

TYING THE THREAD OF BODYWORK, MOVEMENT AND FOCUSING

*Larry Hurst, Jack Blackburn, L.M. P., Francesca Castaldi, Ph.D., Mathias Dekeyser,
Claudia Conza, Stephen Scholle, Ph.D., Lic.Ac., and Nicoletta Corsetti*

INTRODUCTION

A small and diverse — yet increasingly definitive — sector of the Focusing community has been working together since 2004 to explore how Focusing as a process and a range of body-oriented modalities are influencing and enriching one another. The work has recognized the interrelatedness of all bodily modes of expression and has, therefore, welcomed and encouraged the evolution of multifaceted approaches, with body-logic and Focusing as the two common elements operating at a common edge. The principal modalities investigated to date include manual therapies/touch, movement, sound, yoga and somatics. The list is expanding as more body-centered individuals, including practitioners, become attracted to Focusing, and continue to engage in crossing of these modalities.

This paper gives an overview of the relationships that are being forged between Focusing and body-centered practices. It discusses and gives practical examples of the synergies that can emerge. In so doing, it attempts to offer a credible rationale for pursuing these relationships more deeply, from both an academic and experiential standpoint.

In the text that follows, the terms ‘Practitioner’ and ‘Client’ are used when referring to professional consultations, and the terms ‘Focuser’ and ‘Listener’, or ‘Listening Partner’, or ‘Companion’, or ‘Touch-Listener’ are used variously when referring to peer-exchanges in dyads or triads. These latter variations have no differential significance beyond the obvious, relating largely to particular descriptive forms favored by different teachers.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NON-INTRUSIVE BODYWORK

In the prevailing bodywork paradigm, when a client receives a massage or any form of hands-on therapy, the practitioner has been trained to have an agenda as a ‘fixer’. The body is generally seen as the source of the pathology that needs fixing. The emphasis on fixing often leads to seeing the body as a mechanism that requires deep, hard, and intrusive approaches. In this mechanistic paradigm the body is not recognized as a resource that can reveal unconscious needs or implicit remedies. Non-intrusive approaches, however, do not view the body mechanistically, but rather, recognize that bodies and minds are continuously communicating sensations and feelings. In non-intrusive approaches we attend to these communications. The body then freely reveals its own implicit remedies, unconditioned by negative life experiences and mental formations. By learning to feel and listen to the body’s communications, the client can learn how to begin to self-heal, regardless of whether he or she is very ill or merely having a bad day.

BACKGROUND

Focusing was originally developed during an era of deepening understanding of how mental states can affect physiological function. Focusing as a practice offers the experience of a unique relationship between body-process and thinking process. Eugene Gendlin (Focusing, 1981) pointed out how a bodily felt-sense is at the foundation of thinking and feeling — and at the same time more intricate. Bodily communications are always in the present moment. By listening directly to the body, practitioners and clients can receive raw data uncensored by pre-conditioned thought processes. When practitioners and clients attend to the kinds of feelings and senses the body is communicating, they become present to an inner state of observing and reporting that does not censor or judge. Gendlin and his protégés discovered ways to process those observations and reportings. Focusers are learning how to apply those processes in combination with other kinds of somatic observations and data, e.g. tactile, kinesthetic, proprioceptive, tonal, and postural.

AN ‘EMERGING INTRINSIC’ HYPOTHESIS

When a practitioner learns to elicit the client’s *felt sense* or somatic experiencing, a healing or reorganizing principle seems to emerge from within the client’s body. This reorganizing principle is intrinsic to the body and mind and becomes available in whatever way is most conducive to repair. Thus, something innately restorative emerges from within the client’s body-mind experiencing. These bodily changes can be monitored by practitioners through their hands and other sensory impressions. Correspondingly, the practitioner as *witnessing-companion* may also experience a sense of freshness, surprise, or insight — a sort of somatic resonance with the client, a kind of sharing of this reorganizing principle.

Indeed, this witnessing-companionship may itself be the deepest reorganizing principle. In this space the client can discover that his/her experience is being met. The experience of being met is primal. It touches and resonates. It sets up an expectancy about formerly unshareable experiences. It opens that experience to the daylight and the oxygen of understanding, possibility, and hope. In much of the exploratory work described later in this article, the *practitioner/client* concept becomes transformed to *Focuser/witnessing companion*.

GESTATION OF THE SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

A group of around fourteen Focusers, from five countries, five different cultures, speaking six different languages, and trained in a wide range of body-working and movement modalities, struck an affinity at the International Focusing Conference in Costa Rica in 2004, having formed an interest group at the invitation of Robert Lee, the IFC organizer. As they Focused together and shared their bodywork experiences, there quickly developed a common desire to explore the Focusing paradigm in their respective fields, and vice versa. The modalities represented have since expanded to embrace other somatic techniques that work with clients’ body-centered awareness; examples include dance, ‘presencing’, toning, body mapping, yoga, shiatsu, body-centered psychotherapy and medicine, as well as a variety of new approaches that combine Focusing and bodywork together.

The increasing ties between bodywork, movement, and Focusing were finally and irrevocably threaded together in 2007 at a unique three-day experiential event on the Italian island of Ischia, attended by forty-seven participants from Europe and the Americas. A full report on the event, titled Meeting at the Edge (MAE), is accessible via the Focusing Institute website home page or by going direct to www.focusing.org/bodywork/maereport.htm

DEVELOPING APPLICATIONS

Here in summary are some key points from explorations that were carried out at MAE 2007, and which are now stimulating further studies and a widening of the field of applications. The full list of modalities informing the work of participants is in the report cited above.

Program of Creativity and Collaboration

It might seem strange to treat the program as an exploration of itself. However, the core-planning group decided from the outset to develop a process-structure that would typify an overall best Focusing approach. We held the intention of creating conditions that would bring both safety and ‘more than’ — to whatever modalities were offered at the event — by individuals whose degree of Focusing experience (if any) was somewhat unknown to the organizers. Three preceding years of monthly conference calls and two intervening Focusing Internationals provided the necessary degree of confidence that this idea of a *Process-Structure* could work. We created a working definition of a *Process-Structure* to serve as a framework, helping to build interactions and direct attention to ways of generating and processing information. Like Focusing itself, *the emphasis here is not on content but on process*. Despite its previous successes, the core team of seven organizers (co-contributors to this paper) experienced frazzled nerves immediately prior to the opening of the event. What a relief we felt immediately after the whole gathering did a check-in, and the process of collective improvisation started to gestate!

Most of the work during the event evolved in small organic groups, with a substantial degree of interchange and movement between groups and a general sharing of experience at the end. The following paragraphs describe (sometimes in depth and at other times in outline) the ideas and experiences forthcoming from the groups that have reported on their work.

Bodywork and Focusing

Various bodywork modalities and their guiding principles were demonstrated, exploring how the practitioners applied the principles of Focusing in their different modalities. This group was also valuable because it is very rare for such cross-disciplinary sharing to occur between the various bodywork modalities, which in some instances are competitive with one another.

Case Studies: No systematic research of case reports is yet in place. Here, however, are two abridged cases reported from core group members.

1. Fifty-five-year-old male, professional writer, suffering from advanced case of shingles, excruciating pain, deep red discoloration on left chest and arm tissue — along nipple line, movement of left arm greatly restricted by pain and muscle spasms: No physical contact is acceptable — even self-touch; analgesics do not work. Client depressed, 3 month writing hiatus, catastrophizing about poor recovery prognosis by MD. Bodywork practitioner decides to use Focusing to help the client process what is occurring in affected body parts, in hope of at least giving the client a reprieve from the vicious cycles of suffering that seemed to be made worse by his ruminations. Practitioner uses touch in unaffected body parts to monitor client's physical changes. Following the steps of Focusing, in combination with various non-intrusive bodywork applications, the client was able to adjust to being in direct inner contact with the intensity of the pain.

Practitioner: *Please bring your awareness into the painful parts of your body...and perhaps see if there are some words... that describe the kind of pain that you are feeling.*

William: *It feels like a hot searing pain... as if I am being stuck with needles... my shoulder and arm feel like they are in a hot cast... I am seeing something like a pool of hot lava.*

[Practitioner reflects client's words and asks the client to notice anything else that is emerging from the area.]

William: *The pain is the shape of a long cylinder.*

Practitioner: *As you feel into that cylinder, notice where the burning is the most intense... And maybe see... if there are some words that describe...*

[The Practitioner is supporting client's head and neck.]

William: *The burning is white hot... It is about the size of a quarter.*

Practitioner: *As you are feeling into the hottest part, notice what is occurring in the rest of your body...*

William: *It's strange... but I feel my whole body relaxing... At first I heard: 'Don't go there' but as I am reporting the pain, I am feeling something like: 'It's OK.'*

[Practitioner reflects client's words.]

William: *The pool of hot lava is starting to become cooler... not so bright.*

Practitioner: *You're noticing some cooling and not so bright...*

William: *It is still cooling... now I see a cool pond of water... I feel no pain... the moon is reflected in the water... it is very beautiful.*

Practitioner: *Now you're not feeling pain... I feel warmth and softening under my hands... is it OK if I put my hands on the parts where you were feeling pain and stiffness?*

William: *Yes.*

Practitioner: *Feel into the places under my hands and notice what comes...*

William: *I feel a very pleasant warmth... (he takes deep breath)... a deep sense of relief.*

Practitioner: [initiates movement on client's shoulder...] *Notice where you feel this movement...*

William: *I feel very easy... my arm feels totally free.*

As things proceeded, the client was able to feel more and more different kinds of sensations in the affected region. As this was occurring, the practitioner could feel changes in his own bodily and mental state moving from a 'fearful sympathetic' state to a 'relaxed parasympathetic' state. The client was monitoring felt experiences including bodily sensations, feeling states that brought up memories, images, and insights that seemed to synthesize all of those phenomena — including a shift in images that duplicated a shift to parasympathetic body responses.

Just before William reported the pool of water and moon reflection, the Practitioner observed 'parasympathetic shift' ... the client's body warming and softening, client taking deep breaths, and relaxation of facial muscles. As the last of these image shifts took place, the client experienced a palpable (to him and to the practitioner) Felt-Shift. When client and practitioner observed the skin surface of the affected area, the bright red coloration had faded to light pink. The client was now able to touch the area freely with no pain and move his left arm and shoulder in all directions. Practitioner and client continued to work together for a few years. There was never a return of the symptoms. The client, who had been a meditator for years, started incorporating the Focusing elements of this session into his daily practice. (Reported by Jack Blackburn.)

2. Thirty-one-year-old man who suffers from multiple sclerosis and is tetraplegic. Practitioner initially gave him Esalen massage alone — in the lateral (sideways) position, in which he did not become as disturbed when a spasm came on during the session. Practitioner then received client's permission to try something new by integrating Focusing into the massage and began to combine Focusing and touch in every session:

Practitioner: *Please feel into the region where you can sense my hands touching and holding still. Maybe you can feel my hand being warm, the slight pressure that comes through my touch, imagining it is like you can slip inside your body and travel to that meeting spot... and then... maybe say how it is there... any sensations... temperature, tension or looseness... Can you feel a 'quality' and perhaps describe it, or maybe just say what comes...?*

We could then go to the blockages in his body, asking what, or how, he is feeling there and what are the sensations there, and we began through touch to listen together to his body:

Client: *Ah, it is hot and kind of "burning".*

Practitioner: [after acknowledging client's words] *If I remove my hands slightly... see where it feels good for you... and where else you want me to put my hands now... so we can listen to what is changing?*

We followed through all of the Focusing steps, and whatever movements or words came from him, I reflected back through touch and words. The felt sense and felt shifts were clear, and he made significant progress. His physical abilities improved and he now feels more acceptance towards his life in general. He is listening more to his 'body wisdom' now and wants to learn Focusing to cope better with the challenges that come through his illness. (Reported by Claudia Conza.)

Movement and Focusing

In our exploration of bringing movement to the Focusing process, we have begun to distinguish three kinds of relationship between moving and felt sensing.

1. A way of moving that prepares us for the Focusing process and facilitates the formation of felt-senses: Gentle movements that facilitate simple patterns of activation and release, fully embodied breath, extension and contractions, activation of fluids and connection to gravity, create a sense of embodied safety and relaxed connection to one's own whole being. This awakened and relaxed presence to one's own body-person — a fully embodied sense of self — supports the sense of inner safety that is necessary for the beginning of the Focusing process and the formation of felt-senses. We have found that placing this emphasis on inner safety and connection through movement is particularly helpful to new Focusers.

Engaging with inner-directed movement before entering into the Focusing process provides a 'rooting' into one's own body that can be re-engaged at a time of approaching emotional overwhelm/flooding. For example, when the need for safety and presence arise during a session, the Focuser will be able to re-invigorate her or his connection to the ground and gravity, to turn to her/his breathing to sense the flow of air from and into the larger whole, or to engage in tactile explorations that can help in recovering a sense of boundaries. The warm-up process before a Focusing session provides the opportunity to experience one's own body as a 'subjective physicality'. Exploring an inner directed way of moving offers a quite different experience from an anatomically functional way of moving and sensing the body-self. Instead of relying only on following an internal anatomical map or on movement sequences patterned from every-day activities or physical practices that one normally engages in, the mover is able to listen to his/her internal environment directly and to respond to inner stirrings. The mover is encouraged to respond outside of the framework of functional relations that govern moving in the everyday context.

This process facilitates the connection between the 'organic' and the 'symbolic', a connection that is at the very root of felt-sense formation. This kind of kinetic preparation for a peer-exchange also aids the role of the Companion (which would be equally applicable to the Practitioner in a client consultation) since it provides the foundation for cultivating a state of 'somatic resonance'. In this state, the Companion allows her/his corporeal field to act both as a stabilizer and as a resonator of the Focuser's somatic, sub-verbal states.

Somatic resonance refers to the capacity of the Companion to be grounded in her/his own body in a positively neutral state, while tracking the sub-verbal responses of the Focuser. This ability is cultivated with training, experience and intention. The Companion needs to

be able to establish for him or herself an unobstructed breathing pattern and a relaxed tissue tone, and to gently hold an open, allowing receptivity to what is arising in the Focuser. The Companion is alert to subtle changes in the body-field of the Focuser, tracking for example the breath (shallow or full, quick or slow, controlled or relaxed), tissue tone (perceived levels of contraction, density, flexibility and texture), patterns of initiation, range of motion, full body postures, gestures and facial expressions, movement of the eyes (often detectable even when closed). The Companion may briefly match the Focuser's somatic states, yet continually returns to a positively neutral state throughout the session and in that way acts as a stabilizer for the Focuser's somatic process.

2. Movement that is an initial handle for a felt sense: Opening the range of symbolization to kinetic expression can be very helpful for the Focuser's process because movement often comes before words and can facilitate keeping company with states that are by their very nature pre-verbal. Moving becomes a way of meeting a felt-sense and letting it blossom into a fully embodied state, facilitating an organic carrying forward that may not be discovered otherwise.

3. Moving that provides a kind of counter-experience to a felt-sense and helps in staying fully in touch with a felt-sense in a safe way:

Example: *While moving slowly along the floor, the Focuser was keeping company with a sense of invisibility (a feeling of no boundaries between self and the environment, almost transparency). She asked for her companion to come closer, eventually placing her hands and feet on the Companion's body and gently pushing. The moving point of contact with the Companion allowed for a counter-experience to the 'invisibility' (hands and feet reaching and meeting somebody, restoring a sense of boundaries): in this case the kinetic connection with the Companion, as well as the slow motion out of which it originated, did not match the felt sense, but rather supported a safe counter-experience that nurtured the capacity to be fully present to it. (Reported by Francesca Castaldi as the Focuser.)*

Psychotherapy and Bodywork

Most psychotherapists participating in the MAE 2007 event had a background in Focusing, and thus already recognized the wisdom of the body. They took the opportunity to experiment freely with body movement and touch, interwoven within Focusing-oriented therapy sessions.

Particularly, the taboos of using touch in the day-to-day practice of psychotherapy received much attention. With their focus on the therapeutic relationship, the psychotherapists recognized that strong processes of transference and counter-transference might be evoked when they introduced touch into a session. Important but unexplicated feelings can arise between the client and therapist. Striving for maximum clarity in the client-therapist relationship is a central issue in all psychotherapies.

While touch can hold potential hazards for the psychotherapeutic process, it also holds opportunities. By banning touch from the therapeutic interaction, it can be argued that clients are being deprived of a vital and essential form of human interaction. Practicing

touch during the MAE 2007 event enabled the psychotherapists to feel gradually more at ease in considering *how* it might enhance the psychotherapy session. It was recognized that psychotherapists need a great deal of mentored practice using touch in a safe environment in order to weave it successfully into real therapy sessions. Teaching clients how to utilize empathic touch for themselves was also recognized as one of the safer modes — in a relational sense.

There are many complicated issues involved here, including professional ethics and cultural diversity, which warrant further investigation, particularly in the light of the positive attitude generated within the group. There was a wish to create openings that could further examine where body-centered therapies might prove most successful. Trainings in psychotherapy might then become a potent vehicle for integration and forward movement.

Further Experiential Exercises

Visual imagery: This was explored experientially in a Focusing oriented exercise to gain a sense of the physiological and energetic patterns that shape each of our bodies uniquely and revealingly.

Focusing Attitude: As we introduce Focusing into our professional practice and bring it to our moment-to-moment living, we find that we are cultivating a life-enhancing personal attitude in our relationship with others and to ourselves. The transition is highly rewarding and can be infectious. It creates a special field where we are able to experience everyone — ourselves included — as holistic beings at four levels: physical, energetic, mental, and emotional. A practical demonstration has been formulated to show how bringing the Focusing attitude to empathic touch or massage can help the client to connect in a new and accepting way with his/her ‘inside knowing’ in places of unease about the body. [See at www.focusing.org/bodywork/maefile2.htm]

Inner Voicing: The possibility of being able to elicit a felt shift by sensing into and expressing one’s inner relationships non-verbally through ‘voice frequency resonance’ — assisted by movement and touch, was first explored in triads at the 2005 International Focusing Conference. Following this through at MAE 2007, each person was encouraged to improvise individually on whatever inner pre-articulated sound began to emerge during his or her process, with or without touch. Pointers emerged for further experiments, which are currently under way.

Example: *Participants were invited to ‘be with’ and follow the course of their internally generated sounds (e.g. breath, heartbeat, tummy gurgle, chuckle, yell, spontaneous melody) or, in some cases, recalled sounds (e.g. sea waves). This process led to a variety of spontaneous body movements and vocal ‘resolutions’, and some acknowledged felt shifts in perception. One participant, a professional singer, related her experience in a follow-up email:*

“I am used to singing in a very structured situation, confronted with parameters that limit a deeper expression of myself. When exploring in our group, I had the possibility of touching all of my resistances. I remember very well

my felt sense in those moments and how it changed during the experience... the sense, freedom and pleasure of an inner self 'being realized'. I have now re-discovered the pleasure of singing just for myself, without judgment... but the greatest thing was the weekend after the event when I performed three concerts, and I was different — my body, my legs, the movement, the feeling inside me, something happened."

At the finale to MAE 2007 the process was replicated with the entire group of 40-plus participants in a moving collective attunement. Participants remarked upon their having noticed 'spontaneous internal shifts' and requested further exploration of this method of non-verbal connection, expression and communication as a way to further enrich the Focusing experience. (Reported by Larry Hurst.)

Contact Balance: The ethics, comfort/discomfort and experience of weight sharing between Focuser-mover and physically supportive companion were explored in dyads and then shared with the group.

Body Mapping: This was a step-by-step means of entering more deeply into felt sensing and felt experiencing, using a personal pictorial tracing of body shape and feelings, layer by layer.

Three-way Focusing Touch Partnership: Consider how a Focusing partnership creates a shareable space; then imagine the power of 'listening hands' in this 'package of availability' from the provider or providers. The following experiment involved a triad of participants taking turns as (1) a Focuser, (2) a Verbal Listener and (3) a 'Touch-Listener'. The outcome has led the participants to consider the prospect of trying other combinations of position, sequence, etc.

Example: The Focuser sat at the front of a chaise-lounge and leaned back against the legs of the Touch-Listener. The Touch-Listener sat in a comfortable position in the chaise-lounge and supported the head and neck of the Focuser with his/her hands. The Verbal Listener sat in front and to the side of the Focuser. While the Focuser and Verbal Listener engaged in a traditional Focusing exchange, the Touch-Listener maintained a 'listening attitude' with the hands, and so provided a touch feedback parallel to the feedback of the Verbal Listener. The support given to the neck and head naturally led the attention towards "really feeling into" that area and working with it as a place of exploration. Each participant reported something intrinsically extraordinary in these sessions, something beyond what is normally experienced in a Focusing session, be it a vividness, a clarity — "the light of the day" as one participant put it — or a more sure feeling of being supported. Another participant sensed "some further dimensionality... and it isn't clear yet what it can do". (Reported by Stephen Scholle, Nicoletta Corsetti, and Robert Lee from the 2008 Montreal International Focusing Conference Bodywork-Focusing Interest Group.)

Working with Inexperienced Clients: The importance of facilitating body awareness in new clients was discussed and demonstrated. Particular emphasis was placed on finding the best ways of leading a client into the process while staying true to the client's expressed agenda. Our discussion also served to illustrate the benefits to bodywork practitioners of receiving formal training in Focusing.

MOVING FORWARD

Training and Teaching: Teaching Focusing to bodyworkers is now ongoing across the world, including Europe, the USA, Argentina, Mexico and Japan. Teaching a Bodywork-Focusing approach to professional counselors and psychotherapists in Japan started in 2004 and is also ongoing. Six of the seven members of the MAE core team are now Focusing Trainers; one is a Focusing Institute Certifying Coordinator, and one a body-centered psychotherapist doing research with touch.

Bringing Bodywork, Movement and Allied Body-Centered Modalities to Focusing: The members of the Focusing Bodywork and Movement Group are continuing to bring a Focusing oriented approach to their respective specialties. They are also active in facilitating a more overtly body-centered approach to Focusing. These combined aims are being pursued through articles, classes, and sessions with clients and symposia with colleagues. A Yahoo Discussion Group has been available since 2005. A second multidisciplinary international gathering, MAE 2009, is planned for September 2009 in Switzerland. Details can be found at www.mae2009.org. The core development team continues to meet monthly by conference call. It is a testament to the synergy of body-logic and Focusing that our interest group continues to flourish and grow and, through its process of unique collaboration, has managed to evolve into this article for *Folio*.

CONCLUSION

The rich weaving of Focusing with a whole range of body-centering modalities has begun to open up a new creative paradigm for the caring professions and their clients. It has the capacity and potential to bridge inter-professional separations and alienations. Those of us touched by these crossings are moved by the deepening of inner awareness as well as by the richness of mutuality in the work. In the wider community, its application to everyday self-care and to self-expression, whether at work or play, has yet to be fully explored and realized. The potential is there — And the desire?

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Jack Blackburn, Trager practitioner, Master's in theological studies, Focusing trainer, registered counselor, specializes in body centered spiritual growth and healing. He teaches continuing education classes to bodyworkers and other caregiving professionals. Website: www.presencingsource.com

Francesca Castaldi is developing the integration of Focusing with movement, touch and sound into a form she calls 'Contactful Focusing'. She is the founder of Focusing Pathways (www.focusingpathways.net) and can be reached at francesca@focusingpathways.net.

Claudia Conza is a Focusing trainer and Esalen massage practitioner who also owns her own health practice and works internationally as a health and life coach. She can be reached through her websites www.claudiaconza.com, www.atpeacecenterforhealth.com (English) or by email to welcome@claudiaconza.com.

Nicoletta Corsetti is a body-oriented counselor in private practice in Rome. She has been teaching Focusing in Italy since 2000 and is a certifying coordinator: www.focusing.it. She can be reached at nicolettaacorsetti@virgilio.net.

Mathias Dekeyser is a psychotherapist and Focusing trainer-in-training in Belgium: <http://mathias.dekeyser.googlepages.com>. He works in a therapeutic community and private practice and is associated as a researcher and group therapist with universities in Leuven and Antwerp.

Larry Hurst is a developmental coach-mentor who particularly enjoys collaborating in life-skills initiatives. He has a diverse background in the health sciences, industry, journalism and theater. In 2004 he relocated from the UK to New York City and can be reached at larry.hurst@focus-in-touch.com.

Stephen Scholle is a holistic practitioner located in Hartsdale, NY, USA. He has developed an online therapeutic toolbox: www.bodyinfo.com. He can be reached at srslle@gmail.com.

