

Board of Trustees: Hanspeter Mühlethaler

An interview by Dawn Flynn

I had the joy and privilege of interviewing Hanspeter Mühlethaler for this issue of the In Focus newsletter. Hanspeter is the newest member of the Board of Trustees. He is a physicist with a PhD in atomic physics and astrophysics and worked for several years as an engineer in the electric power and railroad industries. He is a Certified Focusing Trainer and has studied both Focusing and Thinking at the Edge (TAE). He has taught TAE with Donata Schoeller at the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) and at the University of Zurich. He is currently teaching TAE courses online.

Hanspeter and I met and had our conversation far away from one another in different time zones. He lives in Switzerland and I live in the United States. Yet, I felt a warm delight in our connection, as if we were spending our afternoon in the Swiss Alps sipping hot cocoa near a hearth. We touched upon deep and intriguing topics such as quantum physics, art, mathematics, philosophy and we did it while laughing and having a jolly time.

Dawn: How did you find Focusing and what was it about Focusing that captivated you?

Hanspeter: Really, Focusing found me. In 1988 I was in a bookstore and saw a little book called *Focusing: Your Body Knows Your Answer* written in German. I must have heard about Focusing, or was it a felt sense? I read it and I was very, very interested. It took me in.

At that time, I had some experience with analytical body work, including that of psychotherapist Alexander Lowen. Within this work there is always something wrong with you, isn't there? One has to stand there and they will say the shape of your body is wrong for example and you have to do something to correct it. This is a corrective model. In those days, there were many schools of thought such as this that said you had to destroy the current structures and rebuild new structures – abusive practices. I experienced some of it. But with Focusing, I experienced things are as they are. Focusing was like “Ahhh, how wonderful and welcoming.” So, when I saw an advertisement for a Focusing workshop being held a half year later, I immediately applied. And again, it was really moving. So, I became really interested in Focusing and did more training. But I am not a therapist; it was for my own learning. Later I became more and more interested in the philosophical side and now for me it's an everyday help for everyday life.

Dawn: You have such a rich background to teach from. What do you love about teaching Focusing and TAE?

Hanspeter: If I feel that people get the sense of Focusing, that is what I love about teaching. I have many personal experiences, but I hesitate to tell such experiences to people because it's important that they have their own experiences. Mostly I teach TAE. I find it quite easy to teach

TAE to those who know Focusing. I am more challenged on how to teach TAE to people that don't. That's why I begin with playful exercises, music and such. We also do hikes with groups doing Focusing exercises, silently walking and playing with what one sees on the outside and feeling what happens on the inside.

I enjoy teaching with Wendi Maurer who is in San Diego and we do an online course called "A Taste of TAE." There we play with music, stories, paintings and so on – exercises to get the sense of TAE, its taste. To approach pieces of art in a TAE way is so interesting to me, even though art originally was not my business. When I listen to a piece of music, I play with distance by changing the attitude from, "*Here* I am and *there* is the music I am listening to" to instead sensing into the music in me, feeling myself as part of it.

Dawn: What have *you* noticed when the music is within you?

Hanspeter: When I hear a cello, I have a sense of physical resonance within me, and my body feels like a resonant body. And from there the felt sense is not so far away. I feel more touched by the music than if I say, "Well, I'm listening to *that* music," and maybe follow the movements.

Dawn: Does this work in a similar way with visual art?

Hanspeter: Yes. You can look at a picture and see a detail that attracts you, as you do with instances in TAE. You may feel a connection with it and feel how it resonates within you. If you be with that, you learn something about yourself and about the world. Would you like to see a picture as an example?

Dawn: Yes! (*Hanspeter displays an [impressionist painting](#) on the screen with white houses in the background and a colorful road in the foreground*). It's beautiful.

Hanspeter: I was in a museum about a year ago. I saw this, and I was really touched. The part that touched me was the road here that comes nearly into me. I connect with the painter and I feel how he puts me into the picture, it's so strong. For me it's so much a metaphor for "interaction first". That was so very touching for me. That's my story of course. You have your story.

Dawn: (*I turn my attention toward the widening road in the painting that runs through a field toward me. My body seems to step onto the road and is moving toward the white houses while the road and the field elongate behind me. My position changes from being a still observer of the painting in front of me to walking in the center of a field surrounding me.*) Ah! Yes.

How do you bring TAE and Focusing into everyday life?

Hanspeter: For me this is the work: to bring TAE and Focusing into everyday life. You can do this with any situation in normal life. You can read an article or hear a story and approach it in this way. Or you can look at a house or tree in nature and apply this.

Another exciting exercise is being with whatever you see and hear and smell while walking. My own rhythmical movement evokes a resonance in my body, similar to the sound of a cello. Walking somehow is a *felt sense amplifier*. New meanings may emerge, about me, my life, or whatever I am thinking.

One problem with Focusing is it's so much in what I call, "the corner of psychotherapy." I think it is of course wonderful that it's used in a therapeutic context but it's also so much more, so rich for everyday life, that it does not need to just stay in the corner of psychotherapy.

There is always a therapeutic effect but that is not the main purpose. Just as if I read a book that interests me, a lot happens, but the purpose of reading a book is not primarily to solve problems. It's also to enjoy being touched by something that excites me, that enriches my experience.

Dawn: Wikipedia tells me that astrophysics "employs the principles of physics and chemistry to ascertain the nature of the heavenly bodies, rather than their positions or motions in space." How does this science and the philosophy of Eugene Gendlin influence your understanding of the nature of us earthy human bodies?

Hanspeter: For me the answer is so clear in Gendlin's wonderful term *implicit intricacy*.

I really like mathematics. Mathematics is a world of objects without any implicit intricacy because the objects are exactly what they are defined to be. A straight line is a straight line; it is exactly what it is said to be. So, there is nothing intricate in it and nothing implicit. Mathematics creates a whole world of well-defined objects and it's wonderful to experience the beauty of its logical structures. But any real thing, whatever "real" means, is more than something well-defined. Whatever the object is, there is an implicit intricacy going on with it. Mathematics is really successful in describing real things – best in physics. But everything is more than what is described by mathematic models. And that is why you cannot replace the human mind with a computer, as many scientists believe. Whatever you take in your hand (*holding a pen*) has more meaning than what is described by logical models. That's what has become so clear to me and what makes life so fascinating.

As an example, let's look at a chair. When you do TAE you feel how it is much more than something to sit on and it is more than the word "chair." There is so much social meaning implied: Politicians argue for weeks about who will sit next to whom; depending on the atmosphere, chairs want to be moved closer or further away. Chairs can have a pedagogical aspect as well: In Switzerland I saw an advertisement for the perfect chair for school children. Usually if you are in a chair you sometimes change a bit your sitting position. But the perfect chairs are made to be straight for the correct sitting position for learning. So, a chair is a powerful tool to force kids to sit in the "right position."

I recently read the book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* by Karen Barad, a physicist, philosopher, and professor of gender studies at University of California in Santa Cruz. She developed a

theory, starting from Niels Bohr's interpretation of quantum physics. Quantum physics is a very successful theory, but no one really understands it. When quantum physicists speak of microscopic particles – of electrons, atoms, and molecules – they say that these particles don't behave as particles should behave. You would expect the particles to be located at a particular place at any time, but for microscopic particles this is not true; they sometimes behave like waves. Only when you measure their position do they behave like particles; if you measure their velocity, they seem to be "smeared over space." Bohr's interpretation says that there are no particles as long you don't measure (observe) them. This means that the observation of a quantum physical system depends on the measuring equipment.

While Bohr talks of laboratory situations, Barad goes further and talks of the world. She says that we observe and at the same time interact with the world with the "measuring device" that we are. She uses the term *intra-action*, very similar to Gendlin's *interaction first*. We are agents when we observe. She talks of *crossing* but uses the term, *diffractive reading*: If I read a book I cross it with my own thinking. She has very similar results to what Gendlin discusses but begins from a different starting point and uses a very different approach. This was fascinating to me.

She gives a quite drastic and provoking example of "girling" babies. When a baby is a girl one may dress her in pink, give her puppies and make a girl out of her. She says that thanks to modern ultrasound with better and better resolution, a fetus can be determined to be a girl or a boy much earlier. So now, the fetus is a girl earlier than before, and the environment starts to treat her as a girl earlier than before. If I don't measure this fetus, it is not a girl or a boy. Only when I measure it does it become a girl or a boy.

Dawn: What made you want to be on the Board of Trustees for The International Focusing Institute?

Hanspeter: It's very new for me. I am trying to find out how the Institute works. I am very interested. If I can help I would like to help. The reason I said yes, to be a Board member, is because for me Focusing is so important, it's a pity that it's not more recognized. For example, in Switzerland I have not read a thing about the death of Eugene Gendlin.

Dawn: Have you had any encounters or conversations with Eugene Gendlin that are memorable?

Hanspeter: I first met him in Germany at our Summer School and then I attended a TAE workshop in New York. One time two friends and I visited him in his house. I was impressed many times. One of us had asthma. Gendlin was smoking, and my friend said his smoking bothered her. He replied, "It bothers me that my smoking bothers you." He said when he smoked they would open a window, but he did not say, "Oh! I will stop smoking." He just let the problem stand.

Another time I was in an audience listening to him work with a woman and her dream. The woman told him a dream she had, that ended with her robbing a bank. When she opened the

safe at the bank there were only potatoes inside. Gendlin began by working on the location of the dream with her then a person acting in the dream. The woman began crying and it was very difficult for her. There was a real big process happening and they did not go further. Gendlin gently turned his back a bit to turn away from the woman and toward the audience. He said the process wanted to go as far as the person and that's it. He would have to accept that. "Of course, I would be interested in the potatoes," he said. That was the joke of it. We were all interested in the potatoes. *(laughing)* But it was important to follow the person's process and not go further. That's very important for this work.

Dawn: You mentioned that you would like to see Focusing extend beyond the corners of psychotherapy and to be more recognized in the world. What can Focusing organizations, teachers, and individuals bring to the practice, teaching, and outreach of Focusing?

Hanspeter: Playfulness. Of course this work is serious, but one can play in a serious way.

Dawn Flynn is a naturopathic doctor, licensed acupuncturist, and certified Focusing practitioner in the Seattle area of Washington state.