

# **Focusing-Oriented Therapy and Complex Trauma 3: Intergenerational and Vicarious Trauma Deep Hunger, the Not Knowing, and Wholebody Focusing**

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*Jeffrey Morrison*

## **Deep Hunger, the *Not Knowing* and Wholebody Focusing By Diane Scalera**

A few years ago, I was experiencing chronic anxiety due to a stressful situation at work. My body was deeply affected. My blood pressure, heart rate and diabetes markers were all higher than normal. I relied on my Focusing practice to help me. In a Wholebody Focusing session, a wordless felt sense of anxiety transformed into a sensation of me experiencing my own birth. As I exited the birth canal, I felt free from the anxiety that I had been experiencing. A new understanding emerged about how my body experienced anxiety.

I was my mother's second child. Her first pregnancy with my older brother was traumatic and she came close to dying. A few months before my brother was born, my mother's friend, Mrs C, who was a parishioner at our Catholic church was pregnant with twins. C-Sections were out of favor during more than half of the twentieth century because the medical outcomes were very poor due to inadequate surgical procedures and lack of antibiotics. This heightened the possibility that a crisis might happen in the delivery room in which either the mother or the fetus might be in danger of dying.

Because the mother and fetus were seen by the Catholic Church as two human entities, Catholic hospitals had a policy that gave priority to saving the life of the fetus in circumstances in which only either mother or fetus could be saved. Mrs. C died in childbirth along with one of her twins. The other twin, a baby girl, was born with severe cerebral palsy. She could not walk, talk, or feed herself.

My mother, having witnessed how this policy impacted her friend's life and family, felt great anxiety about her own fate. Then she had her own crisis in the delivery room. My brother was a large baby in the breech position. The doctor told my mother that she might not survive the birth. Fortunately, both survived, however, my mother was deeply traumatized by the experience. My brother also suffered from this experience. He had severe learning disabilities and emotional difficulties that may have been tied in some way to his traumatic birth.

Three years later my mother became pregnant with me. She decided to lose weight during her pregnancy so that the birth would be less difficult. She gained only five pounds in nine months. Throughout her pregnancy, the danger she experienced with her first birth and the memory of her friend's death caused her great anxiety. My mother starved herself and me during her pregnancy as a strategy to circumvent a possible fatal outcome. At the end of a full term pregnancy, I was born weighing only five pounds. It took me four years to achieve a normal weight and I have had a lifelong struggle with anxiety and panic disorder.

I always had a felt sense that the level of anxiety I experienced was not all mine – that it was stronger than my constitution created on its own.

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What I learned from the re-experiencing my birth during that Wholebody Focusing session is that after being bathed in my mother's high levels of cortisol for nine months, I carried my mother's experience of anxiety in my body along with my own tendency to be anxious. Since that session, my level of chronic anxiety has greatly subsided. My anxiety connection with my mother had ended. My own anxiety is at a much lower level.

Now, I can be with whatever anxiety emerges in grounded presence. This gives it space to carry itself forward in its own way and at its own pace. Under these circumstances, the anxiety sometimes transforms into something else. Before, my level of anxiety was often too overwhelming to be able to be with it in grounded presence. Wholebody Focusing helped me experience the release of my mother's panic from my body and allowed me to understand how it had impacted both her and me.

A new awareness about my birth experience happened years later when I was attending a week-long workshop at a Catholic retreat center. I often felt hungry there because the portions and total amount of food served was inadequate. This experience triggered a bodily sense of hunger, agitation and anger.

It wasn't until early morning on the last day of the conference during a Focusing session that I sensed what was triggering me. This session started with a felt sense of guilt for my surliness toward the staff in response to the lack of food. An image came to me of working in the convent as a young girl, stirring a pot of soup and a feeling of hunger in the pit of my stomach. I did chores after school in the convent. I was never offered a snack and I always felt quite hungry. One day, I was so hungry that I found the courage to ask for a snack. The sister told me that she was not allowed to give students a snack.

It occurred to me in that Focusing session that my anger at the staff had to do with hunger, a deep historical hunger. First there was the lack of nutrition in the womb brought on by my mother's fear for her life while giving birth in a Catholic hospital. Then there was a longing for food while I worked for almost a year in the convent. Then, 50 years later, I returned to a Catholic environment for the first time in many decades and experienced hunger again. This experience gave me a chance to be with what had been hidden in my body.

Sometimes our trauma can be caused by social conditions we are not aware of, pre-birth experiences, laws or rules that influence medical or educational practices, other people's personal decisions, and conditions that have changed over time. We sometimes live our whole lives never learning these stories.

Wholebody Focusing gives practitioners a path to be with the not-knowing. One simply gives their body permission to be with what is there and to move in any way it needs to move. One's awareness of something and your neutrality toward what comes are the only requirements. Often, internal or external movements emerge and they carry forward without words or images. The practitioner stays with the movement until a shift happens. In the process, as a felt sense, a phrase or an image might emerge that gives more information.

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Other times an agitated movement, for example, might shift to a comforting one without any other information. When I experienced my birth, I was observing the felt sense of my rapid heart beat during a panic attack. Suddenly, I felt myself moving through the birth canal. I mostly remember what that felt like on my arms and the release of anxiety when I exited the birth canal.

Wholebody Focusing trains the practitioner to rely on body wisdom for its information. Body wisdom does not need the right word or image to carry forward. Deeply hidden truths may not have words, and they may not even be based on your particular life story. Those places where the unknown parts live also have the ability, with our attention, to tap into the abundant benevolent energy that surrounds us as a support to carry forward our healing.

When we rely on only words and images from our own narratives, we may miss what the vast resources and stories the universe has to offer to help our healing. Wholebody Focusing gives us this kind of range of opportunity.

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