

FOCUSING AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS: An Overview of Volume 20, #1

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First, on behalf of the editorial committee, I wish to thank the authors for writing to share their experiences with the larger community. Publishing articles is one of the ways we share Focusing with others, and this collection is full of interesting accounts of how Focusing is used when fear is a factor.

In looking over the whole issue, I took a particular perspective that is of interest to me to see how the contributions bear on that subject. Readers may wish to read the articles *before* reading what I write below, to take in the content freshly, rather than first looking at them through my lens.

I hope to make a strong case that Focusing fosters a kind of thinking about oneself and others that demonstrates considerable advance beyond a common way of thinking — the common way has some considerable disadvantages.

There is a problematic tendency that people have to think in polarized categories, such as “good guys” and “bad guys,” or “friend” and “foe,” or “allies” and “enemies.” This tendency is especially prevalent when people feel threatened. The consequences have been, and continue to be horrendous for modern society: the holocaust, genocides, internment of citizens of a particular ancestry or religion, lynchings, and more. We see contemporary examples of this kind of thinking in the language of politicians and the media when they speak of “terrorists” and an “axis of evil.” This kind of thinking is also operating when neighbors, formerly comfortable and friendly with each other, regress to viewing the same people as good or bad based only on their religious sect.

But it’s not only “those politicians and media types and other dumb people” who do this. When you start to think like that, *you’re doing it!* It tends to happen to *all of us*. Even we Focusers have this tendency.

Let me give you an example from the 2006 Weeklong Certification Workshop: I had prepared to do a group presentation on polarized thinking, but when the time came, we were behind schedule. I had a tense feeling about that, and something in me said “you can drop your presentation to save time, since you are saying something pretty obvious and trivial.” Fortunately, I was able to notice this in a Focusing way, did not let it dictate my behavior, and proceeded ahead with my planned presentation.

Reviewing my notes from the day, I wrote down some of what people reported after the guided exercise on polarization. A short summary:

- One man said the exercise heightened his awareness of stereotypes when a “military interrogator” on a plane asked to borrow his cell phone.

- A woman from Israel shared that she had recognized her tendency to polarize many situations into “everyone else” and her. Becoming aware of this shifted her feelings into being part of the group, rather than an outsider.

- A woman from South America shared that she identified her tendency to get very shy in new situations, thinking she was the only one feeling that way. Through the exercise and sharing, she realized (with relief) that there were many people who felt similar things.

Participants discovered this kind of polarized thinking goes on implicitly, in ways that could easily go unnoticed without the supportive conditions of Focusing. And I discovered that with all my years of Focusing, I too almost fell victim to polarized thinking, about myself and about what I had to offer.

I believe the contribution that Focusing makes on this pervasive problem has evolutionary significance. Why do I consider it *that* significant? Polarized thinking is likely to be maintained in part due to evolutionary pressures related to survival of species. There are times (and more so earlier in human history) when survival is more likely if one can quickly and easily recognize others from the same “tribe”. Those not in your tribe may be competing with you for resources or dominance, aligning with others in their tribe for strength. Safety is then to be found by joining with others like you.

At least since the first astronauts viewed the planet as a whole, awareness has been dawning that we are, in very meaningful ways, one tribe. For so long, we’ve used differentiating features to form opposing camps. This strategy does not appear to be in our long-term interest in light of the essential interdependence of all life forms on earth. Concern about global warming also compels us to think and act for the benefit of the whole world as one community of life.

Practically, it remains true that there are situations where we need the self-protective value of being able to quickly mobilize against an imminent threat to our safety. But most of the time the tendency to polarize has very large disadvantages, such as in personal relationships, and in negotiations where the goal is peaceful resolution of differences. The tendency to think in polarized categories creeps in when conflicts arise *within* one’s tribe, where survival is not threatened, but once thinking this way, we can feel as if it is! A nasty vicious circle can ensue: putting someone into a polarized category will often generate defensiveness. Just as any category leaves out much of the subtle detail of the individual who instances the category, polarized categories do this but with an additional, sometimes malicious twist: they tend to filter the individual details in a biased way that emphasizes negative features, and exaggerates undesirable features in the other. Naturally an individual so categorized feels poorly understood, if not totally misunderstood. A person feeling misunderstood will often act in ways that are unfriendly because of hurt and anger. Thus, treating someone as if they are your polarized category can produce behavior that “proves” the polarized thinking was justified.

The polarized thinker may not notice that the *way of thinking* helped cause the unfriendly behavior. Polarized thinking is an instance of a spot, as Gendlin says in his article in this Folio, where we need to escape the given categories and think up (with TAE!) some better ones.

Focusing is a way of relating to oneself that carefully attends to subtleties and the details of personal intricacy. Many of us have experienced personally that Focusing opens us up to fresh and more empathic ways of perceiving ourselves and others. Thus, Focusing can generate alternatives to polarized thinking.

The articles here comprise diverse applications of Focusing to experiences involving “fear”. We can see this as a kind of sampling of the effects of Focusing. In situations where we feel fear and hence feel threatened, polarized thinking is especially likely to happen. Does Focusing actually generate alternatives to polarized thinking consistently and reliably in these situations? Let’s turn to the present evidence.

In the following pages, I have considered the authors’ writings selectively with emphasis on how the articles bear on polarized thinking — there is much more for you to gain from the articles than what I highlight here. So please know that my comments on the articles do not fully capture their richness. I hope the authors will forgive me if my comments fail to emphasize what they feel were their main points. For the readers, I hope that my comments increase your appetite to read the authors’ own words in their entirety.

Rob Foxcroft grapples with the philosophical dilemma of how one can balance ethical obligation with the demands of personal need and comfort. In part, he’s addressing the tendency to think *either* I’m ethical, *or* I’m selfish. Thinking carefully *with* and *about* Focusing, he concludes that our beloved practice of Focusing-and-listening enables us to *both* take care of our individual needs, *and* act in ways that care for others deeply and responsibly. This means we can be happy individuals that have constructive impacts on the world, freed from having to choose between a) feeling guilty that we don’t do enough or b) sacrificing personal health and satisfaction for service. To me, the rest of the articles demonstrate this, with many examples of Focusers thriving personally and simultaneously making constructive and ethical contributions to others.

The Focusers you read about in this issue provide examples of three different loci for the benefits of getting beyond polarized categories: 1) the individual’s experience of him/herself, 2) the individual’s perceptions of and behavior towards others, and 3) our vision of the political options and possibilities.

THE INDIVIDUAL’S EXPERIENCE OF SELF CHANGES TOWARD FREEDOM, EMPOWERMENT, AND BELONGING

Juan Prado Flores tells of a woman who started in a condition of being immobilized by her leftover feelings from losing a sister, unable to stand even being near a hospital, and unable to comfortably bathe her child. Focusing changed and enabled her to be present in the hospital with a very ill friend in a healing way, not to mention enjoying and delighting in bathing her child. In the end, the sorrow that she formerly feared opened her up to recovering treasured positive memories of her sister.

For decades Lucy Bowers lived with pride attached to her self-definition as “Canadian.” She reports with surprise and delight how liberating — almost ecstatic — it was for

her, through Focusing in community, to expand her sense of self beyond that self-definition, to being Canadian *and* Dutch and *more*.

Lucy also gives examples of school children changed by Focusing, from being troubled and behaviorally difficult, to having more positive feelings, being less scattered in their attention, and experiencing conflicts with other students less often.

Bart Santen describes his “body-mapping” way of facilitating Focusing with young people who had experienced dissociation from early trauma. One of these cases demonstrates change, from being a fearful victim with some of his inner experience censored and walled off, to being a person who knew what happened to him, and who could choose whether or not to disclose the facts.

Rob Parker shares the story of an adolescent young man who had long been trapped in a pattern of feeling abused and mistreated, out of which he acted aggressively and defensively. After Focusing, he was able to much better control his aggressive impulses, and own up to his mistakes. He then actively began choosing honesty over denial and misrepresentation of the facts.

Joyce Kornblatt reports writers moving from thinking “I don’t have what it takes” to actively writing, and clearly having what it takes.

Mia Leijssen reports a client’s transformation through Focusing from a person fearful of a horrible past experience, whose mother had not been available to comfort her when she needed it, to a person who was able to provide comfort to her own hurting inner child. Focusing helped free the woman from repetitious intrusive experiences of the awful past, and allowed her to enjoy her life in the present with her family.

Akiko Doi shares her personal experience of moving from a condition of being “unable to look” because of her fearful feelings, to finding inner safety that allowed her to look in a prayerful way at things she had been unable to previously observe. From this experience she reports being encouraged that she can deal with scared parts of herself in more comfortable and productive ways.

Joan Klagsbrun lets us in on a woman’s transformation from being a rushed, dizzy, helpless patient, to a decision-maker with real influence over her course of treatment.

PEOPLE ESCAPE STEREOTYPES OF OTHERS

Through eventually successful Focusing, Edgardo Riveros moved from having his “American family” identified with the objectionable actions of the U.S. government, to experiencing them as people who cared both about him, and the injustices that occurred in Chile.

Josine van Noord started with a very visceral discomfort attached to her stereotyped impression of “the Japanese.” She could hardly stay in the same room with a Japanese person. They were to be hated and avoided, according to her previous conditioning. Her dramatic change through Focusing experiences opened her to being able to encounter individual

persons who happened to be Japanese — and experience their kindness and many other positive qualities.

Although the stereotypes for her situation were actually those imposed by others on her group members, Jacqueline Wislesky reports how combining Focusing with Drama in her community group resulted in higher self-esteem and more positive self-concepts, perhaps enabling them to break free of the limitations of others' assumptions.

Nina Joy Lawrence reported a change in what “the other” expects — no, demands — for her to be accepted. Previously she felt she *had* to help people in order to be needed. Through Focusing she examined the detailed facts of her own experiences, and consequently her trust has grown that she and others are moved to help others in need — naturally. She now gives from a freer place, with less fear of being abandoned.

PEOPLE GET ENCOURAGED AND ENERGIZED POLITICALLY BY HOPEFUL AND MORE COOPERATIVE VISIONS

Agnes Rodríguez and Edgardo Riveros both found Focusing taking them to more positive visions of what could happen in their Latin American home countries in response to past injustices and losses. They find great hope in the potential of Focusing and Listening to enable individuals to make changes in their communities in powerful but peaceful ways. This could lead to important alternatives to the polarized conflict of “Oppressor” *versus* “Revolutionary.”

Nina Joy Lawrence and Pat Omidian give examples from their work in Afghanistan with both individual and political impact. They tell of a man who had a history of frequent arguments over the use of irrigation water. With Focusing, he discovered his ability to stop and pay attention to his feelings, rather than escalating conflict. He was so pleased with these individual results that he helped his village to set up Focusing sessions so others could similarly benefit.

CATEGORIES MISS THINGS

The examples I've chosen for each of my three categories don't just fit neatly where I've put them. Many of them bear on the other categories, too. As Gendlin tells us, categories are like that, as the real things are richer and more complicated and interconnected. For example, Catherine Hudek's study showing that Clearing a Space helps therapists avoid vicarious traumatization is another benefit of focusing, not quite fitting my categories. This is also true for Mical Sikkema's interesting description of how her blending of Focusing, Zen, and working in a second language led her to solid ground and living with heart after the death of her husband (and our Focusing colleague) Bob.

Another thing leaps out at me that is not highlighted by my categories: the wonderful things that happen are the product not only of the inner acts that we call Focusing. Those inner acts are certainly essential to the results. But there is also the context: the listeners and teachers and community of Focusers. It's when people Focus *together* that such highly desir-

able results occur. Others accompanying the Focuser, knowing and putting into practice Focusing and the Focusing Attitude, are equally essential to the results.

Several of the reported transformations occurred in the context of International Focusing meetings. Others involved interaction with at least one, often more Focusing-oriented Listeners. Doralee Grindler Katonah organized a sub-section of this Folio by applying some of Gendlin's concepts to illuminate how two Focusers in cross-cultural communication are *both* changed and carried forward by that experience.

Groups of people coming together in a living Focusing environment can enable remarkable *group* — as well as individual — development. Bala Jaison's compelling account of the International in Germany shows this point: many people came to the meeting with feelings about being in Germany. Through the Focusing and Listening process facilitated at the meeting, they experienced safe conditions that allowed each person to be openly present, sharing deeply, healing wounds from the past. New ways of interacting were realized as a result of this profound collective group process.

As we bring Focusing and Listening to more groups, it can go a long way, as it did at the first International in Germany, toward healing long-standing hurts and wounds, reducing the likelihood of people polarizing into subgroups, and increasing the chances of having an inclusive group of equals understanding and caring for each other.

There are teachers, group facilitators, friends, parents and grandparents, siblings, therapists, colleagues and partners, all quietly providing empathy and the Focusing Attitude, who play a crucial role in achieving the remarkable benefits of Focusing. One of these benefits is enabling people to get beyond polarized categories of thinking.

CONCLUSION

Getting beyond polarized thinking is something that promises to increase the likelihood of living in a complicated world with more tolerance of others, and more self-nurturance.

Focusing can be a powerful change agent to move beyond polarized thinking in at least the three ways shown above. As you read on, I hope you will feel optimistic — as I do — about the peaceful power we have to make things better through our own Focusing process, through teaching Focusing, and by giving Listening and Focusing Attitudes to others in our daily lives. Collectively, we are doing this far and wide around the world. We are steadfastly at work in Gendlin's "Town." I hope that in reading these articles, those teaching and facilitating Focusing will feel encouraged, affirmed, and appreciated, for the vitally important work they are doing.