



**SURVIVING COLLEGE—FOCUSING BEFORE AND AFTER:  
“How to Write an Essay Without Chewing Off Your Own Leg”**

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**BACKGROUND OF THE FOCUSING SESSION**

One night toward the end of February 2010, a Swarthmore College student who worked in the Student Life office called me at my home in Berkeley, Ca. with an update on the arrangements for “How to Write an Essay without Chewing Off Your Own Leg,” a program I was giving at Swarthmore College the following week. For years as a tenured associate professor I had taught Shakespeare, Milton, popular culture and much else in the English Department at Swarthmore. “How to Write an Essay” was prompted by disturbing trends I had found when I returned in 2008-2009 to the English Department as a visiting professor after 10 years away being program director at a Tibetan Buddhist Institute on the West Coast. During 2008 and 2009 at Swarthmore in both my intensive freshman writing seminars and literature courses, I found some students paralyzed by perfectionism, quite a few others locked into taking the safest (not necessarily most successful) course through fear of failure, and still others whose ability to concentrate for extended periods was in doubt.

A senior in his final semester, Zach had finished all his classes in the fall, was now working in the Dean’s office, had already been accepted into law school, and only needed to finish his culminating exercise in his major. Though by all rights he should have been sitting in the catbird’s seat, he was in a panic.

“It’s basically done,” he explained, “but I can’t get myself to do the annotated bibliography and the concluding paragraphs.” I’m a bit hazy now on the details, but the deadline was really soon—like the next day, or it maybe had already passed. Zach was clear that if he didn’t turn in the exercise immediately, he would not graduate.

Zach, the Student Life liaison, told me that everything was coming together for the upcoming program: the room was reserved, and publicity sent out, including a flyer I had recently emailed to him. Then there was a pause on the line.

“You know when I read the flyer,” Zach said, “it described my situation pretty closely.” He was referring to the flyer’s “Is this You?” scenarios: “*You have written your first 3 paragraphs 20 times*”; “*You end up typing your paper straight into the computer from 3 AM until 5 minutes before class. This isn’t the first time*”; “*You can’t hand in the essay until it is perfect. The deadline has passed, you don’t answer emails, and you have stopped going to class*”; “*You awaken to generalized dread. The deadline weighs you down like a lead cape.*”

Zach asked, “Could what you are doing next week help me?” I thought he wanted to know if he should go to the presentation. “No,” he said, “I mean, can *you* help me? I need help *right now*.”

## THE FOCUSING SESSION

Our conversation eventually became an Inner Relationship Focusing session, with me explaining what that entailed (as much as I usually did). I have notes that show it was #27 of the 50 that I did as part of Ann Weiser Cornell’s Certified Focusing Teacher training (I’ve been a CFT since June 2011). So while I had some experience (and zillions of years talking to harried students), this impromptu format was not typical for many reasons. When I look back over what I did, I see ways in which I could have been more skillful, and know what I would do differently now. It worked anyway—and it was magical!

The session with Zach confirmed my inner sense of rightness that Focusing is a potent, essential tool for students, writers—in fact, whole campuses! How to grow it throughout a student body, administration, professors and staff; how can it become a robust, visible part of higher academic cultures? But that is another story . . .

As I led Zach in over the phone, having him bring awareness into his body, he was too nervous to sit down, and paced the whole time. He was uncomfortable when attention turned toward his physical being. I did suggest every once in a while that he feel his feet, his hand holding the phone, and his other hand. But that wasn’t the only challenge. Zach was a champion talker in a recognizable Swarthmore mode—speaking at speed, with facility, passion, and without pause about his situation. Words poured out of him about the stages and details of the culminating essay. I reflected back and tried to slow things down . . .

Something caught: he eventually tapped freshly into the flow he had when he was really engaged in the process of writing the project. The phrase that resonated for him was “having a voice.” I encouraged him to stay with that, make space for it, and see if it fit. He could feel it.

What came next was, “I just can’t understand why I can’t finish it.”

I reflected his sentence back to him, using Ann’s wonderful language of presence, “You’re noticing *something* that is keeping you from finishing it . . . Something that was perhaps concerned . . . for some good reason.” That move initially didn’t work too well.

Zach puzzled intellectually about why it wasn't "he himself" who did not or could not finish it. He found it unusual to entertain "a *part* that doesn't want to"—how could "he" and "something else" (an alien creature? That was the *sense*) be in this state?

Anyway, I suggested that we could hold the space for his larger "having a voice" and for the *part* that didn't want to . . . and see how it went. He did go on to acknowledge the *part* that couldn't/didn't want to, and, when invited to see if it was OK to spend time with *it*, he said "Yes", (but when I asked how that might feel in his body . . .?) He said, "It feels distant from me"

So I wondered . . . (aloud . . .!) what it seemed like to him: "Maybe digging in its heels . . .? Maybe sitting there beside him . . .? Perhaps hiding behind a curtain, or some other way . . .?"

He said with no hesitation, "It's hiding behind the curtain across the room."

I suggested he let *it* know it could stay there as long as it wanted, that it didn't have to come out or change. We sat with it for a while, and then I suggested that he might take time to sense if it had a point of view.

"It's anxious", he said. Having Zach let it know that he really "got" how anxious it was, I then had him invite *it* to let him know what all the anxiousness was about . . . what it didn't want to have happen.

"It doesn't want me to graduate because then I won't be a student anymore," he reported.

I asked him to take a minute to let it know that he *really heard it*.

He did this but also said, "I've had this thought before, but it doesn't make sense because I am already 'not a student' since I am not taking classes—but I'm not done." I had him sense into how *all* this *felt*, right at this moment.

I then suggested that he might invite it to show him what it *did* want for him . . . or want him to experience.

"It wants me to watch movies and hang out," it told him. And more: "It's afraid I won't be anything if I'm not a student. I won't belong." Seemingly steering him to activities in which he would belong, but would avoid writing: "It wants me to be happy," he said. He stayed with this *knowing* . . .

Quite unexpectedly at this point Zach reported, "There's some kind of warmth and energy moving through my legs." I had him take time to experience that and let it flow as much as felt OK. Then I suggested he might also look at and feel *both* his hands (he is right handed, my notes say) and consider how he used both of them, how he was bigger than any one part, and that we had held space for the one with something to say. The session drew to a close; as he made his way back, I prompted him to thank his whole self (including his body) and the entire process.

My final notes from this session read, “So now he is going to work. Maybe he will finish.”

It was late night on the East Coast when we hung up, prime Swarthmore student writing time. Though I had told him we could do more Focusing, and I actively wondered what had happened, it was several days before he was in contact again. Then the phone rang . . .

“Oh I wrote the bibliography and conclusion and handed it all in the next day,” he told me, matter-of-factly.

### **PINK BEARS AND OTHER COMMENTS:**

In the Adult Swim cartoon pictured in my flyer, the gummy bear caught in a steel trap chews off her own leg. “I taste delicious!” she shouts. What moved me so much about Focusing with Zach was the sweet contact he—and through him I—had with the flowing, life forward energy. A huge AHA came for me: it’s right at those stuck places, when we keep company with what seems most trapped, that real transformation happens both for me as Focuser and my companion. I gained access to a deep knowing, still there as I sense inwardly now, that my central task as an educator is to encourage that flow, those AHA’s, that connection to what matters, in my self, for my colleagues and those I teach.

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