

MAKING FOCUSING MORE POWERFUL: How Focusing-Oriented Realities Help Us Experience the Larger System

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Eugene Gendlin refers to The Larger System in the first edition of *Focusing* (1979), where he sets a foundation in a quote beloved by many Focusers. “Your physically felt body...is part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people — in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is [your] body as it is felt from the inside.” (p. 77)

Here we see the complex relationship between ourselves, Focusing, and The Larger System, and how The Larger System is already involved in our felt sensing. Gendlin’s quote is beautifully written, but how can we experience The Larger System, especially when we’re stuck, dissociated, or in turmoil? How can we engage with more than what occurs during our usual Focusing?

We have found that we can powerfully engage The Larger System through experiencing what we call Focusing-Oriented Realities. They include, but are not limited to:

- Grounding in our physical here-and-now
- Centering in our embodied selves
- Bringing in something of beauty
- Hoping
- Bonding with a beloved
- Forgiving ourselves and others
- Loving
- Experiencing something vast and greater than ourselves
- Balancing suffering, fears, and grieving with hope, purpose, and meaning

This paper will show how Focusing-Oriented Realities give us powerful doorways into The Larger System. We’d also like to show how Realities work in ways that are both distinct from, and an expansion of, the usual ways many people do Focusing.

The Realities are distinct from traditional Focusing in that we can invite these powerful, meaningful Realities physically into our Focusing. We then allow them to carry us and our issues forward. We experience these Realities as if they are Focusing *with* us and our felt senses. What is then created is a three-way Focusing process where often the “I that is Focusing” and the felt sense deliberately pause to open themselves to these Realities, letting them do their work *in us*.

These Realities are an expansion of Focusing because they are used in Focusing-Oriented ways. At every step we resonate their work with our felt sense, checking for bodily rightness.

This paper begins with a series of sessions using the Reality of loving, which led Elfie to experience the healing of The Larger System. Next, we describe and give examples of each Reality. Then Dave presents Process Qualities through which The Larger System reveals itself.

ELFIE'S EXAMPLE

Here I describe, in the first person, a series of Focusing sessions where I used the Focusing-Oriented Reality of loving to restore a missing part of this Reality in myself.

As background information, I have spent years Focusing on forgiving my parents. I experienced a great deal of hurt from my parents. Feelings other than love were not accepted, and shutting off my other feelings resulted in my feeling disconnected from a large part of my experience. My mother repeatedly made certain promises, but then did not keep them. Using regular Focusing, I felt a great relief when I reached a point where I was able to forgive my mother enough to make plans to visit her grave in a valley near Innsbruck, Austria.

When Dave first talked about the Reality of loving, I thought that I didn't need to Focus on that Reality. My husband and I loved each other, I was able to love most people as they were, and I often experienced God's love.

Then one day, as I tried to experience the Reality of loving as coming from my parents, I realized that I was having serious difficulties. Initially, I thought that these difficulties had something to do with my parents loving me so conditionally.

In the first Focusing session with Dave, I wanted to experience loving as coming from my father and mother. Knowing that love "must be there," I opened to its presence. As I Focused, I became aware of a block to receiving their love. I experienced this block as a felt image of a big cement block in front of my body that kept me from going forward.

As I stayed with the block, I was surprised when a memory surfaced — a psychologist telling me with certainty that my mother and father could not have loved me because of the way they treated me. For forty years I had simply believed that his statement was the truth.

I stayed with this memory in the context of the Reality of loving and was able to notice this mistaken belief, and release it. As this process was happening, a feeling arose that I needed to change the name of this Reality to "the essence of loving." I realized that a person's expression of love could not be perfect, yet if the intention to love was present, the essence of loving was there. As this realization formed, the block disappeared. I experienced loving as a felt image of being held by a large bowl that supported my whole being. I could let go and *deeply* relax into the support of the bowl.

At the session's end I paused and sensed that something was still incomplete. But restoring "the essence of loving" in my body helped my process move in a powerful way. Experiencing the essence of loving from my parents healed this diminished place in me.

In a second session with Dave, I Focused on the "essence of loving" as coming from my father. He had been cold and distant. Many of his choices suggested that he valued money above loving his children. As I Focused, a sense of his life's struggles came to me. I realized more fully how his fears about money developed from almost starving to death during the Great Inflation following World War I in Germany. He arrived in Chicago the day before the 1929 Stock Market Crash, not knowing a word of English. His first job was building large cabinets for a famous museum. While he completed the work, his boss was killed by the Mafia, and he was never paid.

In earlier Focusing sessions, I had experienced some empathy for my father. But this time, as I stayed open to the love that I knew must be present, my empathy was more deeply felt. I could experience the essence of loving from my father. Then I remembered something he said to me — how he worked so hard so he could leave something for his children.

There was a felt shift in me. Before, I thought that it was only money he cared about. Now I experienced how money was his way of showing love. I felt his loving as a round, warm, yellow light with a center in it, and I experienced the feeling at the center of myself.

In the third Focusing session, I wanted to experience my mother's love more deeply. I Focused on the remaining block to her love. She was unable to love me as a separate and different person. As I accepted that her loving was not perfect, I could feel the essence of her loving come into me. Experiencing my mother's love this way, the block slowly melted away. As it melted, I experienced many times when my mother showed her love. She was always in the kitchen waiting for me when I came home from school. She fixed milk with cinnamon toast, we sat down together, and she asked me about my day.

After those three sessions, I experienced the essence of loving as an infinite, warm, yellow light surrounding me, coming into and through me, and flowing back out into the world. The feeling was life-giving and vast. I felt myself deeply experiencing The Larger System at work in me. I had not expected this profound shift. Focusing on the Reality of the essence of loving brought The Larger System to me as a gift.

FOCUSING-ORIENTED REALITIES WITH EXAMPLES

We use these descriptions with both Focusing and therapy clients, with individuals as well as groups. In practice we do not necessarily use all the Realities, nor do we always offer them in the same order.

With each Reality we must pause, be still, and bring our attention gently into our bodies. We let ourselves go into a state of receptivity, opening ourselves up to whatever comes. What comes may be resisting, blocking, demanding, or distorting. We need to discern, but not push away, what brings feelings of being more small, tense, and dull from what is life giving and brings easing (Hinterkopf, 2015). Our usual Focusing responses help us gently

accept what comes without falling into it. The new step may be a few words, a phrase, a melody or song, or a felt image that brings changed feelings. And of course we resonate what comes, with an inner checking for felt rightness.

1. Grounding in the physical here-and-now.

Examples. Elfie often uses these grounding guidelines with clients who come in feeling stressed. Some clients like to start every session with guided grounding. She also grounds herself to help her be in the here-and-now and get into her body.

Be in the here-and-now. Look around the room and notice what you see.

Then you may wish to close your eyes.

Feel your feet on the floor connected to the earth.

Feel your body on the chair or couch.

Take a few slow, deep breaths. Notice the miraculous quality of your breathing in that your breath breathes itself.

Notice how you feel inside after grounding.

While living on Pikes Peak, Dave's grounding was spiritual — a sense of belonging to something infinite. He felt billion-years-old granite thrusting up from earth's core. He felt hundreds of miles of forests and flowering tundra, reaching up into the clouds. When he moved to Denver, city-earth and buildings felt wrong. His body shrank from them, leaving him feeling floating, not all here, and de-spiritualized. He slowly established his belonging in Denver-earth by walking, literally step-by-step, feeling into the prairie soil created during the ice age. He felt his meaning in moving to Denver — to care for his grandchildren. This experience offered grounding, though of a different kind.

2. Centering in our embodied selves. Elfie centers herself by visualizing a line down the middle of her body. Our center can be in other places, such as in our hearts or stomachs. This Reality helps Elfie find strength. This centering also gives her and her clients a bodily focus.

Examples. As Elfie began to sense into her body, she noticed that the line of her center was a bit to the right. She noticed that she felt somewhat uncomfortable. She did not try to *fix it*. As she Focused, she realized that an issue was making her feel off-center, but her center gradually straightened as she went through the other Realities.

When Dave begins Focusing, he centers in his greater Self. However he experiences himself, he keeps feeling that he is always *more* than that. Centering in his greater Self, he more fully experiences the unique richness of who he is, his past, and who he is becoming. For Dave, opening up to another person's greater Self honors their unique preciousness as distinct, but not separate from him. He then experiences his clients as greater than any problem.

3. Bringing in something of beauty. We miss deep truths and potentials when we miss the beauty in ourselves, others, and our world. Experiencing beauty brings richness, fullness, and a oneness with something beyond our everyday world. Our living takes on the beauty that is giving itself to us.

Examples. Elfie remembered a yellow hibiscus with a deep red center from her patio garden. When she noticed how that memory felt in her body, she had an expansive feeling and an image of being connected with all of the flowers around the world.

For Dave, beauty is usually experienced as music playing inside him. His living is deeply affected by the music's rhythm, volume, and emotional tone.

4. Hoping. Without hoping, life becomes stuck with no way out, no way forward. This stuckness can bring deep fears, helplessness, and depression. Hoping isn't a specific possibility. Like trust and faith, hoping is the deep feeling that real and life-forward possibilities can emerge.

Examples. Elfie knows from much experience that Focusing will bring forward change. Hoping is now intrinsic in her Focusing. When she has hope, her energy moves up and forward, and she has more joy. When she notices that her energy is going downward, she pauses and remembers the hoping that comes from her Focusing process.

Dave can get trapped in a client's hopelessness. Then he physically reconnects with deeply knowing that people can change. Dave experiences these sensations as coming from The Larger System. He feels held by The Larger System in this *felt* belief. With hoping, Dave's world shines and sings with possibilities. Hoping energizes and empowers him. From here, he can empathically hold his clients and their hopelessness within his deep trust in their potential.

5. Bonding with a Beloved. With bonding there is an "I," a "you," and a "we" as a precious whole. Bonding might be with a significant other, or with God, a pet, or a place. Dave experiences this Reality as never being "just Dave," but also as bonding with important people and other Realities of his world. Without bonding, he experiences a gnawing, isolating emptiness. He's not just missing something "out there," he's also missing a sense of himself. In important ways, who "Dave" is comes from his experience of being as one with another.

Examples. When Focusing on bonding, Elfie had a felt-image of a thick tree trunk joining her and her husband. The roots of the trunk were in each of their bodies. This image felt solid. Then she was surprised to notice a small cut out "v" in the trunk. She realized that this felt image was pointing to something that could hurt her relationship. She felt an urgent wanting to Focus on this issue.

When a Reality is missing or diminished, Elfie experiences this lack as a deep longing. For many years she had a yearning to bond with a beloved who could share that which was deeply inside of himself. When she found such a person, the longing ceased.

6. Forgiving ourselves and others. When we have not forgiven ourselves or others, something stays stuck. It can be hard to move on in some areas of our lives. Forgiveness involves letting go of the guilt, tension, hurt, and anger that can even harm our health. Forgiving is as important for us as it is for others. Forgiving does not mean forgetting. Trust still needs to be earned over time.

Example. After much Focusing on her block to forgiving her parents, Elfie let forgiving come into her. She finds that an image of experientially letting go of the felt block often

helps. She sometimes imagines letting these feelings of the block go down a river. After forgiving does its work, she feels much more free and light, more spacious inside of herself, and more open to the Reality of loving.

7. Loving. When we experience loving, we feel deeply real and worthwhile, and we have a sense of belonging. When we don't experience loving, we lack a fullness, richness, and potential goodness. We miss the basic truths and a full sense of wholeness. Feeling loving towards ourselves is as important as loving others.

Examples. When Elfie experiences the Reality of loving, her heart feels as if it is opening widely. If there is a felt block to either giving or receiving love, she Focuses on that block.

Two early bonding experiences bring loving into Dave's *experiencing*. He sees his grandma's face smiling at him as she swings him around, and he feels his grandpa's legs protectively behind him. Dave allows their loving to flow into him and then out others. When clients can't love some aspect of themselves, Dave asks them if they *will let him* love that *aspect of them*, and then the client is often able to accept Dave's loving.

8. Experiencing something vast and greater than ourselves. This might God, Allah, the Buddha, the night sky, the vastness of nature, or the universe (Hinterkopf, 2015).

Examples. When Dave Focuses, he consciously felt-senses each Reality as coming out of and participating into infinity. Without something vast and greater, his felt sensing and his Realities become more shallow with a brittle vulnerability.

Elfie felt how God was in her and how she was a part of God. This gave her a powerful "whoosh" feeling going up into the sky. As she felt The Larger System in her body, she felt very broad and tall, broader and taller than she could imagine the size of the universe.

9. Balancing suffering, fear, and grieving with hope, purpose, and meaning. Problems and issues, big and small, often come into our bodies with suffering, fear, grieving, and many kinds of difficult, even painful feelings. These hurts — with their deep meanings — are an important part of our lives and our world. So they are a vital Reality in The Larger System.

At first, it may seem strange, that *these* feelings, *these* ways of experiencing are important.

But as Gendlin says, *The Larger System involves everything*. Indeed, every life does involve suffering, fear, grieving, and similar feelings. Therefore, this Reality helps us embrace something important that we may be *bodily* blocking. Opening ourselves to these hurts broadens our experiencing and makes our Realities more truthful and authentic. We may also find ourselves moving toward *what in us* and *in our world* most needs healing and steps forward.

Examples. In the past Elfie was concerned that she was staying on the Internet late at night, even when she didn't want to. This issue was starting to get out of control. The problem felt like a tight wire wrapped around the center of her body. She knew that she had overcome other issues and that her previous experiences would help her find her way

out of this one. Her hope came as a light at the end of a tunnel, she felt deeply relaxed and supported.

Dave often unconsciously blocks his fears and the suffering of others. In Focusing, he realized he was blocking realistic financial fears about leaving a secure practice and moving where no one knew him. As he let himself experience these fears, an awareness of his purpose — to be with his grandchildren — became much stronger. He took more steps to increase his income, and he slept better, enjoying his family more and taking better care of himself.

PROCESS QUALITIES REVEALING THE LARGER SYSTEM

Generally, we find the more our experiencing opens to Focusing-Oriented Realities, the more we open to The Larger System.

We're also finding that The Larger System may reveal itself more through what we call "Process Qualities" than through the content of the Realities. The Qualities, listed below, are The Larger System's experiential footprints. Dave finds that when these Qualities are present, he trusts that he's more fully experiencing The Larger System. Where these Qualities are missing or cramped, he moves cautiously, even with Realities such as loving, hoping, and connecting with something infinite.

As with Realities, there can be no complete list of Process Qualities. Any Quality can be combined with other Qualities. Any Quality can also be further subdivided. And The Larger System is so rich and so creative a process that discovering new Process Qualities is always possible. Some Process Qualities are briefly listed below:

- Coming as an abundant gift that I don't have to deserve and that I can't use up
- Presencing, holding, and nurturing that I can let go into fully, safely, and physically
- Bringing a deep sense of coming home and belonging
- Reaching out to me as I am reaching out to them, as if involving a mutual magnetism
- Meeting deep wants and basic needs, making me more of who I am and what I can become
- Knowing me and my situation — both what is shared and what is unique
- Guiding, not forcing me in ways toward more right living
- Helping me experience others and my world as they more truly are and can become
- Bringing together and reordering in ways that are respectful, inclusive, and fresh
- Working and creating in ways that bring felt-rightness, not self-righteousness
- Expanding and developing, while always implying still more
- Opening to what's more and different, especially to Realities and experiences that are difficult, painful, rejected, and denied

In my standard Focusing process, I first pause, *inviting and letting* a felt-sense come into my body. As the felt sense starts to form, I start to feel different inside. Getting a fresh felt sense always feels like a powerful and new step forward. Then, once the felt sense makes its presence known, I pause again to *let that felt sense open and do its work in my body, bringing a physically-felt change and my next step forward*. In other words, there are *two pauses — one for a felt sense coming and another for a felt sense working*.

In these pausings, I let go of my usual controlling, analyzing, problem-solving. I invite and allow *the felt sense's processes* — its coming and its working in my body. *I let the felt sense's processes guide me*.

With Focusing-Oriented Realities, I also do two pauses. These pauses are similar to what I do in standard Focusing. The big difference is that with Focusing-Oriented Realities, both I *and* my felt sense *pause together*.

First, we pause to *invite and let a physical sense of a Focusing-Oriented Reality come around and into both my body and the felt sense*. As we feel a Focusing-Oriented Reality's physical presence, this also feels like a powerful and new step forward.

When a Focusing-Oriented Reality (FOR) is physically present, both I and my felt sense pause again. Here *we pause to let that FOR open and do its work*. The FOR does its work both in my body *and* in the felt sense. Like standard Focusing when a felt sense is doing its work, we (I and the felt sense) continue pausing until we can feel that the FOR has done its work.

Of course The Larger System with its Realities and Qualities also comes and works in many other ways, sometimes surprising us when we least expect it.

CONCLUSION

We hope that sharing our experiences will give you a sense of how Focusing-Oriented Realities can enhance Focusing. Attending to these Realities brings power and healing into our Focusing that can lead us into The Larger System. The Larger System may be found in each Reality.

In the above examples, you may notice that Focusing-Oriented Realities embody basic human needs — core processes of who we are and who we're trying to become. We experience these Realities as deeply real. As Gendlin recently said, "They're not just feelings."

We both have worked with these Realities for years, developing distinct as well as similar approaches and understandings. We hope that our sharing encourages you to find your own pathways. By taking the time to explore your own Focusing-Oriented Realities and sharing what you discover, The Larger System gets even larger for us all!

Let us end as we began, with a quote from Eugene Gendlin.

There's 'Something Bigger' that comes looking for me...It's like 'It wants me'....I and many other people always seem to assume that we have to do

whatever it is. But if we point out that we're part of a Bigger System...we find that we usually 'know' this very deeply. It does half the job just to know that there is a Bigger System, and I'm part of it, I'm in it, I'm not differentiated from it...

If I don't stop, I won't get it. But if I pause, then the Bigger System works with me.

(Gendlin, phone courses, 2014)

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