

## A GOOD MOTEL

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*Marian Sandmaier*

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Our group was gearing up to do something called “Clearing a Space.” I thought immediately of housecleaning and its signature sounds and smells—the humming of the vacuum, the Pledge-dampened rags, my mother urging my sister and I to maintain high standards. “Don’t miss the *tops* of the books, girls!”

I snapped back to attention. From the little I’d heard so far, Focusing was a pretty detailed process, with various and sundry steps and stages. If I spaced out now, I’d likely never catch up.

On this cloudy morning in March 2012, I was sitting in a circle with 30-some strangers for a daylong session called “Focusing: Contacting Your Creative Flow.” It was the “creative flow” part that had brought me here; if something called Focusing could get me some of that, I was game.

Before the session got underway, I perched on my metal chair and surreptitiously looked around the circle. I was aware of a familiar flutter inside me, a sensation that often took hold when I was with people I didn’t know, but felt I should impress in some low-key yet memorable way. I battted away the feelings; they were old, bad news.

Then our teacher, a graceful woman who radiated warmth, began to tell us about Focusing. I started to feel calmer. A few minutes into her introduction, she invited us to briefly “go inside” and contact a “felt sense” of ourselves. I closed my eyes. Right away I felt the fluttering again, only now it was more insistent, like a drumstick beating on my heart.

“Try to find a word, a phrase, or an image that matches your felt sense,” our teacher suggested. *Anxious*, I decided. I sighed. Because our teacher clearly believed in the value of staying with whatever came up, and because I theoretically did too, I didn’t bat away the anxiety this time. I just sat there, letting the drumstick thwack at my chest.

But now, something else was nipping at me. Even higher up in my body. It was like—like something was clutching at my throat, trying to close it off. Until this moment, I’d been aware of no such feeling. Along with the throat-groping, I felt something like wings flapping, slowly, repeatedly, through my upper body. What was it? A word came: *Sad*.

There was no time to be amazed by this feeling-I-had-no-clue-about, because our teacher was continuing to explain the various steps of the Focusing process. After a bit, we were ready to start Clearing a Space. This involved gathering up the difficult feelings or problems we’d identified and packaging up each one.

“Place each package on the floor, at a distance from you that feels comfortable,” our teacher instructed. “You may want to put the package right in front of you. Or you might want to put it all the way across the room. Whatever feels right to you.”

I tried it out. Mentally holding my distress in the palm of one hand, like a pillow or an infant, I rummaged around for an imaginary box. But something felt wrong. For some reason, I didn't want to package anything up. Not my anxiety; not my sadness, either. Now that I'd spent a few minutes with each of these doleful beings, I could sense that they wanted something a little different.

Without warning, an image popped into my head. Specifically, I saw a motel.

But hold on. This motel was not the kind of seedy, peeling structure that you might see along a commercial strip, trumpeting its availability with a blinking red "Open" sign. The motel of my mind was pristine, even elegant, its rooms curved around a serene, elm-shaded lake. Each unit faced the water and opened up onto a terrace from which an occupant could commune with the water, the sheltering trees and the mountains beyond. The only thing that made it a motel, really, was its signature one-story design.

"Okay, guys, let's go," I said, leading my two woeful charges toward the building. First, I escorted Anxiety Girl to her quarters. As we entered the sunlit, cozily furnished room, the fragrant aroma of fresh-brewed coffee greeted us. The coffeepot, which stood at the ready on a table in front of the sofa, was surrounded by heaps of homemade sandwiches and bite-sized desserts. Several of the desserts featured chocolate.

"Help yourself," I urged. "Have some lunch. Enjoy the scenery. I'll just be gone a little while. We'll talk more later."

Then I took Sad Girl to her room next door, which had been set up exactly the same way. I invited her, too, to kick back and relax, and be assured that I'd be back to chat. "Soon." I said.

I smile when I remember what happened in the moments after I welcomed my guests into their rooms. Their faces reflected a whole parade of responses, from confusion to disbelief to a kind of slow, spreading delight. Each one dove for her couch, snuggled into a corner and reached for a dessert. Without a word, they seemed to say: How could you have known that all of this . . . this particular kind of room, furnishings, food, view, and promised company . . . was *exactly* what we'd been needing?

What happened after that is hard to describe, in part because of the sheer intensity of the experience. Once I'd installed my guests in their respective rooms and the Clearing a Space exercise drew to a close, I noticed how light I felt. How easy it was to inhale and exhale. Everything inside me felt swathed in feathers. There was nothing to watch out for. Nothing to accomplish. Nothing to prevent. I couldn't remember ever feeling so free.

For the remaining several hours of the workshop, the other people in the room seemed different to me. They no longer felt like strangers, but it was more than that. My earlier need to get them to notice me, *approve* of me, had melted away. I hung out with my co-Focusers as we traded experiences, drew pictures, wrote poetry and danced our way through the afternoon. Everything felt easy, to an almost extravagant degree—including contacting my "creative flow."

In the days and weeks afterward, I was on the lookout for the “workshop effect.” I define this phenomenon as the rush of well being that many of us experience in the wake of intense group work, followed by the steady, sometimes precipitous decline of these feelings. What astonishes me is that I still haven’t experienced the second part of the “workshop effect.” The sense of flowing, rather than straining, remains with me.

I don’t mean to say that I’ve gone on feeling as intensely, cartwheel-turning happy as I did during my first Focusing experience. Since that day, I’ve met up with plenty more fear, grief, helplessness and hair-trigger reactivity—the whole catastrophe. The difference is that I no longer experience these feelings as despised losers, fit only for banishment to an emotional Siberia.

To be more accurate, I often still *do* experience them that way. But the feelings don’t hound and exhaust me like they did before. After the initial, knee-jerk *ugh* reaction, which might last from several minutes to a few hours, I usually remember something to the effect of—“Ahh! They just need a good motel room!”

I’ve found that what these forlorn souls need, really, is just a little special attention in order to calm down and show their real faces—which, by the way, are much younger and far less formidable than I’d thought. They make me think of a poem by Jana Prikryl that I came across recently, which begins this way:

I look down and see through my skin  
To the infant inside; he grows horns on his head  
But my seeing it makes them go away.

I think that’s just right. It’s not as though my sadness and anxiety are now my best buddies, forever linking arms and singing Kumbaya in three-part harmony. We’ll need to get to know each much other better before we can call each other friends. But the big shift is that now, I feel something in me that genuinely cares for them. And I’m showing it. They have their rough edges, some of them needle-sharp and painful. Nonetheless, they’re absolutely worthy of homemade sandwiches on whole grain, a room bathed in light and a lakefront view.

Yes, I know, it’s a motel. And no, I can’t hang out with them constantly. *Girls*, I tell them, *I’m doing the best I can*. I do come visit fairly often. When I arrive they’re usually out of chocolate, so I try to remember to bring along a fresh supply.

Not long ago, we all walked down to the lake together and waded in. We were silent, intent on our own thoughts. Then, somebody splashed somebody else and suddenly we were laughing ourselves breathless, which at first felt strange, and then didn’t at all.

After a bit we went quiet again, listening to the trees exhale. Then, one by one, we flipped over on our backs and spread our arms way out to the sides, like sleeping children. We floated along, our faces tipped toward the sun.

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