

BACKSTAGE COMPASSION

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Often my most powerful and memorable Focusing sessions happen at retreats which offer time to repeatedly bring myself compassionate inner attention in the company of a variety of companions. Luxuriant time, repeated compassion, and varied partners together, allow important Felt Shifts to come. One of my favorites happened at a Treasure Maps to the Soul workshop shortly after September 11, 2001 in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. At a time of so much violent external stimulation, a week of Focusing was a healing gift. My Focusing didn't provide an escape from that external world; instead it helped me find my own way to be in that world.

On a sunny, warm fall day my partner for that session and I walked around outside, discussing lessons from the workshop, and trying out different spots where we could enjoy being outdoors while feeling safe to Focus. I was feeling judgmental of some of the experiences I was having at the retreat and uncomfortable with my overly critical attitude. We discussed my concerns and his, as we walked. After a time, we settled on two Adirondack chairs near the lake.

For my turn I led myself inside and asked what wanted my attention. I don't recall all the stops and turns along the way, but at some point I sensed inside a *little me* alone on a big stage. Little me was uncomfortable there and was scurrying around looking for a way off the stage when the words came "Life is Not a Performance." Immediately I felt a wall go up which totally encased all of me. I felt completely stuck, merged with the wall, and a large part of me wanted to push through the wall, was trying to, but failing to. To each of these inner movements I sent out welcoming words and energy. My words and gestures appeared to my partner as if I was symbolizing giving birth or being born to something new. He shared this with me.

Generally I prefer simple reflection or encouragement to stay with a Felt Sense from a Focusing partner, but his new words—birth/being born—intensified my Felt Sense. They fit. I sensed that the words "Life is Not a Performance" were being said to a critical/judgmental part, to this sort of Life-Critic-In-Residence who believed that life indeed is a performance and that everyone, myself included, should be judged on their success at this performance. With the suggestion that a birthing process was happening, I felt a distancing between that Life Critic part and my greater self, my Self-in-Presence. I realized that I had been identified with, or merged with, the Life Critic as my self!

This alone would have been enough of a transformative shift, but more was to come. An action step emerged: to be less critical of others and myself. With the inner acceptance of this action step, I sensed inside that I was stepping into a huge light-filled place, light radiating outward. I felt birthed to being more compassionate. I felt the brightness and rightness of this step. This was the first time I ever came to an action step within a Focusing session spontaneously, without really asking for the step. I experienced a strong Felt Sense of what that action felt like: an amazing, blazing power of compassion.

After the session, I opened my eyes to the sharp blue sky and waving oak tree branches. A familiar doubt came back immediately—I expressed a fear: would I be able to let go of being merged with my Critical Self? My partner suggested I close my eyes again and acknowledge that piece coming, and when I did, the Critical Self part elongated and connected not from me to other people I judge, but from my whole self upwards. It radiated with a spiritual, powerful, connected-to-something-above feeling. I welcomed this. That was enough for this time and self-place. I wanted to allow all of that experience to settle inside and reverberate outside as I held on to my compassion action-step along with the upward connection.

Fortunately, being on a retreat, I could stay with and expand on this very powerful, rich session. Later that day, I partnered with another person and sensed first a pressure to change myself, to become that “new, compassionate self.” I sensed that this pressure was being imposed on me rather than emerging from my Felt Sense. Had I allowed my partner’s words to force a process? As I spoke of this, a cloudiness entered my head. As I put that into words, the cloud descended and the pressure left. My arms rose up from my lap, palms up, until my hands were shoulder height: I sensed that I needed to hold up the cloud, and that I needed more support to take this emerging action step that felt so authentic from inside myself. Inner support and outer support, both felt needed.

So many lessons from one Focusing session plus the add-on! First, I learned to be open to, even welcoming, of a partner’s suggestions. Both within a Focusing session and in general relations with others, I became more accepting of the diversity of human expression, while also continuing to assert what does and does not fit for me. My Felt Sense resonating with words I did not expect from my partner showed me I could learn and benefit from people sharing the unexpected. My process is not so fragile—I am strong enough to take what others give.

Secondly, I strongly sensed how natural it was for me to be merged with a part of my self and not realize this for many years—even many years of Focusing! Since then, I have been more forgiving of myself when I find myself in that merged place. Again and again I merge with my Life Critic. Again and again I forgive and invite in compassion.

This brings a third lesson, the essentialness of Focusing Presence for an authentic shift to happen for me. Accessing my Self-in-Presence opens up space and energy for new movement to emerge. This ties in another lesson from my session, that when an action step is the “right” one for the time, my Felt Sense tells me: trust this knowledge. And finally, from my added-on second Focusing session, I learned the importance of protecting a new step by buffering it with internal and external supports.

This Focusing session, along with many, many others before and since, reinforce my gratitude for this singularly amazing process.

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