

**AN INTRODUCTION TO  
FOCUSING AND ITS USE IN SPIRITUAL  
DIRECTION**

**by**

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**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first of all like to acknowledge Sister Aileen Martin, who has been absolutely tremendous in her love, support, knowledge, teaching, practical assistance both in helping me to experience focusing personally in Spiritual Direction, and feeding me with a constant supply of material (books, videos, spiritual directors who use focusing, handouts, seminars, time etc).

Thankyou also, to those 'real' directors and directees who provided me with examples from their experience.

## INTRODUCTION

While pursuing another topic for my research project, I came across the book by Ann Weiser Cornell PH.D - “The Power of Focusing”. I was drawn to it ‘like a magnet’. It seemed to me, that God was leading me down another path. Thus started an adventurous journey into the unknown - a fascinating, exciting, sometimes scary, but liberating journey. I hope it will inspire you and call you too, into the unknown, into change, into more of the mystery of God. As in Ephesians 3:16-19. “That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man (*that hidden unknown self, your own spirit discovered and nurtured*<sup>1</sup>); so that Christ may dwell in your hearts (*inward eyes, awareness of Christ in your body*<sup>2</sup>) through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

Some questions I hope to answer, at least in part are –

- What is focusing?
- How did focusing develop?
- What are the basic steps leading to focusing and the meanings of phrases like clearing a space, taking inventories, felt sense/meaning, and felt shifts?
- What is bio-spirituality?
- How does focusing relate to spiritual direction?

In answering these questions, I trust you will see the many benefits of the method of focusing. I also include comments from spiritual directors, on the use of focusing as a tool in aiding them as they journey with their directees, and also from directees who have experienced focusing, and how that has helped them in their discovery of themselves and their relationship with God.

In order to answer these questions I have read extensively (see the bibliography), viewed many video tapes, and written to those spiritual directors/directees known to me, who have used focusing as a tool in spiritual direction.

## WHAT IS FOCUSING?

Focusing is a natural skill, that many of us have to learn to access. It’s a way of being in touch with how we carry important issues inside ourselves, of listening to our body with compassion, of noticing how we feel and then conversing with those feelings, and listening to what they have to say to us, accepting their story and befriending what’s going on inside. Instead of relying only on our ability to think things through, analyse and control what’s happening, we listen to what’s happening within.

*“Most of us resist this letting go....we are reluctant to try anything beyond the minds logical reasoned approach to problem solving. We*

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<sup>1</sup> Bodies Search for Spirit – Session 7. Video Tape produced by Nada Lou

<sup>2</sup> ibid

*avoid this alternative path, finding any excuse to distract ourselves from growing quiet and attending to what our whole being, especially our bodies, can tell us about how things are right now.....its frightening to let go of the reins...yet there is wisdom in our bodies! A sure footed sense for deeper meaning, purpose and direction.”<sup>3</sup>*

Focusing teaches us step by step how to be in touch with our ‘felt sense’. The ‘felt sense’ is an inner bodily knowing for the precise next step to take, a clear creative answer to the problems and issues in life where we can become stuck - unable to move forward. If our intellect could solve all our problems, we would not experience feeling intense frustration and/or helplessness, or be exhausted from daily problems at work and in relationships. Through the process called focusing, we can learn to become totally conscious - combining our memories, unconscious mind, feelings, ‘felt senses’ and dreams with our intellect, resulting in what we may call a gut reaction, intuition or a sense of what is right - continually. In spiritual direction, this can greatly aid the directee in areas of discernment in decision making, and in finding a way out of a ‘stuck place’, where an issue or reaction to an issue, continually emerges, with little progress forward.

Have you ever felt jumpy, sweaty or even nauseous in your stomach about having to make a public speech, or a heaviness in your chest or even headachy over having to make a crucial call to someone? Most of us react negatively in some way to this, put ourselves down for reacting so foolishly, curse the feeling, or have some other reactive/addictive type behaviour, (like a drink or cigarette, or even eat, read a book, watch TV, exercise etc ) to try and rid ourselves of the feeling .

*” What is the pattern you have learned to push away the feeling, rather than embrace it...You become addicted to whatever takes you away from facing issues and understanding yourself.....Some even practise religion and do good things to feel good and escape guilt.”<sup>4</sup>*

With focusing, we listen out for those bodily felt senses, accept them and let them tell their story. Pete Campbell says *“There is always a story waiting to be told in my body whenever I notice feelings, sensations, felt senses. My body has its own language through which it wants to talk to me.”<sup>5</sup>*

## **HOW DID FOCUSING COME INTO BEING?**

At the University of Chicago, Dr Eugene Gendlin, along with other colleagues, began a study on the hard questions most psychotherapists don’t like to ask out loud.

*“Why doesn’t therapy succeed more often? Why does it so often fail to make a real difference in people’s lives? In the rarer cases when it does succeed, what is it that those patients and therapists do? They taped and analysed thousands of therapist-patient sessions and*

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<sup>3</sup> Bio-Spirituality, p21

<sup>4</sup> Pete Campbell / Ed McMahon Video Tape Session 10

<sup>5</sup> ibid

*discovered that it was not the therapists technique or what the patients talked about but what the successful patients do inside themselves.*<sup>6</sup>

Somehow they intuitively connected within themselves, and were able to describe how it really felt inside. They got a “handle” on their problem, a ‘felt sense’ of what it was all about.

*“They would slow down their talk, become less articulate, and begin to grope for words to describe something that they were feeling at the moment. If you listened to their tapes, you would hear something like this. “Hmmm. How would I describe this? It’s right here. It’s....uh....it”s....it’s not exactly anger....hmmm” Often the clients would mention that they experienced this feeling in their bodies, saying things like, “It’s right here in my chest,” or “I have this funny feeling in my stomach.” In contrast the unsuccessful therapy clients stayed up in their heads. No matter how much they analysed their problems, or explained them, or thought about them, or cried about them, their therapy was ultimately unsuccessful. Eugene Gendlin was determined to find out how to teach this powerful and effective skill of emotional healing to others.”<sup>7</sup>*

He did, and he called it Focusing.

In Spiritual Direction we know that at times common “therapy” issues come to the front. Psychological and emotional problems, traumas like sexual, physical or verbal abuse, can all affect peoples relationship with, and image of God. Our emotions, mind, body, and spirit are all interconnected and focusing can be a tremendous tool to help resolve many of the issues, (without reliving the intensity of the nightmare), thus leading on to changed images of self and God - bringing further balance and wholeness to our lives.

## **SIX BASIC STEPS /MOVEMENTS IN FOCUSING**

(Use these steps for yourself or a directee, if you feel the process will help one move forward from a stuck, confused or scattered place. Select questions that best fit what is said.)

### 1. Clearing a space:

Become quiet and relaxed. Come into your body by noticing your breathing - in and out, sounds and sighs. Become aware of your physical body sitting on the chair, your feet, chest, neck, head. Imagine a ladder going from your head down into your chest/stomach area and let yourself climb down. Notice what it feels like. What comes there, when you ask a question like - “*How is my life going? Is there anything that feels like it especially needs my attention right now?*” OR a statement like “*I am really feeling alive right now*” - can trigger off reactions or feelings within. When something comes, stand back from it, acknowledge it with a “hello” , then allow some space between you and it, and ask if there is anything

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<sup>6</sup> Focusing by Eugene Gendlin pg 3

<sup>7</sup> The Power of Focusing by Ann Weiser Cornell

else needing attention right now. Usually there are several things. (**Encourage the directee to tell you what's happening, so you know when to move on with each stage.**)

2. Felt Sense:

From among what came in step 1, select one personal problem or issue to focus on. Ask if it is okay to be with this for a moment, then stand back and take a moment to get a sense of how all of the problem/issue feels inside. (**If the answer is “no” as in too painful or scary perhaps, stay with the “no” and hold that.**) Let yourself feel the unclear/fuzzy sense of “all of that”. It’s partly a matter of shutting up for a change to listen and feel.

3. Handle:

*What is the quality of this unclear felt sense or a word that might describe it? A word like tight, heavy, scary, helpless, stuck may come, or an image or phrase from the felt sense itself, like “have to perform”, “trapped with no way out”. (I once had a picture of a tightly wound up watch spring, when focusing on a frustrating issue in my life).*

4. Resonating:

Go back and forth between the felt sense and the word, phrase or image, checking to see that they resonate together or ‘fit/match/connect just right’. *Does ..... (what you said) fit/connect right with how you are feeling?*

5. Asking:

Use the question that best fits what is said. *“What makes the whole problem so \_\_\_\_\_?”* or *“what is it about that whole thing, that touches or moves me?”* Or ask the feeling, *“How do you need me to be with you? Is there anything you need me to know? What would it take for this to feel okay?”* Be with the felt sense until a ‘shift’ takes place, a slight ‘give’ or release. (Perhaps a headache or tension you were aware of fades, breathing becomes easier or a winding down of the watch spring releases pressure, as in my case.) If the mind rushes in with mental answers, go back to the ‘handle’ to ‘feel’ the problem again.

6. Receiving / Nurturing Period:

Receive whatever comes in a friendly way. Be gentle with it, and stay with it as long as you need to. If you need to stop due to time, promise to return to it at a later time if it needs more of your attention. Thank it for being there with you. A sure sign of focusing is that it will feel good - even if a felt shift did not take place. It's being friendly and kind to yourself, accepting both negative and positive as valued learning experience.

***“FOCUSING IS A WAY OF LOVING GOD WITH YOUR WHOLE SELF. IT PROVIDES NEW MEANING AND FRESH PERSPECTIVE - A BODY LANGUAGE RICH FOR SPIRITUAL GROWING.”<sup>8</sup>***

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<sup>8</sup> quote from a handout

## WHAT IS BIO-SPIRITUALITY?

Fr. Edwin M McMahon, Ph. D. and Fr. Peter A Campbell, Ph. D. are psychologists of religion. Through their research, they have explored the link between Focusing and Spirituality. Our bodies have the ability to experience ‘felt meaning’ as a bridge into spiritual experience, where we become open to, and encounter the God of surprises. We stop trying to control our lives, and reason everything logically, and begin to listen to a greater wisdom within ourselves. Letting go and allowing God to draw us inside to whatever was real, yet unknown. This can be difficult and scary stuff, but isn’t that often the way of spiritual growth, wholeness and faith?

*“The way we pass the life of the Spirit on is not by information, but by discovering and finding our way into the ‘updrafts’ of the body. ....”<sup>9</sup> (like the hawk in the updraft - he can not see the column of air, but he can sense/feel it)*

*“Focusing brings reconciliation, owning ourselves, becoming a more real person, which is life-giving and life-changing. Conversion is finally surrendering to the truth of ourselves”<sup>10</sup>.*

*“God is as close to us as we can risk being in touch with ourselves.”<sup>11</sup>*

## HOW IS FOCUSING USEFUL IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

### 1. **Focusing is particularly useful when a directee gets stuck and has difficulty in seeing the “woods for the trees” or has become confused or scattered.**

Focusing finds a way through the difficult issues of life, enables one to see more accurately what is important, and more open to the journey ahead. Progress is made, new growth and healing takes place. A directee<sup>12</sup> said -

*“it was through an image obtained in focusing that I was able to name and claim the feelings of emptiness and being on a long lonely journey. For me to be able to acknowledge and befriend these feelings in a safe environment and in a non-violent way, that I was able to admit my stuckness. A felt sense came which shifted the focus and I was able to gradually move forward”.*

Clearing the space (step one), helps directees to get to the issues that are most prominent. As one spiritual director said –

*“Through the process of sitting with the body sense of it all and allowing the ‘more of the story’ to unfold, the focusing steps have*

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<sup>9</sup> Body Search for Spirit - video tape. Session 7

<sup>10</sup> Body Search for Spirit - video tape. Session 8

<sup>11</sup> Body Search for Spirit - video tape. Session 9

<sup>12</sup> No names are given for quotes from material directees and directors sent to me in order to retain confidentiality.

*enabled the Directee to find a better space in which to discern what is really happening for him/her.”*

One directee who came to spiritual direction with many mid-life issues, after a time of silent reflection, named the felt-sense as a “grey sponge in the middle of her chest”. When asked to allow the grey sponge to dialogue with her, she eventually smiled and said “*the sponge has thanked me for finally taking notice of it.*” She left the session with the desire to care for this image and to unfold more of the story that this image was offering her.

**2. Focusing is useful when one does not seem to have healthy feelings and attitudes towards themselves, is particularly hard on themselves, and duly relates this somewhere in their concept or image of God.**

Here focusing encourages patience with ourselves, respect, befriending, caring and understanding. One directee, repeatedly struggled with forgiveness of a person who had wronged her greatly, several years ago. As she focused, and stopped “hitting herself over the head”, feeling guilty for what happened and her inability to forgive, but instead befriended and listened to the feelings over the issue, she was able to move forward - in kindness and understanding toward herself and the person, deepening also her relationship with and gratitude towards God. As one director said “*it helps directees to get to befriend difficult issues, embrace happy thoughts, honour and be grateful for feelings - all of which encourages non-violence.*”

One directee had been struggling with intense frustration at work, and feeling trapped and unable to make any significant changes to the causes of stress she was feeling. Losing her voice physically, she was encouraged to listen to what her body was saying to her (I have no voice), and while focusing on the frustration’s later, the words came - “*You deserve to be heard*”. As a result, she not only felt better, but was more courageous in sharing her feelings. This relieved the stress and tension significantly within herself, bringing more settledness in her work.

**3. It can be very helpful in grounding an extrovert, who may be talking all around issues.**

As another spiritual director has found –

*“I have found focusing works well with an extrovert who is doing a lot of talking around events etc and where I sense through the use of a certain word or attitude that there is more to the story. It is a very grounding process for a person in this situation and the images, symbols, and awarenesses are able to be worked with during the direction session and beyond if desired.”*

## CONCLUSION

Finally, with experiencing focusing practically myself, and having introduced focusing to one directee, who is also an extrovert, I have found that most of the above quotes and statements from other directors have matched my own experience. Also, as a directee, I found focusing wonderfully freeing for me. It made me far more aware of my 'felt senses' on a daily basis, meaning that issues are looked at before they become major or more confusing. I now pay more attention to both positive and negative feeling, and my body reactions - allowing my body wisdom to speak to me. Being kinder and listening to myself, instead of pushing away negative feelings, has helped me to embrace God as He exists within me – I realise afresh that God is indeed in the unknowing, in any pain, emptiness or confusion, as well as the joys of my life. I have become more aware of who I am, paying more attention to the small inner voice, to intuition, to gut feeling, my inner child, my whole being.

As I direct, focusing has helped me become more aware of my 'felt senses' - in what is being said, both verbally and physically, within myself and my directee.

I personally feel, along with other directors using focusing, that the benefits are limitless. Even when one says upon clearing a space, that 'nothing' is there, one discovers that nothing is something. "*What does that 'nothing feel like?'*" And often more of the story unfolds.

One thing I have not pursued is the question - Do T's (Thinkers on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator) find it harder to tune into a 'felt sense' than F's - (feeling types)? - and on the Enneagram - Do Head-centred persons find it harder than Heart or Gut-centred persons? So I send out a challenge to all you Myer-Briggs and Enneagram personality types. Give focusing a go and let me know.

For those interested in learning more about Focusing, I would recommend you attend a Focusing Work Shop by Nada Lou (see below under Mercy Life in Bibliography). Also read any of the books below or view the tapes to further your understanding.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Books**

CAMPBELL. Peter A. Ph.D. & MCMAHON Edwin M., Ph.D. *Bio-Spirituality - Focusing As A Way To Grow*, Loyola University Press, Chicago: 1985

CORNELL. Ann Weiser, Ph.D. *The Power Of Focusing - A Practical Guide To Emotional Self-Healing*, New Harbinger Publications: 1996

GENDLIN. Eugene T. Ph.D. *Focusing*, Bantam Books. First printing 1978 Revised version 1982

### **Video Tapes**

COMING HOME THROUGH FOCUSING WITH EUGENE T. GENDLIN PH.D.  
Part 1 & 2. Focusing and Listening  
Produced By Nada Lou 1998

THE BODY'S SEARCH FOR SPIRIT WITH EDWIN M McMAHON & PETER A. CAMPBELL  
Excerpts from a Six Day Programme  
Videos 1,2,3 & 4. Sessions 1-12  
Produced by Nada Lou

BIO-SPIRITUAL FOCUSING: The Next Generation - Young Adults who grew up with focusing  
The Institute for Bio-Spiritual Research Millineum Gathering 2000

FOCUSING TEACHERS - INDIVIDUAL STYLES AND APPROACHES.  
Produced by Nada Lou

THE POWER OF LISTENING with ANN WEISER CORNELL

### **Addresses for the above resource materials**

The Focusing Institute,  
34 East Lane, Spring Valley  
NY 10977  
914-362-5222  
info@focusing.org  
www.focusing.org

NADA LOU PRODUCTIONS  
CANADA  
www.nadalou.com

## **Additional Resources**

MERCY SPIRITUALITY CENTRE

Sisters of Mercy

104 The Drive

Epsom

AUCKLAND

Ph 09 638 6238

... run BIO-SPIRITUAL FOCUSING INTEREST GROUP evenings, for those who have completed at least level one workshop and wish to deepen their knowledge and skills of focusing.

They also bring Nada Lou to New Zealand periodically, to run the workshops on Focusing which are very clear and worthwhile to attend if you would like to pursue Focusing further.

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