

# **Focusing Conference—Asilomar 2011**

## *The Body's Role in BioSpiritual Focusing— Learning a New Language & Developing New Habits*

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“Let me begin by explaining the history  
of my inclination to place metaphor at the center  
of our exploration of Western spirituality ...”(1)

*Joseph Campbell*

### ***Spiritual Values are in The Organism***

The American psychologist, Dr. Carl Rogers, once noted that the most accurate scientific instrument available in our time is the human organism functioning non-defensively in the presence of a problem. After our years of research in the psychological study of what is healthy in spirituality and what contributes to pathology, we believe the BioSpiritual Focusing experience provides an ideal structure within which both accurate science and healthy spirituality can finally come together in a way that builds upon what the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, recognized more than 45 years ago in his book, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, when he wrote:

A whole school of psychologists now believe that “spiritual values” are in the organism, so much a part of the well-functioning organism as to be *sine-qua-non* “defining-characteristics” of it.(2)

Scholars today are beginning to get a far better handle on spirituality by recognizing that such experience never functions solely in the mind alone. It has

always been at work within the physical organism as well. The question of course is: “How can we directly experience this?” “Where do we look?” “What clues do our bodies provide for entering into this hidden universe?” We hope our new workbook, *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality*, may offer a significant step forward in exploring the interface between science and healthy spirituality.

### ***Symbols, Metaphors and Process-Skipping***

This evening I want to summarize some of the deeper *implications* in Ed’s earlier talk about *the experience* of finding ourselves within something Greater than ourselves—a Larger Body, some Greater Living Whole. I want to explore with you the psychological and spiritual significance of such experience. That word, “*implications*,” offers a wonderful point of entry, coming as it does from two Latin words, “*im-*” and “*plico.*” “*Im-*” is just like our English word, “in,” and *plico* means “to fold,” so—*implico*, “to fold into.” What we explore this evening is something *folded into the body*, and there are three discoveries in Gene Gendlin’s work which tie this all together:

- 1) His identification of *the felt-sense*.
- 2) His realization that *symbol* (as metaphor) does not merely *equate* with a felt-sense as some sort of mental concept which conceptually describes a meaning known and felt in the body. Instead, symbol *interacts* with a felt-sense in such a way that felt-meaning can move forward and *unfold within the body*. *Interacting with a felt-sense* is symbol’s *function*.
- 3) Finally, a third discovery by Gene is his recognition of *Process-Skipping Structures*. This is something I have never heard anyone in the Focusing community talk or write about about (other than Gene himself).<sup>(3)</sup>

Process-Skipping messes us up when we try to feel our own feelings. Here's an example. I was invited to present a program for fifth graders after their teacher had been in one of our workshops and wanted to share the experience with them. At one point I asked the kids, "*What do you do in order **NOT** to feel your difficult feelings?*" I was absolutely overwhelmed by what came back from them. "I jog. I talk on the phone with my friends. I read a book. I sing. I dance, I play with my cat—and on and on and on! They had process-skipping down pat. They already knew exactly how *not to feel their real feelings*. And where did they learn that? Obviously, from watching us—the adults in their lives! They simply *observed* and *absorbed*. It is so important that we understand and teach more about process-skipping because it operates 24-7 beneath the radar of our everyday awareness. We don't even think about process-skipping—we just automatically fall into it.

One brief, but vital note to be made before moving on. For anyone in this audience working with substance abuse and addictions therapy, process-skipping in our view may be the most powerful *psychological* component which locks all addictions in place and makes them so resistant to change. Any therapy program working with addictions needs to explore process-skipping habits in the body, learning how to identify as well as how to grow beyond such undermining structures.

### ***Developing New Body-Habits and Meeting Our Affection Teachers***

From our research, personal experience and experimentation with both Focusing and BioSpiritual Focusing, we are convinced that this process is all about *learning a new habit in your body*. When you learn typing, playing a musical instrument or driving a car—your physical body becomes the interface. In like manner, we are all challenged to learn the language of our own

bodies within the context of spiritual experience as well.

In the beginning, when first learning to type, you have to do all those little finger exercises, becoming familiar with the home keys and memorizing the keyboard. You need to learn this in your body. In like manner, learning to focus involves growing into a new way of attending and relating to your own body and feelings. Yet, many still fail to realize that this same quality of *attentive, physical presence* to our own bodies is needed for any healthy growth in spirituality as well. Such a habit cannot be learned overnight. Focusing and spirituality both demand a transformation in the quality of felt-presence to your own body and feelings. Developing such a new relationship can often be quite challenging and, for some, even quite unfamiliar.

Here's an illustration written by one of our small group BioSpiritual Focusing Companions who also happens to be a Buddhist, a yoga teacher and a massage therapist. He wrote:

I have a client who has *fought* cancer for some years. Last week during treatment I helped him listen to some tears that had leaked from the eye corners. Suddenly, he realized how harshly he had pushed against the cancer when what he most needed was to hold in a loving way *how his body carried the cancer*. In that moment of realization his entire body relaxed and a pain that had been felt in his shoulder for years lessened dramatically. We can now not only achieve very satisfying treatment results, but continue an inner journey that was blocked because of fighting vs holding the whole issue in a loving way in his own body.<sup>(4)</sup>

This switch from *fighting* to *caring* marks a dramatic shift in human evolution—a transformed experience within our own bodies of what it means to be human. We believe this change is critical as the next evolutionary step in both Focusing and spirituality. Otherwise, how can felt-meaning possibly

move forward within the organism when you find yourself unable or unwilling to get near the feeling or felt-sense that most troubles or challenges you? Often, the very feeling most needing your loving attention is *the one you instinctively move away from*. How can a symbol interact with a felt-sense when the feltness of it all is something you instinctively push away? *Yet, that's exactly how process-skipping functions in your body.*

Grasping the significance of this discontinuity becomes essential if the Focusing process is ever to penetrate the immune system of our social fabric and the networks around us! What the hurting places in your body most need from you is for you to be there in a loving, caring, *physical* way. One experienced Focusing teacher of ten years, after going through our 3 month program which is now available as our new workbook, wrote:

... I began to realize that I had fallen into a pattern of needing to extract meaning from my felt experience rather than just caring for it. The meaning (that emerged *from* my body) had become more important than the relationship (*with* my body).<sup>(5)</sup>

In the beginning when Ed and I first learned Focusing many years ago, it was suggested that we find some imaginary way to *distance* painful or scary feelings. Neither of us ever found this exercise worked for us. Why? Because there was *no actual transformation within the felt-relationship*. The quality of our felt-presence to whatever we pushed away did not change. There was only a kind of easing, numbing or distraction by getting involved in the details of placing troublesome feelings farther away from us.

However, we did learn from personal experience that a transformation in such relationships could occur when we realized that pain or fear were *the voice of our own bodies crying out in distress to be listened to* so they could feel our caring presence and respond by revealing what needed to be heard. Moreo-

ver, we found it easier to bring a physically-felt, compassionate presence to how our own hurting bodies were *carrying* pain, instead of the psychologically impossible effort of embracing the pain itself which was still too scary or even terrifying to get near to. This essential *switch in the relationship* to our own bodies and how they carried our feelings made a critical difference because then our bodily-felt capacity for caring presence could be drawn into play.

Ed then recognized that we all have very special teachers of caring-presence *right inside our own bodies* as part of our biology as human beings. He called them our *Affection Teachers*—a body-response needing to be called out from us because we cannot make them appear on their own. You neither intend nor order up affection at will. It is drawn out of you, often as a surprising body-gift. You notice this in babies and small children—how they find themselves spontaneously drawn to stuffed or cuddly little baby animals. As we grow up other, more adult experience of Affection Teachers, that we often pay little or no attention to, will occur in our lives and call out to be recognized.

For example, a middle-aged woman needed to find her own Affection Teacher in order to hold inside the fears and turmoil of her own disintegrating marriage. At the same time she was also responsible for organizing everything involved in her daughter's up-coming marriage. Suddenly she remembered the body-feel of nursing her daughter and stroking her tiny little head. Immediately, she and Ed both recognized that she had been gifted with *the physical point of entry* into her body's knowing which could guide and help her to hold and be present in a caring way to how her body carried all her inner turmoil.

Entering the world of body-knowing is a little like learning to drive a car and through the experience getting *a feel for the road*. We all need to let our Af-

fection Teachers guide us into a *body-sense* for holding, being present to and owning in a caring way whatever needs to be heard inside us.

It is very important not to confuse the Affection Teacher with a temporary soothing away of our difficult feelings. For many, this can turn into just one more way to process-skip around how something really feels in our body. Affection Teachers help us *to change the quality of our felt relationship to what we carry in our bodies*. They have enabled participants in our programs to involve their own bodies more actively in the Focusing process.

I believe this is a critical point for developing a more effective Focusing *pedagogy* as well as a more healthy and transformative spirituality. But how do we teach this? It's not just a matter of communicating some new idea in the mind. A new habit and experience needs to seep into the body as well! What inbuilt resources are readily available within us that can motivate and support such a changing relationship? The first steps of learning to *Notice* and *Nurture* our important feelings and felt-senses have become two pivotal *body-learnings* within both personal and spiritual growth. Our workbook is built around six key body-learnings like the two just mentioned above.

### ***How Can the Many be One?***

Let me now briefly describe something in BioSpiritual Focusing which provides an introduction to our linking of Focusing and Spirituality. The French Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in his posthumously published work, *Science and Christ*, came to essentially the same conclusion as Gene regarding our human organism. In a letter penned in 1919 he wrote:

The subtle distinctions and individual explanations we pile up in an attempt to retain in philosophy the empirical notion of 'Body' are simply patches sewn into a worn-out fabric. The very basis of our specula-

tions about matter is defective. We must understand bodies in some other way than what we have hitherto accepted. The problem is how.<sup>(6)</sup>

Père Teilhard then began pointing a direction toward resolving his own question when he wrote:

... the limited, tangible fragments that in common usage we call ... bodies, are not complete beings. They are only the nucleus of such beings, their organizational centre. In each case, the real extension of these bodies coincide with the full dimensions of the universe.<sup>(7)</sup>

In a parallel manner, Gene Gendlin has written:

Your physically felt body is, in fact, part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people in fact the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside.<sup>(8)</sup>

When Joseph Campbell said that he wanted to place metaphor at the center of our exploration of Western Spirituality, his words helped me to recognize and begin sharing a personal experience I have had that relates to his statement. During my training in the Jesuits they needed someone to be a beekeeper for several beehives on the property. So, I volunteered. One of the very first things I quickly learned when working with bee colonies is that the entire colony—that big ball of clustered bees you may have seen hanging from a tree branch, all massed together in the springtime during their swarming season—that entire mass *in and of itself is a single, living organism!* This was not something I could only read about in books. I actually felt-sensed it within my own body. My physical organism touched and could resonate with the organicity before my eyes. I noticed that every colony had its own distinct personality. Some were very gentle, with individual bees buzzing curiously around me. Others had become so fearsome I couldn't even get within



50 yards of the hive before they were all over me.

During my philosophical studies, this experience connected with the single, greatest problem in philosophy which may be summarized in two, cryptic questions: “How can the many be one?” “How can the one be many?” Such questions are never answered in the mind alone. Yet, they became tangible and immediately approachable from within my own body’s knowing. I must confess to having learned more about spirituality and philosophy from my experience with the bees than I have from a lifetime of reading scholarly books and articles or the lives of the saints. My body-experience with the bees has become a *powerful personal metaphor* in my own life, raising into awareness a felt-sense of being part of something Greater than myself. We are all tied-together within a Larger, Living Body. We can never escape from the sheer *physical organicity* of this experience. But we need to develop the body-habit of Noticing and Nurturing such felt-senses.

As Gene wrote earlier, “Your physically felt body is part of the whole universe.” Today, we find ourselves groping our way forward into a more *embodied* experience of just such organic, even cosmic environmentalism. We think of ourselves as totally separate from one another. Yet, like it or not, we find ourselves being drawn together in ways that challenge our radical sense of separateness. Think of lungs and air and breathing. You can isolate and separate them into little pieces, analyzing and discussing each as though they were discrete, separable entities. Yet, while the mind divides, our bodies sense the vital interactions. As John Muir reminded us, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”<sup>(9)</sup>

In the world of body-knowing we are all linked together as a *single, living organism* which, for Christians embraces both the living and the dead—the *Communion of Saints*. A growing awareness of such physical organicity is slowly maturing within humankind today. In our churches, however, many still

vote with their feet because they feel something vital missing in their experience of traditional religion. As expatriates they still instinctively long for an active inclusion of their own bodily-knowing within their personal search for a more integrating and inclusive Christian spirituality.

As members of the community of Focusing, can you begin to imagine what might occur if the different religions in our world could gather to celebrate with one another the shared stories in our evolving body-habit of Noticing and Nurturing the deeper felt-senses within our important feelings? If the human body, together with its unique way of knowing, cannot be fully integrated into our experience of contemporary spirituality, surely that spirituality will have little if any impact for significantly transforming our increasing violence and loss of a sense for the common good.

### ***A Whole New Universe Inside Ourselves***

In closing, let me share a final reflection on where the felt-sense and the felt-shift lie within BioSpiritual Focusing. When Galileo and Copernicus turned everything topsy-turvy, upsetting the serene, stable order of our then imagined geocentric universe—and they did this by *changing the relationships* among sun, moon, earth and stars—they introduced a perception-shattering *new paradigm* which demanded a changed perspective on the universe. But even more, it opened the door upon a whole new way of *experiencing ourselves within the universe*. We were no longer the center of everything. But developing new eyes to see and ears to hear did not just stop with the sun, moon and stars. This powerful new experience eventually thrust roots deep within the communal body of humankind itself, transforming even our most intimate *inner* experience of ourselves.

The effects of this inner Renaissance continue accelerating within our own time, opening a BioSpiritual doorway into that Larger Body which, for Chris-

tians, St. Luke has described in his Acts of the Apostles as, “*The One in Whom we live and move and have our very being.*” (Lk 17:28) I used to think that Gene, supported by Mary had provided us with a psychological key to unlock this deeper knowing of what it means to be human. But after years of reflection and personal experience, I’ve come to realize that my earlier assumption was not fully accurate. Rather, what they have done is to shine a light upon *the keyhole* which lies within everyone, reminding us that our physical organism itself is the key. It opens an unfolding dimension of *felt-sensing our own human evolution* from within the body—“... *as this can be felt from inside.*”

Ed and I thank you all for inviting us to share with you at this Focusing Conference. We both hope to continue our journey together with you into the farther reaches of what yet lies ahead for Focusing explorers, something which we express as a *BioSpiritual journey of exploration into God.*

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- (1) **Joseph Campbell**, *Thou Art That—Transforming Religious Metaphor*, Edited with a Foreword by Eugene Kennedy, Ph.D., Joseph Campbell Foundation, (Novato, California: New World Library, 2001) p.1.
- (2) **Abraham Maslow**, *Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964), p.xiv.
- (3) **Eugene T. Gendlin**, *A Theory of Personality Change*, in J.T. Hart & T.M. Tomlinson (eds), *New Directions in Client-Centered Therapy*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.), pp.129-173.
- (4) From a private conversation.
- (5) From a private conversation.
- (6) **Teilhard de Chardin**, *Science and Christ*, (New York: Harper & Row publishers, 1969, p.13 (Science et Christ was first published in France by Editions du Seuil in 1965)
- (7) *Ibid.*, p.12.
- (8) **Eugene T. Gendlin**, *Focusing*, Second Edition, New, revised instructions, (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p.77.
- (9) **John Muir**, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911). The quotation may be found in Chapter 6 on page 110 of the Sierra Club books 1988 edition.