

## HOW I DID IN FOUR MINUTES WITH FOCUSING WHAT I DID NOT DO IN SEVEN YEARS OF THERAPY

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To understand this story requires a little background.

I was the youngest of four girls, raised in a comfortably middle class family with no more than the usual number of “dysfunctions”, by which I mean there was a good deal of manipulation and hurt feelings mixed in with lots of love and support, but no real abuse.

My paternal grandmother came to live with us when I was about nine years old. She was a tiny woman whom (nearly) everybody loved. She was a sweet, somewhat muddle-headed person, and over the years, a large body of cherished family folklore developed around her naively illogical pronouncements.

A sample: Once, when we were driving through the Colorado Rockies, my grandmother was certain that my father had missed his turn and was on the wrong road. After some time spent trying to convince him, she said, “There! I knew it! That sign we just passed said ‘Wrong Road’. We’ve got to go back.”

No amount of logical argument could convince her that such a sign was impossible, and a little further on, she pointed out another sign triumphantly to prove her point.

The sign actually read “Winding Road.”

My sisters all loved my grandmother. I alone did not. I could not stand to be touched by her. I hated her wrinkly skin, the old lady smell of her, the honeyed voice, the bumbling helpfulness, the tottering step, the way she would give me a friendly pat as she passed me, the way she clung to my arm when I got old enough to help her around. Everything she did secretly disgusted me.

When we were very little and went to visit her at her house, she used to paint our fingernails red. We would line up waiting for this treat. I was always at the end of the line, not because I was the youngest, but because I was reluctant. I didn’t want her to touch me. I knew I had to let her do it, because it would be very rude to refuse the treat, but frankly I didn’t care what color my nails were, and I really, really didn’t want to be that near her or to let her hold my hand.

I was one of those “good” little girls, so I tried to be polite to her, but I could not help but become rigid when she came near me for fear that she would touch me with her disgusting old hands. I never told anyone, and I don’t think she did either, but she could not have helped but notice how I cringed away from her, how I avoided her whenever possible. I know this must have been very confusing to her.

It was confusing to me.

I grew up knowing that I was a deeply flawed person who hated old people. Something in me was not right, and I was filled with shame. I worried, too, about what I would do when I got old myself. Would I cringe away from my own wrinkled, “disgusting” old skin? Would I hate the way I smelled? How would I bear to be alive? This was a heavy burden I bore silently for over forty years.

I grew up and did all the things people do. I went to school, worked, had a baby. I suffered from depression. I went into therapy. Got happier. Moved to New York City. Continued therapy.

For a while I worked as a secretary in a church that had a large senior lunch program. I loved those old people. They were funny and smart and a joy to be around. I became close friends with one woman of 86 or so years and good buddies with a man of 82 who was suffering from emphysema. But I never once questioned my long held belief that I was a flawed person who hated old people. It was just that these old people were exceptions. Who could help but love them?

I learned Focusing.

I was in my early forties and had been in therapy for a little more than seven years. I thought I had things pretty well in hand.

One evening I was on a subway train headed uptown. I was due to change trains at the next stop. I looked up and saw a religious ad touting salvation, which made me think of one of our family stories about my grandmother.

I had (aged ten) pronounced one evening that the church had it all wrong. It wasn't faith that saved, but love. Hadn't St. Paul said that of faith, hope and charity, charity was the greatest? It must be that anyone who loved anything or anyone created by God would make it to heaven. (I was having trouble those days with the very concept of hell.)

My Presbyterian grandmother thought about this for a few minutes and said that she agreed. “I've always thought that if a person is a good Jew and lives a good life, that he can go to heaven,” she said. And then added, “Of course, he'd have to believe in the divinity of Christ.”

Now this is a funny story. I've told it many times.

But as I sat there in the subway looking at the ad, a Focuser trained to pay attention to her body's messages, I realized that although I had laughed about it often enough, I had never really *felt* that it, or anything about my grandmother, was even remotely funny.

In much less time than I can describe it, the following things occurred to me.

- That in seven years of therapy, I had dealt with my mother, my father, my three sisters, my son, and my relationships, but I had never even once mentioned that my grandmother lived in the same house with us.
- That there was probably a reason I had never mentioned her.

- That there was something here I needed to look at, and . . .
- That this was something I probably ought to Focus about.

And I was probably no more than four minutes away from my stop. I thought maybe I should do this later, but somehow that felt wrong. I needed to do this now. So what if I missed my stop and ended up in Harlem instead of Queens? This was important.

So I closed my eyes and went inside and found amazing things. To my fellow passengers it appeared that I was dozing on the train. Actually I was transforming my life.

I asked, “What is this thing about my grandmother all about?” and a whole world opened up to me.

- I realized that what I had always labeled “disgust” wasn’t disgust at all, but more like terror. I was terrified of my grandmother.
- I recognized that I had no memory of ever feeling any other way about her—that whatever made me feel that way was preverbal and before my conscious memories began.
- I knew that babies don’t just make things up. Something must have happened to me.
- I knew that my parents had left me in my grandmother’s care several times when I was just an infant while they went on vacation.
- I sensed that there were two rooms in my grandmother’s house that were especially horrifying for me—her bedroom (where she painted our nails) and the bathroom.
- I noticed that as I sat there in the subway car, my buttocks were clenched tight and my body was rigid.
- I recalled that the only enema I ever remember having, at the age of fifteen, had been extremely traumatic. I had cried and cried and felt degraded and horrified—a reaction way out of proportion to the actual experience. So much so that I have never tried one again.
- And I absolutely knew, though I still have no actual memory of it, that my nice little German grandmother must have decided to “clean me out” on at least one of those occasions when she babysat me and my sisters. (I later asked one of my older sisters if she remembered our grandmother ever giving us enemas, and she said she thinks she did when we were little.)
- I also knew that for some reason (rough handling? a diaper rash?) I experienced that enema as a painful assault.
- And I knew, with a great leap of relief and joy, that I was *not* a hateful person who just couldn’t stand old people, but a more reasonable sort of being who simply hated and feared her grandmother who had (intentionally or not) ‘raped her’ as a baby.

I opened my eyes to a new world—a new me. I could say, “I’m a *good* person. I just hate my grandmother!” (Meaning, *that’s all*. Not *all* old people. Just one—and with a good reason.)

And my train was coming into my station where I was to change trains to go to Queens. Four minutes.

PS: I'm old and wrinkly myself these days and loving every minute of it. But you still won't get me anywhere near an enema.

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