

British Focusing Association



NEWSLETTER

Supporting Your Focusing Journey

Issue 2: October 2013

www.focusing.org.uk

Editor's note

Welcome to the second edition of our newsletter – and thank you to everyone who responded so warmly to our first. We're happy to see numbers of subscribers steadily rising. Please continue to share the newsletter with other Focusers who you think would enjoy feeling part of our community.

In this issue we have some important Focusing news to announce from our 'Sofa'; and Astrid Schillings reports back on this year's International Focusing conference in Switzerland. We also dive into rich inner territory with our explorations of Focusing, by Rob Foxcroft, Kay Hoffmann and John Threadgold. We also continue the theme of how Focusing began in the UK with reminiscences from Barbara McGavin in the Members' Corner, as well as meeting Gordon Adam, one of our newer members. For ideas, offerings and feedback, please contact me!

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News from the Sofa

By Jerry Conway and Fiona Parr

We have some exciting news to share. In 2012 Britain hosted the Olympics and in 2016 something much more important is happening. Britain has been asked to host the 2016 International Focusing Conference – this follows successful conferences in Switzerland last year and California the year before. A co-ordinating group is currently looking for a venue and we are thinking it should be in July.

Our UK Focusing School in 2014 will be a good practice run for us. This is taking place from October 22nd - 26th, 2014 near Norwich. We have gathered together some excellent trainers to lead the morning themes:

- René Veuglers - Being Seriously Playful
- Barbara McGavin - From Spark to Beacon - Ignite your Creativity
- Astrid Schillings - Whole Body Focusing
- Greg Madison - Focusing Oriented Therapy
- Peter Afford - Creative Thinking at the Edge
- Rob Foxcroft - Meditative Listening
- Paula Newman and Fiona Parr - An Introduction to Focusing

We have agreed to change our name to the British Focusing Association because we want to be more active in promoting Focusing and be more inclusive. This is in the run up to registering as a Community Interest Company so we can run events like the Focusing School.

While we've been discussing our governance The Focusing Institute (TFI) in New York is also discussing the future structure of the international community of Focusing. Members of TFI can join a discussion forum online.

Good wishes,

Fiona and Jerry

Fiona Parr and Jerry Conway have been sitting on the sofa together for 2 years (as co-chairs of BFA). They both offer individual sessions and Focusing training; and meet regularly to keep BFA on track.



What's in a Name? BFTA becomes BFA

By Jerry Conway

Right now in BFTA, we're forming a Company to take on the work of the British Focusing Teacher's Association, and so in June I set up a process to discern whether we should change our name; and if so, to what! Holding to a principle dear to us, we decided that we would listen to each other's contributions on our email discussion list, and that we wouldn't make any decision until everyone was willing to settle on a name – even if it wasn't their first choice.

What we call things is important to us in the Focusing world – this is because Gene Gendlin found that when we struggle to find the right word for our inner experience it opens up a space where new understandings can grow; and then when we find just

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the right word(s) something inside seems to settle. Often this can be seen by the listener as a sigh or a change in facial expression.

So what new words emerged for us in the process? Focusing UK was an immediate front runner in the discussion. But then we noticed, somewhat startled, how it would work as an acronym. Of course, there were some who liked it despite – even for! – that very reason; but others amongst us couldn't live with this. I suggested UK Focusing Organisation (UFO) but (for some strange reason!) no one liked that. We also acknowledge that we don't have members in Northern Ireland, as Focusers we know there belong to the Irish Network. So we would need to be 'British'. Then we had a debate about whether we were an Alliance, an Institute (like the Focusing Institute in New York), a Network, a Society, a Community, or an Association. So we had British Institute for Focusing (BIFF) and British Alliance for Focusing (BAFF). Again, we stumbled over the acronyms: a bit batmanish? The caped crusader of Focusing strikes again. Many also wanted to keep the word 'teachers' in the name; but we soon discovered the presence of a different felt sense amongst us, one that points towards who we are in principle.

Are we simply a support organisation for teachers? Or, have we grown into something else? So we began to favour names which reflected a new goal, as we do more to promote Focusing in Britain (FIB)? And in the end we settled on a name which reflects this, and which keeps a continuity with the past (with an acronym already familiar to our ears): BFA. Everyone was able to settle with this. So that is why this newsletter has a change of title in the banner, and how we now come to be the British Focusing Association.

Jerry Conway teaches Focusing to groups and individuals and is based in the West Midlands area. His particular interest is in Community Wellness Focusing, building self-help networks in communities in the UK and overseas, particularly in areas which experience conflict or have limited access to mental health services. For more information, see our website or contact Jerry directly on: www.jerryconway.co.uk



'Coming Home' – The 25th International Focusing Conference

Feature Article by Astrid Schillings

'Coming Home' was the theme with which this year's hosts (Eveline Moor, Christiane Geiser and their remarkable team) enticed Focusers from all over the world to the 25th International Focusing Conference in Switzerland. With 220 participants from 28

different countries, the conference was fully booked – and vibrantly buzzing with ways to share, exchange, work and live Focusing. Newcomers to Focusing felt met in their curiosity, while even veteran Focusers found inspiration in the exceptionally diverse and

rich presentations. We also welcomed Chinese participants for the first time, most of them taught by Campbell Purton from the UEA In Norwich. A group of dedicated translators provided simultaneous translation throughout the conference in several languages.

There was another strange collaborator: the rain, fog and even snow, which at times kept us indoors, connecting even more closely, or venturing out into magically dripping cloudy forest walks; while the rare sun and blue skies unveiled the breathtaking landscape of the Lac des Quatre Cantons/Vierwaldstätter See and high Alpine mountains.

Several Focusers from the UK were presenting. Alan Tidmarsh met with huge interest for his 'Four Key Felt Senses on Focusing and Addiction', while Elizabeth English (Locana) shared her inspiration with Laughter Yoga in a popular workshop, 'Coming Home to Joy – Laughing our way into Presence'. Peter Afford was 'Dialoguing on the Felt Edge' with enthusiastic participants and Judy Moore collaborated with Christiane Geiser on different kinds of structure-bound process. I offered my fresh perspectives on Wholebody Focusing in German/English workshops, reaching quite a crowd.

Gene Gendlin sent us a personal message in The Focusing Institute hour, which touched us deeply:

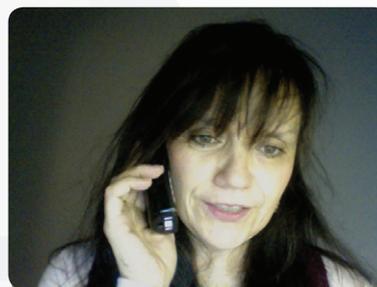
... How did you all do this, build it so large, and spread it everywhere? That makes me stop and realise: One stage of real success seems to have already happened without my taking notice. Let us be aware and celebrate and take strength from all that is going on. Now we will find ways to connect all of us and learn much more from each other.

On a personal level, Gene shared how he felt he had suddenly had become old.

Sensing forward to a time beyond Gene and Mary's presence, there was a palpable wondering about how we will go on as an international community; an appreciation for the delicate space in which we bring alive our collaborations, exchanges, stucknesses A recognition for how these 'international' times allow us to pause and sense a 'Coming Home' into what Focusing is all about.

In the co-ordinators' meeting I could sense a genuine will to feel-think for new ways together in transition and how much the International events seem to bring a sense of community across our different cultures. After a year of indecision, there was relief and enthusiasm to hear that the International will go on! In 2015 in the US; and after that, a big year for Britain, with a UK team hosting the International Focusing Conference in 2016.

Astrid met Focusing while training as a psychologist/ Person-Centred Therapist in 1981. She teaches Wholebody Focusing and Focusing internationally and gives sessions and supervision via Skype, phone (0049-221-5625770) and in person in London. Living in Germany, Astrid is an honorary member of BFTA. Her heart lies in supporting a sense of aliveness in people in their daily lives. You can contact Astrid directly at: astrid.schillings@gmx.de, www.wholebodyfocusing.info.





Elizabeth English (Locana) responds to the multi-lingual, international flavour of the conference by helpfully teaching everybody a common language at the final night's festivities – Gibberish!

Epistle to a Reflective Listener

Focusing Thread by Rob Foxcroft

Dear colleague,

I know you like the phrase, *reflective listening*. And I don't. I believe it encourages the listener to hide, because it brings up the image of a light-reflecting surface. And the listener ought not to be hidden behind any kind of surface, but fully, humanly visible.

Behind my dislike of the phrase, there is a swarm of thoughts about language. Buzz, buzz. Here they are, for what they are worth.

1
Language does not have a public meaning that is found in dictionaries. Not at all. Ordinary language is always contextual. It happens in a moment of human interaction.

2
Only technical language is made by a process of definition.

Even technical language changes, as definitions evolve within a profession. (For example, many definitions in medical science have been changing of late, as the profession takes account of developments in genetics.)

3
More importantly, technical language is always parasitic upon ordinary language. You can't write your technical definition without writing sentences in ordinary language.

4
In ancient Greece, Herakleitos came up with the idea that to say new things you must make new language. For this he was widely laughed at in Classical Antiquity.

I think the ancients were right to laugh. For you can only frame new language by writing sentences in the language you already have. Or by being wilfully obscure.

5
Gene Gendlin claims there is a gulf between private and public language. This is more or less exactly the old claim of Herakleitos. (I commend Herakleitos to you. There are many Heraclitean threads in Gendlinian thought.)

In order to make his claim, Gene first claims that public language is found in dictionaries. This prior claim is absurd. It bears no scrutiny.

And the claim about dictionaries is extremely damaging to Gene, because people naturally

think that anybody who says such silly things can't be worth reading.

For as everybody knows, language is formed in the using of it and re-formed in each new use. (See Austin, Strawson, Wittgenstein, Gendlin)

6

Natural language is very much richer, more fluid and more subtle than any form of technical language. In fact, the whole point of technical language is to simplify: to make limited and exact what in its natural form is shifting and protean.

7

Wittgenstein argues against the idea that we can split between *the language* and *the experiential reality that underlies and gives meaning to it*.

He says something that goes roughly like this:

There has to be something wrong with the following thought:

The meaning of this Brahms sonata is the feeling that it brings. Therefore, if I can get the feeling directly, I may as well dispense with the sonata.

Wittgenstein's example surely points in the right direction.

But at least we have to agree with Gene that the experiential base is always already saturated with language. We are linguistic beings.

8

A friend writes: *Often words get in the way of clear understanding of what the other person means*. This gives me pause. Certainly, I often fail to get what the other person means.

Sometimes both of us fail to notice this.

When I talked to Mary Gendlin, she would break in, saying: *No, stop. You haven't yet taken in what I heard you say*. Then I would pause; and maybe I would find that she had not quite caught my meaning, after all.

But was it the words that got in the way? No. I don't think so. I think it was my inattention, self-centredness and haste. That is, I think the problem was essentially solipsistic: I was too much lost in my own stuff to be fully in relationship.

9

And yes, of course: the meaning is always more than the words. Sentences have always (as the philosophers say) 'an excess' around them.

Does that mean I have to read Brahms's mind? No, it means I have to dig deeper and deeper into his written score; and it means that this digging is more or less inexhaustible.

10

Let's go back to my friend's thought: *Often words get in the way of clear understanding of what the other person means*. This is, of course, exactly my problem with the phrase, *reflective listening*.

To me, the phrase seems to leave itself wide open to foggy misunderstanding. Inevitably, it conjures up some image of a light-reflecting surface. Is that the image we want?

11

I am happy (of course) for you to use the term *reflective listening*. Why would I not be? Yet I find it misleading. How can it fail to inspire the ping-pong-paddle form of listening, in which the listener hides behind a method?

Here is Gene Gendlin:

When I think back to the struggle that Carl [Rogers, ed.] had ... always trying to drop whatever it was he had written, to re-

establish the reality of the contact, I feel I am following in his footsteps ... First he had the method of reflecting, then he said: 'No that is not it ...'

So this is my way of saying that: Do not let ... anything ... get in between. Do not use it as an in-between. Do not say: 'I can stay here because I have my reflecting-method, I have my ping-pong-paddle, so you cannot get me. You say something? You get it back.'

There is a sense that we are armed, you see ... We have all this stuff and so it is easy for us to sit there with stuff in between. Do not let it be in between; put it out of the way. You can have at least as much courage as the client has. If not, I would be ashamed of myself, with all the stuff that I have, if I still cannot really look when this person can. So I want to be there in that same way.

That – I think – is the first job we have ... That is so necessary in a field that is becoming more and more 'professional', which is to say useless and expensive. [1]

For me the word *reflective* is scary. It makes me feel that the person who listens to me is armed with a ping-pong paddle. For you, the situation is entirely different. You use the phrase *reflective listening* as a defined term in a professional vocabulary.

12

We can all agree that table-tennis champions make useless Focusing companions. We agree that it helps when the experience is one of deep empathy. We agree, that is, about the most important points.

It is just that I never use technical language when I can avoid it. In particular, I am keen to avoid technical terms when the ordinary

sense of the words is apt to lead astray the unwary.

I am happy to speak of *experiential listening*, of *receptive listening*, of *meditative listening*, or (best of all) simply of *listening*.

I am wary of the word, *reflective*, because I can't myself banish the image of a shining lake with woods, mountains and clouds gleaming in its depths.

So I feel frightened. I wonder, anxiously: *Who is really there in the hidden gulf?* Is it, maybe, the Loch Ness Monster?

REFERENCE

[1] Gendlin, E.T. (1990). The small steps of the therapy process: How they come and how to help them come. In G. Lietaer, J. Rombauts & R. Van Balen (Eds.), *Client-centered and experiential psychotherapy in the nineties*, pp. 205-224. Leuven: Leuven University Press. From http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2110.html

Rob writes: 'I met the Person-Centred Approach in 1972, Focusing in 1987. My work is done at the confluence of these streams. I teach Meditative Listening, working for the emergence of the listening society. I live in Glasgow with my wife and family. I play the piano – mostly Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. I love to be in wild nature, to walk on the hills or sit by the sea. As a child I loved canoeing and used to build drystone walls.'

For more information, see our website or contact Rob directly on: rob@robfoxcroft.com, www.robfoxcroft.com, tel: 0141 943 1449.



Members' Corner

Your Chance to Meet ... Gordon Adam and Barbara McGavin

Focusing: A Deep, Powerful and Surprising Journey of Unfoldment

By Gordon Adam

I discovered Focusing by chance early in 2007 at an introductory workshop led by Chris Wilson in Bristol for my meditation group. I volunteered for the demo and was surprised by the depth and 'transcendental' nature of my experience.

I focused regularly over the next two years with two Focusing partners. The only book I read in this time was *The Power of Focusing* – I had discovered something that had opened a new experiential doorway and that was working really well, and I didn't want my head to get in the way by acquiring too many ideas or concepts about Focusing.

During that time I also introduced many people to Focusing as part of an open monthly Focusing group that was set up after Chris's workshop. I was struck by how consistently first-time Focusers found their experience to be 'deep', 'powerful' and 'surprising' and I decided to do some training in Focusing in order to teach it to others with more sense of foundation.

Over the next two to three years I did a certification course with Fiona Parr in Bristol and then a practitioner training with Peter Afford in London. Over that period I did a lot of Focusing – sometimes as much as five times a week with a variety of partners. I have

always found having a variety of partners to be an enriching experience – different people support me in accessing different aspects of my being.

I have a passion for Focusing and for teaching Focusing, and since 2009 have been running Focusing groups, introductory workshops, and Focusing and Meditation retreats in the Southwest. I am particularly interested in how Focusing can create bonds between people and brings particular enabling qualities of presence and cohesion to groups.

I am also interested in the use of Focusing as a spiritual practice and how it interfaces with meditation, prayer and reflective contemplation. I am excited to have the opportunity to explore this further through co-leading a Focusing-based day retreat for Buddhist meditators with Manjudeva in Bristol next January.

Gordon has been a member of BFTA since 2011. He lives in Bristol and offers one-to-one Focusing sessions, introductory day and weekend workshops, 5-day Focusing retreats in Devon and Cornwall, and runs an open monthly Focusing Group in Bristol. See the BFTA website for more information, or contact Gordon on gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk or tel. 0117 9080494.

And now, Barbara McGavin ...

Learning to Love what is Difficult: My Focusing Journey

By Barbara McGavin

How I Found Focusing

It was a hot summer day in downtown Toronto and my husband, Beverley Edwards, and I fled to the cool of WH Smith's psychology section. As I scanned through the titles a little book with stones on the cover caught my eye. As I read it I was filled with hope – if this is as good as it sounds, this is going to be great. And I had tried so many things before that I was also feeling, 'Well, we'll see'.

It took many months for us to find a teacher in London and many more before I had an experience that I would call a 'felt shift'. But once that happened I knew that I had found something that was worth all the time and effort and energy that I was putting into learning this funny, hard to describe, subtle process. I was hooked.

Early in January 1983 a group of about six of us sat in our living room and started to work through the steps one by one. Our teacher, David Garlovsky, had learned Focusing in Chicago from Gendlin in the early 70s before Focusing even had a name.

About a year later we started to want to share this with others and so David was granted permission to start a teachers group. And for a few years Bev and I ran workshops teaching the fundamentals of Focusing.

Early Days of BFTA

One chilly December day in the late 1980s the phone rang. On the other end of the line was Rob Foxcroft inviting me to meet with him and Peter Afford. We had a lovely tea at one of my favourite local hotels and talked non-stop. Out of that the British Focusing Network was born. It felt good to have some Focusing friends. It had been pretty lonely until then.

After a few years some of our students wanted also to be able to teach. By that time the Focusing Institute was issuing certification for teachers – but that meant that you had to go to Chicago for a Weeklong. That just wasn't feasible for most of the people in the UK. So we were getting a bottleneck of experienced Focusing people who weren't able to progress.

We tried to work with the Institute in finding a way of certifying people in the UK but that stalled. So we decided to do it ourselves. The British Focusing Teachers Association was born.

How Ann and I met

Bev and I had been writing letters to Ann Weiser (as she was then) since the 1980s for The Focusing Connection. It was in '91 or '92 that I received a letter from Ann saying she was going to be in Europe for a conference and she wondered if we might meet up. I leapt at the chance and suggested that a group of us might meet for a peer weekend of Focusing.

I picked Ann up from Bath Spa station and we rode down to Cutteridge Farm, Wendy Webber's centre near Exeter, chattering like magpies. We quickly discovered that we liked the same books and music and so our friendship began.

In 1994 we began to teach Treasure Maps to the Soul. We have now taught in twelve countries including Israel and Australia. Next year will include Hong Kong. It feels so satisfying to be able to facilitate such deep work with so many people from all over the world and it just gets better and better.

We are now working on two books: one about Inner Relationship Focusing and the

'Treasure Maps' book.

What I have Received from Focusing

It has now been 30 years since I learned Focusing. All those years ago, I was a young mother who was really struggling with almost every aspect of her life. I had tried many kinds of therapy and I was disillusioned and discouraged.

There are still challenges that I face every day. Some of them are really tough. And that is a good thing. It means that I have opportunities to grow beyond where I am right now. I used to be very anxious most of the time about almost everything. Now when I get anxious it is simply a sign that something in my life needs attention.

Perhaps the single most important gift that I have received is how each felt shift brings me more fully into my life – and I have found

that it is a good life. Focusing has given me a deep optimism about what is possible; that living forward will happen if I turn towards what is painful or difficult and give it kind attention.

Barbara McGavin offers individual sessions by Skype, phone and in person. She also collaborates with Ann Weiser Cornell, offering Treasure Maps to the Soul retreats worldwide. She divides her time between Bath and Sacramento in California. For more information, see our website or contact Barbara directly on: bathfocusing@me.com, www.focusingresources.com



Working with Overwhelming or Very 'Negative' Feelings

Focusing Tip by John Threadgold

Feeling safe during our focusing journey is very important, especially as at times when we feel overwhelmed, or we have too many distressing emotions going on. Sometimes as well, we can be in the midst of a focusing session, and discover that our feelings and emotions are just too powerful. How do we work with that?

One way (amongst many) that I have discovered to be effective for myself and my clients is as follows:

When sensing that you could be overwhelmed, try shifting awareness down

to your feet, noticing and feeling connected to the floor beneath your feet. This sense of grounding can help us feel much safer, and more connected. From this grounded position, maybe invite a picture to come, which symbolises those overwhelming feelings. Keep that symbol company from that grounded position. You may also wish to let those feeling know that they have your full attention and that they do not need to be so volatile or overwhelming for you to hear and notice them. This can help you continue the focusing session and feel safe

at the same time. In fact, you may discover that their message to you is not 'negative' at all, but holds precious information that they want you to hear.

John Threadgold has been Focusing since 2005. He is a Focusing-oriented therapist, supervisor and Focusing Teacher. He offers courses on Focusing (Levels 1-5, by Skype and in person) as well as specialist Focusing-oriented Therapy courses for therapists. For more information, see our website, or

contact John directly at www.newfocustherapy.co.uk; email: lesleith@aol.com.



Focusing is ...

By Kay Hoffmann

A couple of years ago, on a rainy Friday evening, I found myself sitting in a circle with a group of five highly experienced individuals: a life coach, a mindfulness teacher, a psychotherapist, an NVC practitioner and a person who had suffered chronic pain for many years with great dignity. Each of them also had other impressive hats, and to cap it all they were all already excellent listeners.

I was there to teach them Focusing. We had been meeting for some time in a series of Skype seminars but this was our first face-to-face encounter. By way of settling in together for our weekend retreat, we began by each taking some time to check in. When it came to my turn, I realised what was uppermost in me was a voice saying, 'What can I possibly bring to this weekend that these sensitive, caring, accomplished people do not already have?' They assured me that I did have something and we determined together to identify what that hard-to-define essence of Focusing actually is.

In response to all that unfolded during the

weekend, this poem came to me on the train journey home:

I do not bring a boat that can rescue you
 I do not have an island of conceptual
 solid ground on which you can stand
 I do not offer a fountain of knowledge
 that you can float upon
 I do not have the power to calm a storm

What I have is only this:
 a willingness to meet you in the tide of
 your raw experience
 the courage to ride the waves with you
 and an unflinching trust in the ocean of
 your inner wisdom

Kay first met Focusing in 1998 and has been a BFTA member since 2002. She offers one-to-one Focusing sessions and tuition, Focusing Skills courses (in person and on Skype), Wholebody Focusing workshops and Practitioner/Teacher training programmes. For more information, see our website or contact Kay directly on: kay.hoffmann@homecall.co.uk, phone 01767 448705 / 07773405640.

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Thank you for reading our second edition.