

LESSONS FROM A FAMILY FOCUSING CIRCLE: Reflections from The Young and The Young At Heart

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(with the contributions of Raina Barara and Angela Davis)

Over the last three years, a new project has entered my life. It entered gently and offered unexpected gifts and learning about the Focusing process — gems of wisdom that I never thought I would find and definitions of the Focusing process that I did not expect to discover. This paper is about sharing some of these gifts. The gifts of a ‘Family Focusing Circle’ — a little experiment that has grown to be a wonderful example of Community building and wellness.

This experiment emerged from my desire to bring Focusing to my family and create more connection and sense of belonging with other families who were around. This paper shares the voice of two participants (one young and one mature) and the impact that their experiences had on my understanding of Focusing and felt-sense literacy. The narratives provide a glimpse of the power of pausing, Focusing, and felt-sensing in bringing more connection and harmony within and between people, even close family members. They also capture new and more vibrant ways and metaphors to describe and understand key concepts and ideas of the Focusing process.

Felt Sense Through the Eyes of a Child: ‘Writing your life with a light pencil’

Four adults and three children from two different families participated in the ‘Family Focusing Circle.’ During our ‘Family Focusing Circle’ the children demonstrated amazing wisdom in being with their felt sense and bringing a breath of fresh air into the interaction. Each exercise, task, and exchange allowed me to witness how much easier it was to invite the children to be with their felt senses than it was with the adults. The younger members of our group beautifully and with precision were able to attend to their inner process and talk about it during our reflection time. It was amazing to witness how concepts, such as the felt sense, were experienced and understood in a way that was so vibrant and alive.

Raina, my daughter (10 years old at the time) in one of our meetings, offered a very powerful description of the felt-sensing process including the knowledge and relief that comes through following a shift. Here is how she describes getting in touch and spending time with the felt sense, and then noticing how the inner landscape changes when we take a ‘little trip’ inside:

“I remember how one time we had to bring into our memory an important moment that happened during the day and see how it felt inside. What came up for me was a moment earlier that day when we were playing soccer at school.

Our team was losing, and the other team was winning, playing unfairly. I thought I was feeling angry, but when I went inside it did not seem like the right word. I could not find the right word to describe how any part of me was feeling. All I could find was the urge to 'ball my fists'. This was something that captured all I felt. It was so much more than anger."

"With Focusing I have learned to trust my body and listen to what it has to tell me. Focusing is like going inside your body on a boat, and seeing how every different part feels. When I go inside I discover things I did not know at first. Focusing helps me solve my problems. Before I had started Focusing, I would just blurt things out to solve the problem...Once I started Focusing, I took my time to handle and listen to things. It is like instead of using permanent marker, you use a light pencil. With a permanent marker, I can't go and erase what I wrote...but with a light pencil, I can erase and write a different thing, if it doesn't feel right...I can keep erasing and writing new and good feeling things..."

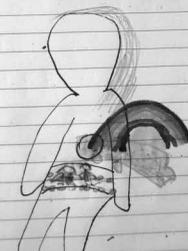
Raina in her words and her vivid metaphor depicted Focusing (and attention to the felt sense) as an ongoing, always shifting process that brings new awareness and allows us to re-author our life in a gentler way. Listening to her reflection allowed me to see that being with the Focuser is not about keeping track of what it 'has been' but what 'is' right now.

Interactive Focusing through the Eyes of a Child: The Rainbow Inside

What do I value about you? This was a question that allowed the members of our Family Focusing Circle to try out their interactive Focusing skills (Klein, 2001). The exchanges were powerful and memorable for all members. The exchanges took place between two members of the same family. Raina, one of the youngest members of the circle, shares her exchange with her dad:

When I did the focusing with daddy, my stomach and chest reacted a lot. At first, my stomach felt like it was full of light and my chest felt like I was touching a soft, woolly and sooty bitten. Then, my emotions changed and so did the feelings in my chest and stomach. My stomach had an image of 2 people, a river with rocks and stones on both sides of it (the river). There were 2 people sitting on the rocks (stones) and dipping their feet in the water. My chest had a little

hole in it. Out of the hole came light. After a few moments, not only was there light, but there was also a ~~rain~~ rainbow and a few light raindrops.



According to Raina, what made this moment so memorable and impactful was that it encouraged better communication and connection: “Listening to my dad in this special way made me feel closer to my dad. My body liked it. This exercise helped me find a rainbow inside. It is not an easy thing to find a rainbow in your chest! It was very special to feel this way about my relationship with my dad”.

Witnessing the impact of Interactive Focusing, I gained new appreciation about the importance of introducing this special way of listening to families and people that share strong bonds between them. In intimate relationships it is hard to simply be the listener and reflect the Focuser’s experience only. Through Interactive Focusing and the ‘double empathic moment’ (Klein, 2001) the listener has also the space to share how the Focuser’s story touches him/her, creating in this way the foundation for mutual understanding and connection. Interactive Focusing invites the listener to feel the Focuser’s internal frame of reference and let an empathic response emerge from that body-sense. In all Focusing exchanges that day, even bitter truths were delivered with respect and gentleness, building the foundation for better communication and connection amongst family members.

Through the Eyes of the Adult: Comfort in Being Together

Bringing families together to learn something about the felt sense and Focusing supported community building and dialogue among family members. The meetings also encouraged rapport-building within and between families. Pausing, grounding, slowing down, sharing and listening promoted a new way of relating. Focusing gave us permission to be together, but differently.

Focusing also encouraged us to slow down and listen to and from our hearts. The tasks were not as important as being together in an open and fully engaged way. Angela, one of the adults of our Focusing Circle, shares in her narrative below, the comfort that comes from being together in a Focusing way:

“We are sitting together in an informal circle — people in various seats, reclining, sitting straight, lounging, bouncy, calm, agitated, bubbly: a group in motion. There is a special energy, from the youngest 6 to the oldest 65, responding to something within themselves or another member or the whole group. Who can tell? The energy is strong as we follow the prompts from a chosen speaker. It could have been an attunement, a retelling of what the member experienced, or their drawing.

This time it was a drawing of a large tree on buff newsprint covering the area in the centre of our circle. Each face is precious, alive and attentive. I feel attuned to our own entrained heartbeats, organically beating together. The conversation is electric with what is happening. The electricity is mostly seen in members’ faces, sometimes in their drawing or writing. I can see members connecting, listening, watching and also withdrawing and working hard

interiorly. Each contributed a piece to the drawing and others said what they saw in it. It felt very satisfying to see ourselves projected on that large tree.

I think a tree is included as a good symbol for our group. Our attunements often speak about our “shy animal” being with a tree or forest our safe place has a tree or trees; our Focusing sessions have been outdoors, surrounded by trees. Since we have met for nearly two years, and we are in close family relations, our time together is spent as intimate friends with shifting roles, making it always new and surprising. These experiences together would not exist without Focusing.”

Family Focusing: Building community and connection

Participating and witnessing the way children and adults came together in the same Focusing circle expanded my horizons of understanding about how Focusing can be introduced to different age groups. Having young children learn about the felt-sense and participating actively in the activities and discussions, along with their parents and/or grandparents, consolidated my belief that children can bring a breath of fresh air in the process. We do not only help them learn, they become our teachers as well. Their lives and our lives are inter-connectedly enriched by our interactions. Multi-generational groups provide a much more fertile ground for new ideas, new ways of expression to emerge. Having children around helps us ground ourselves and also keeps the process simple, without unnecessary frills and intellectual explanations. Our multi-generational meetings taught me that Focusing has the power to reduce power-imbalances between the young and the old and provide the opportunity for each person to be an equal in the interaction.

Having started this experiment with two unrelated families helped me see the power of Family Focusing in building community wellness and connection. One of the most important outcomes of learning about Focusing and felt sense as part of a family group is that we learned together, we grew together, and we built understanding and connection with ourselves and those around us. Creating a Family Focusing Circle offered my family and the other family involved the opportunity to pause and relate differently to each other. Family Focusing gatherings allowed us to experience time differently. As Raina said, at the end of one of our Family Focusing gatherings: “When we are Focusing, the outside time passes so quickly while inside the time passes slowly and gently.” It is through that gentleness and slowing down that we have learned to listen more carefully to our hearts and to those close to our hearts.

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