

International Leadership Council: Getting to Know Claude Missiaen by Jocelyn Jacks Kahn

Claude Missiaen is a member of the Institute's International Leadership Council (ILC) since 2017. He lives in Leuven, Belgium, and has been an experiential psychotherapist and Focusing trainer for over 30 years. (See his bio for the full range of his rich and extensive background in teaching both therapists and non-therapists.)

I'm always curious to know what originally draws someone to Focusing, and so I asked Claude how he became involved. It turns out that it was largely by chance.

Studying clinical psychology at the Catholic University of Leuven, it came time for Claude to choose a topic for his master's thesis. This was in 1984.

Claude: I found the topic of Focusing. I did not know what it was but it sounded interesting. But there were a number of different candidates interested in this topic, so it ended up being like a lottery among us – and I was the winner of it!

So I made my master's thesis on Focusing, and my promoter was Mia Leijssen. She was a professor at the time (since retired) and very involved in Focusing. As my teacher, she passed her enthusiasm for Focusing on to me. And I learned very quickly how powerful it was.

Also during that period, Gene Gendlin was in Leuven, and I had the chance to be in his workshop. And in my training as a psychotherapist I learned client-centered therapy and some experiential work as well.

Focusing never left me – and I never left it!

I wondered how Claude first became aware of the International Leadership Council.

Claude: I have been a Coordinator for many years, so I paid my dues and I visited the website, where there are a lot of readings – but I never had a real connection with The International Focusing Institute.

The 2016 Cambridge conference was my first Focusing conference. I guess this was the start of a stronger connection with the Institute. And then some weeks later there came this question: Did I want to be nominated as a candidate for the ILC? And I said, "Why not? It seems an interesting group of people." And then some weeks later they came back to me and said, "OK, we chose for you." So it came by itself.

It struck me that Claude was an ideal candidate to be a member of the ILC: A dues-paying Coordinator for over 20 years with over 30 years of intense engagement with Focusing – and yet, with no real connection to TIFI! Claude was in the perfect position to grasp the problems around the disconnect between TIFI and its natural base.

To brush up on the role of the ILC before my chat with Claude, I reviewed the ILC statement of [Roles and Functions of the International Leadership Council](#). To me, the core function seemed to be “attending to the voices of the worldwide Focusing community.”

I remarked to Claude on what a huge – and at the same time pretty undefined – undertaking this is: “attending to the voices of the worldwide Focusing community.”

Claude: I’m new, so I still have to understand a bit myself. I was mainly attracted to the ILC by the sentence on the website saying that the goal of the ILC is to “broaden the group of people involved at the center of direction setting.”

For me that’s very important. I see TIFI as a network organization, and we must care for the participation of all members as democratically as possible.

So that’s what for me is the main goal. And even to raise the level of democracy to the participation of *all* members of *all* continents – that for me is the main function of the ILC.

The members of the ILC are all anchors in our local communities – like for me in Flanders. Of course, we are a very small region compared to other regions of the world. But we have quite a strong Focusing community. We have six coordinators, and we spend a good deal of time trying to develop some models of training.

But although Flanders is only a very small part of the world, this is how I see it: I’m not representing only one group of people. I’m trying to be open to as many members of the Focusing Institute as possible.

So this level of democracy for me is very important.

Next to that, I experience in every meeting of the ILC a big respect for all languages and cultures involved – and not only in words, but in how our meetings happen.

For me, this is very important in this time of worldwide polarization. We are in a stream that’s not the mainstream – it’s an undercurrent in which humanistic values are very important.

Being the anchors for our communities is the more global part of this “attending to the voices of the worldwide Focusing community.” You could say that we have ears that can listen worldwide.

And of course, as I said, for me there was a big distance between TIFI and myself as an experienced Focuser and trainer and therapist. The desire to bridge this gap is mainly why I said “yes” to the ILC.

Claude talked about why this is a particularly good time for him to have been asked to join the ILC.

Claude: I am grateful that I can put so much of my life energy into promoting Focusing. My wife and I have three children who are adults now and have left the house. The youngest is only here on the weekends or when she has to study. And that provides a lot of free space.

So it's the right time in my life to have this kind of engagement. I have more time to spend on activities that give me back something – to spend on “spreading the good news” of Focusing!

As Claude described more of what the ILC does, I found myself deeply impressed by the intensity of their commitment to strengthening connection between TIFI and its members. They attend meetings every two weeks for 90 minutes over Zoom. Over and above that, they spend tremendous time and energy developing and implementing their initiatives while keeping close touch with the Focusing communities they serve. And this is all done on a purely volunteer basis with no monetary compensation.

Claude: We mainly work on the relationship between TIFI and their members.

As one specific example, we worked on a new system that defines how new Coordinators will be certified. And connected with this is a pilot program that starts this January. We will be trying out this new system to see how it works and revise the procedure according to feedback we get.

In my time – ancient times! – Mary Hendricks said to me, “Don’t you want to be a Coordinator for the Institute?” And I said, “Yes, why not?” And Gene did the same. They picked some people that they thought would be good representatives for the Institute. But now they’ve passed away. So we are exploring a more formal system for choosing Coordinators.

We are seeking a balance between the diversity of the procedures and traditions that have evolved over the years – which we deeply respect – and at the same time a good, respectful and reliable format for being a Coordinator.

This is not an easy balance.

What I like about the ILC is that there is so much eagerness to find this balance, and not just to propose a new method that comes only from the top down.

Another project: New York is many hours away from most of us – and we found that where there are complaints about Coordinators, there is no ethical rule to use as a standard. So we asked the Board to think about organizing an ethics committee.

That's one more level in, let's say, organizing the traffic between members and TIFI, and to hopefully bring TIFI closer to members. And of course there is a lot, lot, *lot* of work to do toward this goal!

Claude, who has taught Focusing for decades, spoke about his most recent Focusing workshop, which sounds deep and beautiful.

Claude: I've had the opportunity to train a lot of psychotherapists in experiential work and Focusing, and that's my big blessing. What is most developed in my professional life is the combination of Focusing and psychotherapy, and I think that will continue.

At the same time, I'm still looking at other aspects of Focusing.

The most recent program I created was about combining existential and experiential work and how to look into the eyes of our existential demons – like death or sickness or loss or loneliness – from an experiential viewpoint. That is to say, from a safe place in the body.

I find these workshops very rewarding. It has to do with my age and my stage in life now – and to see how, in some way or another, I seem to help other people face their own existential demons. At one point it's something we all have to do. And I think Focusing is a very *safe* way of doing that. That's also important for me.

Claude concluded our chat with some reflections on what is most important to him about this work.

Claude: Focusing itself – that is the most important thing for me, rather than a formal position in the ILC.

And of course the organization is very needed and necessary when we want to keep on spreading the good news of Focusing and providing a counterweight to behavioral therapy and so on.

But for me the most important thing is that I can experience every day what Focusing brings to me and my professional life: that there is some kind of wisdom in us and in others that we can try to make contact with. And that we can experience how much life-forward energy that brings.

I can feel it literally every day – how much it brings me, and how good it is to meet colleagues and friends who share the same experience and values.

That's probably the most important thing about my engagement in Focusing for all these years.

Jocelyn Jacks Kahn is a Certified Focusing Trainer in the traditions of Inner Relationship Focusing and Wholebody Focusing. She is also an instructor in the Realization Process, a spiritual practice of embodied non-duality.