

Morning, Quiet, During the Dawn

Interviewing Sergio Lara, by Dawn Flynn

I had an enlightening, informative, eye opening conversation with Sergio Lara, PhD, member of the International Leadership Council of the Institute. We discussed transformative lessons he learned from several years living in a monastery, his warm interactions with Mary Hendricks-Gendlin, and the surprising words of his gardener.

We also discussed pluralism, diversity, and a major problem with democracy. Because of what Sergio shared, I have become more aware of my surprising tendency to fit people into the same perspective, experience, and language as my own. I am grateful for this insight. Even before our conversation, I noticed some of this tendency. When referring to the time we were to meet, I said 3:00 pm and Sergio stated 15:00. Then when I referred to my time zone, Sergio patiently explained that he did not know what time zone I was in. Eventually, after a turbulent ride through time and space, him from Chile and myself from USA, we landed in the same Zoom room, and my body relaxed. As we listened to one another and laughed together, I could feel less of what made us different and more of what made us the same.

What events in your life led you to Focusing?

Sergio: When I was a child I loved to be in silence. I loved to feel nature, to touch it, to smell it. I always had a contemplative soul. As a teenager, I did contemplative exercises. For example, I would go to the country or to the sea and I would experience the feel of those places. During this time, I also formed a community with others and we would do exercises to be in touch with the soul and the body.

Then I went to medical school and spent two years there before I had a crisis. I saw these people in the medical system had egos so big that I wondered to myself, what is this? So, I left there, and I entered a monastery for six years.

While I was there, I had a very strong experience.

All of us were there in the monastery in silence. We didn't talk, we didn't watch the news, didn't listen to a radio. It was a very special time. I discovered things I had never known: how the grass grows, how the birds sing. I learned the necessity of humor and optimism. There I had a conversation every week with another monk. He never pushed me to think something or to say something. He was only my companion. It was my only deep conversation for the week. In this way I learned Focusing but without the name, only the experience.

While living in the monastery, I learned to be in touch with my body, my felt sense. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't escape my experience. I could not go see a film or have a beer. I could only pray and meditate. That was a very strong experience in my life.

Then I had another crisis and left the monastery. I knew I wanted to study psychology. This was a difficult time for me, but I did get my degree in psychology.

Meeting Gene Gendlin

Sergio: In 2000 I attended a psychotherapy conference in Anaheim, CA. There were more than 6,000 psychotherapists. I saw that Gene Gendlin would be there. I only attended Gene's presentations during the entire conference. I told Gene about my paper on Alba Emoting and asked if I could talk to him about it. He said yes. We walked as we talked for 40 minutes. We were so engaged in our conversation that we found ourselves in the kitchen in the hotel. Gene then introduced me to Neil Friedman who taught me Focusing. At this time Gene said he wanted to have a Focusing Coordinator in Chile and would I do it? I agreed.

Meeting Mary Hendricks-Gendlin

Sergio: After coming to New York and studying Focusing I had the opportunity to speak several times with Mary Hendricks-Gendlin, at the time the director of the Institute. She was very kind. When she would listen to me she would always, always, always deeply listen to me. As I would speak she would say "Wait, I want to make sure I understand what you are saying." She would pause, take in what I had just said, and reflect. Then say, "Ok, please continue." We would eat together, walk together, visit places together, and she was *always* like this.

She spent three hours with me once. She asked, "What is Alba Emoting?" I said it is a technique that comes from a discovery by three Chileans. They discovered an emotional pattern of basic emotions in the 1970's. They called it Alba because of the theatre piece by Garcia Loca that means morning, quiet, during the dawn. Emoting comes from a professor in Harvard. So these two words are combined. They taught people to be in touch and explore basic emotional states and to discover what is happening in these emotional states. So, in talking with Mary Hendricks she said, "Ah, so what you want to do is Alba Emoting Interactive Focusing." Alba Emoting by itself is a very cold, behaviorist technique. But when incorporated with the body shifts of Focusing, something very interesting happens.

How do you integrate Alba Emoting with Focusing?

Sergio: In 2002 I began working with Alba Emoting and Focusing in parallel and together. I call it Experiential Alba Emoting. And I've taken the name Mary provided, Alba Emoting Interactive Focusing. I began to present Alba Emoting and Sacred Movements in workshops.

Sacred Movements

Sergio: I combine sacred movements like this [bends head to breast] or this [crosses hands over chest], or for example [hands open by ears]. I combined these movements with songs, psalms, mantras, and chants. I provide an explanation to participants that these movements are in all the cultures of the world. We enter into a sacred space. We do around seven dances and then we sit. Afterward we go inside, and we get in touch with the felt sense and we do Focusing.

People have very interesting experiences. I take these movements from many cultures: Jewish, Sufis, Christian, Catholic. Within these movements of the body, hands, and eyes, something very deep is happening. In this way I integrate my different experiences in my teaching.

Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy

Sergio: We have Focusing Oriented Therapy (FOT) and Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy (FOP). What is the difference? My task is to teach both but to distinguish the two. I will be strict with this because in FOP we know about the development of the human being, systems, and psychopathology. These subjects come from psychology schools that we need to respect them. So, I teach this and experiential psychotherapy. In the last two years I began to offer online courses in addition to teaching at the university. I also have started to teach this in Spain and South America. And I'm teaching Focusing Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4. I am also teaching transpersonal psychology. Now I am working with Focusing, FOP, and Focusing and Spirituality.

How do your training and experiences influence your understanding of how human beings transform themselves and their relationships?

Sergio: For me it is a very deep experience to share as a companion another's life. It's not doctrine to help them to be in touch with life, with soul, with spirituality. For me, spirituality through Focusing is how to be in touch with life.

On my last trip to Spain I was in Barcelona and I stayed with a hermit. From the age of 19 to 40 years old he lived alone in the Pyrenees Mountains. He invited me to go where he lived. He was very sweet, very warm. He invited me for lunch, and he said to me, "You can speak, you can be in silence, or you can ask, or do nothing." [Laughing] I love that! He said, "Live life because death will come when it has to arrive." For me this sentence is very important because it shows me that what we live, be it anxiety, fear, death, it comes when it must but we can't live thinking about that, we must live life.

What I want to develop and spread is the spirituality of Focusing. Many people are hungry and thirsty for spirituality of something deep. It cannot be a doctrine or a dogma or religion. Focusing gives an open door to go to the soul with the body without pushing something on someone. For me this is very important.

What do you enjoy about being on the International Leadership Council?

Sergio: For me it was a privilege to become an ILC member. It's a very good group. It's a very good challenge and hard task to listen to all people and to be in a Focusing way in the spirit of Gene Gendlin.

Gene Gendlin was totally against democracy. Most people understand that democracy is the way. But he was against it. Why? Because the Nazis came to power in a democratic way. This opened my eyes that with a democracy we don't consider the minorities. And this is very important.

Gene Gendlin was very close to the Quakers and the Quakers are a special group that works without leaders in the community. All people can say something. They don't have leaders that say, "This is the way." This is because the spirit can talk from anywhere from any person at any time. This is very similar to Focusing in that the group is like a body, felt sensing what is happening. This is the way that Gene and Mary wanted the Institute to improve, to be clear and in touch with the body of the community, not to push or to impose something that is "right" or "the best." When we are in touch with conflicts or problems or the dark part of the body, it is ok, it's our body. It's important to not be afraid of the darkness from a conflict or from the people in the group that are not so easy going, for example, because the darkness is part of the body too.

Gene and Mary wondered, how can the Institute go forward in the best way? Later, as a group from the Institute, we would meet to decide how the Institute was to go forward. It was my destiny to be in these meetings, especially in Seattle where we decided how to go forward. It was a very difficult time for all.

We recognized a problem – the Board consisted only of members from the United States. This is not international. We said we need an international community. And so we began to build a group called the International Leadership Council.

The International Leadership Council improved mechanisms for how to go forward with people's questions, problems, tasks, etc. We changed the name of the institute to The International Focusing Institute. Also, we propose things to discuss – not decide, but only propose. We have someone from all over the world, from Europe, from South America, etc. This group provides a service. We don't represent any community. We are people *from* the community working toward the task of feeling the spirit of the community.

There are two words that for me are very important and I fight for these two words: *pluralism* and *diversity*. Something I have seen many times in our community is that people are very good people, very nice people but we have tendencies toward egocentrism. We believe that all the world is English. Diversity and pluralism is the capacity to be open to the human being, to recognize that we all don't see the same, we don't make the same decisions, we don't have the

same ways. Pluralism and diversity is to consider the soul of the cultures, of the countries, of the groups and of the minorities too.

Gene Gendlin felt it was important to not only make decisions for the majority. It is necessary to consider the minorities. When we don't do that, we lose the spirit.

Growing forward

Sergio: I have a magnolia tree in my garden that I've had for 7 years. Recently we had the heaviest snowfall in 40 years. One of the branches broke with the snow. I thought to myself, "Oh my gosh, this tree hasn't given flowers for 7 years and now it will be a short tree forever and never produce flowers." The gardener said to me "You know, the tree is probably looking for how to grow. One of the other branches will grow up. We have to wait because the tree is looking for the direction of life." I said to myself, "Ah! This is my master" [laughing]. And sure enough, last spring the tree grew the first flower: beautiful, white, big, and smelling so beautiful.

Gene Gendlin said Focusing always goes in the direction of life. When we are stuck in something, we must wait for the process of life because life has its own way to grow. It's the same with the magnolia. We may say, "Oh my gosh, this person is terrible," or, "I hate this meeting because we discuss and discuss and discuss and end with nothing." But, the process is so. It's important to remember this.