

LIVING ON IN—MY FIRST FOCUSING SESSION

Jo Kennedy

“Are you sure? You only want the Focusing?” There is a moment . . . An oddness to be sitting in this kind of intimate situation across from a stranger whom I had found on the internet. “Yes,” I nod uncomfortably. “I don’t want the therapy; I really just want to learn Focusing.” Neatly dressed, in a tidy kind of way with lipstick and hairdo, she smiles reassuringly at me from her chair opposite. “You can close your eyes if you would like to.” I look across at her, I am unsure.

I have been sick with cancer; the doctors now say the cancer is gone. In theory, I should be feeling okay again, but I’m always tired, an ever present lingering exhaustion; it’s as if my body is not firing properly. I have spent a fortune on doctors, naturopaths, acupuncture . . . everything I can think of to get myself back to where I was before I had cancer, but nothing is changing. I am in limbo land. She is waiting for me to do something. It’s easier not to look. I close my eyes.

I originally read that Focusing was useful in relation to difficult material that came up in meditation. It sounded interesting. I thought maybe it could connect me back to my health. I did an online search and after ‘fossicking’ (a term for amateur prospecting!) finally came across a counsellor in Melbourne who mentioned that she did Focusing as part of her practice. I had her number for a few months before I gathered up my courage to the *sticking place* and rang her.

Her voice is soothing, and my awareness gently moves inside. I feel the connection of my feet with the floor, my toes, the soles of my feet in my shoes. I can feel the chair and where it pushes into my back. It is one of those chairs that every time you sit in it you think you should get rid of it, pass it on, maybe leave it out on the nature strip for someone else to pick up. But, of course, it is not my chair and people would talk, if after the session, I went and put it on the nature strip. I am already getting sidetracked. Her voice gently pulls me back.

“You might want to take your awareness inside and notice what’s there. Maybe start to become aware of your throat, notice what’s there and how that feels, in your chest . . . your stomach . . .”

I know how to do this. I have been doing this turning my-awareness-inside for a long time. I was invited to take an initiation ceremony with a Transcendental Meditation teacher when I was in first year high school. I was asked to bring a white handkerchief, a piece of fruit and a flower, and in return I was initiated and given a secret mantra. It was all so exotic to a 14-year-old kid from the country. It was like embarking on some special kind of life.

Guide: “So just noticing what is there.”

Me: I look around...“It’s dark...” Silence

Guide: “You might like to describe what’s there...”

Me: I don’t know what to say. It’s just black...there’s nothing there...There is silence. I guess she really wants me to say something...“It’s dark”...I mumble.

Guide: “Oh, it’s dark”...she says .

Me: “Yeah...” I peer into it. It’s kind of like trying to see inside a room at night when there are no lights on.

Guide: “Can you describe it?”

Me: “It’s black.” I start to see the outline of something, the shape of something. There *is* something there. I kind of have to squint. This doesn’t really make sense as I am not using my eyes to see...but that’s what it feels like. I’m tentative...“It looks like something rolled up.”

Guide: She reflects, “There’s something rolled up...”

Me: “Yeah...” I stare into the black...Silence. It is becoming more distinct or my eyes are adjusting. There really *is* something there. Very intrigued now I report, “It looks like a carpet.”

Guide: “There’s a carpet there...”

Me: “Yeah, a carpet...It’s rolled up...”

Guide: “So there’s a carpet and it’s rolled up...”

Me: I am kind of transfixed now, staring intensely at this thing that is completely still. It’s like the edge of something...like a... “It looks like there’s something in it.” It is hard to kind of get it...kind of hard to see. Then my body flinches. A feeling of dread sweeps through me. I gasp, “It’s...” Suddenly I want to get away, scrambling for distance...There is a dead body lying there. A shock runs through me. A dead body. I am horrified. I feel myself floundering. I am not going to tell her. I’m thinking fast. If I tell her that there’s a dead body inside me, she’ll think I need therapy! My mind is kind of panicking. What is that dead body doing in there? God.

There is a shock and a wanting to get as far away from it as possible. Another voice comes in. “Tell her, Jo. You’ve paid your money.” Just tell her there’s a dead body there. I take a deep breath, screw my courage to the sticking place. My voice is kind of shaky...“It looks like there is a dead body there.”

The very moment the words come out of my mouth things start to change and speed up. It all starts to unfold at once as if its unpacking itself; it is hard to say it in words but it’s like the lights turn on...the room is suddenly bright and flooded with light...the carpet unrolls revealing itself as an intricately patterned Persian rug. The dead body elegantly jumps up...it is like a light body, sort of a blue purplish silhouette. It starts to dance, very much alive and full of joy. It dances across the carpet and then looks back at me knowingly before disappearing off into the distance.

When it is gone all that's left is a big beautiful red carpet and a room full of scintillating clear light. I am astonished . . . what is left is a big open space with clarity.

I can't remember what I said to her after that. I can't remember what she said to me. I left the session kind of 'odded out'—if there is such an expression—really not knowing what had just happened. I felt good, but didn't really understand it at all.

The experience was so different, I didn't quite know where to put it. *It*, however, seemed to find ways of connecting to, and further unfolding in me.

As I walked out of the office and down the street, I remembered the moment the doctor had told me I had cancer. I was sitting up in a hospital bed, a thick, heavy tear emerged from my eye, hung there suspended on my eyelashes until its own weight pulled it slowly down my cheek. I wiped the tear away and didn't shed another. In that moment a decision was made, I am not going to die now. I have a child. I will not leave him alone. I will fight. I'm not going to let the cancer get me. I will fight this with everything I have.

I made it my mission to conquer the cancer. My will was intense, and I pointed it at the cancer like an arrow. I thought of myself as a warrior, like Arjuna, looking into the eye of the bird, in the Mahabarata. He aimed his arrow, and everything else dropped away as he saw only the eye. I had spent years as a meditator, and I was going to put that discipline to good use.

And really, to make a long story short, I fought the good fight. I was lucky and the cancer did have the grace to leave. And I was grateful. However, what I had not taken into my warrior-like-calculations and had not really understood, was that there was grief there, too, living in my body. My own body's grief at the possibility of death was real and alive. This thought had not occurred to me and was not something that I had ever read about, but here it was showing up in my Focusing session and clearly needing to be acknowledged.

What I got that day was that my body was grateful to me for listening to it in this way. It was grateful for my turning toward it. I didn't really understand until then how grateful a body could be, but within a week my body really started to regain its strength and vitality. Within a few weeks I felt completely different physically, and I had regained my pre-cancer energy.

It was kind of astonishing to me that in this one hour session my health could so miraculously turn around. The result was palpable and real. I had energy again and could resume yoga and other activities. It gave me great happiness to have my *self* back.

What I didn't know about Focusing back then was that the meaning of a Focusing session often unfolds itself in its own time and in its own way. Sometimes meaning becomes clear in the session, sometimes straight after the session, and sometimes it unfolds itself in an ongoing way. Gene Gendlin coined the phrase 'Living on In', and this phrase describes my process well. There is an interactive aliveness that connects to the whole thing, the process itself is ongoing unending aliveness.

And this is how it has been for me. I had lived most of my adult life as an actor and travelled around a lot. One thing I would take with me when I moved from house to house was a red Persian rug. On arrival in yet another house it would be instantaneously turned into a home by rolling out the red Persian carpet. So the meaning of the carpet unrolling across the floor was unambiguous. It showed me I had come home. I had arrived where I belonged. After this first session it took me quite a bit of time to process what had happened—I didn't feel the need to immediately return and have another session.

In retrospect, it was interesting to me that I didn't feel the need to rush back, but instead, took the time to kind of let it slowly sink in.

I later joined a small Focusing group and continued slowly to get more involved. I took Ann Weiser Cornell's four level classes and received such incredible benefit that I took the next step and undertook the teacher training with Ann. At the time I was working as a director in Film and Television and teaching Focusing was not part of my life plan; I thought of it more as a way of having more Focusing in my life. However, when I finished the training and following my felt sense, as Ann suggested, I found that things just naturally unfolded. An opportunity came up and I took a room in a Wellbeing center in Melbourne and set myself up as a Focusing teacher. My room is small, full of light and has a beautiful Persian rug on the floor. Strange but true.

My work as a Focusing teacher expands each year, as I get more involved in sharing it in Australia. I have more recently been learning Wholebody Focusing with Kevin McEvenue and am currently training with Karen Whalen as a co-ordinator. All of this unfolding started from that very first session 10 years ago and is still unfolding—for me and in me—and clearly has brought me to my new home as a Focusing teacher.

I would be remiss not to mention here another out-of-the-blue (I prefer left of field) aspect of what happened. When I first came across Ann's book, *The Power of Focusing*, I was struck by the picture on the cover. The figure was identical to the figure that had at first appeared as a dead body in my first Focusing session!—the body that danced off across the carpet in joy. I had never seen this image before, but there it was inside me and on the cover of Ann's book. Maybe co-incidence, but certainly significant, and carrying a seemingly unending meaning with it. Even as I write this, I sense inside and have the feeling of the unfolding of that session connecting to the writing of these words. It is here inside me, Living On In, like a river that has no end. It is here with me all the time. I am so grateful.

Jo Kennedy offers one to one sessions on skype/phone/in person, Level one to four Inner Relationship training Wholebody sessions, and Professional Development workshops.

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