

FOCUSING EXPERIENCE

George V. Neagu

When I ask myself what Focusing experience is memorable that stands out in my mind, I marvel that it was result of a couples counseling session.

My first wife of many years, with whom I had three children, were separated and headed for a divorce. We agreed to try marital counseling to see whether we could find a genuine basis for reconciliation. Little did I expect that the couples counseling would lead to such a deep impact, opening my eyes to streams of meaning that were brought into sharp relief as I dwelt on the experience.

During the course of the sessions the therapist used the word “flat” in reflecting the way I felt about my affect. It was in context of describing what life was like for me in the apartment where I had been raised while living with my mother and stepfather. (In those days an apartment was not called by any other name than a “flat.”) I recall (the therapist has since died) that I went home from the session and (I only know that I was Focusing in retrospect), and for some reason I began to dwell on the word “flat.” If memory serves me correctly, it was as though something in me, I know not what, was stirring, and I did not want to let go of the word. I kept mulling it over and over inside. And I began to make connections with the situation I had lived in and through.

Now I know that Gene Gendlin (who was my therapist later on) was correct when he described the many strings or connections that can exude out of one word in Focusing. Most certainly, I felt that the experiences I had carried in and through my life, expressed by this “flat” bubbling up, oddly gave me a felt sense of free-ness that allowed these experiences to come forward, and I remember feeling both awed and appreciative, at the same time.

My mother worked shift work in the steel mill. She represented safety to me when she was home. My stepfather was a man I admired, but also feared. Let me explain. He was from Spain and left home at thirteen to join the Spanish Merchant Marines. He was kind of a roustabout when he came to Gary, Indiana, and got a job as a Foreman in the Mills. While married to my mother, he discovered he had syphilis, which reached his brain, and he went psychotic. In those days it took forever to commit a psychotic person. He had hallucinations and delusions. For six months, while waiting for him to be entered into the State mental hospital, my mother and I coped as well as we could with his paranoid behavior.

I recall one instance when he wanted to enter the bathroom while I was taking a bath. He pounded on the door, and as a child, I was terrified. My mother managed to slip between him and me and helped me to escape naked to the front apartment. (Finally he went to the local hospital where he broke a big bay window. Then he went to jail where he calmed down and was almost normal, and then he was sent to a mental hospital where he got well after a year there.)

When he came home I lived with my mother and him in this apartment and never felt safe with him despite his cure. He did return to work, but life was boring with him, as he never spoke when we were alone at home. He had the looks of a movie star, but that was the era of the “strong silent type”—and he was very strong and very macho.

All of this background is necessary so one can understand that the word “flat” floated up a number of meanings for me that were connected to this word. Flat did not just mean apartment, but my inability to feel important or interesting to my stepfather. Flat meant that so much of my effort was to conceal my lack of safety when left alone with him. At his best he was tolerant of me, but clearly I was his rival for my mother’s affection. Flat opened up so much in me that I had never realized previously. I never thought living in the apartment as a teenager had such a powerful influence on me. For example, I always felt junior to another’s senior, never felt as interesting to others, or as assertive as others. I was always quick to give priority to whomever wanted to speak, and allowed myself to be ignored.

The fact that my stepfather never abused me when he was well shaped my views in a liberal direction (a positive one as I see it now), and that he would never understand how I felt toward him, is beside the point. The negative experiences I had with him were a big part of the response I had to the word “flat.”

To provide one more meaning that came out of this powerful realization from the whole connection I experienced to the word “flat”, I realized that my fear of the dark was a direct result of my fear of my psychotic stepfather trying to kill me in the apartment. I can recall the first time, as an adult, that I could enjoy camping at night under the stars and not being afraid. It was years after he died that I finally was able to detach from my fear of the dark.

I did not know much about Focusing at the time, nor did I learn more about Focusing until much later, but it was surely a Focusing experience that opened me up to so much experientially, and that had implications in my life that went on for a long time.

When I try to remember whether the many meanings surged up rapidly, I cannot say for sure. I do recall the organismic total sensing. It was not an intellectual event. It may seem odd, and I am almost embarrassed to make this comparison, but one of the most joyous periods of my life was when I was in a tuberculosis sanitarium as a child and became emotionally alive to Christ. I felt this totally, and with joy communicated with God. (When I was discharged and was a high school freshman all these feelings became neutralized.) The similarity to the Focusing experience was the total organic experiencing.

Perhaps the longest lasting results of living into the word “flat”, and there were many, was the fear of the dark and length of time it took for that fear to be overcome, plus the sense of inferiority to others—who seemed so much more interesting, stronger, than I was—and, generally, the preoccupation with reading correctly where people are in order to be safe, quickly sizing up a situation.

It is frustrating to describe the quality of the experience and the process after so many years. It is to Gendlin’s credit that he did find a way to describe the steps and to teach people how to Focus. While I later tried to learn his six-step approach, the incident I described

above had the most impact on my life, even though it occurred before I knew much about Focusing. And I feel like a Zen Buddhist who knows how total an experience can be, but cannot put it into words, for words are not the experience itself.

So during the course of the day, I will Focus. I might ask myself, “Given the fact that I, as are all babies, was born wonderful, what keeps me from feeling good?” It may be as quick as that, or it might be a longer time to go inward depending on where I am and what I am doing. But Focusing, as I have come to know it and gently do it, has never given me the sweeping surprise that I had when I dwelled on the word “flat” many years ago.

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