

ECO-FOCUSING: Nature as an Echo to Human Nature

Ronit Schwartz

Rebecca is 84 years old. She has dementia and Parkinson's disease. Rebecca and I go outside and stand on the porch. I ask her how she is. She doesn't answer. I see her rest her hand on her chest. I tell her that I see her hand and I wonder what's there. She doesn't answer. I can see signs of Focusing, and I invite her to feel, to be, with her chest. We begin to walk. I encourage her to walk with her feeling, her sense. She walks slowly, at her own pace. No faster, no slower. Words are not spoken, but I have a sense that they are present, accompanying us in their own way. I don't know where we're going. I am not leading. I look at nature and I look at Rebecca. Nature, like the unspoken words, accompanies us, bringing its own perspective: a support, an anchor, something to fall back on. I am not alone with Rebecca. I am with her and with nature and with them both. Together we are on a journey in Focusing in nature and in human nature. Turning to Rebecca, I touch her chest and ask her curiously, gently, "What's here? Why did you rest your hand here?" I am the one who initiates, the only one who speaks. There are no words from Rebecca, only silence. With nature as my partner, I have strength, I have interest, I have belief. Rebecca stands next to a stone under a pecan tree. At first glimpse, the stone looks like nothing important, with no particular shape or color. I echo her stop—this stop is part of her Focusing. I invite her to Focus by asking her what it is about the stone and her chest, her chest and the stone. Her body changes. Something new has arrived; it looks like excitement. Nature and I are both with her, echoing her, together and as individuals. We each come from our own perspective, without words, but with great presence and acceptance, allowing the process to be alive and dynamic. Then, words break through—lyrics to a well-known song—and I repeat them: "It's not the same home, it's not the same as it was." Rebecca says, "I haven't felt emotion like that in a long time...I love to feel moved like that." She strokes the stone. We are together with the stone without words, and with words and with so much beyond the scope of what can be known. She has created a Focusing journey for herself, through her sense and through the stone, a journey within a journey, nature in human-nature. Nature and I are with her, so she chooses. In this moment of grace, in this moment in her life, we both allow her to be and to be not. She tells me about the stone; it was the stone her beloved son, who had passed away, had visited often as a child. I ask her how her chest feels and rest my own hand there. She answers, "It's like a smile."

Rebecca worked through a felt sense, and through our journey the felt sense changed shape, color, and meaning for her. We completed our journey in a new space—a smile. I call this "Focusing metabolism".

Eco-Focusing is Focusing that takes place outdoors, in nature, in an echoing environment. In an echoing environment, what you emit is reflected back to you by your environment. This echo is an opportunity to re-experience and refine your felt sense by meeting with it a new way. Many such echoing environments exist, including art and music, but the

echoing environment I choose to work with is nature. The combination of the words ecology and Focusing describe the influences on the experience of the person. Ecology is defined as a branch of science that deals with the relationship of organisms to one another and to their natural surroundings. The experience achieved in Eco-Focusing, of nature echoing and connecting with us, acts as an anchor for our felt sense. Eco-Focusing allows the Focusing process to go from a defined space to open spaces. We can move through the spaces of nature, Focusing, and Eco-Focusing in a way that fits our specific needs from the process. At the same time, we can easily connect with our inner-eco, our felt senses, notice them and tend to them.

The integration of ecology and Focusing is the result of my personal and professional experiences. Professionally, I trained in nature-therapy for years before ever learning about Focusing. Dr. Ronen Berger (2013), a founder of nature-therapy methodology, offers an illustrative description of the process on The Nature Therapy Center's website:

Nature Therapy is an innovative therapeutic framework that takes place through the direct and creative dialogue humans have with nature. It expands the classical concept of 'setting' while developing concepts and methods that place in nature as a partner in the therapeutic process. It connects people with their strength, supports change and healing while expanding the therapeutic process and actively engaging humans with nature.

My work with nature and in nature exposed me to its unique qualities in creating connections and context, its characteristic liveliness, and its important role in human life and experience. This is its power to create change. The availability and accessibility of nature can awaken all senses at once, and the infinite variety that exists in nature encourages a wide range of emotional experiences that allow humans to connect with their inner-beings, feelings, felt-senses.

Returning home from a four-month trip with my family to South America, where I had countless meaningful, authentic encounters with nature, I was infused with the desire to continue my studies of *experiential being*. I wanted to verify what was going on inside me, and to give it deepened meaning. This is how I began to practice Focusing.

While studying Focusing, I found nature to be a key element and an active partner in my Focusing process. I was curious about the integration of the two fields, and began making connections in my professional life. I continue to research, through nature, finding new paths of thought, working from the hidden to the apparent, from the apparent to the hidden. I research and learn through the edges of leaves, the shadows of trees, through raindrops, through my interactions with nature, and nature's interactions within itself. I learn through change and through happenings, and most importantly through the meeting of my felt senses with nature—a meeting which supports me and my research, supports the life of Eco-Focusing and fills it with meaning.

What I have discovered I am serving up here, fresh from nature itself. There are many other things that I feel I know but cannot yet express in words, and so I leave them. For now, I leave them be.

ECO-FOCUSING AND THE FOCUSER

For most people, the qualities of Eco-Focusing make the Focusing process more alive and available. This is particularly important for people with cognitive “disconnects”, like people with dementia, ADD, or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) for whom connections between body and senses are not readily available. The “felt-nature” allows people with such disconnects, as well as others, to connect with their felt senses in a way that bypasses the cognitive processes not easily accessible to them.

Felt-nature is an expression that speaks to the unique qualities of Eco-Focusing. Firstly, when we enter into or exit from nature, a felt sense can be achieved effortlessly. The concrete manifestation of a felt sense in nature, echoing our human nature, allows the felt sense to surface without words. Another quality of nature is its presence—nature has infinite dynamic presence. The Focuser, in many ways, has control over his or her echo in nature—through the pace, the intensity, and the use of other senses like touch.

Nature also exhibits deep acceptance—nature accepts each of us exactly as we are; it has no expectations of us, does not judge, does not conform to social norms. Moreover, nature is precise and refined. As in Focusing, Eco-Focusing allows you to be protected and let go at the same time. In addition, nature arouses curiosity—an essential element in the process of Focusing. Curiosity creates an authentic dedication to the movement of self that is so important in deepening the process of Focusing.

An additional quality of Eco-Focusing relates to the question of how nature interacts and converses with a person who has “lost his words”. This quality is one that I’ve noticed often when working with troubled youth and individuals with dementia. The idea of “lost his words” reflects an inability to verbalize properly, perhaps as a result of trauma or neurological damage. Both in Focusing and in nature, the a-verbal is a precursor to the verbal, and one needs to be able to stay in that moment. Nature allows this beautiful stay. The body can be without words. There is something enabling about this word-free part of the process, something supportive and legitimizing in letting the body stay in that space. In this way, Eco-Focusing allows people who cannot (or will not) connect with their felt senses using traditionally cognitive processes (such as speech) to focus.

When I first met Daniel, an abused teenager, he had so much anger in his body that he wanted to hit me, to pick up a stick and hit me. When I tried talking to him about connecting with his felt sense, his feelings of anger and aggression were only amplified. He felt that he could not understand, could not connect with anything he was feeling inside. We started walking in nature, without words. He had bodily movements that expressed aggression. I let them happen authentically, looking at them as a way to clear some space. I allowed them to be expressed by not confronting them with my words. After a few minutes, I begin asking all kinds of benign questions about his day-to-day life, how work is, what he’s doing tomorrow. He answers that he doesn’t know, he can’t decide, and he can’t live with that unknown. I echo, “Don’t know, can’t decide”. I ask him to look for his feeling, somewhere in nature, wherever he

wants, however he wants—look for the unknown, the indecisiveness. He starts walking, and I'm with him. He stops by a tree, and I ask him what it is about the tree that reflects his unknown. He answers, "There are so many branches, how can we know, when each branch goes off in a different direction." I ask him if he likes where he is standing or if he might like to move around. He decides to move closer, touches the tree trunk, touches the branches, and the tree stands as though its only purpose is to be there for him, accepting him and giving him the space he needs, being present and arousing curiosity. I ask him to show me where on the tree the unknown is—is it something in the touch, the size, the leaves, the branches, the directions? He chooses to touch a branch in the middle. I invite him to feel where this feeling is inside his body. He tells me it's like a string in his throat, and now begins to connect with his felt sense. When he cannot stay with his felt sense, he is with the branch. The felt sense is colored white, and when he touches the branch, he explains the sense as one of widening. I find myself Focusing on the tree, and I know that when I am less present in the Focusing process, the tree is there present, and nature is there present. He is not alone, and will not be alone. By the end of our time together, he could stay with the unknown, with the sense of widening. This was the first time he could feel not only with his thoughts, but also with his felt sense, allowing him to connect with the place inside that doesn't know and can't decide, and feel safe at the same time.

For this boy, the echo of nature as an unknown, indecisive space validated his not-knowing.

This story exemplifies for me what it is to be an Eco-Focusing practitioner—I don't tire, don't give in to anger or an inability of the Focuser to connect with his or her felt sense. I look at nature as a path that guides and supports us: trees that embrace us, smells that come and go; they move me; they fill me with optimism and strength and curiosity.

In Eco-Focusing, the element in nature that the person connects with represents the felt sense for them, at least until they can connect with that felt sense in their body. I can use nature to connect with the felt sense inside. In this way nature enables, and is sometimes even necessary, for Focusing to begin, as in the case of Daniel. In other instances, a felt-sense can become more tangible, easier to grasp, when its physical manifestation is found in nature. In this way, I can go from the inside out, as with Rebecca, who had a felt-sense and found its expression in nature.

ECO-FOCUSING AND THE FOCUSING PRACTITIONER

From defined space to open spaces—the widening of choices for the Focuser allows for the deepening of the process, but also allows the Focusing practitioner endless options for him or her self.

Nature itself is a Focusing enabler. As a Focusing practitioner in nature, I am more centered, more present and more accepting. Nature gives me strength and variety; it awakens

my curiosity and arouses my senses. Its qualities of aliveness, happiness and optimism help me feel alive and optimistic myself. In the communal space of all three parties—Focuser, Focusing practitioner and nature, I can make myself more precise.

In another sense, nature itself is a Focusing practitioner. It is three-dimensional, tangible, and alive. The elements in nature echo the elements in human nature giving nature great power in awakening the senses. You can feel it, be in it, be part of, or witness to, the changes that occur in it. Nature can be a partner, a background, a stage, a witness, a challenge. Nature supplies us with raw material to touch, to smell, to feel. Eco-Focusing integrates the felt-sense into the felt-nature.

The Focuser has the option of being echoed by either the Focusing practitioner or nature, or both. In some cases, Focusers need only nature's echo, and the role of the Focusing practitioner is merely to echo the Eco-Focusing between them. In other cases, nature is but a background and stage allowing the process of Focusing to come alive between Focuser and Focusing practitioner. There is a partnership between Focusing-practitioner and nature, between nature and Focuser, and between nature and Focusing in nature.

Working in nature opens doors to many surprising possibilities and connections. I can meander between eco, Focusing and Eco-Focusing, between space and open-space, using the unique qualities that characterize both nature and Focusing to achieve a deep and meaningful experience.

SPACES OF FELT SENSE

In Eco-Focusing, the process of Focusing is based in the body as a whole. The body entering nature—walking, moving, touching—allows for whole body Focusing. In one of my seminars, a participant noted that the most meaningful part for her was during the walk itself. There are people who might feel comfortable Focusing after climbing a tree, and others who want to dip their feet in the water of a stream. This vast world of choices allows the process of Focusing to be more exact, and allows the body to be more open to its felt senses.

In Eco-Focusing, the felt sense reflects an element in nature, or nature may reflect an element in human nature through a felt sense. This felt sense is unique in that it encompasses knowledge about nature and about human nature. Nature's unique characteristics allow interactions with the felt sense to be moving and full of life. For someone with dementia, this ability to connect with a felt sense allows him or her to experience and remember a process that has a beginning, middle, and end—a process that holds meaning. It allows the person the knowledge to understand that there are still new things to experience, things that can open doors to new feelings. Eco-Focusing is a way to facilitate people in their connection to nature, and to human-nature. For Rebecca, Focusing on her felt sense took her out into nature. She would have inevitably gone out for the purpose of the nature-therapy session, but the focus on her felt sense allowed her encounter with nature to be much more meaningful. In my opinion, nature opens options in the world of Focusing, no less than Focusing can help the process of nature-therapy, or other types of work in nature.

I go out into the woods with an 85 year old man. We walk, and as we walk, he is clearing away the pine needles around him with a stick. Entering the woods is like entering the Focusing process, and he soon begins to notice his shadow. I notice him noticing, and echo him, through my movements and through my words that describe what I see him doing. He begins to play with his shadow, making it bigger and smaller, walking with it, talking to it, laughing with it. I ask him if he can tell me where his shadow is inside his body. He points to the palm of his hand, and I ask him if he can stay with that spot. After a moment, he raises his hand as if to show the spot to the shadow. Once in a while, the movement of the sun and the trees make it hard for us to see the shadow on the ground, and sometimes it disappears. I ask him, "What is it, in that spot on your hand?" He answers, "The shadow of death." I echo him and stay there with him. Unlike his shadow, he is there. We continue to walk, shadow disappearing and reappearing alongside us, and I ask him about that spot. He says it's gone. Like the shadow, he doesn't feel it anymore.

One-moment-in-one-session. That dear man passed away shortly after.

Eco-Focusing connects principles from Focusing with principles from working in nature. In their connection, a new entity is created, a whole new field, one that is not the simple sum of the two fields. Eco-Focusing encompasses various methodologies that take place in an environment that echoes both Focuser and Focusing practitioner. In this environment, the person is given more options to connect with his or her felt senses, options for pace and echo and intensity. The Focusing process goes from an abstract internal process to one that has concrete manifestation in the outside world. Eco-Focusing takes us from what is static to what is alive and dynamic, and from a meeting of two people to a meeting of three: Focusers, Focusing practitioner, and nature. The unmediated movement through the space of nature, the space of felt sense and space created when the two interact, speaking to this fields' unique qualities.

Eco-Focusing has special meaning for me. I have personal issues with concentration and attention. When I'm sitting in a closed room, I'm constantly looking for what is beyond. In Eco-Focusing I can access my professional merits with ease, because of nature and because of Focusing. I can Focus precisely without disconnecting myself. Eco-Focusing is a space where my creative process of Focusing can come alive in a way that is both authentic and effortless. I still have many questions about Eco-Focusing, about characteristic qualities as well as the extremities of nature and human nature. Because of the dynamic aliveness of nature and felt sense, I am more curious and less knowledgeable with every question answered.

REFERENCES

Berger, R. (2013, November 5). The Nature Therapy Center [home page]. Retrieve from <http://www.naturetherapy.org.il>

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