

Distinguishing Between Form and Function in the Focusing Process

Introduction

I like things simple. My life feels better that way, and my whole body relaxes. But often something goes wrong, and whatever-it-is-that-was-simple gets very complicated. That feels very different in my body, tight and stiff, bloated, as I try to hold it all. I like simple better, but sometimes there's no easy way to go back to it.

My path with Focusing has been like that. I bought a copy of Gene Gendlin's book Focusing. It was powerful stuff. Despite the detailed explanations, I knew there was a core experience or process that felt both simple and profound. It was a wonderful gift in my life.

Then I learned there were other ways of teaching and practicing Focusing. I studied Inner Relationship Focusing with Ann Weiser Cornell. And I looked into BioSpiritual Focusing and Wholebody Focusing. It was a slippery slope! It led me deep into a rich (and for me, messy) complexity. Eventually I realized it all just felt too complicated. I was overstuffed.

Certainly each approach brings something valuable. Each has a unique flavor and different steps, concepts and methods.

I noticed that different teachers emphasized some things and downplayed others. There were even some disagreements and controversies. I got curious about whether there was really a consensus about what Focusing actually is. And I wondered how my own understanding fits with the way others know Focusing.

So after many years, during which I've been exposed to a number of unique and different approaches, I'd like to come back freshly to the essence of Focusing. Yes, we have a smorgasbord of different ways to learn and practice Focusing. But what makes them all "Focusing?" What are the common, essential elements that cut across differences among these Focusing approaches? And how do we make sense of the areas of disagreement among Focusing professionals?

This paper explores those questions. I invite you to wonder along with me, to be curious, to listen inside for what feels right to you, and for what doesn't fit with your own understanding. I hope new questions emerge along the way.

I'll start by offering a conceptual framework (the distinction between "form" and "function") for understanding the variety and the commonality among Focusing approaches. Then I'll offer my preliminary list of essential elements of Focusing. This is the list I compiled as I started this project.

After I present my own list, I'll show you how other people think about the essence of Focusing. In order to broaden my exploration I invited other Focusers, including readers on the Focusing Institute's discussion lists and a number of Focusing professionals, to respond to a question about the essential elements of Focusing. The question was phrased several different ways for clarity:

What are the *essential* elements or aspects of the Focusing process (not the specific "steps")? What is minimally necessary before we can say that the Focusing process is taking place? (In other words, if it doesn't have "this" it isn't Focusing.)

I'll summarize and discuss their responses to this question and include my own reflections. Then I want to show you how my own understanding changed as I let it all percolate. In a later section, I'll give examples of the many forms that have been developed to serve some of the important functions I've identified. Finally, I'll point to what I see as several controversies within the Focusing community, and talk about them in terms of form and function.

Finding A Deeper Simplicity

When I ran into important differences between various Focusing methods, I wanted to make sense of it. My experience tells me that each has something to offer, something important about the Focusing process. I don't want to blend these methods together or get rid of what is unique to each one. But I do want to understand the deeper experiences that each one points to. I'm calling these the essential elements of Focusing.

In sensing into these differences of method, I can often feel the intention, the purpose of the particular "step" in question. I began asking myself "What is its function?" "What is this step or recommendation trying to get at?" "What's underneath it?"

I once read something about the relationship between form and function. Ideally, when we're working with something that has a practical purpose, "form" is meant to follow, or serve "function" and not the other way around. As I understand it, this means that we keep the function or purpose of something in the forefront of our thinking, and let the creation of forms be done with those functions or purposes in mind. In architecture, for example, many differently-shaped roofs could serve the function of shedding water and snow. Architects and builders express their unique creativity by designing a variety of forms to serve that important function.

As I thought about this, I remembered a little book I read several years ago, which I've never forgotten. Herbert Benson, MD, wrote The Relaxation Response in 1975. It evolved from his research at Harvard's Thorndike Memorial Laboratory and Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. Dr. Benson was intrigued by the fact that at least six different practices that he was aware of were capable of eliciting "the relaxation response" of the

parasympathetic nervous system (the opposite of the body's "stress response," the fight-or-flight response of the sympathetic nervous system.)

I want to be clear here that I am not suggesting a comparison between Focusing and the Relaxation Response, or any of the methods Dr. Benson studied. Not at all. There may be some points of overlap, but it isn't my purpose here to examine those.

I'm pointing to what I found noteworthy about his way of thinking. He realized that these 6 methods, and perhaps others, although different in their form, had several common elements. He understood that these common elements were necessary to elicit the Relaxation Response. They were a set of functions that were served in a number of different ways by the different methods. Dr. Benson never used the terms form and function. Those words are my way of explaining a relationship.

I'm using the word "function" to mean the essential purpose, the work that something is designed to perform, or what it makes happen. And when I use the word "form" I mean something that *accomplishes* a certain purpose. It performs that function. It gets us the result we want. It's one of many possible ways of doing this important thing.

It feels useful to identify the essential functions that make Focusing the unique process it is. Doing so helps me clarify my own understanding of the Focusing process. It also helps me fully appreciate the multitude of approaches to teaching Focusing.

In an interesting way, I'm also reminded of what the Jewish sage Rabbi Hillel is said to have replied when asked to say briefly what the Torah is about. He responded with a version of the Golden Rule, saying, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. *This is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation. Go and study it further.*"

There is an "essence" to Focusing, which sometimes becomes less visible among the details of the steps laid out by each different approach. I want to be able to know "This is what Focusing is. The rest is explanation, to be studied further." I love this quote from The Radical Acceptance of Everything, by Ann Weiser Cornell, p. 33:

"I propose we start by agreeing that there is an essence to Focusing that is beyond steps, and beyond any particular step, except perhaps the step of being with what's there."

Returning to the idea of finding a useful simplicity, a quote from Gene Gendlin feels relevant here. In a tele-class co-presented with Ann in 2011, he was responding to a participant's comment. The man was interested in getting to the simple essence of a complex subject matter he was studying. Gene said, "The simplicity you're talking about is a *third* simplicity, *not* the *first* simplicity. We don't right away have *those* simples. What you have first are beginning simples. And then they become more and more and more complex. And then at a certain point, you can *turn*, and find something simple that takes the whole complexity with it better than (the simplicity you had) before."

This is the simplicity I want to find.

My First List of Essential Functions

When I began this project, I had a tentative list of the essential elements. They were mostly nouns, separable entities, like the molecules from which a compound is made. These were the elements I would expect to find in any of the various approaches that are called Focusing.

I wrote a full description of each. But since they're well-known to Focusers, I've decided not to include my full descriptions here. Instead, they are attached as a separate document. What follows is simply the list, and a few comments.

Pause and Turn (pausing, turning the attention inward, and waiting)

Presence /The Focusing Attitude (being with our own, or someone else's experiencing with an open, accepting attitude.)

Curiosity: I chose to describe this as a separate function for two reasons. It is not always included in descriptions of Presence or the Focusing attitude. And there are at least two forms (and maybe more) that are intended to serve this function.

The Felt Sense (the bodily feel of something we are experiencing, which then becomes a direct referent.)

Symbolizing (finding a way to represent the felt sense in a symbol, such as a phrase, image, movement, gesture, sound, etc.)

Resonating (checking the symbol against the felt sense)

I was tempted to include "Receiving What Comes" as a separate function. In a way, it is really an aspect of Presence. We receive, without judgment, what comes during the process, neither rejecting it nor siding with it. We let each thing come and allow it to be just as it is, for as long as it needs to be.

Yet "receiving" also involves noticing how the body is responding during the process of Focusing, and then being with those changes as they happen. If we are truly Present to what we're experiencing inside, we will notice not only the felt sense of something, and what unfolds from there, but also the feelings of releasing, easing, freshening, or shifting within the body, when that happens. Gene says, "It is your body just now changing. As long as it is still changing, releasing, processing, moving, let it do that.....to get all the release and change it wants to have at this point." When I do this well, it makes a big difference inside.

For the sake of simplicity, I chose not to include "Receiving" as a separate element.

Responses To My “Survey”

Twenty-three people responded to my inquiry, some with a brief list and others with an extended exploration. I looked forward to opening my email each day, delighted to read each response. Some of them touched and somewhat changed how I now understand the essential functions of Focusing.

With hindsight, I can see that people may have neglected to mention some things they consider so fundamental they didn't need to be mentioned. I say this because some things I considered essential were not explicitly mentioned by several Focusing teachers, although in their own published writings these are described as important or essential aspects of Focusing. This may have been the case with others, too.

I looked for patterns in responding. Would there be differences between Inner Relationship focusers and other focusers? Would people who knew meditation or Non-Violent Communication respond in a certain way? Would long-time focusers and focusing teachers differ from people with less than 4 years of Focusing? Although I didn't do a statistical analysis, obvious patterns did not emerge.

The most often mentioned essential elements were the felt sense and the Focusing attitude (Presence). I agree that they are absolutely essential to the process. While the importance of Presence is shared with many other practices such as meditation, the concept of the felt sense seems quite unique to Focusing. I've been glad to see that recently, several other practices (for example Marshall Rosenberg's Non-Violent Communication) are beginning to include some type of body awareness in their teaching.

What follows is a summary of the responses I received:

The felt sense

All respondents considered the felt sense to be essential, although a number of them referred to it as “something,” without using the term “felt sense.” Two aspects of it (bodily-sensed and unclear) were particularly highlighted. Fourteen of the 23 respondents specifically mentioned that the felt sense is sensed or experienced “in the body.” Others didn't mention it explicitly.

One respondent pointed to an important distinction in how we define the word “body.” There's our usual way of referring to “the body” as meaning just the physical body. But there's also “the body” as we know it in Focusing, which is a much broader concept than just the physical body. This is a hard thing to say in words. I'm not sure how we would *feel* things (it *is* called a *felt* sense) other than with the body, in some way. To me, an essential aspect of Focusing is that we can take something merely “held in awareness” (such as a thought or an image, etc.) and bring it “inside” to see if we have an

experiential response to it. Even something that seems to be outside, or around my body, can be somehow “felt.” And that “felt” involves a subtle body or spatial sense.

With regard to its unclearness, 12 people explicitly stated that a felt sense is unclear, vague or not yet formed. This feels important to me, too. If it’s not unclear, we don’t find that there’s “more there” to unfold. It doesn’t have a sense of an implying toward some further occurring.

Four people mentioned the wholistic, all-at-once aspect of the felt sense. This all-at-once-ness has always been, for me, one of the most powerful, unique aspects of the felt-sense and the Focusing process. Yet it hasn’t always been emphasized in the various approaches to teaching Focusing. I wish it would be highlighted more.

Presence/The Focusing Attitude

Presence or “the Focusing attitude” was mentioned or implied by everyone. It was often referred to as “being with” or “attention to.” “Being with” is a simple phrase that implies both a *state of awareness* that is able to “be with,” and *something* we are being with. It involves a relationship between the two. Eleven of the 23 respondents described this “being with” or awareness in terms of positive qualities, such as compassion, interest, curiosity, warmth, kindness, love, caring, etc. Eleven more described it in terms that sounded more “neutral” in emotional tone. They used expressions like being-with, attending to, noticing, witnessing or staying with.

In my own Focusing, I used to prefer to approach whatever I’m experiencing with a positive feeling of compassion, friendliness and caring, rather than to merely “witness” or “notice” or “attend to” it. Lately, I’m not sure.

At the moment, I’m holding some questions about this:

- Are there maybe two different kinds of “awareness” that serve us differently?
- Is a neutral witnessing (without the positive-feeling qualities of compassion, caring, kindness, etc.) enough, in order for our living process to unfold?
- Can we deliberately bring one type of awareness or the other to something we’re “being with”?
- Do they result in different experiences?

Symbolizing and resonating

Ten of the 23 respondents considered symbolizing and resonating to be essential aspects of Focusing, and said so explicitly. Ann Weiser Cornell referred me to her

concise statement in her Focusing Students and Companions Manual, p. 45, where she says:

“The essence of the Focusing process is:

- sensing something
- sensing for symbols that match it
- and sensing in the body to confirm whether those symbols do, in fact, match that something or not.”

Three respondents disagreed, stating their view that symbolizing and resonating were not essential in order to consider the process to be Focusing. One of these responses was particularly interesting. Neil Dunaetz, an experienced Focuser and teacher said:

“Even if we do nothing more, even if nothing more happens, even if we cannot yet or do not yet “say from” “It,” this *is already* focusing
“Symbolizing from” and “resonating with” – *these are more than icing on the cake!* But they are not always possible or wanted, and thus need not be considered *essential*.... I am saying that the very *forming* of and *having* of a felt sense is already great bodily and, implicitly, situational change. We feel this in the felt shift. Sometimes it *feels* as if *everything* has changed, even before symbolizing-from. This is not nothing.”

It was uncomfortable and exciting to have these words bump up against my own understanding, and to reconsider Symbolizing and Resonating in light of the three disagreeing comments. I do agree that something important and very powerful happens *even if* we do nothing more than spend time with an unclear, holistic body sense of something.

Yet, in my own experience, the key that really allows the implying that lies within the felt sense to live forward, and therefore fuels the process of change, are the movements of symbolizing and resonating. There’s a zig-zagging between the body’s experiential feel of some bit of living and the symbolizing of it with our conceptual, meaning-making minds. And as a result, both the experiencing *and* the way it is symbolized change and affect each other.

As I thought about this, it seemed too black-and-white to say that symbolizing and resonating are either essential or they’re not. I needed a better way to understand this. But I didn’t have it yet.

Curiosity

Curiosity was mentioned explicitly by 9 of the 21 respondents, who felt that this is a necessary aspect of being Present with a felt sense. I agree. Curiosity leads to an “orienting response” (turning toward and giving attention to something.) And somehow

the curiosity (wondering or asking) invites what was vague and unclear to become more explicit, clearer, and to live-forward in some way, little by little.

Pause and turn

Only five people stated explicitly that a conscious, deliberate choosing to pause and turn our attention inward is an essential component of the Focusing process. I suspect that this is such a “given” in Focusing that it goes without mention. As I write this, it seems now to be a *precursor* to Focusing (and a number of other practices, such as meditation, Somatic Experiencing, Non-Violent Communication) and I would no longer call it a part of the unique process of Focusing. That being said, I would consider it to be an important preparation and one I’d want to point to in my teaching of the process.

An Understanding of How Change Happens

Ten people implied indirectly that an essential aspect of the Focusing process is an understanding of how change happens. In addition, Ann Weiser Cornell, in her article “Three Key Aspects of The Focusing,” cites this as a key aspect. I believe it is the foundation that underlies all of Focusing. As such, it might be simply assumed, without being articulated as an “essential element.” But using Focusing deliberately and consciously is built on the foundation of understanding how change happens and trusting that process. Maybe this could be considered a “precursor” in the same way that I’ve said that pausing and turning are precursors.

Felt Shift

Although I hadn’t included the felt shift in my own list of essential elements of Focusing, two respondents said explicitly that without a felt shift, however small, the process is not truly Focusing. Two others implied the same. Many others described it as a result that often comes, but is not an essential part of the process. Gene Gendlin has said that it is simply “grace” when and whether a felt shift comes and that we can’t make it happen, no matter how well we are Focusing. In his book Focusing, he says:

“If during these instructions somewhere you have spent a little while sensing and touching an unclear holistic body sense of this problem, then you have Focused. It doesn’t matter whether a body-shift came or not.....”

One respondent made the point that merely allowing ourselves to be what Ann refers to as “Self-in-Presence” brings a subtle shift in the body. Maybe it’s not a

shift in *how the problem or issue feels*, but still a subtle different sense of *ourselves* that we can notice.

Revisiting My List of Essential Functions

I considered all of these responses. And more importantly, I considered what was coming *in me* in response to them. The most noticeable impact of the survey responses on my own understanding came from several that did *not* include an element that I had considered essential (symbolizing and resonating.) The following words felt especially meaningful:

“Symbolizing from” and “resonating with” – *these are more than icing on the cake!* But they are not always possible or wanted, and thus need not be considered *essential.*”

I could see what he meant. Symbolizing and resonating seemed both essential and not-essential at the same time! I had to let that just sit with that and let it be for a while. I’m learning to be more comfortable with this kind of “not knowing.”

In a day or two I had something fresh about it that I can try to say now. What is essential to Focusing is that we hold an understanding of how change occurs in the human process, which includes the fact that bringing felt-experiencing in contact with conceptual thought (symbolizing and resonating) facilitates change. BUT bringing Presence to the felt sense of our experiencing, slowly and patiently, and with great kindness, is the foundation on which the symbolizing and resonating rests. And the process may not get farther than this initial contact and being-with. Maybe that is what it needs for now. And maybe again and again, before more of the process can be entered into.

Now I would say that it’s the *intention toward*, or the *holding of the possibility* of eventually finding symbols, and checking them with the felt sense, that makes Focusing a process that is distinct from the being-with of meditation, or the body awareness of Somatic Experiencing. Symbolizing and resonating may not be possible or wanted in a given Focusing session. But I think it’s the understanding of the process and the holding of the intention that makes it Focusing, *even if* the whole process does not unfold.

At this point, I’ll say what I now think are the essential elements (functions) of the Focusing process. (It’s simply where my own understanding has come to rest for the moment.) In order to explore the various forms within different Focusing practices and what functions they serve, I’m going to call the following functions essential to Focusing, even if they are not a part of every Focusing process. They don’t feel so much like separable entities, but more like movements in a process:

Understanding how change happens – (a necessary precursor) We know that we can't make change happen, and that by allowing our experiencing to be exactly as it is, and going to it with our awareness, a natural innately life-affirming and forward-moving process of gradual change will begin.)

Pausing and turning inward - (a necessary precursor)

Accessing a state of Presence (able to be with and stay with a felt sense)

Allowing a Felt Sense to form (unclear, bodily-sensed, wholistic)

Being Curious

Symbolizing and Resonating (a pair of interwoven movements)

Fully receiving whatever comes and allowing our body time to feel itself changing. (This now seems really essential to me.)

The Variety of Forms That Accomplish the Essential Functions

My discussion of forms is not meant to be exhaustive. I only hope to illustrate my main point, that the functions are the most important thing. There are many forms that could serve any given function. They could be used flexibly if we hold the functions as primary and the forms as secondary.

The following are some areas where I notice a variety of different forms, with an underlying intention to serve a similar function:

Accessing a state of Presence/The Focusing Attitude

There are a number of ways to help people experience the state of "Presence," "Self-in-Presence" or the "Focusing attitude." I see them as falling roughly into two different approaches. One approach is what I call "backing into Presence" by removing whatever does not feel like this state of friendly, accepting equanimity. The traditional "Clearing A Space" does this by setting things out or apart. It uses any number of analogies for removing or letting go of whatever is *not* this state of receptive ease (letting go or removing the issues or situations which bring an uncomfortable felt sense.) We remove the content so we can arrive at a place of "contentless awareness." The other way is to invite the state of Presence directly. Within these two categories, many "forms" have been developed for accomplishing this function.

"Backing Into" Presence by gradually removing anything that isn't Presence

One of the earliest forms developed for eliciting this state of Presence is "Clearing A Space." Gene Gendlin, Joan Klagsbrun, Kathleen McGuire, Neil Friedman and others

teach a process in which our issues or difficulties (those we can actually feel at the present moment in our bodies) can be moved or set out of the body in a symbolized or imagined way. For the sake of further discussion, I'll refer to these forms using Ann's phrase "Distance Finding techniques." They are based on the idea that we can unburden the body so it can rest from all that it's carrying. Once it is allowed to uncramp from carrying these burdens, it's easier for us to move into a state of Presence with whatever wants attention.

In his book Focusing, Gene Gendlin says:

"The first movement of focusing is enormously important because if it can happen, the rest will probably happen, too. In this first movement, you clear a space for yourself to live in while the rest of the focusing process is going on. The first movement is the one in which you give yourself what might be called a "positive set." You put yourself into a state of mind and body in which the other focusing movements can take place freely." "There are many ways to approach the first movement, many different inner acts that can produce the needed positive set – or body-mind receptivity. An approach that works well for one person might produce nothing for another. Keep the one or ones that have meaning for you personally, that make something good happen inside you." (Gendlin, Focusing, 1978, p. 71.)

"Under all the packages each of us carries, a different self can be discovered. You are not any of the things you have set aside. You are no content at all!" (Gendlin, Focusing, 1978, p. 79.)

Gene and others describe useful metaphors for Clearing a Space, such as clearing a cluttered room by stacking each thing on a shelf, or setting down each burden next to you on the ground, or placing each thing on a park bench next to you. Joan Klagsbrun has found that people come up with wonderful, creative metaphors on their own, if invited to find their personal way of clearing a space.

Inviting Presence Directly

Clearing away whatever is *not* this state of friendly receptivity is one way of accessing a state of Presence. Other ways have been developed that invite this state directly.

Presence Language

Ann has developed helpful ways of using language (which has the power to shape our experience) to describe the relationship we would like to have with "something" that needs our attention. She suggests phrases such as "*I am sensing something...*," "*I'm sitting with it with interested curiosity,*" "*I'm saying "hello" to it.*" Ann credits Bebe Simon as the originator of the suggestion to "Say hello to it."

Your "Affection Teacher" (Caring-Feeling Presence)

Campbell and McMahon, on their BioSpiritual Focusing website, include an exercise that invites us to find our inner “Affection Teacher.” They suggest that we imagine holding a helpless and very sick baby who needs our loving attention in order to survive. How would we bring this compassionate and deeply caring attitude into our bodies so it could be communicated to this baby? This exercise can help us better notice where and how our body responds with an empathic, caring presence, which they call “Caring-Feeling-Presence.” They suggest we begin a Focusing session by inviting this feeling directly into our body.

“Grounding and Presence” (Addie van der Kooy and Kevin McEvenue)

Addie van der Kooy, in his book Focusing With Your Whole Body, co-written with Kevin McEvenue, describes this preparation for Wholebody Focusing in the following way:

“So this first stage is a deliberate exploration of the qualities of your own sense of Ground and Presence, separate from anything else that is there in your body that may need your attention....This exploration occurs by encouraging the body to let go of unconsciously held postural tensions by letting go into the physical support of your environment, i.e. chair or floor. This “grounding” allows an unwinding of bodily tensions....a felt sense of being alive, of being “Me Here Now” – a sense of “I Am” in the present moment that is unaffected by the burdens that our body carries.....Having a body sense of your own Ground and Caring-Feeling-Presence provides you with a safe, bodily felt anchor or resource when being with difficult places inside.” (van der Kooy and McEvenue, 2006, Focusing With Your Whole Body)

Notice the reference to McMahon and Campbell’s “Caring-Feeling-Presence.” Van der Kooy also emphasizes that “there needs to be an actual body sense of such a Presence.” I would agree.

Inviting Self-Empathy

In Robert Lee’s Domain Focusing, the focuser is invited to find a certain “quality of feeling to bring to your inside places,” which he calls “Self-Empathy.” He suggests asking ourselves if we can be gentle toward our self, or kind toward our self and our situations, or tender toward this inside place, or understanding toward what’s there, or patient or curious, loving, lighthearted, forgiving, supportive, encouraging, or compassionate toward our self and all we experience. Can we find some way that it feels right to be? And if not, can we be kind toward *that*, too?

Local cultural metaphors (The Guest House, The Hammock)

Imagery and local metaphors can evoke the body-feel of receptivity and respect toward the object of our attention. In Afghanistan, the metaphor of the human being as a Guest House, as described in Rumi’s poem by that name, is familiar to many Afghans. It is also reinforced by the local Afghan culture, which places great importance on the

respectful welcoming of guests. In Costa Rican culture, the hammock represents an honored place in the home that is offered to guests. This image emerged as a helpful metaphor during one Focusing class taught by Beatrice Blake. Both the guest house and the hammock are ways of inviting the sense of being-with our bodily-sensed experience, with a friendly, respectful or even welcoming attitude. They draw from something familiar within a particular culture.

Allowing a Felt Sense to Form

Ann invites us to begin Focusing by noticing whatever wants attention in the body. She states that anything we notice inside (a thought, image, body sensation, emotion, memory, etc.) can be a starting place for getting a “full felt sense.” We would proceed by being curious about 1) where and how it is felt in the body, 2) its emotional tone, 3) images related to it, and 4) what it is about (life issues).

Gene and some others *start* with the wholistic, all-at-once felt sense of an issue, or of “my life” (which already contains the “about-ness.”) They often use language that invites a sense of the whole of something, like “all that about...” or “that whole thing about...”

Being Curious

Gene, Ed McMahon and Peter Campbell, and others teach Focusers to offer a variety of direct questions toward the felt sense. Some of these questions attempt to get at what the problem *is* (What’s the crux of this? What’s in this feeling? What’s the main thing about this? What gets it so _____ (whatever the description is)? Other questions look for the life-forward direction within the problem or issue (What does it need/want? What would be a small step in the right direction?) In fact, another creative question suggested by Neil Friedman (in his article “Innovations in How I Lead a Round of Focusing”) is “What would be a right question to ask It right now?”

Ann Weiser Cornell, on the other hand, recommends that we *avoid* the linguistic form of direct questions. Instead, she suggests we approach the felt sense, or anything that wants our attention, with “interested curiosity.” This curiosity might be a general attitude toward something. Or it might be an active wondering about some specific aspect of it, such as the emotional quality of the felt sense, how it relates to our life, or what it is wanting, but without using the linguistic construction of a question.

Symbolizing And Resonating

The various ways of symbolizing include words or phrases, images, gestures, sounds, postures and body movements. Forms that might facilitate this symbolizing range from simply asking the Focuser to “find a handle” or brief phrase that captures the flavor of this felt sense, to encouraging people to use art materials to create an image, or even making movements or postures that reflect the essence of the felt sense.

I'm not aware of different ways or forms for resonating the felt sense with the symbol. It seems like a commonly agreed-on practice to simply check the symbol against the felt sense, and notice any response. Resonating is simply a way of zig-zagging between our felt experience and our conceptual and symbolic processes, allowing each to change as they will.

Fully Receiving

I'm not aware of different ways or forms for accomplishing this function other than reminding oneself (or another focuser) of the benefit of doing so. I often companion focusers who move quickly from some bit of change. It would be nice to discover or create new forms that encourage *fully* taking in the felt sense as well as the shifts and changes that happen in the body.

Areas of Disagreement Among Focusing Professionals

Let's look at a few controversies within the Focusing community from the perspective of form and function. I know each method or form has a purpose, a function that its proponents want it to accomplish. The disagreements seem to be around concerns that *other* important functions might be undermined in the process.

I've found it helpful to ask two questions. What essential function is being served by a particular practice or method? And could other important functions actually be compromised?

Let's take a look at three of the most significant disagreements.

Clearing a Space By Setting Things "Out of The Body."

According to those who advocate Distance Finding techniques, their function is to help the Focuser access a state of Presence. Those who use these techniques share a concern that if the Focuser were overwhelmed by intense feelings, this would compromise her ability to perform several important functions including being Present with a Focusing Attitude, waiting for a felt sense to form, being curious, and being able to find a symbol and resonate.

In the introduction to her article, "Relationship = Distance + Connection" (included in [The Radical Acceptance of Everything](#)), Ann Weiser Cornell thoroughly discusses the disadvantages of Distancing techniques. What seems relevant here is that these techniques seem to support one function while undermining others. They may facilitate bringing awareness to something that is experienced as separate from the self that is aware of it. But they seem also to undermine the essential function of being-with whatever is there in a caring, respectful and interested way. Distancing may give the

body, and what is felt in the body, a message that certain experiences are unacceptable, or unendurable. And if the Focuser loses touch with the felt sense, the function of symbolizing and resonating could be undermined.

Ann has suggested a different way of accessing what she calls Self-In-Presence. She invites Focusers to “make a space by acknowledging” whatever is in the way of feeling “all OK” or whatever wants our attention. This does *not* involve moving or setting out anything. There is simply a hello or a friendly nod of acknowledgment toward “something,” which allows us to be present with It rather than identified with It. We make a space for ourselves to be there *with* whatever else is there.

Ann has also developed what she calls “Inner Relationship Techniques” facilitated by using Presence Language. In the introduction to “Relationship = Distance + Connection,” she states, “I realized that Relationship techniques could do everything that Finding Distance techniques could, while avoiding some of the glaring problems.”

We are primarily trying to create an environment where anything we’re experiencing can be met kindly, without judgment, and with interest and curiosity. If we keep this function in mind, we can find or create the forms that best fit this particular felt sense at this particular moment. We can even find ways that take into account our body’s need for relief before it can fully engage in the Focusing process.

Dealing with critical inner voices

In his original book Focusing, Gene recommended that “the best way to deal with the critic (everyone has one!) is to wave it away with some disrespectful comment.” He suggested statements like, “Go away and come back when you have something new to say” or “I don’t have to listen to anybody who talks to me in that tone.” We were advised to push it out of the way when it interrupts, or wave it away with a hand.

Handling “the critic” this way is *intended* to support the essential function of Presence or a friendly Focusing attitude toward some *other* direct referent, by removing whatever comes with a negative or critical attitude toward it. But in another way, it undermines this very function, by not showing the same friendly, accepting attitude toward an inner criticizing voice, which after all has its own perspective and comes with its *own* felt sense.

Indeed, at a later point in the same book, Gene says some things that suggest a more respectful approach. Referring to any bad thing a person is fighting inside, he asks:

“How is this bad thing in some way good or useful or sensible?No bad thing that’s in a person is *all* bad. If it’s there, it has or might have some right or useful aspect that we have to listen for. If we find out what the thing is good for, then it can let go. So give it a friendly hearing and see what it says, why it’s right. The point is to help the focuser stop fighting the undesired ways long enough to allow them to open, so the positive aspect in them can come out.”

I believe we can bring this attitude even to our inner criticizing voices.

In the introduction to her article “Radical Gentleness: The Transformation of the Inner Critic”, found in her book, The Radical Acceptance of Everything, Ann Weiser Cornell points to something important about “the critic.” She says, “What seems to be an immutably critical voice is actually an aspect of us in the process of change and transformation just like any other.”

From this realization, she developed methods for fostering compassion and curiosity toward critical inner voices. She eventually discovered that offering a guess that a “critic” might be worried or concerned about something helped it feel safe enough to reveal what it is “not wanting” and “wanting” for us. From this perspective, the functions of Presence and curiosity are more strongly served by including *even* critical inner voices.

Asking Questions vs. Noticing

Once we have brought our Presence to the felt sense, and have found a symbol and resonated this symbol with the experiential feel of it until there is a good-enough fit, Gene Gendlin and others advocate asking direct questions of the felt sense. Open-ended questions are recommended, because they make room for a wide range of responses.

Ann Weiser Cornell, on the other hand, prefers to avoid the linguistic form of direct questions, because they can result in difficulties that interfere with the Focusing process. “Noticing” and “sensing” are believed to be less directive and intrusive than asking a direct question. For example, “What does it need?” might be translated into “I’m sensing what it’s wanting for me.”

It’s true that direct questions do serve the function of curiosity, and the caring and acceptance of the Focusing attitude. When looked at from an Inner Relationship perspective, however, direct questions are believed to pose certain problems. First, questions may be experienced as pressure to respond. They narrow the direction and range of the conversation, are hard to refuse, and can feel intrusive. This may get in the way of simply being Present in an open and allowing way. In addition, with questions there may be a tendency for us to move away from direct experiencing and have the answers come from our conceptual mind rather than from our deeper, organismic experiencing. This may undermine the Focuser’s ability to stay in contact with the felt sense, an essential aspect of Focusing.

Curiosity that is expressed as an invitation to notice, wonder, or sense something about our experiencing does not seem to interfere quite as much with the functions of simply being present, and trusting in the natural process of life unfolding. Yet sometimes, in my experience, just the right direct question seems to give the felt sense the opening to say something it had been wanting to say.

It seems fair to say that if we keep in mind the *function* we are calling “curiosity”, we might easily sense the way *this particular* felt sense would like to be approached. Maybe this time it would like us to reach out directly with a question, or maybe it wants us to approach very gently, with our simple, caring interest. Kye Nelson has expressed it this way:

“Everything you ask into that felt sense (*if you ask in its kind of language*) opens and precisions it again and again, but it remains inexhaustible in its moreness, and in the surprises that it suddenly hands you.” (The italics are mine.)

Conclusion

Having spent time exploring the essential functions of the Focusing process, and examining many of the forms that serve these functions, I’m intrigued by this question: Could Focusing be taught by emphasizing the essential functions, offering the forms as possibilities, and even allowing the learner to find or create new forms to serve these functions?

In a conversation about the wide variety of forms, techniques and methods of teaching Focusing, and the different ways people respond to them, my friend Sharon said, “That’s why we have all these different ways that work for different people.”

Two of my respondents said something similar. Pat Omidian concluded, “So any process that helps one touch into the felt sense of a situation or whatever, would be a Focusing Process. I think there are many other systems out there in the world that help people to the same place – a rose by any other name is still a rose.”

Jocelyn Kahn expressed it this way: “It seems to me that the vast majority of Focusing methods/techniques, etc., are simply a variety of ways to help people do these two things: 1) notice how it feels in your body, and 2) staying with it long enough to allow it to find its own way forward.”

If we hold the important and essential *functions* of the Focusing process in the foreground, and hold them in a bodily-felt way, the *forms* we’ve learned will be used more flexibly and enrich our process.

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