

ON OUR WAY WITH THE CRITIC

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INTRODUCTION

It was in the early eighties that my friend Erna de Bruijn met Focusing. One of her patients gave her Gendlin's pocketbook *Focusing* (1981). She read it, did a session on her own and knew for sure, "This is what I've been looking for, for many years."

When she tried to share her experience with me, I felt a lot of resistance: yet another "good for me" something that wouldn't help me! It took more than a year before something shifted. What happened here... was it a Critic that blocked me, out of fear of all that could surface?

In the early nineties Erna and I became certified as Focusing Trainers and started to teach together. In that first year (1993) we had 40 students in Level 1, the next year 51. Only a quarter of them continued on to Level 2. In contrast, in the past two years (2006 and 2007), three quarters of our Level 1 students went on to Level 2, and about half of them to Level 3 and 4. Many of them want to be trained as Focusing professionals.

What has made this difference?

Looking back we can recognize three main developments:

1. The basic attitude of Focusing — being present to whatever is there inside — has taken a more central place in our teaching.
2. Focusing has become more and more integrated in our lives; consequently, more and more we are not only teaching Focusing but modeling Focusing as well. From there we are able to teach more reliably about the basics.
3. We have achieved a deeper understanding of the nature of the Critic, which is so often active from the very start when learning Focusing. If it is not identified early on, the Critic can block or undermine the whole process. We have also developed a clearer view on the position of the Child Within as related to the Critic.

All three aspects are interwoven. In this article we will discuss the Critic as a special area in which the attitude of openness and gentleness can bring forth miracles.

OUR HISTORY WITH THE CRITIC

In the eighties, Gendlin's *Focusing* was a very important and influential book for us. It had opened up a whole new way of connecting with ourselves and our inner knowing. We were fascinated by how Focusing worked and grateful for what it brought about. At that time we didn't even notice that very little attention was paid to the Critic.

In the one-and-a-half pages that Gendlin devoted to it, the Critic is described as “a nasty voice,” speaking at you from outside, not from within you as a felt sense would; the Critic is to be discerned from your conscience, the ‘still small voice’ inside. Everyone has such a destructive part, and others have named this part as “super-ego,” “bad parent,” or “animus.” It is the Critic’s nasty tone that makes it so destructive, even more devastating than the content of its messages that might contain true information. Gendlin advises, “*Do not respect your Critic...* The best way to deal with the Critic... is to wave it away with some disrespectful comment” (1981, p. 98).

And so we did. We put our Critic off to the side; this proved to be helpful in several cases, but not in all.

In 1992 we attended the Weeklong Intensive Workshop in Chicago. In the training *Manual* (1992), Bala Jaison describes the Critic as a voice that talks in a harsh, bitter, cruel, overly concerned, generalizing way. “It infiltrates our inner space, takes some vulnerable part and exaggerates or distorts it so that we feel awful. The result is often paralyzing — we are no longer able to act.”

Further on, Jaison provided us with a new perspective on the reason why the Critic is so powerful. “The Critic is able to get your attention because, however false or exaggerated its statements are, they always contain some ‘grain of truth.’” Thus, because of the Critic’s power, she emphasized two essential skills that Focusers should master: learning to distinguish the Critic from your true self and training yourself to create a distance between you and your Critic. Practice stopping it when it appears. You might want to assure it that you’ll consider what it has to say at some future date, *but not now!* The suggestion of listening to the Critic at some other time was new to us.

During an afternoon spent on the Critic, we tried several approaches. One approach was to attack the Critic in the same way it attacks us. So we put our Critic in front of us and started shouting, using harsh and bitter words. It made us aware of the impact of the destructive behaviour of the Critic, but didn’t bring any relief. One of the younger participants stated, “I wouldn’t want to treat anybody like this, even not my Critic.”

Jaison’s approach as described in the *Manual* proved to be far more preferable.

In 1993 we came across a publication in German entitled, “*Focusing ist eine kleine Tür*” (“Focusing is a little door”). It is a transcript by Johannes Wiltshko of a workshop given by Gendlin during the Focusing Sommerschule 1992 in Achberg, Germany. Talking about the Critic, Gendlin gave the same message as in his book: a Focuser must push the Critic out of the way when it interrupts. He suggests: 1.) Don’t believe him, don’t respect him; he’s always saying the same thing, he doesn’t know the situation. 2.) Don’t take him too seriously; use humour! Say something like, “You can come back when you’ve got something new to say.” 3.) Take some time to recuperate from an attack and go on with your session. And 4.) (This was new advice, and in line with what we had just learned from the weeklong!) If the Critic happens to have something useful to say, this might be something to focus on—but at a different time, not during or right after an attack (Gendlin, p. 99-102).

Watching Gendlin guiding people in live sessions (Weeklong, 1992; Sommerschule, Achberg, 1996) and on several videotapes, we saw him using all of these strategies.

The overall tendency we met in other contexts during those years, was that the Critic is a voice coming from outside. When it pops up during a Focusing session, it blocks the process, so we need to find the right words to tell it to “go away” or “keep quiet”. If you feel there might be some truth in what it is saying, wait until you can be with it in a non-reactive way.

We’d like to clarify that this is not meant as a complete overview of how, at that time, the Focusing community regarded the Critic and how the Critic should be approached; it is simply a description of our understanding of the issues. This way we treated our own Critic, and taught about the Critic in our classes in 1993 and 1994.

However, when we used this approach, neither we nor our students found real relief when encountering the Critic.

Gradually more elaborate views emerged and brought some changes. In 1993 Ann Weiser Cornell gave a workshop in our Focusing Centre in The Hague. From her we learned that just acknowledging the Critic was very helpful, and that instead of telling the Critic to go away or keep quiet, asking it to do so worked even better.

A year later she came again to our centre and brought *The Focusing Student’s Manual* (3rd Edition, 1994). It became an important resource for us.

There the Critic was still described as a voice: “that harsh inner voice which attacks you with shaming accusations” (p. 37). Cornell also said that, “The Critic gets in the way of Focusing. Some people find their lives completely dominated by the Critic” (p. 37-38). And, “As with all blocks, identifying the Critic is more than half the battle. Try saying, ‘That’s my Critic,’ and see if that is enough to make it lose most of its power” (p. 38).

In the event that it persists, more might be needed. Here she gives some nuances: “There *may* be a grain of truth in what the Critic is telling you... The Critic may represent an unhealed part of you that has been cut off from love and acceptance.” Being compassionate to this Critic and listening to the hurt that’s under the harshness can bring good results (p. 38).

In the Manual, three techniques for dealing with it are suggested: 1.) Ask the Critic to step aside and be quiet. 2.) Ask it to offer the same information in a more supportive way. 3.) If the two first techniques haven’t worked, actually focus on it (p. 68-70).

What was new and essentially different for us about Cornell’s approach were her suggestions that we should offer more politeness and respect towards the Critic, listening to the hurt under the harshness. She also urged us to keep an eye out for the role of the Critic, not only in Focusing but also in a person’s life.

At The International Conference 1994, in Germany, we attended a workshop by Dieter Müller on the Inner Critic. In line with Gendlin, Müller regarded the Critic as blocking the Focusing process, and he recommended putting it off to the side as soon as possible. However, he contributed a new perspective: paying attention to the object of criticism, because it is the object of criticism that is essential, not the criticism itself.

In Müller’s article “Dealing with Self-Criticism: The Critic within us and the Criticized One” (1995) he suggested three steps in dealing with the Critic: identifying it; hearing

it but disregarding it; and changing the focus from Criticizer to Criticized. Once the Critic is stripped of its destructive influence, it functions as a signpost to something or someone inside. For example, it might reveal a vulnerable child within. We might stay with this little person for a while and see if it's possible to be with it in a friendly way, so that perhaps it is able to share how it feels and what it really needs; thus we can give it our attention and keep it company in a loving way.

Surprisingly new in Müller's approach was this paying attention to the criticized part, making room for it and building a relationship with it.

About the same time, Mia Leijssen's book in Dutch, *Gids voor gesprekstherapie (A Guide to Therapy)* (1995), was published, containing an important chapter on Focusing. Leijssen wrote her book from her experiences as a therapist; she states that the Critic, in its various forms, is the most frequently occurring obstacle in her clients' Focusing processes.

She discerns two types of Critic: 1. The Critic that has taken over the critical role of a parent or other authority figure from the past; when the client has recognized the origin of this Critic, most of the time he or she can easily let it go or set it aside. 2. The Critic that has been created to help the vulnerable child survive, e.g. to protect it from experiencing feelings that would be unbearable for the child. This second Critic can't be put aside straight away; that would be disrespectful. It deserves to be acknowledged for its helping and protecting role. After the client has come to an understanding of its motivation and methods, and maybe even appreciation of its tenacity, he or she can check at what moments and to what extent this part is still needed. Thus the client takes over the responsibility. Then the attention can be brought back to the part that has been oppressed by the Critic.

The therapist actively helps the client move through this process by first identifying the type of Critic, then choosing between either bypassing the interruption and continuing the Focusing process or responding to the Critic and trying to find a new way of dealing with it.

If the therapist chooses to follow the client's attention to the Critic, s/he assists the client to first acknowledge, then 'dis-identify' from the Critic. The client is invited to visualize the Critic and take time to explore its intentions. Then the client returns to paying attention to the oppressed part (1995, p. 163-165).

This new view, with its emphasis on and appreciation of the primitive protective function the Critic had in the past, made perfect sense to us. We sensed the importance of the moment of choice in a session: either to respond to or bypass the Critic, and we also appreciated the steps Leijssen outlined that can lead to a better knowing and understanding of the Critic, such as visualizing and exploring.

Something similar happened when, in 1995, Ann Weiser Cornell came again to our Centre and presented parts of the Treasure Maps to the Soul. In the metaphorical landscape, the Critic is embodied by the Dragon. Dragons may appear any time or anywhere in the Territory, but especially show up when one is getting near something important. In other words, where you are criticizing yourself, there is treasure, and the more criticizing, the more treasure. The Critic is trying to help you, but in an attacking way; it is driven by fear.

By empathizing with the fear underneath the attacking, we can help the Critic to shift and transform into what it has been originally: a helper and protector.

Taming the Dragon starts by acknowledging it and dis-identifying from it. Then you ask it what it is afraid of, what it is not wanting, and lastly what it is wanting for you. As in Leijssen's vision the Critic is seen as an originally loving part that wants to help you.

Basically new to us was the idea of Focusing on the Critic as such. The Critic had become an opportunity of discovery!

Of special interest to us was an article by Barbara McGavin, in *The Focusing Connection*, (1994): "The 'Victim', the 'Critic' and the Inner Relationship: Focusing with the Part that Wants to Die." It's a striking report of Barbara's own journey through life. She describes how from early childhood on her life was dominated by the wanting to die and how she, even after years of Focusing, was not able to make the connection between those feelings and an internal attacking process. "For a long time I was really confused as how to recognize my Critic, even after reading the many articles in *TFC*. I didn't really hear words, my Critic didn't speak to me. After many years of Focusing, I have become aware of the signs of being under attack. It is more like recognizing the attacker's spoor" (1994, p. 4). She found what were the clearest and most reliable indicators for her in order to know that she was under attack. Since that time, these signs have her check the "undergrowth".

For McGavin, putting aside both the Critic and the feelings that it brings had not been helpful because they came back over and over again. Being identified or running away from it wasn't helpful either. What these parts really wanted from her was a 'relationship', *being with*. They needed "to be heard, sensed, allowed to say just how bad it is ..." (p. 4) and to hear that they could stay just the way they were for as long as they needed (p. 5).

Here a different type of Critic is described. Unlike other Critics, this was not a voice, but a Critic that might always be there on the background and that can be recognized only by the traces it leaves after an attack. McGavin emphasized that it is important to make a separation between 'me' and the attacking part (the 'Critic') and the part that suffers from the attack (the 'Victim'), and to build a relationship with the attacker as well as the victim.

This article brought a whole new dimension to our work with the Critic, first of all in dealing with my own one. When I started Focusing around 1984, I was aware of a Critic saying critical things to me. It took time to discover that, apart from this talking Critic, there was a different one, like McGavin's — not a voice, but a permanent overall basic feeling of being guilty. It was always there, more or less. And when sometimes it took over, I got a severe migraine attack or felt totally blocked by feelings of anxiety, anger and guilt. Whatever I did was wrong; whatever I didn't do was wrong, too. I already had gotten familiar with the background of those feelings, originating from experiences in childhood around the chronic disease of my mother who was suffering a great deal of pain. However, just knowing the origins of those feelings had not been very helpful.

The breakthrough for me came in 1996, prepared by McGavin's article and Cornell's teaching. Recognizing those attacks as a Critic's process and experiencing that I could make a separation between me and the attacking part and the part under attack (the angry and

fearful child) — that was helpful. The next step, building a relationship with both parts, took more time, and maintaining this relationship is still a challenge.

It was a big move to see how this Critic had been protecting me from a feeling, unbearable to the child, that she was doing wrong, or even worse, she was so wrong that she was not worthy of being a child of God, and thus was deserving of punishment since it was her fault that her mother fell ill and stayed ill.

This process of getting in contact with my Critic and understanding what it was trying to do brought me great relief and a remarkable decrease in headaches.

It took us time to own all the new insights and approaches we learned from others and to combine them with our own new experiences. In 1997 we brought it all together and developed a model for teaching about the Critic and the Child Within. Except for some small adaptations this is how we still are teaching.

HOW WE TEACH NOWADAYS ABOUT THE CRITIC

From the very first day of Level 1, students are taught to recognize negative critical processes. We instruct our students: whenever a Critic appears during your session, know that it has its own good reasons for showing up. It might be anxious about what could happen and wants to protect you. So let it know you know it's there; when it is saying something, let it know you hear it; thank it for its input and ask it to step aside or to stay with you in a supportive way. If that doesn't work, we guide the person in changing the focus from his or her Focusing process to the Critic and being with it in the way it needs.

On day 3 of our three-day Level 1 the whole morning is spent on the Critic. We start with an introduction (see Appendix 1) about the effects of criticizing processes in general, emphasizing their original protective function. We then discuss the difference between Inner Critic and Inner Compass. The Inner Compass is the knowing inside about what is right and true for you, the inner sense of the rightness of the direction in your life. Then an exercise follows to allow students to experience this difference (see Appendix 2). We talk about the two main types of Critics we discern: type 1 is the Critic who talks directly *at* you, criticizing your behaviour, and type 2 is the Critic who silently undermines your existence.

We emphasize the importance of getting in touch with the Critic rather than neglecting it, fighting against it, or being overwhelmed by it. By approaching the Critic with respect and openness, you can create a space to start building a new and more constructive relationship.

Critics usually aim at vulnerable spots that have to do with one's Child Within, so it is essential to have an exercise that helps students find a safe place or solid ground inside before starting the Critic exercise (see Appendix 3). After that exercise, there is time for exchange, individual sessions in the group, or whatever is wanted. In the afternoon students can continue with what came up, or what else might need attention.

On the first day of our two-day workshop on Critic and Inner Child the same program is offered, providing even more time for each part of the program. The second day is reserved for what is mostly the target of the Critic: the Child Within.

OUTCOME OF THIS WAY OF TEACHING

Teaching students to be open and alert, from the very start to the possible activity of a Critic prevents them from getting involved in unnoticed and ineffective struggles. Moreover it enhances their confidence in the Focusing process.

Surprising things happen as a result of the main exercise on the Critic. Recognizing one's Critic as 'a helper out of control' brings real relief. Identifying the originator of mental and physical distress as a Critic often comes as a true revelation: *This is my Critic, and it even wants to rescue me. I'm no longer at the mercy of this Critic — I have a choice!*

For example, an utterly correct, 42-year old secretary got ill, for three days or more, whenever there was some trivial thing she could be blamed for. Thus three or four times a year she would just lie down, not eating, not speaking, not moving inwardly or outwardly, until 'it' was gone. She had no idea about the origin of this 'illness'.

While Focusing on those 'attacks', she got an image of her mentally ill mother punishing her as a child by beating her until she didn't resist or cry any more. Then the mother stopped, startled, and asked herself, "Did I kill her?" Of course, the child believed she deserved to be punished, even if she didn't understand why. 'To die' had been the only way for the child to survive.

Later, whenever she made a mistake, the conviction of being guilty made her fall into this old pattern that once had been life saving. In the session the revelation came that now that she is an adult, her life is no longer in peril if she makes a mistake. About a year after that session she reported that not one attack had happened since.

CONCLUSION

When we started Focusing, we just sent the Critic away, not caring about its intentions or background. Nowadays, we are convinced of its basically good intentions and are interested in its antecedents and aware of its influence on the Child within us.

From the very beginning we teach our students how to recognize a Critic, and we support them in finding ways to deal with it so that it can even be transformed into an ally. Apparently this approach is a powerful tool to help students get more deeply in touch with themselves and their inner wisdom, as well as helping them to let go of anger, fear, and despair.

Largely due to this new approach of the Critic, our students are more enthusiastic and motivated to go on with Focusing classes or Focusing with a partner or on their own.

Appendix 1

INTRODUCTION IN A NUTSHELL

Our Critics, in their seemingly unchangeable ways, are working 'for our good', dutifully and ceaselessly. We can get to know them better by carefully approaching them, experiencing their fears, their drive, and their need to prevent us from 'fatal' behaviour. Critics,

while trying to protect something precious and vulnerable deep inside, may become very drastic in rescuing us.

There are clear differences between Inner Critic and Inner Compass: Critics usually make you feel small, wrong, unworthy, guilty, and bad. Following your Inner Compass, on the other hand, brings feelings of joy, relief, and strength and makes you feel that your insights and felt senses are true and right.

Critics want to pin you down to absolute patterns and judgments. Don't use *their* methods: it is better to see the Criticizing processes as either waves or undertows in the sea.

We discern two main types of Inner Critics: the ones that interfere with our *behaviour* (*You ought to, you shouldn't...*) and the ones interfering with our *very right to exist* (bringing the feeling of, *I'm no good, I'm not worthy of living...*) The latter ones often don't talk to you; they just leave you with a sudden drain of energy, a feeling of worthlessness, or worse, and imperceptibly, feeling so merged with them that you are convinced they are right.

The first type is like the waves in the sea: you can see them coming, they can smash you around — and then they are gone, until the next one comes. The other type is invisible, like the low tide stream in the sea that draws you away.

The latter type is seldom recognized as a Critic, because it can be disguised in many ways, especially in many sorts of bodily suffering. Often it is quite a revelation to discover: *This is my Critic!*

We have found that as soon as we ourselves take over the responsibilities from our Critics, they may start gaining some confidence in us and gradually release their grip.

Appendix 2

GROUP EXERCISE TO EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CRITIC AND INNER COMPASS:

Remind yourself vividly of a situation where you followed your Inner Compass. For example, you might recall having made a decision based on your inner knowing, or your feeling of 'this is true and right' while perhaps other people gave you different advice. Sense this situation. Let it come into your body and notice, 'How does it feel, all of that? In my body, in my soul?' Notice how it differs from experiencing a Critic attack.

Students then exchange in pairs or in the whole group.

Appendix 3

GROUP EXERCISE FOCUSING ON THE CRITIC

First take time to find a safe place inside.

Part 1 — Finding the Felt Sense you get from your Critic

- Remind yourself vividly of a situation where you felt criticized by your Critic or when all of a sudden you lost your energy.
- If there are more of them, choose one.
- What happens in your body and soul? Obeying? Hiding? Fighting? Shrinking?... (type 1)? Or feelings of utter worthlessness? Despair? Hopelessness? ‘Dying?’... (type 2)?
- See if there is a word, or image, or gesture to describe it.
- Make notes, draw or scribble if you want.

Part 2 — Getting to know your Critic

This time don't try to send your Critic away, but shift your attention, from your body sense of, ‘Help, I'm under attack’ to your Critic itself:

- What kind of figure is it?
- How does it approach you?
- Type 1: Does it look / sound etc. in a way you recognize (parent, teacher, etc.)?
- Type 2: In what kind of situations does it come *at* you? See if you can follow its track back, the recent one and maybe some old ones, too.
- Find a name for it—not ‘a villain’, but a name the Critic can recognize itself in, e.g. The Controller, Mrs. Particular, The Judge, the Floorer.

Part 3 — Working on the relationship with your Critic, staying in touch with your body-feel

Remember that for both types of Critic it is crucial to acknowledge that you are the one who is present and observing, so you don't completely merge with your Critic. They are there, and you — yourself — are there, too! Keep in mind that Critics must have had some good reason for getting into your life. Once they had a function — most probably a protecting one. Be open to that possibility! See if you can follow its track back, maybe to early childhood

Tips for type 1: Invite your Critic and say:

- *Hello, I'm listening. What's your message? I hear you. Is there anything more?*
- *What are you worrying or caring about? What should not happen to me or inside me? I hear you.*

- *What happened in the past that you became that... (sharp, bitter, angry etc)? No wonder!*
- *What do you want to happen to me or inside me? I hear you.*

Tip for type 2: Here, before you begin, it is important to distinguish between, *This is my Critic* and *This is Me*.

- You might sense if, underneath the present feeling, there is something even worse, something unbearable to a child that this Critic still wants to protect you from.

From here on just pick out which questions or suggestions are relevant for you:

- *Can I appreciate the watchfulness, protecting, care of my Critic, even if it's disturbing me?*
- *Whenever I get this... (uncomfortable, not-good felt sense)... can my Critic and I, in mutual respect, see together what might go wrong? And can we then together see how to cope with that?*
- Invite your body to let you sense how such cooperation with your Critic would be...

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