

# Transforming our Inner Critics: the Power of Presence

Barbara McGavin

They stand in a dark and threatening line in front of me, their cowls shadowing their faces. Their sabres raised against me, gleaming bright against the dark hollows where their faces should be. I can feel the waves of malice rolling off them towards me. I can feel a writhing in my stomach of fear, almost nausea threatening to bring me to my knees. And then I feel a rising anger, a resistance to being threatened by these figments of my imagination. 'Begone!' I yell at them. They remain impassive, immobile. I look down and find that I have a light-sabre in my hand and I brandish it above my head and step forward slashing through the threatening monks. They fall, one after the other until all are lying in a heap before me. I feel a lightening in my stomach and rejoice in my taking action against these monsters.

Ah, if only that was the end of the story and everything was just fine after that. However, it didn't take long before those seemingly vanquished inner critics were back in full force as if nothing had happened. And then I had not only those critical presences but also the feeling of having been subtly and mysteriously outmanoeuvred somehow. I was at a complete loss as to how to proceed.

It was after many years of trying to banish, vanquish, control, belittle and dismiss my various inner critics with no discernible lasting effects that I came to realise that a completely different approach was going to be needed if things were to change in any kind of meaningful way. And I needed change. I was beset, as you probably gathered from the story above, by some pretty scary inner monsters that were making my life truly unpleasant. In almost every aspect of my life they would turn up and turn my stomach into a writhing mass of fear and shame.

So, what was I to do?

I had been practising Focusing for several years at this point (the early 1990's) and in many ways my life had vastly improved: feeling more grounded,

embodied, contained, centred, stronger emotionally, more able to cope with day to day ups and downs.

And I had been bringing Focusing attention to this area of my life as well. I'd been sitting with the parts of me that felt so bad about being criticised. I could sense them in my body very clearly. I would listen gently and compassionately to how this part or that felt attacked, undermined, as if something wanted to annihilate it. And it would feel a bit better for a little while, but something was missing. Give it a few hours or perhaps, if things were pretty good in my life, a few days and the attacks would be back. The sense of shame and pain would return.

The turning point came when two things came together for me.

For some time I had been feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the difference between how we had been treating what we called 'the inner critic' and everything else in our awareness in Focusing. I had been taught to dismiss the inner critic with a 'contemptuous wave of the hand', to send it away until it had something new to say to me. This jarred with the basic Focusing approach that whatever needs my attention receives gentle, compassionate, patient awareness. I started to wonder if perhaps what this critical part of me needed was the same kind of awareness.

The second insight had to do with a limitation of the Focusing process itself. I could feel in my body the part

of me that felt criticised, but not the part of me that was doing the criticising. As Focusing is essentially a body-based process of awareness, I had at that point no way of being able to Focus with a part of me that I couldn't feel in my body.

Just thinking about it logically I came to realise that if something in me is feeling criticised and there is no one in my life that is criticising me at that moment, then there must be *something* inside me that is doing the criticising even if I can feel or hear it. I started to wonder if I could act as if it were there and start to have a relationship with it, even though I couldn't hear it or sense it in my body.

Bringing these two insights together, I began to turn my awareness to an unfelt part of me whenever I felt ashamed, bad about myself, not good enough. I would act as if there was something I could relate to with compassionate curiosity. It was as if I was saying 'hello' to this unknown, unfelt part. And, lo and behold, it started to respond. Thus my journey of transformation of my inner critics began.

My colleague, Ann Weiser Cornell and I have learned many things since then about those parts of us which are behaving critically. We have learned how to spot them, the dynamics of how they operate in our lives, and how to relate to them so that they can release the positive, living-forward energy that is trapped within them. Here are some of the things we have learned and some of the models that we have developed.

## The experience of inner criticism

Inner Critic, Super Ego, Bad Parent – some names that we have for this experience. What they all have in common is that you feel bad when they are around. You feel smaller, weaker, your confidence undermined, your power fading.

Inner Critics bring shame, withdrawal, apathy, lethargy, depression, aggression, hyper-achievement, rebelliousness, defensiveness. They make us afraid to fully and freely express ourselves, develop our talents, reach out to others, live from our hearts. When we are busy coping with an inner critic attack, we cannot be fully present in our lives. We misunderstand what is happening around us. We are not able to respond in the present moment; we react with knee-jerk replays of situations that happened long ago.

Although everyone that I know has experienced inner criticism, it can be very helpful to take some time to notice just how this lives in your life. Different people experience their inner critic in different ways. Some people feel bad when they are around (I'm that kind of person). Some people hear them. Some people see the dire consequences of 'bad' actions or thoughts. Here are some common manifestations of being in the grip of something in you that is being critical.

- You feel ashamed, embarrassed, guilty
- You label yourself: 'I'm lazy.' 'I'm weak.'

- You diagnose yourself: 'I'm trying too hard.'

- You feel that you have to control some aspect of your personality or behaviour

- You feel bad when someone gives you friendly feedback

- You hear an inner voice that tells you just how you are failing, inadequate, bad which attacks you in a snide, sarcastic, mean, harsh, righteous, impatient, belittling manner.

And, of course, our natural reaction to that is to try to get rid of those kinds of experiences. Most of us want to.

## The Nature of our Inner Critics

Our inner critics are obsessed about the past or the future: how badly you have done, how inadequate you will be. They make generalised judgements about who you are and what you are capable of doing. They tell you that they know what's wrong with you, why you are in such a mess: They offer pat solutions for your problems. It often sounds like this: 'If only I were more...(hard working, loving, assertive...)', or 'What I need to do is...(work harder, forgive him, stand up for myself...)

When you hear yourself saying you ought or should or must or never or always... do or think or feel something, you can be sure that something in you that is feeling critical is active.

Inner critics seem to be determined to make you feel as bad about yourself as possible. They seem bent on showing you how incapable you are to deal with

this dangerous world. They let you know all the dreadful things that will happen to you if you don't heed their warnings and advice. They seem so powerful because no part of you wants to experience those dreadful things. But the truth is that they don't know how to tell you how they are really feeling: *they* are afraid. They are trying to control your behaviour, your thoughts, your feelings because they are terrified of something.

And any part of us that is afraid, needs compassion and company in order that it can become transformed.

### **Moving towards transformation**

Focusing on personal issues is like listening to something inside you that wants to communicate with you. And yet, like a shy animal or child, this 'something' may first need to discover that you are trustworthy and safe before it can come closer and reveal itself to you. And parts of us that are behaving critically are always frightened.

Almost always we have been trying to get rid of these critical parts of ourselves. But think about it from their point of view for a moment. Think about how you feel when you can see the danger in a situation and your warnings go unheeded? Frustrated? Angry? Critical?

I'm not saying that this part of us is right and we should simply agree with what it is saying. Far from it. However, to empathise with the difficulty of the situation that this part of us finds itself

in, is a big step towards reconciliation and transformation.

### **That in me which can keep company**

So what is it within ourselves that can empathise with this criticising part of us? Ann Weiser Cornell and I experience this as a state of being we call Presence. When I am able to be in this state, I am capable of keeping company with anything within myself (or, indeed, within another person) no matter how vicious, how terrified, or how alien it feels.

Presence is powerful. When we are in a state of Presence, energy effortlessly flows from us towards what needs attention. We are not overwhelmed; we are not denying. We are present to the truth of how we are right now. We sense what is there emerging into our awareness, with non-judgemental, open attentiveness. We do not judge whether some part of us is right or wrong. We don't take sides. We notice how it is, what it is like, what it is feeling, what it needs. We are able to keep company both with what is being criticised and the part of us that is being critical.

Some of the qualities that people experience when they are in a state of Presence include: compassion, clarity, receptivity, courage, curiosity, being here in the moment, responsiveness, empathy, being attuned to self and others, trusting in the power of life to find its own healing way forward, feeling separate (clear boundaries) but also connected, open, strong, whole... and

there are many more qualities that we could differentiate.

Whenever you relate to something you experience, and the quality of that relating is interested, curious, non-judging, you are developing your capacity for Presence. For example, when you acknowledge that you can sense something, or when you sense how some part of you feels from its point of view, you are deepening your state of Presence.

Being in a state of Presence creates the conditions where change occurs spontaneously, organically, effortlessly. When the right conditions are there the living-forward of the organism flows naturally. All parts of this painful dynamic contribute essentially to its positive resolution.

### **Some ways to access and deepen the state of Presence**

Ann is a linguist with a particular interest in conversational linguistics and has developed simple, but powerful language to help elicit this state of Presence. We have been refining this language since the early 1990s.

The most simple language that we use, 'I'm sensing something in me...,' has been found to have a profound effect. People who have been feeling overwhelmed regain a sense of being centred and grounded, no longer at the mercy of their emotions. You might try it for yourself. First say out loud, 'I'm feeling really sad.' Notice how that feels in your body. Now try saying, 'I'm sensing something in me that's feeling really sad,' and notice how that feels. Or, conversely, when something seems distant, almost not there, this language

can help it to be more available. For example, 'I'm not sure that this is important' can become, 'I'm taking some time to sense something.'

This language helps you to move your identification from a part of you that is caught in a particular emotion or point of view, to an expansive, inclusive, centred state of Presence.

A second way to enhance the experience of Presence is by carefully bringing your awareness into your body and noticing anywhere that feels easy, flowing, energised, alive. When you are in a state of Presence, the natural experience of the body is one of aliveness. This is true even when you can also feel pain.

### **A dynamic system of Controllers and Reactors.**

If we think about it for a moment, anything which is criticising is actually making an attempt to control the feelings, thoughts or behaviours of another. And an attempt to control demands a response of some sort. Most often what it gets is a reaction. We have noticed that these reactions take three common forms which correspond to the classic stress reactions of fight, flight and freeze.

When a fight reaction is triggered, we rebel against the critic, 'I am not stupid!' 'I don't care! I'm doing it anyway and hang the consequences.' These rebellious parts of us react against anything they feel is constricting. Many of us identify with these rebels. They can give us a feeling of energy and power which can be very seductive. Sometimes we only have access to

them when we are under the influence of drink or drugs.

When a flight reaction is triggered, we withdraw, reach for the drink or the chocolate, throwing ourselves into work, burying ourselves in a book or sports...

When a freeze reaction is triggered, we might blank out, become confused, numb, forgetful. It is as if something inside collapses and we can sink into feelings of shame, guilt, depression, self-doubt, exhaustion, defeat. It is as if this part of us is agreeing with what the critical part is saying. Many people live a great deal of their lives feeling under internal attack, identified with those parts of them that feel so bad. These reactions happen so fast that we are not aware of it.

If the first step to releasing this dynamic is recognising when something in us is under attack, the second step is acknowledging the part of us that is attacking. When we are caught up in the dynamic, we are merged with one side or the other.

Perhaps the most wonderful thing that I experience in my work is this moment of recognition and reconciliation when someone's relationship with a part of them which they had been experiencing as attacking them suddenly transforms. They may have been trying to control this part or even excise it completely from their life. They have been locked in a fierce battle that has been sapping their energy, undermining their vitality. And in a heartbeat they sense how this part of them is actually something that needs their care, their attention, their compassion. They begin to sense how it has been working incredibly hard to warn them and advise them – utterly isolated and reviled by the rest of them. They sense how it feels like it is the only part of us that can see how things really are – and what needs to be done to avert disaster. They sense how lonely this part of them has been, perhaps for years, striving, isolated, wanting nothing but their greater aliveness and safety. In this moment something which I can only describe as magical occurs. It is as if a light begins to shine in this darkest of places. And that light is love.

**Barbara McGavin** teaches Focusing full time to all sorts of people in as many interesting and beautiful places as possible (last tally ten countries on both sides of the Atlantic and both sides of the Equator). With her colleague, Ann Weiser Cornell, she has developed a body of work they call Treasure Maps to the Soul which uses Focusing in some of the most difficult areas of life, including self-criticism. They have also co-authored *The Focusing Student's and Companion's Manual*.

Barbara helped to found The British Focusing Teachers Association and is an Accrediting Mentor of that body. She is also a Certifying Coordinator for the Focusing Institute. She runs The Bath Focusing Centre, which offers courses to the general public at all levels.