

## ***River of Knowing: A Journey with Focusing***

By Joan Klagsbrun, Ph.D.

*This we have now is not imagination  
 This is not grief or joy  
 Not a judging state of elation or sadness  
 Those come and go  
 This is the presence that doesn't  
 Rumi*

### **Finding Focusing**

It was my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party. I remember all my friends gathered around me, celebrating, when suddenly, I burst into tears. I felt an almost overwhelming sense of despair that I had been pretending wasn't there. It was something I had been vaguely aware of for months – my life was no longer working. I didn't look forward to a new decade, and I felt there was little to celebrate in the old one. The painful image I remember that came to me was of a clay pot that had had been fired in the wrong shape. I was stuck in an unhappy marriage, that I had rashly agreed to immediately after graduating college. And my work as a new psychotherapist, something I had been looking forward to for a long time, didn't feel right either. I had been trained in a pathology-oriented model that just didn't fit who I was. To top in all off, my mother had just been diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer, and her prognosis wasn't encouraging. I felt alone and trapped.

Out of desperation rather than inspiration, I decided to spend a month at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. They were offering a program that included the study and practice of meditation, poetry, and an intriguing new system called Focusing taught by a philosopher named Eugene Gendlin .

I had taken a look at his philosophy book called *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, and was fascinated by this innovative and iconoclastic professor from the University of Chicago. He professed a concept that fascinated me: “feeling without symbolization is blind; symbolization without feeling is empty.” Now I sat in the front row as he led us through an intriguing process of paying inward attention to the center of the body. (I intuitively understood that Gendlin was asking us to sense into the ‘lived body’ - a personal repository of experience and memory- more than the actual physical body). The object was, as he explained it, to get a sense what we were “invisibly carrying.” He explained that there were specific physical resonances that we experienced when we thought about a situation, and these palpably felt feelings could lead us to new understandings. He guided us in “dialoguing” with a kind of inner ‘felt sense’ so that small new steps of change could emerge. These steps both released the tension inside, and opened doorways to pursue new behaviors. Most importantly for me, the process brought a welcome sense of calm, relief and clarity.

I liked the idea of what seemed to be a private conversation with myself, (I later learned more about this application of Gendlin’s assertion that we can, as humans, tap into the vast complexity of body knowing and dialogue with this implicit realm.) I discovered within myself a calm interior space where I could reflect on my problems and issues with a refreshing kind of intimacy, and at the same time maintain enough distance to keep me from getting overwhelmed. The experience was both exciting and revelatory.-I also remember feeling a surprising sense of relief to be cataloguing these issues.

Gendlin guided us to check with our bodies for the problems that stood in the way of our “feeling OK.” I was amazed at how many there were in my mind, but I found only a few major ones were actually causing noticeable discomfort inside my body. Those few, however, were disruptive enough to evoke a familiar sense of being weighed down by insurmountable issues. But when Gendlin said, “Please just greet each of these problems, but don’t fall into them... keep a little distance and just imagine you are stacking them up next to you on an imaginary bench.” I felt myself smiling. “They’ll break the bench,” I thought—they were simply too massive. But I found to my surprise I could do as he

asked—one by one, name them, feel how they felt in my body (one was tight, another constricting my throat, a third, pressing down on my solar plexus), and then set them aside. When the main ones had been placed on the bench, I felt lighter, as if I had sent them away for a moment and had some respite from the weight of them. I later learned that these moves of Focusing, that facilitate getting the “right distance” from pressing issues, allow a person to be neither overwhelmed nor cut off entirely from an issue. Then he had us choose one concern to work on.

I chose my mother’s illness.

“This issue has many parts,” he said, “but what does the *whole* of it feel like? See if there is a word or image that would capture how it all is for you.”

*Getting the feel of the whole situation and finding the evocative words or images that capture that whole are important aspects of the Focusing process.*

Tears started to stream down my cheeks. “Sad,” I thought, but then I listened more closely inside. “Sad” didn’t really capture it. The word “devastated” came to me. Yes, that came closest to matching the whole, complicated, murky feeling inside. Strangely, in the midst of acknowledging this feeling of devastation, I noticed that my body seemed to relax, and my breathing deepened.

“Now see if you can keep this word or image company, and wait to see if it has something to tell you.”

Hmm. I waited and listened, and to my surprise, the devastated feeling had a lot to say. It told me I needed to stop being squashed inside, and to let myself cry, to talk to friends more about how lost I felt. And then another message came to me—I needed to share how scared and devastated I felt, and to clearly communicate these feelings to my mother, instead of playing the role of the strong daughter. With that action step came a great sigh.

*Action steps often come organically out of the felt sense.*

I knew that confiding in her would help me, and I also realized that perhaps she would actually be relieved to have me speak honestly to her. Perhaps we could find a way to be more real instead of ignoring the elephant in the room, as we had been doing.

I felt incredulous that listening to my inner self could feel good. Nothing was different—my mother still had cancer--but my relationship to the situation had truly shifted. And the process of shifting it had, in some way, released me. I knew right away that I wanted to bring this Focusing process more into my everyday life, and to share it with my clients in therapy.

When I opened my eyes, Gene Gendlin was nodding and smiling his warm smile, looking directly at me. He seemed to know that I had had an important experience. During the week I had several more chances to do Focusing, and to hear about the philosophy from which it evolved. I slowly came to understand Gendlin's brilliance in naming this dimension of experience, a dimension that was neither thought nor feelings but what he called *felt meanings* that emerged from a bodily felt experience.

"If only you were on the east coast," I said to him at the end of that life-changing week. "I would really like to study with you. I can sense that this way of working fits who I am—it's kind of like gestalt therapy for introverts." He chuckled. I knew then that this approach would both profoundly change my relationship to myself, as well as the way I worked as a therapist. He shared that in fact he was leaving Chicago for a two year sabbatical in New York, and he would be glad to supervise me whenever I could get there from Boston.

I took him up on the offer. Every other Friday I would drive down from Boston to see him and, coincidentally, since my parents lived in New York, I would often visit my mother fresh from an hour spent working with Gene.

My mother and I had been close, but didn't have an easy relationship. I had felt her at times to be judgmental and controlling, and I think she, in turn, experienced me as somewhat distant and resistant to her authority. Now that she was becoming more ill, however, I felt keenly motivated to become more intimate, as did she. Her illness had softened her, and it had made me more vulnerable. We needed to be close, to talk more frankly.

I told her about my experience with Focusing and how devastated I felt about the thought of losing her. She surprised me by accepting how I felt without any judgment. I stopped pretending to be brave, and cried more in her presence. She offered me the mothering I needed. I was even able to tell her about my desire to leave my marriage, and she surprised me by being understanding. One day, I got up the courage to ask if she would be willing to try some Focusing since it had been so helpful to me.

“Why not”, she laughed, rather uncharacteristically. “What do I have to lose?”

It was a cold, brisk March day. We sat on the porch bundled under a blanket. I suggested that she close her eyes and take a few breaths, and bring her attention down into the center of her body and notice what wanted her awareness there. She waited a long time, but I could tell by the pensive and engaged expression on her face that she was sorting a lot before she spoke.

“Well,” she said, “what I find is less fear about dying than I would have guessed. I actually feel a lot of gratitude for the 60 years I have had. I am remembering some highlights of my life. I think my favorite days were the days you and your sister were born.” Her voice became more somber. “Now I can feel a real hard knot in my stomach. Something in their feels like a ball of fists, all knotted up.”

There was a long uncomfortable silence. I tentatively asked her to say more about the knotted up feeling, though I was worried I might have crossed the line and she would stop the process.

Then much to my surprise she began. “It’s the chemo treatments. Something doesn’t feel right about continuing them.” She paused for a moment. “They make me so sick, week after week and month after month, and since the doctors are giving me little hope of getting well...I’d like to stop.”

She paused, closed her eyes again, and said, “I have the image of a ship at sea, with no more fuel, adrift on a grey sea.” She continued, “Enough is enough.” She opened her eyes and turned to me. “But what is knotted up there is that I feel I ought to go on for all of you. I feel you are counting on me to keep getting the chemo, and that I’ll let you all down if I stop. The truth is that I would like to live whatever time I have without these punishing treatments.” She seemed as if her words had surprised even her. “I didn’t quite have the words for it before now.”

We sat together crying. “Are you Ok with this?” she asked after a while.

“Mother, we want you to be around as long as you can, but it sounds as if you have had enough,” I said. “If that’s what you really want, of course we’ll support you.”

We hugged, and she seemed lighter and stronger when she looked me in the eye and said, “ Well, dear, being the captain of my ship as I sail out, does seem to be a lot more my style!”

My mother stopped the chemo the next week, with the full support of our family. I will always be grateful we had found a way to speak honestly and deeply to each other at the end of her life. At one point, a couple of days later, she turned to me smiling and said, “Just so you know, the ball of knots is gone.”

I was gratified she gotten to choose how she died as well as how she lived.

## Focusing for Self Care

I have now been practicing and teaching Focusing for thirty-five years. It has become, for me, a deeply comforting way to connect with myself, and to hear from those illusive inner places that I can palpably feel but can't yet put into words. Focusing has changed how I deal with difficult issues, and with uncomfortable and unresolved feelings that I can sense in my body. Rather than analyze my issues or try to change my feelings, Focusing has led me to a greater acceptance of what is. It has offered me a practice in which I can gently sense into my own truth, neither overwhelmed by it, nor needing to distance from it. It has been an effective way to release and "uncramp" my body and mind. It has given me, as well as many of my clients and students, the ability to keep company with those parts that are blocked, as well as the many critical voices keep me from listening inside. Being with these aspects of myself in a gentle, respectful way helps me to hear their point of view and makes for overall more harmony and less judgment.

There have been many times in my life when I have reached an impasse, times when I have been unsure of which direction to take. Focusing has provided me with a reliable tool for making wholehearted decisions, and for clarifying vague and unresolved feelings. By listening to what is implicit, what is not yet clear, what is right below words and concepts, I can touch into something that feels like a trustworthy body knowing.

I use Focusing when I am alone almost every day to clarify moments of uncertainty by asking my body, "What feels *wrong* here?" or "What would making that decision *feel* like?" or "What am I *hungry* for?" And then with curiosity I silently await my body's response - perhaps a vague pressure in my chest or possibly a swirling sort of ache in my lower abdomen or some other unique inner sense - and then begin listening to the sensation's story of what got it so pressured or swirling. Very often within a few minutes of attentive listening and gentle asking, ("Is there more?"), I get a surprising, but crucial insight into the roots of my unsettling experience, as well as a way forward that exactly fits my needs.

### **Focusing Partnership**

Sometimes, however, Focusing as a solitary practice does not seem to be enough. My process often is enriched by the presence of another person who skillfully listens to my inner explorations, reflecting my words and accompanying me, as the issues unfold. The role of the partner is not to give advice, or analyze, or ask intrusive questions, but simply to provide a gentle, accepting presence. Thus I have a Focusing Partnership with another trained Focuser with whom I exchange Focusing sessions every week over the telephone. Our time together is evenly divided so we each, in turn, Focus and listen for a half hour or so. Over the years that we have been with each other, we have found immense comfort and pleasure as we each find our own authentic direction, take new steps, or discover unfolding dimensions in our relationships. It is as if my partner holds the frame of my self-dialogue, enabling me to dip into murky issues safely, without drowning or having to avoid the problem altogether.

This Focusing partnership allows the practice to be used in a wide variety of circumstances, and with many different kinds of people. A partner can be anyone who is trained not to ask questions or to give advice, but who has learned how to be fully present and to accompany the Focuser during their turn at Focusing. Focusing Partners follow a prescribed way to listen inside and become aware of something that the body feels about a particular situation. There is an assumption with Focusing that words can come right from these bodily felt feelings, if one pauses and keeps attending there. When words or images come, they seem to bring insight, a new perspective, as well as a physiological sense of relief. A “felt shift” or a bodily release of tension often comes with the new clarity.

As an illustration, let me tell you of an incident on which I first self-Focused and then later exchanged Focusing turns with my partner. Each process was profoundly helpful, but the one with my Focusing Partner provided me with an illuminating breakthrough.

I went on vacation expecting to feel lighter as I stepped off the plane into a new beautiful environment. But to my surprise, it was as if I had brought all my old emotional baggage along – and when I sensed inside, it felt like I was bearing staggering weights, like two

sacks of sand draped across my shoulders, pushing me toward the ground. I began to list what created all that heaviness: there was palpable regret that felt like a lump in my gut about a decision I had made that involved taking on more teaching; there was wincing embarrassment about a writing deadline I had missed. I felt awful shame about disappointing a friend who had been ill; and frustration about my bouts of insomnia that seemed to becoming chronic, and one or two other issues involving relationships and money. What came to me was that everything I thought and felt was weighing me down. And yet paradoxically, just separating the issues and noting each one in turn seemed to release me from the weight of the previously undifferentiated mass. I was trying not fall into these issues, but sort of sit next to them, which is part of the Focusing approach. I took the time to notice what the right experiential distance needed to be for each one. When issues feel overwhelming, I need more space or distance so that I can simply get a whiff of them without being too close. At other times, issues need to come in closer, so I can really feel them in my body instead of merely abstractly knowing that they are there. At this moment, however, I knew my issues were too close and overwhelming. I needed to give myself more space away from them. As I sat with the packages of misery at safe distances away, I asked my body what the whole thing needed. What came to me was a tingling, airy throbbing in my heart area that said, "Leave the packages right here for now. Go and enjoy hiking for a couple of days. Then come back and work on whatever is still there." A rush of relaxation coursed through my whole body.

Forty-eight hours later, feeling more resilient and energized, I came back to the list of problems that I had arrived with. I sat quietly, inviting my attention to move from the outside environment to my invisible insides.

What came there were fewer items than before. The regret about taking on the extra class disappeared. I could feel some relief, and noticed that the shame about letting down my friend was also considerably less. Time and distance had softened these issues... and, when I checked, were no longer weighing on me in the same way. But the embarrassment of missing a promised deadline still felt heavy and brought up old bad feelings about myself and an inner criticizing voice that called me a failure. "How is all of this for you?"

I asked my body. Almost instantly I got inner sense of noisy static from a radio whose volume I couldn't turn down. I asked several gentle questions of the static, but it would not or could not seem to respond. I felt stuck.

I needed my Focusing Partner for company and support. Luckily she picked up the phone on the second ring and said she was free to spend some Focusing minutes with me.

With my Partner on the other end of the phone, I began with the question to my body, "What is between me and feeling fine about this issue?"

"Static that will not be turned down!"

My Partner invited me to ask if the static would be willing to temporarily move out of my body, and, yes indeed, it said it was willing to be placed on an imaginary bench. It transformed to an image that was like a despairing foggy feeling, like a dark cloud. I asked Foggy Despair to speak to me.

"It's been so long...so much effort. And nothing ever changes. I kind of want to give up... I just won't be able to deal with this," it said

My Partner softly asked, "So would it be OK for Foggy Despair to give up?"

Foggy Despair seemed surprised that it actually had that option. "Well, there is some rightness to that," it ventured. "Maybe not to give up on the whole endeavor," it continued, "But something has to change." I began to see that pushing and driving simply weren't working, and maybe there was a new way to deal with my block to writing and my embarrassment about missing the deadline.

The heaviness inside felt some relief at this unexpected turn.

My Partner reminded me to ask Foggy Despair what *it* needed. I imagined myself sitting next to my despair on the park bench. There was no immediate answer for a few minutes, but I kept my awareness on the felt sense of this "giving up" feeling. Finally, what came was, "I need company," it said. "I don't want to be alone."

"I can't do this alone," I thought. A big breath came with that forwarding step. It was easier now staying with a not-so-Foggy Despair, and I smiled to myself, I asked about which people might be willing to support me. One name came clearly, and I could sense

the synchronicity of the choice. I felt a huge sense of relief. The session had been just 25 minutes in chronological time, but there had been a radical change in how my body was carrying the whole issue. Now I was ready to become a listener to my Focusing partner as she took her turn.

Partnership Focusing is a well-established tradition among Focusers and is taught as part of the introductory curriculum. Moreover, there has developed a community-based exchange of Focusing sessions in a tradition called CHANGES.

Eugene Gendlin, the founder of Focusing, and others at University of Chicago, began a drop-in group to teach Focusing and listening to anyone for free and called the group CHANGES. Forty years later CHANGES groups are being formed all over the world—a place where Focusing is taught for free and available to whomever comes. And each person who attends exchanges Focusing turns so everybody has the opportunity to give attention and receive it, listening with an accepting partner, to their own inner process.

### **A Brief History of Focusing**

Focusing has an interesting history because it was first described, not by a psychotherapist or counselor, but by a philosopher. Eugene Gendlin, who had escaped from Germany with his family and immigrated to the United States as a teenager, received his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1958. In his dissertation, he outlined his “philosophy of the implicit” in which he endeavored to “dip into the larger realm at the edge of thinking.” However, because Gendlin didn’t want to be solely an academic philosopher, he was intent on applying his philosophy to a living practice. He studied client-centered psychotherapy with Carl Rogers, and in the late 1960’s the two of them collaborated in designing a series of research studies. These studies set out to articulate some key concepts from Gendlin’s ‘philosophy of the implicit’. Both men were eager to find out why some clients were successful in psychotherapy while many were not. They tape-recorded several hundred psychotherapy sessions, searching for information that would reveal what behaviors or insights distinguished successful patients from those that were unsuccessful.

One profound finding emerged from their studies. They discovered that there actually was one distinct characteristic of clients who got better in therapy that was not shared by those who didn't make so much progress.

The successful clients were able to find and consult their inner felt meaning about a situation. They would typically pause and wait, sitting with what was still unclear in their inner felt experience. As Gendlin described it, they attended to the implicit bodily sense that they had of their problems, which, at first, seemed murky and more than they could easily put in words. However, when they paused and got a sense of what their bodies were experiencing, specific tensions inside their bodies could be distinctly felt. Some were able to describe in detail those inner sensations, often labeling them with a word or an image.

*Focusing* was the name Gendlin gave to this process. It was, he said, a 'deliberate procedure for attending to the bodily sense of one's problems'. He called this new approach *Focusing* because it was like looking through the lens of a camera at a fuzzy view. But when the observer turns the lens this way and that, finally the issue "comes into focus," becoming clear and identifiable.

Many subsequent research studies have confirmed that a client's ability to Focus is predictive of successful psychotherapy. Gendlin has four times received awards from the American Psychological Association for his groundbreaking work.

Back in the 1960s, Gendlin, excited by these research study results, posed the question "Can Focusing be taught?" He devised a protocol of Focusing instructions so that clients could learn how to Focus, and thereby increase the efficacy of their psychotherapy sessions. His book *Focusing*, which was first published in 1981 and reprinted in 2007, has been translated into 20 languages.

Within a few years of the publication of the book *Focusing*, many people found that Focusing was relevant for many other endeavors besides psychotherapy. Today, Focusing

is utilized in business, the arts, education, bodywork, theology, childcare, spirituality, and medicine. In the realm of counseling, it has been found to helpful in many settings such as pastoral, vocational, and rehabilitative care. Recently, Focusing has been introduced as a community self-help tool in psychosocial wellness programs for victims of war in Afghanistan, and Gaza, and in developing countries such as Pakistan, Ecuador and El Salvador.

Focusing now has a presence in forty- three countries and most states in the United States. The non-profit Focusing Institute helps to coordinate the growth of Focusing worldwide.

### **Focusing and Psychotherapy**

I have been personally changed by my practice of Focusing, and Focusing (both the philosophy and the practice) has also changed how I work as a therapist. By welcoming the bodily dimension of felt meaning in my own life, I more naturally want to listen for the dimension in clients. I am more alert to their *felt sense* experiences. I work to nourish and expand their body knowing, and I trust that level of knowing. Thus, I no longer feel I have to always be the expert with the right interpretation. I have developed more trust in my clients' abilities to discover their own unique paths and to find their own forward movement. Gendlin puts it this way in his Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: "A step has its own growth direction. One cannot legislate the direction" (p. 21).)

Focusing joins well with many types of psychotherapies, such as psychoanalysis, mindfulness-based therapies, and cognitive behavioral therapies. All can be enriched by Focusing. By helping clients pay attention to the not-yet-conceptualized aspects of their feelings or issues, movement can be accelerated, and a successful outcome is more likely. As Gendlin says, "Focusing will enable you to find and change where your life is stuck, cramped, hemmed in, slowed down. And it will enable you to change – to live from a deeper place than just your thoughts and feelings. (P.21)

Sally began our session ranting about her cousin's terrible behavior toward her own father, who was Sally's Uncle. "He is turning 80 in a few months, and she won't come to see him." (The Uncle lives in Sally's town). Sally went on for a while talking about all the outrageous behavior of her cousin. I asked, "Can we notice how you are inside as you speak about this? How it is for you to feel so outraged? How is it for you that she ignores her Dad? What is it like for you to witness this?"

Sally took a couple of breaths, slowed down and put her hand on her chest, and with her eyes closed finally-entered into her own feelings of sadness. All around her heart area she found what seemed to be shards of glass cutting into tender tissue. The pain was palpable. Sally cried and freshly remembered the deaths of her parents when she was in her early twenties, and she wept at her longing to have gotten more time with them. She spent time talking about how different life would have been had they not died and left her so vulnerable. With some encouragement from me, she was able to sit alongside the pain with compassion for its suffering. I found myself asking her if there was a kind of gentle company this pain needed. Within several minutes, Sally reported, "The pain is not so sharp now. It's more ... tender ... softly aching ... it feels better to be with it instead of running away from it like I have done for a long time."

I could feel Sally's relief that she was treating herself the way she described treating her child when he was sick, home from school and needing extra nurturance... "I am feeling more tender towards myself". She acknowledged. And then without a conscious link she said: "And I don't feel so intensely angry with cousin".

After a reflective pause she looked up and said much to my surprise. "I want to stop trying to control her behavior. My meddling is making tension between my Uncle and me. He can't help it that his daughter is ignoring him."

*In Focusing a pause is crucial. One waits for words to emerge directly from a felt sense.*

Then, as Sally seemed stuck as to how to deal with her cousin in a new way, I wondered out loud this what this whole situation might need.

*A very powerful question in Focusing can be what does it need? And often by waiting, something comes that can be surprising, as it doesn't emerge from the logical thinking domain.*

Sally paused to check inside and then a smile came to her face. “I actually love my Uncle seemingly more than his own daughter does. I can't control *her*, but I can choose how I celebrate him... I just thought of a great way to show my appreciation and love. There are about 80 days before he turns 80, I think I will leave something in his mailbox—a brownie and a poem or some little thing to show my appreciation each day for 80 days.”

You can imagine how pleased I was that the session ended on such a different note than it began. Sally left feeling freer and more positive, and as importantly, with a new experience of connecting with her deepest self. In this session, Sally had done the work of getting right to the place where something new could happen and where authentic steps of forward living naturally arose. It reminded me of what Gendlin says in *Focusing- Oriented Psychotherapy* (1996): “Every experience and event contains implicit further movement. To find it, one must sense its unclear edge (which is more intricate and than one's words can convey). Every experience can be carried forward.”

Sally was able to find genuine movement from raging about her cousin's behavior to finding a fresh response to the situation that felt positive for her.

Harry came into his session complaining that his boss was constantly hounding him for more work than he felt he could deliver. At home his wife kept after him constantly to do more errands, fix things in the house, talk more, everything more. “It's really so unfair,” he said. “I feel like the whole world is sucking me dry.” This phrase really got my attention. There was

so much feeling was in his words.

*In Focusing we listen for provocative words, images and metaphors that signal the emergence of this level of experience.*

I repeated to him: “You feel like the whole world is sucking you dry.”

I added, “I imagine you’re feeling how unfair it is that everyone around you asks so much of you.”

*Reflection in Focusing is both a matter of staying on track and making sure that the listener can hear the meaning of the words he has uttered.*

*As Gendlin (1996) wrote, “To reflect is thus a rare and powerful way to let clients enter into their own experience. It is a way of being as close as possible to someone without imposing something on them.” (p. 46).*

He nodded, sitting with it for a while. Then he said,

“It’s a kind of a heavy thick feeling that weighs on me... like a lead apron, you know, the ones they use when you get an x-ray. I can feel it compressing the breathing in my chest.”

That image was also pretty vivid for me. “It’s like the asthma attacks I had when I was a kid. No — it’s even worse than that. With this, I can’t take anything and there’s no relief. I feel like the life is being squeezed out of me.”

I took in what he said and said it back with the same emphasis he used. “Something is squeezing the life out of you.”

He frowned, then nodded, staying very present and attentive. “I want to say, ‘NO! Get off me!’” he said, “but something stops me.”

“So there is something that wants to say ‘NO!’ and a part that stops and holds you back from saying ‘no’.” His head dropped onto his chest, and he nodded.

“So, what is the ‘no’ part like,” I asked. “Can you say it again for me, the way you might feel you want to say it?”

Harry looked up at the ceiling, and shouted ‘NO!’ and even demonstrated his own “NO!” gesture with his arm raised above his head, as if he was warding off a blow. He did that a few times, and then with a half smile he said, “Hey, this feels good”.

I could see his breathing settle. “So something in you really wants to call out NO! and makes this gesture.” (I mimicked him.)

“Yeah,” he said, “but then I hold back.”

We then spent a few minutes with the feeling of wanting to hold back.

“I have the image of a crab scuttling away under a rock,” he said. “It’s afraid, and wants to avoid a confrontation.” He took some time to “step into” the crab’s point of view, what it felt like to always be looking for a place to hide. Then I asked him if we could together listen to what it was that the crab needed. He waited a while before answering.

“It needs to know that it won’t be crushed if it stays out in the open,” he said.

There was a new energy in the room as Harry’s body face and energy came alive.

“It needs to know it won’t be crushed,” I remarked.

*Referring to this dimension of experience as an “it” allows this kind of dialogue with oneself. Gendlin talks about this dialogue with the surprising statement that If you can talk to “it”, “it” talks back!*

“Yes!” he said. “It needs something to help protect it.” “Doesn’t it have a shell?” I asked.

“The shell isn’t enough,” he replied. “So it needs some kind of shield.” He nodded his head.

“Yeah, something to keep predators away, so it could feel safe. You know, like a force field in science fiction. Something invisible that makes any attacker just bounce off it.”

Harry seemed quite animated as he devised something specific that could shield him and allow him to be more assertive in setting appropriate boundaries at home and at work.

“I need to have rules, you know, like my own little union. Decent working conditions. No overtime.”

He went on. “You know, what I really need is to have a way to know when I’m going over my limit.” He grimaced to himself. “Right now, I’m always working overtime,” he said. “Everyone expects it of me. At work, at home, I can’t say no. I just keep taking on more and more. And then I feel like going under that rock.”

I smiled. I asked Harry “Harry, when you go inside, is there a sense of too much? Can you tell when you’ve crossed the line?” He thought about it for a while. “Yeah, I think so. I get this feeling in the pit of my stomach, you know, like, a little voice saying, ‘Oh, no, Harry, not again.’”

We agreed that, as a first step, he would spend the next week just noticing when he crossed that threshold.

“You don’t need to do anything about it,” I told him. “Just notice when you’re going over that line.

Harry was able to take some steps in this session from feeling vaguely oppressed to connecting specifically with his conflicted feelings, which he expressed in metaphor. He found a part of himself, which wanted to protest, and a part that was scared of asserting himself. Through coming up with his authentic gesture (NO!) and his creative images of the crab and the protective force field, he was able to get in touch with the whole complex issue of his feeling overwhelmed. He also came up with a plan to notice when he started to work “overtime.”

By gently acknowledging and getting to know these parts, Harry became more integrated, more aware, and less afraid of expressing himself.

In these sessions with Sally and Harry, Focusing was woven into the therapy in a way that enabled them to find and stay with their body felt sense; to speak directly from it--often using images and metaphors which are the language of the implicit-- and to hear the meanings that were at the core of their feelings and behavior.

## Clearing a Space

There are times when clients make use of the first step of Focusing called Clearing a Space, a step where they spend time taking an inventory of what is in the way of feeling fine. This is a stress reduction method that can be the prelude to Focusing but can also in its own right, be a powerful method of bringing presence to oneself.

Victoria was in dire need of such an inner compass when she first consulted me. She was a 42-year-old mother of four young children, and her serious illness left her feeling adrift and overwhelmed. Her lung cancer had resulted in a major surgery to her chest, and when she first came to see me, she was in a considerable pain.

“Well,” she began before she had even settled in her chair, “I’m stressed out so much of the time. I’m not sleeping well, and anxiety about a recurrence makes me unable to plan even a month in advance. What I really need is some way to deal with all this fear. I try to think positively, but I’m afraid I’m not going to stay in remission. I’ve tried meditation, and it helps me to reduce the pain level, but it doesn’t seem to lessen my fearful state-- which is particularly bad the month before my check up. And I don’t want to take any more meds. I hope you have some new ideas.”

I spoke with Victoria about the first step of Focusing called Clearing A Space. I explained to her that it is a way to take an inventory of what you are carrying in your body that is “between you and feeling fine.” In this process, you discover each “item” that is interfering with your sense of wellbeing, and then place at the “right distance”. As you place each item aside, you ask yourself, “Except for that, am I feeling fine?” Going through the Clearing A Space protocol helped Victoria to attain a sense of calm that lasted for a couple of days. After that, often as she settled in her chair, she would say, “OK, I am really stressed out. Please help me to clear my space.”

Although Victoria had a large circle of engaged friends and family members who cared about her, she felt she could not be fully honest with them. The fears that she was able to

find and verbalize with me as she cleared a space each week were ones she could not easily reveal to others. She believed these unspoken fears would be too upsetting for others to bear.

One day when she seemed particularly agitated, I asked Victoria to notice what was between her and feeling fine. The first thing she noticed that was that in her imagined space, there was a heavy menacing black cloud behind her... one that she could feel and, when she turned around, even could see. She described a clutched tightness gripping her belly whenever she saw the black cloud. I asked if she might begin by acknowledging the gripping feeling from a little distance away

“Yes,” she said. She was able to imagine placing the cloud a few feet away, behind the couch, tucked in a corner of the room. She then told me that the gripping feeling had lessened. . This movement alone induced her to take a big exhalation, and I could see that that the muscles in her face had begun to relax.

“OK, Victoria, except for the black cloud which you have placed a distance away, please see if you are fine.” She frowned and slowly shook her head, no.

“So, let’s see what else might be in the way today,” I continued.

“Well,” she said hesitantly after a long silence, “in my abdomen I can feel a kind of dark, sinking, sad feeling... like what if this could be my last Christmas with the kids. I am afraid that maybe I won’t be around next year, and it is an unbearable thought.”

I asked if she might want to acknowledge the dark, sinking sad feeling and see if it might be possible to make a package out of it and put it at the right distance away. As she wrapped it in velvet and placed it on a shelf in the room, she and I both had a tear. I reflected her heavy sadness and then said, “Is there more?” She nodded her head.

The next aspect of fear that she experienced appeared as tightness in her throat, as if, as she said, “I have something stuck there, and I can’t swallow. It is about speaking to my kids when they ask if I can get cancer again? I want to be honest up to a point, but I can’t get myself to say, ‘Yes, it is possible’.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s notice that tightness in your throat that doesn’t want to be dishonest, but can’t bear to frighten your kids. See if the tightness in the throat would like to be placed outside of your body for now... not to get rid of it, but to give yourself a free space to be in for a while. It is like getting respite from your problems.” She nodded and made a gesture indicating that she placed the tightness next to her chair. She then mentioned that her throat actually felt more opened, having imagined the tightness next to her rather in her.

Finally, I asked if there were a background sense... kind of like the wallpaper we don’t even notice anymore, but when we stop to look for it, we can plainly see it. She waited with her eyes closed and said, “Yes, there is a background sense of being **preoccupied**. Even when I am at the table at a meal with all the children, or making love with my husband or talking to a friend on the phone, I can feel the fear hovering overhead, preoccupying me.”

I wondered how we might capture the preoccupation so she could place it aside—safely distanced from her. “Oh, that is easy,” she said. “I think I can catch it and put it in a jar my kids use to catch fireflies.” She imagined putting the jar in a suitcase and locked it away for the moment.

I reassured her that we would come back to work on those issues, but in the meantime, she could allow herself to enjoy what it felt like to be in the cleared space, a place where she didn’t have to do anything and could allow herself to just “be”. I could see her breathing deepen, and her shoulders drop. Some of the lines of worry went out of her face, and her expression softened. I asked if there was a word, phrase or image that captured this clearer space.

She smiled. “I’m back in the summer camp I went to for several summers as a child. There was a place in a pine grove that we called Chapel in the Woods. I am there and can feel the breeze, smell the pines, and I feel solid, safe and calm.”

Focusing makes a space for all emotions, feelings, and responses, because by welcoming them, they can become guides and catalysts for change, and for “forward movement.” And forward movement is what is most needed in the process of psychotherapy.

Rumi in the 14th century captured a similar process in his poem, *The Guest House*

This being human is a guesthouse.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent

as a guide from beyond.

### **How Clearing A Space Enables Us To Deal With Our Fears**

The process of Clearing A Space allowed Victoria to enter protected space for a while and to recover the part of her that lived without worry and was truly calm. She found the capacity to reconnect with a deep-seated sense of wellbeing despite her physical pain and anxieties. She had been able to name and enumerate her fears and place them at a safe distance. By doing so she had tapped into the aspect of self that is witnessing the fear, but not enveloped by it. As Albert Einstein reminds us, “You cannot solve a problem with the state of mind that created the problem.” Clearing A Space allowed her to find a new state of mind.

This process of naming and clarifying issues also helps us to identify and validate them as legitimate concerns. By allowing these issues to surface and to come into the light of our compassion and caring, we give a home to a part of ourselves that needs acknowledgement. Engaging in this process of *taking inventory of what the body is carrying* allows us to release much of the bodily tension and free-floating anxiety that accompanies those issues.

Instead of dealing with fear as a clump of concerns massed together, we separate them and thus will find them more manageable to work on when we return to the Focusing process. But for the moment we remain at peace. And from the sense of peace that comes in a cleared space, people often discover a spiritual perspective on their concerns. Often people report feeling more equanimity, more gratitude, more hopefulness, more aliveness and a greater ability to get a larger view of their situation. By spending time in the cleared space, they are dwelling in the present moment, which many spiritual traditions agree is the path to the sacred. Having seen the effectiveness of Clearing a Space in my practice, I undertook two pilot research studies with women with breast cancer ( Klagsbrun

Rappaport et al (2005) and Klagsbrun, Lennox and Summers, (2010) that demonstrated positive changes in life quality in women who practiced this step of Clearing a Space.

### **Focusing and the Realm of the Positive**

I have shown how Focusing can be method of working with personal problems, but it can also be a catalyst for increasing joy, appreciation, gratitude, happiness, love and well being. Recently, I have been including the principles of Positive Psychology as an intrinsic aspect of a healthy psychotherapeutic model. Research on positive emotions shows that a positive feeling *leads to* desirable changes. According to Barbara Fredrickson's broaden and build theory, described in her book *Positivity*, positive emotions affect both personal and interpersonal domains They broaden our attention and our thinking so we enlarge the scope of our thoughts and our perspective; they lead to more creativity in our thinking and actions; and they build cognitive and social resources in ways that help us to become more resilient.

I have found that Focusing is a wonderful way to find insights and to savor the positive aspects of their lives. When I have a wonderful experience hiking on a gorgeous trail, or seeing a great concert, it is even more powerful to pause afterwards and ask, what about this hike or concert was so special for me? What spoke to me? What touched me? And then wait for my 'body' to talk back to me. The experience takes on a new dimension and often the happiness these experiences induced lasts longer by spending time articulating the essence of what was so pleasurable or meaningful.

Focusing is, in essence, a way to hear from and appreciate the non-linear, non-rational aspects of you that are vital and alive and full of knowing. I have discovered that Focusing on positive aspects of one's life is as rewarding and compelling as Focusing on any other aspect of the self, and that paying attention to the positive provides a way to inspire and motivate movement towards health and wellbeing. Focusing is intrinsically an optimistic method; it has as its foundation the tenet that *the Body knows what is needed* and that *the Body has a built-in tropism toward health*. Focusing on the intricacy of the positive realm helps it to grow. The implicit dimension is one we sense into not analyze

and what we get from that is distinctly different from what we get from the intellect. By slowing down and listening for the “more”, you both get insights about what made something so positive, and you help yourself to savor the experience. Whenever a client comes alive or seems excited about something, I encourage them to stay right at that edge and to sense into those excited or alive feelings and to see what comes. A father was finding himself moved that his grown son had decided to move back to the city where his parents lived, but he was ready to move on and talk about some difficult issue. I wondered if he could stay and see what was so moving there. As I saw a tear form in his eyes, I asked him, “Can you say what so special about this for you?”

“I feel so much joy that we will get to be friends now”, he said, and as he sat with that joy, he added, “and I feel redeemed too—like I must have been a good enough Dad that he is choosing to live close and have his kids near me too”. I wasn’t sure I had been a good enough Dad and this is a huge relief. I sort of feel, well, kind of whole again—like he gave me back a part of my heart that I didn’t even know was missing.” Now tears of relief and joy were flowing. So often when people are dipping into the implicit zone below their full awareness, they are surprised by what they find there. And they often speak in metaphors and images because imaginative language helps to symbolize what is freshly forming from one’s felt sense.

These explorations of the positive in our lives are quintessentially spiritual. The experience of attending to those things and people and activities we love makes us feel resilient, happy and absorbed... Asking ourselves in a Focusing way what is it that we love reminds us of the best of ourselves and best of what life can offers us.

*Some say an army on horseback,  
 some say on foot, and some say ships,  
 are the most beautiful things  
 on this black earth but I say  
 it is whatever you love.*

Friedrich Rückert

I now believe in serendipity. It seems that events sometimes conspire such that we find the right people or practices at the right time in our lives. I found Focusing 35 years ago when urgently searching for a new personal direction, and needing a more meaningful way to practice psychotherapy. I have come to rely on the philosophy and practice of Focusing for self-care; for the growth made possible through my Focusing partnerships; for a richer understanding of the intricate, implicit dimension of experience; for the special friendships made across the worldwide Focusing community, and for the depth and texture Focusing offers to psychotherapy. For me, and for many of my clients, Focusing is a compass that allows us to navigate the inner islands of the self and discover in that realm, a new sense of clarity and embodied aliveness—a place where we can “dip into the larger realm at the edge of thinking”.

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