

FINDING THE WORDS TO SAY IT: Searching for the Meaning in Life*

Mical Sikkema

De golven zijn de dagen	The waves are the days,
De dagen van het jaar	The days of the year
Het lijkt of ze vertellen	It seems as if they tell
Hoe het ons vergaat	What will become of us

Maar de onderstroom	But the undercurrent
Die niemand ziet	That no one sees
Bepaalt de richting	Defines the direction
Op elk gebied	in every domain

Stef Bos

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“It lives!”

— Chinese Ch’an master in response to the question: what is Zen?

There is a lone white rose in a vase on the table. In five minutes my client will call me from America, and yet I sit here at the computer still searching for an entryway into the paper that I want to write. Into this subject that reaches its hands out to me and implores me to stay with what is stirring, with what its gesture expresses, until the right words have the room, time and grace to arrive. The grace to emerge says it better.

But here, then, it becomes clear that I have already begun. That *this* is a beginning. Writing about my search for how to begin. Being with the situation as far as it has emerged until now. And staying with the question implicit in the outstretched hands... a gesture that both beseeches and offers...and the longing within that question. I need to attend to what is being offered, implicitly present and precisely felt, though little of its substance is yet formed into words. At this moment, the longing and its gesture say, in fact, all that there is to say: the longing and its question hold the answer in their hands.

This presentation is about my confrontation with the question: ‘What is the value of living?’ which became my immediate and constant companion after my husband’s unexpected death nearly three years ago. And it is about the role that the process of *Focusing* and translating a book of Buddhist teachings, or Zen talks, has played in bringing me to an unexpected, radically experiential answer.

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Early in my development as a psychotherapist, I was introduced to the work of the American philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin. Since then, Gendlin's process of *Focusing* has been at the core of my work as a psychotherapist. More fundamentally, it has come, irrevocably, to influence every aspect of my life. The growing familiarity through the years of attending to certain clues, asking certain questions and then listening and waiting for what arises in response, has formed itself into what feels like another sense organ within me.

Gendlin's discerning and making explicit what he calls the *felt sense*, or experiential *direct referent*, has made possible a structured way of noticing and dialoguing with each moment of living, and the whole of my feelings, thoughts, and not-yet-differentiated experiencing. Gendlin observed what he later called the *felt sense* during the historical research that he and Carl Rogers conducted into what makes change in psychotherapy possible.

Gendlin found that for those who could sit silently and attend to their bodily felt experience of a problem or unclear situation, something new opened up into a concretely felt *shift*, out of which further insight emerged. Through attending to what was felt but not yet known, both their bodily experiencing of the situation and their understanding of it changed, and brought them into a new relationship with the problem, as well as to its solution. Gendlin identified and articulated six steps to facilitate this process, and *Focusing* was born.

Focusing is like the proverbial finger pointing to the moon. The moon in this case is our murky, but distinct bodily felt experiencing of our lives, which always includes far more than our thoughts or emotions. We are all, at least at certain times in our lives, aware of the vague, yet absolutely precise bodily sense of a something we know and feel, but cannot yet find the words for. This is the realm of the *felt sense*. By developing *Focusing*, Gendlin made this realm of awareness accessible even to those unfamiliar with it.

There is hardly anything that I do now without *Focusing*. Through the practice of 25 years, my intimacy with that in-between realm of *felt sensing* has become as natural as seeing, hearing and smelling. All of my work as a therapist and supervisor is rooted in attending to felt experiencing, as is everything else in my life, from brushing my teeth or bicycling to the market, to talking with friends or listening to music. But it was not always so.

My basic character is that of a strong-willed, passionate person, uncompromisingly determined to find, and have, my own way. This stubbornness was only made stronger by a culture of family and ethnicity that emphasized doubt and vigilance, and fostered a fundamental anxiety about being excluded or neglected that ran, like blood, through my veins. Yet I felt a determination and longing to sculpt my own life. This invited a dogged tunnel vision, along with overly dramatic attempts to influence circumstances, control situations and persuade people to go along with my vision of what must happen. Although I developed more flexibility and patience in my late 30's and 40's, these did not exactly come as second nature. My longings were intense and often brooked no compromise, I had to have what I had to have, and did not handle delays or disappointments, not to mention failures, easily.

Nevertheless, something in Gendlin's manner of working, with its roots in client-centered therapy, spoke to me. I trained with *Focusing*-oriented supervisors and co-led *Focusing* workshops. My capacity for patience and empathy broadened and deepened. But my characteristic stance in life remained, at some fundamental level, largely untouched.

In the spring of 1997 I was in a very precarious state. The recent divorce from my husband of nearly 18 years was as essential to my further development as it was devastating to my sense of stability and the life that I had led for so long. I seriously considered suicide as a solution to the terror of being alone and having no sense of solid ground under my feet. I understood the super-cooled rage that can make death seem like just one of many logical choices. It was, to put it mildly, a very rocky time.

I decided to go to the International Focusing Conference in Germany, to see colleagues and friends. The first evening, I met Bob Sikkema, a psychotherapist from The Netherlands. The word that most precisely describes my experience of that first meeting is recognition. I recognized Bob. I had never met him before, nor did he resemble anyone I knew, nor am I alluding to a 'past life.' The exact words for what I felt when I first met his gaze were not 'love at first sight.' But rather, they were words rumbling up from some previously unknown depth in me, in recognition of one I had long been searching for. They were: 'Oh, it's *you*.' And with them came a felt *shift* that moved through me like a quiet tidal wave of awakening.

Bob and I began calling and then corresponding and visiting each other with increasing frequency. I approached the relationship with my characteristic single-mindedness, but quickly discovered that it was beyond my control. Bob refused to be forced into moving more quickly than fit for him, while remaining unfailingly present in his attentions. I wanted him to see, right away, that we could make a life together. He said that it seemed to be developing in that direction, but wasn't there yet. His pace, slow and deliberate, held my feet to the fire of the agony of uncertainty, and I questioned staying in the relationship more than once. But I could not escape a deeper knowing that responded with: 'You must see this situation through, whatever the outcome.' Thus, I was left with doing what was hardest for me: being patient and waiting.

Bob and I co-led *Focusing* workshops in Seattle. We talked 2 or 3 hours every day on the phone. My agonizing did not abate, but through grace and the support of friends, I bore what seemed impossible to bear...and 2½ years after we had met, Bob and I were married. Four months later, I closed my therapy practice of 18 years, sold my house, and moved to The Netherlands.

I was 48 years old, had never lived abroad nor spoken any language but English. I began to study Dutch and acclimate to my new home. I felt no embarrassment in revealing my lack of facility with the language, speaking it as much as I could, and my determination bore fruit. I was fascinated with learning Dutch, and with the unexpected insights that came to me about English and language in general. I insisted on trying to speak and write about the same things in Dutch as I would in English, with the same depth and complexity. And while impossible, with predictable, often humorous, results, this effort helped my progress enormously.

The life Bob and I shaped together far surpassed what either of us had ever experienced. We realized that we had each crossed a threshold of change, that we completed something in each other and belonged together. We enjoyed speaking of growing old together.

On Sunday, August 25, 2002, Bob awoke in terrible pain. The doctor he eventually allowed me to call came and ordered an ambulance to take him to the hospital. At the end of that week, Bob emerged from a second exploratory operation in a medically-induced sleep. I spent every possible minute with him, talking and singing to him, massaging his motionless body and praying. Precisely four weeks after he had entered the hospital, I stood with Bob's son and our 5 dearest friends in a semi-circle around his bed, and struck his meditation sound-bowl three times as the doctor turned off the breathing apparatus keeping him alive. I leaned over him, repeating that our love would always be with him, until it was clear that he was dead. I stood there, empty and defeated. I had held onto Bob with all of my strength, with every ounce of my being, but Death had made it clear that his life had not been in my hands. It felt as if I'd been shoved right through a solid brick wall.

Just months later, I found part-time work in my field, and the concrete details of my life began to assume a kind of normalcy. But I was in a strange state for which I could find no good words. On one level, I was adjusting to everyday life, while on another, I had been shoved into an entirely new land, into another world. In one moment, the familiar had become alien and even what was yet recognizable had an oddness about it. The words of my vocabulary in English as well as in Dutch seemed strange and unsuitable for this new place, at least as I had formerly used them. Yet, there was also nothing more important than finding the right words to express what was happening, to describe the violence of coming through that wall and being shattered completely, while, at the same time, emerging on the other side in one piece and having to continue on.

Meanwhile, I was also trying to do the impossible with words: to bridge the distance between me and Bob, between this world of living and whatever that 'other side' was. I filled notepads with my feelings, questions for and thoughts about Bob. The words flowed out in English as well as in Dutch, often switching several times in one sentence. And underneath them all ran the current of that one unrelenting question: "And what, *now*, is the value of living?"

I knew that suicide was no longer an option. The felt sense that had brought me into relationship with Bob and our marriage *now* made it just as clear that I must 'see *this* through,' *this* meaning, *life*, and I could not turn away from it, even though I could embrace it only in the most reluctant of ways. I also knew that Bob had loved life. He wanted to live to be 400. Turning my back on life would feel like turning my back on him.

Nevertheless, I felt a decided, yet subtle detachment from much of ordinary life, although not at all depressed. I was easily touched, especially in my contacts with people, and also easily moved by the beauty, meaning, suffering and love present in the most everyday things. I also felt joy and immeasurable gratitude for the nearly 5½ years Bob and I had had with each other in this life.

The detachment had more to do with a fineness of discernment than with shutting down: it was a filter through which what was vital, what truly needed my attention, was revealed. I didn't feel any animosity toward those around me buying new things, seeking entertainment or going on vacation, but these held little interest for me. I felt neither happiness nor unhappiness about being alive, but a kind of acknowledgement bordering on

resignation that living beyond Bob's death was what I had been given to do. I didn't know 'why' this was so, and *that* had my attention. The answer to *that* question became vital to discover. But how?

In the fall of 2003, I attended a Zen day led by the Dutch Buddhist teacher Ton Lathouwers, who Bob had introduced me to. Ton and I stood talking at the day's end and the question arose of whether I had the time and interest to try translating some of his writing into English. Despite my far from fluent Dutch, my immediate response was an unqualified 'yes!' As a trial, I would translate one chapter of Ton's book *Meer dan een mens kan doen*, or *More than anyone can do*.

I had read it earlier, when all I could make out, with my limited Dutch, was its larger rhythms and themes. I felt inspired, comforted and challenged by what I *had* understood, but I longed to be touched by the nuance of the words, while knowing that that was beyond me. However, when Bob and I talked about the book, and about other teishos we had heard firsthand, it also was clear that I intuitively understood far more than I could linguistically follow. After Bob died, I went to sesshins more frequently and thus grew increasingly familiar with the themes of Ton's teachings. My improving Dutch made it easier, and I discovered that many of his ideas were not wholly new to me, although I had never studied Buddhism.

In the secularized Jewish family in which I grew up, God had no place. There was no room for thoughts, feelings and beliefs pointing to the possibility of a context of meaning wider than the strange, truncated boundaries of human life. Nevertheless, I possessed a longing to reach beyond those confines. I explored ideas, both philosophical and spiritual, in search of a frame of reference that would give me the answers to such questions as: 'what is the meaning and value of life?'. 'why are we here?', 'why do we suffer?', 'who am I?', and 'what am I meant to do?' But, I always felt constrained when confronted with the step of taking on a particular set of beliefs. I seemed unable to let go of my unremitting sense of doubt and commit myself to a religion or path of devotion. In the end, uncertainty always intervened and left me with no other choice than to reject each way as unconvincing. At the same time, each disappointment only seemed to strengthen my determination to keep on searching.

Yet, it is impossible to compare my search *before* Bob's death with what it became *after* he died. Being pushed through that brick wall changed everything. The existential quest running like an underground spring through my life, had quickened overnight, into a deep river, flowing sure and wide. 'Why am I here?' and 'what is this about?' became as everyday as 'what do I want to eat?' and 'do I need gas in the car?' This quest, fueled by the grief of losing Bob and my love for him, had taken over my life. Everything else felt superfluous by comparison.

From the moment I started translating Ton's book, I knew that I would not stop until I was done, regardless of the fate of the completed manuscript. This was a task tailor-made for me, as it required an extraordinarily intimate encounter with the issues of life/death, faith/doubt, certainty/uncertainty, suffering, compassion and love — in fact, the very issues that commanded nearly all of my attention. The river of my own quest had converged with that of the quest for precisely the right English words to express Ton's Dutch, and left no

room for doubt that this task was needed for my development and well-being, as well as, perhaps, my sanity. I also knew that I had to do it for Bob. The possibility that Ton might benefit from it as well was just icing on the cake.

Zen is a way of paradox, of facing the irreconcilable opposites that nevertheless occupy the same spaces in life. The Zen koan, an impossible question given to the student as a concentration point for meditation, epitomizes this. It calls the meditator to inhabit a 'field of tension' until it breaks open to reveal the wholeness which the impossibility has concealed. Sitting with the not-knowing of how the koan can be resolved breaks open, revealing a space as wide as eternity, where the impossibility of a solution becomes liberating, as it reveals the paradoxical nature of existence. Thus, Zen is a way of facing and directly experiencing that we don't, and can't, explain the deepest mysteries of existence, but that we can come to know them in an intimate way.

From the moment of Bob's death, I struggled with the question of what had happened to him. Of what death meant...for him, for me, for our relationship. Was he totally gone, without leaving a trace in the cosmos? Or was he still present in another way or form? Right after he died, I certainly felt connected with him. Thereafter, the sense of his presence was vague and changeable, but I knew that it didn't fit to say that he was *not* in consciousness, either. Additionally, I knew that the intensity of my wish to believe in his continued existence could only muddy my ability to feel into the situation without bias. I wanted to know, one way or the other, and I still want to know the answer to the riddle: Bob is dead and Bob is present.

In his *teishos*, or Zen talks, ten of which comprise his book, Ton Lathouwers reminds us again and again that compassion — the meeting from heart-to-heart — and faith are the very crux of the Buddha's teachings. A professor emeritus of Russian literature at Leuven University in Belgium, Ton often refers to Dostoyevsky, along with many of the atheistic Soviet authors who are his particular specialty. With these, and classical texts from all currents of Buddhism, along with other sources as varied as Søren Kierkegaard, Elie Wiesel, Julian of Norwich, Antoine St.-Exupery and pop singer Van Morrison, he offers his always tentative, yet unwaveringly optimistic message to those who will listen.

Perhaps I felt at home with Ton's teachings, even when I could understand only the most basic thread running through them, because of the respect, fearlessness and love with which he spoke of not-knowing as an inescapable aspect of unadorned, un-romanticized human experience. He knew doubt and despair, as well as faith and hope, intimately. And he spoke, again and again, on behalf of a faith that is not threatened by doubt, and that encompasses the possibility of going beyond the beyond:

“...here faith and doubt keep each other going. In the Zen tradition that is called: the great doubt. That great doubt is actually one of the basic demands of the Zen tradition, next to and together with a great faith and a great commitment.

Fundamental doubt about everything that happens to you. Fundamentally not knowing and, at the same time, being challenged to give your unique answer

from there. To give your own inalienable expression to that. Existence is a mystery, an enigma. It is: not knowing. It descends upon you as an enormous question. And challenges you to offer up your own completely unique answer. Not theoretical, not prepared, but through your life itself.”

Here was a faith asking me to bear the not-knowing, and to hold myself open for an experience that reaches far past intellectual proof to touch the unshakeable knowing of the heart and remain open to the possibility, even while shaking in my boots, that the impossible is, nonetheless, possible. Here I found room for my grief and despair, as well as for my longing for a first-hand experience of faith. It had never made sense to me that things ‘just happen’ randomly, but I was always stopped short by not being able to prove one explanation over another. Here was a challenge to look beyond the horizon of all such explanations, and to listen to my heart and the knowing there, without reservation, that this marriage with Bob, this love of ours, transcended our separation through his death. To take seriously the longing to understand this knowing, even without being able to know what this might mean in actual, concrete terms. My heart could not predict the future, but it knew, better than anyone or anything else could, what was most important to me. The resulting, unanswerable, questions: Is Bob in consciousness? Is there existence of some sort after death? Will I ever see him again? flowed through me like the swift, interwoven currents of a river finding its way to the sea. Within Ton’s words, I found form and structure, without rigidity or doctrine. A message based on existential process and not on bowing to certain beliefs or explanations. That was such a relief.

Searching for the words to translate Ton’s text was, then, also my search for the meaning and value in my life as a whole, and the words to make these things explicit. Translating the text was one immense *Focusing* process on two levels. As I sat with the Dutch lines, waiting for the right English words to make themselves known, I reached as deeply into my felt sense of their meaning and their intention, as into my dictionary and thesaurus. This was slow and painstaking work — emotionally and linguistically draining. Emotionally and existentially demanding because the grief over Bob’s death and feeling lost in this new landscape of life, formed the atmosphere of my translation work, and of my life as a whole. Through translating Ton’s teishos, I hoped to find my way into feeling less lost, as well as into an experience of faith. I longed to understand how to live further, in the spirit and grace of undying love.

Writing this paper was not unlike the process of translation, although also different in nature; for the experience I sought to put on paper, and the words to describe it, were all my own. I was translating my not-yet-articulated experience from felt sense into words. Two-thirds of the way through, I felt increasingly overwhelmed by the task I had undertaken, as it threatened to disassemble into chaos. The more I tried to write, the more the story as a whole seemed to unravel. After receiving some deeply appreciated feedback, I took a scalpel to those passages of confusion, cutting them all away. Once I reread what was left, I could see that all the deletions had been things I had felt that I *should* include: the references to other writers, to the theoretical and philosophical. For, when I first contemplated this presentation, I imagined drawing on others who had written of their experience of translating and how it

had personally affected them. But, the few texts I could find, including Eva Hoffman's well-known *Lost in translation*, focused mainly on the difficulty the authors had moving from one culture and language to another. . . .and on the profound and lingering sense of loss and alienation that leaving their mother tongue behind brought, as they made their way in their new land. There, I found little resonance, at least in relation to what I felt I wanted to say here. And, the same was true for Marie Cardinal's *The words to say it* as well as Gene Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit. But, I had taken for granted that a presentation must include these things, mustn't it? That had been my assumption. Yet something was clearly wrong. By clearing out the words that did not resonate with what inside of me was still seeking expression, I found my way back to the gesture of the outstretched hands, to *Focusing*, and thus to the possibility of moving beyond assumptions to sit quietly with the felt sense of what I still wanted to say. And then, I knew where my next step lay. In letting this reconnection with that gesture, and with myself, show me the way.

By the time I finished translating Ton's book, I became aware that my relationship with my original question, and the gesture of its longing, had shifted. My fundamental way of being in and moving through life had changed. I had come to recognize the land of not-knowing, on the other side of that brick wall, as my new dwelling place. The answer to my question revealed itself as the question itself.

To dwell within the question, 'what is the value of living,' means meeting each person, each moment, each situation, without already knowing what they are, what they mean or what is needed. This is the attending to what is unclear that *Focusing* facilitates. It is the openness of sitting in *zazen*, as well as the translation process in which I engaged to find the English translation for Ton Lathouwers' words. It is also the only way to ask a question for which you already know there is no answer, at least in the ordinary sense. It means entering into an intimate relationship with the unknown, the unclear, even the impossible. . . .with simple curiosity or with a deep, urgent longing to find a way through the confusion, pain, sorrow, impasse to understanding and perhaps even grace. Ultimately, it means a way of living, each day, indeed each moment, with the guiding questions of 'What is here for me to do?' 'What is being asked of me?' and 'Where is the step I am being called to take?'

Around the same time as I began this paper, I became hooked on an American television program broadcast in The Netherlands, *Joan of Arcadia*. The protagonist is a student at Arcadia High School, and as the title might suggest, she has been singled out by God for attention. In the program, God appears to her in many guises, from a punk-rocker to a construction worker, changing age, gender, and ethnicity. Having missed the first show, I don't know how Joan's apprenticeship with God began, but she takes the exercises she is given seriously, even if reluctantly and sometimes not without a hefty argument. The assignments are often cryptic, like the koans of Zen. Joan is challenged to find out what is being asked of her, and what the fulfillment of her task is, without settling necessarily on the first understanding of the exercise or the first solution she can find.

It took me a while to realize that my kinship with Joan comes through my sense that she has also found her way into the land of not-knowing, perhaps also not exactly by choice. And although she struggles each time, reaching for ready solutions to her assignments, it is

when she can bear the unclearness and uncertainty of not-knowing and attend to the call and wisdom of her own heart that she finds a way through and completes her given task. In her, I have found an unlikely ally. I feel less estranged in the world.

And as I type these last words, I see my husband Bob smile at me and nod, how and from where I do not know. And I know that I am ready to leave this as it is, in your hands, with just a few words, from Ralph Waldo Emerson, in closing:

“I have more experience than I have written here, more than I will, more than I can write. In silence we must wrap much of our life, because it is too fine for speech, because also we cannot explain it to others, and because somewhat we cannot yet understand.”

SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS

Knowing how to Focus...how to be with myself in a ‘Focusing way’...made something extraordinary possible, as I struggled to come to terms with Bob’s death. Once and for all even the most subtle and disguised forms of the myth that life is either knowable or controllable lay in ashes and dust at my feet. But, mixed in with those ashes lay my familiar ways of responding to fear, of trying to pre-empt it through strategy and control or trying to outwit it, which had also been reduced to dust.

Being able to make space for my felt experiencing meant that I could bear witness to not only everything happening moment to moment, but also to what arose in me, in response to it all.

Bob’s death taught me that there was simply no point to trying to turn away or hide from whatever life would bring to me. Having Focusing rooted so deeply within me called me and allowed me to relate to the irrevocable, unwanted, devastating experience of losing Bob with attention, alertness and an open heart. I found myself making a previously indistinguishable discernment between the (ever-continuing) flow of ‘normal’ emotions and feelings, including fear, and existential fear. By existential fear, I mean the terror which arises whenever consciousness of the fundamental uncertainty and inescapable mortality of our humanness breaches the bulwark of our attempts to deny or escape it. The fear that underlies any belief that facing what is beyond this bulwark, all that is unexplainable and mysterious in our existence, is more than can be borne.

Perhaps knowing in every cell of my body that everyone had done everything possible to save Bob’s life, and seeing that this was still not enough to keep him from dying, brought me face to face with the nakedness of human fallibility. It brought me to my knees, and also filled me, unexpectedly, with a strange sense of grace and peace much deeper than any ‘emotion.’

I knew my smallness in the face of the infinite, my fragility as well as my strength, and realized that very little of any of this had anything to do with me ‘doing’ anything, or being responsible for creating these conditions. Yet, at the very same time, I saw clearly that

doing all I could, absolutely all and everything, until there was nothing left to try, was and is the only true task — to live this life to the fullest extent of its meaning, whatever life asks of me.

To put it another way: After Bob's death, I was no longer afraid of feeling fear, or anything else, for that matter. Whatever comes up, as awful and painful as it is, I know that my task is to live it through, and mine it for all that it has to offer . . . as openly and receptively as possible. The purpose of life is clearly to be discovered in and through the living of it.

Focusing gave me a way, and thus the courage, to meet and bear the unbearable moments of Bob's illness and death and living on after his death. To not shrink back from myself, but instead to remain true to myself and my inner process, even in the direst of times. Focusing gave me a way of holding onto myself, bringing me back again and again to the felt sense of the situation, the point of reference within when there was no other elsewhere to guide me. And Focusing has helped me to continue looking life in the eyes...with the unconditional and all-inclusive gaze of one who is looking through the eyes of her heart and dares to see it all — to meet and respond to each moment, whatever it contains.

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