

British Focusing Association



NEWSLETTER

Supporting Your Focusing Journey

Issue 6: April 2016

www.focusing.org.uk

Editor's note

This edition of the newsletter comes after something of a break, but I am hopeful that you will not have so long to wait for the next one (more later on future newsletter plans). This edition brings together articles on working to bring safety and grounding through Focusing, whether for ourselves or clients we work with. Focusing is a great supportive resource for working with difficult emotions and trauma, and here we can read how it has helped with dissociation as well. There is an update on the eagerly awaited International Focusing Conference in Cambridge in July and also reflections on the last BFA AGM gathering. We get to know one of our newer members in Members' Corner and learn about how Focusing may interplay with art and activism. Finally there is a piece to update you on where we are with the work of BFA's Diversity Working Group and also an insight from one of our members into life as a refugee.

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From the Sofa

By Susan Jordan and Rob Foxcroft

Thank you to those who wrote for this edition of the newsletter and thanks also to Shani and Ivo for their work on the proofreading and design. Thank you to Locana for all of her work on editing the newsletter in the past. Locana is unfortunately too busy to continue with this role. But at least she is busy with spreading the wonders of Focusing. I volunteered to 'guest edit' this edition of the newsletter because I have found it valuable receiving it and wanted to help it continue. So, if you value your newsletter, please consider if you have an article in you to contribute – or a poem, a picture or a quote. Some members have expressed an interest in taking the newsletter forward but more hands would give it more chance of being sustainable, so please do get in touch if you feel you'd be able to help with the editing/organising side of things.

I hope you'll enjoy reading this newsletter and consider contributing in the future!

Suzi Mackenzie,
suzimac55@hotmail.com



sofa sculpture' by suzie, from Flickr Creative Commons

It's good to see the new website up and running. It is striking in appearance and is not only clear, elegant and attractive but also easy to use. We hope that many people will like it and use it to find their way to Focusing

partners, teachers, workshops and events – not least the International Conference.

We are glad to hear that the forthcoming conference in Cambridge is filling up fast with delegates from all over the world. People evidently like the idea of a few days with Focusing friends and colleagues in a beautiful, historic city. The organising team are working very hard under the leadership of Peter Afford and it is going to be a great occasion.

Behind these big, visible happenings there are quieter things going on. We would like to thank Elizabeth Smith for going on with her patient, detailed work as Membership Secretary; Manjudeva, Karen Liebenguth and Chris Drinkwater for their work on the website; the Board of Directors for shouldering overall responsibility for the running of the British Focusing Association; and Suzi Mackenzie for editing this newsletter.

Our membership list goes on growing. Members of the British Focusing Association are promoting Listening-and-Focusing in many contexts, developing differing approaches to Focusing, spreading the word and the practice. We very much want Focusing to be available to everybody, including people who don't usually have access to any form of personal growth.

We – Susan and Rob – are always happy to hear from anybody who needs advice, wants to keep in touch, or has any question about the work of the British Focusing Association.

Greetings to all!

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Resource-oriented Focusing

By John L. Threadgold

Put simply, Resource-oriented Focusing, is Focusing where we invite our felt sense to show us our resources, those inner and outer sources of strength, security, safety, humour; our outer and inner resources. All sorts of things can be revealed, including what resources we have, what we are missing and what we need. We might find some inner nurturing is required. These resources could have a spiritual dimension, however we formulate or understand this, or perhaps a sense of resilience or inner strength manifests itself. I myself have been using Resource-oriented Focusing in my own life. I find it very relevant as I experience chronic fatigue and often feel depleted. Sometimes floating a question, 'what do I need right now?' I discover that I need rest, or to self-nurture holding a cuddly toy, or maybe a lemon, ginger, cinnamon and honey drink and then to go to bed!

Sometimes I get in touch with a part of me that wants to give me a sense of strength and endurance, or just comfort and nurturing, or tells me that I need to get away for a holiday. Of course I also have to action what is revealed, and sometimes that proves more difficult. A diary is essential, to put in the action steps that may be required (but not for the drink of course!)



Teddybären Nr. 1 by Björn Láczy, Flickr Creative Commons

I have offered this style of Focusing in my therapy practice for some time to many clients with no adverse effects. However, this is not always the case. Here are some safeguards that can make this type of Focusing a rich, warm and nurturing experience.

So what are the safeguards that might be put in place when Focusing on our resources?

- 1) Before the Focusing session, agree a form of wording that feels right for the Focuser. This could be something vague, like 'what would feel warm or cosy and nurturing right now' or 'what would feel snug and warm right now?' Spend some time honing the words that are to be used and feel right for the Focuser to use.
- 2) Resources could be something very simple, such as a feeling of being connected and grounded in the here and now. Maybe just noticing the floor beneath the feet. It could be a spontaneous picture, or an actual place, or a good memory. It might be that they need to go and get a drink, or meet a friend for coffee, or go for a walk in the park. It might be remembering some poetry. Anything that feels good.
- 3) If the inner critic appears, can the Focuser stay in the warm cosy place, and treat the inner critic with gentle curiosity without having to agree or argue with that part? Maybe even offer the critic its own safe place to be in?
- 4) If the Focuser finds it impossible to find something resourcing, then maybe just continue the Focusing session as usual.
- 5) Anchoring, by shifting awareness through the body into the feet, and noticing the rock beneath our feet, can feel very solid and strong. This can be particularly good where a part of the Focuser wonders if there is a danger, when a safe space is mentioned. Another possibility is to reassure that part that it is safe, and that we are looking to a place of nurture and love.

Resource-oriented Focusing can add a really wonderful dimension to your Focusing experience. Enjoy, but also make sure you are safe!

John L. Threadgold



John is a Focusing-oriented, Person-centred and integrative therapist and supervisor. He is also a Focusing Teacher recognised by The British Focusing Association and The Focusing Institute. Find out more at www.newfocustherapy.co.uk

Befriending Dissociation: a Focusing Journey into the Not-here Places

By Cathy Rowan

In December 1999 I was stationary at a road junction waiting to turn right when a car accelerated into the back of mine. This changed my life. Gone was my career in acquired brain injury rehabilitation, my ability to drive, to enjoy my hobbies, to live life like my peers. I found myself stuck in a world of severe chronic pain exacerbated by a vestibular disorder. I had joined the ranks of a group of my previous clients who, like me, suffered a whiplash injury but achieved little or no recovery. Like them my life became about micromanaging everything so as to 'control' the pain and the vertigo. And like them no doctor could explain why my body could not recover. My only gut sense, which came from my professional experience, was this was not 'all in my mind' but very much in my body.

Quite early on I became aware that, whilst most of the time my inner experience was taken over by physical pain and a spinning nausea, sometimes I had times when something in me knew I was in a lot of pain but I could not feel anything. Sometimes 'the something in me' encouraged me to take some pain-relief medication and I found that by doing this I was able to feel the physical pain again and this felt 'better'. I felt more real, more here. I preferred the pain to the other vague-somehow-not-here place.

For over ten years I had no idea why my body did this and then, by a wonderful serendipity, I made two discoveries: the first was a book called *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease* by Robert Scaer, a neurologist, and I also found Focusing. Out of this came a rapid cognitive awareness that this vague-somehow-not-here place is a physiological state called dissociation and that I was, unknowingly, a Nobel-prize-winning expert at dissociating. Indeed the whole reason why my body had not recovered from the accident was because it was literally stuck in a physiological state of fight/flight and freeze. My body was just yo-yoing between overwhelm and severe pain to dissociation and chronic nauseous exhaustion, it was hypersensitive to the smallest thing.

Through reading Scaer's book and some email

correspondence with him, I came to realise that, despite many years of therapy about my very difficult childhood which had given me a lot of insight into my past, it had not enabled me to release from my body the layer upon layer of trauma created through living in a household where we breathed in fear not oxygen. Scaer's book outlines in great detail how such a childhood had created a particular neural architecture in me to do with the autonomic nervous system. This meant that, as he put it, I had been left with '... a greater tendency to freeze at the moment of ... [future] ... trauma and to develop dissociative symptoms' (p. 108), and the accident had been the final trigger to activate the whole dissociative reactivity that had been stored in my body for years.

I now understood what was wrong with my body, this left me with the questions: what does my body need to heal? How do I teach my body not to yo-yo between overwhelm and dissociation? I quickly found that the body-based trauma therapies, such as Somatic Experiencing, were mostly just 'too much' for my body and its hypersensitivity. However the fortuitous suggestion of something called Focusing, mentioned in passing to me by a Mindfulness mentor, opened up for me a way forward that was about letting my body take the lead in this healing process.

This process has been a highly challenging journey that started with a something in me needing to find out as much as I could about trauma, attachment and neuroscience. For me, growing up in an academic family, the default place of 'safety' was reading books. My head needed to understand, to make sense of, and my body needed to feel safe and chose the then only way it knew how: the left cortex. Then my goal was to get rid of dissociation – I viewed it as 'the problem'.

Two books however offered me a more compassionate perspective: *The Myth of Sanity* by Martha Stout, which is an exploration of dissociation, and *The Boy who was Raised as a Dog* by Bruce Perry – a heartwarming book which showcases how a lack of love traumatises children and impacts on their neural development. Both books felt full of humanity,

care and hope. Focusing enabled me to take some of Perry's neurodevelopmental approaches in working with children, such as Reiki, massage and music, and adapt them to supporting me as an adult to start to create some safeness within me that was body-based.



'Grapefruit' by Lauren, from Flickr Creative Commons

I realised, when my father died, that I had never been able to feel safely embodied, which is a core developmental need in a child. So these unmet needs were still driving my physiology and I had to find creative ways as an adult to complete this process. One of the most potentially challenging areas, to my head, was how to help the dissociated/overwhelm places that came from a start of life trauma. By listening to my body, I found myself experimenting with the senses – particularly those of smell, touch and sound. I discovered that a particular brand of pink grapefruit shower gel made my body feel safe whereas others didn't. So I harnessed the power of neuroplasticity and used this shower gel daily plus I wrapped a soap of the same fragrance up in my pyjamas, so when I go to bed I smell the pink grapefruit and it strengthens the neural loop. I created different playlists of music that have different effects depending what I need and I also put together a 'feeling' bag made of fur and containing various things like a wooden apple. As layers of terror came up I will sit and hold/stroke these items and anchor on them to support my body.

The beginning of being in my body led to a further awareness that when I had to make the shift from the internal orientation of Focusing and Mindfulness to reconnecting with the outside world, my body would immediately default into dissociation. So with Focusing I learnt how to help my body through a simple three-stage sensory strategy that utilises

both the witnessing left cortex of the brain and the experiencing right cortex, and in so doing brings the whole of my nervous system 'online' and into the present moment. All of these strategies were about building into my neural architecture 'feeling safe wiring'.

This last year has been the most powerful as I embarked on a training to become a Wholebody Focusing practitioner. I began to be able to live on a day-to-day basis in my body, and then discovered that this is not a state of 'happy ever after ending' but has its own challenges like actually feeling frightened in the present moment when I found myself trying to deal with a friend who was drunk and abusive. It was only later that I came to realise how 'well' I had done – I had not defaulted into stoical dissociation. Then, a couple of months later, I discovered that I had had an unconscious place whose sole agenda was still all about fixing/getting rid of this troublesome pesky annoying part – namely dissociation. And yet in discovering this place I became aware that implicit in this awareness was actually me now being ready to welcome and befriend the places of dissociation. That far from being pathological – the places in me that are 'not here' have saved me and my sanity. Martha Stout opens her book with a quote from Joseph Conrad:

How does one kill fear, I wonder? How do you shoot a spectre through the heart, slash off its spectral head, take it by its spectral throat?
(Quoted from Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900, p. 296).

And my answer now, to Conrad and to myself, is to befriend the fear, the spectre. Dissociation no longer haunts me – I welcome it now, like Rumi's Guesthouse Keeper, as a dear, dear friend of mine.



Cathy Rowan

Cathy Rowan lives in Malvern, Worcestershire. She trained as a Focusing practitioner with Fiona Parr and Jerry Conway. She is currently training in Wholebody Focusing with Addie van der Kooy. For more information about Cathy look on the BFA website or go to her website:
www.breatheandbe.co.uk

The BFA Gathering and AGM 2015

By Susan Jordan

Unlike a lot of associations, the BFA doesn't just have an AGM. We certainly have one of those, with an agenda, minutes and all the usual reports, but the meeting itself comes at the end of a three-day gathering of Focusing teachers and practitioners with a full programme of workshops and discussions – and of course with time set aside for Focusing. Not enough time, some people would say, and in fact this year's meeting, at Purley Chase in Warwickshire, seemed particularly full with discussions of various kinds. Also included in the programme are a walk in the countryside – a rather adventurous one this year which involved crossing a muddy field in the midst of a herd of bulls – and some activities that are less work-oriented (I won't say less Focusing-oriented). One night we had a wonderful bonfire, organised by Sandy Gee, and the evening before the AGM some of us got together in a circle and played silly games – a bit of needed light relief.

This year's gathering was slightly larger than usual: nineteen of us altogether, with several members who were new to the association or hadn't been to a gathering before. We welcomed Cecelia Clegg, Patricia Foster, Suzi Mackenzie, Abdul Mateen Omary and Carolann Samuels. Suzi tells us in her piece below what it was like for her to attend for the first time, and I can say that for me it felt rather like a first time too. Though I've been coming to these gatherings since about 2003, I hadn't been a Sofaperson before or fully appreciated all the hard work and organisation that go into making things happen. Unfortunately Rob Foxcroft wasn't able to attend, and trying to do the best I could as half the Sofa I noticed how my tendency to feel responsible for everything began to whirr into overdrive. In fact I was very well supported by former Sofapersons Fiona Parr, Jerry Conway and Kay Hoffmann, and Sandy Gee was happy to organise the Open Space part of the programme. Nevertheless, chairing the AGM itself felt like quite a challenge – somewhat surprisingly, as I'm not new to chairing meetings.

This year there seemed to be a general feeling that the small-group discussions in Open Space time were more 'businessy' and less Focusing-oriented than usual, and we hope to redress the balance next time. We looked at some important topics,

though, including how BFA can make Focusing more accessible to diverse sections of the community and, linked with this, how we can offer Focusing to refugee groups. Mateen, himself a refugee, spoke eloquently about this. We also considered how we as an association want to develop: whether to remain as a teachers'/practitioners' organisation or whether to open our membership more widely. No decisions have yet been reached, and it may well take some time to sense what is the right direction for us. What is clear, however, is that BFA is growing larger: we now have over fifty members, compared with less than thirty when I first joined, and slowly but surely we are getting Focusing out into the world more, as practitioners and teachers, as counsellors and therapists using Focusing in their work, and as people using Focusing in many other ways.



Like the Quakers, and to some extent using their model, BFA has a commitment to making decisions by consensus rather than a simple vote. This may take longer and can be demanding, but it seems more aligned with the spirit of Focusing: everyone senses into the issue for themselves and has the right to be listened to. For some time we have had a system of coloured cards, originally introduced by Fiona Parr. At first there were only three – green for yes, red for no and yellow for not sure, but now thanks to Barbara McGavin we have a sophisticated system whereby people can ask to be heard, express their doubts or even ask the whole group to pause and sense further. That may be partly why I found chairing the meeting something of a challenge, but I have great respect for the principle of consensus

and have seen not only the difficulties that can arise but also how well it can work.

We are already looking forward to next year's gathering and AGM, again at Purley Chase. I hope it will be a chance to welcome more new members and reaffirm our commitment to the practice of Focusing.



Susan Jordan

Susan Jordan works part-time as a Focusing teacher and Core Process psychotherapist in Ashburton, Devon. As well as her Focusing and psychotherapy work she is a poet and writer. She is particularly interested in running workshops on Focusing for Psychotherapists and Focusing and Writing. Her website is www.susanjordan.net.

Reflections on my First BFA AGM Gathering

By Suzi Mackenzie

Socialising...

I attended my first BFA AGM this autumn. Overall it was a very enjoyable experience – once I got past my first-night nerves. Even though it wasn't such a large gathering, and I had already met many of the people present – and they were Focusing people – I still managed to get nervous and socially awkward. My inner critic was at work saying I shouldn't feel this in a gathering of Focusing people. I managed to get through that difficult first evening, acknowledging that perhaps this is a stage I tend to go through at such events.

But this also made me wonder: although I was struggling, I felt on some level I had to pretend I was at ease (which only made me feel worse!). Was this all me and my critic or were social norms coming into play? Did I internalise an expectation to act like I was confident and ok, even among Focusers? So I am left wondering what I could do differently to be more authentic around my nervousness in such situations, without becoming consumed by my nerves. And I'm also wondering, with more new members joining BFA if it's worth us considering how to make new people feel at ease at these events.

I'm glad that the International Focusing Conference has plans for making those who feel 'the odd one out' feel less alone. I hope that perhaps this can be taken into account at other Focusing events as well. I'd like to appeal to anyone who's wanting to attend an event but is nervous, to reach out and ask for an

event buddy (or something similar!) as I'm sure there would be plenty of people willing to do this if asked.

Open space

The concept of 'open space' guided how the activities of the gathering were organised and the spirit in which we could engage with them. Open space gave us permission to decide spontaneously to put on our own workshop or form a breakaway group, for instance. I notice how we get used to ways of doing things and stick to them; in this case I believe that once the workshops had been decided this 'programme' didn't change – but it was liberating to know that if there had been the enthusiasm for an additional workshop/happening it would have been 'allowed' to be offered as and when it arose.

I really appreciated the permission to approach matters in the way that kept things alive for me and did decide to leave a workshop in order to take a different slant on the same theme with another participant. Being able to do this really helped me arrive in the gathering, made what I was doing relevant to my needs at the time and helped me feel more connected.

Discussions on BFA membership

There were lots of discussions around how BFA might open up its membership and how trainers from different backgrounds can come to be endorsed by

BFA. It feels like a time of change for BFA, which I find exciting, and I'm all in favour of inclusivity. But I could also see a potential sense of loss of existing ways of being. There are also many practical implications in change and nothing happens in BFA without its unpaid members making it happen.

Through the discussions I gained more of an insight into the historical roots of BFA. I feel glad that these discussions are happening about who can be in BFA and how to reach out to more people. I witnessed how hard it can be to have different opinions and passionately felt yet clashing convictions between people within such a small organisation. And I witnessed people's skill in listening to each other and the use of the coloured card system for pauses and allowing unheard voices to be heard, both at the meeting and via subsequent email discussion.

Socialising again...

I really valued meeting new Focusing people and getting to know people better. I also enjoyed the times we spent together out walking and at the bonfire. I appreciate how the AGM gathering helped to bring Focusing more into my life and I hope that I will be able to attend regularly for this very reason.

Attending this sort of gathering has the potential for helping me to continue my practice of Focusing in a more integrated way, by connecting with more Focusing people and by remembering on a felt level how important Focusing is to me. Being part of a Focusing community gives me the impetus to try to keep coming back to a Focusing way of being in my work and life in general, as these events and the members I encounter act as a reminder, a support and an inspiration.

Suzi Mackenzie

Suzi is a Person-centred Counsellor and Focusing Practitioner with a keen interest in mental health. Suzi can offer one-to-one Focusing training to individuals and is hoping to offer Focusing training for wellbeing in the community at some point in the future. www.suzimackenzie.com



Words

I don't take your words
Merely as words.
Far from it.

I listen
To what makes you talk —
Whatever that is —
And me listen.

By Shinkichi Takahashi
Poem contributed by Gordon Adam

Explorations of Campaigning, Art and Focusing

By Alex Brew

'The listening and focusing process is of crucial political significance.'

'The Client's Client: The Edge of Awareness', Theoretical Proposition 8, by Gene Gendlin

For the last few years I have been attempting to deepen my Focusing practice alongside my art and activism practices. I have been using Focusing to try to get the whole feel of the situation I'm living in. Within this system (a capitalist, racist, patriarchal, military regime, as author Nawal El-Saadawi puts it) how can I manage to be most fully human? What is my physically felt body's response to what I'm living in? What if I purposefully engage in that? What shifts come in me as a result of Focusing on what is larger than my immediate situation? What if I focus on all that in an intentional way? Will it lead me to being more actively involved against drone attacks, austerity, for migrant struggles and for more human ways of being in the world? Or will Focusing on it lessen my outrage about it? Will I feel less impelled to act or speak out?

I am involved in justice movements, but I, like many, face sticking points and blocks to further engagement. Of course Focusing can help us process our emotions, help us stay with what we're doing. In terms of self-care, knowing Focusing helps enormously but it helps in more ways than that. Focusing can help us face and stay with what is horrific and to manage to keep our eyes open or help us to stay in the uncomfortable situations that frequently arise when we try living outside the status quo – poverty, being publicly ridiculed, ignored or accused, and the grief of learning about what we are up against. More than that though, Focusing changes how we interact with what is around us. What once might have seemed like an impossible state of resistance might come to feel like a state of being at ease or a wanted challenge.

I'm bringing my attention to some specific thing that's come to be known to me – maybe drone strikes in Syria. I'm getting the whole feel of it – all that I know about that particular thing on a complex bodily level that I have not yet verbalised. I'm being with the difficult parts of society as if I was with

the difficult parts of myself, and seeing what comes – both my reaction to them and possible new steps forward in my practice of activism.



'Protest' by Jean Phillippe Bourque, from Flickr Creative Commons

In the first in the series of calls 'Conversations at the Edge with Gene and Ann' on 13 November 2014, I asked a question about Focusing in relation to creativity and society. I said that I'd been using Focusing to get more of a sense of other people's paintings and poetry as well as 'horrendous things that are happening in the world'. I asked what they had to say 'about Focusing on the outside world'.

Ann said she was 'confused by this distinction you made between focusing inside and focusing outside. Because wouldn't it still be your own feelings about painting and your own feelings about the terrible things in the outside world?' I answered 'yes', as well as getting 'a greater understanding of or connectedness to those things or those people who have made those things by spending time with them in a Focusing way'.

In a recently reported conversation with Gene at the weeklong in August 2015 a participant said 'By looking at the outside world and listening to the world and symbolizing what we see, we change the world'. Gene responded by saying 'Sure'. The next

question was: 'Why did humans look outside first and now we are going inside with Focusing changing from the inside? What is the difference between the inside and the outside?' Gene responded: 'I want to say right away: don't believe that there is an outside world without the right process. I don't believe that is a good concept, an outside world that is just outside. What would it be to exist just as an outside? It would only be a spectre. ... There is no outside except as part of the inside and there is no inside except as part of the outside. And what you are sitting in when you feel a chair is not only the skin envelope but also the chair!'

I am sitting in front of this painting and have been sitting there for the last hour. Mostly with one eye on the painting and another eye on my whole middle area. I'm getting the whole feel of it and the different parts that make themselves known to me at different moments. There's some emotion that seems to be coming off it, even something more, as yet indescribable. I would not be feeling this particular felt sense if I wasn't looking at this particular image. There are my emotions about it as well as a sense of the person who made it and what they were attempting to convey. At some moment I feel a kind of 'ah!' that feels complete. And I have been sitting on this hard gallery chair for more than an hour. There is something out there that I call a chair and when I am sitting on it I am more deeply connected with it than when I am not sitting on it. Only when I bring my

attention to it does the connection come alive in me, and my appreciation for and understanding of the chair deepens.

If there is 'no outside world without the right process' what would the right process be that allowed an outside world to exist? Does 'no outside world' imply that there is nothing out there that is not also me? Like a huge amorphous body (me and the universe without distinction) constantly morphing and mutating as I change internally. If we can't talk about an outside world without creating a spectre, why can we talk about an inner world or going inside without creating a spectre?

I have been blogging about my efforts at trying to deepen my art and activism practices by using Focusing at <https://drawingonfocusing.wordpress.com>

Alex Brew



I work as a support worker and campaigner on social justice issues with a focus on violence – including rape and state violence. I am an artist and BFA-recognised Focusing Practitioner. Each practice feeds into the other practices. I try to stay open to what's around me and what's inside me.

We're Hosting an International Focusing Conference – What's that?!

By Peter Afford

The great global Focusing circus pitches up in Britain in July, so it will soon be time for us to welcome the world to our shores! We have been dreaming and talking and planning for the last three years, now it's just a few months away. The bookings are rolling in as I write – we are more than half booked up already.

Some BFA members, myself included, are ageing aficionados of these conferences, while others have never been to one. They are the big tribal gatherings of the Focusing world, and there have been twenty-six previous ones, beginning in the 1980s in Chicago.

In between Chicago and Cambridge, the travelling circus and its shifting cast of characters has pitched its tent at caravanserais around the world – Japan, Argentina, Israel, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Canada, Costa Rica, as well as the USA.

The more of them I have attended, the more I have enjoyed them. You get a sense of the real power of Focusing when you are with a lot of people from a lot of countries who all have this body- and heart-centred practice in common. I have returned home filled with warmth and goodwill and positivity, which

has boosted my little local efforts to spread and teach Focusing. I have come to feel part of something much bigger, and that is inspiring. It's like a good-natured, large family celebration where there isn't time for people to start falling out with each other!

This will not be your usual conference with a succession of keynote speakers winding up the audience in the morning and sending it to sleep after lunch. In the main, it will be a series of workshops put on by the participants where you have to keep choosing which one to go to – because you cannot go to them all! There will also be interest groups each morning, exploring a particular strand (Children Focusing, Community Wellness Focusing, Wholebody Focusing, Focusing-oriented therapy, Thinking at the Edge, and so forth) together, providing some group continuity.



'Cambridge' by jordi.martorell, from Flickr Creative Commons

The conference is a great way to sample the different strands of Focusing you may not yet have encountered, as well as to deepen your experience of Focusing generally. And it's a brilliant opportunity to experiment with new ideas by presenting a workshop yourself - you are guaranteed the friendliest and most enthusiastic audience you could wish for. To break up the intensity of it all, we will have some entertainments: dinner at Kings College with music (courtesy of Locana's choir) in the chapel, a ceilidh, the everyone-can-contribute Follies cabaret show, and some surprise pop-up cultural delights.

There are two banana skins we will look out for. One is that if you come not knowing many people, there is the risk of feeling alone and isolated in a big crowd. Everyone else can seem to be having a ball, while you are the odd one out. So we will have a place you can go to find someone to talk to, someone to Focus with anytime you need it, and someone to have dinner with if you're unsure which table to join.

The other is that the English speakers may have a great time while those with little or no English are unable to follow what's going on. So we are giving financial help for China and Japan to bring translators with them. And instead of having simultaneous translation, which means a constant background burbling, we will be getting speakers to speak and then pause, speak and pause ... which, from the experience of previous conferences, engages everyone's felt sense much better.

It costs a bit to attend – there is no way around this if we are to put on a good show for over 200 people from all over the world, many of whom expect a little comfort having travelled a long way to be there. But especially if you are teaching Focusing or using it in your work, it is worth thinking of the conference fee as an investment in yourself and in your business, a tax-deductible expense to boot.

The one concern I have is that the conference involves a lot of flying around the world in aeroplanes that contribute to global warming. The environmental writer George Monbiot says he restricts himself to just one return flight every three years to keep his CO₂ emissions under control. So the green person in me is uneasy. Nevertheless, the fact is that while the internet allows us to meet via our computer screens, this is a poor substitute for meeting in the flesh over

five days. As Ann Weiser Cornell put it after the 2013 conference in Switzerland:

I am freshly convinced of the great importance of Focusing conferences, as I can feel in all the conversations the weaving together of our shared world and what we are creating. These things are just not possible by phone, email, or Skype. Not the same way.

These conferences used to happen every year as people and countries were queuing up to host them. Now, for some reason, they are not, maybe because they have become larger and more daunting events to organise. We do not know when the next conference after this one will be – it could be the last big networking event of its kind for some time. Maybe they will happen at greater intervals in future, and this might be one small concession to mitigating

climate change that our international tribe can make. Register for the Conference here.

Peter Afford

Peter Afford has been practicing Focusing and teaching it in London for many years. This year, he is working his socks off on the organising committee for the conference, with the aim of making it the best Focusing event ever.



Members' Corner

Alex Maunder – Wholebody Focusing Trainer (Focusing Institute)

Alex Maunder

Having recently joined the BFA, I have been asked to write a short piece about what first drew me to Focusing twenty-eight years ago. I must say that all my life I have been fascinated by the way mind/body/emotions seem to interact as an integrated whole. My first love was Tai Chi, and I was amazed to learn this graceful, oriental meditation in movement. Then, over thirty-five years ago, I remember reading a book called *Hara* by Karlfried Graf von Durkheim and being fascinated by the concept of having a large belly and the power that comes from being centred and grounded in your Hara.

I went to Rutte in 1981 to meditate and study Jungian psychotherapy at Graf von Durkheim's centre in the snow-covered mountains. Alas, despite all my best efforts and frequent inspections my belly never seemed to grow any larger

The fascination with body process and energy flow continued. I trained as a teacher of the Alexander Technique from 1985–88 (I still practice as a professional AT teacher today). I loved the feeling of poise and deep relaxation that comes from practicing the AT. It was a blissful experience having lessons from the great Patrick McDonald and Walter Carrington. However, there was still something missing. So that is why I was so happy when a friend gave me a copy of Gendlin's *Focusing* book in 1988. It was like the light went on and I instantly saw how Focusing could be integrated with the AT.

I trained as a Gestalt psychotherapist in 1997–98, but I was not happy with it. I could play the blame game OK and punch cushions, but ultimately it didn't allow me to take responsibility for my reactions to life or to make my own decisions and move forwards in self-

responsibility. In 2001 I wrote a book called *Let Your Life Flow* which explained how to integrate Alexander Technique with Gestalt and Focusing in a more 'psychophysical' therapy. It brought me into contact with Kevin McEvenue, who had also been working in this field separately to me, and who had developed his ideas of Wholebody Focusing (WBF). I was captivated by Kevin's warmth, humour and wisdom, and by his ability to stay grounded in a well-rounded belly.

In particular, I remember him once saying to me, 'Alex, you wrote your book – *Let Your Life Flow* – in 2001, you know all the theory but now you need to learn how to apply that in practice in your daily life'. Those words struck a chord and felt so true. Yes, that was the great ability that I saw in Kevin, and that way of being is what I wanted to learn in my own life.

So our training was unique, because I had already written a book about combining Focusing and the Alexander Technique, I already knew all the theory. Our training together, in a Focusing partnership that spanned over a decade, was to enable me to catch up with Kevin's ability to apply this in daily life, in work, relationships and meditation. This was more like the Japanese way of training, where the student imitates the Master over many years and gradually assimilates his way of Being – through devoted practice rather than study of intellectual theory. After over a decade of regular Focusing swaps I asked him to make me a Wholebody Focusing Trainer in 2011, and he readily agreed to do so.

It's hard for me to find the right words when I try to explain how this interior transmission of knowledge, in over a decade of personal Focusing sessions, was my 'training'. But it was; it was the most marvellous form of training and I am deeply appreciative to Kevin for that. This learning took place on an interior level, felt sense to felt sense. It was like an awakening of the inner wisdom and knowledge that was already there. It was not the type of training that ticks all the boxes – it's absolutely impossible to describe in an exterior, structured way. I appreciate that BFA are

rightly proud of their existing training standards and I also would like to see openness of mind to different ways of doing things, openness to diversity and willingness to recognise the validity of many different training methods.

My ongoing interests include being part of the Functioning Whole for Research into Focusing, which is a grass-roots organisation that is campaigning for more scientific research into Focusing. We recently got a request from Fordham University in New York to conduct a scientific study into the effects of Focusing, on the Enteric Nervous System (ENS). The ENS is our 'gut-level' sense of a situation, the gut that can either be stressed and cramped or function in a relaxed and expanded belly. This fascinating study will be scanning the bellies of both novice and very experienced Focusers in New York. I am also in the process of setting up a WBF community near Guiliers in Brittany, where people can study and stay for extended periods of time to experience what it is like to live in an intentional WBF community and integrate Focusing into daily life activities. Most of the food is organic and home grown and residents live and work in grounded presence, communicating from their felt sense of daily life experience. Further details are on my website www.wholebodyfocusing.org.

Alex Maunder

*Alex Maunder trained at the London School of Economics (BSc Econ), is a professional Alexander Technique Teacher (1988), Gestalt Psychotherapist and Wholebody Focusing Trainer (2011). He has written a book *Let Your Life Flow* (C W Daniels, 2001) which is available on Amazon, and is shortly going to publish a second book on *Wholebody Focusing*.*



Identity, Diversity and Inclusivity

Suzi Mackenzie

As the BFA Diversity Group, Kay Hoffman, Manjudeva, Jerry Conway and I are exploring how we can help the BFA, and perhaps the wider Focusing community, be more accessible to people from a wide variety of backgrounds. I delivered one of the mini workshops at the AGM gathering on Identity and Diversity, focusing particularly on ethnic diversity.

It was great to see people come to this workshop and know that so many people care about this issue. I had hoped there would be more discussion on the BFA email list about what we could do to be more accessible to people from diverse backgrounds – I wonder if there are some blocks to engaging with this issue? In the workshop we discussed people's experience of exploring diversity in previous trainings or organisations: I'm aware that sometimes people have negative associations around this issue – personally I have attended training that was mandatory but where it seemed like the organisation was 'going through the motions' rather than providing training that was really relevant or alive.

In the workshop I gave we looked at the role of our ethnic identity in our lives. I suggest that white people do not often reflect on their ethnic identity and there is little impetus for us to do so because being white has few ill consequences for us. Reflecting on the inherent privileges we enjoy because of our whiteness can be painful. Even though we haven't asked for these privileges we do experience them. We can take for granted things like not having to wonder if it was down to our ethnicity that we weren't successful at a job interview. I believe it's important to accept that we do benefit from these privileges, in order to recognise the extent of social inequality experienced by those from ethnic minorities.

Similarly I believe it is also important to accept that we all hold prejudices. I don't wish to create a sense of blame, rather a sense of shared responsibility for how we create our society each day through the way we live. As helpers I believe we have a responsibility to explore these issues and embrace the bits that are challenging or that we might resist, in order to be of benefit to Focusers and potential Focusers from backgrounds different to our own. Our own lack of awareness or discomfort with an issue could block

a Focuser exploring or a student learning. It could also make us less able to consider what might be contributing to organisations like our own being less diverse than the general population.



'Orientation 2008 354' by Ethnic Cultural Centre, from Flickr Creative Commons

The following are some ideas around what BFA might do to be more inclusive, which have come from our Diversity Group and from the discussions at the workshop. This is a long-term process which may involve considering why our Focusing community is not more representative of the wider society. There are, however, some actions we can consider for promoting access for minority groups in the shorter term.

How we represent our organisation

Creating an inclusivity page on the BFA website could show that we are an organisation that cares about including people. If people from ethnic minority groups see different ethnicities reflected in the membership, for instance through images of people from different ethnic groups on the website, they may be more likely to see this as a place for them.

Making trainings and events more financially accessible

People on lower incomes may find it difficult to afford Focusing trainings and events. People from ethnic minority groups are overrepresented in the lower

socioeconomic groups and financial restrictions affect other minorities such as those unable to work through disability. Trainers might consider reducing the cost of their trainings for some groups or individuals by charging only the venue fee and doing some not-for-profit work. We may investigate the possibility of bursaries for people to attend the AGM gathering or other events for a lower fee.

Reaching out to more diverse groups with our trainings

Trainers could consider delivering training in areas where there's more of an ethnic or socioeconomic mix. Training needs to be relevant to the culture in which it's delivered and therefore knowing the culture is key. It's important to be proactive in reaching out to different groups whilst not being patronising towards them. The people we can reach may depend on the circles we move in, as much interest comes through word-of-mouth recommendation. If we are not moving in very diverse circles we miss opportunities to promote Focusing to people from different backgrounds to ourselves. It has been suggested that funding could be sought to pay trainers to work with certain populations. And it may be that those who already have experience working in this way can provide recommendations for others on how to train and market to diverse audiences.

I think these are all great ideas for us to consider. I personally would also like to see us revise our 'equal ops policy'. Following the AGM a subgroup on refugees¹ was also formed and we may hear more about their group in future. Alex Brew and Kay Hoffman have been working with refugee women in London and Abdul Mateen Omary's article on the experience of being a refugee follows here. The

Diversity Group will continue working on improving diversity and inclusivity and would welcome your input. We want to stimulate discussion through the email list, newsletter and however we can!

Perhaps you might extend an invitation to any inner parts of you that have felt marginalised or excluded in any context, to share what they feel might be needed in the process of BFA reaching out to include people from different backgrounds. Or you might want to give some attention to whatever in you is drawn to this issue and might have something to let you know now, or sometime later, about some action it might want to take.

If you have any ideas, suggestions or feedback on this issue or actions you feel we could take please get in touch with the Diversity Group either through Suzi (email address below) or through the BFA email list.

¹ We acknowledge that the term 'refugee' has different associations for different people and in different places. In some contexts negative connotations may have built up, in part due to media coverage. It is not our intention to endorse any negative associations. We use the term 'refugee' since it is the most commonly used terminology in the UK and is intended to be value neutral.

Suzi Mackenzie

Suzi is a Person-centred Counsellor and Focusing Practitioner with a keen interest in mental health. Suzi can offer one-to-one Focusing training to individuals and is hoping to offer Focusing training for wellbeing in the community at some point in the future.



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Words from a Refugee ... Who, How and Why?

By Abdul Mateen Omary

Article Introduction

Following on from the workshop on Focusing with refugees at the gathering in November and the work that Alex Brew and Kay Hoffmann have done offering

Focusing to women who have experienced prison and immigration detention centres, a number of BFA members have expressed an interest in forming

a group to explore how we might be able to offer Focusing to refugee communities and support each other with projects. The group includes Sandy Gee, Patricia Foster, Fiona Parr, Abdul Mateen Omary, Jerry Conway, Manjudeva and Alex Brew.

Jerry and Mateen have met with Paiwand, an Afghan refugee organisation, and Mateen is now introducing

Focusing there. Jerry has also met with refugee support workers in Wrexham, a dispersal town with ninety-seven refugees, and they have expressed an interest in Focusing. In the following piece Mateen describes his experience of life as a refugee. The piece indicates the value Focusing has had for him and shows us both what life may be like for refugees and how we may reach out to them.

Most Afghani refugees in the UK and Europe come from tribal situations; this means they are uneducated, poor people. However, this does not mean that they do not want to work, earn a living and look after their families as they have always done, but the conditions in Afghanistan make even this most essential of human needs virtually impossible to meet. Even educated people are in the same position, as jobs are only available for those who are backed by powerful people. That means people who usually hold a position within the government, people who for their own agenda will vouch for and push for their chosen person. My own personal encounter of this was when my application and written examination for a position in my field, psychology, was successful. I was appointed for the position after attaining the highest results and having the right qualifications. I resigned from my previous job and presented myself to my new place of work to be told that the job was going to another person. The other chosen candidate was not qualified for the position, but there had been a phone call from a minister who had simply stated that the job was to go to the person he had chosen, despite the fact that the person had only completed high school education and had no relevant qualifications at all. Even if you do have a good job, you still have to be concerned about your family members, as they too become targets just because you are working.

That's one of the major problems in Afghanistan; people simply do not have the right to work, to work at what they know best, independent of having to serve the needs of powerful others, whether they be tribal factions, warlords or the government. The purpose of the Taliban and the other powerful factions, especially in the government, is to demoralise, make useless and if necessary kill or wipe out both educated and simple honest people; there can be no opposition. They do not want educated people to be in key positions and have access to institutions, such as schools, where they can influence the up

and coming younger generations, nor even to live as everyday people seeking to live peacefully with their families and enjoy and reinforce community. Consequently educated Afghans are also leaving and going to Europe, to countries where they hope to be able to utilise their abilities and qualifications, and live peacefully. Why Europe? Quite simply because there are no Arab countries that accept political refugees (with the exception in the last years of Jordan and Lebanon for the Syrian refugees); the only open door or safe haven is Europe.

The situation outside of Europe is inhumane – there your status is defined by money. In Europe people have basic human rights, which is the biggest attraction for the refugees – not money, not economic security, but physical, emotional and psychological safety. In Afghanistan there are no secure places internally or externally, not even in Kabul the capital. Perhaps people outside Afghanistan are not very aware of the fact that it is not usually military personnel, foreigners or government officials who are being killed each day, as they have protection from their different organisations and security guards, it is the normal civilian who is being killed. Everyday normal people who go to Kabul to work are at the greatest risk; even travelling from one town to another, there is a 50:50 chance that you will not reach your destination, as you can be stopped on the way by the Taliban, questioned and killed. The Taliban are not only on the roads, they have also easily infiltrated the security forces, the government and the police. Corruption is rife and not so expensive and thus the Taliban can and do continue to find easy targets. For them this way of life comes from their past experience, from their participation in the previous wars; they were and are tribal war lords, this is how they live and make their living. Unfortunately this way of life was encouraged, supported, reinforced and exacerbated by the wars and policies of the foreign presences in Afghanistan. As a result, it has not been possible, neither in terms of physical resources

nor of ideas and beliefs, to implement and support an education system for the younger generation that ultimately would have presented young people with a vision of a way of life that was based on what you know rather than who you know, a framework which would understand that education benefits all parts and members of society and teaches that peace and safety are essential for life to move forward. Without these conditions – these basic human rights of safety, absence of fear for one’s daily existence, for being able to live peacefully with one’s neighbour, to be able to travel without fear of losing one’s life, to be able to work without one’s family and oneself becoming a target – it must be clear that the majority of Afghans are political refugees and not economic refugees.

It is this fear and lack of protection, this living under a constant threat that forces Afghan men to migrate and split their families apart. The family also encourages its main provider to leave in order to keep alive the hope that there will be a place for them all to be together and live a life free from fear and violence. The Afghan refugees, like any other refugee, would not choose to leave their country if they and their families and friends were living in a safe environment, it is not a matter of money or even making a living, it is about being allowed to live in safety and peace.

Once one becomes a refugee, it becomes essential to feel an anchoring in this new and foreign place. For a refugee in another country, communication is vital. Human connection through talking, listening and being listened to; to be able to express openly and be heard without fear about where you have come from, where you want to go and where you are now. Human warmth, feeling and connection is felt through interactions with another and that can be either through the other’s presence or words. For refugees it is even more important to feel this on a daily basis in order to affirm their own and others’ humanity – simply interaction to feel connection.

Mateen Omary

Mateen learned Focusing in Afghanistan and has trained others in using Focusing. He has been supporting other refugees through Focusing in an Islamic way, helping them to regain hope after the painful conditions they have experienced.



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