

ANGER BECOMES ASSERTION POWER

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I would like to tell you about a Focusing session that transformed my relationship with anger. This Focusing session was so profound for me because until this point in my life I had difficulty acknowledging strong feelings of anger, and when I did, anger came accompanied with anxiety and helplessness. Murmurs of anger rising felt threatening. Since this transformative Focusing session, I experience anger as the empowering, positive force it is in essence. I feel safer and correspondingly less anxious, knowing I am better equipped to protect and take care of myself. I now realize that without access to that naturally occurring anger/assertion power response, I could not feel safe in the world.

In the days leading up to the session, the tension in my body had been building. I knew something significant was on the edge of consciousness, and Focusing on my own was not touching it at the place that might give rise to forward movement. I had a hunch it was connected to interactions I'd recently had with a group of students in a college class that I was teaching. I can easily describe how it felt in my body: tight, especially in my solar plexus (where I feel almost everything), tension down the sides of my legs and in my jaw, aching muscles in my neck reaching into the base of my skull, and an increasing fuzziness in my head, almost headachy. I could sense an angry energy and a kind of dread. This is where I started my Focusing session—with what I knew and was sensing.

I was even more grateful than usual for this Focusing time with my good friend, Mette, in Australia. Mette and I had both come to be awed by the power of Focusing and had trained under the masterly mentorship of Nada Lou. Focusing is an essential component of our daily lives, and we try to connect by phone once a week now that I live in Canada. On this particular occasion, we spent some time catching up as friends do. As we started moving into our Focusing exchange, I could feel anxiety in me growing. I asked to Focus first because my ability to listen was compromised by the uncomfortable tension in my body.

After setting the intention to go slowly with whatever was inside me, I asked the leading-in question that comes from the Bio Spirituality tradition developed by Ed McMahon and Peter Campbell: "Is it OK to be with this?" I didn't even finish the question before sensing a resounding "Yes, PLEASE give me attention," coming from inside.

The felt sense around anger was there, and yet calling more strongly for attention was the inside place giving rise to anxiety. I let it know I knew it was really anxious and worried about something. A slight shift occurred. It liked being described as "worried" rather than "anxious," as if it was being validated for having a tangible reason to be troubled. Over the next moments, it let me know it was worried about something indescribably dreadful happening and that this was connected with the 'angry' energy. I gently acknowledged its serious concern and thanked it for doing what it does to look out for me, to keep me safe.

This place seemed to be settling, although still watchful. The felt sense around anger, a kind of tightness in my solar plexus, came more into my awareness.

It seemed important to inquire into how it wanted me to be with it; “Just be with me, hold me, nothing needing doing,” it responded. The strength of the anger feeling grew some and stretched my capacity to be mindfully present with it (and with Mette holding the space at the other end of the phone). Then the magic happened. Subtly at first, the tension-held energy started to flow and open up. As it did so the associated worry melted, giving way to a bliss I don’t remember ever knowing. Oh, it felt wondrous to let this feeling flow! It offered a new name for what I had called anger: *Assertion Power*. Assertion Power—yes!—that resonates perfectly. It seemed to like being perceived as a positive force, indicating to me that it was a good and healthy thing to feel this Assertion Power. Each time Mette, as the listener, said those two words back to me, I felt stronger and stronger.

Once the Assertion Power felt fully received, I invited whatever else wanted to be known about this Assertion Power and the life situation that stirred it. I realized the feeling was my natural organismic response to being treated impersonally and disrespectfully, albeit subtly, by this group of students. In my perception, they were relating to me as an object to sanction whatever they decided they wanted, with little regard for the implications for me or others. Thank goodness for my newly found Assertion Power! I knew then I could stand stronger, with integrity, in the face of these students’ demands. Also within me, a quieter source of fear—of accommodating the students out of feeling threatened—breathed a sigh of relief as I fully received the Assertion Power in my body. I knew I could live with the dissent I expected.

The earlier tension now replaced with happiness and with appreciation (once again!) for my *body’s knowing*, for Focusing, and my partner’s listening, I turned my attention to listen to her.

For months after that Focusing session I’d feel tension initially accompanying the occasions of anger rising. I got quicker at identifying the anger as an ally. Now it is an old friend, immediately recognizable. When I feel a hint of that tense anger, I catch it and say, “Ah, is that you Assertion Power? Welcome. Thank you! . . .” With that acknowledgement, I feel the accompanying strength that enables me to decide on a conscious course of action regarding whatever inspired the anger.

WHAT DID THIS SESSION TEACH ME ABOUT FOCUSING?

- It affirmed the positive intent of every feeling: the anger itself plus the anxiety, both looking out for my best interests. I like the explicit statement, and book title, of Ann Weiser Cornell’s “radical acceptance of everything.” Bringing a welcoming attitude and faith in—or at least openness to—the benevolence of bodily feelings, helps me be more present to whatever is brewing inside. Gendlin’s words come to mind; “Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness” (Gendlin, 1981, *Focusing*, p. 76).

- When something in me is so scared, sensing how it would like me to be with it is invaluable. Many times such sensing is a fleeting passage in a Focusing session that puts me in the right attitude; in the instance above, it was an essential aspect of the session and required many minutes. I hadn't had an experience quite like this where I felt as though I was building presence-muscle as I sat with it.
- I needed to feel sufficiently safe and encouraged by my companion in order to unblock the process of anger affect. My friend and listening companion has had a healthier relationship with anger, and I expect knowing this made it easier to feel safe with her as I explored this scary stuck place within myself.
- As we know, finding the right word enables further unfolding in Focusing. In the session described, the descriptor "worried" resonated in a bodily felt way whereas "anxious" did not. It opened up further after it heard "worried."
- The felt shift during this session was pronounced. In the previous edition of the Folio, Peter Afford proposed a physiological description of felt shifting. He writes:

My guess is that a felt shift enables brain and body to complete an emotional cycle that got stopped midway, leaving the body marooned in a sympathetic state of nervous arousal. With the openness to bodily feeling that Focusing encourages, these incomplete cycles can run to completion. And their completion triggers a parasympathetic response" (Afford, *Folio* 2012, p. 77).

I initially attributed the lesser anxiety I have felt since this Focusing session to being able to assert myself more strongly. Afford's physiological explanation of a felt shift suggests that by completing an emotional cycle we reduce the underlying sympathetic nervous arousal that I label anxiety. The value of Focusing ever grows in my appreciation!

- The session taught me that getting in touch with feelings and thoughts through Focusing is quite separate from deciding upon what action to take, if any. I realized later that part of the anxiety was fear that I might react impulsively and really get into trouble. While specific action was not a result of this session, there was a change in my orientation towards these people and the feelings that got triggered by this situation. I felt that I could trust this new orientation, as it seemed to naturally imply congruent behaviour.
- Since this session I have been more comfortable with people around me expressing anger. I still may not like it, but my tolerance is greater. The more presence I can develop to be with my own experiencing the more I can be with whatever my counselling clients bring to their sessions with me. Nothing else I know of facilitates my developing Presence like Focusing does.
- This session was a powerful reminder that we have within us all that makes us whole. It's not that it is all there waiting to be received. I think it's more that within us is the

potential to meet fully whatever we have experienced in our lives, old or current. How wonderful our bodies are for carrying all that has been thwarted and is not yet in awareness, for as long as it takes.

- Focusing is simple although not always easy.

Beyond practical survival needs, Focusing is the most important practice in my life. To end with Gendlin's words: "Your body knows the direction of healing and life. If you take the time to listen to it through focusing, it will give you the steps in the right direction" (Gendlin, 1981, *Focusing*, p. 76). Every time!

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