

PARTNERSHIP, FRIENDSHIP AND MENTORING

Thérèse Fortier and Solange St. Pierre

We believe that it will be of interest, to share what a difference our partnership experience has made to various levels of our personal development. We have something valuable to convey, in order to encourage this practice as a way to touch what is needed to fully express ourselves as human beings. We also want to illustrate from our experience how a Focusing Partnership can be a wonderful, enriching relationship tool.

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Thérèse

My name is Thérèse Fortier. I am 82 years old and retired from teaching a few years ago. Many people from the Focusing community know that I have been suffering from Parkinson's disease since 1996. I also suffer from chronic back pain. I did not find relief in spite of all the treatments that I tried. And so I had to resign myself to taking pills for the rest of my life and staying at home with my feet glued to the floor. I often feel isolated and sad to see that my end is approaching. My disease cannot be cured, and the symptoms can only worsen. It is a degenerative disease, and we do not know which symptoms are the next on the list: difficulty swallowing... no longer being able to write... *Life* is escaping by small steps. Sometimes I imagine myself leaving here to go into palliative care... no longer to be able to come back.

It seems to me, having lived through various stages of loneliness — that I actually feel less lonely. I have learned. I have found my way by small steps... gradually. Focusing by Focusing, I desensitized myself to the panic and fear of loneliness. Now a part of me feels less panicked, less jammed. Spending a day alone at home is no longer a tragedy. The anxiety associated with the disease is still present, but it does not persist so long. Sometimes I do not know that I am anxious, but my belly is bad. When I bring my attention to it, the belly tells its own story. I know that my problems are fixed in my body, but I am less prone to dramatizing them so assiduously, and I can say that this gift comes from a long listening relationship to my inner world, which has often been assisted by my partner's benevolent presence.

I met Solange in the summer of 2002. At the end of an intensive training, where I was present as a volunteer, I shared with the group my deep desire to find someone who would like to form a partnership with me. Then, to my greatest satisfaction, Solange St. Pierre raised her hand and said, "I would be honoured to be your partner." That was the beginning of our adventure.

My body relaxed deeply. Let me tell you how happy I was. I asked her, "Why not start right away?" We are now in our sixth year of sharing our experience (mostly on the phone because we live more than a hundred kilometres from each other.) In the beginning, Solange, who lives in Montreal, came to my place, Trois-Rivières, so that we could get to know each

other a little better. Our first meeting took place in August 2002. Since then, we have missed only few weeks, when Solange has taken holidays and workshops.

Writing to you about the beginning of our relationship and the fact that we have been very constant gives me a warm feeling of happiness and solidity. I have been searching for a soul mate all my life. I am now 82 years old, and I am proud to say, "I harvest what I have sowed!"

The most important benefit we have noticed from this experience is our inside transformation. Our total mutual involvement has led to remarkable changes. Moreover, through this magic tool of weekly Focusing, I can see clearly that in addition to having tamed both my loneliness and illness, I came a long way in all my intra and interpersonal relationships.

Yes, of course, the little anxious Thérèse is still there, but being attentive to my internal process allows me to take care of every little feeling and all the physical sensations that accompany them. Slowly, with the empathic listening of Solange, in the half-hour allotted to me, I find an opportunity to transform my anxious lifestyle. I can say that in contact with my friends or my family I feel more assured, and I can sense a certain inner quietness. I am stronger. I have fewer doubts about my emotions and my perceptions. I feel more confident inside me about what I have to say. For example, it happened that I let go of certain people with whom I had believed myself to be in intimate relationship.

Through being available for this kind of experience, this weekly reserved time, I was helped to discover that the implicit is always there. My breathing tells me that I feel good. Gradually, step-by-step, the many problems towards which I turn my attention are shifting. I feel a great wellness when I write this. I know that during the last three or four years, something in me is feeling better. I appreciate my relationship with Solange. I must say that this relationship differs from all other relationships that I have experienced. Having this constant listening and sharing with one another without giving our opinion, has led us to an intimate relationship of friendship. The clarity of this flexible, transparent and authentic relationship allows me to live in a more relaxed way.

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Solange

Reading what Thérèse has written here, touches me deeply because I know her very well. I know her concern for transparency and authenticity, and I found it in her writing. Our history is worth telling because it is a beautiful one. It is the story of two women passionate about Focusing, who attempted the adventure of a kind of intimacy that few friendships reach.

I am 55 years old. Thérèse could be my mother, but our relationship did not look like a mother-daughter relationship. I remember a Focusing session at the beginning of our exchange. I had made the trip to Trois-Rivières because I did not feel at ease with an exchange by telephone. Sitting on the couch, I started to come into my inner world, and I was taking things from my childhood, these old things/places that had never been listened to. I felt this great solicitude for the little girl that I had been, and it was so good to finally be heard. In turn, I listened to Thérèse and... magically... her little *inside* girl vibrated at the same pace

as mine. I had the feeling of being in the schoolyard with her. I had the certainty that if I had met Thérèse when we were both six years old, we would have experienced great epics. This sense of complicity and joy shared by two children, sensitive, curious and mischievous, has always been present in my relationship with Thérèse.

In our six years of productive partnership, I made many discoveries about the mysteries of relationship as well as those of Focusing. These discoveries open doors and lead to surprising pathways *inside*, full of treasure and fresh insight. We have widely explored our child's wounds, our loves and friendships' sorrow, and our anxieties facing the unexpected and difficulties of our actual lives. Our friendship has grown from our Focusing partnership — and — a few times Focusing was needed to explore different aspects of that relationship. We did so to the best of our knowledge, with Janet Klein's model.

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Thérèse

It happened to me last year, that I was feeling sadness about some uncomfortable aspects of our relationship. On Tuesday evening, during our usual exchange, I proposed to Solange an "Interactive Focusing" session. She said, "Yes, of course."

Solange is the type of person who does not always answer the phone and who does not return messages quickly. She needs withdrawal, to remain alone for long periods. My needs are different. When I feel alone, sometimes it becomes too heavy, and I need someone to respond immediately to my call. Because we are different, our relationship brings discomfort, such as may occur in any human relationship. In this particular context, it seemed to me that the discomfort could not be ignored or set aside. I had no choice. I had to talk about that discomfort so that it could be heard. It was too present, too close. I felt a blockage, a regression to my old patterns. This time was not very sweet, not very happy.

With empathic words, my partner then helped me to go along these pathways that I know well, in these internal places, where I had often been, without development or transformation. This half-hour during which I heard myself talking about our relationship enabled the implicit to emerge, and I became a creator of a new part of Thérèse. This part of me can say a thing as it arises, thereby allowing the relationship to evolve and transform itself. This process brings new attitudes, and then new behaviours follow.

I want to say that this type of communication between us has allowed our relationship to become closer. Relationship-Focusing as we practice it is a wonderful way to heal conflicts and increase intimacy.

Two or three years ago, some friends said to me, "Mon dieu, Thérèse, you've changed." And when I think about *all that*, Gene's paper — which staggered me in 1976, came back in my memory. This paper, "A Theory of Personality Change" translated by Fernand Roussel, and used at the Montreal Interdisciplinary Centre (MIC), introduced me to Gene's theory on transformation through Focusing.¹

I must say that before undertaking my beautiful and transformative journey through Focusing, I first learned humanistic psychology with Yves St-Arnaud and had built upon it as a basis for learning. Gene Gendlin and Yves St-Arnaud are two psychological humanists.

Recognizing that I learned from these two great and gifted masters who have great influence in the world of psychology makes me proud to be among their students. I cannot keep all that just for myself. Hum! I could say that my felt sense is “spacious” in my belly right now. Saying: “a need to expand... to grow”

I need to make this digression, to name all of these milestones on my journey. It is like being in a Focusing process right now. The moment opened, and I spontaneously touched in this article all that was *underneath*. I touched what it was that *carried forward* the level of my personal transformation. According to some schools, the personality does not change. Gene brought something else, and it touched me. I needed to know that a transformation of the human person was possible, and that this transformation could be achieved through Focusing. I also know now that it is important to practice Focusing on my own, in order to subsequently be a Focusing partner, as I am with Solange. I needed first to experience the inner process, then be able to go further — being accompanied by someone else.

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Solange

Now I see three distinct stages in our journey that have been described by Thérèse. The first is that we had to live the process on our own and recognize it internally. The second is the ability to go into that place inside of you, where you are able to listen to yourself being accompanied by someone. And the third is to open a transformational space for the relationship that is being built between the two people — this opening leading to changes in all of our relationships.

I had to do all these steps one by one to really understand their profound meaning. The last step is “relational Focusing” where two people are evolving in a relational environment. However, all these steps go together and influence each other. We have to keep an eye on each. Now, I better realize the difficulty of practicing partnership early in the training. The place inside is too fragile, too weak, to allow someone a little awkward to *go there*. I understand why it is so important to recommend to beginners only to reflect back, and just be present and attentive. It is also clear to me that two people already initiated into the world of Focusing are doing *something more* in their exchanges, especially when these exchanges will continue over a long period. Maybe *the more* is contained in the knowing the rich texture of the implicit.

There is now another important aspect that I want to emphasize, and which derives for me from a sustained partnership practice. I am of course talking about coaching someone in a new path, this opening towards a new life direction leading “elsewhere”. I am talking about mentoring. When I decided to become a Co-ordinator for the Focusing Institute, I asked Thérèse to accompany me in this direction. I could have chosen another mentor. I looked at different possibilities and the inner voice was always saying internally, “No... I really need someone who knows me from the inside... someone who knows my issues... holes where I fall... round about way... meandering and blockages, which I have to face.” The mentoring process began therefore, a long time before the big step was there in a concrete way. For example, I remember coming back from my Weeklong Certification with a few books that I did not even feel able to read, because all were written in English. I felt like a poor child in

front of the window of a candy store. It looks so good, but it was not for me. Thérèse, because she had already been on this path, totally understood the great difficulty of being part of a network where everything goes into another language.

I wanted to teach Focusing “for all”, and I wanted to teach it other ways than the oral tradition. I needed French material. I started to read some books, page by page, with my dictionary. With great perseverance, I finally got to where I wanted to be, and was able to develop all the material I needed to teach the primary level that is usually provided by trainers. From there, I was able to teach in French, but I did not feel attached at all to the Institute, and I was thinking, as many others had done before me, not to renew my membership. I felt different, isolated and marginal (At the time, I called this “my homeless feeling”). I could not find my niche within the Institute. I would certainly have abandoned it, if I had not discovered, again with the help of Thérèse, Gene Gendlin and Mary Hendricks’ writings about their great desire to see Focusing evolving in a social and community form.²

Thérèse, listening to me week after week when I was sharing... *all about my sense of isolation*, began to send me some e-mails from the Co-ordinator’s List. One day in 2005, she sent to me an invitation from Robert Lee addressing emerging teachers who were able to start teaching after Certification. Thérèse told me, “Read it. It could be interesting for you.” I was completely shocked. Of course, I was interested, but how would I share with other teachers in this language — which I was then able to read, but did not speak? With many, many rounds of listening and encouragement, I finally climbed the mountain that initially seemed insurmountable. I went to Stony Point in 2005, and I came back with the idea of being able one day to teach my own Certification program developed from a social and community perspective.

I cannot remember all of the details, but I know that things have changed. I named my “macro” (according to the teachings of Robert Lee), and I worked on it in my own way with the support and listening of Thérèse. I confronted my fears one by one. I took one step after another. I found my way in the maze of my sorrow. I also discovered wonderful people with whom I have sometimes exchanged a few words, and whose ideas and practices of expansion and spreading Focusing deeply nourished and inspired me.³

The most important gift I have received in all this adventure was to recognize the power of that kind of support: partnership every week in a Focusing way. I am proud of the entire journey. Some difficulties are still present, and I recognize them when they emerge. I often need to return to the core and once again feel the movement of growth that is coming from inside. And I found, in each Focusing session with Thérèse listening, this feeling that someone is *knowingly* listening to me through each silence, each node, and each new little step, ready to recognize what is there — simply and without any pressure.

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Thérèse

I know that partnership is a way to bring someone somewhere (although we do not know in advance where it goes)... and certainly do not want to stop it. It was for me, and it continues to be, the way of a good and beautiful friendship and a way of finding acceptance of who I am.

After all these years of learning, searching and teaching in the field of helping relationships, I was looking for someone with an open mind. That is what I had in my mind when I looked for a partner.

When Solange and I began our weekly exchange, I walked on tiptoes, listening to her problems and difficulties with great respect. I was witnessing her way of seeing things and studying them. Sometimes silently, as if I read between the lines, I listened with great attention. I realized that this steady relationship had become, for both of us, a relationship of friendship between two people with an open mind. And that was exactly what I was looking for.

As I write these lines, I can say that I am, once again (at this time) in a period of doubt. I doubt the transformation. Have I really changed? I feel the lack again. I need to pause, to see if I can make one more step to get out of this discomfort. I do not want to remain mired in doubt, nor put *me* aside... abandon myself silenced, or even leave the relationship. Things need to be said in order to continue, and I have enough confidence in the strength of our relationship to say them (and even explore being listened to by someone else, if needed). Yes, I can say that I am no longer in the same place. I can express what I need without hanging to it... and move on to something else.

I do not even know how I became “mentoring Solange”. However, I can say that this part of our experience seems to me a wonderful opportunity. The adventure helps and stimulates me, among other things, to continue to clarify and articulate my own understanding of Gendlin’s philosophy. I continue to learn, to understand, and to follow the latest developments in the world of Focusing because Solange, speaking now what we call the “Bad English”, is able to attend Co-ordinators Meetings, as well as various workshops led by the Focusing Institute. I think I can say that this is a mutual support. There is something precious in seeing the way these people carry things. Gene has this ability to always be enriched through contact with people because he respects and welcomes the inner richness of each person. I think that is what he calls the “First Person Science”.

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Solange

We can say that partnership, friendship, and mentoring are three different threads in the fabric that weaves human relations. They are three different concepts or three separate units in the unit model, but influence one another in the field of the Implicit.

Partnership is defined as a listening-shared-time between two people in which each person is entirely free to explore whatever they want to explore from their inner world, using the tool of Focusing. Therefore, there is a certain structure and rules to be observed so the experience can be called “partnership”. We have always followed these rules with great respect, having finally found a very deep level of connection that has great value. When we turned the experience into “Interactive Focusing”, we did it only for a given period. However, we want to emphasize the uniqueness of each partnership experience, and we invite you to see the color (texture or form) of your partnership. Is there a word... or an emotional quality that might suit your own partnership experience?

Friendship is an unfolding feeling between two human beings recognizing their essence. We can only praise again this so rich form of human relationship. We realized that the framework that we have offered here for a sustained partnership practice has opened a space and deeply fed it. Because Focusing enables us to reach the essence of human being, it makes a space conducive to sharing and communion. In International workshops, there is often a feeling of deep connection that emerges between two people when they participate in a Focusing exchange. This feeling — which lets us see and recognize another person from their *inner being* — continues to exist for a long time after.

Mentoring is guiding someone on a path already traveled — and the less experienced one is ready to follow. This aspect, which was not provided to us initially, emerged spontaneously throughout our journey. The one who has already travelled the road respects the other's need to do it differently. The mentoring is done without intrusion and without agenda, always respecting the spirit of Focusing and its egalitarian model. This guiding model is also integrated into the new Certification program under the mentorship (model).⁴ Each student may follow his or her own path. Each one can design and build her/his own unique and original “Practice Project”, being accompanied throughout the training by Focusing and TAE tools. The model and our way of working recall the teaching of small country schools, where all students are in the same class and the teacher is often not much older or much more advanced in knowing than the students. We learn together with pleasure from the richness of everyone.

ENDNOTES

1. The Montreal Interdisciplinary Center, specializing in humanistic psychology, social psychology and organizational development, was created in 1969 by the team of the psychologist and consultant in human relations, Yves St-Arnaud (Yves St-Arnaud is also founder of Department of Psychology at the University of Sherbrooke). I worked for the centre from 1970 to 1981, and I met Gene Gendlin for the first time in 1986.
2. I want to mention “The Politics of Giving Therapy Away: Listening and Focusing” (GOL 2056), “Bringing Focusing in a Political Context” (Conference call published in *Staying in Focus*) and two papers from Mary Hendricks: “Grass Root Globalisation: Creating Free, Self Organising Spaces in The Social Body” (Keynotes address given at the 17th International Focusing Conference, Toronto, May 2005) and “A Focusing Group: Model for a New Kind of Group Process”. I had translated each of them because it seemed important to me to understand this particular aspect of spreading Focusing as a social practice, because this is what I want to do.
3. I think in particular of Robert Lee and Rob Foxcroft, and more recently, of Patricia Omidian, Nina Joy Lawrence, Beatrice Blake and Herbert Rice (Focusing and Psycho-social Wellness, Garrison 2008).
4. This program is available (in French and in PDF) at www.focusingquebec.qc.ca (Solange St. Pierre)

