CLEARING THE FOG…

Nigel Gibbons

“The exploration of the Background Feeling, beyond old conditionings, hidden identities, wounds and traumas, may gradually transform what was first felt as a burden or a limit into an expansion of being.” (De Fréminville 2008, p. 18)

Aching agony, feeling wide open
exposed, vulnerable, wide-eyed
unprotected, torn, divided
one hand reaching out to clasp a hand
to hold, to touch warm flesh
that wants to hold me,
trustingly.
(Journal extract June 2012)

For as long as I can remember I’ve felt sad. As a teenager I described myself as a melancholic. I’ve talked about it in therapy over the years, but it’s there, always: the background feeling, the ‘wallpaper’ of my life (Gendlin, 1981; De Fréminville, 2008).

I’ve come across it in my Focusing, this misty fog, numb blankness, which seems unable to shift, or even to be close to. It’s simply here, there, everywhere. It doesn’t change. “…the Background Feeling as the predominant feeling you have towards life.” (De Fréminville 2008, p. 14)

I write poetry and teach therapeutic creative writing in the UK. Often I express myself in what I call ‘raw poetry’, instant poems written from the heart, from the felt sense of my situation. They’re often quite painful, usually touching and revealing. I’ve included some in this article.

During my recent counselling training and Focusing training, I brushed up against my background feeling and touched it. For instance I’ve discovered that when I read some of my poems, I can sense a painful spot coming up, and when I get to it, instead of crying I swallow my emotion, swallow my tears.

One weekend during my Focusing Certification, I was working with one of my fellow students when I touched something painful and deeply sad. I felt tearful but did not cry. Then I talked about it in the group. Again I could feel it, feel the sadness overwhelming me, but I couldn’t go beyond my tortured words. I couldn’t cry.

This has always puzzled me: Why can’t I cry? Well I can. I watched ‘The Jungle Book’ with my daughter and, when it looks like Baloo is dead, I cry—not fully—but with tears filling my eyes.
I’ve begun to explore this phenomenon. My mother probably had postnatal depression, but as a label, it didn’t exist in the UK in 1957. So instead she thought of leaving us; after all she was a woman used to rural Wales, and being in two rooms in London in her in-laws’ house must have been alienating, and achingly lonely. And then having a screaming hungry baby added to the mix can’t have helped. My mother always did what she was told, so she did four-hour feeds with no picking-up to cuddle or reassure me between times. Eventually the midwives told her to give me two bottles. That worked, sort of. Unfortunately I became overweight, which caused its own problems. Looking back, I can believe that my sadness might be connected to this time period.

When I was seven my grandfather, my favourite member of my family, died falling down the stairs while we were on holiday in Wales. We rushed back, but I wasn’t even allowed to go to the funeral, or to talk about it, so I buried it. A few weeks later when I returned to school for the beginning of the new school year, I sat in assembly and the headmaster informed us of the death of the pupil—it turned out to be my best friend, Andrew. Not surprising that I felt sad, but added to that sadness, I said to myself, “I’ll never let myself get close to anyone again.”

Wheel forward almost 50 years and I’m off to the 2012 advanced and Certification Week-long at the Garrison Institute. Over the first couple of days the reserved me, the holding back me, the not-letting-anyone-get-close-to me was in operation, but I gradually warmed up. Yet always in the background the sadness lingered, as it always did, affecting my relationships.

On the Tuesday, Shaun Phillips was talking about trauma. At one point he got us to do some Focusing. The effect was deep. I felt so sad, so very deeply sad. It wascrippingly painful. One of my fellow students tried to talk to me at the break, but I could barely hear what she was saying, and I guess my responses were fairly inarticulate.

A further Focusing session brought up an image of two horizontal steel doors sliding open and closed, below which were my feelings. That image suggested to me the sense I have of hiding my inner world from others behind very strong defences. However, as I Focused, the image developed into a picture of the doors opening, thus revealing the vulnerable inner me.

My feelings began to run wild. I could sense the sadness dominating me. I felt desperate and eventually spoke to one of the coaches on hand (in case any of us were triggered by what was being taught).

We slipped back into the meditation hall and sat down onto chairs in the stillness. She spoke softly, gently, to me. I knew that Focusing ‘feel’, but I was no longer observing the niceties of what was going on.

As I talked I kept touching the recent difficulties I’d had in crying, at the same time telling my story. Calmly, she got me to slow down, to pause, all the classic Focusing language. I just about managed to do it.

She encouraged me to keep checking inside, what was my sense of this?
Suddenly a word came, a very simple word. It was behind the sadness; it seems to be bigger than the sadness. *Lonely*.

Something clicked. I felt intensely lonely in my personal relationships; I found it difficult to make friends. My mother had been intensely lonely in the first year or so of my life. Could I have picked up my mother’s loneliness, adding to it with my grandfather and Andrew’s deaths? Possibly—plus many other things. *Loneliness*.

De Fréminville refers to Shirley Turcotte’s work: “Is there something in this Background Feeling that does not belong to me? Something that I might have absorbed from my environment (from family, from my personal, historical, geographical, or trans-generational environment)? Acknowledge whatever emerges.” (De Fréminville 2008, p. 17)

Her questions touched something, and I began to cry. The tears flowed openly and freely. It felt so different. It felt as if something had shifted in the geography of my insides. *Lonely. Tears*.

Later that evening I wrote in my journal:

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\begin{align*}
I & \text{ found myself crying for myself,} \\
& \text{for that inner child who both wants to be loved desperately,} \\
& \text{and yet who pushes people away.} \\
& \text{When I was able to stay with him as he wanted,} \\
& \text{to be close enough,} \\
& \text{I found his sense of loneliness at the centre of what I was touching.}
\end{align*}
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In the afternoon session on trauma something clicked into place. Shaun talked about how children are like sponges and can pick up parents’ feelings and can choose to pick up the difficult ones especially. I could have done that.

In an exercise where we tore up a sheet of paper to see how much of a sense of something was ours: “I initially assumed most of the loneliness was mine, but gradually came to see that a percentage was my father’s, and a much larger percentage was my mother’s.”

I wrote:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Loneliness,} \\
& \text{absence, not being there} \\
& \text{leaving me to cry, leaving me to lie} \\
& \text{alone, not held, not cuddled} \\
& \text{untouched, unbodied, no boundaries} \\
& \text{to my tears, to my pain, you did not} \\
& \text{bring me the boundary I needed to keep this} \\
& \text{to its natural proportions.}
\end{align*}
\]

Over the next few days as the effects of this process continued, I saw how in my personal relationships I tended to choose people who were inclined to not want to deal with my
feelings—especially my sadness—and who were uncomfortable or unable to show feelings of love and affection for me.

During a ceremony organised by one of the other week-longers, we did an exercise/ritual where we placed one hand on the heart of our partner, and they put their hand on ours, and we both then covered the others’ hand with our second hand. There was a surprising warmth in me to this connection and an acceptance of this comradeship which was not me.

Later in this ceremony we were invited to choose a Mexican painting. I chose one for its bright colours but, when I turned it the right way up, I saw there were two birds on it while most of the others had only one. It felt as if I was choosing connection to another.

Over the following days of the weeklong I found myself connected to my colleagues in a powerful way, whether in my Focusing partnerships or being with them as friends. Something had shifted.

De Freminville writes about this: “In working with the Background Feelings over the years, I discovered that its recurrence is often related to something repressed, something trying to express itself in an uncomfortable way. Gendlin proposed a brilliant question to address these reoccurrences: “When something comes from the past, or is related to childhood, we can offer this question to the felt sense: What should have happened?” He also emphasized, without any doubt: “We all have in us this blueprint of what should have happened.” (De Fréminville 2008, p. 17)

Prof. Kim Etherington from the University of Bristol talks about the difficulties of dealing with the absence of love when it has been traumatic. “Sometimes trauma can be subtle and seem, at first sight, less serious, but when it accumulates over a prolonged period of time this can lead to the creation of ‘a passively traumatic environment’. When children are ignored, chastised or dismissed, or trained to meet the parents’ needs and ignore their own; when adults are overly controlling and critical, constantly overriding the child’s opinions, this will probably have long term and profound impact on the child’s sense of self and identity. These kinds of trauma are often more difficult to recognise, acknowledge and therefore heal, seeming to be less dramatic or obviously traumatic.” (Etherington 2003, p. 24)

The wallpaper sadness had proved very stubborn to get close to, yet a series of interconnected Focusing sessions allowed me to Focus on things freshly, and touched something else there.

On the last day, as I reflected on endings and what I had learned, I could sense the temptation to pull back into defensiveness with others. That as I returned to the “real world” I’d go back to the way I’d been. The lack of community, friendship and affection in my life could easily swamp me again.

Some words had come over the week while I was Focusing, and which I’d used in the Certifying Ceremony, “touch the sky, touch the ground”. These were also suddenly alive for me on that last day.
I wrote the following to read out in the final session, as a reminder to accept the challenge of not living from loneliness and to embrace this new way.

From the deep well of our connection, I am
Forced up to the surface, gasping, breathing different air
Not the cool fountain of our life, but
The wilder winds of the world that
Beckon me to return. Which one is home, the
Depth of peace and passion, or
The flowing currents that will fly me back?
Remember the challenge,
Touching the sky
And to be in touch with the ground.
Now, catch my breath, fill me up with this crystal community,
You have been my sky
You have been my ground.

Others can be the community for me, the strength of not being alone, as my body had thought it was. It wasn’t easy; making connections could throw up all sorts of challenges and issues about how to balance these things out. There’s a release of feeling—personal, intimate, friendship. Coping with them isn’t necessarily easy, but “such predominant feelings may include a felt sense of fear or anger or heaviness or many other feelings, and that being able to set aside and then later Focus on a specific Background Feeling can transform one’s life.” (De Fréminville 2008, p. 14)

But the possibilities are there. I can move forward. It felt right to acknowledge that “You are my sky, you are my ground.”

REFERENCES


Etherington, K. (2003). Trauma, the body and transformation, London: Jessica Kingsley


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