

## A GENTLE PATH TO RADICAL CHANGE

---

*Suzanne L. Noël*

---

*We found the Great Reality deep down within us. —Alcoholics Anonymous (p.55)*

*Within experiencing lie the mysteries of all that we are. —Gendlin (1970, p. 565)*

The life I had known was left behind when I entered Recovery, discovered Focusing, and began integrating the two in a radically new therapeutic program. Called “Recovery Focusing,” the program applies the liberating felt sensing process to each Step of the 12-Step Pathway outlined by Alcoholics Anonymous, and to patterns of thinking/feeling/behaving that are difficult to change (Noel, 2010). Each Step addresses specific aspects of the addictive process and/or of Recovery. Facilitating these groups has changed my life and enabled me to embody a deep, solid sense of joyful aliveness. Because it is always fresh and new, each group process brings more of this freshness and newness into my living. As I give, I receive, and life just gets better and better.

My love of “Recovery Focusing” was carried forward into a whole new perspective when I went to El Salvador in August 2012, thanks to Beatrice Blake and Melba Jimenez, who have been working hard to introduce Focusing there for several years. They invited me to present a three-day “Recovery Focusing” Intensive and several Community Wellness Focusing workshops.

The participants of the “Recovery Focusing” Intensive were health promoters from several institutions in El Salvador and Nicaragua who were curious about addiction, the 12-Step Pathway, and Focusing. I had never done this work so *intensively*. I compacted a 10-week course into three days! The result: people were transformed before my very eyes, and I myself had yet another transformational Focusing experience that changed me in a gently radical way, as Focusing tends to do.

The session that most impacted me during the “Recovery Focusing” Intensive was on Step Six, which is “[We] were entirely ready to have [our Higher Power] remove these defects of character.” This Step is about being willing to change (after we have seen our destructive patterns in Step Four and shared these with another person in Step Five).

We began “Honoring” ourselves by making a list of four or five character traits that we liked about ourselves. I wrote that I liked the fact that I was creative, intelligent, affectionate, playful, and compassionate. I then Focused into these qualities by pausing, holding them, attending inside myself, and waiting for the felt sense to form. Soon, I felt a bright light emanating from the center of my chest. It had a quality of being like a cool breeze, and

the word that captured the feeling was “happiness.” As I stayed with the feeling, it became a self-embracing happiness, as if my face, heart, and belly were all smiling together. The felt sense of the qualities I liked about myself was symbolized by the words “Self-Embracing Happiness.” I hugged myself happily. We then all shared with the group, and thus our own positive experience was deepened and enhanced by listening to others.

After sharing our positive felt sense of the qualities we liked about ourselves, we then moved into the “Opening” phase. I invited the group to choose a character trait that is difficult to change and which is no longer working for them. I chose my fear of speaking my truth. I invited the group to first write about how this difficult trait makes our lives unmanageable. For me, this fear of speaking my truth means I betray myself and others; I destroy relationships; I hurt others (and I circled the word “hurt”), and I hurt myself.

At this point I introduced Ann Weiser Cornell’s facilitative language, asking them to write, “*Something in me is* [stuck trait].” This phrase helps us to separate ourselves a bit from the “defect” so that we can be with it instead of identified with it.

I wrote, “*Something in me is afraid to speak the truth.*”

I then paused in silence, went inside myself, and waited for something . . . an image or maybe a memory or body sensation . . . to emerge.

I felt my body want to curl up tightly. It was like I was curled up inside myself so that I would not get hit by stones—stones that were coming from all directions. I was closing myself off from the world. A memory emerged of my father beating me when I was 15 years old, kicking and punching me when I was down on the floor, where I was, of course, curled up! There was something about my age (15) that made this incident particularly humiliating. As I stayed with the experience, I felt extreme pain right in the middle of my chest. Wow! It was excruciating! The words came: “Heart Break.” This was very moving for me. Discovering that my heart felt broken by that event completely shifted things for me; though it is difficult to explain how or why. I just felt and knew that something was different. The pain in the center of my chest eased.

When I asked what the worst of this heart break was, and waited while attending inside again, I saw my heart as red, raw, and inflamed, like an infected wound. I realized my heart hurts so very much that I do not want others to touch it! That was the worst. I don’t want others to touch my hurting heart, for that contact might injure it even more. (And ironically, I kept hurting my heart by hurting others, by not letting them touch my heart, by never exposing my heart, but remaining curled up and protected within my false self!)

Ahh! Compassion and relief flooded my entire being! I forgave myself for my people pleasing, for I understood it not only had its roots in my past trauma of childhood sexual abuse, but was made worst by my father beating me up at the age of 15—because I had “smart-mouthed” him! I understood that I was desperately seeking to protect myself from further heart pain. This self-forgiveness replaced the all-encompassing shame associated with my people-pleasing false self. I had broken free just a little more from the brokenness of Co-Dependency!

I then asked all of this “Heart Break” what it needed. It responded by letting me know that first of all, it needs understanding. Yes. What happened was very painful. Indeed. Then, *it* needs to for me to recognize and tell that adolescent girl of 15 that not everyone is going to beat her up. (At that age I was in a relationship with a violent alcoholic who was six years older than I, as well.) This was a new insight taken further: Not everyone is going to threaten my life when I speak my truth. It won’t kill me to be truthful, as my body had previously believed. I can survive the outcome. My body was now receiving this simple fact. Of course, I had intellectually known these concepts previous to this session. But the knowing did not affect my body’s response of “freeze” when faced with someone’s anger. This transformational shift was helping my body to accept this new truth: that I could be *real!*

The last phase involves “Welcoming” what could be. That is, we let ourselves imagine and feel how it might feel inside were we to change or heal. We further the previous experience of hope and possibility by actually inviting our whole self to sense how living in this new way might feel. For example, we can sense into how it might be if we got what we needed, or how it might be to “Recover” and have soundness of mind, body, and spirit. Once the thick feel of what could be is vividly present by combining several “handles” or symbols: image, body feel, gesture, etc., we ask the question: “*What is the best of this?*” This question deepens, widens, and enhances the feel of what could be!

During this “Welcoming” phase I imagined replacing my fear of speaking my truth with being willing to speak my truth gently and with tenderness (for I sometimes do it harshly, being that I feel so threatened when I do it!). I then paused to wait for the feel of this form inside me. I got the phrase in Spanish: “Cambiar de tener un corazón espinado a tener un corazón delicado,” which means to “Change from having a thorn-protected heart to having a sensitive, delicate heart.” Not raw, but sensitive. It had a different feel to it.

When I stayed with all this, a sense of companionship/union emerged. This companionship had a quality of being tender and safe. Staying with it by continuing to attend inside, I noticed a feeling of dignity and well-being, swelling up in the center of my chest. I then asked, “*What is the best of this dignity and well-being?*” I felt a total, full-bodied calm and quiet stillness. Oh what a pleasure it is to feel such quiet stillness! What a shift this was from that desperate distress and the shaming silence of my false self!

I was quite moved by this experience. “Recovery Focusing” had once again taken me into the felt dimension from which meaning emerges, leading me into a whole new way of relating to myself and the world. The three-day intensive also showed me the power of this process in others. I witnessed a similar transformation in almost all of the participants. By the end of the course, they too had shifted into the feel of the best of Recovery! I could see it in their faces and their body posture, and hear it in their voices. Who they were now was not the same person they were three days ago.

Months later, I carry the importance of the quiet stillness I experienced into my interactions with others. Yes, I still sometimes lose my center in relationships and speaking my truth still scares me, but I am now more ABLE to do find a stillness that will help me speak my truth. From this calm place, I can notice I am defensive and then will myself to stop it. I can listen to others and try to own up to my part in whatever conflict is happening. Rather

than changing the distress I feel that by trying to change how others feel, I can trust that speaking my truth, however clumsily, will lead to the experience of safe companionship. My hope is that someday I will be unbroken and whole enough to always be able to speak my truth gently and tenderly, and thus be free to be . . . me!

Obviously, I have found that each “Recovery Focusing” workshop is transformational [I write, grinning]. In El Salvador, however, this one particular workshop changed me forever, just like several Focusing sessions I have had over the years have changed me forever. Being joyfully and authentically ME, open to my inner experience, connected intimately to my loved ones, is the best of my Recovery!

---

*Suzanne Noel is a Certifying Coordinator for the Focusing Institute in New York. She facilitates Recovery Focusing groups at Costa Rica Recovery Center. She teaches the H.O.W. We Heal Focusing process and Domain Focusing internationally through teleconferencing and has presented Recovery Focusing in several countries.*

*Her website is [www.recoveryfocusing.com](http://www.recoveryfocusing.com)*

*Email: [recoveryfocusing@gmail.com](mailto:recoveryfocusing@gmail.com)*