

FOCUSING AND AGING

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What can I say about the theme of Focusing and aging that isn't already self-evident? Short-term memory decreases — yes! Sometimes I totally forget an appointment. But so far, not one client has come in vain — I just wasn't prepared for the person showing up at that moment. The good thing is that as soon as the person starts her session, we can both be fully present with what is there, and often, relevant memories from earlier sessions come up. Maybe one could name this 'Companioning in Focusing *Despite* Aging'.

So, I would now like to change the subject title to '*Focusing Over The Years*'.

I started Focusing in 1983, at the age of 52. Of course, *over the years* a lot has changed, intensified, and developed in my way of Focusing, listening/guiding and teaching. I can't help wondering . . . Would the changes have been any different if I had, let's say, started Focusing at age 32 instead of 52? I don't know.

What actually increased most over time is *confidence in the process of the Focuser* — a confidence that fosters the practice of simply being with what's there. In turn, this being with what's there brings a reassurance for both the Focuser and the companion.

This confidence has especially had its effect on my way of being with 'obstacles'. I no longer want, expect, or even hope for those obstacles to change. I just want to get further acquainted with them and understand more about their origin.

I also want to acknowledge the hard work of my obstacles, for my own good — especially in the past, when there really was a need for their acting out. Now that I am aware of their worrying for me, I can say, "Thank you for warning me! I will take your message into account." This gives the obstacles and barriers a chance to release. Simply being with them, just the way they are, in an invitational way, appears to be a rich source of acceptance, of caring, and sometimes even loving what (up until that current moment) had been abandoned, suppressed, deformed — despite their good intentions.

In a recent Focusing session about *the whole of my Focusing in 26 years*, two words came up: Love and *Aandacht* (a Dutch word I will explain later on).

Love: In 1981, two years before I met Focusing, I participated in a five-day workshop with Elisabeth Kübler Ross on Life, Death and Transition. That training was a great and memorable experience. The workshop brought some big shifts for me that initiated major and lasting changes in my life. I am still feeling deeply grateful for having had the privilege of working with Elisabeth.

She considered 'unconditional love' as the one and only tool for dealing with what keeps you from 'finishing your unfinished business'. This prerequisite of love was a 'standard' that I felt certain I could not meet. In my experience love isn't something I could

provide upon request. For me, love is not just there. It can only sprout and grow from the core of my being, and that takes time . . . and more.

Aandacht: What enables love to grow? What, I wondered, was something I could deliberately do in order to make a space where love might grow? That, to me, is *aandacht*. This is a Dutch word, usually translated as ‘Attention’, but so much richer in meaning (especially as an adverb *aandachtig*). *Aandacht* has many layers. Let me try to explain.

In my Dutch-English dictionary I find: (close) attention, noticing, consideration. We also have the word *attentie*, which mostly concerns outer things, like a warning, an announcement, or a friendly gesture. *Aandacht* has to do with listening, sensing something you want to know and understand better, be it something in oneself, in another person, in a text, in nature, or in a spiritual field.

Being with the word *Aandacht* in a Focusing way, made a whole field of related words emerge. Maybe none of them can be translated exactly into English, but I’ll try:

Being there, being present, positive (yet not skipping negative aspects), curious, not expecting anything, an open stillness (rather than the absence of noise), receptive, listening, sensing, being alive to ‘all of it’ — yet at the same time listening for nuances and undertones, for contradictions and untruths, to what is present and what is lacking. It is a kind of not knowing, open to what’s there. It is the way one would be with a sick baby: “Oh . . . what is the matter with you?” without words, and also the way one would listen in awe to something beyond one’s usual field of experience.

The *aandacht of the listener* stretches forth beyond the words, over the tone of voice, over the pace and emotional load, over body language.

Aandacht became my main tool in Focusing and listening. Both in my own Focusing, and in companioning a Focuser, I learned not to ask myself what to ‘do’ in an unclear situation, but rather intensify my *aandacht* for what was actually happening, asking quietly inside, “Is there more to it, under the surface, than what can be seen, felt and heard?”

In my experience, tone and intensity in the companion’s voice, as well as pausing and ‘humming’, are way more important than the words they choose. Words, other than the Focuser’s, may be quite helpful, but can also be very disturbing. I was shocked when a beginner in Focusing told me that one has to learn ‘Focusing Language’ before one can learn Focusing and listening. I do assume that her teacher had not meant it that way!

Aandacht for where the words come from, for what is there as a bodily process before the words are formed, that, in my experience, is what really matters for both the Focuser and the companion.

Over the years my ability for *aandacht* — and love — has widened and deepened. Is this specific to aging? Let’s say it just takes time.

Maybe an *increase in gentleness* is more specific as one ages. I have the feeling — and people around me confirm this — that I became more gentle and milder in aging.

However, I can still be unexpectedly defensive, reacting rather than responding. This, of course, is a good reason for even more Focusing!

Here I stopped writing this story. A few days later my Focusing partner came, and I focused on my bodily felt experience at the very beginning of a defensive reaction. A sharp flash, like a blow-pipe flame, shot up from deep in my belly and all over my chest and shoulders. It came with the words, "I won't let you overrule me!" (There was a time I had a hard job not getting overruled).

Then a deep laughter came up, together with the word '*Asjemenou?!*' I just couldn't stop laughing, my partner laughed with me, for minutes we handed that word back and forth over and over, laughing all the time. This word (actually it is half a sentence) is slightly slang-ish. It is usually spelled with both a question mark and an exclamation mark, and that shows its very nature: an expression of amazement or wondering, and a questioning or invitation for further information. The word often has a disarming effect. My dictionary says, 'well, I never', a friend translated it into 'Be my guest'. Both are not quite *it*. Just *Asjemenou?!* feels helpful to bring a change in that old pattern of the flame.

This session took about ten minutes. It was enough.

Still, the idea of responding with an *asjemenou?!* brings up a big smile. Each time when I meet the paper at the mirror (where I put it in big letters) and even at this moment that I am writing, that word makes me smile. Probably it won't prevent every flame, but just feeling the possibility of how things could work out is already great! Overcoming a tough habit might be somewhat harder at an older age, but I give it a good chance. Creating a space for an old pattern where it might change is a challenge, and at this time it is fun too.

Truly, Focusing is a lifelong affair!