

Wounds and Gifts: Finding the Story that is Trying to Live Through Us

A Focusing Highlight Series Presentation, July 23rd, 2022

Jeffrey Morrison, MA, LMHC

“The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

Rumi

Introduction

There are two ‘doorways’ we will enter to help us find our gifts and story. The first is something in your own life experienced as traumatic or wounding. The second is working with an experience of great aliveness. Guided exercises will safely support your encounter with both wounds and aliveness, and help you find your strengths, gifts and the story trying to live through you.

Following a brief overview of trauma from a Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT) perspective, we will explore Presence in both our physical and feeling bodies, followed by finding a safe place to work from. This will allow us to stay emotionally regulated and safe while working with uncomfortable memories.

Trauma can be something that **initiates** us to a deeper experience of Self and connection to others and life purpose. To facilitate this with clients, therapists benefit from being connected to *their own story of trauma and healing*. From here unique gifts are discovered and inform the healing journey of the therapist and client alike.

Lakota Prayer

Wakan Tanka, Great Mystery,
teach me how to trust
my heart,
my mind,
my intuition,
my inner knowing,
the senses of my body,
the blessings of my spirit.
Teach me to trust these things
so that I may enter my Sacred Space
and love beyond my fear,
and thus Walk in Balance
with the passing of each glorious Sun.

*According to the Native People, the Sacred Space
is the space between exhalation and inhalation.
To Walk in Balance is to have Heaven (spirituality)
and Earth (physicality) in Harmony*

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Working with Trauma: Finding the thread through wounds and gifts

What it is:

Trauma is an experience or experiences that overwhelm the organism. If what was implied could not occur, the organism becomes blocked (a stoppage forms) and begins to shut down and/or seek out new behaviors in an attempt to carry forward experiencing. Our organism becomes stuck often at an earlier developmental stage which can interfere with current functioning. Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT) is less concerned with the story of what happened than with attending to where and how the client is stuck, so their trauma can unwind. It recognizes that trauma alters and fragments our identity. Post-traumatic growth is about working with the essence of the person and restoring their identity.

What happens:

Trauma brings a cascade of protective responses that may include severe inner criticism and vulnerable feelings such as shame, fear, and despair, and thoughts like "*I'm not good enough; I'm broken, defective or crazy.*" Unsuccessful attempts to solve life's problems become repetitive habits. Depression, anxiety, and addictions set in.

A client's self-concept or identity becomes a mix of these failed attempts to move forward. They become identified with their own story of repeating thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (attempts at change that fall short). These uncomfortable thoughts and feelings are what clients want to get rid of and need to learn to be with for change to occur.

Partial selves (parts) form a way of managing overwhelming experience. Some parts hold the trauma, some protect the trauma from our awareness, and others, like the Critic, protect by shaming us into action (or inaction). FOT sees *all aspects of our experience as having something positive to offer* and needing to be listened to. Only then can they integrate back into a whole self.

"Some wounds cut so deeply that they sever the mind from the heart and cleave the soul in two. Some traumas leave people so split within that they can only see the world as utterly divided. Before it came to mean a holy war waged by true believers upon unbelievers, 'jihad' referred to the battle being fought inside the human heart and soul."

Michael Meade *The World Behind the World* p. 77

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How we respond:

For a Focusing-Oriented therapist, these symptoms provide a doorway into the lived experience of the other, a place to turn toward and be with their experience. Clients need to be able to be present with their inner sense of the situation, to turn toward themselves, to keep company with the immediate present-moment-embodied-experience so that it finds its way forward.

Post-traumatic growth is our ability to set aside the lens of diagnosing pathology so we can find the person *in there* and work with them to restore their identity. We are not simply trying to eliminate symptoms. We are being present with the one *in there* who *suffers from the trauma*, and how their life has been altered by going through life with the effects of trauma, so they can *restore their identity and thrive in the world*.

As therapists, we can learn to facilitate the client's experience of being present; in other words, to help them step back from how they identify with their experience. This is critical to allowing Felt Senses to form.

Clients then can begin to observe, relate to, and turn toward their experience with warmth and compassion. They learn to accept it, interact with it, and allow it to unwind in the life-forward direction that has been held up for so long.

Focusing offers a way of being present and facilitating deep contact with fresh *bodily-felt experiencing* that moves clients forward. Focusing allows clients to step outside their habitual categories of experience and sense freshly the wisdom of their own unique way forward.

I think we as clinicians live for those moments when our clients light up, speak from their unique voice, and live their lives in ways that allow new experiences of wholeness and better health. *We all have a deeper continuity and story trying to live through us. Once we are in contact with it our body will show us the healing journey home and we can live and share our deeper purpose.*

What we need to know: We all have a trauma story

Trauma can feel shameful and cause great suffering. It can be something we are told to get over and put behind us. Seldom are we shown how to unwind its troubling symptoms or mentored in a way that views trauma as a doorway into the deepest sense of our unique giftedness.

Trauma is not something to overcome; it is something that initiates us to a deeper experience of Self and our spiritual connection to All.

"Your life is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be opened."

Wayne Muller

We all came into this world and into a family, time, place, culture, and we all have a story of being wounded. This is our fate, our story, and our *personal myth*. It is important to me that as I work with my trauma, I work with my own process and how my own limiting story holds it up [Holds what up? Growth?].

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It is an old story, which needs fresh experiencing, compassion, acknowledgement, understanding, and many little steps forward. As I attend to my suffering, I also release my joy, discover my gifts, and more fully live out my unique contribution in this life.

My Story

I wrote an article for the Folio entitled, *Hidden Trauma: A Personal Story of Living with Dyslexia*. It was difficult to write a story about my own wound because when we enter our wound all the shakiness, fear, self-criticism and doubt return. Here is how it begins.

"In the fall of my senior year of high school, I began my search for a small liberal arts college to attend. I had not been a stellar student. In fact, school had seldom been a place where I felt good about myself. I did, however, have some confidence in talking about myself, even though I was by nature shy and introverted.

I was interviewing with the director of admissions at a small college when he leaned forward and said to me, "I just want you to know that your SAT scores don't mean that you are mentally retarded."

How I realized I was dyslexic

It wasn't until my daughter, Kelsey was diagnosed with dyslexia that I read the book, *Overcoming Dyslexia*, by Sally Shaywitz, M.D., and had one of those "aha" moments in which my childhood and educational struggles began to make sense. I too am dyslexic. I have since recognized that most adults come to this realization about themselves often when a child is struggling in school and is diagnosed by a specialist.

My daughter had always been a very confident child and engaged student. When reading became the center of learning in first grade, she changed. Unable to keep up and perform with the rest of the students, she became anxious and developed stomach aches.

Dyslexia and learning to read (my daughter's story)

Being able to learn how to read would carry forward a life process for a child in first grade. When the implied sequences of being able to read do not occur, the organism adapts in predictable traumatic responses of fight, flight, or freeze. Anxiety, depression, illness, and behavior problems begin to form as a way of coping with the blocked or stopped process.

These very behaviors are attempts to solve the problem that the stopped process presents, but they don't carry forward the life process beyond the stoppage.

Imagine everyone around you being able to do something important, and you cannot. In fact, the harder you try, the more frustrated you become and the further behind you fall.

You cannot see what it is others are doing to be successful, nor is your teacher able to explain anything to you other than to encourage you to "keep up" or practice more of the activity that you are unable to do in the first place.

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All you can experience are your failed attempts to solve the problem. Over time, this situation generalizes into other learning experiences, the way you see yourself, and what is possible in your world.

The English word *trauma* is a direct translation of the Greek word for *wound*. We all have a story of being wounded by life. Let us learn to stop measuring “how bad it was” and respond to how it held us up, re-oriented our life, and began to define our sense of self worth. Something moved forward and often something was hidden or protected until the day we can heal the inner war and claim all of our-selves.

“Until we have a sense of the story trying to live through us we miss the meaning hiding in the wounds we carry.”

Michael Meade *The World Behind the World: Living at the Ends of Time, pp. 75-76*

Exploring the Wounds We Carry: Your story

Trauma can hold up some important aspect(s) of life. We feel wounded. Life doesn't work out so well for us. Anxiety, depression, and addictions lead to checking out (process skipping). We become angry toward the world and ourselves. For many of us, this begins in childhood. We may feel broken or less-than. We lose touch with any inner sense of who we are. We try to orient our life by outside standards and measures. We lose touch with the story that is trying to live through us as well as the spiritual vitality beneath our wound.

We are taught to cover up our defects and hide our flaws. We try to control our world and the people in it. We try to be strong and right. We try to shame and guilt ourselves into being good, yet it does not work. Being good becomes just another way of process skipping; trying to become what we think the outside world wants to see, not who we really are. Our wound, our stoppage continues to reiterate and generate more suffering.

“I realize that it requires a tremendous leap of faith to imagine that your own childhood – punctuated with pain, loss and hurt – may, in fact, be a gift ... it did not irrevocably shape your destiny ... Your challenge is not to keep trying to repair what was damaged; your practice instead is to reawaken what is already wise, strong, and whole within you.”

Wayne Muller *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood p. 14*

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Post-Traumatic Growth: Healing wounds and opening gifts

As I learned the deeper structure of Focusing, I encountered the deeper structures of my own being and how I learn. I was able to more fully trust my own experience and to be gentle with myself when I struggled. Focusing allowed me to unwind many tangles of fear and doubt.

If my wound is a disability that prevented me from being educationally successful when growing up, and twisted my own notion of self-worth, what then is the gift? One gift I have come to realize is my ability to sit with someone in his or her darkest moments. I will doggedly pursue them even when they want to abandon themselves. Another gift is a certain persistence and repetition I can sustain over long periods for both myself and in my work with others. I am realizing that my organism's painful response to being dyslexic has given rise to deeply enlightening connections with others.

Brené Brown, author and shame researcher, says courage is the ability to face one's shame in a way that allows you to do what you really want to do. Our shame is a **placeholder** for our trauma. Go there and you will find the wound and your gifts. It is not an easy journey.

We have Focusing

Our gift and our wound come threaded together. No wonder it is so difficult for people to follow the thread and unwind trauma and embrace gifts. Luckily for us, we have Focusing. Focusing allows us to be with whatever comes and appreciate the trouble it brings. It is a powerful practice of following the threads of our wounds and gifts so we can remain vulnerable to who we are becoming and to those around us.

Following the Thread: Exercises for discovering our gifts

We all have suffered and many of us have found something deep inside that has pulled us through and helped us be our biggest self. I refer to this as a gift. It is a unique quality about us that is often activated, discovered, and expressed during times of hardship and struggle. It can also be activated during a time of great joy and aliveness.

I would like to discuss and offer experiential activities so that we might find safe ways to both explore our own stoppages and how we found a path forward. Stoppages cause us to *version* new, fresh ways of being. The right trouble can lead us to healing and to a deeper experience of what we uniquely have to offer.

I believe this is essential to growing with Focusing. Growth is often uncomfortable as we encounter our fears, inner vulnerability, and places of shame. We can encounter harsh inner critics, protective strategies, and frightened younger parts of our-self. Focusing is a way of being with our experience in which we can step back and be-with it in a friendly manner. **It is very important to go slowly and keep yourself grounded in the present moment when doing inner work with tender places.**

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These exercises introduce a way to begin to be with our own wounds with our Felt Sense. They are a series of exercises about saying, "Hello" to our wounds and gifts from a place of compassion, as well as a beginning exploration of what got us to this present moment in our lives. It is important to choose something that isn't too big or uncomfortable to spend time with right now.

Finding Presence:

- Presence is the natural state of the self: calm, curious, interested, and able to act in mature and balanced ways.
- Presence is our ability to be a compassionate observer of our experience. As one client remarked, "I have feelings, but I am not my feelings"
- Presence is the experience of being larger than one's problems and emotions, able to explore with curiosity the experience that is there.
- This allows us to welcome our experience without rejecting or falling into it
- Making Soup!

Attunement: Finding Presence in the Physical and Feeling Body

Let's take some time to pause and notice our body on the chair.

Feel your hands and feet, your seat, and the weight of your body.

Bring your awareness to your breathing.

This is our physical body, our embodiment, and experience of "I am here."

Allow an in-breath to draw your awareness inside your body, sensing how it feels to be you from the inside.

We might also call this our guest house where we can welcome and safely be-with our experience.

Our awareness from the inside is what I call our feeling body or situational body. It is our awareness of how we carry our experience bodily. It is a reflection on "how am I?"

I am here (physical embodiment) and how am I(our feeling body) build our foundation of presence and awareness.

I invite you expand your inner space to include an awareness of others in this workshop and notice the feel of support from our interaction together.

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Finding Your Safe Place

Our first inner exercise is one of finding or creating a safe inner space or place to work from.

I invite each of you to think of a place that feels calm, beautiful, and safe to you.

This may be a place you know well, or you imagine. The important quality is that it is a place that represents safety, calm, and beauty and that you can visit anytime you like. In fact you can be there for the rest of this exercise if you like.

Imagine your safe place in all its beauty and calmness inside you.

Sense this place in all its richness, colors, smells, and textures.

Notice how your body feels in this place. Take a moment to feel your strong energy and the peace it brings.

Example: *For me it is lying on a sandy beach listening to the waves.*

Finding a Wound to Work With: The first door

Take some time to recall an event, circumstance or chronic situation that was wounding, caused suffering, and made a difference in your life.

There may be several situations and that's just fine. There may be a number of memories around a theme.

Allow yourself to feel what wants your awareness right now and feels manageable to explore at this time. Take your time to settle on one experience.

There may be several memories around a theme. Sense for a Felt Sense of the theme and some words that describe it like, "that whole thing with my mother, father or partner." If it feels more like a chronic situation, find a few words that describe it.

You might want to begin writing down words or phrases that capture the whole of it.

Example: *Education for me holds many memories of failure, loneliness, and shame.*

Sensing into Your Wound and Listening

Allow a feel of the whole experience to form while you stay calm, grounded, and present.

Allow yourself to sense into what got held up or blocked in your life as a result of this experience. What stopped, was no longer possible, or changed?

Allow yourself to get a Felt Sense of the wound, hurt, or pain felt at that time.

Inwardly ask this wounded place to say or show you something about how it suffered. Perhaps there was a loss of opportunity, confidence, or identity.

Take your time to sense its emotional qualities and point of view. It's like you're pulling up a chair and listening to your bodies knowing of how your wounding experience affected you.

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You might invite yourself to sense into what you came to believe about yourself as a result of this wounding experience.

Invite your whole body to let you know how it has carried this experience over time ... how did you survive carrying this for this so long?

Example: *I formed beliefs of inadequacy and found ways to hide and not be seen as a result of not being able to read or spell well in school.*

Take some time to write a sentence or two about your wounding experience and how it affected you.

Transition:

As you bring yourself back to this room we are sitting in, allow yourself to feel the rhythm of your breath and your feet on the floor.

From the sense of the support of the ground under your feet and the breath supporting your life energy. Perhaps you might bring to your whole body awareness a sense of the way that you survived this difficulty.

Allow yourself to really take in and sense the strength that helped your life to move forward on your path ... the strength that has gotten you to where you are today.

Finding Your Gift(s)

A gift is a strength or talent that can come into being when we are faced with a very difficult life experience or wound. It can be felt as a healing force and antidote to the shame and self criticism that developed out of our suffering.

"In many cases, this gift is what we wish we could have gotten from others – or been able to give to ourselves – during this difficult time."

Bruce Anderson

Let's take some time to bring our awareness back to our Felt Sense of how we have lived through this wounding experience. What helped you survive?

Sense for the energy that pulled you through the wounding time or experience.

See if it feels right to be with your strong energy. Allow your inner strength to be known and felt.

Perhaps you can sense the way it has a deeper connection to the unique person that is you. Does it in some way feel essential to who you are now? Does it play a role in what you do for a vocation?

Notice if what we have called a strength could also be felt as a gift, something that you do or give yourself that is healing and life giving.

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If it feels right, maybe you could invite this inner quality to let you know how it might want to be expressed more fully in the world.

Writing prompt: Let's pause and do a little writing.

I invite you to write a few words about your wound (what happened) and how it made you feel about yourself (how it shaped how you valued yourself).

Then reflect on what got you through it. How did you do that? What did you learn? What grew as a strength or emerged as talent or gift? (what has it helped you do?)

My wound is _____, It left me feeling or believing I was _____. What got me through that experience or time in life was my being able to _____ (strength or gift).

Example: *My struggles with education left me feeling inadequate, less than, and like I was a failure. Out of that grew a persistence for enduring hardship, embarrassment, and shame. What was initiated in me was my gift of sitting with people in their darkest moments. I know what that feels like and it doesn't scare me.*

Break: 5 minutes

An Experience of Deep Aliveness: The second door

Sometimes we are deeply touched by the beauty of the world. We have experiences that shake our soul and leave us with a deep sense of connectedness, wonderment, and appreciation for who we are. In these moments of aliveness something bigger opens in us but it often closes down as we resume our everyday life.

What if we turn away from our gift, uniqueness, destiny, or story? What if we say, "I feel big enough already. Go away and don't bother me." Isn't this what most of us do? The calling is too big, comes at the wrong time, asks too much of us, or stirs up too much trouble. *How many of us know someone who has turned away from his or her gift and it has caused serious trouble?*

The life energy that comes with our gift can be re-wounding. It can feel like the energy of a wound or trauma. No wonder following your bliss is so hard.

*"Maybe another reason we don't take up the gift is because there's a shadow dimension to following our bliss ... Even the word bliss comes from the French word **blessure**, which means, hurt, or injury, or wound. So when we are invited to follow our joy we are also led to an inner wound that our very quest needs to heal."*

Michael Jones, p. 66

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A Theory of Trouble

There is another aspect to gifts that I have discovered. Finding a gift can be an overwhelming experience if we are not prepared to grow bigger and accept its call. *When we tap into our uniqueness, our gifts and destiny begin to unfold.* Yet the heart's need may place us under great strain and burden. If we cannot muster the resources to hold a space for our biggest self, then we may collapse and become traumatized by the opportunity.

"We've been educated to lead a so-called practical and useful life. To receive our gift, however, implies that there may be a completely different life to be lived than the one we have settled for."

Michael Jones p. 49

Our gift or unique something is just below the surface ... waiting. There are times in all of our lives that something bigger wants to emerge and be shared in the world. Perhaps the most common expression of this is love. Love is an antidote to control and perfectionism. To love is to see and be drawn to the imperfections and vulnerability of another. It activates something in us that longs for connection and being seen and accepted for just who we are. In love we are not broken and that is very healing.

Our deeper self longs to stir things up. It is looking for the right trouble to stir the soul and initiate change. This process can even be rather reckless. In fact it keeps therapists busy at our craft! There is a difference between chaos and the kind of trouble that cracks open something fresh and alive in us. *It can be very challenging to both follow the thread of wanting and yet hold the space patiently for small steps to come.*

Our wounds have often taught us to hide our mistakes for fear we will be seen as less-than and shunned. Yet how often have you *made a mistake* only to realize it set you on a different path, one in which you discovered something you would not have otherwise? I am not saying, "Go mess up your life and see what happens." *I am pointing to those moments when our mistakes or circumstances may at first feel like a closing but can be an opening to something new.*

Real trouble has purpose hidden in it, says author and storyteller Michael Meade:

"We 'find ourselves' when ... (we are in trouble because) it draws on all our resources, making us more resourceful and more aware of capacities we didn't know were there."

Our gifts are threaded through our troubles or fate. Our fate is the circumstances that have given birth to both our troubles and at the same time have provided our unique way forward. We get into trouble to find the right trouble and thereby the right way to go in life.

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A Time When You Felt Deeply Alive

I will guide all of us through an exercise of finding and being with a memory of a time in which you felt most alive.

Lead in:

Bring your awareness to your physical body.

Notice your feet, hands and seat.

Sense the weight of your body and the support of the chair.

Allow your awareness to come up through your torso, neck, and head.

Allow your awareness to follow your breathing.

As you breath in invite your calm, beautiful safe place to be present in you.

Finding a Moment of Deep Aliveness

Allow yourself to search for an experience in which you felt alive, vibrant, and deeply connected to yourself and perhaps others.

Let's go slowly and drift through our memory. We may have many such memories, or it may feel blank at first. Take your time.

*It does not matter if what you find seems like a small moment or a big event. **What is important is that life touched you in a deep, fresh, and perhaps unexpected way.***

Allow your aliveness to be present and bodily felt.

Invite the wholeness of the experience to be in the present. Speak out loud beginning sentences with "I'm sensing, noticing, aware of" and so forth. Let the experience be occurring now.

Sense your body's energy and the way it feels to be you experiencing this moment.

Notice the environment you are in and if you are with others.

Breathe in the richness of the whole experience.

Explore the environment with all your senses. Sense what comes alive in you?

Is there something that opens or seems possible here which surprises you?

Take time and write down your story. Now read your story out loud as if you are telling it to a friend who is a good listener.

Imagine being the listener and write down the important aspects of the story without judgement. Then read what you wrote down out loud to yourself.

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Gathering what came:

What stands out about your moment of aliveness now? How does this show up in your life today?

Write something about the positive aspects of yourself encountered in the deep aliveness. Allow spirituality, connection, environment, relationships and more to come. Circle key words or phrases.

Example:

My experiences of deep aliveness point to a connection with an opening to beauty, wonder, awe, relationships, and wanting to share this with others. **My key words are connection, relationships, and sharing with others.**

Crossing the exercises:

Now I want you to take what you wrote down from the first exercise on wounds and gifts and what you just wrote down about a moment of deep aliveness. Reflect on both and notice how they can inform each other.

Example: From the first exercise I wrote

My experience with education left me feeling inadequate, less than, and like I was a failure. Out of that grew a persistence for enduring hardship, embarrassment, and shame. What was initiated in me was my gift of sitting with people in their darkest moments. I know what that feels like, and it doesn't scare me.

Example: From my moments of deep aliveness I wrote

My key words are connection, relationships, and sharing with others.

Example: How I combined them was like this

What I have learned through moments of deep aliveness is that being in dark places with others are really moments of profound connection, beauty, and sharing. I learned about that through feeling alone, isolated, and hurt. The story trying to live through me involves teaching and sharing how to listen and connect with others. Connection helps me feel alive. It is what I really was needing when I was alone. It is what I am doing with all of you today.

Now you try. Find a way to include your wound, your gifts, and deep aliveness.

There is no right way to do this. It is more an exploration of qualities of you. Take a little time to reflect and write.

The story trying to live through us is always something bigger than what has limited us, always growing, and wanting to emerge further, connect with others, and the world around us. It is not

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a destination or outcome. It is a continual process of interaction and becoming. *Each of us is unique and **that gift** is what the **world needs** and only you can share.*

Transition

It is important to put away our inner experience so we can be fully here in the present. If there is something shaky or upsetting say hello to it and let it know you hear it. If it feels right, let it know you will come back to it when you have time. It is very important to close past experiences in a way that allows you to dis-identify from them and return to this moment in time.

Gifts are bestowed and need to be shared. It is my hope and gift to all of you that some essential aliveness from each of you be shared and felt in this room today and can be taken back into the communities in which you live.

“You may feel like, ‘Oh, nothing I have could possibly contribute to the world,’ but it isn’t true. It isn’t true because you are a living thing, you are an organism and it doesn’t matter what you think about yourself, you are something that nobody else is. So you have a living understanding of the world, and the universe, that nobody else has.”

Gene Gendlin TAE transcript by Nada Lou, 2006, **p.3**

The Way It Is

There is a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you cannot get lost.
Tragedies happen: people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You never ever let go of the thread.

William Stafford

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Bio:

Jeffrey Morrison is a Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapist and Focusing Coordinator who specializes in working with complex trauma and teaching Focusing to therapists and other healing professionals. He has developed a FOT training program, which blends Focusing, mindfulness, and other embodied practices for unwinding trauma and restoring wellbeing. He lives with his family on Vashon Island, Washington. For more information, go to:

www.seattlefocusing.org

Contact info:

Phone: 206-935-7850

Email: Jeffrey@seattlefocusing.org

