

THE ART OF LISTENING WITHOUT ADVISING: My Own Focusing Story

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‘Counseling’ is so-called, because it generally requires that an individual defined as ‘the professional’ provides counsel, or advice for individuals experiencing crisis or disturbance in their lives. In the dyad formed between counselor and counseled, a basic understanding exists by which the latter is advised by the former.

It happened last winter, a season marked with memories of deep pain coursing through all my limbs. My legs, my hands, and my head, all so familiar to me, suddenly became an alienating reality. The pain pervaded my entire body, giving me no rest; my functioning relative to my husband and children became a persistent downward-spiral; for the first time ever I experienced the sense of incapability. Initially I waited, counseling myself to be patient until the pain relievers I was taking could do their job. I devised a number of compensatory solutions, and chiefly sought advice from doctors and holistic health practitioners on how to cope with the pain. But the pain held its own. The more I tried to cope, the stronger it lodged in me, paralyzing even my ability to protest it. Eventually I gave in to conventional medicine, which provided a clear diagnosis: fibromyalgia. I was told and understood that my illness meant ongoing pain. The only solution offered was medication, which did eliminate the pain quickly, but took away my ability to remember and to think. As a lecturer, I realized I would not be able to continue using these medications, which solve the physical problem, but create another kind of pain that I experienced as helplessness.

By chance, and after myriad try-outs of various treatments, I heard about a technique/process called ‘Focusing’. I decided to set out on a journey from Israel to the USA to learn how Focusing might assist me in coping with the pain. In August 2012, I participated in a conference, staying in New York for two days before the conference began. These were the two most painful days of my life: I was neither at home, nor at the conference, but rather in limbo, spending the next two days walking the streets of New York in pain that reached new peaks.

It was as though, at one level, I thought I might soon learn how to converse with this pain through Focusing, and at another level the pain seemed to be doing everything possible to remind me of its immense power and control over me.

On to the conference: In the classroom, Dr. Ann Weiser Cornell led us day after day through lectures and exercises. I was surprised to discover that in spite of the geographic distances represented by individuals from 18 different countries, physical pain seemed to cross all borders as a subjective experience. When one woman described her migraines, I felt my eyes tear up and my heart fill with strong empathy, because that shared nameless feeling brought about by pain was shared by us both. In fact, it is possible to conceptualize

the connection, touch it, and use it to create the sense of closeness until distances between us disappear.

The turning point for me occurred during a morning exercise during which a woman volunteered to demonstrate. As she entered inside her body, relaxing her limbs and describing the event on which she wanted to Focus, she expressed very strong emotions of both happiness and sadness. The demonstration ended, and discussion ensued in the classroom.

I was unable to concentrate, experiencing internal disquiet, which after three days of Focusing practice, I knew to define as a 'felt sense'. It seemed like a heavy gray cloud was pervading my body, filling my stomach, and floating upwards towards my chest, leaving a wake of distress, while at the same time, as I looked at the Focuser, her face seemed tranquil, and she was at peace.

Because I research the body, I took note of her skin color before the demonstration: her face had been red, but now had returned to normal and she looked comfortable. Her posture spoke of calmness. But I found the disparity impossible to bear. While the guide listened to her attentively, gently, and with such caring presence, she also did not attempt to rush in to fix-it.

I noticed how calm everyone else seemed to be, while I remained deeply uncomfortable. The class ended and I hurried to our teacher, waiting politely, but asking adamantly, "How can that be? Why didn't we talk to her? Why didn't we expand or instigate a discussion based on her descriptions?"

Our teacher took a deep breath and quietly said: "Because we don't do that. In Focusing, the guide listens with presence, but does not interfere." Disquieted even more, I joined the next session. During the exercises, I used Focusing to examine my own tempestuous emotions.

I began the Focusing process questioning why the absence of counseling causes me such discomfort, why I cannot just trust that the individual can find her or his own way, and why I immediately want to offer advice and orientation. First, I needed to relax my body. Breathing deeply, I Focused on all my external limbs. Slowly I began the journey that would be life changing and would reshape my insight.

Gradually I moved inwards, examining my need to advise, and suddenly a living, colorful entity was revealed to me. It was a large hand, moving as though directed by a mechanical force across a right to left axis, and it held a huge red flower. The hand was not destined for anyone in particular. No one claimed the flower, but the hand continued moving aimlessly from side to side. At this point I wanted to stop, finding the sensation somewhat frightening. What connection could there be between me and the hand? What did I need to do with it? How should I understand it? My brain went into high gear and immediately became resolute, demanding logical explanations, here and now. However, I remembered what I had learned earlier in the workshop: Try to silence my thoughts and move into the experience and the image. And that is what I did next, insistently opposing and politely rejecting the voice of rationality. It was silenced, and I continued looking inwards into the image. The red flower bled profusely, and a fine thread of pain, gossamer thin but strong and

powerfully present, traced the path of the gliding hand. The image called out to me, “I have no strength” and “I’m tired” and “I’m sick of this movement.” The exercise session ended, and I promised the image residing inside of me that I would return and reexamine it.

I came home. Some days later I returned to the image. Its messages became sharper, encompassing more and more areas of my life in which I was moving right to left and offering flowers to anyone who asked for them. Up until that point I held the thought that I was some kind of CEO organizing every aspect of my day. By the time I was 38, I had earned my Ph.D., written two books, was managing a home and a family of 4 children, and progressing in my career, but most of all, I had not really enjoyed any of it. Everything was organized in my mind in lists of achievements, targets and ‘projects completed successfully’. Even my family’s criticism was evaluated by whether my actions promoted me, or promoted an overall plan, or not.

And then I fell ill, a crisis that frustrated me, and my ability to achieve my goals. It limited the speed at which I could tick off my imaginary daily set of achievements. The illness effectively halted my ‘effectiveness’. But in the end, the illness that so severely hindered me healed my super-speed conduct. Only through Focusing did I realize that a bleeding flower, mechanically presented, is of no use to anyone. At this conscious stage, I decided to lovingly accept the halted process of my life and encompass it warmly, not fight it but contain it, and slowly bring about the cessation of the nonstop side-to-side movement. I promised the image within me, and the emotions and experiences surfacing from it, to revisit at a future point.

I joined the second stage of Focusing studies, my goal being to re-examine my image. New insights slowly emerged. My personal biography surfaced. As an adopted child, and as an only child to my aging parents, I had spent my entire life practicing how I could give my appreciation back to them. I was so good at it that I gave to others too, though they were not part of my family and did not need my giving. Even my choice of profession—counseling, facilitation and student orientation—furthered my need to give, at all times.

Other spheres of my life that have improved include being able to accept advice through more challenging negotiation with my ‘private’ internal counselor. I have also become more perceptive about blocking out advice that does not serve me, an outcome of the power of Focusing. Finally, and possibly most importantly of all, at the family level, I have finally succeeded in understanding my partner’s claim that I am too deeply into the rat race, an aspect that he has shared with me many times, that has caused him pain, and which, until I had my own Focusing realizations, I was unable to comprehend. I have set aside more quality time with my children, and my more relaxed attitude successfully mitigates those lists of goals and targets residing in my mind, and insists instead on finding enjoyment.

As for the pain, the fibromyalgia, and the increasing dosages of medication . . . ? Amazingly, the pain is melting away—which surprises me every day. I wake and wait for the pain like a loyal friend, but it doesn’t knock on my door. Some days, it does manage to slip inside and lodge itself in one or another specific places in my body. Then I Focus, create a dialogue of acceptance, and the pain leaves the way it came, disappearing quietly like a guest who knows not to outstay a welcome.

It would be wrong to end with the past-tense phrase, “Focusing changed my life”. Rather, Focusing is an ongoing orientating journey that continues through every moment of my day and my life. I am immensely appreciative of the wonderful teachers I met during this experience-laden course, and hope to meet again, during my continuing journey. My thanks to you all for your wisdom and unlimited patience. Thank you for teaching me how to walk the path of self-acknowledgment.

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