

MEMOIRS: THE SPACE BETWEEN

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INTRODUCTION

This is the first time I have told my story in the context of my life. I have told parts of it to friends, but I have not put it all together before.

The Focusing experience took place on a warm June day sitting under a tree in the garden of an old manor house on the last full day of a Treasure Maps to the Soul Retreat. I will start by telling you a little about my life before the Focusing session that changed it for ever.

For as long as I can remember I have passed out occasionally never fully understanding why. More recently I had understood that it is a form of dissociation—a complete avoidance—when something in me feared being overwhelmed, as some animals do when their lives are in danger and they ‘play dead’ or freeze. I also became aware of many smaller incidents of dissociation when I completely missed words others said because they were associated with things that something in me was avoiding. I wanted to be able to accompany others as they explored their own experiences, and I knew that in order to do that I, myself, needed to be able to feel safe.

For years I had avoided managers (and anyone else who seemed to only notice me if I got things wrong) by working hard and trying always to follow rules and get everything right. If I didn’t know how to do something I was expected to do, I would react as though my life was in danger, with my heart rate racing and whole body shaking. What I feared most was getting something wrong, and not realizing I had, until someone else pointed it out. A few weeks before, I had unexpectedly been replaced at work by someone more experienced than I was. Something in me had understood this situation to mean that I had been getting things wrong, and that I wasn’t considered good enough. I felt as though I had been dismissed and found it impossible to go near the place when my replacement was there and difficult to go even when she wasn’t there. I thought that I might have to leave although no one had asked me to, despite the fact that I knew that several people wanted me to stay.

Through years of trying to understand my behavior, I knew that my extreme reactions were likely to be connected to a past trauma, not to things I was experiencing now, but I had no idea then what it was. I also knew that it was likely to be something hidden in a part of me I had lost, maybe because the trauma happened when I was too young to have any conscious memory.

I have used the Focusing process and Thinking at the Edge (TAE) to explore many areas of my life that I’ve wanted to understand, and I knew that I was very close to the place that something in me feared. I had explored all round the issue from many different angles, but it remained a part of me that I could only observe from a distance.

I read *The Radical Acceptance of Everything* which helped me to get closer to my exiled parts, and Levine's *Waking the Tiger* which explained how trauma is experienced in the body. Both of these books confirmed that Focusing with someone who could safely accompany me into that place I couldn't go to alone was what I needed to do. When I discovered that there was a 'Treasure Maps to the Soul Retreat' starting the following month, I booked a place.

Although I had no memory of any traumatic experiences in my life, I had been told as child, and several times since, that I had screamed continuously until I was six months old, and that my mother had nearly thrown me out of a window. This story had no personal meaning for me; it was as though it had happened to someone else, and anyway, nothing did happen.

Just before the session I felt a shift when I understood for the first time that the part of me that protected me as a baby had continued to do so all through my life.

THE FOCUSING EXPERIENCE

When I think of that hour under the old tree, I remember feeling that there was something I had been looking for all my life—and I had found it. It felt almost too good to be true, and at the same time, I knew it was real. I knew that the frightened part was there, but until that session it had been a sort of parallel life, one that I did not know how to be with. In this particular session we *met*, and stayed together, and 'we' began to learn for the first time to work together.

My Focusing partner that day was someone I had only met a few days before; this was the first time we had Focused together. He was experienced in Peter Levine's way of treating trauma, something I knew could be helpful. I remember a strong sense of his presence and knowing that he was with me throughout the session. I had my eyes closed and no memory of what he said, but I heard his voice.

I have used the notes I wrote soon after the session to fill in some details that connect the memories.

The session started with a very small and faint image of the baby about to be thrown out of the window. I wanted to stay with the image as I knew how important it was—the baby was me—and as I described her, tears came, and a pain in my throat. I continued describing in words everything as it came, and as the pain in my throat subsided, there were various waves of numbness, tingling and of dizziness.

Everything went quiet for a while, and then *something new* appeared, criticizing me for running away from my fear and being pathetic for being so afraid when nothing had actually happened. When I repeated the harsh criticism out loud, more tears came. At one stage it felt as if I would pass out. I asked my partner for grounding. He reminded me of my feet, and the dizziness subsided as I connected with his voice and the birds singing in the garden.

I felt like I wanted to stand up and stretch, and as I stood, I sensed the strength in my legs. I realized that those legs weren't there when I was a baby, and I couldn't have walked away from danger. A trembling kept erupting from somewhere deep within me and spread outwards through my whole body to my fingers and toes. It felt as though huge amounts of long trapped energy had been released—as if a volcano had erupted and a part of me had been set free.

Over an hour later when the deep trembling had subsided I wrote, “That was the most healing Focusing session I’ve ever had. There were huge shifts and they are still happening.”

WHY THIS SESSION WAS SO SIGNIFICANT TO ME

Until that session I could not understand why I so often reacted as if my life was in danger (usually when I had made a mistake or didn't know how to do something I was expected to do). I was also sometimes suddenly overwhelmed without knowing why, and could pass out for reasons no one could fully understand. I had known the story about nearly being thrown out of the window because I screamed all the time for as long as I can remember. Other family members knew it too, but the story had always been told without any emotion, as if it was of no significance whatsoever. But as I Focused this time, I was able for the first time to feel and express the fear I could not understand before. The story of the baby became my story, and welcomed as a valued and very important part of me.

WHAT THE SESSION TAUGHT ME ABOUT THE FOCUSING PROCESS/PRACTICE

This was the first time that I had used Focusing as a way to gain access to a body memory before I had any conscious memory allowing those reactions to trauma to change.

In this session I learned that something in which no physical injury occurred had indeed been remembered and had affected me all my life—and—that it could be healed through Focusing. I thought that I knew about building relationships, but the one I started to build in this session was different from any other. Until the fear became a baby, I had no *other* to be with and relate to.

For as long as I can remember I've tried to cross facets as a way to try to understand my experiences, so once again I've crossed these facets, this time with a film, 'The Space Between'.

In the film, there is a memorable image of two people, a child and an adult holding hands and walking away together, two previously lost people who have found what they needed, someone they can be with and who can be with them. That image resonates with my felt sense of being with the part of me I lost as a baby—a part I didn't know I was looking for until I found it.

Before the session there was something in me that doubted whether such a small incident, one in which I had come to no physical harm, could have had such a huge impact

on my life, and for a while I wondered if I had perhaps had another traumatic experience, as well. But I knew in that session that the only trauma was the experience of nearly being thrown out of a window by my mother. However, the experience was traumatic, not because my life had been in immediate danger—it hadn't—but because I no longer trusted my mother as someone safe to be with. I now understood that my deepest fear was that I would lose *me*.

Ever since I have only been partly me with my mother, and with anyone who reminds me of her, I try to be almost invisible. Every time since, when I have reacted as though my life was in danger, it has been when I again feared losing *me* because it wasn't safe to be me.

HOW MY LIFE HAS CHANGED

I had another *that's-it* moment when I understood that all my life something in me has been looking for people who want to be with me and whom I want to be with. These are people who welcome all of me and with whom I feel safe to be me.

Knowing what I need has given me the confidence to do things that I could not have done before. I know that I need to do everything as a *whole person*, and if it doesn't feel safe exploring on my own, then I need to be with someone who is not afraid to accompany me.

As I have told my story, it has grown and changed, and I've noticed other ways that the Focusing experience has changed my life. Earlier in another Focusing session, I had become aware of several safe islands in my life, places where it was alright to be me and to be seen. These were places where I felt whole, but it is only now that I realize that my life is no longer divided into islands with unsafe gaps in between—it is all one. I know how my life is connected and how to stay safe and whole. The entire experience, and what I learned from it, was so very exciting to me—and still is!

REFERENCES

- Cornell, A. W. (2005). *The Radical Acceptance of Everything*. Berkeley: Calluna Press.
- Film: *The Space Between*, directed by Travis Fine (2010)
- Levine, P.A. & Frederick. A. (1997). *Waking the Tiger—Healing Trauma*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

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