

Dying with Dad – A focusing way of mourning .

A core personal sense of meaning

My father , much loved , was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and I was advised that if I wanted to spend quality time with him then I had better book a ticket to return to South Africa as soon as possible. The first time I saw him he struggled out of his chair to greet me. As we embraced I had a powerful felt sense - a physical blow – like an electric shock, within me. My spontaneous thought was ‘ Death is already here!’ My own core meaning to the whole experience of attending my father’s dying and death was to centre around this shock of anticipating not so much his death, but something dying away in me . And what is more, that implicit and underneath this dying away was a sense of something in me being shocked awake and shocked into being more alive. “Me, awake and alive” was the phrase in mind. This was not a meaning I could easily speak of at the time – but it was most definitely there throughout everything.

Staying connected to inner resources

In the weeks that followed this initial sense opened up many intricate strands of meaning – a bodily sense of heavy dread, of hard resistance, empty waiting, huge emptiness - but as each experience came to me it was invariably shot through with this distinctive sense of being freshly alive and awake. I was also to find that the multiple roles of being a carer , a daughter, and the more subtle roles of becoming parent to a parent, and even spiritual ‘midwife’ to changes , meant digging deep in inner reserves. To have the staying power to respond and keep giving of myself I needed to keep close to this my personal meaning of things as a resource for strength and insight. When I lost connection with this inner resource I could almost immediately feel a sense of stress.

Turning moments - restoring the inner connection.

The intensity of this period brought an urgency into my practice of focusing . Here I could observe more precisely my own vulnerable areas where I tended to lose touch with myself . Focusing also gave me a context where, having noticed that I had disconnected, I could make a new choice that might restart the flow. Each turning moment implied a turning away from something – a habitual response taking me away from my personal sense of meaning – and also a returning toward it. With hindsight I can see these critical turning moments more clearly – moments where I could repeat to myself – ‘I choose not to do that - for now’. In the weeks I developed a kind of vigilant alertness for three particular kinds of turning moments where I could restore connection with this sense of ‘me alive and awake ! ’.

Moments of changing old responses to pain.

Most interactions and responses to my father’s condition were in one way or another underlaid with emotional pain - concealed or overt, conscious or not, my own, my fathers’ and the pain of all of us in his circle of care mingling together. In bringing my awareness to be with my own painful feelings I noticed that focusing got blocked when something in me

chose to focus on other people's pain and ignore my own. I recognized the harmfulness of this old pattern of pain avoidance in me - cleverly obscured by the habits of pastoral listening. In my focusing practice I had a context to not only recognize the problem but have a context for seeing a turning moment 'to not do that for now.' Focusing gave me safe opportunities to choose to give my own experience priority. Each time felt like a small moment of dying away of the old pattern of over identifying with other people's pain stories. And each time I restored connection a fresh matrix of inner relationships and new possibilities began to build up as I got into focusing kind of dialogue around a painful felt sense.

I could bring my awareness to what hurts.

I could bring my awareness to the part of me that chooses to ignore that.

I could bring my awareness to the part of me that gets caught up in other people's pain.

I could bring my awareness to the part of me that feels that it is my pain over against another's pain.

In the situation this practice brought a release in tenderness to my self and compassion to others - and I could be present to other people without being caught up in their pain.

Moments of changing responses to the unknown.

Inevitably I was on the receiving end of a quite extraordinary array of assurances and statements of belief about life and death. These offerings were well meant and intended to give me something to hold onto in facing what cannot be known about death. In my focusing practice I could recognize my inner response to powerful ideas. One response would be to go into an internal debate to evaluate their content and my comfort level with them. This inner debate felt exhausting. Another related response was to get into thinking abstractly about Death with a capital D to get some momentary relief from the relentless particularities of my father's illness (body functions, body fluids, body needs). I experienced this abstracting as seductive, but also distracting from a bodily sense of meaning.

In focusing I watched for the opportunities for a turn around moment where I could choose to refrain from habits of mental checking of content or distracting myself. I could 'not do that for now', and sense a break in the spell of being transfixed by powerful ideas. A small dying away of old patterns of response to not knowing. And in using focusing kind of questions around and underneath my responses (rather than repeating them) and see if a new and lively matrix of meanings comes up.

I could bring my awareness to the part of me that does not know -

I could bring my awareness to the part of me that says it must know

I could bring my awareness to something in me that knows but doesn't know how it knows.

In the situation I experienced the freedom and spaciousness of not being bound to any explanation of death and able to receive the strength and warmth of intention behind the statements of belief offered to me. There was life in this.

Moments of changing responses to powerlessness.

To stay emotionally close and present to my dying father as we watched and waited I felt

brought me up against my own futile desire to control life. My way of wanting to manage the process of my father's dying was to try in vain to create a psychological time structure . I wanted someone to tell me how much time we had, other times I wanted to shore up more time (worrying about nutrition) , and other times I wished to hurry death to get done with it. I could recognize the strategies of my agenda mind to avoid what was real and true in the present, but in focusing I had a context to find moments to safely drop the agenda habit Here again there was an opportune moment 'to not do that for now.' I could then start of question and interact with inner parts and places connected to a felt sense of wanting control. I could bring my attention to the part that wants to hurry ..
I could bring my attention to what wants more time
I could be with and wait with something that is there - now.
I could be with the part in me that is letting go.

This helped me to be open and present in painful moments with my father - without the resistance. What was dying was the mental habit mind to creates a time frame and decide what must be there. There was sense of freedom and liveliness from not doing that.

In conclusion – changing the manner of mourning.

Focusing became a way of guarding my personal truth from the deeply ingrained habits of mind that distract me from and dissipate my own felt sense of meaning . The threats to this inner experiencing were old mental habits to try and manage pain and fear and powerlessness. Focusing helped me to recognize turning moments where something else could be safely tried - in small repeated safe experiments in freedom from old and fixed mental habits. These moments are comparable to moments of conversion, a real dying away of the strength of these mental habits, and a turning towards an inner felt sense of being freshly awake and alive. This was the surprising , unique and constantly evolving felt sense of meaning of a painful loss. As for now – I can stay quietly with the huge nothingness that comes with being, in my fifties, a fatherless child – and at the same time sense a sweet tasting passion for life infusing through that empty space. Or in focusing language I could say that yes, I am grieving, but that the manner of mourning is being changed.