

## THE STORY THAT WANTS TO BE TOLD

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*Joyce Kornblatt*

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years I've been privileged to work with writers documenting — in fiction and Memoir — personal, familial and cultural trauma arising from the tragedies of genocide, war and exile. To meet the particular needs of such people who come to me for guidance, I've created a process I call 'therapeutic mentoring.' Rooted in Focusing, I also incorporate some of what I've learned in a recent three-year training in Hakomi bodily-based psychotherapy, as well as decades as a writer and teacher of creative writing.

To demonstrate how a Focusing-oriented approach supports the process of those embarking on these narratives of bearing witness, I've invented in this paper a composite writer named 'Vera' and part of a session in which we work together on what she brings to me as her 'block.' While Vera is not an actual person I've mentored — that work remains confidential — her story resembles that of many I've actually companioned: survivors of the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, Ugandan atrocities under Idi Amin, South African apartheid and the Lebanese civil war. In our time, there seems to be no end to the suffering that arises from cultural/political violence, and also no end to the resilience of those determined to record and memorialize and understand the terrible traumas that mark their lives.

Through 'Vera,' I hope to deepen the reader's understanding of how much courage is required by such a writer, and how Focusing and focusing-related processes can help her carry forward into the next step. Often I find that someone like Vera brings with her one or more of a triple burden: 1) the need to be a 'perfect' witness for countless victims; 2) the struggle to write in spite of familial and cultural injunctions to stay silent; and 3) the encounter with an internal silencer who fears the writer will be either punished or emotionally destroyed by her memories and the act of recording them. Meeting these 'blocks' in a Focusing way can transform them into something new or become content themselves, rather than obstructions.

### VERA'S STORY

Vera, 75, arrives at my home office in Sydney for a private mentoring session. A friend who took a writing workshop from me has referred her. Vera is gregarious, intelligent and charming, but I also note her wariness — both confidence and fear live in her body. She wants to write about her girlhood, but each time she begins something inside stops her. She's written a lot about other subjects — books and articles in her field of 20th century French literature — so she doesn't doubt her capacity to make a good sentence and see a project through. In terms of the memoir, however, she's labeled the problem cowardice, failure of nerve, and says, "Maybe I just don't have what it takes to go back there." She says, "I always planned to write this book when I retired from teaching, but it's been two years now and it

doesn't happen." She's despondent and a bit angry at herself. I offer to work with her in a Focusing manner, explaining briefly what that would mean. Often what appears to the conscious mind as a 'block' or a failure of imagination or a *not-having-what-it-takes*, I suggest, reveals it quite differently when contacted in a Focusing process.

She takes that in, as if appraising what I've said. Then she offers me some of her story. Though at this point she isn't ready for an actual Focusing process, I see enough trust is establishing itself for her to share more information with me. We may get to Focusing this session, or not. We may have many more sessions, and at some point a Focusing process will happen. I can't know that at this point — I can only meet Vera where she is. She tells me she's Hungarian-born, Jewish and a Holocaust survivor. She speaks of these details in a tentative and tremulous way, revealing the child-like vulnerability that lives in this sophisticated and accomplished woman.

I'm also a trained somatics-oriented psychotherapist, and I'm aware of how much trauma may be held in this woman's body, how we will need to move slowly and tenderly, taking opportunities to appreciate small victories and depths of resilience. Often, the 'block' in relation to expressing traumatic memory is serving the good purpose of protecting the person from the flooding of the nervous system that excavating the contained trauma might precipitate. The organism — the person — saves herself from being re-traumatized by shutting down the attempt to 'tell the story.' This is not the same thing as an inner critic that inhibits the telling of the story — it is more a kind of regulator that functions on a somatic level of experience. At the same time, there may be a 'crossing' with fears from the past about retribution or madness. It's important in working with traumatic material to honor this defense that Vera brings to me as 'the problem.'

It's vital to proceed at the speed in which the person's own inner guidance suggests is wise for her. To give the person the 'unconditional positive regard' that Carl Rogers taught and demonstrated.

In addition to the few biographical details, Vera spends some time telling me about 'the problem' with her writing while she carefully avoids sharing anything more of the material about which she wants to write. "I'm a survivor," she ventures, and not much more — as if she's assessing the wisdom of revealing even that much to a stranger. She relates all the false starts and avoidance strategies, speaking with vivid humor, but I see the pain in her eyes, which the wit attempts to mask. She also catalogues her scholarly achievements for me, as if she needs to reassure me, and herself, that she is a capable person, this memoir is a special case. "I'm not used to failing", Vera says. "In fact, I've been a workaholic".

When she comes to a pause, I thank her for sharing that much of herself with me, and ask if she'd like to know more about how Focusing might assist her. She nods. I explain in more detail about the felt sense, Eugene Gendlin's Focusing model, Ann Weiser's inner-relationship Focusing, how I use the process myself in my own writing life as well as in my mentoring of others, and she looks reassured. I let her know she's in full control, and any time she wants to signal 'enough' it is fine with me. Gendlin's 'little steps' come to mind, and I offer that phrase as an intention to work together gently, 'taking little steps,' in no rush to get somewhere or fix anything. I invite her to sample Focusing by checking inside to see what

comes when she asks her body, “How am I about working in a Focusing way with Joyce?” She takes up the invitation, closes her eyes. “Something feels safe,” she says, touching her heart, and I can hear the primacy that word — *safe* — has for her.

Because Vera has meditated for many years, turning inward is a familiar movement, and we can begin our session with an ease others might not feel so readily. Were that not the case for her, I would have suggested we do more experiments together in meeting the felt sense, so that she could become comfortable with the territory that I’ll be supporting her to explore. When she asks the question to her body — “What’s this whole thing about not being able to write about my childhood?” — I can see that she is attuning, waiting, available for what will come. So far, the safety that is so crucial to her is in place, and the contact with the felt sense is possible.

Vera sits with her eyes closed for several minutes. This can feel like a long time to the Focusing listener, but I have learned to be patient with not knowing if the person is in touch with a felt sense or not. When she is finally ready to speak, Vera begins a cascade of felt-sensings and accompanying memories that might strike a reader as an unrealistically-fast unfolding of her inner reality.

But it is my experience that when someone is wanting to write about an extreme trauma, that wanting-to-speak, however blocked it might be, has brought the trauma very close to the surface. Once that initial ‘something’ is contacted inside in a felt-sense way, it is very difficult for the person to pull back into silence or confusion.

The story-waiting-to-be-told is a bit like a fetus being born — once the head emerges the rest of the body will quickly follow. The release is organic; if there is any difficulty at this point it’s not usually around the person shutting down again, but rather about the overwhelm that might happen as ‘this whole thing’ becomes conscious as an experience. In Hakomi work, which is based on Focusing and mindfulness processes, this release of powerful feelings around a long-silenced or not-fully-contacted experience is called ‘riding the rapids,’ and produces the good effects of catharsis and consciousness — but if trauma is being accessed, ‘riding the rapids’ can shift into ‘flooding,’ which can all too easily re-traumatize the person. It will be my function in what follows to attune to what is unfolding in Vera and what might be needed from me.

So, she poses the question to her body: “What’s this whole thing about not being able to write about my childhood?” — and we wait several minutes for a reply. Vera says softly, almost whispering, “A fist.” She touches her solar plexus and winces. “A fist in there.” I reflect back to her: “Something feels like a fist in your solar plexus.”

“Yes,” she says, “and it’s not mine. I can see anger on her face now, hear it in her voice. “So this fist-thing inside isn’t yours and something doesn’t like it inside you.”

Tears come now to Vera, and anxiety. She’s trembling. “It’s a bad fist,” she says.

A little-girl state is present in her body, her eyes are closed and behind them I see rapid blinking. From my Hakomi somatics training, I know that signals the arising of old memories. “Maybe there are memories coming now,” I suggest, leaving room for being wrong with my *maybe*.

She nods her head yes, again like a child. She's sitting now as a child would, with her feet turned toward each other on the floor. "He's hitting Papa with his fist!" She wails out the words. "And I can't do anything to help him!" At this point Vera begins to sob quietly. It's as if a membrane separating her from her past has broken, and the memories of that childhood time are experienced as if in present time. "You felt helpless," I say. "Helpless to save your papa. You're remembering that terrible day here in this room now."

I am consciously signaling Vera that she's survived that moment and is having a memory of it, rather than actually experiencing it afresh. Invoking a resource in her in the present, I say, "Can you and I, the grown-ups Vera and Joyce, be here together for the little Vera?"

If Vera remained identified with the suffering of that day in Hungary so many years ago, I might have moved into some somatics work to ease the flooding that can turn a Focusing process into a re-traumatizing experience. I might have placed my hands on her knees, or my feet on her feet, or offered her a pillow to cradle against her chest — some physical contact that would bring her back into her here-and-now body, into relationship with the present. In this instance, Vera is able to make that shift herself. The traumatic activation subsides organically, and the empowering, integrating insight arrives:

"I've been ashamed all my life that I didn't save Papa from the Gestapo that morning. They beat him up and took him away and I never saw him again." She's weeping, quietly now and with a kind of composure that is holding the pain. She is holding herself in her own arms, rocking slightly, as if she were a mother to herself. The trembling has calmed. Her whole system has softened.

"You've realized how you felt you'd failed him," I say. "And how you've carried that shameful guilt inside you all your life."

"I've been ashamed to write, that it would all come out, that people would know what a bad little girl I was."

"Something's been ashamed," I say, "and now something new has compassion for that child you were."

"How could I have fought off a Gestapo brute? But that's what I believed I should have done. I have believed it until today."

"Little Vera had that confusion," I say. "The adult sees how things really were."

Vera lets out a huge sigh that signals a shift. Her whole body has relaxed. She's not sitting like a frightened child now, nor like a rigidly-defended woman. She begins to speak about the story of her father's 'arrest,' and how she and her mother were sheltered in a convent for months, then spirited out of Budapest to England just before the mass deportation of Hungary's Jews. From England, Vera and her mother traveled to Australia, where we are sitting together now.

## CONCLUSION

Through the use of Focusing, Vera has had a profound opening in her first session — meeting the life-long shame she’s carried unconsciously of not having been able to save her father. In subsequent sessions, over the course of a year, she will work with additional layers of resistance that she finds in the process of writing her story. She’ll begin to touch on how much the fear of being shamed resulted in a perfectionism around her scholarly work, hindering her in the writing of the memoir. Freed now to speak, she will find she has to ‘say it all perfectly,’ and who will be the judge of that? Such an inner critic is never satisfied, and without the deadlines imposed by scholarly journals and conferences, she can see how she might never be able to complete the ‘not good enough’ memoir. As that belief softens via Focusing work with the ‘one who needs to get it perfect,’ another layer of blockage arises to be met and understood: if she finishes the book, she’ll lose her final link to her father and lost Hungarian girlhood. The goodbye she could not say as a child is finally possible, and Focusing allows Vera to see how much she doesn’t want to say it. “I never really grieved,” she says at that point in our mentoring work. “I just shut down to all the sorrow.” We’ll spend some time gently allowing the waves of grief that want expression.

All of these ‘strata’ of resistance will become part of Vera’s writing—she’ll discuss in her book what she has to face and process in the present in order to narrate the past. And this act will become the integration the traumatized self requires. A writing project begun as a guilty obligation to another becomes, through a Focusing-informed process over time, an act of self-respect and personal healing.

It is important to state that this process of mentoring and the writing it frees is not always a fluid and ever-opening experience. Old structures can re-form in the body/mind; long-held beliefs find ways to insist themselves again into our nervous system, dream life, and cognitive functioning. And yet the capacity to meet these ‘obstacles’ again and again, with the gentle gift of Focusing, actually allows for an entire shift in *who one takes herself to be*: though difficulties remain, the sense of them as fixed and impermeable changes. For me, this is the most important realization anyone I mentor can have. My work is not to make the ‘obstacles’ vanish — that is impossible and presumptuous — but to assist the writer in coming to a new relationship with them. As Vera uses Focusing more and more in our work together, and on her own as she writes, she encounters her very being as a creative process that is revealed to her by the ‘problems’ that once seemed insurmountable, when it came to writing about her past.

For Vera, the key shift will remain the discovery of her shame in our initial Focusing process. She will include that shaming in the writing itself, owning it, seeing her memoir as a witnessing of what happened to her family decades ago, as well as a narrative of the aftermath of those events — how the past has lived on in her. Being able to make this connection between past and present brings a level of healing to Vera she hadn’t expected. This comes as the result of cultivating, in our work together, the capacity of Presence to hold the young Vera and the older Vera with compassion. She will meet many forms of ‘the critic,’ and will learn ways to either engage creatively with these judges and managers, or to simply ask them to ‘sit over there’ while ‘I do my work over here.’ She finds a new way of empowering her-

self that's rooted in self-respect and patience. In one meeting she tells me that the most she had hoped for was 'to get all this off my chest once and for all,' as if ridding herself of a toxic substance. What she comes to find is far more positive, and intricate, than that.

Far from making the suffering worse — or simply excising it as one would a sickened organ — she opens to the scale of it, seeing how it has functioned within her all her life. She can now acknowledge how large a burden she has carried, and how resourceful she has been in the face of it — accepting what is available to her now. What she had carried in her conscious mind as a narrative of a victimized family transforms as she works into a meditation on memory, resilience, and self-forgiveness.

I have seen this happen in so many of the writers I have mentored, who come in imagining that they have a specific story to exorcise or to present to the world as their responsibility to others. They discover as they work in a Focusing manner, the layers of intricacy and responsiveness in themselves to which they had not been attuned. What seemed like a known story that the person was having difficulty writing becomes a new or expanded narrative that is fuller, richer, and surprising, opening up layers of intricate depth, that hadn't been consciously known. These discoveries, as much as the re-telling of the memories, heal the soul who believes herself to be defined by the past, or who fears that the past could still destroy her. Focusing offers the writer with a traumatic story a way to become bigger than the pain, and what had been a haunting can now be transformed into peace.