

'What is focusing and what it means to me'

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PREFACE

The current essay is written in fulfilment of the course requirement undertaken with Suzanne Noel, titled 'Passing It On: Teaching and Facilitating Meaning Making'. Given the ample freedom in choosing the style and topic of the essay, and considering the timing of its completion, *a crossing* between moving to another country and attending two quite interesting focusing events¹, this present work has inevitably a strong autobiographical flavour.

Italics in the text, as well as footnotes in the main body of the essay point to focusing questions, phases, or examples, definitions or concepts.

I provide below three quotes of Gendlin's, and I deliberately refrain from referring to his work in my essay. I feel I don't know at the moment his work well enough for this purpose.

Quotes by Eugene Gendlin

'Most traditional methods of working on oneself are mostly pain centered. People get to repeat over and over their painful emotions without knowing how to use the body's own inherently positive direction and force.'

'What is true is already so. Owning up to it doesn't make it worse. Not being open about it doesn't make it go away. And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with. Anything untrue isn't there to be lived. People can stand what is true, for they are already enduring it.'

'Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you it space to move toward its rightness.'

¹ A Macroshifting retreat with Robert Lee (in Sardinia) and a Whole Body Focusing workshop with Alex Maunder (in London), respectively.

Beginnings ...

Beginnings are elusive – rather hard to trace, since true beginnings happen spontaneously, silently and unrushed; and with focusing being a natural or innate capacity, it means that it might be a self-arising process, too... so, when did it begin for me?

It was when I thought my dear grandmother, the significant other in my life, had died. It was more than a thought; it was a conviction, a real bodily experience of alone-ness in life, the clear, dark and certain abyss of life lying in front of me, with no one left to walk it with. It was a tormenting ‘what is going to happen, now?’, ‘to me?’ Despite my efforts I was unable to wake her from her death-sleep. One last move, before resorting to accepting the reality of death – sitting down on the hallway floor, the same floor that meant so much fun playing previously, my little body all curled, embracing my knees as if to draw courage from the ground up, a conscious decision was made to turn my attentions to the skies, and then slowly my hands reaching up² I transferred all my burden *out there*³ and uttered ‘please, God, don’t let her die’. And in doing this, the first, and perhaps the most memorable *shift* in my life came, as *the bleak inner place had vanished*; completely – I remember nothing else.

This was four decades ago, I was only five and I had just discovered self-empathy. My grandmother did wake up, and she and I shared many times together, happy and sad, so closely intertwined, such that, as it often happens, one finds the greatest joy in the deepest sadness. And probably the deepest of all is the sadness of death (to which we will return at the end of this essay).

² ...as I had seen my grandmother do many times before [ie, reaching up to the sky (*as if* to God Himself) with amazement, curiosity and awe, followed by a prayer or a plead, would invariably bring some bodily relief in her].

³ The embodied feeling of (physical) space has an intrinsic, therapeutic effect of which the ultimate confirmation can be seen in language, and in what I think is the interpretation of forgiveness in Greek – the verb *συν-χωρώ*, *syn-choro*, literally means to *fit in the same space as*. In experimenting many a times with this notion in my focusing sessions, I find that the extent to which I have forgiven someone (or something, or myself) is a reflection of the extent to which I could imagine themselves existing, being or sharing the same space. Images that typically would come involve being in the same country or town, garden, road, or room, or even sharing a taxi (this being closest in space).

In addition, the Greek verb for being worried or unhappy, is to feel restricted in space ‘*στενοχωριέμαι*’

Years later...

If this is like a personal chronology of using at least aspects or elements of focusing, I would say that the next notable phase was in my teens, where I was well aware of this tuning-in, and looking inside process, and checking how the esoteric happenings match the reality outside. Often this was a way to achieve a place of self-empathy, again from the perspective of a spatial, external opening, an environmental expansion which I could allow to affect me, and even more than that – to permeate my physical body, enjoying all the rejuvenating outcomes, as it did so.

Today, after receiving focusing training, I quite often take any good feeling further, wishing to enhance it by asking '*what is the best of it?*'. And for this question I am grateful to my trainer, Suzanne Noel, for introducing it. Indeed, together with its partner question '*what is the worst of it?*' (*when asked in a soft, safe and solid manner*) are truly empowering and carry the process forward.

So, back to my early teens, typically when things would get tough, and difficult to understand or just be with, my favourite medicine would be to observe instances in nature where things were easy, understandable and pleasant to be with. This of course presupposes a slower pace of life that most kids have to live by today. For example, something that worked time again was to observe the 'kindness' with which the vastness of the sky would allow the clouds to be there, to come and go, just float, or transform or carry rain. I guess just looking up to the sky uplifts your mood anyway, releases tension in the spine, shoulders or back of the neck, relaxes the nervous system and helps change perspective. It is a nice way to be.

A would like to mention an example of a vivid memory I have of my life in the countryside. A very ordinary countryside, but one that you could not resist being in awe of the raw and unpretending surroundings. Just looking in the far distance, fixating, zooming in... or focusing (!) at the turn of the road – *patiently awaiting* for what might appear from there⁴, and *being curious* about whatever may come and *welcome it...* and *the more you stayed with all of that.... the more would come*. It is not an exaggeration to say that my whole life would have been dramatically different; I would have been a different person, not a 'better' one, had it not been for that plain turn of the road, there.

Objectively, it is a just a usual turn of the road, but the closest one to my birth-home, and perhaps for this reason, the subjective meaning I ascribed to it over the years made it unique to me, unique in that it became the generator and container of the 'what lies ahead?' question. 'What is beyond this turn of the road? Or 'can I envision what waits for me around the corner?' and 'how can I be with all of that?'

⁴ People, some car, horses, sheep or other animals would often make their appearance, and this had a pleasant feel to it. Equally important were the products of the imagination....

These really are magnificent questions, which only an equally magnificent natural environment⁵ can support. Increasingly, I find that it is nature that provides us with the friendship and goodness necessary to hold and contain ourselves and our big questions: stated otherwise, nature provides us with ‘friendship with no advantage’, to use the quote by Plutarch, referring to dolphins’ kindness towards humans.

Serendipity around the corner

Revisiting this end of the road from my present life and point of view, I can only say that serendipity was awaiting me just around that corner, and I mean here my crossing with formal focusing training.

From the range of topics to elaborate on, I chose for this essay the issue of self-empathy (as alluded to above); but let us consider for a moment ‘*where in our life might we need self-empathy*’. In turning this into a focusing question, one might repeat it, *softer* and with *more meaning*, and would then *pause*⁶; a huge array of situations come to mind, from the common daily hassles (forgetting where you have put your keys, whether you locked your front door, being stuck in traffic) through less infrequent occurrences (missing your flight to an important seminar) to what is typically regarded as more serious situations (suffering ill-health, any kind of loss, or going through depression or retirement).

Irrespective of the varying severity of the situation in these instances, they do have something in common, namely, they demand the same attitude from us, if they are to be tolerated, and why not, resolved. Here, the question is posed: ‘*how do I need to be with myself, in this situation?*’ ... a question which is simple, clear and to the point; a question inviting unequivocal self-empathy; and a great entry to Domain Focusing⁷.

A particular form of self-empathy is being kind towards oneself, and where this fails, it is important – as I learned from Suzanne – to acknowledge this and stay with the awareness of how lack of kindness may make it especially challenging to move forward, and also be kind towards this lack of kindness, or compassion. And if none of the above works, nor is it possible to acknowledge the effects of any ‘lack of’, then allowing oneself the luxury of non-acknowledgement, of the inability to be kind, or spacious, could be the very kindness that is required *at that moment* to get the person un-stuck. Hence, it is the issue of receiving of kindness that we next turn.

⁵ Such an environment can also be just a room, of course, any environment that offers itself to be invested with (personal) meaning.

⁶ The interested reader may be referred to the article by Mary Hendricks ‘Focusing as a peace force: revolutionary pause’

⁷ Domain Focusing (DF) places a great deal of emphasis on self-empathy, in fact it is one of the three domains, the other two being Issue and Felt-Sensing. An on-going linking between those three is vital.

Receiving Kindness

The single *sine qua non* criterion for personal growth and flourishing is indeed this ability to receive kindness, truly, deeply unconditionally. This, I understand it as not something static that is happening to us, recall the posture we have when we receive a gift – standing, gift placed in our hands, nodding and saying thank you – no! this is a dynamic, a moving, interacting phase, it is a fusion of stillness and movement⁸, like a symbiosis, almost; it is about effecting and being effected by, and finally it is about the oneness⁹ we forgot about, or we find hidden in the apparent multiplicity of the world around us.

There seems to be, however, something immeasurably difficult in opening up to kindness, at least for the average adult of our modern era, and to be more specific, at least for me, it was. To continue my account of the journey in the world of focusing, not long ago, and as I was working on my macro¹⁰ I experienced this difficulty in receiving kindness as a major *set back*.

In persisting with macroshifting work, however, and in a profound focusing session I became aware that the fertilisers for kindness to thrive are space, safety and beauty, all blended together, an interplay that has been there all the while. Specifically, the availability of physical space allows room for manoeuvring, literally for physical, whole body movement, inside and out, as this determines the rising, the unfolding and the fate of important questions, eg., in my case '*who would I be if this were true, i.e., to be at the receiving end of this infinite kindness?*'¹¹.

The second ingredient, the sense of safety, acts as a platform for plucking up courage, and dare to dream or just see clearly, while the third component, namely giving in to beauty opens a window to another kind of compassion, enabling self-empathy when this is difficult to achieve in the first place¹². It is a speculation of course, but it is entirely possible that Dostoyevsky was felt-sensing into the meaning of beauty, when he wrote that 'beauty will save the world'; I believe, yes, through self-empathy, it just could...

⁸ Take an athlete when he or she is executing his sport, or a free diver at those moments of intense activity, there is also remarkable stillness inside their bodies, such that the complex feat is producing this stillness, and at the same time it is possible because of it.

⁹ Ancient philosopher Parmenides talked about Oneness (HEN TO PAN) obscurely, but in a strange way I would often find it making sense in my focusing sessions.

¹⁰ In Macroshifting, a macro is defined as something that relates to our core identity and changes with difficulty

¹¹ This is the type of question Byron Katie asks in her Work

¹² Often what I have found in teaching focusing is that a) I would spend a lot of time in the self-empathy domain and b) where self-empathy was challenging or just elusive, quite often that is the case, I would ask the focuser to observe where empathy could be seen in nature. For instance, watch how lovingly the garden accommodates the lettuce and the cucumbers or the generosity of the road permitting the cars and trucks, animals and humans to walk on it and get to our destination. These examples would come from the focuser's daily life and background, directly or indirectly, and initiated by the trainer. The focuser would be asked to feel into and stay with that pleasant sense of empathy, often augmented by responding to the invitation to just smile, or follow the trainer in carrying out slow exercises to first relax and then also tune in with the whole body. Observing kindness seems to enable self-empathy to make its appearance.

A Happy Ending

Like all good stories, there was a happy ending in my grand-mother's story, too. She passed away in a cold winter night, a white night, only this time there was no worrying or doubting on my part, no praying to God. I had agreed to it, I felt ready for it, it was I who had said 'I am so happy with her, and for her, that she could even die now'. I could be separated from her, she from me, at 84 years of age... These were indeed days of sweet happiness that seemed stronger than death, un-destroyed by it. And no matter how intense such a conviction is, is there any human on earth that isn't defeated by its own strength? Humility is a rare quality, and no wonder only few had it - in fact, my mind goes to only one, human, that is... the so humane and humble Socrates (and a person with a great sense of humour, to boot).

So, is death, the deepest sadness, or the deepest kindness? To me it is both. In more ways than one; and what often feels perplexing is when death is experienced as kindness and sadness at the same time, like they are embraced! I said perplexing, but it doesn't have to be, it's just opposites gently embrace, co-existing, in harmony, and for ever-changing... which is the only true way to be.

Thinking now of my beloved 'turn of the road', it is clear that it also changing, slowly, into the horizon line I see every time I get down to the beach, here in my new home. And I *hold both in equal positive regard*; on one hand there is the old turn of my birth-home, and on the other, the great horizon of my new home. Two very real points in the physical environment of my life's experiencing. Just becoming *aware of these two points, the space between, and appreciating them with the same positive regard* (the key element of Whole Body Focusing) is simply transforming, in that it allows life to move and change into what it needs to be.

Life IS a constant flux, change is the ultimate truth, 'τα παντα ρει', everything flows, said Heraclitus, and although change is painful, it is for sure more painful when things become petrified and their flow is forever impeded. Literally, they can become stones in your body. Very painful; ... the story of a new round of focusing sessions.

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piece of writing here*