

## WE HAVE TO FIND YOUR KITTEN

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*Rob Foxcroft*

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*For Mary McGuire*

I love stories. And I am uneasy about stories. When I tell a story, it has a way of settling into an ideal form somewhat remote from the untidy texture of events. Then it has life as a story has life, but no longer has life as an inner journey has life.

Once I had undertaken to write the story of a significant inner journey, I soon found that I didn't want to repeat a story often told. I wanted to wait until I could catch a story in the making.

This week something memorable is happening and today there came a crucial shift in my feeling and understanding. I will try to tell you about it.

### BEFORE THE SESSION

On Tuesday morning I spend two hours with my long-term, long-suffering, long-loving Focusing partner, Barbara, time all for me. I am in anguish about a long-blocked situation with a dear friend. As I pour out my feelings I am pretty continuously foaming at the brain.

Barbara says we *must* concentrate on grounding. How seldom has she offered any breath of advice! I am deeply thankful for this exceptional word of counsel. Every word of her listening is imbued with a characteristic, unfailing blend of kindness, insight and imagination. She shares some quite personal things today, highly relevant, highly illuminating. I feel I have been set firmly and gently back on my feet.

### MEDITATIVE LISTENING

I need to say a few words about the way I do Focusing. In particular I want very much to avoid procedure, to stay close to the natural process, avoiding learned moves. I want to move quietly through a wild forest. I don't want to walk along neat paths in a city park. So I make a constant effort to see the natural case, to take nothing but memories and leave nothing but footsteps.

It seems to me that the natural cycle of empathy has four or five phases, which I call Feeling, Conveying, Feeling-in, Receiving and Accepting. Accepting merges back into Feeling. The Focuser feels something; and tries to convey it to the Listener. The Listener feels her way into the Focuser's world by allowing the words and images to resonate inwardly; and finds some words through which to receive them. The Focuser checks back inwardly to see whether the Listener's words are acceptable, whether they come close enough to the feeling.

This is the natural cycle of empathy, the cycle of Focusing-and-Listening-together, which I call *Meditative Listening*.

What I am newly coming to understand—you can see this understanding still forming below—is that the natural cycle of self-empathy must echo the cycle of empathy: it must also allow for what is felt and conveyed to be felt into, received and accepted.

The natural cycle of Focusing-alone must shadow the primitive case, in which one is speaking to a listener. This is the cycle of self-empathy or Focusing-alone. I call it *Meditative Listening with an Imaginary Listener*. You will see why in the session itself.

## MEDITATIVE LISTENING WITH AN IMAGINARY LISTENER

When I am Focusing alone, I follow the same four or five phase cycle, which seems to me to be the fundamental natural sequence of self-empathy.

1     **Feeling.** I turn my awareness inwards to see how I am feeling.

1a    **Clearing a Space.** If I find that my feeling is a muddle of several things, I clear a space. What usually happens when I clear a space is that the different things (the guests, or more likely the ghosts) come in a rush. Since the visitors all rush in together, I quickly note who they are. Then I have to go back to each one and say hello properly. I must take a little time to see how I feel about each one and to give each one a chance to feel at home. One at a time. And I always leave a space for one more guest-ghost, who may not have showed up yet. Sometimes even the guest of honour may turn up late to the feast. Finally I ask them, “Who do I need to listen to now?”

2     **Conveying.** I find a word or two, a gesture, a sound or an image, which says something about what the feeling is *like*; and perhaps something of what it is *about*. There are always these three aspects: (1) the feeling itself; (2) what it is like; and (3) what it is about. Though I do not always know what the feeling is about, I can always touch the feeling directly, just as it is. I try to convey something of the quality of my feeling exactly as if I were talking to a sensitive, empathic listener.

2a    **The Action Step.** Once in a while an action step appears. I mostly don’t look for action steps, but am happy to welcome one when it comes.

3     **Feeling-in.** And here is that sensitive, empathic listener. I talk to her and she comes. It is just as if an apparition joins me where I am. She is a kind, receptive listener. She listens to my words, gestures, sounds and images. She is not me. She is not enmeshed in my life. But she is generously concerned to be with me and to feel with me whatever I may be feeling. (For empathy is a transmission. The empathy that we have received from others flowers into an empathy that we can give ourselves. This is the essence of Focusing-alone.)

4     **Receiving.** As if I were that listener, I say back to myself a version of what I first tried to convey. It is fairly free in form, but needs to be delicately attuned in essence.

5 **Accepting.** I check inside: “Can I accept that this is how I feel? Or is the form still some way remote from the feeling?” Here I am myself again. I check as myself, not as the inner listener. Once I accept this, I am ready to feel for the next thing.

## HOW I KEEP NOTES WHEN I AM FOCUSING ALONE

In the following notes the sign ~~~ replaces a wiggly line in my notes. It represents a few moments of inward, bodily attention.

Y = yes. It replaces a tick in my notes. The wiggly lines and the ticks ‘police’ the session pretty well. I write ~~~ when I intend to make the inward turn. I don’t write a tick until I did it.

X = no. I didn’t do the step. I got waylaid.

! means a digression, too strong to be gainsaid.

Times are noted thus: 14:45 means a quarter to three in the afternoon.

These simple notations keep my intention pure. They guarantee that every detail is referred back to an inner sense of knowing. The careful notation of my solitary sessions helps them not to drift. The sequence is completely natural, even though (or maybe because) it is quite firmly held.

Here are the notes that I wrote this morning as I sat quietly with my feelings. They are exactly as I wrote them. Afterwards I will tell the story as simply as I can.

## NOTES MADE DURING THE SESSION

(at 11:25-12:05)

I make a drawing.

Feeling ~~~ Y

Clearing a Space:

1 Hume ~~~ Y

2 Chaos ~~~ Y

**3** K ~~~ Y

4 Tired ~~~ Y

5 ... —LATER: Brian (see below) ~~~ Y

3 is the one ~~~ Y

Feeling ~~~ Y

Conveying:

Images of Pluscarden and Embercombe

Barbara's "grounding" + drystone walling

Feeling-in ~~~ Y

Receiving: X

!

1 Hume: Impotent reason, calm passion, dangerous emotion

2 Carl: Empathy precedes self-empathy

3 Brian Thorne: A special case

Feeling-in ~~~ Y

Receiving:

In some sense,

"God is that shadowy interlocutor  
who is written into the fabric of our being."

Accepting ~~~ an edge of tears ~~~ more than an edge ~~~ Y

Feeling ~~~ X

! Wash up breakfast things.

Feeling ~~~ (review) X

! THE THREE POINTS

1 Plato—aporia is a knowing [Note: aporia = dumbfoundedness]

2 Hume—calm passions

3 Dewey—the feeling of perplexity

Accepting ~~~ Y

Feeling ~~~ Y

Conveying:

Full of feeling (from eyes to belly)

Feeling-in ~~~ Y

Receiving:

"God...being" has life in it.

Accepting ~~~ Y

Feeling (at 11:55) ~~~ Y

Conveying (action step):

\*\*\*\*\* To K: "*We have to find your kitten!*"

Feeling-in ~~~ YYY

Receiving:

In other words, your actualising force

Accepting ~~~ Y

Receiving (action step):

\*\*\* And a series of grounding steps

Accepting ~~~ YY

Action Step:

*Talk to K now!*

Accepting ~~~ Y

Receiving:

“God . . . being”—still tears there

Accepting ~~~ Y

Receiving:

“Love divine, all loves excelling . . .” (Hymn)

Accepting ~~~ Y

(at 12:05, forty minutes later)

I make two drawings.

I talk at once to K and we agree a Five Point Plan. It is a great step forward, a decisive change in a situation which has long been both stuck and painful.

## THE STORY OF THE SESSION

These days I feel fraught and frightened. Throbbing, miserable and defeated. Abandoned, alone and isolated. Longing for release. Anxious, thwarted and stuck, fearful and uneasy. There is a run of sleepless nights. I feel pretty rough. Underslept and exhausted. My eyes hot and painful. My head hurting. My insides sore.

It is not easy to be with myself with gentleness and compassion. I feel unslept, unwell, unhappy, unsure and unwashed. Ashamed and impotent.

Since Sunday something begins to feel a little easier. When I listen to all these feelings as if I were a friend listening, there is also love. Yes, there is love. And I am worried. As one worries over the loved one. For days I am haunted by Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Love, divine, all loves excelling”.

Sadly, I can’t get my soul to sing one of the beautiful melodies for this hymn, Hyfrydol or Blaenwern. John Stainer’s squelchy Victorian harmonies echo insistently around the inner cliffs. Never mind. The hymn is a guide and a beacon.

On Tuesday morning after the long session with Barbara I am more or less back on my feet.

(at 11:25-12:05)

Over breakfast, I make a little drawing. It is a variation on a drawing that I have used for some years. The old drawing is a drawing of *Meditative Listening*: of Focusing-and-Listening-as-a-single-flow. In the new drawing, the listener has faded away and become shadow.

In the old drawing two people sit facing one another. Between them is an infinity sign, a figure-of-eight lying on its side. On the left is the Focuser, on the right the Listener. The infinity sign represents the single, undivided flow of Focusing-and-Listening.

In the new drawing the figure on the right has dissolved into shadow. Even when we are Focusing alone, there is an implied listener. I will say more about this below.

As I begin I also make a note: Feeling > (Clearing a Space, if needed) > Conveying (Action Step, if one comes) > Feeling-in > Receiving > Accepting > Feeling . . .

When I am Focusing alone, I continually make these little drawings and notes. They remind me of what I am doing. They coax a wayward soul to accept some outward form.

Having made the little drawing and a note of steps or phases, I make the inward turn. The usual guests are waiting. Ah well. I guess they slept on the sofa. But a friend is here too, our great Scottish philosopher-historian, David Hume. I love David for his gifts of friendship, his luminous clarity of mind, his pagan humanism, cheerful, learned and wise. I love his equanimity in the face of paranoid betrayal and searing physical pain. And here he is. Also here are the usual chaos and the tired feeling and K. Hello, K! Later, Brian Thorne will come to join us. How lucky, that I leave an empty chair!

And of course it is K who needs my love and care. But I am happy to find David and Brian close at hand, with their kindness and good sense.

Sounds and images come.

Here are the Benedictine monks of Pluscarden Abbey on the Moray Firth, chanting and digging, deeply grounded in devotion and manual labour. Good men faithfully walking an ancient way. I see them tending their beehives. The air is full of incense and bells, the odours of earth and honey.

I see an image of Embercombe, the lovely estate in Devon where programmes are run, “touching hearts, stimulating minds and inspiring committed action for a truly sustainable world”. I hear the wind over the moors, the birds in the hedges, the creak of a swan’s wings, and the laughter of young voices.

Like Pluscarden, Embercombe stands for grounded, selfless work. These are images of human beings finding fulfilment in a grounded commitment to the greater good.

Finally, there are images of drystone walling, memories of the absorbing physical toil that gave me so much fulfilment and healing in the days when I used to build unmortared stone field boundaries in the Scottish countryside.

As I begin to receive these images, I get waylaid. Thoughts and companions.

Here is David Hume, carefully distinguishing three things: impotent reason, calm passion and dangerous emotion. Focusers will recognise this distinction, which Gene Gendlin has often echoed. According to Hume, reason can only help to clarify the facts. It can never move us to act. Immediate feelings are risky because they lead us into impulsive, short-sighted blunders. Only the “calm passions” are to be trusted. (These calm passions are what Focusers call felt senses.) Hume warns that the calm passions are subtle and easily missed, that one has to learn to recognise them.

The next visitor is Carl—Carl Rogers—saying that “Empathy precedes self-empathy”. “Before I can listen to myself”, he says, “I must have had the experience of being listened to by somebody who gives me empathy and acceptance. Empathy is always a lineage, a transmission”.

Or maybe not. Here is Brian Thorne, my dear friend Brian. He disagrees. “No, Carl”, he says, “not always”. Brian talked to me one Sunday morning on the hillside above Harlech Bay. He said that sometimes the inner need for empathy—the inherent need—is so great that it calls up a spiritual fount of empathy when life has failed to provide it. This can happen occasionally, even in quite young children whose lives have been horribly cold, devoid of human sympathy.

As I sit with these images, sounds and guests, a sentence forms:

In some sense,  
“God is that shadowy interlocutor  
who is written into the fabric of our being.”

This odd, surprising sentence brings an edge of tears; as I wait, more than an edge.

Without thinking, I break off to wash up the breakfast things. What is that about? I think it is a kind of instinctive grounding, a coming back to earth.

Then I begin again, but am at once interrupted by my thoughts. It comes to me that there are three crucial moments in the prehistory of Focusing, three key insights of philosophers before Gene Gendlin. Two of these Gene pointed out to me when I asked him which philosophers to read, some twenty years ago.

In Plato, there are many dialogues which end in *aporia*—in a state of defeat—what in natural English we would tend to call “dumbfoundedness”. All the suggested lines have come to nothing, and there is no way forward yet. What is left (says Gene) is a wordless feeling from which new words will arise later. Here is the first dramatic (or self-conscious) appearance of the felt sense on the stage of world history.

In Hume, there are the calm passions, which are clearly felt senses, and which he commends to us as our best guides to living.

In John Dewey, there is the famous feeling of perplexity: “Every process of thinking”, he says, “is guided by a feeling of perplexity”. I wonder for a moment: Why did Gene tell

me to read Plato and David Hume but make no mention of John Dewey the democratic philosopher, his own teacher's teacher?

As these three old companions take their seats I find I am full of feeling from eyes to belly, a broad bodily mass of emotionally charged sensation.

I go back to my strange sentence:

“God is that shadowy interlocutor  
who is written into the fabric of our being.”

This brings Mary McGuire. I remember saying to Mary in 1988: “It seems to me that Focusing is just a secular name for prayer”. She did not agree, but it seems that my feeling has lain dormant. At any rate, I can feel that my strange sentence has life in it.

It is now 11:55. I turn back to my feeling as if for the first time. And here comes another welcome guest! Gene has joined Mary. I am so happy to see them both! He tells her: “We have to find your kitten!”

And that is what I must say to K. Here is my big step. Yes. “*We have to find your kitten!*”

(There is an old story here. Many years ago, Mary told Gene a long, long dream full of alarms and excursions. At some point in the dream she mentioned a small detail: a lost kitten. When he had heard the whole long dream, all Gene would say was: “We have to find your kitten!”)

And so we do.

Writing up this session now, I find that the step still brings tears; a sense of rightness and a sense of release:

“K, dear one, we have to find your kitten!”

Yes, it resonates. It rings true. It is an action step.

And the pedantic self (so boring) explains: “In other words, we have to find your actualising force” (the word *force* takes some time to come, to feel right.)

As I receive this action step, another one comes: “And a series of grounding steps”. Yes, yes. This too has a strong sense of rightness . . .

And even a third action step (they are piling in): “Talk to K now!” The inner voice imperative.

Still I pause, to receive all this fully. I go back to my strange sentence:

“God is that shadowy interlocutor  
who is written into the fabric of our being”.

Yes, there are still tears here. Something is very much right about this.

Am I done? No, not quite. I make more space to receive all that has come. And here is that hymn again: “Love divine . . .” It was never far away.

It is 12:05. Forty minutes flashed by. Now I am done. Once more I make the two drawings: the drawings of Meditative Listening with a real or imaginary listener. Why? I don’t know. Perhaps this too has a grounding effect. Later, at some point, I will make various versions of my two drawings *with the kitten added*. The kitten curls up at the feet of the Focuser. Or on the Focuser’s lap. I’m not sure yet. Probably at the feet? At any rate, the kitten *knows*.

I talk to K about kittens. K gets it at once. We agree a Five Point Plan, which includes finding a kitten and perhaps a kitten-finder. We make a commitment to grounding.

Here my story ends.

## THE ESSENCE OF A STORY

For what is the essence of a story? I hear the first line of Leslie Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there”. Yes. That’s it. The story takes us into another world.

This thought brings Walter Scott into my mind. For it was really Scott who showed the world that other times, other places, other communities and other individuals are all of them foreign countries. Each has its own integrity. They do things differently there.

Machiavelli throws a sharp light here: not only do these foreign lands have different good values, but not all good values can live side by side. Scott dramatised these inescapable discontinuities. He did not choose between them, but seemed to say quite simply: “Here are two good forms of life!”

So that I am left wondering how deaf I have been in the foreign land of K. Wondering how far I am foreign even to myself, and blind to my own being.

Which reminds me to say one word about another foreign land, the land of hearing. In all these years, how little we have heard about how the inner life moves in people who are deeply aural by nature! Words about images, silence about sounds.

As I come to the end of this writing I hear various sounds. A quiet American voice murmurs a line from *Four Quartets*:

“And the fire and the rose are one”.

Deeply moved, I listen more intently. I hear a woman’s voice, an old Norfolk dialect. It is Mother Julian:

“And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well”.

And the lilt of William Langland comes to join us:

“Love is the plant of peace and most precious of virtues”.

I think we got there.

*Glasgow, Scotland,*

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*Rob writes: “I teach empathy and self-empathy. I offer spiritual accompaniment. I am a musician and a poet. I live in Scotland with my wife and family. I play the piano—mostly Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. I love to be in wild nature, to walk on the hills or sit by the sea. As a child I loved canoeing, and used to build drystone walls. You are welcome to email me at The Centre for Meditative Listening: [meditativelistening@gmail.com](mailto:meditativelistening@gmail.com), or to phone me on: +44 141 943 1449.”*