

ILLUSION...REALITY? Making Sense of Non-Sense Through Focusing

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This is not your usual abstract outlining exactly what will be covered in the article below. Yes, this piece will certainly address how Focusing can make a definite difference in a “landscape of fear”. It is also about the general confusion, illusion — maybe even delusion — that can happen when fear is allowed to seep into the mind, creating a disconnect between outer reality and inner truth. I believe that Focusing can provide a sane counterbalance to fear, so that the *felt*-sense does not become *non*-sense.

A WORLD OUT OF FOCUS...

It all started for me after 9/11. I am probably not alone in saying that I have yet to actually fully recover from that event, and not because it was so-called “close to home” (i.e. in North America rather than somewhere “over there”). It is because after extensive reading (post that dreadful day), I could not believe how incredibly naïve I had been in the first place. There had been hundreds of terrorist attacks and threats in the past: a U.S. Embassy bombing in Beirut in '83; the Pan Am Flight 103 that exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland in '88; the Air France hijacking in '94 — and of course the earlier attempt on the World Trade Center in '93 (to name a few).

The only difference (for me) between those horrors and 9/11 was that I never really ‘took them in’ or let them ‘touch’ me. So the first shocking realization was that I did *take it in* this time (and every ghastly event thereafter) in what felt like constant and relentless blows to the Soul. Hence, I have been struggling ever since with how to live in the world in a way that is realistic: being proactive, productive, spiritually aware, and avoiding succumbing to what feels like a massive depression — no, not personal depression, but a kind of global grief for the pain, poverty, destruction and injustice in the world that nearly brings me to my knees with agony, if I let it too far in.

No place feels safe. How odd that feels to write. I know a lot about safe *inner* space: how to make it, how to live in it at a personal and interpersonal level, but as soon as I switch my awareness from personal consciousness to global mass-consciousness, nothing that I know interiorly “fits” anymore. I have only recently come to understand *why* that is so. At an intrapsychic level, I can trust what is true or real or “right inside”. I *know* what I know. I can viscerally *sense what is so*, and knowing Focusing has supported and validated the process of trusting that inner knowing.

The problem was that the concept of inner *felt knowing* did not seem to fit into current global patterns in any way that made sense. Why? Because I realized that I no longer had any accurate feelings to serve as an anchor-point that I could reliably trust regarding *what* was true. I no longer believed that anyone — politicians, the media, our Governments — was

telling the whole truth. In fact, the complexity of today's world seems to render the concept of "the whole truth, nothing but the truth..." as either simplistic or a total oxymoron. To use Focusing terminology to describe the present human dilemma, we might say: Everyone is right (for themselves) and nothing is right (for everyone). There does not seem to be a way to "make room" for all of it, i.e. the diversity of human inter-cultural perspective, in a way that the world *body* "buys". The current world "spin" seems to dictate that we need to operate on the general principle — unlike Focusing — that someone must be 'right' or 'wrong'. Our dearly held notion of *both/and* (rather than *either/or*) has not yet been utilized by humanity as a concrete way to move forward. So much for the depressing part.

COMING INTO FOCUSING...

On a more uplifting note, having reflected long and hard about and since 9/11, I have also come to the realization that there *are ways* that people can operate more effectively in groups, in society, and in interpersonal cultural interactions. Focusing is one of them. Before I go further, I would like to clarify something, so that any non-Focusers who may be reading this do not construe (or misconstrue) Focusing as a cult or some new fangled fad.

One of the aspects of Focusing that has made a lasting impression on me, and has deepened my commitment to getting it out into the world, is that Focusing is not an 'it'. It is not a religion, or some kind of club; there are no requirements or prerequisites for doing Focusing — except a *wanting* to.

For those who don't know Focusing, it is a gentle yet powerful process that helps us to connect and 'dialogue' with our own inner places of 'knowing'. The uniqueness of the process is that it can integrate with anything and everything, from the most profound experiences of contacting deeply held feelings, to the most mundane: "*Should I put the flower pot here or there...umm...what's my sense about that...*" The process begins with what we call the "Focusing Attitude". This refers to a way of being, both with oneself and with others, that includes creating an environment of safety, in order to speak freely with non-judgment and non-blame, whether Focusing on our own or with another. The essence of being able to Focus is in learning how to *listen inside*, making permission and (inner) space for whatever parts of the self wish to speak. The results are a new internal flow that allows unknown issues or places of discomfort to emerge openly and without constraint. In Focusing we say that we "sit with" and "listen to" with concentrated attention and empathy to *whatever is there*, so that what was initially unclear and vague — *implicit*, becomes clear and more manageable — *explicit*.

Part of what helps the Focusing process move forward is the presence of a listener. There are many distinctive features to listening in a Focusing oriented way, one of which is called "Experiential Listening". This form of listening embraces more than simply reflecting back what the speaker has said. Listening to a Focuser *experientially* entails 'taking in' (to one's own body) what the speaker/Focuser has said, and getting an empathic 'feel' for it in order to reflect back not only the speaker's words, but also the speaker's *felt meaning*.

This combining of the gentleness of the Focusing process with the power of presence often results in a profound "shift". These "shifts" that come through Focusing can be poten-

tially transformative — not so much because the issue actually changes, but rather because *our relationship to the issue changes*. And this is what interests me: *How* can Focusing and the attitude of Focusing a) make a contribution in alleviating some of the tensions facing our world today, and b) how dialoguing with a “Focusing Attitude” can support and enable the many disparate groups in our society — groups with vastly different experiences — to relate to each other in new and meaningful ways that will produce positive change in what is currently a very dysfunctional world.

Focusing has a crucial role to play as a viable, effective model for bridging differences and building connections. One of the great strengths of the Focusing process is the ease with which it can be readily, flexibly, and creatively integrated with and in any number of situations and/or practices. The general tenets of the process, which include being kind, respectful and non-judgmental to one’s self and others; listening with felt-attention and empathy to others, as well as to one’s self; maintaining an attitude that allows room and space — *both/and* — for diversity at all levels, helps to create a climate that is conducive to interacting with others in ways that are both authentic (to one’s self) and tolerant (of others). It seems that the people who are already actively living by and using the underlying values and principles of Focusing — either implicitly, explicitly or both — have made, and are continuing to make, some meaningful inroads into the world of conscious transformation.

THE WORLD OF FOCUSING...

And so, I have a story to tell — a story that demonstrates in more practical and concrete terms how the Focusing process, with its unique way of listening and embracing ‘attitude’ of safety, supported a group of people in coming to terms with some difficult and painful issues. This story is twelve years old, yet it is as alive and clear in my felt-memory right now, as it was when it first happened.

This story is profound, touching, scary at times, and uplifting in a way that is a tribute and living testament to how Focusing *can* bring “new patterns of relating in a landscape of fear”. Further, how, if groups: political groups, cultural groups, school groups, business groups — any group! — used this process regularly, global transformation would indeed be *moving forward in a right way...*

(For those of you who were there, this story will be familiar, as it is one of the many that was openly shared at the time it occurred, and many times after, both verbally and in print. I hope these reminiscences touch your heart. For those reading it for the first time, well...I hope these reminiscences touch your heart, as well.)

It was the Spring of 1994, and the first Focusing International Conference that was held abroad — in Germany to be exact. Our hosts had been to every International in Chicago -five of them. Hence, when they suggested that the Europeans be given a respite from the expense and time of having to travel to the U.S. for this event, no one could quarrel with that logic - and so, it came to pass, that the conference would be held in Europe.

It turned out that many people had ‘feelings’ about going to Germany. It also turned out that until we got there, people guarded those feelings with hushed caution. At the time I

thought I was alone in what I was experiencing. I now know (after the fact) that what weighed heavy in my heart beforehand was shared by many, regardless of their country of origin or religious proclivities...and so I would like to share a bit of my pre-conference process:

I am a Jew, and at that particular juncture in my life (it has all totally transformed now) just the word “Germany” brought definite uncomfortable felt-senses into my body. I felt guilty about feeling this way, especially since I not only had many German friends (our hosts among them), but also a German brother-in-law whom I dearly love, and further, the most important teachers in my early spiritual life were German, as well. So it was not about *being* German — it was about *going* to Germany.

I carried the angst about this all by myself. I was terrified to mention my feelings to anyone for fear of sounding...I cannot even find the words here...let’s just say for fear of being judged very badly. I was, as the saying goes, “a nervous wreck” from the moment I signed up for the conference until I arrived. So this was my state of mind as I headed toward Germany.

In the opening session we were warmly greeted, and it felt comforting to be amongst colleagues and friends whom I had known for years. We introduced ourselves in the large opening circle, saying our names and the countries from which we came. Then, seemingly out-of-the blue, our hosts asked us to “check inside” and quietly ask ourselves if we had any “feelings about being in Germany”. I nearly fell off my chair. My stomach was turning over in a way that bordered on nausea. I felt that I had to keep silent, lest I reveal my innermost secret: I wanted to be at the International. I did not want to be in Germany. Yes, I had A LOT of feelings about being there.

The room went silent for what seemed like an interminable period of time. I was sure I was going to faint...then...one lone hand went up, and one lone person had the courage to say, “Yes, I have a lot of feelings about being in Germany.” She shared, as a Jewish woman, her concerns, fears, and discomfort about being there. When she finished, there was a very long pause — dead silence — then another hand slowly went up. This time it was a non-Jew, a European whose country had been badly affected by the Nazi regime. More silence, then another hand, then another. What started as inner terror began to morph quite miraculously into astonishment, then into total awe, as the circle of sharing went on and on, creating a sense of connectedness, as deeply held fears, concerns, regrets, remorse began to reveal themselves. Everything I had been feeling was being expressed now...so very openly in a Focusing way...with people listening from the depth of their souls...and this was just the opening session...I thought to myself...

Our hosts had been, I silently reflected, so unbelievably perceptive. I could hardly fathom what they were inviting, where this would go, what would be the outcome. I was moved to the core by their courage to keep inviting *more*... And so, the next day, we were encouraged to take a longer-than-usual period of time for Focusing triads in order to come to terms with whatever...*all about being in Germany*...brought up for us.

I have no recollection whatsoever of how I wound up in my particular triad. I was with a male colleague that I knew from Chicago and a German woman I had never met. As we often do in triads, we took some quiet time to see who felt moved to begin first. The German

woman wished to start, and indicated that she would like me to be her listener. This was fine. I was relaxed, and adjusted my energies into a clear listening space, not ever imagining what was about to come next...

She looked at me before closing her eyes and simply stated, “My father was a Nazi.” (All I remember of that initial frozen moment was thanking G-d that she closed her eyes *before* seeing my jaw drop.) She did not know my cultural/religious heritage, and was now moving deeply into her own inner process. Slowly, she began talking about her past...she talked about her father, a member of the Gestapo, pulling the switches on the gas chambers. She described the pride that her mother took in what her husband was doing, working for the total extermination of the Jews. She talked with the most profound pain I had ever heard — ever — about *knowing inside* that this was wrong, and not being free to express her most deeply held feelings in her home. She talked about a point in time when her father had a change of heart about the rightness of what he was doing, but not able in his official position to have “a change of heart” — so he committed suicide, instead. She talked about the pain of running away from home permanently in her mid-late teens, because she could not bear her mother’s continued commitment to the Nazi philosophy and hero-worship of her dead husband. She talked about how it felt to never make contact with her mother again, after she left. The story seemed endless...each memory brought yet another memory...the complexity of her pain was unbearable for her...

And for me...well, this was before the days of *Interactive Focusing*, so there was no format, no structure in place at that time to express *how this was for me*. It was *her process* — my job was to listen. Part of me felt pulled by a sense of responsibility and doing what I had agreed to do: to be the “listener” or “Focusing partner”. That meant being reliable, present, and fully *there*. My “job” was to reflect accurately and empathically. *And/also*...something else was going on in another part of me. I was simultaneously listening to the sound of my own voice echoing the words I was reflecting back...as if they were coming from someone else’s body: “So there is a terrible, painful feeling in you, right now...a sense of such horror and deep agony that you carry... knowing at such a young age that your father’s job was to exterminate...(gulp)...and feeling so sickened knowing that your own mother was so proud of him (gag)...and those feelings have weighed so heavily on your heart...for such a very long time...” *Was I really saying this?* I was feeling as if I might go completely mad, as I noticed this other part of me “freaking out” (the term I used to myself then) — now I would call it “vicarious traumatization”.

How could I listen to this? Could I bear it? Could I keep on keeping on like this? I had to make a choice. I made a choice. I remained the listener. I kept everything that was “my stuff” separate, and listened with every fiber of my being — I had to — I felt that if I lost concentration for even a second, I might break down on the spot. It was not until the end of the process, when she opened her red and weeping eyes, that I realized that the three of us, in total connection, were crying from a place of such primal pain that there are still no words to describe it, all these years later.

This woman had been severely traumatized. Through the process of Focusing, and being listened to with caring and safe attention, she was able to, for the first time in her

whole life, tell her story in its entirety. Her embarrassment went beyond what she could verbally articulate. She was embarrassed by the story. She was embarrassed to be who she was. She was saddled with guilt and remorse about where she had come from — her early roots. She was horrified at what her father had done. Her pain was as palpable to her as my pounding heart was to me. My empathy level far exceeded anything I had ever known. It was Focusing that allowed me to listen to the ‘unlistenable’. It was through knowing and living Focusing that I was able to keep a safe space for my self and my pain, freeing her to process in a way that touched into the deepest core of what she had been carrying for a lifetime. I felt so very grateful that during the conference we were able to share further Focusing time to process (together and then in a larger group) what we had each experienced in that powerful triad.

What I did not know (coming out of our triad) was that the other small groups also had their share of heart-rending stories — so many in fact, that it was collectively decided that there would be another open (optional) Focusing process in the evening for anyone who wanted to come.

There were, as I recall, over twenty people there. We stood (I have no idea why) for much of the process — a very long time. We stood in a circle so we could see each other, and the stories poured out — so many stories, with more crying, more pain — and all of it processed in a *Focusing* way, with the deepest level of caring, safety, listening, and *felt-knowing*...a profound understanding that stretched all boundaries beyond anything I had ever experienced before.

The signal moment — and major turning point in my life forever — was when our German colleagues in this group (all born after the war) began to share what it was like to *be* German; what it was like to carry the burden and guilt of being German for a whole previous generation; what it felt like to be dismissed by total strangers for simply saying, “I’m German”. NEVER in my entire life had I considered the implications of this predicament from a non-Jewish perspective. I was totally astounded by the endless stories of rejection in a myriad of circumstances — all different, all the same: dismissal, embarrassment, pain — both personal and professional. These people were my friends — and I never knew. I had never thought about it. “*How had I missed this?*”, I asked myself. “*Because it never came up — that’s why.*” This was not something that any of us had ever talked about — ever. But we were talking about it in that circle. We were talking about it now. We were living it now. We were grieving it now...and now together, we were experiencing the transformational power of a *collective felt-shift*...

A WORLD WITH FOCUSING...

The larger picture is the miracle of healing, and how, under the safe and sheltering umbrella of Focusing, this *living process* transformed a group of scared, uncomfortable people into a cohesive, functioning whole. We had cried rain — a downpour — a tsunami of tears that ultimately washed away the barriers between “us and them” into a very definite

“we”. A profound group tension was transformed into a profound group bond. I think we sang *We Are The World* — certainly I was singing it in my head. Focusing made it possible.

It seems to me as if, inherent in Focusing, is the world of possibility, and within *possibility* is the hopefulness of change, making almost anything (in terms of human misunderstanding) more workable and more manageable. The ‘attitude’ of Focusing creates a sense of safety in which people can express their innermost feelings and thoughts openly and freely. In turn, being ‘listened to’ in a Focusing way allows us to contact the deepest places of self in a more authentic manner — building connections and a sense of relatedness with others, thus making dialogue on *any* issue possible ...one felt-shift at a time...

Thanks to the foresight of our hosts, we were able to talk about our concerns and our process openly. We continued talking and writing about it after the conference. Twelve years later, we are still talking about it, and the process is as relevant now as it was then — perhaps even more so today.

And so, I cannot help wondering...

What would it be like if all the disparate cultural/religious/political groups knew Focusing...? How, knowing Focusing, would these diverse groups of people be with each other differently...than how they are being with each other now? How would empathic felt-sense listening and the attitude of Focusing make a difference to the concerns and fears that impact upon our society — our world?

And finally, how will *we* carry our work forward...? How shall we continue to plant the seeds of what *is* possible...to help move us closer to the collective understanding that truly, *we are the world*...