

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PROCESSING AGING AND PAIN

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This article is written for people who are aging and in pain, and for those who are working with people concerned about aging and pain. I will begin by describing some of my own experiences with aging and pain, then present some practical ways that help people understand, and thus experience aging and pain as processes, rather than as fixed structures. Hopefully, these processes will be seen to have their own beauty and spirituality.

Included in this approach are new experiential ways of being with pain, especially when faced with chronic and severe pain that seems to remain stuck and even overwhelming. Eugene Gendlin's Focusing approach, Marshall Rosenberg's Non-Violent Communication, and Robert Gonzales's Beauty of Needs, will be integrated to show how they may be used to help bring about change, and healing. Case studies will be presented. I believe that Beauty of Needing/Focusing as described by David Young can carry a process forward to bring hope, healing, and wholeness (personal communications, September 5, 2009–February 28, 2010).

PERSONAL HISTORY

In the last several years I have had six surgical operations. I learned that I was a “slow healer” which means that it takes me a longer than average time to heal from surgeries. The last operation, a hip replacement, left me with a great deal of overall pain and lack of stamina. I often awakened in the morning with “blinding” pain. This meant that I felt overwhelming pain throughout my body without any differentiation. My whole body *was* pain. I was unable to do many things that I did before. Walking became painful. And the pain limited my activities. I have had to grieve these losses and the resulting limitations.

I confused aging and pain. I knew intellectually that aging does not necessarily bring pain. But I did not have a felt experience of the difference. Pain started to overwhelm me in my early sixties. So aging and pain remained intertwined experientially. Aging, as well as pain, became negative concepts for me. Pain has been the one aspect of aging that has remained stuck for me. I have felt hopeless about pain. I thought that it would not improve with age.

The first thing I had to do was to separate aging and pain. Conceptually I knew that aging and pain are not one and the same. But I had to find different felt places for each of them. I let a felt sense of aging form in my body. It felt like a hopeless road going downhill. I used a combination of Clearing a Space and Finding a Certain Distance using an image of some apartments near our home. I put the felt sense of aging in one apartment. Interestingly, aging by itself did not feel so bad. There was more of a sense of curiosity. Then I let a felt sense of my pain form in my body. It felt like an overwhelming, red body of pain that was

larger than myself. I imagined putting that felt sense in another apartment. This brought some easing and felt better than before. But the inside-sense continued to feel hopeless, overwhelming, and painful.

I have used Clearing a Space, Finding a Certain Distance, and Focusing on my relationship to my pain, medication, relaxation, meditation, physical therapy, and exercise. Sometimes I prayed for a gift that would bring even some small step of easing. For example, I have received the memory of a hymn or a verse of poetry that eased my pain for a short time. Each approach brought a step of easing, but not a felt shift, an entirely different way of being with my pain.

Then I received a gift — a wonderful felt shift that brought a different way of *being* with my overwhelming pain. Tears came with this shift. I could see my pain as a process! (I might call it “pain-ing”.) Pain was no longer something negative. It was an ongoing, complex, intricate, changing process. I could see my pain as a mystery — a mystery in the sense of feeling awe for a process that was ever changing — one that I could not control. It was a process that would continually bring new, as yet unknown, feelings and meanings. Now I was more able to accept my pain, less likely to dread it, and more likely to look at it with a newly found curiosity.

In the above experience, I found beauty in the process of pain itself. Something else that I realized I could do was to bring something that already had a feeling of mystery and awe to my feeling of hopelessness about pain. This resulted in my felt sense being more complex, intricate, and whole. And it helped carry my process forward.

For example, I had a red hibiscus bush on my patio. The red flowers brought a felt sense of mystery and awe. I held both my felt sense of a red hibiscus flower and my helpless feeling of blinding pain together and asked, “How does this whole thing feel?” I was then able to breathe more deeply and relax my body more. Because I can easily get stuck in my pain, I found it important to begin with a life giving felt sense and bring it to my felt sense of pain and or aging. I also found that my process was best carried forward if I brought a felt sense of something simple (such as that of a flower) rather than a felt sense of something complex (such as that of a relationship) (Hinterkopf, 2009).

Of course, if something other than pain came up in my process, I would practice Focusing on whatever that was. The basic guideline is to use Focusing on whatever is most present. For example, one day I was Focusing on the beauty of aging. I started feeling edgy, frustrated, and sad. So I used Focusing on these feelings. I noticed that the sensations were generally in my chest. I waited for the next thing to come. The words that came were “too much beauty!” I realized that I had neglected my uncomfortable feelings. I waited again and the words that came were “a house is not a home.” I asked myself, “What is it about my inner self that is not a home?” The answer that came was “my tempo.” I have a slow tempo of living by nature. And I had been rushing and pushing myself. I remembered a recent nightmare about not finding my home. I let myself feel the felt sense of my tempo—both the rushed and the natural tempo. My natural tempo felt like a big relief. I could breathe more deeply. And I could see more clearly. It felt like yet another felt shift. I thought of a few steps I could take to feel my natural tempo more often.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCING

The above process was spiritual in that it helped me reach out to and embrace more parts of myself, others, and life (Hinterkopf, 1998). Earlier in this paper the process helped me accept and embrace more of my aging and pain, rather than rejecting them. In the above example I was more able to accept my slower tempo. Before experiencing these felt shifts, I had to stay with my bodily feelings with vague meanings. These subtle bodily feelings brought new, clearer meanings. The spiritual process brought a transcendent growth process. Transcend means to move beyond one's former frame of reference in a direction of higher and broader scope. Spiritual growth or a felt shift may involve a sense of rightness, bodily felt release, more life energy, and/or a feeling of being more present.

A felt shift comes to us as a gift, not as something that we can maintain, create, or control. When a person attends to his or her felt sense and it unfolds into a felt shift in which a transcendent growth process occurs, the Focusing process and the spiritual process become one and the same thing. A process definition of spirituality applies to all human beings and does not judge or exclude anyone. The distinction between a process and a content definition is extremely important for psychotherapy (Hinterkopf, 2004). Each person's content words, in each specific situation, have their own feelings and meanings. When differences in feelings and meanings of a certain word, such as God, are not tolerated, prejudice and intolerance may result. People who do not tolerate these differences are perhaps ignoring a fundamental nature of spirituality — that spirituality is often beyond defining.

The spiritual process is always available to us. But like any aspect of our holistic, intricate, changing processing, we can become alienated from it. Our processing may then become stuck or stopped.

SPIRITUAL CONTENT

Spiritual content may or may not have vague feelings and implicitly felt new meanings. The content of a spiritual experience, such as God, Christ, Allah, and The Way, may be extremely inspiring because it carries such rich, implicit meanings for a particular person in a particular situation. Any definition of spirituality that depends solely on content, and does not carry the experiencing process with it, may run the risk of being judgmental because it might exclude some people.

Under certain circumstances, for example, in a group of like-minded people who accept each other's differences, a content definition may be deeply meaningful. For some years I led a group in which each person would choose a spiritual word or phrase that was deeply meaningful to him or her. The person would focus on the word or phrase. Then the person would share the feelings and meanings that came from his or her process. Each person's experience was respected. That group was deeply valued by those who were able to participate in it.

UNIVERSAL NEEDS

In my work with aging and pain I also used Marshall Rosenberg's work found in his book, *Nonviolent Communication* (2003). Rosenberg has made a partial list of universal needs that all human beings share. These needs include such things as: physical nurturance, interdependence, and spiritual communion. People who frequently question their needs experience that these needs feel much more validated when they realize that *their* needs are also universal needs.

Example

A male client of mine retired from a career of thirty years. He moved to another city where he felt quite sure he could find a job. He came to see me because he had been unable to find work. He said that his life felt "meaningless". He said that he felt depressed. He thought that he shouldn't feel depressed because he had a wonderful wife, great grandchildren, and he didn't really need the money from a job. But he felt depressed with a heavy and weighted-down feeling — almost hard to breathe. I asked him what he needed. And as expected he said, "I need meaning in my life." I said, "You know, that is a real and universal need that all human beings have."

He said, "Wow! That feels completely different when I think of it as a universal need. It feels exciting, like energy rushing upward. It gives me more energy to keep looking for meaningful work." Pointing out that his need was universal helped carry his process forward.

BEAUTY OF NEEDING

Robert Gonzales has taken Rosenberg's universal needs and added the term "Beauty of Needs". David Young has integrated the three approaches of Eugene Gendlin, Marshall Rosenberg, and Robert Gonzales and calls it "Beauty of Needing/Focusing" (personal communications, September 5, 2009 — February 28, 2010). A person who has been critical of his or her own needs and learns that his or her needs are beautiful, often feels a great sense of relief.

Example

A female client of mine questioned her own need for emotional connection with her husband. She said that she had an intellectual connection with him, but emotionally, her relationship felt painful and empty. She and her husband were having trouble enjoying retirement. I said that I thought her need for emotional connection was a beautiful need. She said that when she heard these words from me, she felt greatly relieved. She was more able to accept her own need for emotional connection with her husband. Thus her process was facilitated. This acceptance of the Beauty of Needing leads to hope that one might find the fulfillment of the need in the future.

HOW BEAUTY OF NEEDING COMPLEMENTS FOCUSING

The Spiritual/Focusing process can become stopped or stuck. At such times, many Focusing interventions may be used (Gendlin, 1981, 1996). Beauty of Needing may also be used to help move a person's process forward. No complete list of needs exists because the number of needs is limitless. The ways of combining them, experiencing them, and expressing them are countless. Still, it is often helpful for the person to have a partial list of needs as a learning tool. Knowing what the need is (as opposed to not knowing what is needed) often gives the person a sense of hope that the need may be fulfilled. By calling the process Beauty of Needing, and by calling the needs universal, the person tends to feel less alone, more valued, worthy, and appreciated. Often the person feels more grounded in his or her basic and shared humanity.

Example

In psychotherapy, a therapist may tentatively articulate a client's needs in order to help the client's process go deeper. For example, a sixty-six year old woman who was partially disabled felt sad and guilty in her marriage, that she was not able to do half of the housework because of her disabilities. The therapist tentatively stated that the client probably needed to feel safe to the degree in which she contributed to the household. She needed a sense of self worth and a need of connecting to her husband. Each time that the therapist stated a need, he checked if the need that he was stating fit the client's sense of the situation. The client reported that by stating her needs, the therapist helped her go deeper in her process.

NEEDS VERSUS DEMANDS

The therapist can also help a client go deeper by noticing when the client's so called "needs" are actually demands. A demand is likely to be a strong, desperate, and/or authoritative statement requiring an affirmative response. Interpersonally, saying "no" to a demand is usually not a good option because it will likely be met with punishment or blame (Rosenberg, 2003). A demand may often, but not always, be detected by a demanding tone of voice. (Some people call this "demand energy".) Demands are not felt sensing or experiencing. They often have a thin or sheer quality that we can feel in our bodies. We can hear it in our voices. And we can sense it in our acting and reacting. We often feel alienated from our experiencing. Demands often occur when we are overly focused on goals, objectives, or things. Demands frequently have a nervous, driven, obsessive quality to them.

Example

A woman in her sixties, who made unreasonable demands on herself to dress beautifully, was prone to obsessive shopping. This created a strain on the household budget. She said that she was very uncomfortable and had a nervous and driven energy when shopping. It was different from her usual, calm self. Internally, when a client makes a demand of him — or herself, the psychotherapeutic process becomes stuck and even painful. The session

may continue in a superficial way. Instead, however, the therapist might notice a deeper need, such as a need for love. And she tentatively said this to the client.

In the following example it is difficult to distinguish the client's needs and demands. The client calls her demands "needs." She sounds sophisticated as she realizes that she cannot get her "needs" met by another person. Probably most therapists would not be able to identify her confusion of needs and demands. The second therapist in this example knew that needs do not require a 100% response. Nor do they require perfection.

Example

A woman who had been abandoned as a child said that she "needed 100% constancy, 100% reliability, and 100 % responsibility from herself or from God." She knew that she could not get these needs met by another human being. The therapist responded to this statement with empathy — and — the process stayed at a somewhat superficial level. A second therapist heard this statement and realized that the client's stated "needs" were actually demands, because they sounded so absolute and had the quality of a demand. He tentatively stated two deeper needs by saying, "It sounds like what you really need is trust and faith." The client replied that these two needs resonated with something inside her. And she went on to using Focusing at a deeper level. She realized that trust and faith are not 100% and do not come as total perfection. She was now able to experience them as changing and evolving qualities.

How Focusing Complements Beauty of Needing

As a Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapist, I continually see the power of using the felt sense as a touchstone to everything I do. I use many other therapeutic approaches. For example, I use Nonviolent Communication in a Focusing way. This means that I try to check whatever I am doing with the client's felt sense. It is the felt sense, with its ever changing complexity and more holistic quality, that brings new meanings in a way that single emotions, such as sad, angry, happy, usually fail to do. It is the felt shift or the sense of relief, release, more peace, and more life energy that I use as a compass for my work as a therapist and as a guiding force for my own living.

Beauty of Needing and Focusing are part of the same experiential process. In both cases the therapist is trying to facilitate the client's process. At times, when clients are in process, it seems as though I don't even have to facilitate the process. It simply evolves miraculously before my eyes.

In Focusing-Oriented Therapy, the client is taught to be an empowered Focuser, saying what he or she needs from his or her therapist. For example, the client at the beginning, or at any time during a session, might say that he or she needs close reflection, some reflection, or no reflection. The therapist might say, "You can tell me if you would like exact listening only at the beginning of your process or throughout your process. Let me know if you feel stuck and would like a suggestion to help you return to your process."

For a Focusing-Oriented Therapist to tentatively state a universal need, the client has to be sufficiently aware and strong in his or her own process to say, “No, that doesn’t fit.” If a client says, “I feel blank” or “I don’t feel anything any more”, it is important for the therapist to return to the last felt thing that a client said, and say that back to the client. This can help the client return to his or her process. Alternatively, the guide can ask the Focuser if he or she would like to stay with the blank feeling and notice what comes.

Focusing confirms if we have moved closer to, or found the right need, in this or any situation. This inner confirmation is accomplished by checking our felt sense for a sense of rightness, a step, or a felt shift. In the next example, notice how the client uses vague words, such as “like” and “like something underneath it all”. Such words indicate that a client is paying attention to vague feelings with unclear meanings, or a felt sense. The therapist reflects this lack of clarity. The client keeps checking and correcting herself until she finds what her need really is.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SAYING BACK WORDS THAT INDICATE A LACK OF CLARITY

In Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy, it is crucial that the therapist say back words that indicate a lack of clarity, such as “something”, “I don’t know what it is”, and “more like”. This helps the client stay with a vague, implicit felt sense until it unfolds into something more explicit. The therapist needs to respect the client’s pauses by giving the client time to allow the process to unfold. After some training, a therapist will usually know if the client is Focusing during a silence. For example, the client usually looks straight down and speaks tentatively. The client will pause as he or she is searching for the right word, or words, that describe his or her particular felt sense. Below is an excerpt from a psychotherapy session in which the therapist reflects the client’s words that indicate lack of clarity.

Example

A client felt hurt and angry because someone made a prejudicial remark about her age.

C1: I feel hurt and angry . . . no there’s something more underneath it all.

T1: So there’s something more underneath it all.

C2: Yeah, but I don’t know what it is.

T2: But you don’t know what it is. You could try staying with that vague feeling and see what comes.

C3: (Pause.) So it’s sort of like I need respect.

T3: The therapist respects the pause and waits until the client says the next thing. “It’s sort of like you need respect.”

C4: (Pause.) No, it’s more like I need to feel the beauty of my own aging!

T4: The therapist waits. “Ah, so it’s more like you need to feel the beauty of your own aging!”

C5: Yeah, that’s an important piece.

FINDING THE PLACE THAT IS *MORE* THAN THE PROBLEM

When the client is working with something especially painful, the therapist may help the client experience their Center or sense of being “more than” any particular problem. This process may begin by suggesting that the client “ground” him — or herself. The therapist can suggest that the client feel his or her feet on the ground, pay attention to his or her breathing, and notice whatever is around him or her. The client can then notice the problem at some distance. This helps the client let go of demands. It also helps the client be present to the problem rather than being overwhelmed by the problem or pushing the problem aside. The client is then opening up him — or herself to something more than what was previously present.

THE FELT SHIFT

When a felt shift occurs, it is usually helpful if the therapist invites the client to stay with the felt shift. For example, the therapist can say, “You could stay with that sense of your needing to feel the beauty of your aging. You can notice the feelings in your body that come with all of that. If you like, you may say the words or describe images that come.” (Hinterkopf, 2004). The Focusing-Oriented Therapist knows that the felt shift is a gift. It is something that neither the therapist nor the client can control. For this reason the Focusing process often seems miraculous.

SUMMARY

In this article I have described ways in which Experiential Focusing, Nonviolent Communication, and Beauty of Needing may be used as one integrated approach to help move a person’s psychospiritual process forward. Beauty of Needing/Focusing can be especially helpful when a client’s process is stuck in the areas of aging and pain. These areas are especially prone to anxiety and depression, and thus a sense of stuckness, because of the multiple losses involved at this stage in a person’s life. As many interventions as are helpful need consideration. Some suggestions for and examples from psychotherapy have been given. Further exploration needs to be done. As I was writing this article, my pain lessened and became more intermittent. My stamina increased.

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