

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT FOCUSING AND AGING: Losses and Gains

Joan Lavender, Psy.D.

INTRODUCTION

It never occurred to me that my practice of Focusing would be subject to an aging process. But why not? Along with changes in my Focusing, listening, and guiding skill have come other aspects of aging that have clearly affected my “fluency and fluidity”. I notice these on a daily basis as they affect my professional and personal life.

The definition of my problem — of memory, fluency and fluidity — seemed simple enough when I began this piece. It would be about the existential fact of how these real losses have affected my practice of Focusing, guiding and listening. But as this theme developed, it underwent its own carrying forward. The way I have held this apparently simple issue has become a doorway into the question of my life as a Focusing Therapist. You are invited to come along as the situation — the problem, my confusions, partial clearings, etc. are transformed. I will start with the “fact” of my memory.

It is an unalterable fact that my ability to be in a Focusing mode, to listen and reflect, and even, in some ways to guide Focusing, has changed over the last fifteen years. My ability to form a felt sense has waned. It is harder to remain suspended in felt sensing while waiting for words to come. Often the right words never come. I miss that moment. And then there is the challenge of holding two evanescent things in my awareness simultaneously. I lose one; it drops out while I am waiting for the other. I notice instead (okay, so focus on this!) the absence of felt sensing, the presence of this absence. I notice the falsity when I try to convince myself that it IS a felt sense. I know better.

My immediate memory is evanescent. It is not a matter of inattention or even of anxiety, although I am definitely worried about all this. I attend to the focuser, yet their words evaporate before I can reflect them. Without the precision of their words and phrases, I quickly lose the pathway to their implicit. So I cannot convey to the focuser that I am “at home in the universe of the other person” (Rogers, et al, p. 104) even when I am. Even careful paraphrasing could keep someone into a shallow pool, or worse — a lead them down a blind alley. Better to stay quiet.

The flow of this paper is as follows: the problem, about me, how I have held Focusing, from Focusing to Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy to Focusing Oriented Relational Psychotherapy, observations on two delicate, passionate processes, and, finally, wanting it all.

THE PROBLEM

What is getting in the way of my Focusing? Is it some deep theoretical disagreement that cuts me off from my experiencing? Is it due to changes in the way that Focusing is being taught? Is it punishment for having written a dissertation that includes a critique of

Focusing? Have I not practiced enough? Is it the low dose of antidepressant I needed to help me through a family crisis? Is this the start of dementia? And/or, am I “holding” Focusing in different ways over time?

I am leading a workshop to teach theory and practice of Focusing to psychotherapists. Some are newcomers; others have a good grasp of Focusing. We have practiced pieces of the process, done listening rounds, etc. The students are enthusiastic and inspired. We are nearing the end, and I notice myself thinking, “Joan, you just might get away without doing a demonstration!” Then someone says, “Could you show us how the process looks when are you teaching a new person?”

I find myself in front of everyone, sitting in an unfriendly chair that rolls on its own volition. All has been going well, but my gut is now saying something quite the opposite. Some part of me realizes the predicament we are in, yet I am too frozen to allow it to be part of our process. My new focuser is a young woman from a distant culture, bravely learning Focusing in English. She has expressed her wish to learn this method. Now I sense her struggle to not let her nerves get the best of her. I want to be gentle and trust that my teaching her the skill of Focusing steps will be enough to help her find herself in this moment. But my voice is hollow, and my suggestions disembodied. And I cannot remember what I have said, even a moment before.

When it is clear that this is not working, my concern for her overrides my paralysis. I say something like, “I am so wanting to help you find a Focusing moment here, but I’m having a hard time following our process and your words, or even my own.” I am leaning toward her and speaking softly about this collapse in my performance. I force myself to peek at the group. Shame flashes through me, and I am readying myself to offer a long list of self-flagellations. I am supposed to be an expert.

The group is quiet. Someone says *sotto voce*, “This is really hard to do, and especially out in front of other people.” One student says that she is touched by the connection we are making about the connection we are not making. This comment about the interplay of relating, technique and context goes to the heart of this piece.

Back to the story. I hold back my urge to confess. That would be my old way of proceeding. But I have learned (through years of Focusing) to stay alive to the process. So I stop cringing, open my eyes and see that this fiasco has created a situation that is . . . interesting. The students are learning MORE from this poignant moment than from a seamless performance.

Fine for them . . . what about me? For now, and maybe forever, I will make every attempt to avoid a repeat of such fiascos. I am not going to offer anyone else a poor experience of Focusing or listening! I am not going to leave anyone stranded mid-stream. I cannot count on myself as a reference to guide others. I’ve lost my sea legs.

ABOUT ME

Some personal background will lend an added perspective to the issue of losing Focusing, memory, etc. My colorful, complicated, poignant family embraced humanistic

psychology the way other families find comfort in religion. My parent's crowd changed (and exchanged) spouses, grew beards, wore love beads. Many mistook my depression for the spiritual manifestation of "an old soul".

My parents threw psychological terms around like confetti. We had more than our share of passions and eccentricities: sadly, some of my family members had real psychiatric problems. We needed help. The humanistic movement, with its emotional and sensual overload, obscured some of the stranger sides of our family life.

While my father was out canoeing with his therapist and my mother befriending the Black Panthers, I became a dance therapist. Then my mother joined a dance therapy group, and my father went into Gestalt therapy. In the meantime, along with some good enough psychotherapy, I learned Focusing. Thank goodness, no one in my family got to Focusing first!

Precious aspects of my personality and professional identity found a safe place when I found Focusing. I had been the family listener: now Focusing gave me a chance to be listened to. Focusing insulated me from the alienating objectification coming from the analytic world back then, and equally from the wild and crazy fringe. The process spoke to my poetic rhapsodic side. And, most of all, it gave hope to my depth.

HOW I HAVE HELD FOCUSING

I see now that I have held Focusing in different ways through the years. In my twenties my memory was impeccable, and my ability to sustain a felt sensing mode was buoyant. Focusing also provided me with professional cache and a prowess I could demonstrate. This worked nicely into the grander image I had of being the special one with magical powers. I smile as I write this; power is not a word that I associate with Focusing. So my early use of Focusing actually ran contrary to Gendlin's democratic non-guru grassroots intent.

I also needed to find a way of getting close to others without losing myself in them. Focusing guidelines provided this balance. The first focusing/listening guidelines did not yet reflect the genius and radical vision of Gendlin's philosophy. Or maybe they did, but I wasn't sophisticated enough to grasp them. The initial advice was cast in old paradigm thinking i.e. "put your own stuff aside, and be prepared to listen to the (separate) focuser." I just went ahead, followed the instructions (including the one that said forget all this if you and your focuser need something different!), and it all came out beautifully. Decades later some of us now consider: Do you ever put your own stuff aside? Is it your own stuff only? Is the focuser ever a truly separate person? Is the isolated mind a myth?

Yet for me, back then, this iteration of the Focusing world was "flat"; everything and everyone was in their place, and I loved it that way.

FROM FOCUSING TO FOCUSING ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY TO FOCUSING ORIENTED RELATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

In my thirties I had no problems with Focusing, guiding, listening or memory. My mind was opening up to complex questions and discrepant theories about psychotherapy. I had arrived at the view that Focusing was essential, yet not sufficient, to sustain a psychotherapy session. This was no secret, but I had to arrive at it myself — experientially. I allowed myself to question the relationship of skill or technique to authenticity, an issue that remains unanswered.

I struggled with what to do with my awareness of something about my client that did not fit into the structure of the Focusing Therapy. Do we adapt the structure and, if so, how? How do these changes affect the Focuser? What to do with my own reactions to us together? These issues buzzed in my head, affecting my ability to create and sustain a pure Focusing Attitude.

One clinical moment captures the dilemma of this transition well. I had been working with a lovely woman in pure Focusing sessions as psychotherapy. During this time I was involved in psychoanalytic process research, observing with slow motion video how therapists manage their own anxiety in difficult moments in difficult sessions. (Freedman & Lavender, p. 81). I saw that therapists' movement patterns and cognitive processing go hand-in-hand, and that slight changes in movement behavior indicate when the therapist is taking a moment to refer inwardly to his/her own separate awareness. This internal action is usually preceded by a slight postural shift away from the client and a change of facial orientation. In other words, the therapist is having a brief private moment to think about something. But from a Focusing perspective, this slightest of gestures has great implications. It is a clinical faux pas.

I felt uncomfortable entertaining the idea of “thinking about” my client separate from being with her while listening to her in an active listening mode. Yet I did have a distinct need to think about her as well as plenty of thoughts about us. What was I supposed to do with them? In the next session, at a certain point, I found myself shifting my position and drawing my gaze into myself. She was instantly disoriented and . . . shocked. While we weathered this crisis, we never truly resolved it. I didn't have the relational skills at that point to make good therapeutic use of that crucial moment.

This incident signaled a turn toward a different kind of Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy. Pure active listening placed limits on my awareness. I needed my own subjectivity, but did not yet know how to use it.

The greater complexity of our engagement raised my anxiety. I needed more theoretical knowledge of the relational aspects of our work as well as a seasoned ability to improvise. My attention was challenged by the inclusion of more levels. This development temporarily affected my ability to remember details. I missed the flow of a Focusing session. I had learned to trust the intrinsic structure of the process, its rhythms, pregnant pauses and the reconstellating of experience that came with felt shift. I missed knowing what to do.

When I first began to conceive of psychotherapy as including me (and every one and everything else) as embedded in complex relational fields, I could only picture us each separately, but interacting. When I feel us as ‘interaction’, I think of the following quote:

My sense of you, the listener, affects my experiencing as I speak, and your response partly determines my experiencing a moment later. What occurs to me, and how I live as we speak and interact, is vitally affected by every word and motion you make, and by every facial expression and attitude you show

. . . It is not merely a matter of what I think you feel about me. Much more, I am affected even without stopping to notice it yet, every response you give me, I experience your responses . . . Thus is it not the case that I tell you about me, and then we figure out how I should change, and then somehow, I do it. Rather, I am changing as I talk, and think and feel, for your responses are every moment part of my experiencing, and partly affect, produce, symbolize and interact with it. (Gendlin, p. 38.)

In factoring myself into our shared equation, I can no longer pretend to simply factor myself out. Yet, this does not mean that the sessions are all about me, or us, or that we discuss all this explicitly all the time. Far from it. What emerges as salient moves from moment to moment and my responses are equally contextual. Pure active listening, noticing the quality of our relating in the next moment, taking in the details of an important story, being confused together, disembedding, etc. That’s how it goes.

One thing remains constant — the leaning into moments of incomplete processing that carry forward meaning. This applies not only to the client’s processing, or to my own (privately), but also equally to the implicitly sensed incomplete process that carries forward our implicit force fields, our undertows, and to all manner of relational meanings.

Hypothetically, we should be able to bring our experiencing to whatever beckons. But I notice a big problem here. My capacity to stay present to whatever is occurring actually waxes and wanes. My ability to stay in a Focusing mode is definitely not a steady state. I am exquisitely vulnerable to shifts within, between, among, etc. There are things I can’t fathom, issues I need to tune out, blind angles, densities, as well as the natural obliviousness that comes with the fatigue of being in the labor-intensive role of a therapist.

So perhaps my forgetting and my impaired Focusing, guiding and listening have to do with questions of the meaning I make of the immediate context. So I know that there will be always be aspects of our being together that I do not fathom. Sometimes, if I am lucky, felt sensing informs me of these, like the canary in the mineshaft. Perhaps my inability to even form a felt sense functions like a clue.

Now I’ve got it! My ability focus, guide and listen are themselves contextual and can never be a steady state!

Experiencing brings some difficult moments into emergence, but other perspectives appear only later on, when I “step out” of our context and view them from another angle. I am listening to many levels from many levels, and they are not continuously accessible.

Here is an interesting application of Focusing Oriented Relational Psychotherapy. You can see that we drift from fantasy to reality, from present to past, from I and thou, from my private self to my client, and all back again, in a moment. Any ideas I have formed about Terry’s situation are offered as felt sense hunches. What is unusual here is that Terry **is actually listening to my experiencing.**

Terry is furious with me, yet has agreed to come in for a last session before quitting therapy. She has been involved in this therapeutic adventure beyond her expectations, her symptoms are fading, and we have been hopeful for her. But now I make a mistake, putting our delicate relationship on the rocks. In the midst of a migraine, I made a hasty decision about a serious issue in Terry’s life. Shocked and betrayed, Terry flared up at me. “It’s over!”

On the phone, I am trying hard to remember all the details and to just listen. Damn that migraine, why don’t I just tell her that I wasn’t thinking straight! I actually do trust Terry, but now, well, here we are in this tough place. I am also aware that this specific kind of crisis/betrayal between us has an air of inevitability, but now we are in it, living it.

Terry reluctantly agrees to come in. Sitting across from me, she is watching me very closely as I struggle to follow her. I am in two places at the same time, sensing how she is watching me and trying to stay in touch with my own insides. My felt sense informs me that Terry is watching to see how I am with all of this very real difficulty between us. She is getting ‘something’ out of this mess. She tells me sternly that she expects me to be real with her, as always. This means that I share the impact she is having on me in the moment. She refuses any response that hints of her definition of a staid therapeutic stance; she wants the living substance! Right now I am her therapist facing her imminent departure. I continue in the experiential mode that we have cultivated and both grown to trust:

J: (sensing inward) I’m asking myself what I am noticing inside myself, as I sit here with you, knowing you are leaving . . . I understand what you are saying about betrayal . . . if I tell you exactly what I notice, one thing is feeling . . . honored, no . . . relieved . . . that you have come in, but just now I feel more a . . . pathetic feeling . . . like right now . . . (checking words with bodily felt sensing) I am . . . pathetic. (Yes, that really fits.) I note to myself . . . where is this going? I am reaching out to you, as someone who does not want to be here, really. (I can feel the pathetic in my chest, caved in, my arms reaching out, pathetically, hunched over.) . . . And I noticed myself feeling . . . reduced, it’s kind of . . . agonizing . . . helpless, yes, that’s the way it seems to some part of me . . . helpless, agonized, pathetic . . . yes, that seems right.

T: (watching and listening closely). You feel pathetic!?! (She smiles slightly, and I can feel a shift in the atmosphere between us. I still don't know where this is going.)

J: Yes, that's it . . . like you are dragging your body to be here, but you don't really want to be here with me. And that there is absolutely nothing I can do about it.

T: (giggles) You really do look pathetic. Oh, (she moves into her own deeper level) . . . like I am almost . . . (trying out words to felt sensing) enjoying seeing you this way? Like there's a pleasure in seeing you like this (in a dramatic fanciful tone) . . . I'm the one who can leave, but you have to be left! Poor therapist. You have no choice! I could almost feel sorry for you . . . (she is silent, then her mood darkens) . . . take my father . . . he always promised to come . . . I would wait . . . he would never come . . . it made me feel . . . oh! Pathetic.

J: Pathetic? You too?

Terry has never spoken from her direct experience about the pain of feeling pathetic around her tantalizing father. She has talked around it, but never been able to speak *from* it. My experiential dimension, our shared dimension, has brought her to this.

Later that day my insides are still wrenching. How awful, if she were to have left just then — awful for each of us, for us together. How fragile all this is . . .

While I failed Terry (in the incident preceding this session) in the session cited, I was able to manage my feelings enough to be able to use Focusing as a way to carry forward my, and then her (our) experiencing. Staying present to the “pathetic”, we made great use of that moment!

Terry's session is a more successful version of the same issue I confronted in the first example I shared with you at the start of this paper. In the first story, in grasping for faltering “technique”, I lost the opportunity to carry forward the meaning of our context. I explained this to myself only as a gaping ‘senior moment’. Yet it is also likely that I ‘spaced out’ in response to the anxiety inherent for each of us in this difficult moment. There was too much going on inside me — too much meaning. What saved us was our wish to stay connected despite the odds. This intent came through in the way we maintained our physical closeness, the way we looked at each other, and how the softness of our voices held each other's feelings. We were right there! I wish I could have taken my time! Yet I see now, with greater compassion for myself, that these gaps exist for a reason.

TWO DISTINCT FELT SENSES

I have described the evolution of my first Focusing practice and my current work. I have emphasized the continuity of philosophy, theory and spirit. But there are also signifi-

cant differences in my life as a therapist then and now. The felt sense of working in different ways — all including Focusing — is different. Working in a purely Focusing mode speaks to my aesthetic sensibilities. The feel of being in the slightly altered realm of the implicit, the alternating rhythms of pause and emergence, has a beauty all its own: Hopeful expectancy amid the uncertainty. The presence of fluency and fluidity. And there is the comfort of knowing what to do.

The felt sense of being a Focusing Oriented Relational Psychotherapist/ Psychoanalyst is distinctly different. The word ‘courage’ jumps up immediately. I do not know what will emerge within, within or between us, but by now I’m pretty sure that it will require emotional courage. Tangle, stuck, cliff, risk, abyss, etc. It fits with my memory of a trip to Costa Rica rafting down a tropical river, discovering snakes along the way, getting snagged on the rocks, resting deeply after a long, exciting, exhausting adventure. Seeing first growth rainforest! Almost going off the deep end!

I am deeply, but not fearlessly, committed to the tangles, precipices, faux pas and moments of grace. This is the felt sense I take into my psychotherapy office these days.

My work — inspired by the process optimism of Gendlin’s philosophy — is enriched by the current developments in psychoanalysis that come closest to the spirit of Gendlin’s contribution. This complex marriage speaks to two sides of my nature — the darkly furrowed psychoanalytic and the luminosity of focusing. The sheer variety of moving parts and shifting levels makes the process more complex.

OBSERVATIONS ON TWO DELICATE REALMS OF PASSIONATE EXPRESSIVENESS

Analogies, like metaphors, are an important part of Focusing. This brings to mind an analogy between two realms of passionate expressiveness i.e. the Focusing process itself and the nature and process of sexual passion. I offer these considerations in a nascent form, as they have been a persistent voice (duet?) in my life as a therapist — and so deserve a chance to be heard.

In both cases, the elements of inner life and the physical seem to need to be poised in particular relation to each other. Slight shifts in the alignment of imagery, the senses, physical urges and the emotional life of the individual are the ingredients of the system. Passionate sexual process relies on the interplay of arousal and physiology, fantasy and psychology, the highly voluble with the palpable ordinary. Orgasm — the manifestation of that tipping point — occurs when psychology becomes physiology, releasing heart, mind, fantasy, passion, love, longing and, some say, soul.

Sexual and Focusing experiencing each occur within a timeless zone that removes us for a brief yet essential moment from the tethers of reality. In sex, desire is the fluid; without desire, orgasm does not take flight. In Focusing, bodily felt sensing is the fluid; felt shift and meaning emerge from the delicate poisoning of felt sensing to language.

Both are experiences of passion which “inaugurates a reversal within the world of expression: it is the breakthrough of another side to things.” (Jager, p. 349) Moments of felt

shift occur in a slightly altered state of consciousness. Felt shift is a distinct phenomenon, a sense of grace, an opening, etc. Both phenomena are famously delicate and require a letting go. In each context, one remembers and cherishes such moments. Both have a touch of the miraculous.

It's fascinating to me that both sexual/sensual process and Focusing process require fine lines of experiential distinction. In both contexts, misfiring, misunderstanding, misusing, mechanization — and even faking — are all possible outcomes.

Like all living systems, despite the tremendous role they have in sustaining human vitality and creativity, these phenomena morph and eventually break down. It's easier to understand how this must happen in sexual passion, with its need for sheer physical effort and a resilient physiology. Is it simply, as a friend with a gift for humor recently said, "When the pilot is off, don't expect the burners to work." Do we just give it up or deny its significance?

Or can we keep the essence of passionate experience while transforming its context? A Focusing process is not subject to the perils of the physical. So why would it wane? Why should it fade? Perhaps there is even a surprising dialectic between frailty of body and strength of spirit as we become older. (Gadow, p. 144) Could I at least consider that the practice (in the literal sense of the word) of Focusing could sustain my precious fluency, fluidity and passion?

IN CLOSING

This paper is a good example of the Focusing process itself. In true Focusing style, I find myself in a much different place than my original point of departure. I started in a panic — seeing my loss of memory as a sheer function of aging. This explanation carries its own ring of truth and carries with it a real sense of loss. I will do my best to offset this with replenishment of my skills and practice.

But then it occurs to me, through the course of this piece, that my worry about my memory is much more than this existential fact. I start to see how memory itself is a much more complex phenomenon. My developing capacity to hold experiences of greater complexity, to tolerate the attendant anxiety, to stay present to the uncertainty, is the gain. I am listening to more levels from more levels. In fact, now I see that, through the literary device of worrying about memory, I can step back and see what has happened, not only to me, but also for me, as I have become an older person.

The vision of the human capacity for meaning making articulated in Gendlin's philosophy and method have given me glimpses of a different way of being in the world. It has made it possible for me to be involved in life on a more molecular level while simultaneously appreciating its vastness and beauty. I can appreciate the complex unfolding nature of situations, and smile at my futile need to prejudge. It is living in Focusing philosophy (as applied in the method) that has given me the trust and permission to see how this piece develops. I can even trust the unfolding nature of uncertainty. Trusting uncertainty, being curious about uncertainty, having confidence in . . . uncertainty?

WANTING IT ALL

It seems proper to end this piece with a bit of Focusing. I sit back, notice my breathing, taking time to court uncertainty, and the following comes up: the image of a fist balled into my gut . . . “I want it all”.

“What is the ‘all’ that I am wanting? On one level, I want to keep my perfect Focusing, guiding and listening skill. Give it back!! And I want to always be able to stand back and see the greater context. But since the contexts are ever expanding, there is no spot I can ever find to perch myself on to get that perspective.

I will never have full access to what is occurring while I am participating in it and creating it. There will always be things that emerge later; there will always be shifting contexts that I cannot fathom. I do not want to use Focusing to avoid the facing of an awkward relational moment, but, of course, that will happen. And I don’t ever want to lose Focusing as a way to carry forward experiencing. “Let’s take time to sense what this moment is like . . .”

I continue with my Focusing to close this paper. I am chuckling about the part of me that always wants it all. Yes, I know you are there. Maybe nothing else will happen now.

Then I have an image . . . of Harpo Marx! Hmm, I must be conjuring this up; it just can’t be a real felt sense. Harpo has on his magic overcoat, the shopworn one that looks like nothing special on the outside. To passersby he is a little hobo with a car horn for a voice. But then he opens his coat! Full of zippers, secret pockets, and holes, he produces a red silk scarf, then musical instruments with blooping sounds and finally, a live chicken. Finally, he reaches deep inside and out comes a bouquet of my favorite spring flowers! And all that with his famous cryptic smile. He’s got a lot to give, that silent little guy, in his own crazy way.

REFERENCES

- Gadow, S. (1983). Frailty and strength: the dialectic in aging. In *The Gerontologist* 23 (2) 144-147.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1962). *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Jager, B. (1978). Toward a phenomenology of the passions. In R. Valle & M. King, *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lavender, J. & Freedman, N. (1997). On receiving the patient’s transference: the symbolizing and desymbolizing counter transference. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 45:1, 79-104.
- Rogers, C.R., Gendlin, E.T., Kiesler, D.J. & Truax, C.B. (Eds.) (1967). *The therapeutic relationship and its impact: A study of psychotherapy with schizophrenics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.