

CLEARING A SPACE ON THE WORKBENCH How Focusing Helps Me Build

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“Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.”
(Martin Heidegger, 1971, p. 160)

I was introduced to Focusing in the late 1970’s as a graduate assistant in a philosophy class on Tibetan Buddhism. It was taught by the phenomenologist and author, David Michael Levin, who felt that Gendlin’s book *Focusing* (1978), described something enough like Tibetan Buddhism to be a useful read for westerners unfamiliar with Asian thought. Assisting that class was a revelation, but I could not have known that 30 years later, the Focusing work would still touch my personal life or so shape my eventual career as a craftsman and designer.

I really had no business in a graduate program of philosophy. My career in philosophy was doomed by an inability to read Heidegger, Gendlin, or any other thinker that I really took to, without jumping up after an hour full of the book’s implications for life. Heidegger (it was obvious to me, if not to my teachers) had more to do with building tables, than reading another chapter of Heidegger. This is the inherent danger of the best books, and I include *Focusing* in that short list. Such books put me in the mood to get up and try something. The upside of this unfortunate behavior is my membership in the presumably small guild of craftsmen who have read Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* cover to cover, twice. The *Critique* was the first of several books to help me dispense with a certain kind of futile argumentation and get on with a different search — a search I believed could get underway on a well-worn workbench. *Focusing* was among the books that gave me a positive way of carrying on this search.

From the first read of *Focusing*, I was struck by the simplicity, directness, and pivotal quality of the process. It is true that Gendlin channels work that had gone on before and was going on concurrently, but it is equally true that he explored the territory anew and drew a newly intelligible, useful, and integrated map. I say this not to detract from the originality of this work, but to strengthen our sense of it as a weaving of many strands.

Throughout the 1980’s my sense of how and to what Focusing applied was ‘by the book’. I used it therapeutically to navigate my way through problematic life circumstances and my personal reactions to those many events. There was plenty of material to work with: a complicated religious upbringing, a divorce, a few years of commune life, the effective monasticism of a struggling furniture maker, and more. My life is an ongoing process, but in little pivotal ways Focusing has kept me coming back to the nuances of reality and generally sorting out the differences between emotional reactions, intellectual analysis, and real insight.

I didn't transition from philosophy to making things. I had always tried to improve on the world around me. At four, I took my Dad's claw hammer to the institutional parking sign where he worked; at six, I carved my name on the front porch of our rental; at eight, I had the other neighborhood boys making pretend smoking pipes out of expropriated road tar and something in the hot Texas alley we figured was bamboo. Occasionally, the improvements were more obvious — such as the endless kites and two or three excellent slingshots.

Philosophy was the digression; but it was an important one: first, as a safe environment in which to process that complicated religious upbringing — and secondly, as an awakening to the spiritual/cultural significance of serious craft. This awakening to the more subtle elements of building was a surprise development taking place in graduate school and reminding me that I should get back to my life as a builder. I hope to make the point that Focusing was a part of this awakening by showing that Focusing has elements of craft, and craft has elements of Focusing.

I was somewhat familiar with art therapy, but my connection between art and Focusing was different. My situation in the shop was not therapy. Sometimes it was why I needed therapy. The shop was a kind of cosmos of trouble and joy in which I moved around much of the day trying to coax pieces of wood or metal into useful orbits around each other without pinching my fingers more than absolutely necessary. An artist navigates an intricate, tricky territory. This is true in both the practical sense of handling difficult materials and tools, but it is even more true in the metaphorical sense of developing an honest, unmediated sense of design and aesthetic meaning.

It is easy to say that art requires a rapprochement between technical expertise and intuition. That is really not an observation as much as an after-the-fact analysis — a tautology, a truism. Finding that sweet spot where the engineer and the poet finally sit down to talk and work together takes time and is worked out in space with attention to what is happening both inside and out. Far from healing my life, shop work was its own little cosmos of difficult and provocative material. I do not want to make too much of this difference between working as a full-time, tradesman/artist and using art in other contexts. Obviously, there is overlap and useful metaphor between different worlds. A woodworker might find it useful to describe the 'poetry of a dovetail' or a writer 'the craft of words', but sometimes it is useful to play out the differences which are after all, what keep metaphor so interesting.

By the early 1990's, I had become aware that Focusing had gained a place in the shop alongside the tools and was about as pervasive as the sawdust and metal filings. Focusing had evolved into a necessary component of design and craftwork. In fact, Focusing took on unique properties when used in the very physical context of making things. The primary clue for me was a recurring, muddled sense that craftsmanship and Focusing shared both a deep logical structure and a special attitude toward their respective subjects. In this common space inside myself that they seemed to occupy, each played out in its own way — one as emotional healing, the other as ... well, these strange hybrid objects we call furniture and sculpture. I call them hybrid to capture a sometimes overlooked quality of made objects — that they are not just material/functional structures, but that they are full of meaning and embedded intent of one sort or another. Design is not so much style, as it is a way of thinking

and feeling in space. Tools are not inanimate objects, but are extensions of my body. Tools can cause effects, but they are equally windows through which to see.

Love, spirituality, and design have to be thoughtful. Clarifying the *kind* of thoughtfulness necessary proves the more difficult question. Most philosophy, theology, design theory and everyday opinion disappointed me. I noticed that the problem was not so much situated in the propositional content of a system, as in the thinking and feeling process that guided the speaker, the author, the school of thought or religious group. This underlying process was often perfunctory, dismissive, argumentative, self-referential, and one-sided. Along side my questions about thinking and feeling was a developing sense of craftsmanship. Designing and making are both questioning processes in time. The judgments of a craftsman are nimble and sometimes in motion. Craft favors receptivity, breadth, patient skill, and practical outcomes. Gendlin's process also had these telltale signs of craft that I was coming to see as essential to any kind of thoughtfulness. Focusing straddled Eastern and Western ideas; Focusing did not take sides between thinking and feeling, or between speech and experience. Focusing, too, was nimble, receptive, could manage complexities and looked for transformations. Rather than argue for one thing over another, Gendlin tends to align 'opposites' into disciplined working relationships with each other that glow with the craft of an honest search.

Let me illustrate this issue in another way. I was born into a family with two threads of work. The stronger thread (more of a cord) was teaching — I have three or four generations of schoolteachers and preachers on my father's side. The life of words in this conservative religious subculture held sway over my life and was alternately illuminating and darkening. To be fair, the culture was not precisely fundamentalist, but on some kind of scale it registered a seven or an eight, and it was a total milieu. My parents were and are very dedicated and loving parents who were much more humble and less severe than the forces that surrounded us. I have come to understand that the fundamentalist tendency is a universal, very human response to modern complexity and its relentless, often blundering reassignment of symbols and values. It eventually became clear to me that modernism, too, had its own variety of "fundamentalisms" that could pose as forms of science, art, personality theory or social reform. We all have an impulse to submerge troubling complexity and rich nuance by overriding them with hastily applied ideas, trendy phrases, and frustrated emotions.

During my childhood and young adulthood the rigor of the pervading "idea" was so great and thoroughly applied that a separation from some kinds of experience and questioning had to be carefully maintained. Experience is nuanced and tentative, and the community around me could not tolerate the corrosive effect this seemed to have on the system. To my constant surprise, questions could cause shaming or awkwardness. Unfamiliar phrasing, ideas, or desires might be dismissed as naïve, disrespectful, frightening, or sometimes treacherous. Much of the normal experience of a child, teenager, and young adult could not be discussed safely. After college I became very angry about this; but with time, I have realized that this narrowing is human and almost universal.

Why don't I dismiss this separation from experience out of hand? How can I say that it was sometimes illuminating? This is a difficult point to make — a point that is going somewhere, and so let me set it up. I'm not trying to do metaphysics and I'm not trying to make

a clear and precise epistemological abstraction. I am trying to gather a few words that can point to something we can see for ourselves, and frame in our own words.

Experience comes at us from the outside and from the inside. Experience feeds us, but *it also feeds on us*. In Eastern, Western, and Middle-Eastern wisdom traditions the things that feed on us, especially from the inside, are sometimes portrayed as animals — hungry lions, poisonous serpents, etc. Today we might speak of the tyranny of events or our habitual reactions. Nature gives us life, but eventually nature absorbs us. If nature has leeway, it literally eats us alive. This is true of both physical nature and our emotional ‘natures’. And so at times, a separation from experience can be life saving. And sometimes as a child a religious story, or an article of faith, or even a moral prohibition could help put some compassionate distance between me and the absorbing and dissolving forces of life. This creative separation from experience is so different from the dismissive separation from experience that is sometimes thought to be required by the system. When there is a *right* relationship with experience, the symbolic intellectual life can have a role in saving us from the emotional inertia and downward gravitational pull of daily life. So there is a tiny beautiful baby that can be saved out of what sometimes seems like an ocean of bathwater. The mind or the soul (let’s figure those out some other day!) allows for that illusive but real event of separation. Clearly this separation can get out of hand; it can be misunderstood and misapplied, but the point I want to make is that we cannot dispense with some tincture of a dividing, separating force. I will try to make a case that Focusing begins with the careful application of such a force.

In any kind of workshop you will see several kinds of tools — tools for cutting and tools for assembling. There are as many tools for separating and cutting as there are for binding together, maybe more: consider the variety of saws, the chisels and gouges of every size and shape, the half-dozen hand planes, a spokeshave, the cabinet scraper, shears, grinders, and plasma cutter. The craft of a careful, well-timed division is a thing of beauty — sometimes a terrifying beauty to be entertained after much consideration and a good night’s sleep. The cut is necessary, but it all turns on the sensitivity of the timing, the relative precision, the restraint, the respect for the material, and the watchful eye on the unfolding process. A careful cut can move things forward. A thoughtless cut will set things back. Focusing also requires such moments — and it is partly because of this that I think of Focusing as craft-like. Consider that ‘Clearing a Space’ is the critical act of separating from overwhelming emotions and defeating opinions. Even before Clearing a Space there is that wish for separation when something inside says, ‘No, I don’t want to freak out again’ — or ‘No, I can’t keep shoving this down’. These are breaks with the usual current and gravity of things. Gendlin understands that a separation from inner reactions is necessary, but that it must not be an absolute or sloppy separation. As in craft, it must be just so. Getting the useful distance from the emotional reaction is a critical part of the craft of Focusing. Too little separation and emotional (and mental) static continues to overwhelm the study. Too much separation, and the event is lost in the shadows — too far away to study.

When I feel back into my childhood, I see that this call for separation from the flow of experience had become too great, too generalized, and though I now hear faint echoes of a craft, there was no longer sufficient contact between the idea and the intricate complexity

for my emotional and intellectual process to carry on. The medieval alchemists (we should give them another look) spoke of ‘solvent’ and ‘binder’ forces that had to be applied carefully (in the right order, in the right strength) to the base metal in order to render it into gold. Transformation requires a knowledgeable, sensitive process of separation and joining. The ‘solvent’ of Clearing a Space and establishing a useful distance from my suffering is critically important, no matter how implicit the step may seem as we become more adept at Focusing.

On another day I would like to explore this question of separation from ordinary experience further. As an adult I have had several helpful encounters with other faiths and esoteric methods (both Eastern and Western). I have learned so much from these contacts, but in each case I felt that the system ceased to be transformational and flirted with manipulation when there was confusion in the ranks about this question of separation and joining. This craft of separation from reaction (and attraction) and joining to the body’s greater intricacy must play out just right. Gendlin seems consistent and strong on this question, but as we take Focusing in different directions, we must remember that the temptation to take short cuts and avoid the ‘craft’ is always there.

The other strand of work in my family is engineering, design and art. Although this thread seemed less important in my family value system, it was nevertheless operational and professionally pursued. These efforts were not considered intellectually, morally or spiritually valuable, but they were enjoyed as living skills and not discouraged in any way. Even as a child, I felt something ‘thick’ and ‘true’ about these things. In the context of these pursuits, complexity, nuance, and experience were treated by all as essential. Everyone understood the necessity for listening, practical understanding, and carefully applied skills. This experiential strand supported my sense of the reality and thickness of the ‘implicit intricacy.’

Gendlin’s book *A Process Model* (1997) illuminated for me more systematically the meaning of this implicit knowledge and gave me a practical understanding and strategy for understanding that the world was already a world of meaning — words and sensations were distinct, but truly woven together and interdependent. He understood that there were stops, places in life that didn’t work — that needed unraveling, that needed change. Transformation took place within this world of starts and stops, not in spite of it. Focusing and Gendlin’s Process Model were among the perspectives that helped to establish an authentic and benevolent connection between body and thought, between matter and meaning, between thinking and feeling. It became clearer to me that manual work need not be a mere necessity of life, but it could be a way of seeing the world and working within its flow and its resistance. It could be a way of Being-in-the-World, not just a method for making and fixing things. It was within the context of that thick intricacy that separation found its value and role as a prelude to the clearing of obstructions in the flow. Gendlin, along with others such as Martin Heidegger and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, laid out brand new roles for a craftsman. I could now think about and speak of this connection between thing and spirit. It finally made philosophical sense to me that working with my hands also meant working with feeling and intelligence. Craft, I could now say, was a way of seeing the world.

The world of the builder has value and meaning beyond pleasure or practicality. It does not have to be assigned a meaning. Already in the first grade, I knew in my body that

when I mixed green and yellow crayon on paper, something came alive in me. I knew I was not *just* combining colors or imitating nature. I felt something elevated, renewed and even truthful in this act. And although I didn't understand it conceptually, I would continue to feel this relationship between nature, handiwork and meaning throughout my childhood and early adult life.

Throughout my childhood, experience had been dismissed as a primary source of doctrinal error. Intuitively I knew this formulation was off, but I could not figure out why or how. These objects I was dedicated to designing and making were hybrid objects in the sense that the 'felt sense' is a hybrid thing of the body and of meaning. The objects I tried to build seemed to have one foot in the material world and another in a spiritual world — this made cognitive and emotional sense to me. The 'felt sense' — a concrete bodily sensation that harbored human meaning — had an analogous structure, which I experienced as both physical and meaningful. Gendlin gave me a structure with which I could discover how the spiritual dimension of life was hampered by events or carried forward by events. There are many sources of error. The special part of experience we call the 'felt sense' was not one of them. The felt sense opened things up and illuminated belief and artwork alike.

Lunchtime is a break from the dirty, loud, intensive environment of a working shop. We wash our hands, take a seat, have a drink to wash down a little sawdust and let out the breath. At least once a week, we take turns raising a question or observation about our work. Someone brought a polished, black marble sphere about 5 inches in diameter and passed it around. It fit the hand nicely and the weight of it could be felt throughout the body. The question was then raised, "What is the meaning of a sphere?" This was certainly an odd question that seemed to make a category mistake. How could a shape mean something? And yet there was this undeniable satisfaction in holding this inedible, inoperative thing. The satisfaction clearly ran throughout the body, the mind, and the feelings. Slowly, tentatively we entertained the idea that various meanings were clustered about this thing. We felt silly at first, but one by one words and phrases were ventured: *unity, completion, simplicity, singularity, intelligence, responsive, infinite, fluid, impenetrable, mysterious, drawing inward, consciousness and primordial.*

Of course, something weakly protested that these were mere associations, but we felt the weakness, the complaining tone, and the needless departure from the moment. Focusing does not tell me that a sphere means 'primordial'. Focusing is not a system that favors conclusions. Rather, Focusing outlines the components of a skill, which allows me to discover things — in this case how spirit and matter relate (or don't relate) in a given moment. This has implications across the human spectrum and certainly related to my efforts in the shop just as well as in the original therapeutic arena. Focusing, as I had understood it in the beginning, was a way of facing and understanding inner anxiety and reaction. But in time the Focusing process was also available when I was navigating creative territory in the shop.

Focusing is a self-correcting, iterative model for understanding. Several important characteristics follow from this. Focusing is a procedure that requires us to walk through a series of distinct, even contradictory, steps. We separate from something. We join to something that we had forgotten. Progress is often small, but it accumulates over time. Simplicity

is coaxed out of complexity. Complexity emerges out of simplicity. Understanding slowly aligns itself with something more genuine. Feedback in the system reflexively guides future interest and questioning. My body is intelligent. The body of my work is also intelligent — not because it is good or right, but because a question put to it with enough honesty will have its answer.

Let us say that I would like to design a cremation urn. I am not interested in the style of the piece or whether it looks like a familiar version of an urn. I put aside these ideas, but still there may lurk the unconscious idea of what a cremation urn is supposed to be. I find a way to separate even a little bit from this tug. I do not want to dismiss the past, but I do not want to let it choke me either. Something has got me wishing for more. I am interested in a design that might really help someone carry forward their loss and their love into their own evolving future. My goodness. Can an object really perform in that way?

I will explain why we must not answer that question. To make such a thing is certainly not a given. In this case it is a very distant, even presumptuous prospect. A system builder tends to “know” the answer already. They may have drawn a line between matter and meaning — which establishes for all time the impossibility. Or they may identify matter and meaning in one way or another such that meaning is reduced to function, symbol, politics, or the latest design school theory. It is not that these theories are wrong. Most of them are right in some way and played very important historical roles. I am a great fan of design theories. But you get the sense that they describe conclusions or prescribe the questions. If you begin with a theory, the real art is in discovering the way in which the theory really opens things up and avoiding the ways in which it dismisses intricacy. The theory is never *enough*. With or without a theory an iterative process begins with a muddle and a question that has more of a sense of being-in-between. It regards beliefs such as, “I can do this” or “I cannot do this” as obstacles or illusions. Both opinions shut down the more generative process and rich muddle in which incubation might take place. I must willingly hang out in that that place where I neither *know* nor *don't know*. In this place there is the more difficult thing of *let us see*. This will be a journey of unknown steps — steps unknown in both direction and number. Do you remember the childhood game in which you look for something your friend has hidden? You begin to look in whatever direction you can while your friend narrates the process as either ‘you are getting colder’ or ‘you are getting hotter’. Remember the excitement when your friend’s voice reaches a pitch and ‘you are about to burn yourself!’ Well, Focusing in this design scenario is the narrating friend telling us we are cold, warm, freezing, or hot. It is a real adventure and a real process. Many design sessions will end with ‘cold’ or ‘warm’ or ‘tepid’. Even though the end is not known, something inside knows when progress is being made or when the thread has been lost.

The urn design is something we can work on without first knowing which direction to turn or what exact step to take. The process keeps referring back to that sense of being hot or cold, so that even if I have started in the wrong direction, I am in some sense on the way. Ordinarily, we want to arrive at the solution so dearly that process seems like a terrible waste and distraction. But the truth, the hidden truth, is that real movement must be in time, in space, and from whatever place we happen to be. We don’t have to stop wishing to arrive, but we may have to stop wishing so hard. The interest in the search and especially in what

is happening right now must be stronger than such a wish for completion. Focusing does not tell us what is happening and certainly it does not tell us what will happen. It gives us a way to discover what is happening — bit by precious bit. Again, this makes the system builder in us very unhappy. This single fact, responsible for making Focusing so powerful, is exactly what makes it so difficult to communicate or accept. It requires our more squirrely efforts of perception, not the clarity of our pure thought. And the work it requires must unfold as we go. The muddle must be embraced. You trade in your certainty for the inscrutable real. Sometimes I am right there and able. Other times I have to get into real design trouble before I remember to try. Either way it is nothing short of a miracle to have this humbling and enabling realization.

I know that an urn must be a container — it must hold about two hundred cubic inches of ash. This is a clue — a little place to start. I know now to accept deeply within myself the mystery of this ash and that this urn must contain more than a volume. I allow myself to drop deep down into this question. I feel the hair rise on my arms — not out of fear — but out of a sense of inner vertigo. I stand inside myself at the sheer edge of a great depth and great height. I am already drawing lines.

If I cannot immediately find a piece of paper and a pencil, I draw in the air with my arms and fingers. Strangers look askance. My wife smiles. I look at the lines. Do they carry anything? Would they carry the dead in the hearts of the living? A ridiculous hope, but I try not to despair. I try again quickly, because I know there is a short window of time before the vertigo will pass. By now I have found some paper. I fill four pages with overlapping ideas. I look for any hint of mood, voice, adequacy or resonance. Here is a figure of curves and short, straight lines. It mumbles something. I bend my ear and ask it again. I try to pick out the word and drop out the static. I redraw. I look for an essence — the little whiff of anything. The distillation process is long and hard and may or may not be successful. There are dead ends. There are promising ideas for a coffee table. There are ideas that would exceed a customer's pocketbook. There are good ideas mixed with lesser ideas. But I relax and move on without further mental comment.

Every failure tells me something. I put it all down after an hour and come back the next day. There is no set time. It may all collapse neatly into a half hour process. More likely it draws out for a week or two. I reach an impasse and something gives up trying so hard. Often, it is within this moment of relaxation that has not completely forgotten the task — this moment of relaxing and remembering — that the illusive, critical line is drawn. I know this by a humble sense of alignment — something more than excitement or satisfaction. Sometimes a shape may glow and shimmer. A fresh breeze has blown in from somewhere. The vertigo has found some kind of handle — a shape that recalls something (never all) of the mystery.

The process has just begun. The singular shape must be broken down into components, specifications, numbers, sequences, actions, reactions, solutions, phone calls for parts, assessment of dangers, endurance, and so forth. When it is all done, the urn must voice a word. But in the meantime the voice is temporarily lost in translation. It is being spelled out. It is being articulated somewhat awkwardly syllable by syllable. In the end it must return from multiplicity to the single voice once heard. I listen to its sound. I check it again

for fit. I hear the way it fits, and I hear the way it does not fit. I log the information for the future. It will all form part of the new environment in which I will continue to work and design.

Design is not the only place where Focusing is useful and illuminating. The embodiment or incorporation of skill that a craftsman experiences is an intricate process that develops over time — it is not a given. Skill requires certain kinds of special efforts, and these efforts change location and meaning as the process evolves. When I first pick up a chisel and apply it to wood, my body feels clumsy. Sensation ends at my skin where I feel the wooden chisel handle in my hand as I blindly poke at the wood. When I bring the chisel up against the wood, I register the bump against my palm and the strain at my wrist or elbow. The body feels clumsily arranged between floor and wood. I try to be slower and more deliberate. The blade cuts a bit of wood and then jams. I feel strangely distant from the action — like I am at the end of a long tunnel trying to see some light at the other end. I get a message back from this distant frontier — it says push harder. I push harder, but it is too hard and the blade slips. A new message from the frontier says be more gentle, but when I lighten up, the blade jams again. This is a very strange moment that will eventually shape-shift if I can accept it as a normal stoppage and take a friendly look at it.

With practice, a bit of magic begins to happen. I stop simply trying to change the wood. I relax my frustration and try to receive something. I don't stop trying, but something more attentive comes forward that can listen at the same time. I see things I never saw before. I make guesses. I test the guesses. In fits and starts, my sensation moves out to the end of the blade. The tunnel shortens. My felt sense stretches from the inside. It stretches out toward the end of the blade. I feel the wood directly now. I am no longer receiving distant messages through the tool. The tool is now an extension of my hand. I can see through the tool, even as it acts on the wood. This shift of the body's boundary incorporates many nerve strands. I can *hear* the sharpness or dullness of the blade. I learn to apply some 'English' — some side pressure, some twist — just so. This nuance is too small to see, but I sense it from the inside.

Now, instead of these delayed carrier pigeon messages from the wood, I am seeing the wood through the tool. It is a different seeing. It speaks to me about which direction and how hard I should push. The work is actually magnified. The tool has a certain nerve structure and transparency. A sharp blade opens a window onto a molecular level. The wood is flush with new meaning. I feel the previously invisible direction of the wood grain. I feel the changes in hardness. The body has positioned itself differently. I am no longer awkwardly supported on the floor. Now the force comes up from the ground and through my body and does not stop until it reaches the wood. I feel a circuit close between the ground and the action at the wood. Something clumsy, dark, and stopped is now full of light and current. These things are magical, but they begin and are worked out within time. Sometimes a day or two of work suffices, but often it will take a year — maybe two, of struggle, relaxation of the struggle, and that crucial something which watches, studies, and waits. Clearly, Focusing can help us describe these transformations with fresh and more accurate words, but I am saying something more. Is it not apparent that something very much like Focusing is enabling and speeding along the transformation?

Here's a more familiar example. You are learning to ride a bicycle. This may have begun with an eagerness to learn or a fear of learning. Either is a place to begin. The bike is a fearful conglomeration of moving pedals, twisting handlebars, and a road rising up way too quickly to meet you. We call this process 'practice' and we say that practice requires 'patience', but we fail to notice the metaphysics and epistemology at work — the way that we must relax certain reactions and allow our sensation to move out to the business end of the wheels, the way the body merges with the bicycle and establishes new body/environment boundaries. For a while, you overreact to the sense of falling and begin to fall into the other direction. You are getting messages a little too late. You pump the peddles and yank the handlebars — you are all parts against parts. You are using the distant messages to reason about the handlebars and your center of gravity. You may have an instructor trying to help you with commands and encouragement. You try to take in the help, but it grates on you.

This is a beginning, but it is not enough. It's as if the nerve endings of your body need some time to grow down into the bike. The felt sense moves out from the flailing arms and legs down to the sidewalk and into the gravitational center of the person-on-a-bike you have become. You feel the momentum of your trajectory. It does not seem as fast or as furious with you. Your shape has shifted. You are a bike-body. There is an expansion and contraction of environment that has gone on. Now that you can ride a bike, you see the world differently. In some ways your world has narrowed — bumps in the road may be more interesting than passing flowers. In other ways your world has expanded — you feel a pull from the end of the block. You feel the arrogance, joy and vulnerability of fast things. You've endured a separation from your walking self and maybe your driving self — and all that signifies. You've relaxed that emotion of 'all the parts about to tangle and crash'. Should we say that you have found a new felt sense outside your skin where the rubber grips and slips upon the road? No, I think it more that the skin has moved out and the feeling and intelligence have moved out with it. The bike is now transparent as your eye is transparent. In some important though makeshift sense, it is part of your sensing body.

It is very important to understand the ways in which your body merges with new technology. You have extended capacities and narrowed capacities. A technology extends your vision in specific ways, but it does so at the expense of narrowing it in others. By shifting the range of our abilities and even our vision, tools and machinery can shift the way in which we are. Clearly this is something to wonder about. There are new opportunities accompanied by new limitations and dangers. Technologies extend and limit even the soul. Focusing can help us see clearly the range and significance of these changes.

Although the comparisons between Focusing by the book and Focusing as a skillful means continue to resonate for me, I do notice that the search for a handle may be quite different between the one and the other. Finding a handle in the usual sense is to discover words that adequately summarize or recall the felt sense. This word or phrase handle is an important part of the new understanding. Along with the handle, we feel a shift in the body. Slight or earthmoving, this shift is a new relationship to the problem.

In Focusing at the workbench, words may or may not come. I often find that they do come and form a part of the shifting process. If one wishes to teach, this is particularly useful. Yet often, there are no words. It is not that the shift comes without the same effort. The

search and testing are very much there, but instead of looking for and testing words, there is an analogous phase in which trajectories, balance, pressures, sounds, views, colors, lines and more are tested for fit and shift.

Word handles are very flexible, and it seems possible to sharpen them to a perfect point so that the felt sense is very accurately evoked by the carefully chosen phrase. However, at the workbench the handles seem harder to sharpen. There are other concerns that must find their way into the project. These concerns may be allowed into the protected space of the felt sense where they exert their own pressure. The urn must not tip over. The bronze must be crafted with respect for its molecular and cultural character. There is always the two hundred cubic inches — sometimes a designer wishes to be free of that. What can this number have to do with the felt sense? There is a sense that in the urn, many problems have been solved at once. Perhaps some of these issues have their own felt sense about them — consider the stability of the urn and the felt sense of that. Sometimes these other concerns seem to really contribute to the total understanding. But sometimes more solutions are simply more distracting and part of artistry is learning to submerge some issues that detract from the whole. For now, I want to state this problem without trying to solve it. From a strictly Focusing perspective, the art object includes the handle, but it is also more or less than the handle. Can it be a handle that grasps a multiplicity of other handles? Does this complexity express cosmos, or is this complexity dispersive? Perhaps we just have to wait and see.

My shop includes a small library, partly a hangover from my days as a philosophy student, but more immediately from the sense that the two ingredients of thought and praxis are always best served up together. My apprentices soon understand that ‘tools are ideas’, but it is much harder to convince them that ‘ideas are tools.’ I keep a paperback copy of *Focusing* on the shelves next to books on aesthetics, furniture design, and practical tricks of the trade, but I always have the darnedest time explaining why.

I remember a visiting tour of art students. After an hour talking in the gallery and the bench room, we ended up crowded into the library. Initially intrigued, the art professor asked me to pick out a single book that might be most useful for students to read. *Focusing* was my choice, and I tried to give a little synopsis of why it was so useful. The tension and excitement I had felt from students and teacher crowded so attentively into my studio dissolved into silence and blank stares. I went on explaining for another futile minute trying to make a connection. And so this public disconnect between thinking, feeling, and making came home to me once more.

It is easier to explain to Focusers the connection to craftwork, than it is to explain to craftsmen the connection to Focusing. With time I have learned to be more careful about how I place a book between a craftsman and his work. In the presence of intricacy all ideas seem trite.

Ideas are trite, that is, until they are needed to free a blockage in the intricate flow. Ideas meted out sparingly at the operative moment when their sharpness and force are actually needed are like jewels in acid — nothing trite about the way they now sparkle and sizzle.

I remember a few days of interesting struggle with an apprentice. He had been with me for six months and had learned to use some difficult tools to do some difficult work. At the time we were working together on a large, curvy, cherry table. It was time to smooth the wood. Cherry is a persnickety, gorgeous wood. Its grain direction changes on a dime. It splinters easily under a hand plane. Three hand tools were needed for the task: a hand plane, a spokeshave, and a scraper. Each tool worked on the cherry in a different, complementary way.

The apprentice had shown skill with each tool and so I abandoned him at his bench with the task of smoothing this monstrous conglomeration of rough saw marks, hardened glue, disparate joints, and crisscrossing grain patterns. I kept an eye out on what was happening, but I knew my input would not be useful at this time.

I stood at my own workbench, doing something with a little project. An afternoon and most of a morning went by. Though there was no apparent progress with the cherry table, I could hear serious efforts being made in the back room. At about 11 o'clock my normally respectful, self-controlled apprentice strode over to me in an obviously challenging mood. He was highly frustrated and visibly angry with me. He was not sure what to say, but he made it clear that I had abandoned him to an impossible task and that perhaps I did not really know how to teach. I nodded and we walked back to his bench where I assured him that he was right on both accounts.

The next ten minutes would be pivotal. Apprentices who have dedicated themselves for many months have left the program in these liminal moments. Not knowing the outcome, I nevertheless welcome this state of affairs in which very big ideas related and unrelated to Focusing become relevant and teachable. Ideas that have fallen softly against ears and been swept up with the wood shavings now become wonderfully subversive and effective — they glow with inner light and tingle with acidity. I wallow into the situation with this comment — that at the upper end of a craft one faces a series of impossibilities. At this level, the tools and procedures that have been taught don't quite suffice. Something more is needed. I cannot teach it. It is something only the student can bring. I am likely to call it 'attention', but I do not mean the usual concentration. Industry, I say, does not require this thing. This is the difference between industry and craft. Industry is a collection of procedures and machines that guarantee a result. Craft is different. Procedures do not always work and certainly there are no guarantees. Welcome, I say, to your troubled life as a craftsman. I say these words tenderly, with all the compassion that I feel. Each of these three tools that the apprentice uses complements the other, but also each undoes the work of the other. The plane smooths and flattens the wood until it hits a curly section of 'reaction wood' or until the grain changes direction unexpectedly. At this point the plane causes a deep tear-out in the wood. The scraper could have handled the difficult spot — had it been anticipated — but then it ruins the smooth geometry of the plane when used too much. I tell him he has to see things he cannot see. He has to see the precise moment a success is about to become a massive failure. He has to read the direction of the grain like a book. I can teach him to read, but I cannot read this book aloud to him. Being himself, the craftsman, the words are secret sounds and vibrations only he can feel. He must become as quick and precise on the inside as he has become on the outside.

Furthermore, I say, his frustrations and anger can no longer be background noise. He must attend to them with as much care as he brings to the wood. They are gifts and they must be unwrapped. As he is working on the wood, the wood works in the opposite direction right back onto him. If he wants the wood to relax its contrariness, he must notice his own. If the wood must change, then so must he. It's the law.

A thing or two more is said. The word 'Focusing' is never mentioned. He looks at me. I do not see belief in his eye, but I do see a new question. He seems ready to be left alone again, and I oblige.

I keep an eye on his work from a distance. He does not need to feel me watching. I hear a renewed effort. I hear an increasing steadiness and rhythm. And finally, it both surprises me and doesn't surprise me that in about twelve hours he has found a way to complete the task. I am happy that the work is done and done well. I am happy that he is happy. I am happy that something of the inner life of the craftsman has come to make sense to him.

Bringing Focusing to our work, whatever our work may be, can have the effect of elevating routine work to a new level of craft. But there is something brittle in labor that can resist the complexities of feeling and critical thought. And for thinkers and poets, there may be something aloof that resists the troubles of labor. Perhaps there can be an awakening for those who live primarily by their words and an awakening for those who live primarily by their hands. Focusing is clearly a tool to help with that awakening. The distances from head to heart to body — and from all to our work — are distances to be measured, triangulated, spanned, and relished, by all.

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