

WHERE IS FOCUSING IN TODAY'S MIND/BODY EXPLORATIONS?

Mary Jane Wilkie

Tapping into the wisdom of our bodies is the next phase in human development. Many and varied are the approaches, and persons wishing to access somatic information or integrate mind and body have an array of choices that might perplex the conscientious seeker. A large population acknowledges the relationship between body condition and emotions, and I suspect many people would like to act, but are not sure where to turn.

MYRIAD OPTIONS

A search at amazon.com for books on mind-body therapy yields 100 pages (10 entries/page). Googling “mind-body workshops” produces myriad options. Methods for heightening our knowledge and capacity include reading books, taking courses and workshops, and establishing relationships with psychotherapists or other practitioners. How is a body to choose?

We may want the knowledge for ourselves, or to teach others, or both. Some of the methods are Focusing, Somatic Experiencing, Mindfulness, Guided Imagery, NeuroAffective Relational Model, Journey into Healing, and others whose originators write books or offer workshops at, for example, the Open Center (New York City) or the Omega Institute (upstate New York). Each perspective makes a contribution to our understanding, but the methods that prevail will offer varied structures and practices to build upon, and concepts for achieving greater depths of understanding. Each approach attempts to provide consistent instructions to promote new learners' success.

ONE PERSON'S STORY

I learned about Focusing when a friend gave me a copy of *Focusing*. Because of my involvement with Somatic Experiencing, I was familiar with most of the concepts so I finished the book in almost in one sitting. I was intrigued and went to the Institute's website to see how I could act on my interest.

I found several Changes groups and after some exploration became a regular participant in Larry Hurst's West Side Group. The first time I attended, Larry met with me for several hours prior to start time to acquaint me with the practice. I have regularly attended his group for the last four years.

THE FOCUSING ADVANTAGE

An advantage of Focusing is that one can practice the process regularly, regardless of whether one is in therapy, or attends workshops. I equate the practice to ensemble playing

in music. Although you learn things in a private lesson with your piano teacher, you develop different abilities when you play with other musicians. And music-making is really the objective. In like manner, you benefit from therapy sessions, but the objective of mind/body exploration is usually to feel more comfortable with yourself in the company of others — and to enjoy life.

As I learned more about Focusing, I was inspired to share the process with others. The Institute's website mentioned that one could train to be a Coordinator, and I thought I might do that. I called the Institute to learn the steps and was told that they customize training for each Coordinator. This puzzled me, and I didn't know what to do next, so I just kept attending Changes meetings and started to participate in New York Metro Focusing Group events.

Two years into my Focusing practice, in 2012, I attended the Focusing Institute Summer School. Because of my interest in children, I enrolled in Rene Veugelers's track. I had read Marta Stapert's *Focusing with Children* and other child-related materials and was excited about the potential. That year I also attended Lucy Bowers's Focusing with Children conference in Toronto. Although I don't currently work with children, I found myself wishing I had known about Focusing when I was a full-time teacher. It occurred to me that I might be called to share the message with parents and teachers, although I wasn't sure how to do this.

Meanwhile, I thought it might be a good idea to take Level II, assuming that at some point the path would become clear for me to play to a larger role in disseminating Focusing to others. At FISS, I spoke to Ann Weiser Cornell about her upcoming training, and she agreed to work with me, saying, "I teach Inner Relationship Focusing." This was the first time I heard that there were different kinds of Focusing. I subsequently learned that a number of the leaders in the Focusing community (e.g., Lynn Preston, Rob Foxcroft, Robert Lee) had specific ways of teaching Focusing. Each had a following, maintained through various means (books, workshops), and they publicized their work within the Focusing community.

I learned too, that the various leaders in the Children's Focusing community had specific approaches. I even heard one leader say about another, "[that person] doesn't really *get it*." Startled, I asked, "Who decides who *gets it*?" To date I have no answer.

I still didn't know how to make a greater contribution and didn't know whether what I had learned constituted a specific level of training, or whether it would help me on the road to becoming a Coordinator. I took a one-day workshop with Janet Pfunder (Level II), but still didn't know what type of Focusing she was imparting. I decided to use Focusing merely for my own personal growth, a supplement to the astounding changes I was experiencing in sessions with my Somatic Experiencing therapist.

DIVERSITY: CURSE OR BLESSING?

It may help to compare Focusing training with other methodologies. I practice Iyengar Yoga (an exacting form delivered by teachers in more than 60 countries), and I have been certified in two music pedagogies (Orff, and Kodály). The founders of each of these practices are deceased, but their teachings are alive in the instructors. Whether I am a student

(Iyengar) or teacher (Orff, Kodály), I notice that such teachers apply their knowledge with an individual approach, yet all are true to the founder's principles.

The key is to be principle-driven rather than protocol-driven (and to see the teaching as tools rather than rules). If we were to observe many teachers practicing Iyengar, Orff, or Kodály, we would recognize that even though they are teaching a particular model, each teacher has his/her own way and personal style. To use a culinary metaphor, we could each make a dish recognizable as meat loaf, but each one's version would taste slightly different.

By establishing basic parameters and guidelines for the teaching, with the intent of conveying a "product" that is similar everywhere, there is no reason to believe that awarding a single Focusing therapist, trainer or coordinator certificate would hinder individual approaches for the principles taught. People such as I might find the way to participation at a new level.

FOCUSING IN THE POST-GENDLIN ERA

I had wondered what would happen to the Focusing community when Eugene Gendlin stepped down. The sequence of events put me in "organizational analysis" mode. For almost fifteen years now, I have generated most of my income recruiting executives for a national non-profit organization. The work has taught me a lot about organizations, their executives, and the characteristics that support longevity.

Many organizations disappear when the founder steps down, but what makes it possible for one organization to survive, and another not? I pose here some questions crucial to the life of any organization.

- *How do potential participants learn about Focusing? What attracts them to the organization?*
- *Is attendance at program events growing? What percentage of the attendees are newcomers?*
- *Are interest groups in the world-wide community growing? (e.g. Body workers? Focusing with Children? Other areas of specific interest?) What percentage of those participants is new?*
- *Is new blood coming into the ranks, and in all age groups?*
- *How do potential participants learn about the organization?*
- *What is the organization's strategic plan for spreading its vision?*
- *How is the effectiveness of its plan measured?*
- *Do its leaders have the willingness and means to correct the course, if warranted?*

I myself have no statistics, but it would be useful to have responses to these questions. It may be that new people are flocking to the Focusing community and that would be thrilling. And also helpful to know whether *Focusing* book sales are increasing, because each reader represents a potential participant.

Even though many Focusing books are promoted as self-help methods, I do not believe it is as easy, as is often implied, to learn the deeper skills of listening, finding a partner, or becoming integrated into Focusing activities. I equate the dilemma with learning how to play guitar by consulting a book or taking an on-line course. The student does learn some things, but a book cannot anticipate the myriad of human reactions to circumstances. I have watched Larry Hurst's careful work to enable participants to function effectively in Changes groups. If Focusers are to continue to learn and practice and to develop a discipline that supports their desire to become stronger at self-regulation and enjoy satisfying human interaction, the initial platform must be solid and integrate crucial components. The Institute can play an important part in facilitating that process.

The diversity of approaches has value, but I submit that for newcomers the initial understanding of what might fit could be confusing. It would seem advantageous to have a basic "starter" model in preparation for in-depth participation in one form or another.

Even though one can find a list of potential Focusing partners on the website, I wonder how efficacious this system is. I have seen Focusers exercise great care in choosing their partners, usually after a period of acquaintanceship in, for example, a Changes group. The process outlined on the website seems — at least to me — laborious and requires a newcomer to join the Institute before seeking a partner. I suspect there are many who would benefit from Focusing but haven't found the format easy or fulfilling. I hope I am wrong. Are newcomers using this system and, if so, are they staying?

GROWING THE ORGANIZATION

The successful organization is one that serves its constituents and adds value to their lives. The community's *existing* constituents are primarily therapists, teachers, counselors, and individuals drawn to the practice. *Potential* constituents are any organization that would introduce the practice in formal settings, e.g., schools, counseling centers, faith-based organizations, adult-learning centers. From my observation, it appears that most inroads have occurred through the work of *individuals*. A strong organization can accomplish even more.

The Focusing communications I routinely receive from various sources are internally focused, meaning that they dwell on the inner Focusing experience with its many manifestations, assuming that the reader is immersed in the practice. I believe that it is important to simultaneously take an *outward focus*, in order to offer a pathway for new people to become involved. We are all potential spokespeople for Focusing, and it behooves us to have a clear sense of its benefits and be able to explain Focusing in terms that non-Focusers will understand. Think of the "elevator moment." How would you describe Focusing in 30 seconds, sufficient for your listener to want more? Why should *organizations* be interested in Focusing? I suggest that the Focusing community should consider taking a more external focus, using terms and examples that non-Focusing people can easily understand, and providing easy access to start on the Focusing path. And most importantly, the audience — or market — should include organizational leaders, administrators, i.e., persons in a position to support the work of individuals trained in Focusing.

Without too much effort, I can think of some potentially useful partnerships: National Education Association, National Association for Education of the Young Child, American Montessori Society, American Holistic Medical Association, Columbia Teachers College, The Search Institute. I am sure that readers can name others. We shouldn't wait for them to find us. We could familiarize ourselves with their needs and participate in their work, in order to inform them about how Focusing could benefit their respective visions and goals. Tactics would include presentations at conferences, adult learning centers, and any community gathering of potential constituents.

INDIVIDUAL ACTION

We must be solid practitioners ourselves, i.e., practice Focusing regularly with partners and groups. Building the ranks can increase the number of those who can oversee Changes groups and those who can teach others. The work requires organizational support, and The Focusing Institute can be a crucial component in fostering and supporting the efforts of individuals and groups.

The Institute is already doing valuable work through trainings, by offering a network, and by making available Gendlin's writings, but it might be more effective if the F.I. knew the needs of various sub-communities, such as: Changes groups, the children's contingent, and local and international groups. I suspect that many more Focusers would be willing to support the work if the capabilities of Institute members were even more effectively used (a database of skills and connections is invaluable for this).

I can envision programs in schools and other community organizations. I can envision seminars for individuals to delve more deeply into the theories behind Focusing. I can envision a sub-community devoted to sharing Focusing by any number of means.

The world needs what Focusing has to offer, and now is the time to share it!

Acknowledgments: I want to express my appreciation to Mary Elaine Kiener, who read my various drafts and provided insightful comments. I am grateful too, for suggestions and edits made by Paula Nowick and Bala Jaison.

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