

MY JOURNEY WITH FOCUSING: A Developmental Process

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“Aging” is an interesting word. We’re all doing it, every moment of our lives. And yet at age 62, I sometimes want to reject that word. “I’m not aging, I’m ripening.” Although my skin and joints are surely past their prime, my sense of myself-in-the-world continues to unfold into something fuller and juicier. Focusing has been a major part of that process.

My “aging” as a focuser has included several important shifts in my understanding of Focusing and listening, and has certainly brought shifts in my relationship with myself. I’ve come to see this adventure of learning and living Focusing as a kind of developmental process. When I began, it seemed that there was a body of information and wisdom that I could take in and then practice, in the form in which it was presented to me, until I could use it effectively. I’ve found that it hasn’t worked that way, and thank goodness for that.

The practice of Focusing interacts differently with each unique human being. It evolves and develops. New meanings emerge. Certain learning tools and understandings that are helpful at one stage of development may not be as useful at a later stage. As I’ve grown and changed, what I need and want has also changed.

Several areas of Focusing come to mind where I’ve gone through an evolving process. There is certainly a path of development that is unique to me, unfolding from my own particular experiences. I also suspect that in some cases the path of development is more universal.

I would like to describe a few of these areas of development, in the hopes of opening further discussion. In some places, I will mention the influences which have crossed with my previous understanding to create something richer and more useful. Sometimes this “crossing” influence was another perspective within the Focusing community, and in other cases it came from outside the Focusing world.

PRESENCE (THE FOCUSING ATTITUDE)

My early understanding of Presence, or the Focusing Attitude, felt inwardly like a mental intention to be non-judgmental, caring and allowing. Gene Gendlin invited us to hold a “friendly attitude” toward what we encountered inside. Ann Weiser Cornell suggested we turn toward each thing with a kind of “interested curiosity.” I also learned to use certain language to support me in bringing my larger self into relationship with something I was experiencing inwardly. As I went further with Focusing, my understanding of Presence was felt more as a bodily-sensed experience of caring, interest, and even welcoming. Peter Campbell and Ed McMahon’s description of Caring-Feeling-Presence, and their exercise of feeling our “affection teacher” in our bodies has contributed to this change. I recall a particular exercise which invited me to sense the feeling that might come in my body if I

were asked to tenderly hold a fragile infant who needed my loving care in order to survive. Now the experience of Presence is something I try to find in my body, rather than in my conscious intention.

ACTION STEPS

At first, I thought my life would begin to move forward magically, just because I was Focusing. I know I was not taught to expect that, but somehow I did. I learned about the work of Atsmaout Perlstein and Bilha Frolinger in which they speak of “Step 7” (the taking of Action Steps) at a time when I was also studying Life Coaching. Now I really value conscious action steps that help me live forward into a situation, interact with it, so something new comes both inside myself and in the situation. Action steps are like little reflections we feed back to whatever in us wants to live forward in some way. It is as if we’re saying to this place, with every little action step, “Is this right? Would this feel right for this wanting?” And we wait for a response.

JOY AND ALIVENESS

I recently discovered that what I want from Focusing has shifted somewhat. What drew me to Focusing initially was the longing for more inner peace and calm, a need for relief from distress. But now I am getting more interested in joy, aliveness, excitement, and challenge. Of course, painful or uncomfortable things still come, and Focusing helps them shift. But perhaps as part of my developmental process, I am starting to notice more of my longings toward my future. At those times, I know I am connecting with the forward-reaching energy of my whole organism, leaning toward what it is wanting and guiding me toward a fulfilling life. And I am getting more sensitive to noticing those wantings.

STRONG EMOTIONS

My understanding of strong emotions has changed quite a bit. When I first learned Focusing, I tried to avoid being “identified” with strong feelings. As Gene Gendlin would caution in his writing, I don’t have to “stick my head in the soup to find out how it smells”. Now I can also see that simply allowing the body’s natural expression of a strong feeling, for example crying, can sometimes be a next step forward. Crying doesn’t necessarily mean I am taken over or identified with the feeling.

I realize that in my own process, crying comes in more than one way. Often tears *follow* a felt shift; they come *with or after* some movement that carries forward. Here, they seem to just come as my body’s expression of relief. At other times, the movement of crying itself can actually *be* the next step, *be* the carrying forward that is needed first, in order to *then* experience a felt shift. These instances happen when I have a warm and caring connection with an *It* and am sensing into “what *It* feels or wants from *It’s* point of view” (my deep gratitude to Ann Weiser Cornell for this). Then *It* sometimes lets me know that *It* wants my body’s natural expression of an emotion to be allowed.

Once, while focusing alone, I had been spending time patiently being with something inside. I “heard” *It* say, “Share this body with me.” I deeply understood that *It* was asking me to allow the natural expression of *It’s* feeling through my real, flesh-and-tissue body. In this particular case, *It* just wanted to cry. *It* wanted to have a sort of “equal access” to bodily expression of *It’s* truth.

I began to notice how empowering and integrating it felt to let something in me cry, shout, moan, or speak, out-loud with intensity, to give *It* an actual physical voice. Often something totally eases, as a result. The pure physicality of these expressions through my living body seems to carry them forward in some way. Often I am aware that I’m still quite solidly grounded in my larger self, even as I let myself fully experience something painful. This is unmistakably different from the times when I know I am “taken over” or identified with a strong feeling. As a result, there is a fresh sense of “owning” something in myself that has been cut off and inviting it to be fully there for me to encounter.

When my body’s process is blocked, I feel stuck in a very uncomfortable, sometimes painful way. As Rob Foxcroft has described, the body’s way is for the feeling to rise like a wave, to be experienced, expressed, and to pass. “We are meant to let the wave rise and pass, in order to be freshly with what’s left behind.”

FUNCTION BEING MORE IMPORTANT THAN FORM

In my early years, I learned the “forms” of the Focusing process as they were taught by various trainers. By “forms” I mean the ways of doing things, the steps, stages, language of Focusing. Sometimes these forms were controversial. One teacher would say, “Do this”, and another would say, “Don’t do that.” Some liked Clearing A Space; some did not. Some waved away The Critic dismissively, while another turned toward it with curiosity and compassion.

As I have gone further in my own explorations, I am starting to see beyond the form to the function. Many different forms may serve the same function. And certain forms may be more or less useful and effective, depending on the function we are asking them to serve.

Clearing a Space, when introduced as a way to experience the content-less state of Presence, may help people, in a sense, “back into” Presence by temporarily moving out anything that isn’t Presence. Things that are noticed, acknowledged and set out may then be attended to from a deeper sense of Presence. But if Clearing a Space is used to remove things from our experiencing bodies, to get rid of them or exile them, then it undermines another important function of Focusing: *being with* our own experiencing.

I’ve been inspired by the work of Herb Benson, who wrote *The Relaxation Response*, describing the essential functions beneath a large variety of different practices (forms). When I learn of various methods and techniques in Focusing, I try now to understand the essential functions they serve within the Focusing process.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OUTER AND INNER SAFETY

When I first started Focusing, I had a very strained relationship with myself. I had little ability to bring the caring, non-judgmental awareness of Presence to what I was experiencing. Looking back, I think the receptive *listening* of Focusing partners was an essential part of learning to hold that same state of Presence within myself. I had rarely experienced the feeling of unconditional acceptance before.

I began to enjoy this kind of listening so much that I felt disappointed and even annoyed when I didn't get it. Something in me not only wanted it but was demanding it, as if I required this kind of outer safety in order to feel safe within myself. This is the kind of outer safety often talked about within our Focusing community. Over a period of years, a number of experiences related to outer and inner safety left me wondering about the relationship between the two.

It became a little clearer with my exposure to two sources of learning outside the Focusing community. When I started to study Non-Violent Communication, there was a noticeable change in how the issue of safety felt inside me. Later, more clarity came as I encountered the work of Dr. David Schnarch, including his book *Passionate Marriage*. I am deeply grateful to him for his work on the process of growth and development within committed relationships. I especially love his distinction between 'other-validated intimacy' and 'self-validated intimacy'. It helped me see that there was a place beyond where I was, and I wanted to go there.

I recently read a sentence written to a discussion list by Suzanne Noel, who has developed a uniquely facilitative process she calls 'Recovery Focusing' for working with addictions. With her permission, I share it here:

"When someone can be with me just as I am, I can be with myself just as I am."

The sentence captured the essence of my earliest feelings about outer safety. And I now see that there is place beyond what this sentence points to, a place that has much more to do with Inner Safety. So, to make the sentence more my own, here's how I would say it now:

"When someone can be with me just as I am, I can LEARN to be with myself just as I am EVEN when someone else cannot be with me just as I am (because they are afraid, or criticize me, or want to change me). And maybe then I can be with THEM just as they are."

Outer safety may be an essential foundation for the development of inner safety. What has evolved in me is that outer safety is not the end place I am seeking. It's a developmental step toward *something further*: an inner safety that is not shaken by the lack of outer safety. I even notice that sometimes things that used to feel "unsafe" now feel only very uncomfortable.

I also know that when I am challenged by *not* being received with unconditional positive regard from another person, I stretch my ability to feel safe *inside* and to speak my own truth, even in the face of criticism. In a moment of not being validated, there is an opportunity for growth in the development of my self. My favorite focusing teachers actu-

ally embody this further development of inner safety, although it is not often talked about explicitly. I wish it were.

WHAT MORE MAY COME?

Looking back, I see how I have begun to trade a static view for a developmental perspective. Earlier in my life, each new understanding came with a sense that I had finally arrived at my truth. It has taken an accumulation of remembered changes in my “truth” to finally tip the balance to a more tentative way of holding each new understanding. I delight in knowing that these current places where my thinking rests are only stops along the way. I have a real sense of excitement about what more may come.

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