

LOVING PEOPLE INTO BEING: An Interactive Focusing Experience

I feel exquisitely vulnerable in sharing this experience in a public journal. I am struggling to find a way to share my words without overexposing the place inside me that feels so vulnerable. For purposes of this article, please call me “unnamed.” Thank you.

PREFACE

The first time I truly doubted “reality” was when I was 6 years old. I had strep throat. I was delirious with a temperature over 106 degrees F, and I was hallucinating. I screamed to my mother that there were lions and tigers circling my bed. She said that if I opened my eyes they would go away, and then she left me alone for the night. I fearfully and hesitantly opened my eyes—the wild animals were still there, still circling. In that moment, I knew that there was a reality beyond that which my mother and other people knew.

Throughout my childhood, I had a high degree of stress arising from my relationship with my Mother, who was incapable of any empathy and gave twisted mirroring. (Her mother was psychotic from the time Mom was born.) I also experienced a number of serious traumatic events. I would like to add that nature and spirituality were deep resources for me, as was my childhood relationship with my Father who died when I was 21 and he was 46.

As a young teen, I began to have strange experiences that I called “reality shifts”. I told no one about them. They continued to happen a few times a week when I went away to college, and increased in frequency and severity until they would happen one or more times a day.

During these reality shifts, everything would look strange and unreal, as if I had just landed from another planet. I would usually experience complete loss of my own personal history along with all context for whatever was happening. I could be in the middle of a conversation with someone, and then suddenly not have a clue who I was talking with, where I was, or what we were talking about.

I often experienced sensory distortions and sometimes loss of control of my body. Loud sounds seemed to invade my very being. My college was near an airport. If an airplane flew overhead during its takeoff, I had to fight collapsing onto the ground. The noise filled everything. I was afraid to look in a mirror—the reflection of my eyes looked like an evil stranger’s. I tried not to look at my reflection. If I did, my hands might float up and start to choke me, or I would go weak and fall towards the floor. The groceries in the checkout line might glow in brilliant colors, and I would often have to ask the clerk for the year, not just the date.

Sometimes my own thoughts felt like they didn’t belong to me, and were so loud that they were painful. As an instructor of Anatomy & Physiology, I would often turn around from writing on the board and see 26 faces looking at me expectantly. It was somewhat

terrifying, as I had no idea at all who I was or what we were doing. I could tell they were waiting on me to say something, but I had no idea what to say.

Over time I learned to function in spite of these inner episodes. I learned to stall until the context came back, and take the spotlight off of myself by asking the other person (or the students) generic questions and listening to their answers. I found that if I came into my heart, and listened and spoke simply, everything would turn out fine. My heart didn't leave me, as long as I didn't give in to panic. It is interesting to me as I write this—perhaps these coping skills were the hints of what I would later discover in Focusing: Pausing, being curious, listening and coming from my heart.

These altered states usually lasted a minute or two before passing, and then they would pass, but I never knew when they would come on me again. Just the thought of it happening could lead to my slipping into a strange and unfamiliar world. These “reality shifts” became so frequent that they often wove in and out several times a day.

Since I had no context to understand these experiences, they left me with an underlying doubt about the nature of the universe. Was I alone in a malevolent maelstrom that could destroy everything that arises? I was terrified that I might be crazy, or somehow evil. I was terrified of my own mind.

Since I'd never heard anyone else talk of the similar experiences, there were times that I didn't know if anyone else actually existed or even if other people were made out of paper or were part of a dream. The isolation and fear were profound.

At age 21, I began practicing Zen Buddhism, as this tradition seemed to address the nature of reality and how to experience it for oneself. Unfortunately, this type of meditation exacerbated my symptoms greatly, although at the same time the teachings did give me something to hold onto.

I want to be clear here, that these episodes never happened with my two children. It was for their sake, and the sake of any others that might be like me, that I endured all this deep suffering. When I was 19, I vowed to “make it to the other side” and somehow help others who felt crazy and alone like me.

In my 40's, I finally took the step of going into therapy, first with a Jungian, then a dance/movement therapist, then a specialist in dissociative disorders, and lastly two blessed years of Focusing-Oriented-Therapy with Mary McGuire before she retired. Over time, I learned that I wasn't crazy, that reality wasn't shifting—the difficulties were the result of my own mental processing, and most significantly—that I could trust my senses. I learned to work with my unconscious through dreams and expressive arts, and began to express my anger in safe ways. I learned Focusing.

By the time I went to the Weeklong for certification as a Focusing trainer, my times of dissociating were a lot less frequent and much less severe and frightening. I could usually identify clear triggers such as sleep loss, meditating too much, even the slightest amount of caffeine, high stress, anxiety or being in an overly stimulating environment. I knew I just needed to take a few minutes and I'd be fine. Most of the time, I understood that dissociating is actually a normal human response to highly stressful situations. The strange states that I

had been experiencing since childhood were simply forms of dissociating called “depersonalizing” and “derealizing.” They are not symptoms of psychosis.

But the roots of the condition were still there, deep in my psyche. Throughout my Focusing training, I sensed that I wasn’t able to listen to my partners as deeply as my classmates in the training program were. I felt like someone who had no sense of rhythm, or was tone deaf or colorblind. My partners didn’t notice, but I did. I would be amazed by the power of their listening and heartfelt reflection. Mine felt empty somehow—I didn’t feel it in my body the way they did. I yearned so deeply to be able to listen, and I didn’t know how to get there.

I have included the above background because it might help you understand the momentous significance of the following Interactive Focusing experience.

AN INTERACTIVE FOCUSING EXPERIENCE

As I write this now, I have no memory of the particular content of my partner’s Focusing, or my own. The deep shift in my consciousness came as a result of actually experiencing the Interactive Focusing process. It was a global shift—a different kind of “coming home” than I had found in regular Focusing—a coming home to myself-in-relationship-with-another. And it changed my life.

The Setting: Many years ago. It is Day 2 of my first weeklong. Mary McGuire and Janet Klein are trying to teach us Interactive Focusing. I am sharing this with you in presence tense, as I find the story freshly in my body’s memory.

I am very overwhelmed by all the sensory stimuli. Around 30 of us are in the small living room at Stony Point. The room is very crowded, and many people are talking loudly as we break into dyads. The sounds and sights feel disjointed—like they are hurtling at my head, piercing my skin, coming out of nowhere. It is very hot and the air feels stale. The wallpaper has a red velvet pattern—it assaults my senses, and I have no protection from any of this.

I am overwhelmed by the written instructions. The format that Mary and Janet have given us makes no sense to me. The words float on the paper. I am used to regular Focusing, and I can’t see any reason to do this new thing. It feels so complicated, and I am getting really irritated.

I want to scream “get away” and run or curl up in a ball.

Yet I also want to learn the Interactive model. And I am intrigued by Mary and Janet, and how they relate. I see my friends around me, through the chaos of my mind. I try to stay with the instructions. Mostly, I am just tightening and trying to control the part of me that is flying apart. I hurt all over, sad, frustrated and holding against the sensations/experience. I am ashamed and want to hide how fragmented and crazy I feel.

The Focusing Trade:

I go first. Instruction #1: *Share something with my partner, speaking from my bodily felt experience. It could be something regarding our relationship, or just something that I want to share.* I feel completely confused by this instruction. So I just do a regular individual Focusing process instead. I go down inside and describe the felt sense, etc.—while my partner listens and reflects. I get a shift and say “I’m done.” So far, I’ve survived.

Instruction #2 says *to pause for a moment—During the silence, the Listener is to go inside and allow a body sense to form from all the Focuser has said. The Listener waits for an image, gesture, sound or metaphor to arise that captures how they imagine it is for the Focuser, and then they offer it back to the Focuser.*

“What?!!” I am really alarmed now. I’m not even sure what empathy is or how to “do” it. *And I don’t want my partner sharing her sense of my process!* I have great doubts that anyone could accurately understand what I say when I am Focusing. I don’t want her interpretation! It feels invasive—like I have to come out of my inner experience to listen to her. I love regular Focusing partly because it is structured so safely—no comments afterwards. And . . . to tell you the truth, I mostly ignore my partner during my regular Focusing partnerships, taking in the reflections that help, paying no attention to the ones that don’t fit . . . but also . . . ignoring that there is actually a person there reflecting. How could it have been otherwise, given my history of not even knowing if other people existed?

Mary adds that *we are to correct/edit the metaphor or image until it truly resonates with our own felt sense as Focuser.* Well . . . that part feels good. To edit it until we really feel our partner has it.

Instruction #3: Then we are *to Pause again, and savor how it feels to share and be heard.* Hmm. Now I am interested a bit, but I still don’t feel like I know what I’m doing.

Now it’s her turn to Focus, and mine to Listen. My partner is talking with me about what it’s like for her . . .

I suddenly realize that SHE IS SPEAKING FROM HER OWN EXPERIENCING.

Tears start to flow down my cheeks, as I realize—REALLY realize—that she is truly sitting there in the chair opposite me, speaking from the center of her experiencing. For the first time, **I am physically feeling the presence of another person in my body as separate from me!** She is not separate from me in the old unit model way, she is separate in the sense of she is not a product of

my mental creations, projections and emotional reactions. She is really her—and she is a complete mystery and delight to me!

The instructions now feel amazing, rather than confusing. It is as though THIS experiencing is what the Interactive structure arose out of and points to.

Following the next step, we sit quietly with what has been shared when she finishes speaking. I sit with my felt experience, and a metaphor arises out of how I sense it is for her. **I now have an embodied experience of empathy!** I offer it to her, and she edits and changes it until it really fits HER experience. How lovely, how perfect!

I find myself absolutely fascinated by what my Partner is saying. I know she is here through my own bodily experiencing. She is a total mystery to me—I find myself deeply fascinated by what SHE is experiencing. We are not discussing concepts, or rights and wrongs; we are sharing our experiencing!

Suddenly, the deep listening I have so yearned for is available to me. I am listening from my heart.

The final instructions guide us to spend a few minutes sharing with each other how we now feel about our relationship. We take the space to acknowledge the impact of our interaction on each of us—speaking truthfully from our own individual embodied experiencing. Whatever has shifted within me recognizes the importance of this step. I leave this session with a way out of paranoia, fear and isolation into a world with boundaries and infinite possibilities for learning and relating.

AFTERMATH

This fascination with listening to others continued for the next few years. It strongly colored how I taught Focusing. During class, I would find myself intensely interested in the felt experiencing of my students. I delighted in their existence, and felt such joy as they spoke. I smile even now as I remember these shared moments.

For example, as each student spoke about what had meaning for him/her in his assigned reading, we would all slow down and enter the Focusing space together. We would listen and reflect, helping him be with what was emerging freshly from the “more” that had drawn him to that selection. When they finished, others were invited to Focus on that same reading, letting us all “have” Gendlin’s words so much more deeply. I loved the sense of awe that would come as they heard their own wisdom emerging. I felt such delight in that awe. I felt so happy just to sit with them and listen! I quickly learned that if I gave them too much content, no matter how valuable that content seemed to me, the life would go out of the room. The magic was gone. If I said a little, and then let them digest it and come into relation to it while I helped hold the space—the aliveness was right back. I remember Mary and Janet saying that we should relate to “the Focuser as Teacher”. Listening and reflecting creates the space for this to happen.

I would find that I was magnetically drawn to listening to certain people during my daily life, and that following this sense led to awesome experiences. I remember an encounter with a grumpy clerk at the grocery store . . . just being present and reflecting as she checked out my groceries. I could tell we were both uplifted and energized by the encounter. In the midst of the chaos of the long check-out line, suddenly our worlds were suddenly a larger place.

I remember one day a Jehovah's Witness missionary came to my front porch. In the past, I would have been irritated. This time, I stood with her and listened from my heart, reflecting, as she quoted the Bible and tried to convince me of her beliefs. As I reflected and also shared with her from my own body sense, she began to weep and we held each other, our shared tears holding so much meaning. My eyes tear now remembering the depth of vulnerability and connection with this amazing other human being. She had such wisdom and heart under the set beliefs.

Over time, this simple joy has faded in my daily life. I now usually take for granted that people exist and can hardly remember what it was like otherwise. I can easily slip into a medium level listening without being really aware of utter mystery of the person opposite me. I will likely always experience altered states of consciousness more easily than most Westerners, yet with the help of Focusing exchanges I can explore them and sense what about them is skillful, and what is just a signal to take better care of myself and change something I'm doing. However, since that Interactive, I have never again doubted the existence of other people or the reality of my own senses.

Writing this paper has been extremely difficult at times, because I needed to revisit the edges of the old isolation, shame and fear. Yet it has also brought me the fresh memory of experiencing another's presence fully in my body . . . And I don't want to forget! I don't want to go back to sleep. I am so glad that I volunteered to write this story, as hard as it has been. It's not that hard to step back into the deep listening—I only need to remember to take that step.

Ahhh . . . now the words come freshly, alive in their own right. Before that Interactive Focusing experience, I had never physically felt the ongoing existence of another person. And the message of that discovery echoes freshly now with these words . . .

Let us not take each other's Presence for granted.

As I write the above, I realize that this is the very center of what I want to say! I drop into deep tears, feeling the shift that arises from having shared this story with you. There are no words—*the gift I hope to bring you now is to pause . . . and is to remember that YOU are here, to be curious and to listen to how it is for you. And to share how it is for me . . . in this moment, with you . . . I am overjoyed that you give this to me too. That we care about this process called Focusing together, that we share this Community.*

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT FOCUSING

Regular dyad Focusing serves a priceless function. Within the safety provided by the Focusing Partnership guidelines, the Focuser can safely go deep inside, knowing that which is newly arising within us is protected from input from the Listener. And the Listener voluntarily gives control to the Focuser, attending carefully to the Focuser's requests. Both parties agree to temporarily suspend their regular relationship for the sake of the unique relationship of Focusing Partners.

During trades while in the Institute's training program, I would follow the guidelines just as they were written: I would go to my inside space, taking the reflections that helped my process move forward and ignoring any that didn't help. I would basically ignore the existence of the Listener except as a support for my Focusing. In another way of looking at it, I was wiping her out so that I could feel safe.

However, this way of practicing Focusing actually allowed the root of my dissociation to remain in hiding. Although certainly valuable, it was not enough for my healing. It involved paying no attention to the very area of my primary wounds!

It wasn't until I did the Interactive process, and brought my awareness to the other person and our interaction, that I fully experienced the healing of that damaged root. I could then feel my body "filling itself in" as Gene Gendlin says in the Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy book.

The Interactive model was a "just right" next step for me . . . I needed the structure to help me not "process skip" over my interactions. The structure is not as protective as regular Focusing, but it is more grounded in reality.

This experience of seeing the "Other" not only healed the root of doubting that others existed, it is now available as a touchstone when I remember to use it. It is like a torch lighting my way. It is the necessary first step to any healthy encounter. It is the step of . . . Pausing, turning towards the Other, and saying Hello . . .