

THE IMPLICIT TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF THE BACKGROUND FEELING IN FOCUSING

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My contribution to Focusing's evolution concerns the fuller development of the Background Feeling, a term first introduced in 1978 by Eugene Gendlin, in the first step, Clearing a Space, of his six movement model of Focusing.

I have been developing this topic for several years, presenting it to the international Focusing community for the first time in 2001, and have continued to offer this work every year up to the last 20th International Focusing Conference. This article outlines the current version of this model with some new additions, in particular, the idea of balancing the work of inner exploration with inner resourcing.

FROM CLEARING A SPACE TO BACKGROUND FEELING

Gendlin, in his *Focusing* book (1981), emphasized the value of the first of Focusing's six steps: Clearing a Space:

The first movement of focusing is enormously important because if it can happen, the rest will probably happen too. In this first movement you clear a space for yourself to live in while the rest of the focusing process is going on. The first movement is the one in which you give yourself what might be called a "positive set". You put yourself into a state of mind and body in which the other focusing movements can take place freely... like the overt actions of artists when they start to work each morning... There are many ways to approach the first movement, many different inner acts that can produce the needed positive set — or body-mind receptivity. An approach that works well for one person might produce nothing for another. Keep the one or ones that have meaning for you personally that make something good happen inside *you* (Gendlin, 1981, p. 71).

For some people, these comments still fit even if, today, there are different ways of teaching Clearing a Space (for example, Joan Klagsbrun's "Clearing a Space as a Spiritual Practice").

Later, in a short article in 1999, Gendlin highlighted the relevance of this first Focusing movement, which allows for a "much greater stress reduction" than usual methods (Gendlin, 1999, p.178). As a few certified Focusing friends have said to me, "I practice Clearing a Space because I need it." Persons who are easily overwhelmed by their feelings or who are often under pressure will find some benefits practicing Clearing a Space. In my case, discovering Focusing in Chicago in 1985, I had such a beneficial memorable experience in clearing

my space for the first time that it gave me enough confidence to trust the whole Focusing process. Upon my return, I then decided to choose Gendlin's Experiential Psychotherapy as the subject of my Master's thesis at the University of Montreal (Fréminville, 1988).

HOW GENDLIN COMES TO THE BACKGROUND FEELING

When I give a presentation on the Background Feeling, I like to share Gendlin's nuances in reference to Clearing a Space, paying attention to the change that occurs in the body and the awareness of *not identifying with the problem*.

When a problem does allow itself to be placed in a space made for it, there is a change in the body, something like a felt shift. Of course the problem is not resolved. But I believe it is very helpful first to have put a problem down, let the body live without it, then work on it... People who were able to put all or several such now-coming problems down, often remark: "Oh, I'm not the problem, I can sense myself as something different than it" (Gendlin, 1989).

Gendlin mentions another kind of experience which may occur for Focusers while Clearing a Space: "There is also a vast breadth, a big space, that comes here, which has spiritual overtones." But, if nothing like that happens, he invites us to pay attention to the *Background Feeling*: "There is often also a background feeling, some way you always feel, always gray, always a little sad, always rushing or running scared, always trying hard, always lonely, etc. Whatever your 'always-feeling' is, take that out too." And he adds: "Often it is taking this one out, and putting it down first that opens the big space" (Gendlin, 1981, p. 79).

MORE DEFINITION

This opening of the 'big space' triggered my curiosity, but I discovered that for some people it was not so easy to feel the Background Feeling or to identify it sufficiently in order to 'put it down'. To make this process easier, I began talking about the Background Feeling as *the predominant feeling you have towards life*, a phrase Elfie Hinterkopf used in her book, *Integrating Spirituality in Counseling* (1998). I explain that such predominant feelings may include a felt sense of fear or anger or heaviness or many other feelings, and that being able to set aside and then later Focus on a specific Background Feeling can transform one's life.

EXPLORING THE BACKGROUND FEELING

The following section outlines the process I use in my workshops on Background Feelings. The instructions are more like invitations or exploration guidelines presented here with some comments and examples.

The first invitation to Clear a Space is an adaptation of the short form used by Joan Klagsbrun (1999, p.163) and Mary McGuire (1999, p.181). Participants are invited to relax

and to breathe, sitting in a comfortable position, inwardly connected and grounded (feeling the feet on the floor), bringing the attention inside:

- Recall a peaceful time or a pleasant place and feel it, sensing all the good felt senses
- Notice what's between you and that feeling; acknowledge what is there without judging
- Put aside each concern that you are carrying with its global feeling, letting each be placed at a right distance and feel the difference in your body after doing that
- See if there is a 'background feeling', something you carry all the time that you may not even notice; see if you can find a word, an image for it and put it down too, if you can
- Take the time to feel if you have a clearer inner space
- Stay with this different life energy in the vast space. Enjoy this mini-vacation for a minute or so

Then, I introduce the participants to the origins of the Background Feeling, referring to the theoretical contributions made by Gendlin and Hinterkopf. I also underline that we may have some problems, difficulties, or issues that we *can* identify in order to then become *less identified* with them; we then allow ourselves to experience how we are *more* than 'that', and take the time to look at the issues from *a distance*. I offer the following invitations using the words 'Background Feeling' or 'Wallpaper', whichever term feels more accurate.

During the group process, with their eyes closed, I ask them to give me a sign with their finger if they have found one. In this way, I can keep track of what they are experiencing, adapting my invitations to what I observe is happening in the group. I then often invite the participants to write what they noticed that is important to them, especially concerning their Background Feeling.

The following is a series of proposed invitations that may be used to facilitate the exploration of the Background Feeling.

1. *After clearing your space from whatever you are carrying in your body, take the time to sense if there is something today like a Background Feeling. See if you can find a word, an image for it.*

Can you identify it? Notice what comes; notice what kind of 'always' or 'often' is there for you today: Always or often (or, a little bit) gray, heavy, sad, angry, scared, worrying, watching, lonely, small, etc. If it is not there today, you might have noticed it another time.

2. *Can you notice and feel the attitude that comes when you are present to your Background Feeling: rejection, impatience, frustration, anger, negation or tolerance, acceptance, compassion, love? Can you be friendly with it? (If your Background Feeling is recurrent, something has not been listened to and needs your presence.)*

Then there is an invitation to stay with it:

— *See if you are able to stay with it a little.*

Or, an invitation to create some distance:

— *Or, see if you wish to find some distance from it.*

There is another simple way of inviting people to find some distance:

— *If you wish to find some distance from it, see what comes if you ask yourself: How would my life be without this Background Feeling? How would my life be if it was not there? Feel what comes.*

Then I offer a special invitation which, over the years, has brought participants very interesting experiences. I invite them to go further.

3. *Feel what comes if you ask yourself: How would it be beyond this Background Feeling? (... that is so often there...)*

Participants frequently experience big shifts with this invitation. One woman saw her life in a whole new way after this experience. She met her ‘true nature’ for the first time. Beyond the apparent obstacle of her recurrent Background Feeling was the implicit light of her true self. These powerful insights are the reason I always offer this ‘*beyond*’ invitation: to allow the opening of a new door, to reach beyond, and get in touch with some implicit jewel inside us.

— *See what kind of feeling comes if you ask yourself: Who am I beyond that feeling that is always there?*

This invitation might allow someone to see beyond the apparent identity and can ‘shake up’ this ‘who’ or self with whom he or she is identified. As a participant said, “I saw myself and got a felt sense of strength and confidence inside me, but I am not used to feeling like this. What will happen if my relatives see me this way? I am afraid to lose their love.” It often happens that the emergence of the new, wonderful, fresh forward energy will need to be listened to in order to find ways to keep it from falling back into the old way of being. Gendlin, in teaching Focusing, often cautioned Focusers to receive what came and to protect it from inner critics.

4. At this point, I invite people to spend time Focusing on the Background Feeling. Sometimes it takes courage to pay attention to an uncomfortable Background Feeling. However, with Focusing we know that something ‘more’, not yet accessible, may emerge. It then becomes an interesting journey to go through the process of feeling, making space, and listening to what that *feeling in the background* has to say.

The following are a few possible invitations which may be used with a partner or alone, as needed, *according to one’s personal rhythm of exploration*: exploring, pausing, resourcing, and coming back later in keeping with the body’s ability to deal with it.

— *If it feels right to stay with this Background Feeling: Take your time to be with it, to feel it, to describe it. Feel what comes... See if it is possible to listen to what this Background Feeling that is so often there, has to say to you. See if you need something in order to be able to stay with it a little bit more...*

— *Feel what comes if you ask yourself: How would this background felt sense like me to be with it? How would this Background Feeling like me to take care of it? What is it that I have never done for it?*

If you want to go further, you can explore a possible link with something repressed:

— *See if you can feel what might have been repressed in you.*

— *Feel what comes when you ask yourself: What should have happened instead of that (the repressed something)?*

In working with the Background Feeling over the years, I discovered that its recurrence is often related to something repressed, something trying to express itself in an uncomfortable way. Gendlin proposed a brilliant question to address these reoccurrences: “When something comes from the past, or is related to childhood, we can offer this question to the felt sense: What should have happened?” He also emphasized, without any doubt: “We all have in us this blueprint of what should have happened” (Gendlin, 1991).

When he said that, a door opened for me. What should have happened in my life emerged clearly to me as if the scenario of the past was rewriting itself in a healthy healing process. All of a sudden, a felt sense of a new, fresh strength emerged bringing with it a clear knowledge of the right way of being, and transforming old, repressed family situations into life-giving images. For example, an authoritarian, threatening father became a welcoming, safe ally. This experience is very interesting because as a therapist I am often confronted with the recurrence of old wounds, listening to them with empathy, giving inner compassion, but somewhere staying with ‘unfinished business’, as we often say in psychotherapy. The “what should have happened” offered by Gendlin, allowed me to walk on a path of completion accessing an intact knowledge which was always dwelling within.

5. Another interesting exploration comes from the field of ‘vicarious traumatization’ (also called ‘secondary trauma’). I found a most powerful resource in Shirley Turcotte’s precious contribution which comes from her vast experience of working with trauma (Turcotte and Poonwassie, 2004). Sometimes when facing a strong recurrent Background Feeling, whose reoccurrence may not only be puzzling but even shaming, it may be very appropriate to ask:

— *Is there something in this Background Feeling that does not belong to me? Something that I might have absorbed from my environment (from family, from my personal, historical, geographical, or trans-generational environment)? Acknowledge whatever emerges.*

Turcotte said that 50% of her clients were dealing with vicarious traumatization! This means that they were absorbing many things from their environment: parents, relatives, etc. Hearing those words, I felt something like high voltage electricity moving up my spine, as if my body immediately knew the truth of it! My mind could not explain it. Why, as a French woman without major known trauma, would I experience such an intense reaction? It took a few Focusing explorations for me to discover what I had absorbed from familial, historical and geographical environments. For example, I was brought back to fully sense in my body my mother’s very painful loss of her first newborn infant; I felt trapped in my father’s insistent wish that I behave like my ancestor who took care of Marie-Antoinette’s children

during the French Revolution; and, living in a heavily charged historical area in France, I physically carried some memories of the atrocities that happened in the period following the Revolution, known as ‘The Terror’ (1793-94). It then becomes very appropriate to go through a mourning process, grieving gently what was absorbed unconsciously and kept inside us for so long! (There is no need to research one’s entire family history in order to explore a Background Feeling. Our body wisdom will call our attention to what it needs to know and process.)

You might also ask the body another interesting question:

— *Does my body know that the traumatic situation is over?* This may bring such relief!

Checking with the body to make sure that it knows that *it is over* can make a huge impact on the person who has been carrying the trauma for so long. It is one thing to know rationally that the traumatic situation belongs to the past, and another situation entirely, to let the body feel and acknowledge this reality. Taking the time to do so can alleviate the burden of this past feeling, unblocking and allowing the emergence of a fresh life-forward energy that has been waiting to be brought up to the present time.

6. The Background Feeling exploration may be completed with a seemingly elementary question, so obvious that we might forget to ask it. While holding the background image or felt sense, we may ask:

— *Did something like that concretely happen in my life?* For example: “I again feel something like a fear of being... (squashed or crushed)... Did something like that happen to me?”

When I asked my body the preceding question, a memory came back to me: a large cupboard fell on my back a long time ago! The body often keeps inside the feelings of some forgotten traumatic event that now needs to be acknowledged and listened to with a very gentle caring presence.

7. Last but not least, there is great value in spending time with a good or comfortable Background Feeling. Clearing a Space and exploring an uncomfortable Background Feeling might give us access to an unexpected and powerful positive feeling in the background: the source of love in us, a sense of belonging to a bigger world, feeling confident, strong, at home, creative, faithful, unified or connected, a sense of bliss...

— So whatever your comfortable Background Feeling is, take the time to feel it, to welcome it, to sense its qualities, and to thank it for coming. You may want to spend more time with it, resourcing yourself with its energy. Finally you may be interested in feeling how you might give it more space in your life.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the Background Feeling, beyond old conditionings, hidden identities, wounds and traumas, may gradually transform what was first felt as a burden or a limit into an expansion of being. This work may become a special door giving us access to what

was implicitly there: our true self, our true nature or true identity. With very gentle attitudes and much patience, we may find ourselves connecting or reconnecting with our essence.

Many of us do not even know that the body carries unknown Background Feelings that can be identified, placed at some distance and listened to. For some people, there is a tendency to ‘escape’ from *feeling* the Background Feeling, often through addictive behaviors (food, TV, alcohol, cigarettes, telephone, work, etc.) that act as a cover-up. However, knowing that there may be a hidden ‘gift’ within an uncomfortable, recurrent Background Feeling, we may be encouraged to explore it, gently and patiently healing the repressed source of these addictions, finding peace inside.

THE BACKGROUND FEELING WORK SPREADS AROUND THE WORLD

Over the years, Focusing colleagues have been inspired by this work and have written about it in several languages. Kumie Osako from Japan, after the 15th International Focusing Conference in Germany (2003), shared her discoveries in working with the Background Feeling at a Focusing Network Meeting in Tokyo, and later wrote about it for “The Focusing Network News”. Isabel Gascon from Spain has been the first to write a complete chapter on the Background Feeling, published in *Manual practico del focusing de Gendlin* (Alemany, 2007), where she invites readers to work on it with sensitivity and delicacy.

BALANCING THIS DEEP WORK WITH INNER RESOURCES ALONG THE PROCESS

Over the years, it is becoming clearer that exploring the Background Feeling is ‘deep work’. Inspired by Gendlin and my colleagues, I realize that *exploring our inner felt world may be more beneficial when balanced with some inner resources*. In my most recent Background Feeling workshops, I now choose a Clearing a Space form which includes the evocation of a ‘pleasant time or place’ as a resourcing moment. This invitation is offered at the very beginning of the Clearing a Space exercise.

As a second resource, I use the Rumi poem, “The Guest House”, as suggested by Nina Joy Lawrence based on her teaching experience in Afghanistan. It is a simple exercise that invites Focusers to find a ‘safe place inside’.

I am now developing another component in my workshops, a third resource which invites participants to call on the people who have helped them through difficult life situations, or to notice any life support manifestations, such as unexpected events or ‘gifts’ which might have arrived so appropriately on their life paths. This last addition, based on Robert Lee’s “Get Help” exercise from his “Changing the Unchangeable” workshops, provides participants with positive resources to balance the depth of their Background Feeling exploration.

Finally I want to share a process model-like experience: *writing about the Background Feeling becomes itself an instance of working with the Background Feeling*. While I needed to give company to all the feelings which arose in writing this article, my body

invited me to be coherent and congruent to what I was writing, compelling me to use my own Focusing tools along the way. Unexpectedly, I was able to experience the gift of a comfortable Background Feeling that held within it a life-forward moving energy.

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