

THE SELF-LED PATH

True North Counseling & Wellness, LLC



Welcome to The Self-Led Path

I'm so glad you're here! Much of my work as a therapist is rooted in the belief that healing is not about becoming perfect, emotionless, or endlessly "regulated." Instead, it's about developing a deeper relationship with ourselves — learning to understand the different parts of us that protect, react, strive, avoid, criticize, shut down, long for connection, or carry pain.

In Internal Family Systems (IFS), this grounded, compassionate inner presence is called Self. Self is the part of us that can remain curious instead of condemning, connected instead of reactive, and intentional instead of overwhelmed. A self-led life doesn't mean we never struggle.

It means we become less hijacked by fear, shame, defensiveness, urgency, or old survival patterns, and more able to respond to ourselves and others with clarity, compassion, courage, and openness.

This newsletter is an extension of that work — a space to explore healing, relationships, emotional patterns, growth, and what it means to live with greater compassion and self-leadership.

My hope is that this space feels like an invitation into a more compassionate and self-led way of relating to yourself. Healing is rarely linear, and growth often involves learning how to stay present with ourselves through uncertainty, vulnerability, and change.

Whether you are deep in your healing journey, newly curious about therapy, or simply looking for thoughtful reflections on emotional life and relationships, let's walk the path together.

— Vanessa Leon-Gonzalez, LCSW

UPCOMING:

WOMEN'S IFS GROUP

**Virtual | 8 weeks
\$400 (\$50 per session)
Begins mid-June**

**Schedule a consultation
to see if it's a good fit!**

IFS INTENSIVES

**For Individuals and
Couples**

**4 hours, plus pre and
post session**

**Reach out for more
information**

www.mytruenorthcounseling.com
(727) 916-7144

The Power of Group Therapy

There's something unique that can happen in a therapy group that is difficult to recreate anywhere else.

Many of us move through life feeling isolated in our struggles — believing our fears, shame, grief, relationship patterns, or insecurities are somehow uniquely ours. Even in individual therapy, there can still be a feeling of “this is happening inside me alone.”

Group changes that.

A good therapy group becomes more than simply “people talking.” It becomes a living relational space where people begin to see themselves — and others — more clearly and compassionately.

People often come to group hoping to feel less alone. But many are surprised by what they actually find:

- a sense of community and continuity
- being deeply seen and understood
- hearing their own experience reflected in others
- opportunities to practice vulnerability and authenticity
- a place to notice relational patterns in real time
- moments of discomfort, tenderness, connection, and growth
- support through difficult seasons of life
- meaningful relationships and lasting bonds



One of the powerful things about group work is that it becomes a kind of relational mirror. The dynamics that show up in life often show up in the group too — fears of rejection, feeling “too much,” staying quiet, caretaking, withdrawing, comparing, longing to belong. Instead of only talking about those experiences intellectually, group allows us to experience and work with them in real time, together.

Then something begins to soften.

People often begin relating to themselves and others with greater compassion. They realize they are not uniquely broken. They feel more human, more connected, and more able to bring their authentic selves into relationships.

Groups also develop their own rhythm and continuity.

There are often core members who remain for long periods of time, while others come during particular seasons of life — during divorce, grief, transition, loneliness, relationship struggles, or periods of self-discovery. Each person brings something meaningful to the group, and the group changes because of it.

For many people, group becomes a steady place to return to, a place to be witnessed, challenged, supported, and known.

If you've ever longed for deeper connection, wanted to understand yourself more fully in relationships, or simply wanted a place where you don't have to carry everything alone, group therapy may be worth exploring.

“A good therapy group... becomes a living relational space where people begin to see themselves - and others - clearly and compassionately.”

Living From Self - Reflections from Vanessa

"Do we have any beginners here today?" the drawing teacher asked. I raised my hand, and so did the woman next to me. We glanced at each other and smiled, apprehensive. To us two he gave an assignment on shading, while everyone else got a photocopy of a drawing by Bruegel to transpose into their sketchbooks.

I set to work. I had done a drawing class before, once, but found it so lacking in fundamentals that I still felt like a novice. The teacher, a former pilot who seemed to always have a crack about his ex-wife in his back pocket, leaned over us as we shaded circles and grunted with approval.

"Ok," he said. "We move on." He gave us a photocopy of a painting of a man and his seated wife in a simple modern style. "Watch the lines," he said. "See how they go here - and here? Let's see how you translate this to the page."

My fellow novice, who had seemed confident with the circles, faltered. I felt her beside me, drawing tentative lines, shifting in her seat. She leaned towards me and said, "I don't know how he expects us to do this. Isn't this too hard?"

I made sympathetic noises. "We're just beginners, right?" I said, "I'm sure he'll help us."

Erase, erase! I always tell everyone, erasing is half of what you do in drawing.

This didn't settle her. Her mouth crumpled up and she sat back against her seat, at a loss. I turned back to my page and focused on directly sketching each line. Forget that circle is actually a woman's head, or that line is a man's arm. Just draw the line.

Around the room, I heard the teacher exclaim over the way the Bruegel was coming together for everyone else. He held up the piece done by one woman - who he called The Empress - a very true, delicate representation of the picture. Uh oh, I thought. There's real talent in this room. My doubtful companion moaned.

"Oh," she said, "I think I'm in the wrong class. How will we ever do something like that? Maybe I won't come back next week."

"She's been practicing a long time, I'm sure," I said. "Stay! I know we'll get better."

She shook her head, clucking and murmuring to herself. I went back to drawing and soon the teacher was back.

"Oho," he said, looking at mine. "The shapes are coming together! But see here, this sleeve doesn't line up with where her head is. Erase, erase! I always tell everyone, erasing is half of what you do in drawing. Keep going, it's looking good!"

He turned towards my seatmate. "Ah," he said. "I see where things are going off the rails a little. It's ok, we can fix this." He leaned closer and tapped with his pencil. "The shading here is all one note. Can you create some variation?"

As he walked away, I felt her slump. If she could have, she would have put her head down in her hands and refused to go on. Then, with 15 minutes left in class, she packed up and ducked out. When the teacher came to me for a final check, he said, "I feel so bad for her. I tried to help her - I can see she has no confidence yet. We learn! We keep trying. But she did not seem ready for that."

"I hope she comes back," I said, and knew she wouldn't.

"You do not have this problem," he said. "You can take feedback. You will do very well being able to adjust." I smiled bashfully and looked down at my drawing. In the end the lines had formed into a close-ish representation.

But I couldn't forget my neighbor, who had not been able to give herself over to the process of missing the mark, erasing, and trying again. I could only imagine the swirl inside her as she compared and found herself wanting, and having felt that, lost heart in the journey.

I would have told her about all the things I dropped and wished I hadn't. All the ways I got only so far and then got spooked. Of all the times I thought continuing might show me parts of myself I didn't want to see.

Now, I stay in the room, even when my parts are crying desperately. I allow the feedback as I soothe them, and we carry on down the path.

Maybe next drawing class - or pottery, or whatever she decides to do - she'll be able to stay a little longer. Shine compassion on the part that slashes at her when someone else does beautiful - or even competent - work. Take the feedback, soothe her parts, and keep moving forward on the singular path that belongs only to her.

Sharpening Skills

Notice the comparison spiral early

When you notice yourself comparing:

- pause
- name what's happening internally
- notice the emotional shift

Separate learning from identity

Growth often requires tolerating temporary incompetence.

Stay in the room

Sometimes healing looks like:

- staying five minutes longer
- trying again
- erasing and continuing
- allowing yourself to be seen learning

Normalize revision

Healing often involves:

- revising old narratives
- trying new ways of relating
- making mistakes
- adjusting repeatedly

A self-led life is not perfection.

***It's the willingness to remain engaged
with the process.***

Self-Inquiry

What happens inside me when I see someone else doing something beautifully or effortlessly?

What part of me believes I should already be "good enough" before I begin?

How do I tend to experience feedback — as information, rejection, exposure, failure, or something else?

What have I abandoned too quickly because being a beginner felt too vulnerable?

What protective parts show up when I begin to feel inadequate or behind?

What would change if I believed that erasing and adjusting were part of growth rather than evidence of failure?



Vanessa Leon-Gonzalez, LCSW

