

## MY VERY FIRST FOCUSING SESSION, LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

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1982. I had just read about half of Gendlin's book *Focusing*. This method seemed so down-to-earth, clear and promising—I wondered if it would work for me. So I sat down, directed my attention inward, which was completely new to me but nevertheless quite natural, and—yes, there was something uneasy, unclear but perceptible behind my breastbone. No need to look any further; it was quite remarkable that I felt something in my body at all.

After a while, when I had made kind of a space for 'it', it made itself known as 'fumbly', 'wrenchy'. I didn't know if these words actually existed, but for me they matched exactly what I noticed inside. There was a kind of a turning movement, downward, too. A screw? But a screw turns in one direction, and this feeling was turning to and fro. No, screw didn't really fit—that was clear, no doubt about that. This movement felt more like that of the blade in our former old-fashioned, open washing machine, but even this image didn't quite fit. I got more and more curious—this process was really exciting! It struck me that the 'something' was pulling down, although the space was getting narrower there, like forcing itself downward in a funnel.

This word 'funnel' had a 'more' about it. With a deep but loudless chortle the image of a funnel puppet came up. I have known funnel puppets since I was a child; they never had any special meaning to me. This is what they look like: from the outside you see a funnel with pleated cotton from the brim to the centre. From its shaft a little stick emerges. Underneath the cotton a puppet is hidden. Stick upward: puppet rises up; stick downward: puppet gone. Something like this little puppet was wriggling behind my breastbone, trying to get out of there, downward—in vain, of course.

I just sat down with it, slightly amused, waiting curiously. Then it gradually dawned on me that this puppet might have to do with anger—although, I was never angry, was I? But how about that brand new fumbly, wrenchy feeling, wriggling downward in my chest? Maybe all the same it *was* anger, anger that couldn't get out.

Anyway I wanted that feeling to change (not very unusual for a beginner in Focusing). But how? I waited for something to happen. A thought came: "Push the stick high up. Let the puppet come out proudly and have a look around." In the same second came the thought: "Heavens, no! I can't do that, don't want that, don't dare, that's not me!"

Well, then, I thought, take some more time to sit with it. After a while, with an unexpected and freeing feeling, came: "You might cautiously take a look over the brim, to see what's going on—and if necessary you can pull back in the next moment". What happened inside of me felt so new, alive, and surprising!

Of course, this was beginners' luck. But it left me convinced that this new approach was exactly what I had been looking for, both for myself and for my patients in my medical practice. The process turned out to change my way of relating to what happens inside and around me. My usual way, rather unpleasant for myself and all persons involved, was clenching my teeth, pretending nothing was wrong, making myself believe that, and treating everyone around me in a peevish way. And here was this new, surprising potential of just cautiously looking over the brim!

A new way opened up for me: as soon as that 'fumbly, wrenchy feeling' comes up: just notice it and give it attention. Then, together with the puppet, take that look over the brim in order to see what's going on. That's the moment to get openly angry if need be, or to discover a misunderstanding, maybe even a humorous one. Wonderful! And in case something is really wrong, the special quality of the anger that goes with that 'really wrong' will help me get hold of what kind of wrong this is. And after some more Focusing, *it* can even tell me which way would be right.

Quite a change for the better, for me and for people around me!

What this, my very first Focusing session, taught me:

- I can *feel* something when I bring my attention inside the middle part of my body.
- If I just give it time and attention, I can get a felt sense of the whole thing.
- A felt sense can bring up a perfectly matching image that tells more than a hundred words; *it* knows what is partly or completely right.
- A deep bodily felt change can happen. It works. It lasts. It's freeing!
- This process can happen without any help from outside, just between me and 'that'; no outer authority is needed!
- Whenever the old feeling returns, it reminds me of the new approach (even when sometimes I'm not willing to listen to it, I know it's *there*).
- *This Focusing taught me to get angry!*

In my youth I had learned: "Anger is destructive, so don't get angry. Find clever solutions instead." That's what I had tried practicing all the time.

Later, from Elisabeth Kübler Ross, I learned: "Anger is the power with which you can change things." That was new and quite surprising to me; I could understand her words and even see how anger could change things around me, but that didn't bring any real change in my own life. No wonder! How could I use a power that I didn't know from the inside? But after that first Focusing session, things started changing: anger, freed and liberated, turned into fresh energy, together with new perspectives. Today, 30 years later, it still works that way, even more!

Later, after having introduced some Focusing basics in everyday practice, I found out:

- What works for me works for many others, as well.  
Deep listening *and* reflecting, for instance, does so much more than just listening!

Using both (listening *and* reflecting) a lot of relevant information is brought up, which often saves many expensive and burdensome examinations. Wherever this Focusing intervention worked, it worked deeply; where it didn't, the patient and I just let it go and proceeded in a conventional way.

- What works with anger, works with other, more complicated feelings or emotions just as well.
- The Focuser is the only one who can check what is real, what is not, or not quite so.
- A suggestion can modestly be offered to a felt sense, by the Focuser or by a Focusing guide or companion, in an open ended way, as I had discovered with the images of the screw and the blade of the washing machine, and also with the image of the puppet, high up, looking around proudly—in that very first Focusing session.

Looking back, I feel sure that my lasting love for Focusing started on the day of that very first session, described above. The most important effect on my work as a GP has been that the old adage, “Doctor knows best” has changed into, “A patient often knows more than s/he is aware of.” Working together, a patient and a listening helper can reach a level *underneath* or *beyond* the surface where the problems or symptoms appear. Reflective listening can pave the way to a new, bodily felt level of awareness. From there, fundamental and lasting change is possible—comparable to the effects of my very first Focusing session.

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*Erna has been a GP from 1959 till 1991. She has been dedicated to Focusing since 1982—right up to the present time.*

*She started Focusing, first privately, then by and by introducing a Focusing approach into her medical practice. She became a Focusing teacher/trainer, and later a Certifying Coordinator. She now is limiting her activities to a more or less ‘senior’ level of work, including some private sessions, an occasional workshop or class, practicing Focusing in everyday life, of course, and also writing in Dutch, her native language, about Focusing and Companioning. Hopefully, her book on this theme will be published in about a year.*

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