

DISCOVERING FOCUSING

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Coming to Focusing late in my career (I am in my early sixties), I have at times experienced a sense of shame that I didn't know all this stuff before. I am also aware that throughout my life I have had a tendency to react to new learning with some de-valuing my existing knowledge and experience, so, now, integration is a very important theme to me. It is Focusing that has helped me desire to 'gather together' everything I know and have become – all the parts of me - and keeping company with my shame about not knowing and my fear of being 'not good enough' is proving to be an extremely creative process.

I first heard about Eugene Gendlin during my person centred counselling training and was inspired by the transcript of his address to the Client Centred and Experiential Therapy Conference at Leuven, in 1989. I loved his spirit of inclusiveness and felt that that the following quote summed up what I aspired to as a counsellor and psychotherapist:

'When I sit down with someone, I take my troubles and feelings and I put them over here, on one side, close, because I might need them. I might want to go in there and see something. And I take all the things I have learnt – client-centred therapy, reflection, focusing, Gestalt, psycho-analytic concepts and everything else (I wish I had even more) – and I put them over here, on my other side, close. Then I am just here, with my eyes, and there is this other being. If they happen to look into my eyes, they will see that I am just a shaky being. I have to tolerate that. They may not look. But if they do, they will see that. They will see the slightly shy, slightly withdrawing, insecure existence that I am. I have learnt that

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is O.K. I do not need to be emotionally secure and firmly present. I just need to be present ... What is wanted for the big therapy process, the big development process is a person who will be present. (Gendlin, 1990)

It was a few years later that I read 'Focusing' (Gendlin, 1981) and quite soon afterwards heard, almost by accident, that Peter Afford was running the BFTA Focusing Skills Certificate course in my home town.

From my training and experience as a psychodramatist, I was familiar with tuning into my experiencing. The first phase of a classical psychodrama group is the Warm Up, where people engage in structured activities geared to releasing spontaneity, building group cohesion and helping people contact aspects of their experiencing or problems which need attention. However, in this context as in many other forms of counselling, psychotherapy and personal growth activities, the expectation is that we will be IN our experiencing, immersed in it, experiencing it intensely.

Person centred counselling eschews the sorts of structures used in psychodrama and emphasises non-directiveness, but I had still understood that the client is IN their feelings, thoughts, reactions and that the role of therapist is to be alongside aiming, as far as possible, to see the world through the client's frame of reference.

So, for me, the first revelation of Focusing was the notion of **being with** rather than in our experiencing and that this activity is inextricably linked with the concept of the **felt sense** – the term Gendlin coined to describe our not yet conceptualised or symbolised

experiencing. So I began to understand how if I am going to be able to contact and follow my Felt Sense there has to be a part of me which is separate from my experiencing, but close. (As I shall show later, this is significantly different from the familiar psychological concept of an 'observing ego').

In my previous experience this role was always played by the therapist, counsellor or, in a group situation, other group members, at least initially. One of the central functions of psychotherapists from most orientations is, through the quality of their presence with and availability to the client, to enable clients to begin to experience themselves differently and it is understood to be from this that both insight and change often arise. A common phase in therapy is when the client's dependence on the therapist's physical presence – to feel okay - loosens as they begin to internalise the messages (both explicit and implicit) that they receive from how the therapist is with them. This phase often involves conjuring up the therapist's voice, words or physical presence. As the work moves along, this internalised therapist is replaced by changes in the client's sense of themselves and ways of experiencing themselves and others.

However, in Focusing the first task is to develop or find within ourselves this capacity to be present, attentive and compassionate, in order to find the Felt Sense and to stay with it. In fact to do the opposite of becoming immersed in any aspect of it. So here is a way of the 'client' finding their own internal listener, becoming their own therapist, right from the start. Gendlin (1984) explains this beautifully: *The felt sense*

is the client inside us. Our usual conscious self is the therapist, often a crudely directive one who gets in the way of our inward client all the time. That therapist frequently attacks in a hostile way or at least wants to use all the old information, claims to be smarter than the client, talks all the time' etc., etc., *'Research shows that those clients succeed, who are client-centred with their felt sense.'* (my emphasis).

Client centred therapists aim to stay in psychological contact with the client, to experience, embody and communicate the attitudes of acceptance, empathy and congruence or genuineness and to work at relational depth. (See for example Rogers, 1957, Mearns & Thorne 1988, Natiello, 2001). Gendlin (*op cit*) continues in this paper to explore in some detail what client centredness means in the practice of Focusing together with some common pitfalls.

Elsewhere, Gendlin (1990) talks of this relationship in less psychotherapeutic terms: *'The client, and I, we are going to keep it company. As you would keep a scared child company. You would not push on it, or argue with it, or pick it up, because it is too sore, or scared or tense. You would just sit there, quietly...'*

Focusing has many applications and it is my understanding that the Inner Relationship Focusing (I.R.F.) model and its companion, Treasure Maps to the Soul, are addressed specifically to this crucial aspect of Focusing: this inner relationship and its potential for emotional healing. (see McGavin & Weiser Cornell, 2002a; 2002b). From

their many years of Focusing and Companioning Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin (2002) have synthesised their learning about how to support the whole business of staying client centred with our Felt Sensing. Remaining entirely faithful to the spirit of Gendlin's work, they have developed teaching programmes and manuals which explicate the intricacy of this relationship – between our experiencing and our capacity to **be with** it, which they term **'Presence'**. They suggest very practical ways in which we can develop and maintain our capacity to hold this attitude of 'compassionate curiosity' with whatever is there in us (the many different aspects of our experiencing self.) In *Treasure Maps to the Soul*, they have looked particularly at those areas where people frequently get stuck, lost, blocked or overwhelmed and developed metaphors, language and procedures which help in negotiating this difficult terrain.

The term **'Presence'** encompasses the whole quality of being with the many aspects of our experiencing and I.R.F. links strongly with the notions of multiplicity of self, developed in a range of psychotherapeutic models. (see Rowan & Cooper 1999). In his Inner Family Systems Therapy model (which McGavin and Weiser Cornell see as having many similarities with I.R.F.) Richard Schwartz (1999) uses the term 'Self' to mean something very similar to 'Presence' and affirms his belief that *'everyone has at their core a Self that contains crucial leadership qualities, like perspective, confidence, compassion and acceptance'*. He continues: *'The Self in IFS is less analogous to an executive or observing ego as it is to the spiritual concept of a soul....a*

transcendent state of compassion and calm from which emanates wise, healing energy. In contrast, based on assumptions from developmental psychology that such a healthy inner leader can only develop if a person received adequate parenting during a crucial early period, many psychotherapies view clients as lacking anything resembling this healthy inner state. Consequently, therapists try to build ego strength, where it is believed that little previously resided.

'The IFS model not only recognizes the existence of the soul-like state of Self at everyone's core, but has developed ways to help people access and release it. Once in this state of Self-Leadership, people can harmonise and heal their inner systems of subpersonalities or 'parts' that they experience as extreme thoughts or emotions.'

'With certainty in the existence of a healing, loving Self within clients, a therapist's task is transformed.'

I am very interested in Schwartz' model and some of his methods are familiar to the psychodramatist in me, but my reason for quoting him at length here is because of his clarity about the developmental psychology perspective, which guess is where I had been stuck and also because I have some difficulty with his framing this soul-like state as being a leader. My understanding of Presence is, exactly as he says, something which everyone has at their core, but the notion of it as a leader, organiser, mediator and the use of the term 'Self' gives me problems. (Schwartz 1995). What I have taken from IRF and from Gendlin is that Presence functions more as a receiver, listener

and inviter of parts of our experiencing each of which contains within it the seeds and secrets of its transformation. I also experience it as holding and inviting something 'more than' the individual Self or even Soul – and Schwartz does explain that: 'I believe that the Self is both an individual and a state of consciousness, in the same way that quantum physics has demonstrated that light is both a particle and a wave.' (ibid). On reading for this essay I discovered the phrase '**Self in Presence**' (Weiser Cornell 2004) which seems to get nearer to what I understand Schwartz's 'leader' to be.

Here is Weiser Cornell and McGavin's (2002) introduction to 'The Power of Presence':

*'Becoming as sun and wind and rain and soil. Open and spacious. Vast as the universe.
Trusting and knowing. Patient ... things grow at their own pace
Deep in peace. Accepting of all things as they are – fearing nothing.
Knowing what is possible – beyond impossible. And knowing nothing ... the place of the pregnant void.
Rigorous and gentle.
Loving and compassionate.
Whole.
Now.
Presence.'*

So my felt sense of Presence is that it is within each of us, at the core, as Schwartz says and it is also outside of us. I guess this is what Christians mean when they talk of God within us or the Divine within us – and I guess it also has connections with Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, and with concepts in many other religious systems. It is about a relationship with

something in us and something which is more than us. It continually leads us to the edge of awareness and helps us stay with this not yet known place.

When it is working well in me, I sometimes have the sense that something outside me is drawn into me, shines into me in this centre place – and something in me reaches outwards, is drawn outward to connect with the 'something more than'. And what is part of the revelation of Focusing for me is how Presence can hold together its opposites, so that I experience it as containing at the same time as it enables me to expand beyond my boundaries. Presence, for me, is like air and light AND like the most comforting parent. Presence is what it is and what it is not and, from my perspective, its mystery is an essential part of its power.

With the loosening of its attachment to the concept of an individual Self, it seems to me Presence also opens the way for less culturally specific understandings of Self and, whilst I am aware that my focus in this essay is on the emotional healing aspects of Presence, my sense is that it also has the capacity to bring us into greater relationship with the external world and our political and social responsibilities.

From reading Gendlin's (1996) and Purton's (2004), writing on Focusing-oriented psychotherapy I have learnt a great deal about how therapy works – when it does and when it does not produce change – about the fundamental importance of 'carrying forward' and how to encourage clients' capacity to be with their experiencing in a way which will allow the little steps and shifts which carry things forward. It has been helpful to think about my past learning and practice in relation to Gendlin's notion of 'blind alleys', where there is no carrying forward of experiencing, particularly in relation to emotional catharsis and I am encouraged by his valuing of the potential of all therapeutic models and all the 'avenues' which different therapies employ: '*A given therapeutic event can consist of images, role play, words, cognitive beliefs, memories, feelings, dreams, dance moves, muscle movement and habitual behaviour*' (p 171 Gendlin, *op cit*). So this reminds me that I can use all of what I have learnt, I don't have to throw anything away and that there is still the thrill of more discoveries as I continue to integrate Focusing into my life and work.

Further reading

MEARNS, D. & THORNE, B. (1988): *Person Centred Counselling in Action* (Sage)

NATIELLO, P. (2001): *The Person Centred Approach: A passionate presence* (PCCS Books)

ROWAN, J. & COOPER, M. (eds) (1999): *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in everyday life* (Sage)

SCHWARTZ, R.C. (1995): *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (Guilford Press)

SCHWARTZ, R.C. (1999): 'The Internal Family Systems Model' in Rowan, J & Cooper, M (eds): *The Plural Self: multiplicity in everyday life* (Sage)