

## A Letter from Texas to Japan

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A bridge made of rainbow, mud under the bridge, and a bamboo shoot in the mud

### Introduction

I have been staying in Austin, Texas as a visiting scholar of University of Texas at Austin since August 2016. The areas of my learning are “Dance Therapy” and “Focusing”. In this essay, I will focus on my experiences of Focusing learning that I could feel, taste, and put into words.

I had a feeling that my “head” and “body” were functioning separately and not connected properly. I felt like this has been at the root of my unclear feeling of discomfort as a psychologist, and as a member of the university faculty. My struggle to connect these two parts of myself was a big motivation for traveling to the U.S. Both dance therapy and focusing are body-oriented approaches, and they have many overlapping features. Today, as of January 2017, the things I have learned in both these areas are interlocking and resonating, and I feel that the relation between my head and my body has been gradually changing.

### Learning Focusing

I visited Elfie Hinterkopf, Ph.D.'s private office to take individual guidance sessions. Because it takes two hours by bus one way to reach her office, we have scheduled our sessions for 90 minutes every other week. These training sessions include not only experiential work but also guidance on how to use Focusing in therapy.

Experiential sessions begin with various points, such as anxiety or dreaming, or without any agenda. Every session develops freely by combining methods of focusing with other approaches. In all cases, “felt sense”, which is felt subtly inside the body, becomes the basis of focusing. However, this is difficult to put into words, even in our native language. When I say “How can I say...?”, Dr. Hinterkopf often gives me a pad of paper and pen so that I can draw a picture and explain it that way.

I had tried focusing several times when I was a graduate student, but at that time I was not so interested in it. Although I became more interested in the last few years, and had learned and practiced on my own through attending workshops etc., I was still almost a beginner. I wanted to learn from Dr. Elfie Hinterkopf during my stay in Austin. But wouldn't it be reckless to take private sessions in English now? I was hesitating about that, So I asked Professor Mako Hikasa, who translated Dr.Hinterkopf's book, Integrating Spirituality in Counseling: A Manual for Using the Experiential Focusing Method. She gave me a supportive push forward. I sent an e-mail to Dr. Elfie Hinterkopf asking if I could see her, and she accepted.

I was very nervous on my first visit, but I relaxed when I saw that the office was decorated with Japanese dolls and Hokusai wall hanging prints. Seasonal flowers bloomed in the garden, and little birds were singing. It was the kind of place that makes me feel calm. Dr. Hinterkopf had wonderful memories of Japan from when she presented workshops there. Listening to her I could discover the beauty of Japan and the good points of Japanese culture. I could honestly be proud of them.

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Fortunately, I adapted to life in Austin rather smoothly. But in the first one or two weeks I suffered from jet lag, difficulty in getting to sleep, interrupted sleep, and the sort of negative thoughts that come with sleepless nights. I was nervous about starting my research life in a foreign country; it was going to be much different than a simple sightseeing trip. I also had to wait for various activities to get on track. What did I come here for? What am I doing here now? I had left so many important people in Japan to come here... Such thoughts were spinning around in my head deep into the night.

#### First Focusing Session

At our first meeting, I told Dr. Hinterkopf a bit about my background and my wants, and then we did a warm up.

“You might look around this room,” she instructed. “What attracts you?” (pause)

“The red cushion,” I responded.

“What is it about the cushion that attracts you?” (pause)

“The red color.”

“What does red mean to you?” (pause)

“I remember a school hat from my childhood.”

“I didn't like the hat, but I liked that it was red.”

“What is red for you?” (pause)

“The color of a girl, a symbol of womanhood and of passion.”

(This type of warming up was often used in subsequent sessions to come into the here-and-now to be open to senses and images and to accept them as they are.)

After the warm-up, Dr. Hinterkopf said we would try focusing. “You can use the cushion there, so be relaxed. Feel your feet touching the ground, (pause) Notice your breathing. (pause) Let your awareness down into your body.

I was still nervous, but I could feel inside myself right away. There was a feeling that the inside was hollow like a ball.

“Is it a comfortable feeling?” she asked. “Or uncomfortable?”

I responded that it was a “good feeling”, and a little warm.

She asked, “Is there anything standing in the way of your feeling all okay?”

“I am nervous about living in a new place.”

“I understand that very well. What is particularly hard?”

“Communicating with new people in English. And somehow it seems I'm always in a hurry. I have to do so many things in only nine months.”

“How do you feel about all of this inside?”

When asking myself this on the inside, a “yellow image” came. I responded, “It's something that is delicious but sour like a lemon, so I cannot eat it a lot.”

“What about it is delicious and what about it is sour?” Dr. Hinterkopf asked.

“It's fun and exciting, but it cannot be digested very quickly.”

Then a feeling occurred. I felt myself naturally focusing more on the inside. Dr. Hinterkopf saw it, waited a while keeping silent, and then asked, “Did something come?”

“I realized that in Japan I was experiencing the same thing—there were lots of things I had to do.

Among them was the pressure that I had to write papers.”

“It is step by step,” I agreed.

“Yes, like dancing. Can you dance here?”

“Here? Now?”

I was surprised by the unexpected situation, but I stood up and danced a little while humming the hula dance songs I had just learned. Dr. Hinterkopf was humming along with me and rocking her body.

“This is comfortable somehow,” she said, “as if I were rocking on my mother's chest.”

When I stopped dancing, I had the sensation of a warm wave spreading all over my body, including my head. I could feel that my entire body was connected. Dance and focusing were going to be connected in myself from now on, and Dr. Hinterkopf and I were able to be connected with each other.

### Second Session

By September, my body and mind felt recovered. I think the most effective things for this recovery were to dance, to sleep, to cook, and to eat. When I ate local vegetables, I felt like I became part of the land and culture of Texas and I could feel calm. However, I felt as if I had returned to my childhood, both mentally and physically, because I couldn't communicate in English as well as I wished, I had difficulty going places by bus, and people around me were much bigger than I!

Gradually I had gotten used to everyday life and was becoming more relaxed and having more fun day by day, but it was also evident in my nightly dreams that I was still tense—much more deeply than I had been in Japan. Although I didn't encounter any dangerous situations, I had the uneasy feeling that I was not connected to the land. Whenever I went to a new place, I felt like I was in a “capsule”. Even when I was at my apartment, I felt like I was in a “flower pot”.

### Third Session

Dr. Hinterkopf asked me, “What shall we begin with today? Checking inside? Grounding? Or is there anything else you want to look at?”

I told her that I had had some dreams about death, In one of them I was scared because a Zashikiwarashi appeared.

“You were scared? This is a good dream for focusing,” she said with a smile.

She loves Japan so much but had not known about Zashikiwarashi. So I explained, “It is a girl ghost that possesses a house and brings good luck to the place. Residents take care of her so that they can keep this luck forever. But in my dream, she grabbed me roughly by the wrist. And then she touched my foot when I was lying. It was scary.”

She suggested that we try something called “bias control” for this dream. Bias control involves picturing something that we think is negative, such as a tornado or a knife, and then trying to feel its positive energy.

How can I do that, when I am so scared? We started with grounding. After I made sure that my center was around my stomach, she asked, “What would you feel like if you yourself were a Zashikiwarashi?”

“I would feel sad,” I answered. “I am not alive, but everyone else is alive and can move freely.”

“Is that connected to something in your life?” Dr. Hinterkopf asked. But I couldn't find anything. My sense of self disappeared. Once again, I returned to the feeling of the body and I could feel the sorrow of my life.

Then Dr. Hinterkopf turned her palm to me. “See my hand as your foot in your dream. You can become the Zashikiwarashi and touch my hand.”

I touched her palm just as the Zashikiwarashi had done in my dream. Surprisingly, I felt “like playing. I don't want to scare anyone.”

She said “Playing. It is playful.”

While talking about the importance of playfulness, I suddenly remembered something. On the same day that I had had that dream, I was sitting on an outdoor bench. I felt something touch my cheek and found that it was the leaves of a cycad plant. It reminded me of my grandfather, who liked cycads and had died ten years ago. I found that the dream and the occurrence were synchronic and connected by the same essence. And I realized that I had actually been scared of the things I felt in myself, even though I had intended to be open to them. This was an experience whereby a totally different aspect came to be seen, simply by looking at it from a different viewpoint. I also noticed that I had forgotten for a while that my grandfather was always with me and watching over me, though I regarded the sense as a simple warm feeling as a Japanese.

#### Fourth Session

In late October, I participated in the annual American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) conference held in Bethesda, Washington, D.C. I was so surprised... Do you know such a dancing conference existed? I enjoyed meeting lots of people and was so inspired.

However, maybe such an exciting experience was too big to digest right away. I felt spent and tired, suffered from itching around the neck, had a cold, and felt like withdrawing from working hard to communicate in English or trying to be nice to people. Perhaps it was time to take a rest. The itching on my neck seemed to symbolize that the boundary between my head and body was experiencing problems.

#### Fifth Session

After warming up, Dr. Hinterkopf asked me how I felt in my body, and I responded that I felt "a shape like a gourd" in my body, and then I painted it and showed it to her.

"I feel like there is a narrow gate around my heart. It's not comfortable because it's hard for my breath to pass through."

She responded, "A narrow gate. What in your life is like that?"

An answer came, "That I have sought a better life since my childhood."

"What is a better life for you?"

I thought about this question in my head, but came to a dead end.

Again, as I returned to feeling my body, I found I could sense things more easily, and said, "The area around my heart is divided into upper and lower parts, with the upper one hot and the lower one quiet."

"You can gently say hello to that separateness."

I found myself hating this separation. I felt that inside of me there was "a flat wooden plate like a bridge around my chest, and there is mud below it. I do not want my inside to be separated, so I want to remove the bridge. However, if there is no bridge, I cannot pass through the mud. So I shouldn't remove it."

Dr. Hinterkopf asked, "How do you feel it as a whole?" I asked inside of myself and waited for a while. Then two things came. One was an image of the landscape around my parents' house in the spring. The other was the feeling that I wanted to connect the areas above and under the bridge.

"If those two areas were connected, how would it feel? You can ask your body."

I asked my body the question, and a message came: "This is fine as it is. You can find another way." I didn't yet know what "another way" was. But I was convinced that it would be found before long. I felt clear and we ended there.

#### Sixth Session

I didn't have anything in particular on which to focus, so we decided to "check inside". I breathed deeply several times. When I turned my mind towards my throat, chest, and stomach, My whole body felt like a bamboo shoot.

"What is a bamboo shoot for you?" asked Dr. Hinterkopf.

"Something new, something delicious."

"Yes, and it's white and shiny."

"Is this a comfortable feeling?"

"Yes. it also seems like the rocket. It will fly into space."

"What could this be, in your life?"

"Beginning. Departure."

"In your present life?"

"Well, I do not know. I have no idea."

"An 'idea' means a thing to be thought about in your mind."

"Oh right..."

I focused on my body once again and felt I could see the image of a rainbow. I said, "To me, the differences between Japan and the United States were uncomfortable before. But I have a freer feeling about

that now. I would like to respect both. It's like having bridges between different things..." I wanted to say that the rainbow represents diversity, and that it can connect different things as they are. But I couldn't express it well. It occurred to me that the bridge from my last session may have evolved into the rainbow.

### Seventh Session

Before I knew it memories and dreams about my grandparents and my childhood had begun to decrease. My world in Austin was expanding. I enjoyed new places and new experiences. And gradually I felt that my body and mind became easier to connect. At the same time I felt uneasy about these changes because I thought it meant I was losing something.

I felt that I had been fluctuating between my excitement about a new world and the frustration of my feelings of inadequacy. I had arrived at the turning point. (There were some sessions between this and the next session. But I am omitting them for the sake of brevity.)

### Tenth Session

"What would you like to do today?" asked Dr. Hinterkopf.

I responded, "Now I'm coming to the halfway mark of my stay, so I'd like to look back on my Austin life. And it's also the end of the year now."

"That's fine. You might ask inside, 'what was the best of it?', or 'what was hardest about it?'"

I said, "I would like to ask the inside, about the hardest thing."

When I asked inside about the hardest thing, what came was "I cannot understand other people's English speaking well when I am in a class."

"Where in your body do you feel that?"

"Shoulders, stiff shoulders. I always suffered from this in Japan, too."

"What in your life is like that?"

"There are always two directions in me. I want to relax slowly—this is my nature. And I want to do more, I want to work, I want to go upward. And then I feel irritated."

"Can you imagine what happens when both feelings become one?"

The image was a bit difficult and nothing came soon. However, when I kept on giving attention inside, an image eventually came. "There are two containers, divided into two around the chest, with liquids in them." At first the top was red and the bottom was blue. Eventually they became marbled, and different colors were added: white and black, green, navy, and yellow. The whole image became a glass container like Japanese wind chimes, and then the development stopped.

"How is it now?" asked Dr. Hinterkopf.

"Even now they are divided, but there is a wind chime in the middle of the boundary through which they resonate. The ringing sound comes from the top to the bottom, and from the bottom to the top, resonating off each other. I feel good."

### Conclusion

In my experiential learning the theme of "head and body" has appeared repeatedly in various forms. When I struggled with wanting "to connect it, to do it", it was a binary confrontational relationship. I could see that when "the head was trying to work hard when I cannot feel it well with the body" and "the body expressing itself even if it cannot be processed in the head", I was trying to connect them linearly. But I think I came to the place where I realized that it is a richer and more complex dynamic relationship.

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