

# Processing my daughter's death with Focusing

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In recent months I have been introduced to the activity of Focusing. This has been a gift for me, for I have been wanting help in relation to coming to terms with the death of my nineteen-year-old daughter Fyfa, on 30 October 2019. She was flattened by a concrete truck while doing what she loved, namely, cycling. This article, giving attention to Focusing, is written primarily for the purpose of processing Fyfa's death. I hope this processing can be put to good use in, among other places, a restorative justice conference.

A valuable starting point is Ann Weiser Cornell's book *The Power of Focusing: A Practical Guide to Emotional Self-Healing* (1996). Ann splits the singular "I" atom – the self – into many people. In a section titled "Being in a relationship with your feelings", she says:

If you find yourself saying, "I am sad," try changing that to "*Part of me* is sad," or "I *have* a sad feeling," or "*I'm aware of something* that feels sad" Now the sad feeling becomes something you can *be with* instead of feeling all over, because it's part of you, not all of you. (P.17)

This seemingly simple move from whole to "part" makes an opening for her reader to a whole new world, namely, to become "a good listener to your self" (p.17) -- or, perhaps better, your many selves. Such listening with Focusing, "allows all parts of the self to be heard" (p. 21). When our many selves get to speak with a radical "accepting" (p.108), we can be in for something special: "a special kind of magic can happen when we are able to be with all the different parts" (p.21). Cultivating "ambivalence" could be a key: "it is the most natural thing in the world to have mixed feelings" (p.20). So is a certain "presence", including "staying in touch with how you are feeling in your body right now" (p.18).

Some months after Fyfa's death, a friend mentioned her and asked me, "How do you feel?" From memory, that was the first time someone had asked me that or a similar question, and I had little idea how to answer, and I felt at a loss and a bit inadequate, unable to respond to a simple question. (I did feel moved that he cared.) I had felt flickering moments of grief, and a lot of blank nothingness. Concerning one flicker of grief: I came to suspect the need for some kind of therapy some months ago when I returned to one of my favourite films, the 2008 Japanese drama *Departures*. This film, which I have watched multiple times, centers on a man who loses his beloved work/play as a cellist and then happens upon a job as a mortician. His new vocation, he discovers, can be as beautiful as making music. The way in which he carefully prepares the bodies, dressing the deceased, for viewing, was for me extraordinarily powerful. However, when I returned to the film after Fyfa's death I found I could not bear to watch the film, for it sparked images of the way in which Fyfa died. At the time of her death, I was advised not to view her body at all. (I was so grateful for a text from the police officer who was at the scene, saying that Fyfa's body was treated with "dignity".) Without having farewelled Fyfa at a face-to-face level, I am now wondering if I was confused for some time. "Is Fyfa really dead?" When I have thought of

*Departures*, I have found I need to divert my attention away from it in order to cope. What is this inside of me that may be confused -- and wanting to vomit?

But that is only a flickering feeling. Blank nothingness is the dominant feeling, with no sense of grieving. Currently (I write this paragraph in Oct. 2021), part of me wonders if 'I' (another part) am heartless and unfeeling. Part of me knows this is not true, but is surely wounded by that other part. (A wound upon the other wound of Fyfa's death.) I would love to know how to prod a valuable inner conversation that moves me toward "the centre of the maze", as Ann puts it (p.31). Part of me suspects another part is afraid of being overwhelmed by the reality of Fyfa's death. I hope that by reading *The Power of Focusing* a sequence of questions will emerge that can start my many selves off on a healing process.

I wrote to Ann, telling her that situation as I have just told it, asking her for a "tip", in the form of a sequence of questions. She wrote back and expressed, among other feelings, concern that given that the "horrific" event happened "just two years ago", "I suspect you are still in shock." This possibility had not occurred to me. I was reassured when she said, "I don't think there is any reason to doubt that you are already on a healing journey." Phew! A sigh of relief emerged. Ann then said this: "I suspect that in you somewhere there is a very wounded animal crawled into a cave." This metaphor struck a chord within. I'm not sure "where". I would need to check this out, tuning in to the "felt sense". Ann went on to say:

I do think you would probably benefit from a Focusing session with me. I usually just give people tips, but in this case I'm actually recommending a session, because this is not just about what to do, it is about the self-love and self-compassion with which to do it. But perhaps just hearing the metaphor of the wounded animal in the cave has already started a process of trust in your body's wisdom.

The word "trust" in that last sentence struck another chord within. It felt reassuring. When I reread the message later, I wondered if I lacked the qualities of "self-love" and "self-compassion" worthy of the names. What did these terms mean to Ann? How and what was she going to teach me? The word "com-compassion" at a dictionary level means "to endure" something *with* another person, to put ourselves inside the skin of another, to feel their pain as if it were our own. This makes "self-compassion" ... well, um, ... fascinating. This splits the "I" atom, as mentioned above. How does one become more self-compassionate? Some kind of self-listening will be central here.

There are hundreds of striking questions in *The Power of Focusing*, questions of a wide variety, including questions about questions. Concerning the activity of questioning, Ann offers this "tip":

Don't ask any question that starts with the word "why." "Why belongs to your logical mind, and your logical mind will happily leap in and take over. "Why" also contains a connotation of criticism or judgment (as in "Why are you holding the book that way?) If you really want a "why" question, try rephrasing it with "what." "Why are you angry?" becomes "What gets you so angry?" "Why are you hurting?" becomes "What happened that you're hurting?" (P 41.)

The day Fyfa died is a bit of a blur. My boss at work was contacted and asked to take me to my parents' place. (The car ride was deeply troubling. Lots of questions were swirling. "Why?" "Why?" "Has my father died?" ... Perhaps not .....) When I arrived, I saw my mother, father, and sister, who had red eyes. My sister, Caryn, told me in a shaky and firm voice to sit down, for there was some "terrible news". I can't recall much else, except not feeling much. I do recall wondering why I was not feeling much. Was something wrong with me? (I can now sense the need for Ann's more refined language, including sometimes splitting the "I" atom.) I also recall walking outside my parents' place and receiving a phone-call from an uncle, Peter Sewell, who lost a daughter to an epileptic fit many years ago. He told me a lovely story about Fyfa and then closed by saying that it would be good not to ask the big "Why?" question. There would be no answers, and just a range of bad feelings. After listening to Ann's advice about where that "Why?" can come from within the selves, I am now feeling indebted to my uncle's kindness. I suspect doing some Focusing on asking myself the right questions could be healthy for me.

I do vividly recall meeting my new love, Julia, at Takapuna Beach that evening to tell her the news. The night before, Fyfa had called me and we had a wonderful conversation on the phone for about 30 minutes. Julia had heard the conversation, and she had got for the first time a good glimpse of Fyfa's personality. When I told Julia what had happened with the truck, she screamed and started sobbing. I wondered why I was not doing the same -- why was I feeling almost nothing? (There was definitely a hint of judgment.) Thanks to Ann, "I" am getting a sense of a minefield to avoid.

I caught a plane down to Christchurch for the wake -- going with Caryn, niece Sophia, cousin Geoff Sewell and his wife Simone. We went to the site where Fyfa was killed. There was a bit of a gathering. At one stage I recall some deathly silence, which was horribly empty. This was broken when Geoff started to magnificently sing "How Great Thou Art". It felt to me like a fitting song for Fyfa, lifting my spirits, out of a blank feeling.

There were some speeches at the wake. Fyfa's boss was among the speakers. This usually super-healthy-looking person looked a wreck, and sounded utterly gutted. I had the same reaction to him that I had with Julia's anguish. I spoke, and told a few stories about Fyfa. While speaking I felt normal, as if I was doing the formerly familiar activity of teaching in front of a classroom. The contrast with Fyfa's boss was palpable. But doing the contrast with a "Why?" can be, I have learned, very unhelpful.

Let me now move forward in time. Just before I contacted Ann, I contacted a Focusing guide, Rachel Hendron. I talked about my feeling of blankness, or my lack of apparent grieving, and my desire to know more about it. We started to talk about the word "curiosity" in relation to the blankness that I have felt. I sensed that the word needed some richness. I said that the present curiosity was an assertive character. The blank part of me was intimidated by this assertiveness. Rachel tried out the word "bossy", and yes, this seemed to fit. "Aha!" This "bossy curiosity" sits in contrast to a "gentle and wise curiosity" (another "Aha!"), which had a large part in the writing of my book *Justice as Attunement*. While it might seem good to be interested in the blankness, it would be important not to be "in its face" (Rachel's fitting words again). Yes! The Blank needs to trust the gentle curiosity -- and it does not trust it yet. An image emerged of the "bossy curiosity": he is an interrogating self (like an aggressive lawyer), who is wanting to "bash the door down" (Rachel's fitting words). Actually, the image evolved into an "interrogation" at Guantanamo Bay, with waterboarding: "What can you FUCKING tell me?" I felt a trembling in my body when that surprising language surfaced.

The Torturer within me felt scared of doing the torturing at some level, scared of who he is becoming in the process of torturing. He was scared of getting out of control, and becoming the brute he detests. At a tense point, Rachel asked why the Torturer wanted to know about Blank. "I" laughed at the "Why?" question directed at the Torturer. Rachel laughed at the funny side too. Tension was dissolved. (And the Torturer seemed to vanish from the stage.) As for the Blank self, who seems to want to remain nameless for the moment, resembles a shy animal peeking out of the edge of a forest (see the opening of Chapter 3 of *The Power of Focusing* -- for this analogical resource). He is curious to explore the world outside, and to make contact with others, but he is timid and feeling vulnerable.

I asked: Might I do well to say hello to Blank? Is saying hello going to scare off Blank? Which self within me has asked those last two questions? I can feel my wise, gentle and curious self at work and play. Part of me feels that Blank is just as good as anyone else within me, and is worthy of being heard. Blank is necessary to help my feelings emerge. I had a good sigh of relief in saying those good things about Blank. Part of me suspects that Blank feels noticed or heard. That same part senses that some self-attunement is happening, in the form of harmonizing. Wow!! I have tears welling up in me. I am excited!!

I could tell I am on to something good with this Focusing.

Talking with Rachel was like being caught up in a very powerful dream. There were many "Aha!" moments. She had listened to me so well, sometimes finding the right words.

The last word in Ann's book is "Enjoy!". I did that and much more. I felt that different selves within me were heard in a whole new way. I recall feeling sad when the 60 minutes was up, for the fun play was over, at least for the time being.

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"Fyfa is quirky!", many people have said to me. And people have said it to her, too. One person was a teacher at Villa Maria College, Christchurch. This utterly mortified Fyfa, who was 14 years-young at the time. I recall a very lengthy conversation with her, trying to persuade her that, rather than being bad, quirky was good. The term suggested uniqueness and authenticity, among other qualities. I thought at the time that the word was fitting for Fyfa. I vividly remember her slowly attuning to what I was saying. Without wanting to sound patronising, there was some excellent listening on her part.

Now I am re-membering some other times of excellent listening on her part: our conversations about her desire to move from Villa Maria College to Hagley Community College, her desire for a huge tattoo ("body art", she called it) on her arm, and her desire to decline an opportunity to enter the Under-18 New Zealand Table Tennis squad in favour of pursuing other possibilities, including cycling tours by herself in the U.S. In all of these conversations, we heard each other well, coming to a meaningful and enriching attunement.

I am now re-membering with immense regret a time when I was trying to teach Fyfa to do some "active" listening. In particular we did an activity called "mirroring" (for a discussion of this activity, see my engagement with Harville Hendrix in *Justice as Attunement* – in my chapter on Listening). Fyfa was being dramatic and loud to me, and I said to her that this was the time to do some "mirroring". And I tried to explain. She became more dramatic and louder, and I became angry at her. She got angrier with me, and I got angrier with her. It was not pretty. We simply were not remotely hearing each other, except each other's anger. I wish now that "I" had had the wisdom to playfully split my "I" atom and to listen not only to my angry self (and its needs -- and this could have dissolved the feeling of anger) but also to speak gently to Fyfa. This could have been a magical justice as attunement (with me teaching and leading and guiding by example), but instead it was a

disaster. I wish I could speak to Fyfa now and explain what happened, what could have happened, and then ask for her forgiveness. I might do well now to try to forgive myself for the mess. How can “I” do this? What about my many selves entering into a treaty? At the core of such a treaty could be this version of the Golden Rule: Listen to others as you would have others listen to you.

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While reading Ann’s *The Power of Focusing*, I found myself rereading James Boyd White’s book *The Gospel as Conversation* (2013), which is described in the Foreword as “an exercise in the participatory imagination, placing us in the utterly human context of people who met Jesus, the utterly human context that is the crucible of spiritual transformation.” I was particularly drawn to a passage in a sermon on the death (and resurrection) of Jesus that mentioned how the disciples “grieved brokenheartedly” for him. The words “grieved brokenheartedly” struck a big chord within me. I said a resounding “YES!”: those words fit me in connection to my feelings for Fyfa’s death. “I am not heartless but brokenhearted!” Then came this image: “I AM brokenhearted.” For me, this means that God is brokenhearted over Fyfa’s death at some level too. During some more Focusing, these questions arose: What does it feel like to be brokenhearted like the disciples? And what is the feeling for me now? I got an image of the Twin Towers collapsing on 9/11. The planes entering those towers resemble the news of Fyfa’s death. I believe I received a huge shock/trauma but was not conscious of the shock/trauma. I can imagine future Focusing dealing with that shock/trauma.

I took the image of “brokenhearted” to another session with Focusing guide Rachel. We talked about the image of the Twin Towers. I began to feel my whole body trembling. I imagined what it was like in the lower floors when the planes struck: an earthquake. I connected this to hearing the news of Fyfa’s death. I was dazed and confused. Rachel suggested that grief sometimes does not know time, and it can wait until we are ready. My body trembling in the present time was part of the shock I experienced from the news of her death. Rachel mentioned that the trembling could come in waves, and it makes sense to be scared of them if they are big. I recalled the Christchurch earthquakes and how I enjoyed the smaller shakes that caused no physical harm -- it felt like being attuned to nature. Some tremors were, um ... joyful! I began trembling again, and this felt joyful. The session itself was starting off joyfully. Rachel wondered if with Focusing we were going to some dark places with a light, and with lightness. YES! Rachel wondered if the source of the trembling was my heart, the heartbroken heart. YES! I breathed a sigh of relief! Part of me sensed that the heart was relieved that it had been heard by “me”. Rachel wondered how the rest of my body was feeling. I could feel an ease in the tension in my shoulders and stomach and neck. I felt, ... Calmer. Yes! Rachel asked what this calm was like for me. Like the feeling during a good massage! I said to Rachel that our conversation was like a massage, without physical touch. But her words and gentle questions were touching me, my heartbroken being. The words were healing words.

Rachel reminded me of my quirky massage therapist in Christchurch (who asked me quirky questions.). When I said the word “quirky” to Rachel, I had a big sigh. Yes! Quirky was the right word. I realised that saying the word quirky in the right places would help me to re-member Fyfa. Re-membering her is of infinite importance. Tears are flowing now!! What do the tears mean? A sense of being heartbroken. After the tears, calm again. “A gentle little wave?”, asked Rachel. Yes! I am reminded of body-surfing gentle waves as a teenager.

That was so enjoyable. Just like this activity of Focusing. I am now thinking that I am equipping myself for some bigger waves, if they come.

I can sense some questions arising from the ashes: Can I resurrect Fyfa's playfulness and adventurousness in myself, and in doing so resurrect myself? Does my shift from "heartless" to "brokenhearted" have the quality of a resurrection? Just the liveliness of those questions gives me hope.

I can now sense that my brokenheartedness -- my dis-integration -- calls for self-love and self-compassion, as Ann suggested in her email. This passage from her book is helpful:

You may find that strong feelings, like panic or grief ... come up... When this happens, just say hello to the feelings. Acknowledge that there must be a good reason for these feelings to come ... Imagine that you can put a friendly arm around the feelings inside you. Say to yourself, "Yes, part of me feels this way." If you are alone, take time to simply be with the feelings, describing how they feel in your body, and asking, "What do you need me to know right now?" Overwhelming feelings will quickly become manageable with this kind of gentle attention. (P. 108)

That passage evokes this question: Who is Ann? I am imagining a compassionate spiritual guide and neighbour who has pursued a vocation helping and encouraging her reader to give their own neighbours within ("the feelings inside") "gentle attention". The feelings inside may well welcome such attention, and perhaps will discover their own "needs" in the process. If the various selves within can all be heard at different points of time, then there may be hope of an harmonic self-attunement. We might do well to try to internalise the "gentle attention" that Ann gives her reader, with the hope of coming to learn to draw out and love our many selves. People who write about education often point out that the root meaning of "to educate" is "to draw out" and that the teacher's task is not to fill students with information but to evoke the truth that the student holds within. The teacher is a loving midwife. (Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, imagined himself a kind of midwife. And he talked about the pain of labour, in giving birth to new ideas.) At best, in the context of Ann's "self-healing", the teacher(s) within our many selves can have a miraculous healing conversation with the student(s) within.

For me, the activity of Focusing offers an experience of a wholehearted love that I had not known before. Oh, how I wish and wish and wish I could have a chance to offer Fyfa the experience of this kind of wholehearted love. I can hear Fyfa now: "Shit happens, Dad!" She so kindly said those words to me when I was blaming myself -- beating myself up -- for the painful breakup between myself and her mother. I will do well to internalise Fyfa's kindness.

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Meanwhile, I have some pressing questions. How am I to respond to the construction company, Downer and McConnell Dowell, responsible for inadequate safety measures in place at the construction site where Fyfa died? How do I feel now? It is time for more Focusing! I have not thought much about my feelings towards the company, and I imagine this is because I have been in a kind of shock since the death. If I start to attune to what my brokenheartedness means, might I become angry -- an overwhelming anger?

I am anticipating meeting company officials at a restorative justice conference. I imagine that this could *possibly* be a healing process. Here I am reminded of the remarkable story of Emma Woods, who met with the person responsible for her four-year-old son's death (*Sunday Star*, Nov. 7, 2010). She took to heart the view that, among other matters,

anyone could make “a foolish or careless mistake that could have had potentially devastating consequences.” And she met (in a restorative justice setting) the person (and his family) concerned in her case in order to “get first-hand experience” of them. The outcome was deeply moving. This gave a rich meaning to the end of young Nayan’s life. (For a discussion of the Woods case in a wonderful book on restorative justice, see the final chapter in Christopher D. Marshall’s, *Compassionate Justice* (2012).) Having been a facilitator in restorative justice meetings for several years, I have witnessed the potential richness and fruit of such meetings. Let me quote from the final paragraph of Marshall’s book:

Restorative justice is not, strictly speaking, a doctrine of forgiveness, since forgiveness is a voluntary affair of the heart, not a predetermined facet of a formalized process. But by placing the healing of hurts, the renewal of relationships, and the re-creation of community at the center of its agenda, restorative justice paves the way for forgiveness to occur. And when, by grace, it does occur, the ship of justice reaches homeport.

I hope that, with “grace”, justice worthy of the name can be done in Fyfa’s case, and give rich meaning to the end of her life.