

**A TRANSFORMATIONAL FOCUSING EXPERIENCE:
The Power of Engaging from One's Embodied Presence:
A Tribute to Neil Friedman**

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INTRODUCTION

There are certain moments in life when something comes together in an effable way that has a powerful effect on your whole way of being in the world. I am going to share such an event—and the impact it had at the time, as well as the ramifications since that time. I have shared this story verbally many times over the years. In doing so, I learned that many people that I grew to know, respect and adore were there that day. Of course, I did not know them at that time, and was in such a state that I probably did not look at anyone in the audience that day anyway. It is by far my most significant Focusing experience—something that has stayed within me and reverberated in my organism and energy field to this day.

In addition, as I will describe in later sections, not only was it a personally transformative event, but the seeds were planted that have grown into my new orientation to Focusing/Wholebody Focusing. So this paper is dedicated to Neil Friedman, whose untimely passing a few years ago was a deep loss for me and so many others in the Focusing community.

BACKGROUND

It was in May, 1996 that I attended my first Focusing International conference, which was held in the Boston area. The day was sunny, warm with a slight breeze—one of those special late Spring days in New England. Yet I could not enjoy the beautiful weather or the wonderful place nor connect with anyone. There I was amongst a group of people, only a very few that I had ever met. It was a time of great turmoil in my inner world and deep distress about my life situation. The best way to describe my inner-body-space was one of continual churning and twisting, like a wet towel being twisted tight in my gut. In addition to these constant pangs of anxiousness, my spirits were very low. If I had to show it in a postural stance, my back would be hunched over, like the shoulders carrying a heavy weight, a huge burden, and the neck/head would be slumped downwards, with pained eyes pulling away from making direct human contact.

The outer persona I showed was probably friendly and somewhat engaging but the inner being who lived within was filled with overwhelm and great terror. It was like a first day at a new school, when everyone else seemed to know each other—with warm hugs, smiles, engagement, so much more together, confident and connected. And then there was little me, a newbie, who felt like a complete outsider. All these experienced Focusing people, and me. They seemed so polished, open, outspoken—and my insides felt completely locked

up. What if someone asked me to Focus, and I didn't know what to say or do? What if I ruined their process—or exposed my inadequacy?

“You call yourself a Focusing person!?! And you are a therapist, no less!” was how this inner one projected the reception it might receive. So of course, there was a strong trepidation of being “called on,” or paired up with someone. Needless to say, my insides were stirred up, locked into this anxious-filled space.

TRANSFORMATIONAL FOCUSING EXPERIENCE

So with all this angst as backdrop, I made my way through the first couple of days, meeting some people, and finding a small group that felt comfortable enough to settle in just a bit. One of those I met briefly one morning was this rather short, stocky guy, balding a bit, who seemed very engaging and spoke like a ‘real guy’. “Hi, my name is Neil. Nice to meet you.” When I saw that he was giving a workshop later that day, I knew I would attend. It was entitled (something like): “Integrating Focusing with body-oriented techniques.” As I recall, Neil did not do much teaching but rather asked for volunteers to go through a “demo” with him. There were a couple of people with whom he worked in the first half of the workshop. While sitting and observing, there was something in Neil’s presence that stirred a kind of inner courage to volunteer. Now this surge of ‘bravery’ felt very compelling, yet equally if not more so, felt terrifying to that anxious being. “Are you crazy? Getting up and processing something in front of all these people? No f-in way!”

However, while that inner spirit of courage persisted, I knew I had to act right then before the more usual shrinking back would take hold, and I would lose the nerve of the moment. I recall running up to Neil at the start of the break, and with a big gulp, said, “If you don’t have anyone else, I would volunteer after the break to work with you.” He looked back with that warm smile he had. “No I don’t have anyone else set, and yes, it would be fine. You can go right after the break.”

It was as if he was already channeling a knowing awareness of how shaky inside this felt for me. So when we began the demo, Neil invited me to take some deep breaths, settle in, and let him know if there is anything that I would like to work on. I began to describe these intense pangs of anxiousness in my belly, and some of the other feelings that I had been experiencing at the conference. While describing these feelings, (unbeknownst to me at the time), my upper body was rocking back and forth, and my right hand had formed into a fist, and was moving up and down, pounding on my right thigh with some force. Neil asked if I would like a pillow to cover the spot on my leg—but I declined, saying something like, “No, it’s ok. I want to feel the impact and pain without any cushion.” It was the direct bodily feel of the impact of hitting (pain) that seemed to want to happen, like shaking up and awakening from a frozen or deadened place.

Instead of just reflecting my words, Neil brought attention to what my body was doing. He invited something like, “Let’s pay attention to the fist pounding your leg and your body rocking. Try to sense into what this is saying . . .” As I did, I could feel the anxious place in

my belly moving upward, like a wave of hot energy. “I feel angry, pissed off . . .” but think that my voice was not channeling that feeling.

“See if you can stay with it, let it come as strongly as you can. And you might sense who it is you are angry at . . .” Then it just came, “It’s my father. That’s who I’m pissed at. He left me all alone, to suffer with this terrible anxiety, insecurities and shame . . .” Neil reflected, “He left you all alone, and you are really angry about that . . .”

What came next was a total shock to me (and maybe to others there as well). Even to this day I am amazed at what arose from a depth beyond what I had known, a full bodied scream, “YOU BASTARD!! YOU BASTARD!! How could you have done that?! You were never there for me . . .” and more, all coming at an incredible decibel of yelling with hot rage. This went on for probably a couple of minutes (although it felt much longer), and Neil was right there with me, gently but firmly encouraging me, “Just breath, let it keep coming. It’s all right . . .” Finally, as the upsurge ran out of steam, Neil’s tone shifted a bit. “You’ve been keeping this anger and pain inside for a long time—and so good that you are allowing it out. And what your father did was wrong, not ok. He shouldn’t have abandoned you like that.”

Hearing these words along with a sense of his sincere caring hit me right in the gut. With some of the heat having been dissipated, what emerged was the inner pain. I believe that Neil saw it in my eyes, because he kind of nodded in what felt like a loving gesture of permission. “It is ok to cry about this—because it was wrong. You deserved better . . .” Then the tears came like a flood door had opened, and just as sudden as had come the rage, tears started streaming down my face. I think that my body might have leaned toward Neil who was positioned immediately to my left side. What he did next seemed to directly connect with the little boy in me—and opened the floodgates even more.

He leaned toward me, with open arms, saying, “You were a good boy. You didn’t deserve to be deserted. You deserved to have a good father.” As I was sobbing, this inner boy leaned further toward Neil’s right shoulder, and I think I said, “Is it ok for me to lean on you here?” He smiled, “Of course, come here.” And he put his big arms around my shoulders, and my head buried itself in his large, strong shoulder. He kept repeating, now very softly, “You ARE a good boy. You don’t need to suffer alone. I’m here.”

In that moment, a powerful torrent of tears and lifetime of grief and pain flowed out into his strong shoulders and warm, solid presence. He kept holding me for a short time, until it was time for the process to end. The whole event lasted probably 20 minutes, but felt like hours. As I came back into the space, I was amazed that there were people there, because, while I was Focusing, I had only been aware of Neil and me.

After the workshop ended, I left the room feeling as though a 1000 lbs of weight had been lifted or released. The constant pang of anxiousness in the belly had disappeared, and my whole bodily being felt lighter, straighter. My eyes were clearer, and my stride was different. I recall that a few people spoke to me after the workshop, praising my courage and sincerely admiring my openness and vulnerability. In me, something shifted. “So it is ok to show vulnerability, pain, need—to let someone in to help. I don’t have to pretend or shoulder this huge burden alone.”

DISCUSSION

Immediately thereafter, and for years later, this experience has stayed with me, etched in my body and psyche as a touchstone or hallmark as something very powerful and transformational. In writing the vignette, the depth and sacredness of that event reemerges, touching me again in my soul and spirit. I want to share what made this event so special, first on a personal level and then how it has informed the development of my orientation to Focusing, especially Wholebody Focusing and the transformative power of Co-Presence in the Focusing/therapy space. I will also briefly touch on how this has morphed into what I call the *theatre of the living body* or *embodied theatre*.

What allowed me to open up and let go in a way so unusual and generally terrifying to a large part of me, was Neil's presence. Even before the workshop, there was something in his way of embodying his being that felt refreshingly honest, grounded, and warmly solid. And having witnessed him work with others in previous demos seemed to affirm this sense that it was possible to be more engaged, open and embodied. Neil encouraged, and I sensed could "take" the type of outward display of strong affective and bodily expression that came alive and flowed out of me. So as a "client," this was quite evocative and empowering, that another living being was both inviting a depth of feeling and capable of "holding his own" (being grounded/ embodied enough) with a strong show of expressiveness. I know for sure that it was not his methods or any particular Focusing or body-oriented technique that allowed this experience to unfold. It was *him*, his embodied presence as real, open, sensitively attuned and solid that conveyed in his comportment and *way of being* that it was ok to let go to the extent that happened. For this, I am eternally grateful. That one session with Neil initiated a journey of inner healing of deep wounds and began a process of moving closer to my true Self, an inner spirit that is quite passionate and expressive.

This experience also showed me the importance of something we might call *intensive* vs. *extensive* processing. Although as a psychotherapist and Focusing facilitator, I do recognize that deep change proceeds in small steps over a long period of time. Yet the fact that the session with Neil has stayed with me so deeply and for so long also shows us the importance of *intensiveness*.

There are certain ingrained patterns and inner beings that seem to live in their own world, i.e. embodied places that have a life of their own. Thus, it sometimes requires a depth of intensity to reverberate through our whole system in order to loosen blockages, allow life-energy to stir and flow where it has been deadened or stuck. This is certainly true for my process, as in the session when my fist hit the thigh, awakening sensations that allowed my awareness to become more embodied. Thus, for me, Wholebody Focusing was a natural extension of what I first encountered with Neil, using one's whole embodied presence as well as movement, gesture, and energetic/affective expression as integral to the transformational process.

For example, in this session, Neil not only reflected back what I was saying/describing about my inner body feelings (felt sensing), but also brought attention to the gestural/bodily movements that were co-occurring. I know now (in retrospect) that this was an important contribution that Neil made to the Focusing world, regarding the integration of what he

called “soft,” “expressive,” and “hard” body-oriented interventions (Friedman, 2000). For me, at the time, these ideas were a revelation. My arm/hand was doing something different from and in contrast to what my words were conveying. Because he brought this to awareness, and encouraged more of that pounding and rocking, more aspects of the process were allowed to emerge. Now, I would say that the fist/arm was an outward expression/movement of the awakening of an inner living being who had been split off or deadened.

In addition, Neil not only reflected, but *added* aspects that must have emerged from his own embodied presence in relation to what something in me was needing. This is a living example of what Gendlin has called *bodily implying*, (Gendlin, 1996) and the *primacy of human* presence (Gendlin, 1990). When Neil said, “You didn’t deserve to be deserted . . . You were a good boy . . .” it seemed to flow from his embodied engagement with something in me (a hurt, abandoned boy). It was not just his words, but what *came through* the words, a deep, sincere and authentic *response* to what was emerging in the session.

It is this felt quality of responsiveness that I found most transformative, more powerful than just reflecting. It is a way of attuning and resonating to the bodily/feeling quality of what is being expressed, and letting it be modulated in one’s own organism. So when Neil shared what came for him, a door was opened (I called it a floodgate) that had been locked. Without this type of embodied, personal sharing, in tune with what he sensed something in me was implying it needed, that gate would not have opened. He also “lent” his arms and shoulder, opening his body-self to allow that little boy to receive a “father’s” warm, loving and strong embrace. Thus, he was attuned enough to sense that was what was needed and comfortable/open enough to allow his body to be touched and touch. Now I recognize that the “true” touch had already happened—a “feeling” or “spiritual” touch that was transmitted through his gaze, body and being—something that was transmitted in the shared embodied space of his presence in resonance with what was emerging from me. These are beautiful gifts that Neil had, and which I was fortunate enough to receive in this one ineffable event.

THEORETICAL / PRACTICAL INFLUENCES OF THIS TRANSFORMATIONAL FOCUSING EXPERIENCE

Since this event in 1996, I have undergone many transmutations on personal and professional levels. I can still sense how this session reverberates in my awareness and living organism, as these inner beings and their patterns of experiencing/living are continually worked through. Moreover, I have come to realize that a Transformational Focusing experience reverberates in the hologram of many levels of one’s own life, as well as much wider and deeper realms of generational patterns and morphic transmission of unprocessed trauma. I would like to share some of the progression of my own journey in Focusing as it has (explicitly or implicitly) evolved since that day with Neil.

First, the session with Neil began a process of becoming more alive inside, and more embodied. Through other Focusing experiences, I was able to finally acknowledge with clarity that I needed to leave my marriage and was able generate enough inner strength to carry that forward.

Second, that session helped me begin to confront a major block in completing my dissertation, and actually allowed me to use my own experience as an integral part of the dissertation (Fleisch, 2000). I developed a model in which a specific area of blockage (e.g. dissertation blocking) was part of a much larger journey of transformation, one that mirrors the “hero’s journey,” as described by Joseph Campbell. During the last stage of writing my dissertation, my father became very ill and died the very next day after I told him that had I completed my dissertation. Since that session with Neil, I felt a growing shift in my whole stance toward my father—which culminated in a very heartfelt phone conversation the night I told him about the dissertation. Perhaps through some inward softening and healing on my part, as well as the awareness that he was on the verge of dying, for the first time he opened up about regrets he felt as a parent. It was very emotional for both of us, a moment I treasure (which I don’t know if would have been possible without my session with Neil). I dedicated my dissertation to my father.

Third, as an aftermath of my session, I became much more aware of the importance of kinesics, what the body (or more precisely, living beings coming through the body) is doing as a form of embodied communication and expression. I developed a concept I called *implicit leads*, i.e. a bodily movement such as gesture, postural shift, tone in the voice etc. that is a sign of an emergence of something new, the whole body’s implying of next steps (Fleisch, 2000; 2008). These “leads” are often different from or in contrast to the verbal message, as if the inner body has a life or knowing of its own (in WBF, we call this “body-wisdom”, c.f. McEvenue and Fleisch, 2008). Sensing the felt energy and life spirit of emergent leads has been an important aspect of my work and has larger implications for the theory and practice of Focusing, something that I am exploring in more depth.

Fourth, I have been more aware of the importance of Co-Presence, the shared field of embodied experiencing. This aspect of Wholebody Focusing has become central to my way of being as a therapist, facilitator, and teacher. More than specific steps, it is through the use of what I am now calling our human *Organon*, i.e. our whole body as resonating instrument or tuning fork, allowing us to receive, reverberate and transmute the feeling tones and quality of felt energy between client/Focuser and ourselves. Seen as a musical instrument, the body is both a container and chamber that receives, as well as transmits its own felt tonality through our grounded presence (Fleisch, 2011a). I believe that Neil embodied and manifested his own Organon, his feeling, embodied organism in a very finely tuned, sensitive and expressive way. In retrospect, I can now sense how that session planted a seed somewhere in my awareness that has grown into the centrality of Co-Presence, as a co-resonance and inter-active engagement through our embodied organisms. When Neil shared from his inner being to that hurt being in me, this transmission had a powerful impact in my own inner life and in the subsequent development of this model. Perhaps something in me has been channeling Neil’s spirit in my own unfolding.

Fifth, and finally, I have been developing (along with Doralee Grindler Katonah) a model that we call *Transformational Focusing: a wholebody/spiritbody integration*. In this model, we have included many of the areas mentioned above, plus Doralee’s important contribution of the spiritbody—which I sense as its own separate entity. This includes but is more than the physical body (as in many somatic therapy models)—it is the *living body* or

embodied organism that attunes to and resonates with felt qualities of Spirit, a larger field of Being to which we can use our grounded body as a receptive instrument or channel. This opens us to receive and transmit through multiple avenues of felt experiencing, including inner directed movement, gestures, spiritual/ soul qualities, and feeling tones/rhythms.

Part of this model includes something I call the *theatre of the living body* or *embodied theatre* (Fleisch, 2011b). I will not detail the process here, except to say that it involves an expansion of Focusing/Wholebody Focusing to include the active participation of the Companion and (in workshops) of the whole group. I now view our inner world as comprised of inner beings that are enacting their own inner dramas (or if projected, played out in the outer world of relationships/situations), living a life of their own. Since the living body as an Organon is a receptive organ of spirit (life-energy), it can receive signals and information that can enact a sequence of an aspect of another's inner world. The theatre is a safe and resonant space in which the group forms a larger organism, *a living body of wholeness*, in which participants are invited to embody a part/role/aspect of the Focuser's situation or symptom. Through inviting and waiting for a bodily felt sense to form, the living organism embodies some quality of that *being* and lets it come through the body in whatever way it emerges. The whole group provides communal support, containment and life energy on behalf of the transformation of each person.

Again, I now see how this process germinated from my experience with Neil. Although he did not necessarily sense or express it in this way, his way of being embodied these qualities of organismic attunement, deep listening, authentic sharing and outward expression of feelings.

ADDENDUM

In 2002, at the International in California, there was an evening tribute to Neil. As I recall, his health had already started to decline, his hearing and movement impaired, but he was there, and many people congregated to express their love, memories and appreciation of him. At that event, I told Neil the story of our encounter in 1996, and how much it meant to me. He received my sharing very sweetly, and although I can't remember if he said anything, I know it meant a lot to me that I could share that with him. And then at the International in Montreal in 2008, at a memorial tribute to Neil, put together by his dear friend Joan Klagsburn, I shared this story again. So his spirit is still with me and within me, and this is the first time I have ever written about that session, as well as sensing how many threads it opened in my personal growth, in my understanding and practice of the potentials of Focusing, and in my continual expansion of the process into new edges of experiencing and possibility. Neil showed me that all this is possible and to him (as well as so many others with whom I have studied and worked), I bow with gratitude.

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