

## ONE MAN'S LIFE JOURNEY Like the The Ebbs and Flows of the Sea

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This article is about a life journey of a man named Abe. He is now in his 70's, and married to a woman who is 25 younger than he is. Abe has experienced ebbs and flows in his life and came to therapy during a crossroads connected to a crisis in his marriage. I worked with him using the Focusing Oriented Therapy (FOT) approach, which facilitated deep work, insights, and several shifts within the six, hour-long sessions we had together. I encouraged and coached Abe to integrate into his daily life the principles and 'attitude' of Focusing that we used during our sessions, mainly to make the Focusing process a practical reality, rather than just some 'technique' used in the office. His ability to continue and use Focusing in between sessions brought major changes, not only in his relationship to his wife, but also as a gateway, opening doors for him to connect with his spirituality. Focusing also helped him to address and deal with his physical back pain.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Abe was born in South Africa to a well-known and well-respected Jewish family who emigrated from Poland to South Africa after the Second World War. He expressed that he felt he had "the perfect life" until the age ten, when his parents divorced. He felt ashamed and rejected by his parents who left him with his grandmother, where he stayed until he left for university. Because of the constant emotional pain that he experienced from his parents' divorce, he vowed that once he got married, he would never divorce. His grandmother was a spiritual leader in her community and was known for her gathering of "healing circles". She invited Abe to join these circles that she led. Because of these spiritual experiences, Abe was very bonded and close to his grandmother, and her influence played a big role in his life.

As an adult, Abe put aside the spiritual influence and upbringing of his grandmother and wound up denying the emotional traumas he carried from his childhood, developing "a new me" as he called it. This "me" was a person who did not show or express emotional content, and above all, would not let himself be vulnerable to other people. He was known for his intelligence, high motivation to succeed, and honored for his achievements. After university, he went on to law school and graduated with the highest awards. Soon after graduation, he started a very successful law practice and became known as a skilled and successful courtroom attorney, winning many cases. He was a tough lawyer, highly competitive, and sometimes cynical. He was married with three children when, in the 1976 Soweto Political Riots, his law firm was burned down, and he lost his fortune. At this time he made a decision to move to Israel with his family to start a new life.

Establishing himself as successful and sought after attorney in Israel became his first and only priority. He increased his workload to fulfill job demands and worked long hours, often disregarding his family. He described the situation in those years, “I ignored my wife and my children, and I had no role in their upbringing. In retrospect, I acted more like my parents did to me, and I feel harsh guilt feelings because of it . . .”

At the age of 65 his worst fear became a reality — his wife filed for a divorce. After the divorce was completed, Abe found himself depressed and experienced anxiety attacks. During this difficult emotional time, he also discovered that he had both heart and kidney problems that required several surgeries.

Quite unexpectedly, after four years of being divorced, he met a beautiful woman, with three young children, who fell madly in love with him. She insisted he “allow her to love him”, and he did. They finally married, although she was 25 years his junior. The first couple years of their marriage were full of love, and everything he wanted, yet in time, his new wife eventually started to complain that he had stopped paying attention to her. She said that he withdrew from friends and family members and developed new addictions, such as being on the computer for days at the time and listening to the radio with earphones during the late hours of night. She demanded that if he didn’t immediately enter therapy, she planned to end the relationship.

Although Abe had success and respect as a lawyer, when he retired, he said, “I was stripped of all that I had worked for all my life: my social status as a husband, and image of having a perfect family. He felt that the world he had created for himself and his family in Israel had fallen apart, and he found himself feeling as he did when he was young — parents divorced and feeling like “an ailing child”.

When Abe started therapy, he was depressed and anxious about the future. He asked questions such as: *Why me? What is the meaning of life for me at this age? Who am I, really now?*

In the second FOT session with Abe, the therapist interviewed him about his life story. Toward the middle of the session there was a special moment, during the Focusing/ listening process, that opened up a sensitive and important story that connected Abe to his childhood, and was carried forward with a step toward his healing.

**Abe:** *Since, the divorce from my ex-wife, I feel as if someone has pulled the carpet from under my feet. I do not recognize myself now. I am depressed, anxious, and withdrawn from people . . . all the old ways of relating to myself and others seems to be gone. When I came to Israel, I was in control of my life, but now I am lost. I am me — and not me — at the same time. I don’t know who am I really? Who is the real me? Am I the famous lawyer, or just an unemployed retired old man?*

**Therapist:** *You are really questioning everything in your life, right now. . . who you are, what you’ve done, what you want. . .*

**Abe:** *Yes. . . all of it. . .*

**Therapist:** *And the divorce. . . your worst fear. . . became a reality, along with depression, anxiety and the question of who you really are. . . Now, you've had a very powerful image: as if someone has "pulled the carpet from under your feet" leaving you behind and empty of all that you know about yourself.*

**Abe:** *Yes, that's exactly how it feels. . . the rug has somehow been pulled out from under me. . .*

**Therapist:** *I'd like to ask you if you can just sit quietly. . . for a little while. . . with this experience. . . What it feels like to have this "rug pulled out". . . and maybe what comes inside of you, when you sit with that. . .*

**Abe:** *I feel empty of all the roles and games I played throughout my life. I used those roles to protect and shield me. Now it feels like there is a big dark hole in my chest. (He touched his chest with both of his hands.) I actually remember times when I felt that same dark hole, for a moment, just before my court cases. But I always denied the feeling and moved on.*

**Therapist:** *It sounds like you have been aware of this empty hole place in your chest, before. Maybe. . . see what it would be like to just sit with this big dark hole. . . for just a little while. . . maybe getting to know it. . . or knowing more about it. . . from inside. . .*

**Abe:** (Sits for a long time in silence and then says): *Ummm. . . right now, in this moment, I don't feel the emptiness of the dark hole. . . I'm not sure why it's moved. . .*

**Therapist:** *You don't know quite why it's moved, but just let yourself see what is there now. . .*

**Abe:** *I am remembering my grandmother. . . and thinking about her. . . her presence always brings a feeling of comfort . . . this feeling is familiar. . . it reminds me of the good days of my childhood when I sat around in the healing circle with my grandmother and all of the other people. Everyone is quiet. . . no one is speaking except my grandmother.*

**Therapist:** *This is a wonderful memory that you are having. . . the thoughts . . . feelings that come when you let yourself sit with. . . all about my grandmother. . . It makes you feel. . .*

**Abe:** (Folds his legs, straightens his back and falls into a deep meditative state. After a long while he opens his eyes, having a boyish smile on his face, his eyes are brightened and he says softly): *Those times with my grandmother were the happiest in my life. I feel something moving in the pit of my stomach. . . a yearning. . . as if something is calling me to go back and remember all that I learned there.*

**Therapist:** *Those times with your grandmother were some of the happiest in your life . . . and when you sit with those feelings there is a 'more' there. . . a yearning. . . to remember something. . . Take as much time as you need. . . to see if there is more there, that wants to talk to you about the yearning. . . the learning. . .*

**Abe:** (Waits in silence and then says): *It is saying, "Come back home; it is time to remember all the lessons you learned way back then."*

**Therapist:** *So it is calling you to go back home. . . and it is letting you know that you have a place to go. . . you are not just empty. . . there is so much more there. . .*

Abe started talking with a new and fresh, young energy — as if something in him had been revitalized after a long sleep.

**Abe:** *You know. . . when my grandmother did her last circle, she asked me to sit by her. Then she told me that she felt I was blessed with special healing energy in my hands, and that she wished me to never forget that. She also said that she wanted me to remember these words and help people who experience pain.*

**Therapist:** *Wow. . . that is profound. It sounds like you have really connected with something that is very meaningful and important from your past. . . and something you want and need to remember and hold close to you.*

Abe got up from the sofa, stretched, and said:

**Abe:** *I actually feel that quality of that energy in my hands right now, and I want to remember it. I want to let it be there and remember it.*

*I also want to thank you for your help in encouraging me to remember what I forgot. I have not discussed my time with my grandmother with anyone, for many years, and I am sort of amazed at how it just came out here. This is only my second session with you!*

**Therapist:** *We both want to receive the gift of this important memory . . . and the wonderful energy that goes with it. This is a very special moment.*

### **FOT AS EXPRESSED IN THE ABOVE EXAMPLE:**

One may wonder how it is possible, that in only the second session, the client was able to speak so openly about such a long-standing and meaningful memory of his participation as a child in the healing circles with his grandmother — especially after denying those experiences for some 50 years of his life! The answer lies in the power of *listening empathically* from a felt sense to a felt sense. This type of listening is organic to the body's wisdom — well beyond words.

In addition to listening, there is another aspect that makes the Focusing process so effective and powerful. The first is the 'Focusing Attitude' where we help create (and teach the client how to create) a 'safe space', where the client's body — the organism — feels accepted, respected, non-judged, and gently invited to open up in (in both feelings, thoughts and words) in its own rhythm and time. Once the inner feelings open up, and the client can experience his/her own inner container as safe (as well as the safety of the Therapist's own inner container), the process opens even further.

Then comes the therapist's knowledge regarding how to facilitate the Focusing Movements in carrying forward the 'small steps' hidden in the client's responses. In the above case, the therapist invited the client to 'sit with' and 'be with' the black hole that the client mentioned. The client disregarded the therapist's invitation and went on describing a positive feeling that was just near the big-hole experience. The therapist moved forward with the body wisdom that 'suggested' the new direction, rather than insisting on the dark hole experience (which was not, as it turned out, where the client wanted to go). The outcome was that, for the first time in many years, the client was re-connected, way back to the deep spiritual experiences of his youth. It is as if the body wisdom finds Abe, at age 70, ready to return to and connect with his deeply held spiritual path. For whatever reasons, he had to go through ebbs and flows, and the traumas and dramas, of two divorces (his parents and his own) before he was ready to return "back home to himself — to his real self."

As a FOT therapist, I feel ongoingly privileged to dive into the deep sea of the client's inner self. At the same time, the client's process allows me to shift from the depth of feeling to the connection with the outer space, continuously weaving small steps from inner movements to daily applications in the outer world and external relationships.

### **THE PATTERNS EXPLORED IN FOCUSING-ORIENTED THERAPY:**

A. Identifying a 10-year old inner child state that has been ruling Abe's emotional life, thoughts and behaviors ever since his traumatic experience with his parents' divorce.

B. Focusing on Abe's back pain

Physically, Abe has experienced multiple problems with his back. He explained that he had been able to manage his physical condition and pain because he learned how to disconnect himself from his physical body. All along, Abe reported having a strong hatred toward his body for betraying him after his divorce. "Since I was 10 years old I have experienced a split between my mind and my body, my needs and others' needs, my spirit and my body's pain and limitations."

### **IDENTIFYING THE CHILD WITHIN:**

In one of Abe's therapy sessions he struggled with a big decision as to whether or not he would fly to South Africa to attend a recognition party of his 70th birthday. He experienced anxiety and fear about becoming sick on the trip. Abe walked into my office and approached me with an anxious smile, ready to share his problem: "On the one hand I would like to go with my grandchildren and son and share with them my life story. On the other hand, I am so anxious to visit my hometown where the riots happened when my best friend was killed."

**Therapist:** *So it sounds as if you have some mixed feelings about the trip. I hear you talking about two places in you. One that wants to go on this trip and one that is afraid and anxious.*

**Abe:** *Yes, I have two totally different places: one is about my love for my children, and the other place that is fearful like a little child.*

**Therapist:** *Both, a place that wants and a place that does not want. Can you take a moment to sense that place where you might experience your love for your children*

**Abe:** *My heart, of course. My love for them fills all my heart.*

**Therapist:** *Your heart is filled with love (therapist touches her heart with her hand). And now, can you sense the place where you experience the fear of going.*

**Abe:** *Abe sat quietly for a long while, unable to give any answer.*

**Therapist:** *Be very gentle with yourself, Abe. There is no rush, take your time to notice your breath, one breath after another. You can sense that there is a you sitting on the sofa, looking at me now. We call this part your 'observer' or the manager of your inner space. Then, there is your heart filled with love, and I also hear you saying that there is a place of fear somewhere inside you.*

**Abe:** *I feel lost! I'm not sure what you mean that there is a me and love and fear and some other places.*

**Therapist:** *Let me show you something. (The therapist pulled out a poster of a giant iceberg and put it in front of Abe). For a moment, I am going to use the iceberg as a symbol to represent a human being. The top 1/10th of the iceberg is our conscious and cognitive thinking; underneath it we find 9/10ths of the iceberg representing your inner space. . . where there is a large room for your feelings and your experiences. Now maybe you can take a moment to sense the whole of your experience and locate the place on the iceberg where your fear is situated . . .*

**Abe:** *(He was silent for about a minute, looking intently at the iceberg), then he said, My feeling of love is in this area (pointing to the area on the left side of the iceberg).*

**Therapist:** *This is your heart area (pointing on the iceberg to the area he showed me before), and now can you find the location of your fear?*

**Abe:** *(He took another long silence, coming closer to the iceberg poster as if searching for some hints for where the location of his fear was). Suddenly, Abe said out loud, I can't believe it! For the first time in my life, I can sense in me a feeling of a little boy of about age 10 sitting right there . . . (Abe pointed to a dark, long shaped location at the bottom of the iceberg). This 10 year old boy is really afraid of this trip. He is not sure what will happen to him there: he does not want to be traumatized again. Abe was silent again for a long while and then he said in an assertive voice, I am a 70-year-old man and the traumatic 10-year-old boy cannot rule me anymore. This boy has been managing me for too many years. It's time for me to sit in the driver's seat!*

**Therapist:** *It sounds like you are shocked to discover that the 10-year-old boy has been managing your behavior for so many years. I also heard a longing there, as if you are saying, "It's time for me and not the boy in me to sit in the driver's seat!"*

**Abe:** *I am not young anymore. This is my life, and I want to heal this experience of a 10-year-old traumatized boy. He and I deserve much better.*

**Therapist:** *Maybe you can take some time here to acknowledge this experience you are feeling inside by saying “hello, shalom” to it, right at this very moment.*

Abe took a deep breath and was quiet for a moment with his eyes looking down at the iceberg where he identified symbolically the site of his 10-year-old boy. He then took a deep breath, his body relaxed and his face softened.

**Therapist:** *I can see that something has changed in you. I saw you taking a deep breath and your body relaxing somewhat. . . is that right. . . ?*

**Abe:** *For the first time ever I am filled with warm feelings toward this boy within me. I am hugging him and saying, “Trust me, I am here to listen to your needs; there is no need to fear. You are no longer in a life and death situation, the war is over, we deserve better.”*

Both therapist and Abe sat quietly, honoring the experience without talking for a while. The second half of the session concentrated on identifying Abe's objectives and physical needs on the trip, such as meals, resting times, alone times . . . and more.

Abe ended up going on the trip a week later with his son and his grandchildren, as he hoped he could. He was able to visit his home town and the memorial place for his best friend. He experienced the adult in him rather than a scared, and anxious 10-year-old boy.

Abe reported feeling very proud of himself and excited about the new relationship he was having with his inner self — his inner boy.

## **FOCUSING WITH PHYSICAL BACK PAIN**

**Therapist:** *Is it Ok for us to talk about your physical pain today?*

**Abe:** *I cannot allow my attention to be with the pain all day long and everyday. I tend to resist it, fight it. I try hard not to make it bigger than my own life.*

**Therapist:** *May I ask you. . . are you experiencing any physical pain right now?*

**Abe:** *Yes, I am. I feel it right down in my back and pelvis.*

**Therapist:** *Let's try a process-step here. . . is that OK? (Abe nods, affirmatively.) See if you can bring your attention there and ask yourself if it is possible to accept the pain with no judgment, treating that pain with the same attitude you would treat your best friend who is in trouble.*

**Abe:** *The pain has been part of my life since the back operation. I live with it everyday. It is a part of me. I cannot treat it like I would my best friend! I have to fight it throughout the day in order to be able to do the simplest things on a daily basis.*

**Therapist:** *I hear you saying that fighting the pain is the only resolution to overcoming the pain. Fighting is the only way to do daily things. Maybe you can consider having a dialogue with that pain, rather than a fight. Your body knows what is right, and it wishes to go back to living with no pain. In a way it might be sending you a message through the pain that it might need extra help to deal with it.*

**Abe:** *The pain is my number one enemy. A long time ago I chose to live my life in spite of the pain, and I have done it through fighting it, and using my stubborn spirit. Now, you are suggesting something that is very new and very unfamiliar to me. I am a bit curious and interested to hear more about what you mean — especially about what it means to befriend the pain.*

**Therapist:** *So, let us start by inviting you to go on a short journey. . . in which you try something new to deal with the pain. Is that okay. . . ?*

**Abe:** (Nods affirmatively) *Yes. . .*

**Therapist:** *Take as much time as you need. . . and see if maybe you can describe where exactly you feel and experience this pain?*

**Abe:** *I feel it in my lower back and toward my pelvis. Right now it would be much better if I got up and walked a little, because of the pain that I am experiencing. I have been sitting in this one position for a long time. I prefer though not to get up.*

**Therapist:** *There's a part of you that wants to get up, right now, and there's another part that would rather not move at all. (Abe nods with his head while listening to the therapist's reflection.) Now, taking as long as you need to. . . see if you can describe the pain down there — maybe you can say something about the shape of the pain, any qualities that you can sense there. . . maybe there is an image that comes along with it.*

**Abe:** (takes a long moment with his eyes closed) *I can feel the pain being much stronger in the left side of my body. I can see it right away. It has the shape of an iron that is burning hot.*

**Therapist:** *So the image there is really clear. . . like a burning hot iron, and it is stronger on the left side of your body.*

**Abe:** *Yes, but the center of the pain is in the middle, and its size is smaller than a fist.*

**Therapist:** *Now you have the center of the pain in the middle. . . See if this image fits for you. Maybe you can imagine something like putting around this center of pain, layers of soft, thick pillows that are somehow capable of absorbing the waves of pain. Take some time to create this image around the center of pain.*

**Abe:** (closes his eyes and focuses his attention inwardly) *Yes, it is not easy, but I can focus down there where the pain is (a minute of silence). I can feel the painful spot. I am able to put three layers of soft, thick pillows around the spot of pain.*

**Therapist:** *And now see if you can ask the center of pain if it is willing to release the pain — that is so tight and crunched. Take some time to allow the waves of pain to come out and be released into these soft, thick pillows.*

**Abe:** *It is happening right now, it is quite scary to me to see so much pain being released from this place.*

**Therapist:** *You can identify the scary place in your body now. . . and you can bring the welcoming of the focusing attitude there. . . presence, non-judgment, and acceptance. . .*

**Abe:** *(takes few conscious breaths) I can feel a small space between me and the pain in my back. The pain, there feels less sharp, and less threatening.*

**Therapist:** *(Reflects back) You are aware that the pain, there, inside you is less sharp and less threatening.*

**Abe:** *Yes, I can, and I'm surprised. I was very skeptical when we started. Now I am quite interested in exploring this process on my own. I can experience me, the observer, my organism, and my body that holds this pain, right there in my lower back. I think that maybe I have learned something new. Maybe fighting the body is not necessarily the best way to overcome pain. It seems to me that it takes less time and less energy to just focus in this spot and do some work.*

**Therapist:** *That is true. What we have found over the years in practicing Focusing, is that when we are able to look at the pain inside at eye level, from the right distance, with acceptance and empathy and with no judgment, something incredible happens. It is as if the body is longing for someone to be present, give it acceptance — as it is right now — so that it can move into its next step toward healing. This organic process is natural. The body needs a witness to unlock its own process.*

You might want to just take another moment here to check again. How it feels inside you right now?

**Abe:** *What a miracle this feels like. Whatever you did with me just a moment ago has really helped. The pain is not there now. It is gone. I just found out how much energy and time I spent fighting my own body. Instead, I learned today to pay attention to the pain, empathize with the body, and partner with it — to work with the pain.*

**Therapist:** *I want to thank you, Abe, for your openness. I highly recommend that in the next week you come and visit your lower back and practice your non-judgmental attitude, and your breathing between you and the pain.*

**Abe:** *I will tell you next time what has happened. Thank you!*

## **SUMMARY:**

Abe's life journey is intriguing with its many ebbs and flows. From a very young age Abe experienced difficult events and feelings — and — he also had the gift of his grandmother's healing circles. Those early experiences grounded within him, a safe and special place of truth, caring, wisdom and healing energy. Although for a long period of his life he denied the powerful resource of those times, in favor of social power and charisma, the energy and memory of those times were there — waiting to be rediscovered.

Focusing Oriented Therapists know and experience life energy and the body wisdom in constant interaction with the surroundings, forever searching to find new ways of healing the organism. When the therapist integrates the elements of Focusing Attitude, Focusing Movements, and the profound philosophy that underlies the Focusing process, the therapist is tuned into and can discover those small steps of change that happen unexpectedly, and can then facilitate the carrying forward of these change steps. These changes do not depend upon the time-frame of the meetings, or the age, gender, or the culture of the client.

For me, integrating Focusing into my language, my daily living, and my therapy practice, has allowed me to experience life as a deep ocean that constantly sends forth waves of endless treasures.