

ON CULTIVATING A GRACED LIFE The Struggle within a Culture that Disconnects

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The year was 1979, Elizabeth was five months old, and I was attending my first Bio-Spiritual Focusing and Healing Listening workshop. It was a reunion with Ed McMahon and Peter Campbell whom I had met fifteen years earlier when they gave a course on Human Sexuality to a group of nuns. I first realized as a twenty-four year old nun in the class that I was searching for a human face to a spirituality that is as old as the body itself. Today when people ask why I entered and left the convent, I use physicist Stephen Hawkins phrase to explain what I have now come to know: I was “remembering the future.” Deep within me was a knowing full of possibilities for the future.

Writing now twenty-nine years later, I take a deep breath as my body clearly remembers my first Focusing experience. Ed gently instructed me to pay attention to what would come in the middle of my body when I sensed into the feel of having three small kids at home. The felt sense of being cooped up, constantly busy, and tied down came quickly. An image that came of me riding the crest of a wave at the beach near our home was accompanied by a deep sense of freedom, and so began the journey we write about here.

Before that first workshop ended, I knew deep in my bones I had found the reason I entered and left the convent. I was searching for a healthy spirituality that would not only support my growing development, but also that I could share with others. Through Ed and Pete my dream was realized of teaching our children to grow up with this newly discovered process of Focusing. Instead of experiencing the same stale feelings over and over again, my children would learn a way through stuck patterns of behavior. Unless we as children are fortunate to know a way of listening to ourselves, we all grow up experiencing what Gerald May writes about in *Simply Sane*.

He writes, “In all my experience as a psychiatrist and as a human being, the deepest, most pervasive pathology I have seen is the incredible harshness we have toward ourselves. I don’t know where it comes from originally, but I know it is at the core of so many of our troubles. We jerk ourselves around, berate ourselves, drive ourselves and confine ourselves in ways we would never subject an animal to. We are willing subjects of our own abuse. The most religious of us are so terrified of appearing selfish that we subject ourselves to un-nameable internal cruelties. And those of us who are more selfish stuff ourselves with poisons and whip ourselves into self-destructive highs. Some of us are meaner than others, but I have yet to meet a person in modern Western culture who was not in some way cruelly self-abusive” (May, 1993). In light of a culture that breeds self-criticism, I knew this process would be the most precious gift I could give my children, a gift that would serve them well throughout their lives.

I found myself moving toward a way of being that placed much more trust in my own experience and in a process of inner unfolding. As soon as I became familiar with this inner

terrain, I began to talk to the children about stories and how our feelings are like stories. They loved having us read bedtime stories to them, and if we couldn't finish the story, waiting for another evening carried with it the excitement that unfinished stories hold for all of us. With not much more of an introduction than that, the older two were soon eager to listen inside themselves to see what stories they could hear.

Elizabeth was quite young at the time, and I used to say she absorbed Focusing through osmosis, but as I write today remembering that I was still nursing her when I attended that first workshop, I can say she absorbed it through her mother's milk. My body had no trouble letting me know when something I heard from either Pete or Ed was right on target; my nursing breasts let me know immediately!

The following vignettes describe how Elizabeth's early experiences with Focusing laid the foundation for self-trust.

One night at bedtime when Elizabeth was seven, she seemed agitated and frightened. Earlier that day Elizabeth had been scared by the sight of a man walking on crutches with only one leg. As I sat on the edge of the bed with her, it wasn't very long before I could see her relax. She looked up at me with the words: "Mommy, where did the scary feeling go?" Feeling better was what first attracted her to focusing.

No matter how loving a home our children grow up in, parents, teachers, friends and relatives cannot always know the effect their words and behaviors are having on them. Children constantly face peer pressures and images telling them how they are supposed to look, dress, smell, talk and behave. Serious commitment and time is required to accompany children with the feelings that arise as these pressures penetrate and bombard their lives. I also knew that I needed to pay attention to my own feelings as I watched Elizabeth's emotional pain result at times in severe headaches and vomiting. I recall wanting to make her feel better, to step in and fix the problem, to tell her not to worry. Only by paying attention to my feelings in a Focusing way could I allow Elizabeth the time and space needed for her wisdom to unfold. I had to first live the process and let my own inner unfolding guide me, before the applications with my children could become apparent.

"Cheater, cheater, you're a cheater" were the words Elizabeth heard from her classmates in a junior high school history class. Ever since the 6th grade when she took an interest in school, she faced these kinds of comments from students who were convinced there was something wrong with "smart" kids. As we sat together listening to this hurting place, she felt alone and pushed up against a wall, cornered and trapped. With her head she knew she needed to cuddle and gently listen to this place, but she felt a strong resistance. The words came, "I don't want to be cuddled because then you will become freer with yourself and your classmates. You will do what you want to do, and I can't stand being ridiculed even more." These words felt right as she said, "I just can't stand the thought of having to face more jealous remarks." After many tears and more time, she asked that place, "What can I do to help you?" What eventually arose brought a "humongous breath" as she realized she could let the kids be themselves and accept them while at the same time saying, "I can be myself!"

A dream that night confirmed what she already knew. In the dream she was dressed as a cheerleader although she didn't go to the game. As people noticed she didn't attend, they

asked, “Why aren’t you going to the game?” and I replied, “Because I don’t want to.” Upon awakening she knew exactly what the dream meant: she realized she could accept the cheerleaders — those who made fun of her at school — while not having to act like them.

“How does it feel to want to please me and at the same time want to become more independent?” I asked Elizabeth when she was entering her adolescent years. She could feel some of the ties that attached her to me begin to loosen, and yet she still felt torn by wanting to please me. She marveled when the words “caught in a maze” and “trapped” emerged to describe exactly what she was feeling. A sense of peace swept over her as she realized that “childish ropes could dissolve and new and stronger bonds could emerge between us.”

What began as a hope and a hunch that our children would not have to get stuck in unprocessed behavioral patterns turned into more than I could ever have guessed at the time. As I look at Elizabeth’s writings, I see a gradual development of a graced attitude of *allowing* that permeates her Focusing experiences. This all too rare quality is difficult to grasp as most of us are tempted to remain in control of the outcome with our vested interests in place. When we are free enough to own what is real, for a long enough period of time so the outcome is allowed to organically emerge out of our experiences, we allow our gifted selves to reach out and touch others.

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As I (Elizabeth) reflect on the numerous ways Focusing has impacted my life, I pause with a particular question. Having developed a habit of listening to the felt-senses that accompanied my childhood, shouldn’t I now be living out of my felt-sense on a much more frequent, daily basis? Shouldn’t I be more like the Gene Gendlin on video who pauses, turns inward, and speaks slowly from a nebulous and developing place inside? I didn’t need much time to realize that my twenty-nine years of growing self-trust are the direct result of developing sensitivity to inner friction, to those times when felt senses are longing to be heard, or to those times when I disconnect from my authenticity, when experiences become flat and felt senses difficult to access. I don’t believe it is possible to be congruently aligned with felt senses at all moments in the day. In the same way that evolution moves forward through friction, through some challenging interaction with the environment, I find that my own development feeds on the dynamic between connection and disconnection.

My experience with Focusing at a very young age developed my sensitivity to that friction. As a child, the inner contrasts were obvious and overwhelming. I was either content or scared, blissfully enjoying life or frightened by some disturbing experience. I knew that by asking my mother to “sit with me”, I could again return to child-like contentment. Unbeknownst to me at the time I was developing a precious sanctuary, which even at this moment brings tears as I tap into the gentleness and tenderness that surrounds me when I am connected inside.

Most of my childhood diary entries begin with the particulars of something troubling me, and end with the resolve to “sit with that” as though writing down my resolve would somehow assure me that I would in fact “sit with that.” Throughout my life my resolve to “sit with that” sometimes only turned into action when the friction became just too great. I

recall my first year out of college, grappling with graduate school decisions and whether I would enjoy work as a college career counselor. I had been exposed to the profession while working at my university's Career Center as an undergraduate, but how would I know if I would *really* like the profession? What if I spent all my time reading resumes and preparing job search workshops, when I really wanted to "counsel" students? As worry took over I grasped for control, trying to quantify my future career into hours spent on each activity. Despite years of learning "another way," I instead turned into a hamster in a wheel, feverishly repeating the pros and cons over and over, trying to respond through logic to something much deeper inside needing attention. Of course, I inexorably failed to will any significant change in my outlook.

When the friction becomes too great, I always come back to the place inside that I implicitly trust, and I learn anew the simple insights Focusing has taught me. I asked my mother to accompany me in listening to my career anxiety. As I took a deep breath and let go into the frightened and worried place, I tapped into a trust in the rightness of career counseling, despite the many unknowns. I gratefully look back on that moment because I landed my dream job right out of graduate school, teaching "Let Your Life Speak" (Palmer, 2000) classes to college students.

When I consider how Focusing has impacted my life and the corresponding applications, I am aware that I live out the richest consequences from within. I cannot separate "Focusing applications" from my own experience with living Focusing. Somewhere in college and beyond, my physical development and life experiences integrated with years of Focusing. I developed an attentiveness which allowed the felt sense into my daily consciousness far beyond just those times when overwhelming feelings demanded my attention. The ramifications have been enormous. In the workplace I am keenly aware that speaking out of gentle inward attentiveness tends to have a disarming affect on others. When mundane conversations are somehow perceived by fragile egos as personal threats, I find inward processing allows others to let their guard down.

With students I find that allowing my organic processing to unfold in their presence invites a space for them to turn inwards as well. When I listen to students and remain inwardly connected, I feel my way into the conversations, into gently inviting them to notice what is behind their words. When I accompany students in this way, I am not thinking about what I should say next or what approach will work best based on their "Myers-Briggs" personality type. I instinctively let in the feel of the students, and the approach that comes out of me aligns with their style. My ability to be effective as a counselor directly relates to my ability to let myself respond as a person who is in relation to the student in front of me. Rather than view the student as an open receptacle for techniques, I let my approach organically arise within me as I sense my way into the student's personality.

As I grow in life experience and self-trust, I also notice myself intentionally pausing to let others' words pass by my felt-sense to notice if they "fit." I find myself saying less frequently "Oh, I wish I had said..." just moments after I leave a conversation, because I take the time to pause in that moment to let my inward sense of the situation articulate the words into speech.

Additionally, I suspect the way Focusing has cultivated gentleness towards myself also plays out in allowing others to simply be, rather than viewing their actions through critical lenses that measure their behavior according to my expectations. A special trust develops when people allow each other “to be.”

Perhaps what I most appreciate is how my growing self-trust, developed from years of Focusing, has allowed me to develop my own genuine approach in my work. I recall disillusionment in graduate school when surrounded by what felt like rote approaches to career counseling. As an impressionable, young graduate student, I was particularly affected by the role models around me. I grew disconcerted thinking the profession I chose would not tap into the original inspiration for my work. I am incredibly grateful for the inner trust that developed from years of Focusing as a child, which allowed me to slowly cut through the measured and controlled approaches to presentations and workshops that I observed in my colleagues so that I could develop my own passionate and vulnerable style.

Developing “my way” has never been easy. When I entered my first job after graduate school, teaching “Let Your Life Speak” classes to college students, I was asked to present my work to the university’s Board of Regents. Only twenty-four years old, with limited public speaking background, I freaked out! Unwilling to pay attention to my fright, I instead feverishly attempted to put together a PowerPoint presentation filled with statistics, assessment, and facts. Just two days before the presentation, nothing was coming together right. I called home crying, and my mother, of course, knew instinctively how to accompany me. As I let go into the fear, I let go of the control, and what I needed to do became obvious. I threw out my presentation and started over with renewed inspiration. I deeply trusted that sharing myself with vulnerability and integrating poignant stories from my students’ lives would connect with the audience in a powerful way. When the moment to present arrived, I walked to the front of the room and stood before some forty Regents as well as University administrators, with butterflies in my stomach. I took a deep breath and began to speak in stories, drawing on my personal experiences. When I finished, the room held an inspired silence. An elderly man in his eighties, formerly a successful executive in Silicon Valley, raised his hand and with tears in his eyes he thanked me for allowing students to explore questions of meaning, purpose, and calling in their lives because he never had the opportunity to address these questions in his own life. That tearful moment affirmed my trust in the power of letting my personal and vulnerable approach guide my presentations.

Trust has been most important and not always easy in the realm of relationships. Always less experienced in this area than my friends, I have been the recipient of their well-meaning advice. When in graduate school I pondered dating a guy who was interested in me; however, I had very serious hesitations. My friends would react to my hesitations by telling me, “You can’t go through life avoiding involvement. You can’t avoid the pain that results in breakups.” Advice is usually the product of personal experience and therefore holds a grain of pragmatic, reasonable truth, which most can relate to. Without my inner anchor, I know that such advice could easily have swayed and confused me.

I have witnessed among my friends innumerable instances in which approaches to relationships become nothing more than attempts at control. They tell me “all relationships require work.” While certainly true and reasonable, I have too often observed how this

mantra glides over inner knowing when what might be fundamentally wrong can simply be “worked on.” Most recently when I was seriously dating someone, and would express painful doubts to friends, they would with best intentions suggest taking time to “work it out.” Referring to my limited dating experience, they would ask how I could possibly know that this person was not the right one for me if I didn’t take time to “work” on the relationship?

Attempting to convince me that hesitations were normal, my friend told me that she had serious doubts just weeks before her wedding. This advice was coming from a friend who would develop a pro/con list for each relationship to determine if her non-negotiable needs were met. She addressed the question of commitment like one might approach a logic question on the Law School Admissions Test.

With a Ph.D., a lucrative career in Silicon Valley, and devilishly good looks, my boyfriend also met the culturally acceptable criteria for a “good catch.” As I prepared myself to break up with him, I was surrounded by friends who were married and having children or who at twenty-nine years of age were anxious they would never meet anyone. Despite the external noise and distractions and my limited dating experience, deep inside I trusted that my self-knowledge was a worthy guide.

In a culture which breeds disconnected behavior, Focusing has provided me with an alternative way of being. I am incredibly grateful to my mother for supporting my inward sensitivity as a child, when such attentiveness is so quickly dulled by a culture that scripts behavior. I witness mothers proudly displaying their infants and doing their best to elicit a smile. While seemingly innocuous, encouraging infants to smile for others begins to teach babies the value of programmed rather than spontaneous behavior. The minute subtleties of cultural norms set the foundation for larger patterns of behavior.

I hear stories of babies purposefully placed in front of “Baby Einstein” videos so that listening to Mozart and watching animated figures move about on the screen will develop their brilliance; however, I suspect what really occurs is a dulling of the senses when babies interact with technology rather than human beings. I watch my ten year old cousin, who is particularly scripted in her behavior, respond with a “you’re welcome” when I held the door open for her. She then immediately fumbled and caught herself because she realized the appropriate response was “thank you.” Amidst such culturally scripted behavior, I feel blessed to have learned another way, which gives uniqueness to my actions by letting my own voice guide me.

Even now I can lose myself in a culture that encourages reactive rather than reflective behavior. I could live on a flat plain of existence, programming my experiences through Ipods, TiVo and virtual cyberspace worlds. I can get lost in a workplace that rewards outcomes and productivity, which quantifies and packages experiences through the lens of time and deadlines.

Not long ago I returned home from work, and as I walked into my apartment, tears welled up in my eyes. I was feeling trapped by the workplace culture in which the inhuman bombardment of stimuli that each year speeds up experiences and moves even more quickly to “action steps,” certainly does not support the attentiveness needed to pause and pay attention inwardly. By gently attending to the “felt-sense” behind those tears, the feel of a trapped

prisoner, frantically wanting to escape its prison emerged. My natural inclination was to assist this mute prisoner in figuring out the best way to escape, or in less figurative terms, to create a way to allow the creative process I was longing for to emerge at work, even amidst the task and goal oriented environment. But the prisoner knew more than I understood at that moment. In my tremendous desire to figure out another way of being at work, I missed the obvious reality deep inside me that the prisoner already felt. The very reality of an eight-hour workday, which demands the completion of a litany of tasks, most of which require a computer to aid in the outcomes, does not allow for the time and space needed for sustained creativity.

By letting go of my desire to somehow bring the creative process more fully and consistently into the workplace, and instead allowing the mute prisoner inside me to acknowledge the unbending limitations to that approach, I surprisingly felt liberated instead of discouraged. Letting go of this desire meant I was letting go of my own cultural programming to “take action,” and this is precisely what the mute prisoner inside needed from me. I simply needed to keep company with the place inside that felt full of unexpressed creativity. Nothing changed in my workplace reality and yet everything shifted in how I felt about the situation.

What then emerged for me was the realization that in order to remain engaged in my work, I must bring my work home. I do not mean bringing home the tasks required to complete a project, but rather bringing home and creating a space for the experiences throughout the day that call for further attention. Whether it is being attentive to the experience of personal hesitation that accompanies a particular planning meeting, or the feel of “too much to do and too little time,” or a particular interaction with someone that rubbed me the wrong way, all these experiences are accompanied by felt meaning. When given attentive presence, they often unfold into new insights, leading to a shift in perspective, an ah-ha moment that may entirely change the way I feel about a particular situation, even when the particulars of the situation remain the same. In this way, I can return to work refreshed and accompany the mundane tasks with the rich felt affects of the creative process.

After a lifetime of Focusing, I still marvel at how an inner shift can change my entire perspective when the externals remain the same. I am still amazed all over again each time I experience anew the simple insights Focusing teaches about letting go and allowing what is real to share its story with me. I am deeply grateful for my growing self-trust, which is neither bounded by my environment nor wedded to outcomes. And I am keenly aware that my behavior with others is only as effective as my ability to be with myself in a Focusing way. Indeed, Focusing has been the most precious gift my mother could have given me.

REFERENCES

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