

## Interview with ILC member, Guilherme Tostes by João Fonseca

Guilherme Tostes is the most recent member of The International Focusing Institute's (TIFI) International Leadership Council (ILC). Born in Brazil with Polish, German and Italian descent, he is a psychologist, psychotherapist and university professor who, in his spare time, loves to walk through the hills and contemplate the silence of nature.

Guilherme is a Focusing Coordinator with a PhD in clinical psychology, currently residing in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, where he teaches and coordinates the *Lato Senso* postgraduate courses in Phenomenology, Psychopathology, and Mental Health and Existential Humanist Psychotherapy at the Faculty of Medical Sciences in Minas Gerais (FCMMG).

TIFI wanted to know a little more about Guilherme and his journey, inviting him to an online interview with João da Fonseca from Portugal, who is a fellow Portuguese-speaking Coordinator. The interview transcribed below took place on October 31 through a very pleasant conversation where the notion of time and space got lost.

**João da Fonseca:** *Guilherme, tell me a little about your journey and how you got to Focusing?*

**Guilherme Tostes:** Well João, I always felt like a child out of place in this world. In my family and where I grew up, I was always surrounded by good people and cared for, but it seemed to me that the world only worked on a material level or that it only had material concerns. The theme of spirituality motivated me from an early age.

In professional terms, I graduated with a degree in psychology in 2007, but in 2005/2006 I decided to do an internship at [Hospital André Luiz](#) in Belo Horizonte, a philanthropic Spiritist Psychiatric Hospital that has about 160 hospital beds, and offers spiritual treatment to people in addition to conventional psychiatric treatment for various mental health disorders and crises.

When I graduated, the hospital created a position for me. I started working as a clinical psychologist in 2007 and later became manager of the psychology department. I stayed for 13 years, until the end of 2018. During my time there, my psychology team and I treated acute psychological crises together with the nursing and medical teams. Since the psychology team started their work, physical restraint and medicating of patients in acute crises was significantly reduced. So much so that a protocol was developed in the hospital where the psychology team was the first to intervene in these crises followed by, if necessary, the intervention of the nursing and medical team. This type of intervention, which highlighted the importance of a person-centered approach in conjunction with Experiential Focusing, was so significant that I ended up publishing an article on the topic of psychological intervention in psychotic crises.

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In 2007 and 2008, I did training in the person-centered approach in Belo Horizonte and, at the same time, a specialization in Jungian psychology. This was my initial passion, having fulfilled the initial training as a Jungian specialist, though not becoming an analyst.

Since I was a child, the economic inequality between people bothered me and this was one of the reasons I was motivated to create, with the help of some friends, **a non-profit network of social psychological** care in 2008. This network, RAPS, provides psychotherapeutic support to people with low resources, and has served more than 7,300 people so far.

In 2010, I became interested in phenomenology, studying with a Professor Miguel Mahfoud at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. Miguel opened me to the world of Husserlian Phenomenology, Edith Stein's Phenomenology, and also to the concept of Elementary Experience by Luigi Giussani, an Italian philosopher and theologian.

Elementary Experience argues that part of the human condition is a set of fundamental needs which motivate human living. What motivates a human being if not a search for truth, for justice, for love? At first glance it may seem like a romantic take on life, but it can be shown that these searches can deviate from their fundamental purposes and be destructive, for example. Observing the expression of Elementary Experience means becoming aware of the values or the ultimate meanings that motivate human events. With this awareness, one is able to have greater freedom, identifying axes or values present in the background of their experiences. If we stop to observe people in everyday life, we will see the void that permeates their lives; a void of forgetting what is most valuable and lives in each of them. Unfortunately, the contemporary human being cannot say "you" to anyone. This may be a consequence of the lack of an "I," lack of self-awareness. As Buber says, "it is when I become 'I' that I say 'THOU.'"

As I work with human mental suffering, I see that we need to regain interest in our person, as Focusing teaches us. If I know myself, I have more autonomy and freedom over my own actions. It is similar to Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and the search for meaning and how we need to recognize these values and objectives in our existential projects and in what we do. **The curious thing here is that I understood that these values are present** in the body and proposed a link between the Elementary Experience and Focusing, and how this link helps to reveal these values and these essences. It was a very enriched learning that offered me a lot of growth. In a workshop I held at the online Latin American Focusing Conference in 2021, I had the opportunity to present some ideas for this dialogue between Gendlin's thinking in and the thought of Giussani.

***J: And when did Focusing enter your life?***

**G:** I came across Focusing when I did my training in humanistic psychology in 2007 through Professor Walter Parreira. He had worked with Wolber de Alvarenga who was the first person I know of that worked with Focusing in Brazil, at the end of the 1970s. Then I had the opportunity to be a part of the course with Tomeo Barceló, who trained in

Brazil between 2009 and 2012 following TIFI's parameters of training. It was a group of students who brought Tomeo to do this Focusing training in Brazil.

All and all, I ended up being delighted by Focusing. The possibility that it allows to listen to people's souls; to offer more direct access to themselves and to their hearts. Merleau-Ponty asked, what precedes words and thought? He argued that it was the subject taking its stance in relation to his world of meanings. Buber spoke of the dynamic center of the person. If we think about the etymology of the word "heart" - *Kárdia* in Greek, "that came to give color," *Cordis* in Latin, which has to do with courage – it is the center of what drives us. I have thought that this "taking the subject's stance" is the expression of his heart, and I see that Gendlin presents this in an incredible way. Gendlin invites us to enter another dimension of human life, a life in communion, integrated. When we resonate the felt sense through bodily empathy, we are capturing, above all, the presence of the other. We agree on the fact that the word "Focusing" ends up not conveying the magnitude of what is in question, which is a focus on the living of the human process, where presence is. That's a lot. This is of an importance that words cannot quite grasp. I think that Gendlin's brilliant work, in my opinion, points us precisely to focus on the human heart.

So when I, who always felt a little out of place in this world, discovered Focusing it showed me all this "language of the heart," of feeling things, of feeling people. Something in me says that the path of a full life goes very much in that direction, and knowing this filled me with hope even in my professional practice. I finally felt more at home.

Gendlin, for me, pointed to the beginning of a path towards a kind of felt human interaction, which is beyond words. It is much more complex, much broader, and much more effective, since it is interested in capturing and interacting with the living presence of the person. What Focusing represents for me today is the desire to convey to people this new way of connecting, both with themselves and with others and with the world - this felt connection that it gives through the heart, through the dynamic center of the person. I don't think it's an exaggeration to think of a language that brings us closer to the truth of human living.

In 2012, I graduated as a Focusing Trainer and I started to want to promote Focusing here in Brazil. However, here in my country there were some struggles which prevented me from beginning this outreach for seven years. Finally, I made contact with Sergio Lara from Chile who hosted me at his house for a few days while I started my training as Coordinator (2019). With Sergio, Roberto Larios, Salvador Moreno, and the group from Argentina with Elena Frezza, I encountered a style of Focusing that touched me deeply because it was more experiential, organic, fluid and welcoming.

At that time, some people appeared who helped me start disseminating Experiential Focusing in a more solid and organized way. I had already created the Sapiientia Cordis Institute in 2014 which offered courses in the area of psychology, and the process of starting to spread Focusing in Brazil motivated me to create [Focalização Brasil](http://Focalizacao.org).  
(Focalizacao.org) - Continued on next page -

It is worth mentioning some people who contributed to this process, such as Walter Parreira and João Messias. Since 2019, we have had 12 classes encompassing more than 250 students. In each class we had scholarship students; we always seek to ensure that the student paying or benefiting from a scholarship, if interested, could carry out his training.

**J: *How did the opportunity to be part of the ILC come about?***

**G:** There were a few people who suggested my name for the ILC. Catherine Torpey and a few other people approached me, asking if I would be interested and so I expressed my willingness to contribute to the dissemination of Focusing. I think that the fact that I am in the academic world, having worked with mental health, doing research and also having an interest in phenomenology, helped to create this bond.

It is also important for me to bring Brazil closer to the international Focusing community, because as it is a very large country, it is sometimes a little apart from things.

**J: *How has your experience been so far?***

**G:** It's still too early to comment. I've only been there for a few months and I'm still getting closer to the group. It is a very harmonious group, very affectionate and dear.

**J: *Any last words for the international Focusing community?***

Certainly, those who know this precious resource which is Experiential Focusing, feel that we have an ethical duty to disseminate this knowledge. It is a revolutionary, and much needed today. We have a lot to do, and I believe that we should spare no effort in this regard.



*João is a clinical psychologist, Focusing Coordinator and psychotherapist with certification in Transpersonal, Existential, Focusing Oriented and Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy. He works in private practice and at the Liminal Minds Clinic in Portugal.*