

Getting to Know New Board Member Darryl Commings
Interview by Jocelyn Jacks Kahn

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First of all, congratulations on becoming a member of the TIFI board. And congratulations on being one of the organizers of the "Embodied Liberation: The Felt Sense & Social Justice" Felt Sense Conference, as well as a presenter!

Thank you. We had an amazing team organizing the Conference, and I feel more intertwined with the Focusing community because of my involvement.

What I always love to start with is the initial journey to Focusing. How did you come to Focusing?

Like many of us, I ran into Gene's original book, *Focusing*, and tried to do it by myself. I failed miserably. That was in the mid-80s, and I sat on it for about 20 years. Then in the early 2010s I ran into an advertisement from Focusing Resources – and sat on that for a little while longer. Finally, a couple of years after a significant health challenge, and really wanting to find other ways of growing and healing, I decided that I would at least take a Level One Inner Relationship Focusing class and see how that goes.

I finished up the Inner Relationship Focusing series of classes sometime around 2016. After a couple of years of Focusing partnership, I began to sense that it had had an effect on me. I could tell that I was different from when I started. And then I began realizing some connections between Focusing and the work I was doing in ministry. In fact, it was after I graduated with my master's from divinity school that I decided to go through Focusing certification. I felt it might have some relevance to the doctorate in ministry that I am currently pursuing.

And before we continue, can you please say a little bit more about the difference you sensed in yourself after learning Focusing?

I felt more present in ways that I didn't before. I felt more aware of my inner world. There's a real qualitative difference. I was literally a different person.

Slowing down and listening into the question... There's a sense of a connection to *me* in this process. I've opened up in ways that weren't available to me before.

There's something about Focusing on a regular basis that is inherently affirming. Something about having a partner to reflect back; really starting to sense that, "Wow, there are ways that I can see myself and be in my own process that just weren't there before."

Is there anything that comes to mind as the most significant change?

Externally, it shows up in how I relate to others. I sense more than I did before. There's more of a sense of the *space* of relationship. I'm more aware of the give and the take, the presence of somebody else there with me; the taking in of what I'm hearing and the checking of it.

Internally, it's more like slowing down, more a sense of developing the practice of just checking and seeing "Does this feel right or not? Does this make sense? Does this feel like a direction I can head that might be fruitful?" Also, there's more a sense around my own boundaries and more of a willingness to respect that sense in me that says either, "Okay, this is far enough" or "Come closer."

Yes, boundaries as a sense of: Here's my space. And I can have some authority in my space and how I share that space with others.

Just that willingness to slow down and say, "Okay, does this work or not; is it right or not?" Or maybe even a more comprehensive way of saying it is that there's just more truth-telling towards my own experience.

And I would also say that I feel more open-ended – more sense of possibility of where I can go, of ways I can grow as a person.

Right now, I can sense *possibilities*. Before really getting into this work, I felt more closed off in a front-end kind of way – like, the space in front of me was more limited. Whereas now what I sense in front of me is a frontier that has an openness to it.

You began your story with first becoming aware of Focusing and finally taking your first class 20 years later. But having known you for a little while now, I know there's a lot more context here. What most surprised me when I first met you is finding out that you've been an accountant for decades, which is something you're still doing. But not that many years ago, you embarked on becoming a minister. And there's this wonderful-sounding community healing group that you're an integral part of – to the point where they chose to finance your Focusing certification fees, so you could bring what you learned back to them. I find all of that so fascinating. Please tell us more.

That's where some of this sense of a real difference in me comes because, honestly, I simply stumbled into accounting. This was back in high school – another lifetime ago! I had to take some classes because I needed some credits to graduate, and I figured somebody might need some accounting along the way.

I stumbled upon a summer internship, and it seemed like it was a pretty cool, honorable way to make a living. I went on and majored in it and eventually got my CPA license.

But one thing that has become clearer for me is realizing that difference between stumbling into something and choosing it. And it's possible to do both.

That was what I needed; it fit for me. So, in the longer term, I will always have that skill and I'm always going to use it. But I'm a lot more selective in how I use it now. I'm now more interested in using that kind of skill, as an example, for boards that I sit on – like TIFI. Because, particularly for social cause organizations, that's often a major weakness – they usually don't have that kind of technical expertise.

They're passionate about the issues that they come together around, they have their secret sauce that they want to run with and use, but they often don't have a background of financial skills.

And I sense that I'm changing in ways where I don't want accounting to be the fullness of my life.

I'm changing in ways where I'm much more drawn toward the work of ministry, of social movements, to giving support to those kinds of movements, to bringing this skill of Focusing out into the world. And melding that with my ministry background. The phrase that came in a session recently, that really sticks with me, is that I have a new sense of *vocational clarity*.

Along the way I made connections with a group here in St. Louis called the St. Louis Black Healers Collective. They're a group of Black people in the area who come with a variety of different skills, some more connected to the African diaspora than others – but the goal is for all of us to come together, to share our gifts, and to create models of doing work and healing in community. As opposed to some of the more – for lack of a better term – westernized idea that you can heal a discrete individual who is set aside from the communities and contexts of which they are an integral part.

There's a real clear sense that that model doesn't work, particularly long term. And it especially doesn't work in communities of color because they are usually underfunded and marginalized in all kinds of ways. So, to bring the work of Focusing into community – it's meeting a humungous need. Yeah, I'm really excited about it.

And this specific community also helped sponsor my certification training. So, big shout out to the St. Louis Black Healers Collective!

It's so great, the way you're really embedded in that community – you're not coming from outside to bring them wisdom. But they're actively supporting you to bring them wisdom, as part of the collective.

I really like how you just described it as not coming from outside. There's something really important about doing this work through membership in community. And especially in light of the ways that our dominant culture teaches us to *not* be parts of community. There's a different feel between being *associated with* a community and being a *member in* the community.

Community is something that we don't learn from our dominant culture, and we lose that muscle – the practice of community. We lose the sense that this is a natural process, that we're embedded within community. And it is a skill we can develop – a way of sensing and sharing and being open with one another.

So I'm over the moon happy that there's a group here in St. Louis that thinks along those lines, and that has created some space for me to bring my particular gifts and skill sets to share – and to share locally.

One of the things I'm finding that I'm more able to articulate is this sense of commitment – not only being committed to that community, but committed to sharing my particular gifts. And inviting people in, even in little ways. Yeah, we can create a little bit of space, where we can be here present with one another, listening and sharing with one another. And I can give my beingness to help you see just how magnificent a person like you can really be.

Somewhere along this Focusing journey, probably somewhere early on in my certification training, it just came to me out of the blue, a sense of: Man! There's just so much possibility in being a *person* that if we could just tap into that... into ways of being together and offering open space for one another to experience ourselves as a *person* – without the labels – if we could just tap into the fact that here we are as human beings, here you are as a living, breathing *person*. And to be able to help people to have a *moment* of that experience – if it is anywhere near as life changing for them as it has been for me – wow!

How did you originally come to connect with the St. Louis Black Healers Collective?

There were some events in the community that brought us together. And one of the founding members of the group is a friend of mine from seminary, so I had an automatic connection to the group. But that's another story!

And one that I'm sure we would all love to hear!

This group is the result of a couple different iterations. The original call for the group was a response to a local case of some police violence that brought us together.

Of course, one of the pressing needs was putting your body on the line and being out loud in public – that's certainly part of social justice mobilizing. But just as importantly, there was a real clear sense that if there isn't a commitment to healing through this process, we might get the right verdict, but the wrong ways of being together will still be there.

The police officer executed a young black man, a student – the details aren't relevant for this conversation – but what is relevant is the sense of calling, of coming together, the sense that we are not okay. And we had the sense that we needed some ways of practicing healing and practicing relationship-building, and if we aren't doing those, then we were just going to continue running from crisis to crisis to crisis.

So, we organized a day of grieving. It was really well received. We gathered some healing circles, and I was charged with leading one of them. We trained a little bit on some listening skills. And I knew I could bring this gift of the Focusing listening kind of skills at an even deeper level – in particular, how to listen to facilitate taking a step. Hearing people so that they can tell that, “Yes, you heard me. You see me and you can offer that back to me.”

Those were some of the gifts that this work had given to me. I was able to take that and do it with this community.

We've done several more of those healing circles. We've organized local community fairs, where one of the things that I do is to give listening space. For me, it's like Focusing space. So, somebody comes in: "I need somebody to listen to me for a few minutes." And as you hear them, you can literally see them open when they hear back what they said. It's like, "I can trust you. I can trust it. You're here with me. You are listening to me; you're giving this back to me for my best interest." And to see somebody who came in who doesn't even know me – to just see them relax. You can literally see in their face: "Oh, yes, that's what that feels like." It's worth it every time.

I'm looking forward in 2022 to doing more training. So that those of us in the Black Healers Collective are not only good listeners but can bring that skill of listening that opens the door for a step to occur. To practice together, to do healing work together.

Yes, after that, they were more than happy to support me when it came to Focusing certification!

And now that we have this deeper context, I'd love to hear about how you came to join the TIFI board.

So, I can't tell that story without telling the story before.

Great – we want all the stories!

In 2019, on June the 19th, also known as Juneteenth, I happened to be in the middle of certification and some related classes. And I got a real clear sense of it in that moment: that it's not about trying to heal up an isolated person.

This work is about human liberation. This is what it is. And human liberation is this growth, this taking steps, and so on. And it just became really clear to me that it was an open question: Are we, as people who are doing Focusing, are we open to that? Are we seeing it? Are we realizing it?

In order to process this, I decided to write a letter. I shared that letter with Ann Weiser Cornell, who's my certification teacher, and Ann invited me to share it with Executive Director Catherine Torpey, and she also invited me to share it with Nell Moffitt, the Board President. From that, I built a relationship with both Nell and Catherine. With Nell, it became not only a Focusing relationship, but a Board relationship.

And with Catherine, it became more about, "Okay, let's dive in, let's dialogue, let's have some sense of how it is from my [Darryl's] perspective. How do I see the community? How do I see the possibility of taking a step, or taking a step as a community, in that sense of commitment to the work of human liberation?"

So, sharing this similar kind of conversation with both Nell and Catherine, Nell brought to light that they needed a finance person on the Board. So that was a fit. But in addition to that, there was an invitation to bring my whole self to the board.

And honestly, I didn't say "Yes" right away.

I really stopped and thought about it because one thing I did *not* want was to be one voice. And to say, OK, we checked the box, and now we have somebody who looks like me on the Board. If that's what it was about, I didn't want it at all.

I wanted to be really clear that if you invite me on the board, I'm going to bring my whole self. I have this set of skills, no doubt, and I'll give them to the best of my ability. But at the same time, I can't separate myself as a person who comes from a historically marginalized community. And in doing all of that training, most of the people I interacted with were not people who look like me.

I was reassured that it's not at all about checking the box. First of all, TIFI does absolutely need an accountant. So that was easy. But secondarily, there is this sense that in some ways I do embody the type of person that they're looking for. That there *is* a wanting, no matter how small, for this work to be in the hands of people who *have* been historically marginalized, and who you don't see when you look around the room and Focusing spaces. You *do* want to see more people who look like me, who bring my kinds of experiences, who have the sense that Focusing is therapeutic in a healing kind of way. But there's more to it – that Focusing doesn't need to stay in this box of “it's just about the therapeutic kind of ways of being.”

So once I got clarity around that, we were off to the races!

And I would also say that there is an ongoing question I continue to ask in terms of Focusing not staying in a box.

A budget is a moral document. And if that's the case, where we put our money, where we put our capital, reflects what our values are. So, in a Focusing kind of way, it's like an ongoing way to continue to check in as an organization, from a fiscal perspective: Is our money where our mouth is? Are we putting our resources to those things that we say we're committed to?

I think that's one of those things that I've been able to contribute – to have that question be there, to have it in the space: If this is who we say we are, if we can catch a glimpse of the enormous possibilities that doing this work can bring, and then act on it with our policies,

with our choices, with our ways of spending our money, our ways of advertising, recruiting, etc. – if we're *not* embodying that in our work, then what does that say about us?

So, yeah, I'm grateful that in some small measure up to this point, being able to put that question has led to some things like the last Felt Sense Conference – this sense of putting our moral muscle to work in ways that challenge the whole community.

Very recently, there was a TIFI holiday fundraising appeal that had a picture of Gene Gendlin and his dad, and a little back-history about Gene. And it talked about how he discovered Focusing *because* of his background of coming from a marginalized community, coming from a background of understanding what state-sanctioned violence is. Having to run for your life. And to have that as a memory that guides our work. I loved that.

I told Catherine that I would like to see more of this embracing of our legacy. I want to see the Focusing community embrace its legacy. I want us to remember the story of Gene and his father. I want us to remember how Gene's father sensed into their situation, realized that all was not well, and that they needed to run for their lives. That's why we're here doing this practice together. We should absolutely embrace that legacy and sense our kinship with anyone who has had to run for their lives, literally and figuratively.

And lasting change, whether personal or social, only happens in spaces of empathy. Empathy is part of our Focusing DNA.

I'm also learning from the example of Gene and his dad that Focusing really is about sensing the whole situation we are in. That includes us, of course. I can imagine a type of "social Focusing," for lack of a better word, that begins with sensing "Are we well?" That's something we can listen for in the spaces we are in. When we sense into that, we'll notice some things that are going well with us. And we'll notice some things that ain't. We can get a sense of the whole situation, and that can be the basis of a "social Focusing."

I appreciate having been on the Board for only a short time and already seeing some of that come to life – the sense of owning our legacy as a people who in the fabric of our being can know what "not okay" feels like.

And I don't say that punitively. There's a sense of when you're able to tune into that something that says, "This is not okay," you're already in the process of change. Just to be able to come

into relationship with the sense of, “Yeah, this doesn't feel like it's all good” – and now you can turn toward it.

That's insightful, because we often just acclimate to a bad situation, so it just becomes a background buzz, and even though we don't feel good, we don't register it with the precision of that question: Are we well?

That word precision really fits. It's that Focusing kind of spirit – just to slow down and be able to sense into it. To describe it, that this feeling has its edges, it has an emotional quality, it has a sense of, “This isn't right, and this could be right.” It's practicing what we preach.

Now, if we do this at all levels, including the levels that might seem mundane – the accounting, the money – if even there we can bring that sense of, “Are we accomplishing what we wanted to accomplish? Are we living out our best values in a financial kind of way?” – that's practicing this art. Where we are.

I'm feeling even more clarity around how I am showing up in my financial work. Just the sense in my accounting career of being more drawn towards working with nonprofits, social agencies, and so on, who are giving their blood, sweat and tears to something bigger than themselves, and being able to sense with them, “Are we accomplishing our objectives? Are we doing the big thing that we wanted to do?” And being able to show, even in dollars and cents, “How does this feel?”

Same thing with a budget – does it feel like we're making a plan to accomplish the things that we're talking about accomplishing? That's a way that Focusing can live in spaces where it doesn't seem like it would be, there in the debits and credits. But when you put that together with the sense of accomplishing the things that we want to accomplish, there's life there, because there are ways to do that.

I love that. And now that you've laid out your vision of your role on the Board, is there anything else about the TIFI Board that you would like to say?

I've served on other boards before, so I'm just taking a moment to sense if there's something different about serving on the TIFI Board that I haven't expressed...

I think the thing that's different is the intention to do this work in a Focusing kind of way. In other types of environments, you have to encourage it. You have to lay the groundwork for relationships of trusted communication. Whereas being able to go in upfront with a Focusing attitude – the willingness to be open and to listen – it's more available at TIFI. That's very different.

And I think the other thing that I did not realize until I was on the Board is the sheer *reach* of the Focusing Institute.

It's true that "International" is right there in the name. But there's a difference between hearing the word and actually seeing it – seeing the ways that the Board tries to create infrastructures where, for example, people with multiple different languages can interact with our platform; the recognition that we're going to have people who speak other languages and to make sure that we're present with them.

And I was seeing it especially after doing the Felt Sense Conference, just the multitude of countries that were represented. Even in the planning, making sure that we scheduled sessions so that different parts of the world could be there. Like, "Oh, yeah, we've got to remember, they're on Australian time."

Most other boards that I've been on have been more regional. So yes, this sense that there's a *humungous* community of people who are doing this work is different!

There's a broadening of horizons for me, in terms of just seeing how far-reaching we are.

And the flip side: How much more can we be known as an organization?

If you mention "Focusing" to people, it is not as well-known as you would want it to be. There are significantly more ways that we could grow as an organization.

For me – and of course this is just my opinion – some of the ways that we can grow as an organization and as a group that practices this work is being in dialogue with other healing

modalities. What if we thought about more ways of how can we partner with practitioners of other healing modalities?

Resmaa Menachem, the author of *My Grandmother's Hands*, comes to mind. And he's somebody who's out there doing this work of somatic abolition. (By the way, I love that term "somatic abolition"!) But that's just it – we're trying to accomplish similar things. So, might a working relationship benefit us both?

How can we partner with others? How can we relate to others? How can we be in places of shared discussion with others? I think that from my bird's eye view, that's probably one of the biggest opportunities for us to grow the practice.

Of course, Focusing has its own kind of secret sauce! *And* how do we help this to live in other places?

Can you say something more about how Focusing informs your work of ministry?

One of the things that I feel most drawn to in my work, and that brings the Focusing and theological points together for me, is this question: How can Focusing enliven and support practices of doing theology – where we're realizing that people already want to come together in some form in community, and where there's possibility to come together under the umbrella of what we call faith?

There are ways of practicing that are life-affirming, that foster taking next steps together, so that our practice isn't so dogmatic; but it's more about, "How can we touch the living core of what our faith is supposed to be about?" I think that kind of question itself offers possibilities for ways of growth. That's something that's exciting for me on a personal level, given my own related tracks to Focusing and to practicing theology.

I think you can go to pretty much any industrialized country and see participation rates of organized religion there declining.

But the questions of, "Who am I? How do I live out my purpose in a community with others? How can we live together so that we are well together?" – those questions are not limited to a

particular faith. Each faith asks that kind of question in some way. And if you can approach it from, “What's the deep question that's trying to be asked in that specific faith context, in the communities of people who rally around it?,” then there's real possibility for growth and development that just isn't there if it's only about, “You should believe this,” and that's it.

The ways that we practice can shed light on: Here's where hurt and harm is. A case in point: I identify primarily as Christian. Although if you try to pin me down, I'll have a bunch of names! But that's my home base. Here in the US, there are trends towards ways of practicing as a public Christian in a community that says, “You can only be Christian if you believe these things, if you are associated with these people, if you vote a certain kind of way.”

Well, if you look at it, if you are with it in a Focusing kind of way, you see that (1) there was some medicine to the practice – Christianity wouldn't have survived for 2,000 plus years if there wasn't some medicine to the practice; and (2) the ways that we organize and practice has supported regimes of oppression and hurt and harm for centuries.

So, when you bring the sense of, Here's the aliveness that calls us – here's the possibility that we can transcend ourselves and be more than what we were – there's the possibility to rediscover ourselves as human beings in community.

And if you aim towards those kinds of big questions, and if you do it in a way that's open and reflective and intended to not do harm, there's some real possibility for some life-giving stuff.

So, I'm hopeful – not only in my official capacities with Focusing, but in my own work of ministry, to be able to help us do more of this life-giving, life-affirming way of holding our spirituality. And I think Focusing is an ideal modality to help hold that because it's designed to help us sense into what's giving life right now, and what does this life-givingness call us to do.



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.