

## GEMS GLEANED FROM A FOCUSING BODYWORKER

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Touch is the oldest form of communication. Our mothers, fathers, and caregivers used touch to convey care, support and love before we could see their faces with our eyes and long before we could form and understand words. Relationships develop from this touch, where the words used from the caregiver accompanies what is already being experienced through touching. I begin with this primary truth, that we first experience and connect with others through the non-verbal communication of touch, so that we might keep this in our awareness as I share with you two topics: what massage and other forms of touch offer the Focusing session and what Focusing offers the massage session.

Drawing from my 18 years in the massage profession, I hope that you, the Focuser, might explore ways in which your Focusing practice can be grounded in using touch for your process, should you have someone available to practice touch-based Focusing in your area. My second and equally important hope is that, if you are a massage therapist or touch-based practitioner who senses the profoundness of using Focusing in your practice, that you feel encouraged to take the next steps to integrate more Focusing in your practice.

I am a social worker-turned-massage therapist. I will always be a social worker, but my calling to help others led me to a more hands-on approach, finding the untapped wealth of healing potential for body, mind, and spirit through the use of my hands. I have witnessed many times over how profound a massage session can be for clients when they shift from reacting to the stressful goings-on of life to becoming receptive to the resting quality and slower pace that touch gives. They shift from reacting to receiving. The transition can be more or less easy or downright difficult. Here is why: what we know about the physiology of the body is that the sympathetic nervous system engages when we are experiencing stress. The sympathetic nervous system keeps our body ready to react to real or perceived threat by taking blood flow away from the limbs and re-routing that flow, making it available for the heart to use, and also by causing shallow breathing and tunnel vision. Touch can change this dynamic: it engages the parasympathetic nervous system, or the body's way of coming in to relaxation, receptivity and healing potential. Blood flows back to the limbs and gut, the breath becomes fuller, making it possible to become aware that the stresses are not all of you, and therefore, where more can be lived besides the stress in front of you.

Focusing can be a most supportive process for massage clients who find *something* in the way of coming in to a state of receptivity. Just being with that *something* cultivates an inward attention during the massage session, so that *something more* can come in that present state. Rather than 'pushing through' or ignoring the cues of the body that are signaling, 'Oh! Can we slow down a minute? I'm not sure about something and I'm having some feelings about it.' We can then invite the client to acknowledge and make further contact with those feelings — compassionately.

## WHAT TOUCH OFFERS

Here are a few gems I have gleaned as a Focusing bodyworker:

- an island of safety, as an anchor through touch
- a touchstone to come back to when one feels disconnected or lost in one's inner process
- a tangible place to stay in the space before words
- entrainment, and the ways in which both companion and Focuser co-create a space that offers a deeper connection to presence
- a rich place for metaphor
- a way to prime the pump of presence

I will explain each of these points in more detail. Though I use the term 'companion,' the term also applies to a massage therapist; as well, the term 'Focuser' could also refer to the client.

### Island of Safety

During his presentation at the Innovations of Trauma Therapies Conference in 2014, Peter Levine talked about how psychotherapists can support clients who are dealing with trauma by providing moments of 'okayness' that can build into islands of safety. For many of us who suffer from the barrage of unceasing thoughts and a tendency to merge with parts that pull us out of presence, just knowing that in this massage-moment it is possible to experience — that 'things are okay' is a feat in and of itself. Whether we are coming from past deep trauma or are inundated with daily, unremitting stress, we can learn that islands of safety can be built by taking a moment to check-in and sense, that for this one moment: *I am okay, I am here, I can leave the doing and just be*. Using the skilled and listening touch that is available with a Focusing-trained companion or bodyworker, the parasympathetic system is activated, and the client is able to find his or her own island of safety. These are the gems that touch offers.

For some, an island of safety may last a moment, and for others, an island of safety feels like a welcomed respite that could last longer than just moments. Either way, this respite provides a foundation that can be built upon and remembered — in a bodily felt way — to be accessed again and again, ultimately strengthening the clients' ability *to stay in presence*. Once the island of safety is experienced, the process of Focusing will be an organic next step.

Tactile cues coming from the companion's hands help the client literally *feel into* his or her body, providing the massage therapist with an appropriate moment to invite the client to drop down into the bodily felt sense, in order to sense *the more...* clearly a context that is larger and more informative than just stressful thoughts.

The following is an example that perhaps you have experienced: When hard at work and hunched over your computer, someone you trust comes along and starts massaging your shoulders. Up to now the inner critic has been with you, commenting negatively (of course!) on your writing. Suddenly, as you start to *relax into the warm hands of trust*, the Critic begins to cease its input. Maybe you didn't even notice that you had engaged a critical part

until you were able to sense *okayness* — down into your body — through the hands of your trusted friend!

Of course, the goal is not to ignore or make the inner critic go away. At some other time, the inner critic might need our attention fully, and we might learn something new when we Focus on what gets it so activated. The point I want to emphasize here is how touch brings an instant connection back to the body and reminds us that the body is here in the present moment to offer a grounded way of knowing in whatever task we are doing.

## **A Touchstone**

Once islands of safety are established, we can use touch as a touchstone for Focusers who might become disconnected from their body sensing, or who might have gotten lost in their Focusing process. Touch is a way to sense freshly in to the body as the hands of the companion have been supporting and literally holding space for the Focuser.

Another way to describe the idea of having a touchstone in your Focusing process is by using the idea of the foyer. I wrote a previous article about using the metaphor of the foyer and I give sincere thanks for this idea to Nina Joy Lawrence and Pat Omidian, who reported using the concept of the foyer in their work (2011). The foyer is a cultural reference to a place in the house where you receive guests. It is the place where someone can be in your home, but not in the inner areas of the home. The guests are in the house, but not all the way in.

The guests can be metaphor for the many felt senses, and the foyer is the metaphor for a place inside body awareness. The foyer can be considered as the neutral space where the Focuser goes to calm and sort out strong emotions — and to find a place of grounding. The hands from the companion often facilitate the process should the inner feelings become overwhelmed or rather, if the *something in* them that is needing attention feels just as big or bigger than the whole of the Focuser. Coming to the foyer does not dismiss what is happening, or place the issues somewhere else. Rather, the foyer is a resting place that is held by your companion's hands should you need it.

## **Staying in the Place before Words**

It can sometimes be difficult for people to stay present with their felt senses while waiting for something to emerge from that place of wordlessness. Perhaps there can be a sense of *something* coming, but it might be shy, or slow, or need time to form. Touch can be so helpful because the tactile stimulation creates a continuous feedback loop that keeps the Focuser aware of being present in their body and also in the company of another. When a Focuser senses the companion's active engagement just by the warmth of the hands, there can be longer periods of remaining attentive, making it much easier to lie on the massage table patiently and curiously...with all of what is happening...

Sometimes I use my hands to directly touch the place where the Focuser has indicated experiencing discomfort or pain, and has specified that s/he wants me to spend more time in that area. When the area of pain is touched, the Focuser often finds that it's easier to find the 'handle' in describing what is being experienced in that moment. My observation is that my

hands often increase the depth of awareness of the client, thus making *whatever comes* easier to engage with. Then the Focuser has more time to sense in to the space of wordlessness, allowing the right word or image to come. There is less pushing to get to whatever it is that is coming and more ease in being with what is vague. Using touch for staying in the place before words is like watching a child holding the fingers of a guardian as she boldly steps in to the swimming pool. She can go down the first step without holding on to the hands of a helper, or she can grab the fingers of the helper and more steadily go down that first step, still experiencing the thrill of the water, but with the support of someone's physical hands so that she gets cues to find her stability during the descent.

### **Entrainment**

Entrainment is a way to name the energetic rapport between Focuser and companion, especially when touch is used. Entrainment describes the communication of the felt shift that both Focuser and companion feel in the session. Physicist James Oschman has applied some of the research on entrainment to healers, including bodyworkers. In his research into the scientific basis of energy medicine, he described how the phenomenon of entrainment between two people involves "...oscillating electric and magnetic fields, such as those produced by the heart and brain of two individuals, can become coupled or entrained, through direct touch (electrical connection), or biomagnetic interactions, or both" (p.122). So, whether using touch or sitting comfortably in front of each other in Focusing, there is a resonant quality that arises between the two during the session. Heart and brain waves begin oscillating at the same frequency, coming and going throughout the session, in a natural rhythm. "Certainly, for those who use their hands to enhance the functioning of their fellow beings..." Oschman continues, "when allowed to happen without intellectual processing, [entrainment] can give rise to moments of profound insight and deep healing" (p.110).

Oschman's description best reflects the space that is offered both when a massage therapist uses deep listening with his or her hands and when a companion uses his or her skilled hands on a Focuser. I will go a step further and say that in entrainment, the companion begins to receive information that comes from the Focuser non-verbally. To discern whether the companion is picking up a shared felt sense from the Focuser — or from a felt sense coming from inside the companion — she must employ her own Focusing, i.e., checking in to see if this *inner* information is coming from a part of her. We don't really have tools at present in Focusing that have been developed to work with such energies, but I believe that we will in the future. This phenomenon is a whole rich area that massage therapists have already explored among themselves, and one that can be offered to the Focusing community — for further exploration and integration.

Another interesting phenomenon happens within this shared space, coming in and out of entrainment. The skilled touch therapist may feel through his/her hands the felt shift and release that is happening in the client. The therapist at first feels a holding in the skin and tissue, like the pause before a big exhale. Then, at the moment of the felt shift, the tissue changes and feels soft, warm and open. So, the therapist first feels the pause before the felt shift and then the felt shift itself.

A gentle direction as one of the six steps of Focusing (from the [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) website) can be usefully adapted at the point before the ‘big exhale’ or before the tissue changes: “If you get a quick answer without a shift in the felt sense, just let that kind of answer go by. Return your attention to your body and freshly find the felt sense again. Then ask it again.” The companion will feel that not-yet felt shift with the Focuser. This makes it easier for the companion to know how he or she might be supportive in the Focuser’s process and offer more specifically helpful suggestions.

### **A Rich Place for Metaphor**

“My shoulders are so tight!” says my client. I first ask her if she’d like to spend some time with this feeling, so that we know what is here that needs attention. I place my hands on her shoulders and invite her to sense the quality of tight. “It’s tight like I can’t move, like I’m stuck and I can’t do anything about it”, and then tears fall, and at that moment I feel her tissue soften as she acknowledges how much tension there is in her relationship with her son.

“My ribs won’t move and I’m really finding it difficult to do anything without intense pain,” says another of my clients. I place one hand above and one hand below the rib area that is having the pain and invite her to meet me in the space between my hands. “It’s like they are pieces of driftwood jammed up on the shore, and they don’t have any way to move away from each other.” After spending time with this image, being with it exactly as it is, she found a felt shift and then started breathing slowly and rhythmically, reporting that her ribs were now floating separately and moving away from each other, as if her breath were the incoming tide.

There is a natural ability for the body to speak in metaphor, and an easy conduit for this conversation comes by using massage and touch. Metaphor is such a rich area to explore; using Focusing here would be a natural fit, an extended interchange that supports the client’s desire to know more deeply what is within and how their metaphors shift their discomfort.

### **Priming the Pump**

As a person who uses Focusing in my day-to-day life, I notice that there are times when my grounding techniques don’t really work as well as I’d like them to. My techniques lose their freshness. It feels as if my body got overly used to the way I tended to lead myself into my bodily felt sense, and my old way is not as helpful as before. However, when I went for a walk in the woods, took a paddle board ride out at our beach, or got away for the weekend, these physical activities effectively grounded me or reset *my-presence-button* (for lack of a better term). Using massage and other forms of bodywork can also reset the-presence-button, grounding me and priming the pump for me to be able to turn inward.

Touch helps prime the pump of presence, giving the companion another path to open into the present moment because touch can literally change how we feel in space. Our bodies have proprioceptive cells that help us know where we are physically. When introducing touch to the body, the body takes the opportunity to reassess where it ends and the rest of the world begins. Focusing is greatly facilitated if one can know the outside boundaries one

will be turning inward from. Sometimes we may not be clear about our physical boundaries in space until we have touch to help us know.

In closing, my hope is that you better understand that using touch in Focusing is intriguing and has some new and exciting ways to support one's Focusing process. I also want to encourage bodyworkers/massage therapists to begin using Focusing in practice professionally and personally. There is an emerging desire for our profession to be able to use appropriate, supportive dialogue to accompany massage sessions when there is emotional content. I see Focusing as a way to bring our profession to the forefront of mind/body/spirit integration, offering whole healing for our clients. In a future article I will share why Focusing is the answer to our dilemma and why it will be the gift for our profession to move forward in a fresh, new and more helping way for our clients.

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