

TYING THE THREAD OF BODYWORK, MOVEMENT AND FOCUSING

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INTRODUCTION

A small and diverse yet increasingly definitive sector of the Focusing community has been working together since 2004 to explore how Focusing as a process, and bodywork as a group of modalities, are influencing and enriching one another as body-oriented, client-centered approaches. The principal bodywork modalities investigated to date include manual therapies, movement, sound, yoga and somatics. The list is becoming further extended as more practitioners become attracted to Focusing.

This paper gives an overview of the relationships that are being forged between Focusing and bodywork. It discusses and gives practical examples of the synergies that can emerge. In so doing, it attempts to offer a credible rationale for pursuing these relationships more deeply, from both an academic and experiential standpoint.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NON-INTRUSIVE BODYWORK

In the prevailing bodywork paradigm, when a client receives a massage or any form of hands-on therapy the practitioner has been trained to have an agenda as a 'fixer.' The body is generally seen as the source of the pathology that needs fixing. The emphasis on fixing often leads to seeing the body as a mechanism that requires deep, hard, intrusive approaches. In this mechanistic paradigm the body is not recognized as a resource that can reveal unconscious needs or implicit remedies. Non-intrusive approaches, however, do not view the body mechanistically but recognize that bodies and minds are continuously communicating sensations and feelings. In non-intrusive approaches we attend to these communications. The body then freely reveals its own implicit remedies, unconditioned by negative life experiences and mental formations. By learning to feel and listen to the body's communications, the client can learn how to begin to self-heal, no matter whether he or she is very ill or merely having a bad day.

BACKGROUND

Focusing was originally developed during an era of deepening understanding of how mental states can affect physiological function. Focusing as a practice offers the experience of a unique relationship between body-process and thinking process. Eugene Gendlin pointed out how a bodily felt-sense is at the foundation of thinking and feeling and at the same time more intricate. Bodily communications are always in the present

moment. By listening directly to the body, practitioners and clients can receive raw data uncensored by pre-conditioned thought processes. When practitioners and clients attend to the kinds of feelings and senses the body is communicating, they become present to an inner state of observing and reporting that does not censor or judge. Gendlin and his protégés discovered ways to process those observations and reportings. Bodywork Focusers are learning how to apply those processes in combination with other kinds of somatic observations and data e.g. tactile, kinesthetic, proprioceptive, tonal, and postural.

AN 'EMERGING INTRINSIC' HYPOTHESIS

When a practitioner learns to elicit the client's *felt sense* or somatic experiencing, a healing or reorganizing principle seems to emerge from within the client's body. This reorganizing principle is intrinsic to the body and mind and becomes available in whatever way is most conducive to repair. Something innately restorative thus emerges from within the client's body-mind experiencing. These bodily changes can be monitored by practitioners through their hands and other sensory impressions. Correspondingly the practitioner as *witnessing-companion* may also notice feelings of freshness, surprise, and insight - a sort of somatic resonance with the client, a kind of sharing of this reorganizing principle.

Indeed, this witnessing-companionship may itself be the deepest reorganizing principle. In this space the client can discover that his/her experience is being met. The experience of being met is primal. It touches and resonates. It sets up an expectancy about formerly unshareable experience. It opens that experience to the daylight and the oxygen of understanding, possibility and hope.

GESTATION OF THE SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

A group of around fourteen Focusers, from five countries, five different cultures, speaking six different languages, and trained in a wide range of body-working and movement modalities, struck an affinity at the International Focusing Conference in Costa Rica in 2004, having formed an interest group at the invitation of Robert Lee, the IFC organizer. As they Focused together and shared their bodywork experiences, there quickly developed a common desire to explore the Focusing paradigm in their respective fields, and vice versa. The modalities represented have since expanded to embrace other somatic techniques that work with clients' body-centered awareness: examples include dance; presencing; toning; body mapping; yoga; shiatsu; body-centered psychotherapy and medicine, and a variety of new approaches that combine Focusing and bodywork together.

The increasing ties between bodywork, movement and Focusing were finally and irrevocably threaded together in 2007 at a unique three-day experiential event on the Italian island of Ischia, attended by forty-seven participants from Europe and the Americas. A full report on the event, titled 'Meeting at the Edge' (MAE), is accessible via the Focusing Institute website home page or by going direct to www.focusing.org/bodywork/maereport.htm

DEVELOPING APPLICATIONS

Here in summary are some key points from explorations that were carried out at MAE 2007 and since, and which are stimulating further studies and a widening of the field of applications. The full list of modalities informing the work of participants is in the report cited above.

Program of Creativity and Collaboration

It might seem strange to treat the program as an exploration of itself. However, the core planning group decided from the outset to develop a process-structure that would typify an overall best Focusing approach, and held an intention to create the conditions that would bring both safety and 'more than' to whatever modalities were offered at the event by individuals whose degree of Focusing experience (if any) was somewhat unknown to the organizers. Three preceding years of monthly conference calls and two intervening Focusing Internationals had provided the necessary degree of confidence that the idea of a *Process-Structure* could work: i.e. a framework that helps to structure interactions and directs attention to ways of generating and processing information. Like Focusing itself, *the emphasis here is not on content but on process*. Despite its previous successes, the core team of seven organizers (co-contributors to this paper) experienced frazzled nerves immediately prior to the opening of the event. What a relief we felt immediately after the whole gathering did a check-in, and the process of collective improvisation started to gestate!

Most of the work during the event evolved in small organic groups, with a substantial degree of interchange and movement between groups and a general sharing of experience at the end. The following paragraphs describe, sometimes in depth and at other times in outline, the ideas and experiences forthcoming from the groups that have reported on their work.

Bodywork and Focusing

Various bodywork modalities and their guiding principles were demonstrated, exploring how the practitioners applied the principles of Focusing in their different modalities. This group was also valuable because it is very rare for such cross-disciplinary sharing to occur between the various bodywork modalities, which in some part are competitive with one another.

Case Studies: No systematic research of case reports is yet in place. Here, however, are two abridged cases reported from core group members.

1) *Fifty-five-year-old male, professional writer, suffering from advanced case of shingles, excruciating pain, deep red discoloration of left chest and arm tissue – along nipple line, movement of left arm greatly restricted by pain and muscle spasming; No physical contact is acceptable – even self- touch; analgesics do not work. Client depressed, 3*

month writing hiatus, catastrophizing about poor recovery prognosis by MD. Bodywork practitioner decides to use Focusing to help the client process what is occurring in affected body parts, in hope of at least giving the client a reprieve from the vicious cycles of suffering that seemed to be made worse by his ruminations. Practitioner uses touch in unaffected body parts to monitor client's physical changes. Following the steps of Focusing in combination with various non-intrusive bodywork applications, the client was able to adjust to being in direct inner contact with the intensity of the pain. As things proceeded, the client was able to feel more and more different kinds of sensations in the affected region. As this was occurring, the practitioner could feel changes in his own bodily and mental state moving from 'fearful sympathetic' state to 'relaxed parasympathetic' state. The client was monitoring felt experiences including bodily sensations, feeling states that brought up memories and images, insights that seemed to synthesize all of those phenomena – including a shift in images that duplicated a shift to parasympathetic body responses. As the last of these image shifts took place the client experienced a palpable (to him and to the practitioner) Felt-Shift. When client and practitioner observed the skin surface of the affected area the bright red coloration had shifted to light pink. The client was now able to touch the area freely with no pain and move his left arm and shoulder in all directions. Practitioner and client continued to work together for a few years. There was never a return of the symptoms. The client, who had been a meditator for years, started incorporating the Focusing elements of this session into his daily practice. (Reported by Jack Blackburn.)

2) Thirty-one-year-old man who suffers from multiple sclerosis and is tetraplegic. Practitioner initially gave him Esalen massage alone - in the lateral (sideways) position, in which he did not become so disturbed when a spasm came on during the session. Practitioner then received client's permission to try something new by integrating Focusing into the Massage. "I then began to combine Focusing and touch in every session. We could go to the blockages in his body asking what, or how, he is feeling there and what are the sensations there; and we began through touch to listen together to his body. We followed through all the Focusing steps, and whatever movement or words that came from him I reflected back through touch. The felt sense and felt shifts were clear and he made significant progress. He improved his physical abilities and now feels more acceptance towards his life in general. He is Listening more to his 'bodywisdom' now and wants to learn Focusing to cope better with the challenges that come through his illness." (Reported by Claudia Conza.)

Movement and Focusing

In our exploration of bringing movement to the Focusing process we have begun to distinguish three kinds of relationship between moving and felt sensing.

1. A way of moving that prepares for the Focusing process and facilitates the formation of felt-senses: Gentle movements that facilitate simple patterns of activation and release, fully embodied breath, extension and contractions, activation of fluids and connection to gravity, create a sense of embodied safety and relaxed connection to one's own whole being. This awakened and relaxed presence to one's own body-person—a fully embodied

sense of self—supports the sense of inner safety that is necessary for the beginning of the Focusing process and the formation of felt-senses.

If this sense of inner safety were lacking, inexperienced Focusers might instead perform a ‘Focusing-like’ process that operated at the level of affect while never coming to the formation of a felt-sense proper. By this we mean to say that a ‘Focuser’ might feel into her/his emotions, check with her/his body sense of where they come from, surround them with an understanding presence (or find places without understanding), connect to a narrative around the emotions etc. *and yet never come to that specific organic carrying forward that the formation of a felt sense IS.*

We have found that inner-directed movements support a sense of deeply embodied safety and thus provide a resource that helps avoid emotional overwhelm and flooding *and provides the relaxation necessary for the formation of felt-senses.* Also, an inner directed way of moving is quite different from an anatomically functional way of moving and of sensing the body-self. It provides the opportunity to experience one’s own body as a subjective physicality, i.e. to see oneself from the inside. This process facilitates the connection between the ‘organic’ and the ‘symbolic’, a connection that is at the very root of felt-sense formation. This kind of kinetic preparation also aids the role of the Companion since it provides the foundation for cultivating a state of somatic resonance. In this state, the Companion allows her/his corporeal field to act both as a stabilizer and as resonator of the Focuser’s somatic, sub-verbal states.

2. Movement that is an initial handle for a felt sense: Opening the range of symbolization to kinetic expression can be very facilitating for the Focusing process because movement often comes before words and can facilitate keeping company to states that are by their very nature pre-verbal. Moving becomes a way of meeting a felt-sense and letting it blossom into a fully embodied state, facilitating an organic carrying forward that may not be discovered otherwise.

3. Moving that provides a kind of counter-experience to a felt-sense and helps in staying fully in touch with a felt-sense in a safe way:

Example: *While moving slowly along the floor, the Focuser was keeping company to a sense of invisibility (a feeling of no boundaries between self and the environment, almost transparency). She asked for the vicinity of her Companion, eventually placing her hands and feet on the Companion's body and gently pushing. The moving point of contact with the Companion allowed for a counter-experience to the ‘invisibility’ (hands and feet reaching and meeting somebody, restoring a sense of boundaries). In this case the kinetic connection with the Companion, as well as the slow motion out of which it originated, did not symbolize the felt sense but rather supported a safe counter-experience that nurtured the capacity to be fully present to it. (Reported by Francesca Castaldi as the Focuser.)*

Psychotherapy and Bodywork

Most psychotherapists participating in the MAE 2007 event had a background of Focusing, and thus already recognized the wisdom of the body. They took the opportunity to experiment freely with body movement and touch interwoven within Focusing-oriented therapy sessions.

Particularly, the taboos of using touch in the day-to-day practice of psychotherapy received much attention. With their focus on the therapeutic relationship, the psychotherapists recognized that strong processes of (counter-) transference can be evoked when they introduce touch in a session. Important but unexplicated feelings can arise between client and therapist. Striving for a maximum of clarity in the client-therapist relationship is a central issue in psychotherapy. Yet, not all clients (or therapists) are prepared to recognize these evoked relational reactions and to deal with them.

Whilst touch can hold potential hazards for the psychotherapeutic process, it also holds opportunities. By banning touch from the therapeutic interaction, it can be argued that clients are being deprived of a vital and essential form of human interaction. Practicing touch during the MAE 2007 event enabled the psychotherapists to feel gradually more at ease in considering *how* it might enhance the psychotherapy session. It was recognized that psychotherapists need a great deal of mentored practice using touch in a safe environment in order to weave it successfully into real therapy sessions. Having clients apply empathic touch to themselves was recognized as one of the safer modes (in a relational sense).

There are many complicated issues involved here, including professional ethics and cultural diversity, which warrant further investigation, particularly in the light of the positive attitude generated within the group. Traditional trainings might become one of the major targets to put under the microscope.

Further Experiential Exercises

Visual imagery: This was explored experientially in a Focusing oriented exercise to gain a sense of the physiological and energetic patterns that shape each of our bodies uniquely and revealingly.

Focusing Attitude: When we introduce Focusing into our professional practice and bring it to our moment-to-moment living, we find that we are starting to cultivate a personal attitude that becomes easily and instantly identifiable in our relationship with others and to ourselves. The transition is highly rewarding and can be infectious. It creates a special field where we are able to experience everyone, ourselves included, as holistic beings at four levels: physical, energetic, mental and emotional. In a practical demonstration that follows the six steps of Focusing, combined with empathic touch or massage, it has been found possible to help the 'client' to connect in a new and accepting way with his/her 'inside knowing' of places of unease about the body.

Inner Voicing: The possibility of being able to elicit a felt shift by sensing into, and expressing, one's inner relationships non-verbally through 'voice frequency resonance' assisted by movement and touch, was first explored in triads at the 2005 International Focusing Conference. Following this through at MAE 2007, each person was encouraged to improvise individually on whatever inner pre-articulated sound began to emerge during his or her process, with or without touch. Pointers emerged for further experiments.

Method: *Participants were invited to 'be with' and follow the course of their internally generated sounds (e.g. breath, heartbeat, tummy gurgle, chuckle, yell, spontaneous melody) or, in some cases, recalled sounds (e.g. sea waves). This led to a variety of spontaneous body movements and vocal 'resolutions'; and some acknowledged felts shifts in perception. The process was then replicated with the entire group of 40-plus participants in a moving collective attunement experience. Participants requested further exploration of this method of non-verbal internal connection, expression and communication. (Reported by Larry Hurst.)*

Contact Balance: The ethics, comfort/discomfort and experience of weight sharing between Focuser-mover and physically supportive companion were explored in dyads and then shared with the group.

Body Mapping: This was a step-by-step means of entering more deeply into felt sensing and felt experiencing, using a personal pictorial tracing of body shape and feelings, layer by layer.

Three-way Focusing Touch Partnership: Consider how a Focusing partnership creates a shareable space, then imagine the power of 'listening hands' in this 'package of availability' from the provider or providers. The following experiment involved a triad of participants taking turns as (1) a Focuser, (2) a Verbal Listener and (3) a 'Touch-Listener'. The outcome has led the participants to consider the prospect of trying other combinations of position, sequence etc.

Method: *The Focuser sat at the front of a chaise-long and leaned back against the legs of the Touch-Listener. The Touch-Listener sat in a comfortable position in the chaise-long and supported the head and neck of the Focuser with his/her hands. The Verbal Listener sat in front and to the side of the Focuser. While the Focuser and Verbal Listener engaged in a traditional Focusing exchange, the Touch-Listener maintained a 'listening attitude' with the hands, and so provided a touch feedback parallel to the feedback of the Verbal Listener. Each participant reported something extraordinary in these sessions, something beyond what is normally experienced in a Focusing session, be it a vividness, a clarity, or a more sure feeling of support. (Reported by Stephen Scholle, Nicoletta Corsetti and Robert Lee from the 2008 Montreal International Focusing Conference Bodywork-Focusing Interest Group.)*

Working with Inexperienced Clients: The importance of facilitating body awareness in new clients was discussed and demonstrated. Particular emphasis was

placed finding the best ways of leading the client into the process while staying true to the client's expressed agenda. This also served to illustrate the benefits to bodywork practitioners of receiving formal training in Focusing.

MOVING FORWARD

Training and Teaching: Teaching Focusing to bodyworkers is now ongoing across the world, including Europe, the USA, Argentina, Mexico and Japan. Teaching a Bodywork-Focusing approach to professional counselors and psychotherapists in Japan started in 2004 and is also ongoing. Six of the seven members of the MAE core team are now Focusing Trainers; one is in addition a Focusing Institute certifying coordinator and one a body-centered psychotherapist doing research with touch.

Bringing Bodywork and Movement to Focusing: The members of the Focusing Bodywork and Movement Group, in continuing to bring a Focusing oriented approach to their respective specialties, are also active in facilitate a more overtly body-centered approach to Focusing. These combined aims are being pursued through articles, classes, sessions with clients and symposia with colleagues. A Yahoo Discussion Group has been available since 2005. A second multidisciplinary international gathering, MAE 2009, is planned for September 2009 in Switzerland. Details can be found at www.mae2009.org The core team continues to meet monthly by conference call.

CONCLUSION

The rich weaving of Focusing with body-centering through movement and touch has begun to open up a new creative paradigm for the caring professions and their clients. Its application to the wider community at work and play has yet to be fully explored and realized. The potential is there. And the desire?

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