

THE BODY'S RECOVERY OF SPIRIT:
Transforming Life-Stances and Releasing Bound Energy-Threshold
Events in Wholebody Focusing Oriented Therapy

Glenn Fleisch, Ph.D., LMFT

The purpose of...psychotherapy is to set people free...to help people become free to be aware of and to experience their possibilities...Problems are the outward signs of unused inner possibilities. (R. May, 1981)

The human spirit is made possible only by freedom. Without freedom, there is no spirit; without spirit, no freedom; and without freedom, no self. Spirit has its psychological roots in the individual's inner freedom. (R. May, 1981)

[And] since binding is always in question, what needs to be thought is: is it enslaving, or is it liberating? (Levin, 1988)

[There is a] crying need of the spirit, [a] dream of a complete transformation of the human body... (Levin, 1988)

Therapy is not a matter of doing something to the individual, or of inducing him to do something about himself. It is instead a matter of *freeing* him for normal growth and development. (Rogers, 1942)

Therapeutic change is in part an actual change in the body's tissue...a new and freeing physical energy [that] actually flows in the client's body. (Gendlin, 1996)

Spirit healing is...about *bodying* the spirits within us...through *resonance* with body spirits [so] that they are released from entrapment...and can circulate freely in our resonant souls. (Wilberg, 2003)

INTRODUCTION

Most of us live with some degree of bound energy and bodily constriction. Often, this bound up quality can be observed and felt in our bodily postures as well as in embodied life-stances (lived attitudes and behaviors toward the world). Once formed, especially as a consequence of early life traumas, these life stances become fixed resulting in repetitive patterns of responding. Over time, these patterns become the background context, forming our primary identity or felt sense of self, and often go unnoticed and remain invisible until a) either life situations call for a new way of responding or b) our inner spirit calls us

toward a freer, more authentic way of living. At those moments, an *impasse* can occur as the forces desiring or needing change are met with an equal or sometimes more powerful pull toward stasis and familiarity, and we come upon the threshold or the edge of our bound and restricted bodily stances and living energy.

To facilitate transformations at the edge of this impasse, Wholebody Focusing (WBF) may use an intervention known as *Threshold Events*:

Here is a brief example: *A client “Sandra” in her 40s, suffered from intense and prolonged emotional and verbal abuse as a child, and complained that her husband treated her abusively. While sharing her concerns, her body would contract, slump over, and her tone became very soft, almost mute — conveying an image of a little girl being scolded, reprimanded, and shamed. After many similar sessions, something else emerged. “I wish I could stand up for myself — but I have never been able to do so, not without a lot of turmoil and anxiety.”*

*Given her expressed desire, I offered and demonstrated the possibility of physically ‘standing up’ to which she agreed. I first guided her into an awareness of her whole body as she stood in her usual contracted postural stance, and after some time, she suddenly became more alive. She first felt her legs, feet, then felt some vibrant energy moving into her upper body. As we followed the movement of energy, **her upper body spontaneously straightened up, her shoulders loosened, breath deepened — then her face turned upward as her eyes became more open and her face softened.** As she Focused on her felt sense of this postural shift, she stated, with a deepened voice: “Wow! This is a whole different sense of self that I’m experiencing. I never thought it possible to feel myself stand taller and straighter, but here it is. I have never felt my legs and feet beneath me, holding me up.” We affirmed the feel of the whole body, inviting her to embody this new postural stance.*

Comment: Notice how the whole body came alive when standing — generating new, vibrant energy from the ground up — and how this life energy transformed her typical postural stance of its own accord. We built on this threshold effect in future sessions to solidify a growing sense of self — with more confidence to stand on her own and to express herself more firmly with her husband. In addition, we were able to retrieve and restore the spirit of her inner child by sensing her anger and defiance in protest of abuse that had been suppressed in order to survive.

As shown in the above example, this WBF process event can be a spontaneous coming forward of new life energy, inner directed movements, and postural shifts. Yet I have found that when clients are stuck or blocked by deeply entrenched patterns and stances, they often need a higher level of active *bodily* participation and *embodied* support to enter into the threshold space. As Gendlin says “*Letting the life-forward energy actually come in the body is the chief purpose of body dream interpretation.*” (2012, p. 2). When we use the whole body in Focusing and therapy, the person’s inner spirit and life energy can begin to flow, forming new life-stances, as well as recovering the spirit of deeply traumatized, wounded selves.

Threshold Events: a WBF process to free bound energy and transform embodied stances

The living body knows how to retrieve and recover its spirit, the innate life energy, inherent power, force and vitality, that pre-existed trauma and is still implicitly functioning regardless of severity of traumatic events or environments. When allowed to do so, the body has the capacity to disclose its life-stance and move us toward *retrieving, recovering and restoring its natural spirit*. The body's remarkable capacity shows itself when we are attentive to *bodily leads*, i.e. gestures, postural stances, voice tonality, movements, sounds etc. that are the body's incipient signs of renewed life energy and movement. These bodily leads function like a "homing instinct" of spirit, bringing us to the exact place, event, situation, where its spirit (energy) was broken or wounded. Thus, the movements, backward and forward, are not linear, but rather circular, or holographic- a going back to retrieve *is* a moving forward toward our wholeness of being.

Threshold Events involve co-creating a ritual space in which we use these movements of the living body as implicit leads toward: 1) that which is showing itself as a bound or fixed place or pattern (a movement *backward*) and 2) letting the energy of the reawakened body open to its new possibilities of moving forward.

Threshold has three meanings, all of which are essential to this process event: 1) *the starting place* — the beginning or opening of a new experience, state or venture, 2) *an entrance* — such as a doorway, sill or passageway, and 3) *the level necessary to produce an effect* — the point at which a stimulus is of sufficient intensity to begin to produce an experiential effect. Thus the characteristic of a *Threshold Event* is that it transpires at the edge or border of an impasse, a bound or stuck place or process, that it is at the verge of a new beginning or different experience, and that this experience is held long enough and with sufficient intensity to generate a noticeable felt effect, a significant or major shift in our bodily stance. Once shifted or opened, a postural stance or bodily schema can reveal memories, scenes where the life-stance of lost or expelled selves were formed, eventually re-awakening and restoring their spirit.

Spirit comes from the Latin *spiritus* 'breath' and is generally referred to as the animating principle or force of life. When I use the term "spirit," I am referring to the bodily felt awareness and experience of 1) *Life force* — the vital force; aliveness; vitality; 2) *Will* — the sense of self; power; agency; and 3) *Enthusiasm* — the energy; joy; passion; love. Spirit is the experiencing of a vital life force and energy, one that transcends our immediate situations, history and previous knowledge. Thus, as Rollo May (1981) states, "Spirit is the breath of life...that which gives vivacity, energy, liveliness, courage and ardor to life (p. 220)." "Spirit is the power of *being*, reaching forward into *becoming*. (Bugental and Bugental, 1984, p. 56)." It is the power and energy of our living spirit that has been stopped, broken or impaired by the life traumas that necessitated it go "underground," or be "exiled."

When our spirit has been broken or violated, its life-energy becomes *closed off* — encapsulated, dispersed, or disembodied — resulting in a deeply *dispirited self*. When we bring awareness to these closed-off and shut-down places, our awareness reawakens their spirit, *reopening* its natal energy and aliveness that had been curtailed or broken.

Creating the threshold: entering the liminal space

Threshold Events come at a point during the journey with clients when they are actively desiring and/or needing to make a major life change — a significant life transition. The character of this change is either one of a *beginning*, wanting to start something new or different — or an *ending*, needing to stop or break away from a situation or pattern. In either case, clients and I often find ourselves stuck or blocked, not wanting to give up yet, nor not willing to journey further, causing a build-up of pressure.

These events are a *relational or interactive process*, in which each person's "move" in the therapeutic "dance" is intertwined with that of the preceding one. There must be bodily felt contact between the therapist and the client — an openness to being mutually affected, to using all of our senses, and to becoming more aware of what is visible (explicit) as well as what is invisible (energy/feeling qualities/ implicit). This awareness is connected to the whole body of the therapist, the whole body of the client, and the whole field "in-between." Like a tuning fork that both receives and transmits energy, this awareness provides a sensitive attunement that awakens the life-energy of the living body. What is often called forth is a response to the need and the *call* of the whole body's implying, one that "inspirits," i.e., brings life to and animates dispirited energy.

We start at the point of the impasse, create a clear threshold or edge, delineate it as a significant crossroad, and then hold the line at this edge until there is a *threshold effect* when something shifts or transforms. Thus, the result of a 'successful' threshold event is that we *cross over*, or *break through*, so that we enter into a different space. On one side of the threshold, the bodily stance can lead us *backward* to a seminal scene where the spirit was broken, and a life-stance formed. It can also move us *forward* to a new capacity and possibility, sometimes both, as this movement is *circular* or *holographic*. We often encounter many *guardians at the threshold*, powerful forces that guard and protect the wounded spirit. These guardians often implore us not to go forward because serious danger lies in pushing ahead. We can also discover helpful guardians, allies, and angels.

Whole Body Focusing at points of blockage: setting up the threshold event

A *Threshold Event* is jointly created. It comes at the stage when there is 1) an active desire or pressing need to make a major life change — whether external and/or internal, 2) a prolonged difficulty generating a lasting change with old patterns tending to repeat, and 3) a despair, discouragement, or frustration, etc. about ever being able to change, yet accompanied by the feeling that change is necessary.

There are several steps here that are crucial in entering into the blocked/stopped process

1. *Moving inward* — connecting with the felt sense of the body as sensed from within.
2. *Moving outward* — allowing the felt sense and bodily energy to flow outwardly, to amplify, animate, to show more of itself in playing out and expressing itself.

3. *Growing awareness of the blockage* — something holding back, stopping the desired change, pulling in the opposite direction, or keeping the process at a standstill.
4. *Use of the felt body for resonance/mimesis*- utilizing the body as an instrument of *resonant attunement* and *mimesis*, (shaping and moving with the energy/feel of clients' body.)
5. *Bodily expression as implicit lead arises* — something emerges at the point of blockage or stuckness — a movement, postural stance, gesture, expression that spontaneously arises.
6. *Pointing out/playing back the gestic lead* — bring the bodily expression to awareness, and check if client is willing to *enter into* and *let show more* of itself.
7. *Letting bodily felt responses form* — the coming forth of *bodily implicit leads* including responses that might fill in what has been missing, needed, being 'called forth.'
8. *Setting the stage for the threshold event* — co-creating the process and inviting the bodily expression to have "center stage," to let come whatever *it* wants to show **or** do.
9. *Ending the event* — coming back to our whole body in grounded presence, returning to our whole sense of self, and inviting the body to integrate what has come.

Brief vignettes of *Threshold Events* in Wholebody Focusing Oriented Therapy:

These vignettes are all taken from my therapy practice. For brevity, I am leaving out most of the reflections, safety invitations, and some of the intervening steps. Please assume that these took place, and that everything that transpired was based on mutual collaboration and felt sense of rightness/agreement by all clients. Also, to protect privacy, not only is some information changed, but these are integrations of more than one client. The essence of each event however is intact.

Vignette #1: How a postural stance retrieves the spirit of a deeply wounded self

A married woman in her late 30's has been having an affair for about two years, wants to end it, but can't seem to break away. On several occasions, while talking about ending the affair, her body would shift into a specific posture — arms would cross in front of her chest area, and her chin would lean on her hands. When it felt right, I called attention to this posture, and wondered if there might be something important that this stance was revealing.

We set up the process, and as she closed her eyes, what came was, "I see me at 3 years old, standing by the window sill near our front door. My Daddy is leaving — and somehow I know he won't be coming back. Something I did made him go away. And every day after that, for a long time, I would go to that window sill, and rest my head there, wondering if maybe today Daddy would come back. Every time the doorbell rang, I ran to open the door — hoping it was my Daddy."

After sharing this memory, we were both tearful as we could feel that deeply wounded, dispirited little girl, who “came here” through her body stance to show us that she is still looking and waiting for her Daddy. In effect, her young girl had taken a stance of “awaiting or searching for Daddy,” and would not give up until she found him.

This event opened a new pathway, both in our relationship, as she could feel a deepened trust in my care for all of her, and in her development of a more nurturing, caring capacity to this abandoned girl. This event was the portal that enabled us to care for this wounded girl, and help restore her beautiful spirit. Within a short while, she was able to break off the affair, as we continued to work through the pain and grief of this early abandonment.

Vignette #2: How an entrenched life-stance opens and releases

*A male client in his early 50’s had a history of difficulty allowing intimacy in interpersonal relations — often describing his sense of “putting up a wall” between himself and others. As we became closer, we could sense that this wall became thicker. In one particular session, I felt drawn to moving a slight bit closer to B. It was then that we noticed **his whole body tightening, contracting, and he then had an awareness of the felt quality of the wall — with his arms going up into a ‘stop’ position.** I moved back a bit, and asked if B. might be open to staying with this bodily position to sense what emerges. He agreed.*

While standing, I guided us into body awareness. With eyes closed, B. felt his wall as the wall of a bathroom in his childhood home. He then relayed an incident when he was about two or three years old. “I think I was playing with myself, and my mother came in, saw me, and went into a tirade, yelling, berating me,” You terrible boy — you should be ashamed of yourself! Don’t come out until you’re ready to be good.” B. was able to inhabit the felt space of this little body — at first sensing an intense feeling of shame and badness, followed by a feeling of wanting to disappear. Then suddenly and without any deliberate effort, he began to feel a strong quality of rage, something he had never before felt. The words come, “You don’t want me to come out — okay then! I will stay in this bathroom as long as I want — and no one including you can make me come out until I’m ready!”

There were deep tears coming, as B began to embody the power of this assertion. For the first time, he felt the wall as a powerful stance of protest, and as he reclaimed the little boy, he could feel his energy and spirit. As we ended the session, B. noticed that the wall between us was gone, and that his bodily being felt more alive, confident and strong. “It feels like I finally came out of the bathroom. So it seems I won’t need the wall. And I’m also making a vow to that little boy not to abandon him again — ‘I dedicate every day to take care of you.’”

Vignette #3: Letting the body reawaken its youthful spirit

G. (mid 60’s) has lived most of her adult life in a kind of mute, shut down and depressive space. After many years of living in this contracted bodily stance, she feels ready to become more energetic and alive, but keeps getting pulled back to this familiar position.

While she described a recent situation that was very disheartening, I observed that G's shoulders first began to slump (the common dispirited stance), then very slightly began to move in a kind of rolling motion. As my body mimicked this movement, through inward Focusing, I got a resonant sense like something trying to escape or stretch out — struggling for release and freedom. I brought this movement to her attention — and invited her to check and see if she would like to allow more to come. G. readily agreed — as she liked standing and letting her body move.

We both stood up, took some time to bring awareness to the whole body, and then invited the energy of her shoulders to move however they would like. The rolling movement, which started in her shoulders then evolved into a whole body squirming as though she were emerging from a tight fitting outer skin. Together we carefully and gently helped something wriggle out from within this sense of being trapped in something very tight and constrictive. At one point, she had a distinct sense that her body was free of this entrapment. "It feels like my body has shed an old skin — sort of like a snake — and it feels like this new skin is very different. It feels soft, rubbery, loose, warm, and fresh." We continue to move together — which to me felt like birthing this new being into life. "It feels like I am a very young girl — just starting to find her legs, and the environment feels very nurturing and wonderful. This rocking feels very soothing — and us moving together gives this young girl a lot of support and security, something I never felt before. She is moving with ease, and freedom that feels very new."

Discussion: *Threshold Events* as a turning point on the journey — the body leads us Home

As illustrated in these vignettes, our living-body functions as a beacon, lighting and showing the way to re-open and retrieve the wounded or dispirited self. Symptoms and body stances serve as "homing signals" which are our main guides, bringing us to exact places (scenes/events) and revealing the exact ways that the flow of life energy became bound and blocked — and what is/was needed to reawaken the life-spirit and release the bound energy.

It is crucial to keep in mind that each of these events was co-created by the client and therapist, emerging out of Focusing awareness of what the whole body is implying — specifically the calling of bound embodied stances, and new possibilities. Each *Threshold Event* is unique, requiring that we have sufficient devotion, capacity and willingness to enter into and stay bodily engaged in this intimate space. There is a quality of *not-knowing* what will transpire or what will be called forth — a depth of holding, supporting (including physical support/touch), actively participating, and authentically sharing, responding as well as transmitting one's own embodied energy and spirit. These events always occur in the context of a well-established and close relational space between the client and therapist — a space of safety, trust, confidence, openness and authenticity. Clients always know that they have choices: that they should check for the rightness or readiness of any process, that they can always say "no," and that they are free to suggest something or stop a process at any time.

Conclusion: Crossing and returning to the threshold: repetition, circularity and retrieval

Threshold Events are not meant to function as a onetime healing. Although certainly transformational, they must they be returned to again and again — as a *touchstone*, a reference point, a new edge that is then recalled and re-experienced many times. They are more like a “crossing,” a “shifting,” and because these events can shake up our system, there is a strong tendency to return to the more familiar patterns and entrenched life-stances. Thus, we want to keep in mind the phenomenology of *repetition* and *spiraling*, the *circular movement* that revolves around the same themes, patterns, and bodily reactions over and over. Some core aspects include:

1. *The power of the “compulsion to repeat”* patterns and habitual stances.
2. *The continual return to this threshold point* — holding, reworking, reminding, and renewing what transpired until it is more integrated in our body and spirit; a continual commitment to follow this path.
3. *The shifting focal point* — the body wisdom and energy can move us “backward” toward early, wounded places or “forward” toward new capacities and stances. This dual movement requires continual practice, dedication, patience, and often, creating or re-creating new threshold events as the need arises.

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Glenn Fleisch, Ph.D., LMFT, is a Focusing-oriented therapist, WBF trainer/ coordinator and workshop leader. He is most interested in creative innovations in WB Focusing, such as the use of theater, drama work, expressive-interactive methods, to facilitate deep healing from complex trauma and depression. With Doralee Grindler Katonah, they have been developing Transformational Focusing, that uses the power of spirit and communal energy for the benefit of ourselves, the community and the larger wholeness of Being. He can be reached at: glennfleisch@aol.com
Phone: (415) 384-0144; Skype: glenn.h.fleisch; Location: Mill Valley, Ca. U.S.A.

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