

## **A Meeting of Words and Touch**

by Jack Blackburn

In 2004 I was part of a group of Focusers who met together at the International Focusing Convention in Costa Rica. We were practitioners of body-centered modalities based upon touch, movement, and somatic awareness. We created an interest group: the Bodywork and Movement Focusing Group. Since then we have presented workshops individually and collectively at the International Focusing Conferences. We also organized our own gathering, "Meeting at the Edge," in May 2007 in Italy. (Our next gathering will take place in Switzerland in Fall 2009.) We found that bodywork and Focusing connect in wonderful and productive ways.

In 2003 I developed, along with my colleague Cynthia Price PhD, a course called *Table Talking* (see my website: [www.presencingsource.com](http://www.presencingsource.com)). It was designed to teach bodyworkers how to combine words with touch. Cynthia Price is a researcher and her studies involve the combination of professional touch and verbal support for sexually abused women. She has used the Experiencing Scale,<sup>1</sup> a measure that has been used extensively in Focusing studies, to examine engagement and the relationship between engagement and health outcomes. Her studies have shown positive results.<sup>2</sup>

Table Talking encourages bodywork practitioners to accompany their clients with in-the-moment verbal interaction. The dialogue stays body-centered so that any emotional issues that arise can be confirmed or felt "somatically" (meaning in the body). We have developed a vocabulary that borrows much from Focusing<sup>3</sup>.

*Presence* - that state of body centered awareness in which one becomes conscious of the interconnectedness of all phenomena. I tell my students that the doorway of presence opens when we listen to or observe our own body's signals in the moment without trying to change or understand them. Hands-on therapists are in a unique position to teach their clients how to become present in the body for longer and longer periods of time and reap the benefits of fully clear conscious awareness from moment after moment. I believe that presence is the place where Focusing and bodywork can merge.

*Presencing* - my term for the conscious *choice* to practice presence. Once people recognize that this choice is an effective antidote to the fear and suffering they are experiencing, they can choose to activate their own shift in awareness. The body surprisingly is the key link to this change, since the body, it can be argued, exists only in the present and is reporting the present continually to its owner as sensations and awareness. Body practitioners say, "the body never lies." As a bodyworker of many years, I have noticed that the body is an incredible communicator because it always reveals one's state of being.

*Body Messages* - The body communicates through its various systems: mental, chemical, emotional, neurological, positional, sensorial. These channels of communication produce internal sensations, emotions, and thought. When thought is consciously directed towards tracking these internal messages,

thought changes from brain-centered and abstract, to body-centered and present. As we train ourselves to pay closer attention to these communications our body and mind form a somatic unit that is capable of registering both inner and outer phenomena simultaneously.

*Mirroring* - In my three-day workshops I teach students how to help their clients to discover what they are feeling moment to moment and how to mirror their clients' words and confirm what is changing under their hands.

*Listening with our hands* - In my course students learn to "listen" with our hands as well as ears. They learn that whatever a person is thinking or feeling can show up in the body *now*. Students practice Presencing while placing their hands on the client's body and thus learn to discern very subtle information coming from that body, such as muscle tension, skin tone etc, that changes as the felt sense changes.

*Felt sense* - functions as an in-the-moment doorway to self-truth. By contacting the felt sense, we become aware that the body is communicating in a pure language of feeling and sensation continuously. Like spoken language, this sensory language of the body has a varied vocabulary, including feelings, sounds, reflexes, colors, smells, words, and images.

*In-forming* - Literally formed from within. As we pay attention to our internal environment, the ongoing experience of presence in the body changes or *in-forms* us. Presencing brings us new information that reshapes our thoughts, emotions and body-state. When we apprehend the changes that are happening inside - we are changed! In spiritual direction the word "formation" refers to spiritual development. I use *in-forming* to refer to self-referenced developmental changes.

*Felt-Shifts* - when there is an undoing or releasing of our habitual thoughts and reactive patterns, this loosening can be felt as a parasympathetic shift, that is a shift away from tension and towards comfort in the body: warmth, relaxation, softening, and/or relief. A practitioner who is using touch can be taught to feel these shifts as they are occurring in the client's body.

I teach this method not only to body-workers, but also to counselors and business people. Anyone can learn to use their hands to listen to the body and thus accompany the inner experience of another. I have demonstrated this ability to listen with our hands to Focusing counselors in Japan. They have not been professionally trained to work with touch, but are open to the concept. They learn that the body's sensations in the present can be the touchstone between client and practitioner, their shared place of meeting. In this way they reach toward a shared experience with their clients. By sharing the body-centered experience both client and practitioner are changed.

To state this concept differently, our thinking mind seems to shift from one subject to another, from one time context to another, from one story to another. All of these flittings and absorptions are accompanied by bodily sensations that can be felt by the client and monitored through tissue tonus (or tissue quality)

by the practitioner. When both persons share these first person experiences, both can respond to the larger picture that is emerging beneath their mental patterns. It is the *teamwork* that results in true client-centered healing.

The following case study will illustrate what I mean.

*Elizabeth's arthritic and fibromyalgic symptoms were so severe that there was no way I could work with her by applying physical pressure. I had to use my hands as sensors rather than manipulators. My hands as I touched her were very soft. Elizabeth then sensed into her body and as various insights arose, I was able to feel her process with my listening hands. It was much like "no-hands" Focusing, except that I was able to feel the tissue changes as she experienced little lettings-go. Focusing was combined with what in bodywork is called "somatic awareness" on both our parts. She was willing to attend to where she was being touched; and I could confirm that she was present because I could feel her awareness in my hands.*

*I started the session by guiding Elizabeth through different parts of her body. This was like a Focusing lead-in. She reported various sensations, mostly uncomfortable, in some joints and muscles. I started to work with different parts of her body and she brought her attention to wherever she could feel my hands. I asked her to describe or put into words what she was feeling to the best of her ability, and she was willing.*

*So as I felt the tissue tone and movement restrictions, Elizabeth was telling me what she was feeling from inside. In the beginning, she would flip back and forth between the sensations in her body and what she was feeling emotionally. I found it best to mirror back what she was reporting but help her to translate emotions into bodily sensations. As she "came into" her solar plexus she said: "I'm feeling a lot of stuff... it feels like anger." I mirrored: "So Elizabeth, you're feeling anger here under my hands." Then I helped her presence. "Notice how the anger is showing up and give me a sense of what it feels like." She responded, "It feels like a burning pain, as if I have hot coals in my stomach... and the heat and the pain are radiating out to the rest of my body." As she said this I felt a palpable softening under my hands. I also noticed that Elizabeth was breathing more deeply. I echoed: "The burning pain feels like hot coals, right here under my hands..." She said: "Yes and it's cooling down now."*

*We continued this same process for about 20 minutes, moving from place to place in her body. Elizabeth became more used to reporting sensations, sometimes adding emotional content. All of a sudden she announced: "I've been saying 'No!' to everything in my life for 15 years, ever since my divorce!" As she made this statement, I was working on her right shoulder, which had been extremely painful to her for a long time. I was palpating the levator scapula attachment with my left hand while decompressing her rhomboids with my right hand. "So, you've been saying 'No!' to everything... come in right here Elizabeth"-- I tapped her rhomboids to indicate the place for her to put her awareness. "And notice what 'No!' feels like..."*

*As I said this, I paused, removed my hands, and stepped back so she could sense inside her, without associating what she was feeling with my hands. I observed that she was taking very deep breaths. I found myself saying to her: "What would it be like if you were to say 'Yes!' to everything?" I then brought my hands back in and we continued what we'd been doing except that as she reported her sensations she also said: "Yes!" I began to notice that each time she said "Yes!" there was a definite softening in the tissue. I could tell that her attention was right where my hands were, because I could feel some tingling sensations in the tissue and a palpable breath-pulse. (The "breath-pulse" is the displacement of any part of the body due to inhalation or exhalation).*

*It didn't seem to matter whether Elizabeth was reporting her experience or silently saying: "Yes." Under my hands everything felt freer, softer, and warmer. After about ten minutes of this she started to laugh, gently, quietly at first and then louder and fuller. Finally she said: "This is impossible... I feel no pain in my body! I feel like I'm bubbling over with energy! I can't believe this is happening!" From Elizabeth herself: "... about the case study. Honestly, I had to read your report a couple of times to remember. I know I was in a very deep place in our session ... and so it is that I don't remember so much of the specifics as I do that felt-sense of "yes" that I experienced. I'll never forget that. The case study is just a wonderful reminder for me."*

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, M., Mathieu-Coughlan, P., and Kiesler, D. (1969). *The Experiencing Scale: A Research and Training Manual*. Wisconsin Psychiatric Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Price C. (2005). Body-Oriented Therapy in Recovery from Childhood Sexual Abuse: an Efficacy Study. *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, 11, (5): 46-57.

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn, J. & Price, C. (2007). Implications of Presence in Manual Therapy. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, 11: 68 - 77.