

HEALING HAPPENS FROM WITHIN: Crossing Two Modalities with Focusing

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MY PRACTICE NEEDED CROSSINGS

Many of my clients experience extreme levels of pain and trauma. The Focusing attitude (Gendlin, 1996, p.55) correlated well with my philosophical tenets. I teach meditation classes and noticed the similarities. As my client roster became more pain/trauma based, I wondered what would happen if I wove Mindfulness, Body Scanning, and Focusing's Clearing a Space together for them. I became intrigued and identified some valuable similarities of these interventions.

- Gentle, person-centered practices that created an inner sense of safety
- Practices that allowed me to be in energetic connection with my clients

After implementing this combination, clients experienced a variety of positive outcomes including:

- A deeper sense of safety
- A willingness to identify and contemplate releasing pain and traumatic experiences
- An ability to identify felt senses, and an increased capacity to allow the emergence of new expanded meaning of the experiences, regardless of the complexity of the pain experience (visceral, spiritual, emotional, environmental, psychological)
- Experiencing how meanings implicit in the body (sometimes called “the unconscious”) powerfully describe in images, gestures, and words ways to move forward
- A desire to take proactive control of their lives, make informed healthcare decisions, and aspire to experience happiness, fun, and joy

CREATING NEW CROSSINGS

Mindfulness Meditation keeps one in the present, body scans relax, and Clearing a Space creates the connection to whole being (mind body spirit). This crossing of therapies provides a basis for a practice that clients create for themselves, begin to feel the benefits of, and then want to incorporate into their daily living. The Focusing practice includes Clearing a Space, imaging, felt sensing, releasing the hold of disturbing events by expanding meaning, and developing resources to move forward toward self-actualization. Ultimately, by using this combination of practices, a new, unique to the individual, practice emerges that is fluid and life altering.

My initial Focusing experience was prescient and flowed symbiotically with already established daily meditation and Reiki practices. I incorporated Focusing as another practice

for mind body spirit wholeness. I especially enjoyed the rich and gentle features of Focusing beginning with nonjudgmental listening. In a clinical setting it is sensed as an act of kindness, which establishes a safety zone. An interaction occurs that creates change. It is immediate, palpable, and documentable.

When I was eleven, my mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease; she was 38. Her dear friend taught her meditation and yoga asanas; the asanas fell by the wayside as her balance became an issue, but the meditation continued until she passed at 49. By the time I was 15, meditation was part of my daily life, because I felt better when I did it, and no matter what chaos surrounded daily living, for those minutes (being exactly in the present with NO JUDGMENT OR EXPECTATIONS) I felt safe and peaceful—all of my troubles seemed to slip away. I wanted that for my patients. My Nonna always said, "*When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.*" Meditation is like lemonade, and I love to share it.

Early in my career, a colleague suffered through an unanticipated medical leave. Overnight, my caseload increased to nine or ten patients a day. I was overwhelmed. And yet, it was fortuitous when K. (one of the former colleague's clients) entered the therapy room, and I was forced to deal with my reciprocal anxiety. In addition to her extreme issues, she was overcome with fear and anxiety because a stranger with only a chart and file was sitting across from her. It had taken months for her to feel safe enough to disclose some of her overwhelming pain and tragedy to her therapist; suddenly she was thrown into an uncomfortable situation of beginning anew. She could barely speak and when she did the speech was circumstantial—hardly comprehensible. Her distress was palpable, and I noticed my increased heart rate, shortness of breath, feelings of despair, and hopelessness. I was a physical, mental, and spiritual wreck when she left. The worst of it was that I had no idea what was wrong with her, and the prior progress notes were illegible. She was scheduled back in two days. With an already overloaded patient roster, I could not schedule a consultation before her next appointment.

My intense physical response was code for *I need a plan!* I could hardly sleep, consumed with worry about how I would be with K. At the time, I was teaching a meditation practice, and was therefore familiar with the benefits of mindfulness breathing. As a Focuser, I experienced relief with Clearing a Space and observed how just that piece of Focusing allows a modicum of relief to occur. I reflected on my personal journey with debilitating physical pain and my extraordinary healing with Focusing, thanks to Doralee Grindler Katonah (who conducted the experiential program at the university I attended). I "Focused" with my partner and alone, but at that time (not so different than now) the issues that needed my attention were external (classes, practicum, work, family, finances...). One night, in bed, surrounded by books, laptop, files of student papers requiring grading, I was experiencing a lot of physical pain. In this midst of chaos, I sensed the word *Focus*. I began to Clear a Space, an image emerged: a posse of gunslingers guns blazing. What? I sat with that for a while...an image of me as a small child sitting on my Dad's lap watching Gunsmoke on television. *Sometimes you have to bring out all the guns to scare away the bad guys.* I placed the pain on the dresser. I sensed the need for sleep and meditation. It really was an inner wisdom—a knowing. That was the beginning of combining modalities for me.

When I greeted K. in the reception area a few days later, I could sense her containment of fear and frustration. She stared at me deeply; I felt her in my heart. I said, "It seems as though you have so many things you want to tell me and just don't know where to start, and

you don't even know if you can trust me with it all. Let's just relax for a few moments before we begin." My heart was racing; knowing I needed to calm down at least as much as she did, I pulled my chair up so our knees were almost touching. I knew she wouldn't be able to close her eyes—not yet trusting me, but she did follow my cues, and we were able to breathe together. I sensed that if I could guide her to notice her breathing and then count her breaths, she would calm a bit. When I noticed her body begin to relax, mine did as well. I did a quick body scan with her, allowing us to acknowledge the places in her body that were tight, tense, and painful. Our eyes never lost contact. She told me I had a soothing voice and began to cry.

"No one listens to me," she claimed hesitantly. My eyes teared up, too, and I felt a heaviness in my chest.

"It hurts in here," I whispered, (putting my hand on my chest). "It is so heavy." She nodded. We both sighed. And our relationship began. An empathic connection is part of being human; perhaps connection is an interaction that carries forward the client's implicit intricacy, as Gendlin (1998) would describe it.

The breathing was an icebreaker of sorts. It eased anxiety and fear for both of us. But also it created a sense of safety for her and intimacy between us. When I moved into the body scan, I also mentioned that in the room judgment and expectation did not exist. I could feel myself relaxing more; I knew how to proceed. We would just allow what would come to come and be in the present. Nothing from the past would interfere, and the future was yet to come. I was there with her. The playing field changed, at least for that minute. Each of us sensed an energetic connection.

I guided K. through Clearing a Space—so many enmeshed issues appeared. Each issue seemed to her so big and entangled with other issues. Together, we just observed each one with friendly curiosity, at a distance. And then, it was time to end the session; too soon, I worried. But something more emerged—a glimmer of hope. A change. Definitely a carrying forward.

My supervisors, while familiar with Meditation and Focusing, did not understand the mechanics, but they liked the results. I described to them the ways in which Meditation and Focusing created a sense of quiet by listening to the body in a gentle way; how the body can relax and release physical and mental tension—calming the busy mind and allowing for peace, wisdom, and safety in the present. I explained that continued practice allows one the realization that in times of distress, these modalities can be used as resources.

In a short time, my caseload was filled with heavily medicated pain patients suffering co-morbidly with severe depression, anxiety, and intense anger. No one else wanted to deal with them, because they were difficult, noncompliant, easily agitated, but primarily because they did not seem to improve in any way, regardless of the intervention. I believed Focusing would help them, and at that point I had a missionary's zeal that belied my lack of experience. Relaxing them enough to even get to Focusing required meditative breathing. Immediately after intakes, I discussed the benefits of Mindfulness Meditation: I impressed them with the quality and results of the literature I cited. My patients had tried everything, they thought. They had been shuffled from primary care to specialties, pain management, psychiatrists, and physical therapy. They were pain. And now they were presented with a promising new way to manage their pain.

My standard protocol after the intake became a three-part intervention. It takes up an entire session, but because it instills hope that more will come, I saw an immediate benefit. I taught the client to breathe (Mindfulness Meditation), to relax (body scan), and become present (Clearing a Space). The relaxing body scan is useful for identifying the pain and non-pain parts and overwhelmed and not overwhelmed parts (which could be a fingernail or an ear). The body scan attempts to make those painful or overwhelmed parts comfortable.

Then, I would move into Clearing a Space. This step would often allow the patient to feel better than when they arrived. After the first few times of meditation with Clearing a Space the patients looked forward to coming in and finding some relief. They had more difficulty with meditating at home. After I explained that it was impossible to do it wrong, most patients put in the effort. I worried initially that I had to combine modalities because I couldn't tolerate their pain and my inability to *fix them*. I sensed it was my desire to share *the something* that seemed to work.

SEA TURTLES, TRADER JOE COFFEE CANS, AND OTHER METAPHORS

I have witnessed that the image that comes in Clearing a Space can be used over and over until another takes its place. My favorite is with a fragile woman who carefully places her issues and concerns into a Trader Joe coffee can and puts it in the freezer. She can feel better, and still know all of those worries are close by if for some reason it is necessary to resurrect them.

Clearing a Space is a joy to me, because it is the prelude to becoming whole without regret. It allows for the work to begin and then for the client and myself to make sense of it all. I believe we need to make sense of struggles in order to acknowledge them fully and move on without regret. Sometimes the struggles are easy to sense: a heaviness in the pit of the belly making it difficult to even move, an ache in the chest like a boulder pressing on the heart, a searing burn in the throat refusing to give voice a choice to communicate. Other times, most times, the bodily sensations are subtle.

Attention must be directed to the hurting parts that are usually taken for granted. I instruct them to notice the tickle, the butterflies, the slightly rolling nausea, and especially to acknowledge the existence of something there. I ask them to allow for the faint sensations to come into consciousness. I encourage them to slow down to listen and to translate these sensations into left-brain language.

“Give the experience...the feelings...inside your body...enough space to expand and allow yourself to sense the whole of it,” I tell them. “The meaning may be vague in the beginning, yet there is a willingness for it to become clear. Issues and concerns may come up...just welcome whatever comes...”

For most of my clients there are too many issues to examine each individual one in its entirety in the limited time we share. Sometimes the issues are so enmeshed that it would take too long to separate them. These issues, after all, are interfering with *the now*. They are mostly coming from the past; perhaps, a few issues present warnings for the future, but there is no place for them in the here and now. Multiple issues can be explored individually by giving the client time, with the suggestion to: “Take a quiet moment to sense inside and ask...*What needs my attention, right now...?*”

And the Clearing a Space procedure normally changes from session to session, generally presenting a surprise for both of us.

I quietly suggest, “With honor and respect, request if it is okay to relocate that issue out of your belly for now. Allow a way for it to move. The issue appears sometimes as an image, a gesture, a word.” The process is like magic. I am humbled and filled with a sense of wonder. *Ask and you shall receive.* Just listen for the answer. I observe their faces, body language, sounds. Sometimes their reactions include tears and sobs or laughter. Many times the word ‘freedom’ comes up. An opening appears and allows for more to emerge.

As one client put it:

An old, large, wise sea turtle swims gracefully up from the water and embraces me, gently removing all of the troubles, leaving a sense of relief. And then I feel tremendous guilt that I have unloaded all of that pain on that beautiful creature. And I see at the bottom of the ocean, the sea turtle drops all of the pain, and turns and smiles at me, then vanishes. I sob with joy unremorsefully.

In the words of another,

It happens with great speed. My arms are stretched tightly over my head. My wrists are bound with thick handcuffs. Suddenly without notice, the handcuffs break and my arms fly open. Freedom. The way forward has become clear.

And yet another,

There are so many issues. They will not go together. They demand acknowledgement individually. I name each, and then that process allows me to place each one gently on the weight rack behind me. When they are all there on the rack, my body is light and stretches out fully in the air.

So the first three parts in my practice involve: Breathing (Mindfulness Meditation), body scan (relaxation), and Clearing a Space (release). They are the beginning of the healing process. I encourage my clients to practice meditation and Clearing a Space at home. I encourage and support their practice, and explain to them that they can participate in their own healing, and have a *sense that their lives can be better.* And I tell them that I will be there to help for as long as they need me to be. A sense of safety and hope has been established.

FOCUSING AND CARRYING FORWARD

H. is a 47-year-old woman, in the process of divorce for the second time from a husband who insists on extra marital affairs and refuses to contribute financially to the household. They have five children. H.’s primary care physician referred her to me because she suffered with thyroid cancer, major depression, and severe anger management issues. She described rage as an all-consuming emotion that she had no control over. She said this is not who she

is, and she wanted to rid herself of these intense feelings. After the intake, I went through my three-step protocol. She began begun to practice mindfulness meditation with Clearing a Space at home at least three times a week, beginning with 10-minute sessions. On our fourth session after Clearing a Space, the anger needed attention. (T = therapist C = client)

T: See if you can manage to notice the anger at a distance (I was concerned that she would “fall into the anger”)

C: The anger is on a shelf, covered in dust.

T: It has been there a long time... (I feel it, too...)

C: Getting bigger. Feeling it all inside. (She gestured to her core, under her chin to her lap in a quick violent movement, her face contorted)

T: Maybe... see what you might want to do with it? (I whispered very gently, never moving my eyes away from her, sitting knee to knee.)

C: Get rid of it.

T: Ummm... How?

C: Put it in a bin.

T: You want to put it in a bin... (She nods yes) Can you see if the bin has a color?

C: Green.

T: Ummm... How will the anger get in the bin?

C: I don't know, but I don't want to touch it.

T: Is there someone there that can help you?

C: Yes. He is putting it in the bin.

T: He's putting in the bin... with the dust...

C: Yes, now he's putting on the lid.

T: It is all gone? Duck taped up? (I sense it is being sealed. I see duct tape—she corrects me. She doesn't care that I am mistaken in what is going around the bin. It all flows easily.)

C: He's putting a chain around it... he's dragging it away.

T: He's dragging it away... Check and see how that feels?

C: It feels less grey, it is turning to colors—yellow and green. (Many people associate yellow with harmony and green with wellbeing.)

T: Can you spend some time in those colors? In that space? (This is a part of a healing meditation I teach to my meditation students.)

C: (smiling) It feels so different, I feel free.

T: Enjoy that feeling of freedom. (Client spends time in that open bright place.)

C: There are flowers. IT FEELS GOOD.

T: Maybe notice in your body where you feel that?

C: (gestures all around her center.) It feels like freedom.

T: Maybe take a little time to enjoy that feeling of freedom... (Client frowns)

T: I see a frown on your face... What are you seeing?

C: Ashamed. I am so ashamed.

T: So there is a feeling there... like ashamed... maybe you can see... sense where you carry that shame inside...

C: Around my heart—a heaviness (client gestured)

T: Can you be with that feeling at a distance for a while. (Client nods.)

T: How is that?

C: Afraid.

T: Let's spend some time with the afraid-part...just keeping it company, no judgments, no expectations, just friendly curiosity.

C: It is getting a little lighter.

T: You feel it getting a little lighter...Can you send that part some gentle, warm energy...(Time passes.)

C: (smiling) It is getting better.

Notice how the anger uncovered the ashamed feeling. I didn't pry into the ashamed feeling. I don't need to know the whole of that. Most importantly I didn't judge it, I had no expectations of it, and neither did H. Then the afraid emerged. Fear is a base emotion. H. had built up many things to be afraid of—for example, *Will I even live? Who will nurture my children if I don't? Will I be in pain?* Therefore, my intention is to assist H. in finding inner resources leading to peace and harmony. We discuss how life continues and challenges occur everyday, but we can use meditation and Focusing as a resource to return to a safe place even if it is temporary. And from that practice comes hope. And hope is life enhancing. And code rewriting is carrying forward.

CARRYING FORWARD

S., a woman with severe sensory and pain issues, comes to a solution about her working until she reaches sensory overload. Her body or unconscious creates the image of a bag—this much weeding, garden waste is enough at one time. Then she moves on to an easier, enjoyable task—planting bulbs. It is okay to not complete each task fully—just enough. She senses the rightness of the stop-place, before the pain—the noise begins. She goes on to implement this new way of being in her garden. Somehow her compulsion to do it all at one time has been released. “But how can I be sure it will last?” Acknowledging the source in the left-brain is not sufficient. Without directing S.—and even then would she believe me if I said your mother taught you this, beat it into you—let it go, let her go, put her on a shelf, forget about this erroneous teaching...No! It must come from within her.

S. and I terminated therapy shortly afterwards. We spoke on the telephone about six months later. She thanked me and said her life is great. Her disability has improved, her fear of relationship involvement diminished, she is living happily with her significant (new) other, and life in all respects is much better. She said she owes that to Focusing, Meditation, EMDR, and using her resources—friends. It was clear that our intervention was successful. Last year she contacted me after she received a cancer diagnosis for a “refuel”. We met three times. Last month she sent me a note—six months all clear and enjoying life more than ever. I felt so happy for her, knowing she was well, and that she has an inner knowing of what she needs and a way to check inside and find her own personally meaningful answers. I sensed relief, gratitude, and calm in me.

Forward movement is a gentle result of these three interventions. Arriving at that point means beginning with safety. A deep sense of safety is established in the therapy room in the initial interactions of therapist and client when they engage in an energetic connection or mirror neurons. Asking questions to understand where the client is in terms of pain and trauma experience is helpful when journeying with her in the Focusing experience. The Clearing a Space step helps to identify the issues and concerns and lays the groundwork

for the client to acknowledge and then to contemplate releasing painful experiences. The images, gestures, words, hold a plethora of meaning and guide the way for a resolution. When a client experiences this level of meaning, it resonates so strongly within that s/he has a renewed sense of hope and a desire for life that includes joy and creativity.

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