitable failures in mirroring or attunement support the development of the self system and also facilitate neuronal growth in the child's developing brain, in the limbic and sub-cortical regions, and most

important, in the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex has nine important functions: body regulation, the ability to attune to others, emotional balance, response flexibility, empathy, self-knowing awareness (insight), fear modulation, intuition, and morality (Siegel, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that these nine functions are increased as an outcome of a secure attachment and of mindfulness practice. These and other positive influences also facilitate linkage between differentiated parts of the brain, which, in turn, contribute to the integration of their various functions, leading to optimal brain development. According to Siegel (2012), "The mind's process of linking differentiated parts (distinct modes of information processing) into a functional whole is postulated to be the fundamental mechanism of health." [loc. 7198]

Development of the Anti-Self System

As Winnicott (1958) once observed, seemingly innocuous interactions with an insensitive parent can seriously impinge upon the child's "going on being." Even "good-enough" parents, who would be characterized as mostly

effective in their child-rearing functions, have certain limitations and deficits that are damaging to the child's emerging self. If parents have low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, or unresolved feelings of trauma and loss from their past, children intuitively sense their parents' state of mind and feel threatened in their own security.

For example, Giovanni Liotti (2004) noted that "parents' unresolved states of mind can induce fright without solution and dissociative reactions in the infant *even when the parents' behavior does not obviously constitute maltreatment*" (p. 13). These damaging parental responses are largely unintentional and are based on unconscious processes. As Louis Cozolino (2006) pointed out: "Our parents are the primary environment to which our young brains adapt, and their *unconscious* minds are our first reality" (p. 7).

At those times when a parent temporarily loses control, as all parents do at one time or another, the parent is cut off from "high road" brain processes—specifically the functions of the prefrontal cortex—and the child suffers the consequences of the parent's "low road" behavior. In *Parenting from the Inside Out*, Siegel & Hartzell (2003) show how "A parent's unresolved issues can produce disorganization in her mind as well as her actions, which may cause her to respond with emotional intensity and unpredictability in her interactions with her child" (p. 156). Under these conditions, parents' or caregivers' anger as well as their negative traits, maladaptive attitudes, and defenses become a separate, non-integrated, alien aspect of the child's personality, which we refer to as the *anti-self system*.

All people experience a split in their psyche to some extent. Fonagy and Bateman (2008) have described how this split leads to the development of the alien self:

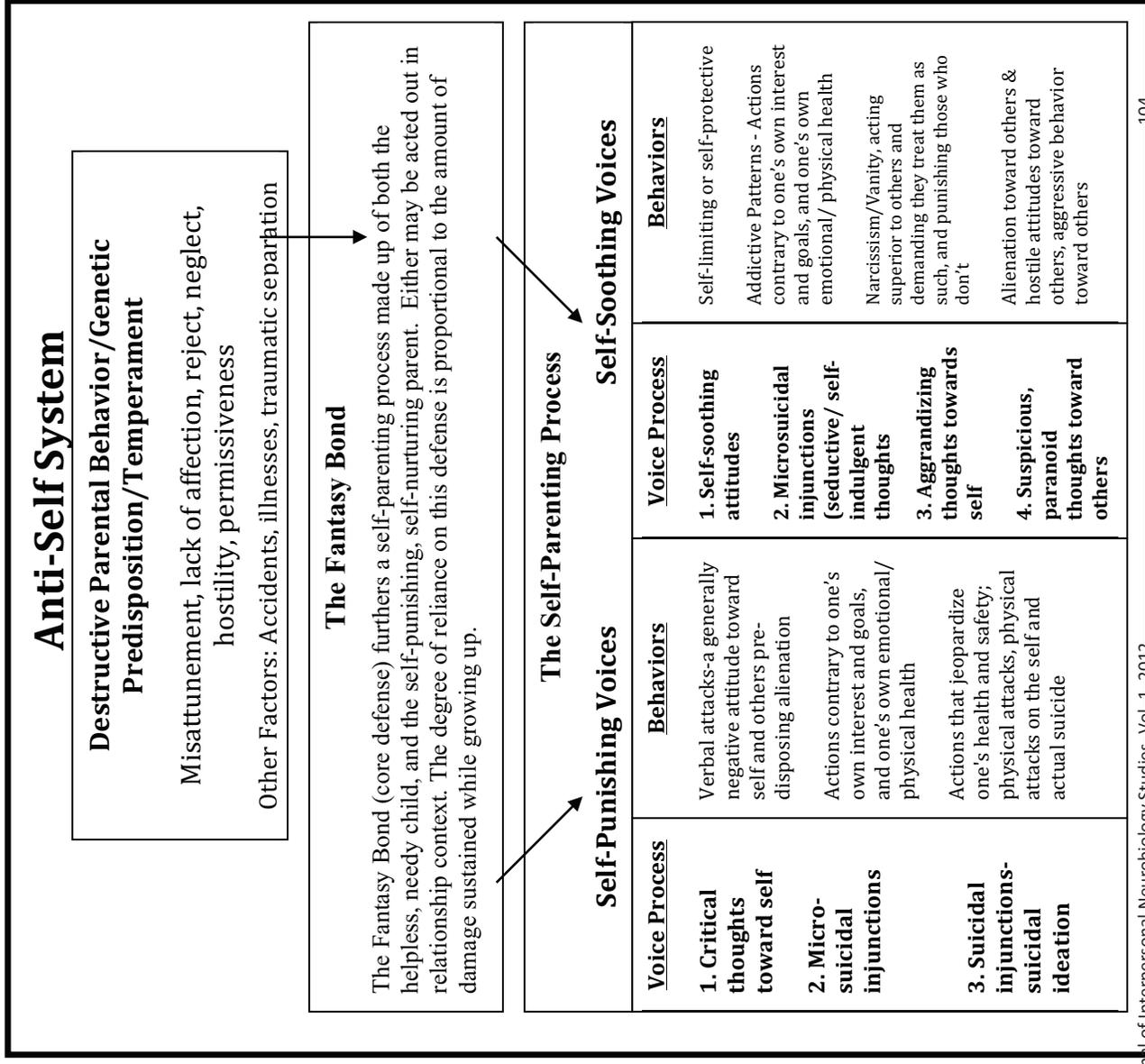
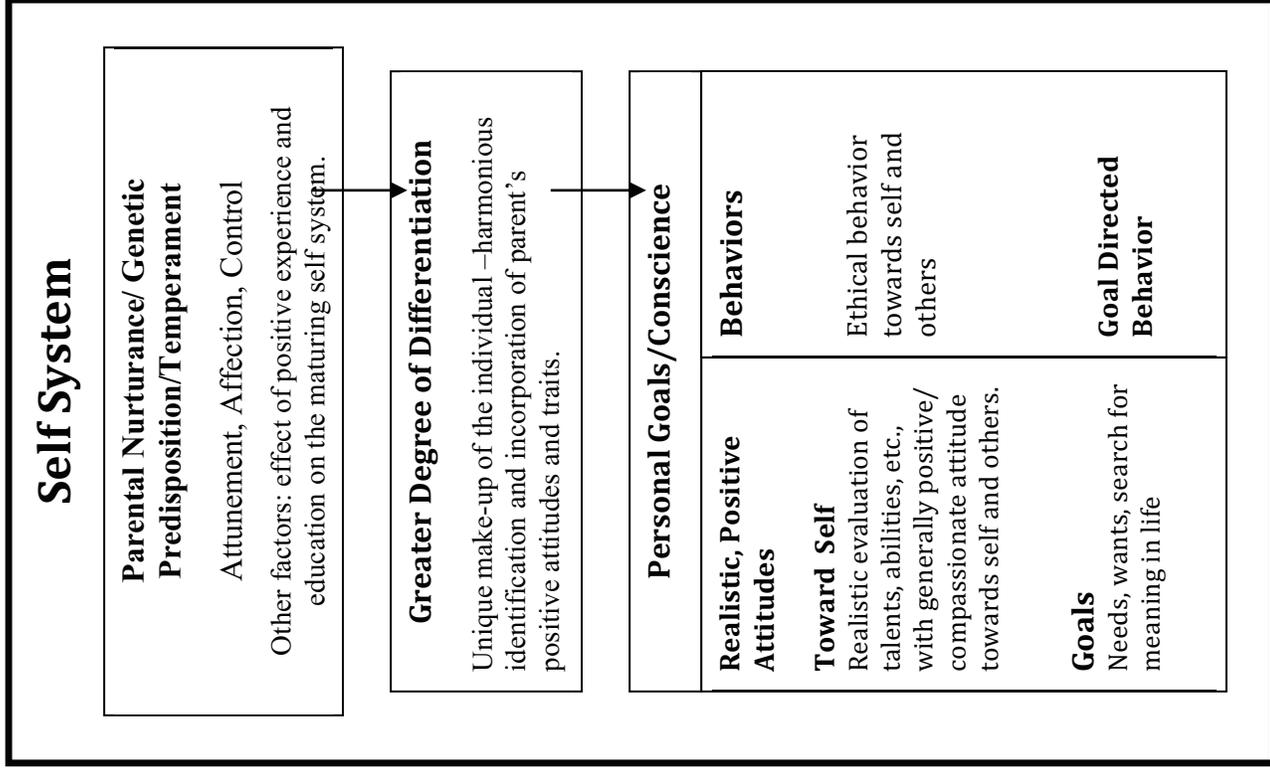
To achieve normal self-experience the infant requires his emotional signals to be accurately or contingently mirrored by an attachment figure.... When a child cannot develop a representation of his own experience through the caregiver's mirroring interactions, he internalizes the image of the caregiver as part of his self-representation. We have called this discontinuity within the self the "alien self." (pp. 142-143)

The anti-self system is made up of negative introjects, i.e., an accumulation of internalized hostility that was directed toward the child from parents or primary caregivers, older siblings, relatives, teachers or others. It develops as a defensive reaction to the destructive side of parents' ambivalence: their rejection, hostility, neglect and unresponsiveness. In addition, parents' emotional hunger, over-protectiveness, and lack of understanding of the child's nature negatively impact his/her development. Moreover, many parents unconsciously dispose of traits they dislike in themselves by projecting them onto their children, and their children internalize these projections as part of their self-concept.

In terms of early brain development, Allan Schore (2001) cited research showing that infant trauma, including neglect, abuse, and exposure to violence, lead to "impairments of the early development of the right brain's coping systems" (p. 201). "The dysregulating events of abuse and neglect produce extreme and rapid alterations of ...hyperarousal and ...hypoarousal that create chaotic biochemical alterations, a toxic neurochemistry in the developing brain" (p. 212).

These aversive incidents also prevent the child from taking advantage of positive environmental inputs: "Infants who experience chronic relational trauma too frequently forfeit potential opportunities for socio-emotional learning during critical periods of right brain development" (Schore, 2001, p. 209). In terms of

Division of the Mind



psychological development, repeated emotion-dysregulating events that occur during the first five years of life continue to generate defensive responses and reinforce aspects of the anti-self system within the child.

Genetic predisposition, in interaction with negative environmental factors, also contributes to the development of the anti-self system. In addition, the anti-self system is affected by other negative events that can occur early in life: birth trauma, accidents, illnesses, traumatic separations, and the actual loss of a parent or sibling through death.

Identifying with the Aggressor

In actuality, perfect parenting is impossible. Because of the power differential between parent and child, and the child's utter helplessness and dependency, some degree of trauma is inevitable. A certain amount of parental misattunement and subsequent failure to repair these disruptions is unavoidable, even in the best of circumstances. This is because, despite parents' best intentions, their unresolved trauma is usually unconsciously acted out on their children. This negative imprinting tends to have a significant effect throughout the lifetime of the individual. Because of this power differential, the same events that might seem relatively trivial to adults often feel highly dramatic or even life-threatening to the child.

For example, casual irritability or anger on the part of parents (particularly when disciplining their children) can have a dramatically frightening effect on the child who experiences his/her parents' mean face and angry disposition as terrifying. When children are especially frightened or hurt, they incorporate the aggressor (person causing them emotional pain) into themselves. This is a psychological survival mechanism that reduces intolerable stress.

In describing the defense of identifying with the aggressor, Fonagy et al. (2002) showed how caregivers' anger, their inconsistent care or neglect, and repetitive failures in attunement can lead to the formation of an "alien self" within the child:

The alien self is present in all of us, because transient neglect is part of ordinary caregiving; it is pernicious when later experiences of trauma in the family or the peer group force the child to dissociate from pain by using the alien self to identify with the aggressor. Hence the vacuous self comes to be colonized by the image of the aggressor, and the child comes to experience himself as evil and monstrous. (p. 198)

In these situations, children come to see themselves as at fault, worthless, and bad rather than recognize that they are at the mercy of a negligent or out-of-control parent. It is too threatening for children to see the danger as coming from someone they depend on for their very survival.

In general, children incorporate their parents not as they are most of the time, but as they are at their worst. When faced with parents' overt or covert aggression or indifference, children try to make the best adaptation possible in order to maintain some type of relationship with their caregivers. However, their efforts to remain intact produce a division within the self or personality. We refer to this as the "division of the mind," a primary split between forces that represent the self and those that oppose it. [See Division of the Mind Chart] As noted above, in our approach these propensities are conceptualized as the self-system and the anti-self system, respectively. The two systems develop independently; both are dynamic, continue to evolve and change over time, and are susceptible to positive and negative influences from significant people through the life span.

Later, at some point between the ages of 3 and 7, children discover the fact of mortality, first their parents' and then their own. The fear of death reinforces the defenses that they developed earlier in relation to interpersonal pain, and these defenses and negative introjects become more entrenched in their personality as part of the anti-self system.

To the extent that we retain the critical attitudes and destructive elements we have incorporated into our own personalities, we remain undifferentiated from our parents. In a very real sense, we have both a positive and negative identity, and we are very different people depending upon which side is dominant. The negative identity is most likely to emerge and become ascendant when we are under stress or are particularly fearful. On those occasions, we symbolically reconnect to the people who caused us psychological pain and anxiety in our developmental years by acting out the destructive behaviors that they directed toward us.

Left unchallenged, the anti-self operates as an extensive alien viewpoint that impacts us as adults. These incorporated attitudes promote a defensive lifestyle that predisposes misery and maladaptive, even self-destructive, behavior, opposes individuation and self-realization, and serves as the core resistance to psychotherapy and a happy and harmonious life.

The Process of Differentiation

In order for people to live their own lives and fulfill their destiny, they need to *differentiate* themselves from destructive influences on an internal level, as well as from those in their social environment. To the degree that people can retain significant aspects of their unique identities, they are able to live truly individualistic and creative lives.

The concept of differentiation has a long history. It was Murray Bowen, (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), founder of family systems theory, who initially proposed “the existence of an instinctually rooted life force [differentiation of individuation] in every human being that propels the developing child to grow to be an emotionally separate person, with the ability to think, feel, and act for himself” (p. 95). Bowen believed that “The more differentiated a self, the more a person can be an individual while in emotional contact with the group” (p. 94). He went on to say, “Differentiation describes the process by which individuality and togetherness are managed by a person and within a relationship system” (p. 95n).

In his work, Israel Orbach (2008) also described the “self-actualized” or differentiated person as authentic and having personal integrity: “Authentic being is creating and constructing one’s life on the basis of what one thinks, feels, and desires and not on conventions, norms, fashions, or expectations of others” (p. 283).

Differentiation [<http://my.brainshark.com/Becoming-the-Real-You-938319886>] involves identifying harmful behaviors and faulty programming in the family and in society and developing insight into the relationship between these factors and destructive thought processes or *critical inner voices* [<http://my.brainshark.com/Conquer-Your-Critical-Inner-Voice-723781366>] that cause personal distress. It entails understanding the source of these emotional problems and modifying our negative attitudes, personality traits and behaviors accordingly. It means effectively separating out those elements of our personality that are antithetical toward us, that adversely affect our lives, and that impede our movement toward individuation. To become a more differentiated person, we need to emancipate ourselves from imagined connections or *fantasy bonds* [<http://my.brainshark.com/The-Fantasy-Bond-438148341>] with parents, unlearn destructive programming, and learn to embrace more life-affirming ways of satisfying our needs and pursuing our goals.

The process of differentiation encompasses four steps. We need to:

(1) break with internalized thought processes, i.e., critical, destructive attitudes toward ourselves and others, and internalized maladaptive points of view about life. Learning to separate our own point of view about ourselves, other people and life from the dysfunctional attitudes and views we have internalized is often the first step in emancipating ourselves from negative influences in our past.

(2) separate or differentiate ourselves from the negative traits of our parents and/or other significant figures and from their defensive posture toward life. We can identify the traits that we liked least in our parents and others, and change them in ourselves.

(3) relinquish patterns of defense formed as an adaptation to painful events in our childhood, but that are no longer functional in our adult lives. It is important to give up self-soothing, addictive behaviors, habitual routines, compulsive work patterns, an inward, isolated lifestyle, defenses that once may have been survival mechanisms during childhood.

(4) develop our own values, ideals, beliefs and personal goals that give our lives meaning rather than automatically accepting the beliefs of our culture or the goals of other people who we grew up with. This task includes learning to satisfy our wants and to fulfill our goals in the real world rather than in fantasy. It is also helpful to develop a coherent narrative about our personal history and to construct a life plan based on our own values and point of view.

Some Characteristics of a Highly Differentiated Person

Individuals with a high degree of self-differentiation can be described as having developed a unique personal point of view, a realistic identity separate from any labels or definitions internalized from childhood. Because they know themselves and have an accurate self-concept, they are aware of both the positive and negative aspects of their personalities. They have a sense of inner harmony, a self-affirming approach to life, and are not overly preoccupied with the past or the future. Instead, they focus on the here and now, which allows them to fully feel their life experience.

In their relationships, they are vulnerable, that is, they are willing to take a chance on love by risking the possibility of being hurt or rejected. Because of this, they become increasingly tolerant of intimacy. They appreciate the importance of sexuality and regard sex as a natural extension of physical affection. They recognize that the unknown and ambiguous are realistic parts of life, and they have a strong desire to search for meaning beyond their everyday existence. They exhibit a concern with the suffering of all people and are likely to be involved in efforts to help others. In being involved in transcendent goals that go beyond the sphere of their personal and family life, they gain a sense of purpose and of valuing themselves that perhaps cannot be achieved by any other means. Searching for personal meaning in life and embracing transcendent goals enables them to realize their unique human potentialities, closely following their true destiny. These characteristics of a well-differentiated person - altruism and involvement in transcendent goals - are similar in some respects to Siegel's (2012) description of the domain of *transpirational integration*, which "entails an awareness of an expanded sense of self," involves actions that "fulfill the inner drive to help others" and widens a "sense of belonging to a larger whole while not losing a sense of personal or at least bodily identity" [loc. 5838-5845].

People can aspire to these qualities in their everyday lives and move toward a more satisfying and freer existence. They can overcome limitations and evolve as independent, autonomous individuals. Differentiating from negative introjects and relinquishing psychological defenses are essential for all of us. This task is a central developmental issue in every person's life. To lead a free life, we need to separate ourselves from

destructive forces, both internally and externally, and remain open and vulnerable. In order to fulfill our personal destiny and to make full use of our life, we need to strengthen our real self, the self system, while at the same time, challenging the harmful aspects of the anti-self system, thereby diminishing its influence on our lives. In this endeavor, it helps to surround ourselves with positive influences and to be open to imitating admirable characteristics in our friends and other positive role models. The reward of doing so is experienced in maintaining a liking and respect for ourselves and in the satisfaction of living an honest, autonomous and meaningful life.

On a broader level, it is crucial at this juncture in our evolution to develop a new humanitarian perspective not only in order to transcend destructive familial and social influences that reinforce people's defensive modes of living, but also to preserve our species in relation to warfare, climate control, and other crucial problems facing humanity.

Our ultimate goal is to help the individual remain independent, open, honest, deep feeling, vulnerable, and able to operate with integrity from his or her own value system.

The Self Under Siege: A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation

Lisa Firestone, PhD, is the Director of Education and Research for the Glendon Association www.glendon.org and senior editor for PsychAlive (www.PsychAlive.org). She is the co author of numerous articles and several books including: *The Self Under Siege* (Routledge Publications), *Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion*, and *Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships* (APA Books), and *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* (New Harbinger Publications). She has been involved in clinical training and applied research in the field of suicide and violence resulting in the publication of four assessments. Dr. Firestone is a frequent blogger on *Psychology Today* and *The Huffington Post*. She is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Barbara, CA and a consultant on high-risk clients. You can contact Dr. Firestone at LFirestone@Glendon.org.



If it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and if it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

-Alexandr Solzhenitsyn