



# British Focusing Association NEWSLETTER

*Issue 23: Winter 2023-24*



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# From the Editor

Gordon Adam



The last BFA newsletter was way back in November 2021! I've had a really difficult two years with my health, with a window late last year when I nearly managed to produce a newsletter (I had all the content for it). However, I had a stroke in January which effectively incapacitated me for most of this year. I'm glad to say that I've been feeling much better in the last few months and have been gradually been getting my life 'up and running' again. I feel happy to be producing another issue of the newsletter and apologise to readers for the big gap in publication.

There are two main 'themes' in this newsletter. The first is that of various Focusing community gatherings that have been happening around the world:

the BFA Summer Camp in Suffolk (2023); the TIFI hybrid week-long gathering in Dublin (2022); and reports of both the 2022 and 2023 EFA gatherings in Italy. The reports from these gatherings consistently highlight the strong sense of community and belonging that participants experience on these events.

The second theme is that of crossovers or close similarities or new exploration of healing modalities that are very similar to Focusing:

Internal Family Systems (IFS), in the lucid and helpful article by Amanda Raine; Voice Dialogue and Fool Expression in my own article; and Sarah Paul's account of an experimental, largely non-verbal workshop she facilitated at the annual BFA gathering in Swindon last year.

This issue also contains an account by Vicki Thomas of the 'pitfalls' of surrendering one's autonomy to 'spiritual teachers' – in contrast to the liberation and empowerment that comes from Focusing! There is also a new poem from our 'Focusing poet laureate' Susan Jordan and a lucid practitioner profile from Lucy Hyde.

New in this issue is the listing, on the 'Focusing Groups' page, of WhatsApp groups, which are becoming increasingly popular within the UK Focusing community for finding a Focusing partner at short notice, and also, inevitably, of forming new ongoing Focusing partnerships. The UK group started by Sarah Paul currently has about 120 members, and the Bristol Area group started by Catherine Flynn currently has about 50 members. Both of these groups were started several years ago.

I have departed from the usual 'name of the month' heading with this newsletter and have opted for 'Winter 2023-24'. This feels somehow more 'organic' and means less pressure in terms of deadlines e.g. getting the 'November 2023' issue out by the end of November! I still aim to produce four issues per year but they would be 'seasonal'.

I feel pleased to be offering such a rich, full and stimulating newsletter after the long gap in publication. I hope you enjoy reading it!

[www.focusing.org.uk/Gordon-Adam](http://www.focusing.org.uk/Gordon-Adam) [gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk)

## Credits

Design & Layout: Gordon Adam

Photographs: Amona Buechler, Ria Van Hage, Michael Califronas, Christie Animas,  
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# Annual Report from the Sofa

By Celia Dawson and Fiona Parr

Our **AGM** was held online on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> April. In the morning we met for sharing and Focusing in the morning session, and we held the AGM in the afternoon. Alison Thorpe stepped down from the Sofa and her place was taken by Fiona Parr. Ildiko Davis was replaced as Webmaster by Robert Copperwhite. The other officers agreed to carry on with their posts – Greg/Ceri Thomas as Treasurer, Suzi Mackenzie as Membership Secretary and Clare Myatt as Administrator.

We discussed the format for the **2024 AGM & Annual Gathering** and it was decided that we should have an in-person gathering in the spring – on **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April** at Unstone Grange in Derbyshire. The AGM will be held online on **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May**.

We had an online **Summertime Get-together** on 5<sup>th</sup> July, hosted by Fiona. Eight people participated and the event was enjoyed by those who attended.

The **BFA Summer Focusing Camp 2023**, held at Ringsfield Hall in July, was a great success and a lot of fun was had by all. We had lots of Focusing, lots of workshops, lots of dancing and singing around the campfire. Many thanks to everyone who helped to organise it and to those who ran workshops and helped everything to go smoothly.

There will be **2024 Summer Camp** at the new, more central venue of Noah's Ark Children's Venture in Cirencester, Gloucestershire from 14<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> August. Help is needed with the organisation of the camp – please contact Helen Bower at [helengoeswalkabout@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:helengoeswalkabout@yahoo.co.uk)

We had an **Autumn Focusing Meet-up online**, on 11<sup>th</sup> October, again hosted by Fiona and this was very enjoyable for those who attended.

There is also a group organising a third **Focusing School**, which will be along the same lines as the previous two events which were very successful. We aim to have 100 delegates and to bring in well-known names to run our some of the workshops.

It has been a busy year, but we have both enjoyed our work with BFA.



**Celia Dawson**

*I have been focusing for over twenty years. I trained with Simon Kilner and I became a Coordinator with the Focusing Institute in 2013. I am a Director of the Complex Trauma Institute and I train therapists in working with complex trauma, where we incorporate Focusing along with many other modalities. I am also a Shamanic Practitioner. I live in Bradford, West Yorkshire, but I now work mostly online.*

[celiaandawson@hotmail.com](mailto:celiaandawson@hotmail.com)

**Fiona Parr** is based in Devon, and offers individual Focusing sessions online. She teaches the Focusing Skills Certificate course, and professional training to Practitioner and Teacher level, currently online. She is a BFA recognised Focusing Teacher and Mentor, and Certifying Coordinator. Fiona teaches Focusing on a Presence oriented therapy training at the Just Being Centre in India. Fiona is a member of BFA, and hosts a monthly Focusing practice group. She is an active member of the European Focusing Association (EFA), and she initiated a special interest group for Focusing teachers in Europe. Fiona also enjoys teaching the first seven steps of Thinking at the Edge (TAE).

[www.fionaparr-focusing.co.uk](http://www.fionaparr-focusing.co.uk) [fiona@fionaparr-focusing.co.uk](mailto:fiona@fionaparr-focusing.co.uk)





# Focusing and Internal Family Systems: The Crossovers, Differences and Gifts They Bring Each Other

By Amanda Raine

When I embarked on my IFS training, I was struck by how foundational Focusing is to Internal Family Systems (IFS) and by the many crossovers with Inner Relationship Focusing. In IFS, a client is invited to come inwards, sensing into a Part by noticing sensations, images, colours, emotions and thoughts that arise. Then spending time with a Part, noticing any words that come with it and how it might be described, and enquiring more about what the Part might want to share about its feelings, maybe the role it plays, how long it has been doing this, what it wants for you, etc. Does this all sound familiar?

I remember thinking at the beginning of my IFS training 'but this is Focusing'. I felt like an art student at the first day of a class already knowing how to mix colours, and patiently waiting for the teacher to move on to learn something new – and they did.

IFS is a modality which explores our inner Parts and our Self to Parts relationship. 'Parts work' is not new! Many modalities use Parts, including Focusing. The founder of IFS, Dr Richard Schwartz, honestly shares how he did not invent the IFS Parts approach – he learned it from his clients. Originally a family therapist, Schwartz noticed his clients repeatedly shared about their inner Parts, their different roles and how they affected the person's life. Together with his clients he learned how to form connection with parts and speak to them. He also learned that everyone has a compassionate and wise Self, even if for some it felt remote or unavailable.

Schwartz realised the experience of inner Parts and Self was pretty universal. He developed a teachable way to support people to come into relationship with their Parts from Self and thereby to facilitate transformation. It took off! IFS has spread rapidly across the world, bringing deep transformation and healing for individuals and more recently groups of people, with an emphasis on ancestral and cultural healing.

Central to IFS is helping a person to identify and befriend their internal Parts and their roles. These can be conceptually divided into categories of Protectors (Managers and Firefighters) and Exiles. This shares many similarities with the idea of Protectors, Defenders & Small Ones in Inner Relationship Focusing. When working with a client, an IFS practitioner tracks Fire Fighters, Managers and Exiles, but it is not necessary for the client to know these categories, what matters is the client's Self to Part relationship.

With so many similarities why do some Focusers find IFS jarring? Sometimes an IFS practitioner may invite a client to speak to a Part before a Focuser feels a felt sense has had time to emerge, for it to become a 'something'. Focusers can find this too quick and abrupt. Others find some IFS Practitioners' language can be a bit clunky, lacking the 'cushions' familiar in Inner Relationship Focusing. Some find IFS too directive, they like to follow a flow and don't like to ask a Part which is not the chosen Target Part to step back. I will write more about this later. Focusing has a wealth of experience supporting people to come inside which I believe IFS could learn from.

IFS also has much to offer. It matters to me that I can use my skills as a Focusing Practitioner to provide a bridge for Focusers to connect with IFS in a way that works for them. Focusers I've worked with have shared how IFS has brought something different that was 'needed' and enabled their process to go forward. The IFS map can be helpful for Focusers to lean into.

## The IFS Map: Self, Exiles, Firefighters, Managers & Unburdening

### Exiles

Exiling parts of ourselves is a strategy that other Parts use to try to protect the whole system. For example, a child who is shamed by their family for asking questions and being curious e.g. "All you do is ask

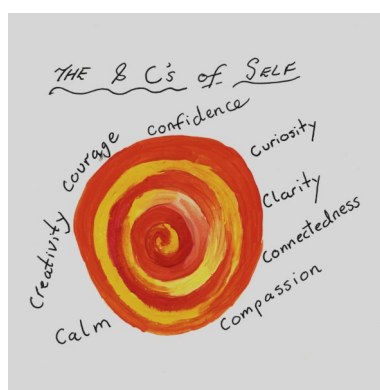
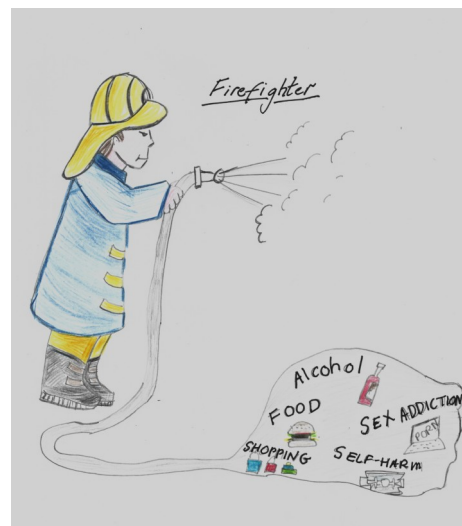
questions, don't you ever stop?" may take on beliefs such as "I'm too much for people, I'm annoying". The child's system may then exile their curious Part in order to be accepted. Exiles are often young Parts that have experienced deep wounding, trauma and attachment injuries. From these experiences they have become 'burdened'. These Parts are exiled from the rest of the system with all their feelings of pain, shame, unworthiness, etc.

## Protectors

Protectors in IFS can be subcategorised into two camps: Managers and Firefighters.

**Managers** work preventively, both externally and internally, to ensure that a client's exiles are not activated, and that their hurt, rejection or humiliation, etc, is not felt. Externally, Managers employ behaviours to prevent an exile being triggered e.g. a Perfectionist Manager may push to achieve at work so the painful exile of feeling worthless is not triggered. Manager behaviours are generally socially acceptable.

**Firefighters** like real life firefighters, are reactive and come in quickly in response to a painful event or perceived threat. Their job is to calm and take care when any kind of vulnerability of exiled feelings has been triggered or threatened. Often a Firefighter's actions are destructive and may include addictive behaviours to try to numb pain. For example, a person being criticised at work might try to numb the painful feelings of worthlessness when they get home through excessive alcohol, food, computer games, and internet browsing, etc. Firefighters can be out of control and impulsive, with their focus on survival regardless of how this would impact self or others. Firefighter behaviours are generally not socially acceptable.



Developing a 'Self to Parts' relationship is very similar to 'Self in Presence' as described in Inner Relationship Focusing (Ann Weiser Cornell & Barbara McGavin). IFS considers there to be an undamaged Self inherent in all of us. This Self, which is different from our Parts, embodies the eight 'C's: Calmness, Curiosity, Clarity, Compassion, Confidence, Courage, Creativity and Connectedness.

As in Focusing the primary relationship in IFS is between the client's Self and their parts, not the client and the Practitioner. If a client cannot access enough Self to be with their parts, an IFS Practitioner with the permission of a client may talk to a part (Direct Access), with the intention of supporting a client to come into a 'Self to Parts' relationship. IFS is most prevalent in therapeutic settings and not taught as a reciprocal partnership, however IFS is being expanded into groups, organisations and communities where people are using IFS to connect with themselves and others.

## Unburdening

As in Focusing, when we come into relationship with our Parts, building trust and respectfully listening to them, they begin to transform. In IFS, Parts do not dissolve or disappear. When they or the Exiles they protect are unburdened and healed, they are able to take on new life, serving roles under the guidance of the Self which holds care for the whole system. For example, the Manager who used workaholicism to drive a person to be perfect to avoid criticism – when released of this role may choose to use its managerial skills to create a healthy work/life balance and bring in more fun!

One of the main differences between IFS and Focusing is its more targeted approach. In IFS, the client identifies a 'Target Part' they would like to work with. Throughout the session an IFS Practitioner encourages the client to stay focused on this Target Part. If other Parts show up, they are first acknowledged,

and then asked by the client to step back if they are willing. Sometimes it helps to explain to a Part the reason for asking it to step back. For example, a Manager Part that strictly controls a client's food may be unwilling to step back and let an overeating Firefighter Target Part be heard. However, it may be willing after the client explains to the Manager that listening to the Firefighter may bring understanding about the Firefighter's behaviour, which could be helpful for the whole system and may lead to a change in the Firefighter's behaviour.

If a Part is unwilling to step back, then more time is spent with it and it may become the Target Part. This is similar to family mediation – all Parts are assured they will get their chance to share, however the Target Part is not forgotten and attention is returned to it as soon as possible. Protector Parts are assured they can come back in at any moment if they need to, or retire to somewhere else in the system where they feel safe to rest if they would prefer.

IFS puts a great deal of care in place to check in with Protectors and other Parts simultaneously, while working with a Target Part. When this is not done and Parts are bypassed too soon to reach a vulnerable Exile, Protector Parts can use the client's body somatically to stop the process. The client might become very sleepy or confused and experience brain fog. This is a helpful sign to stop, slow down and check in with that Part and what its concerns are.

What I particularly value about IFS is its unburdening process for Parts. It is very healing and transformative. An unburdening can be quite shamanic in nature, releasing beliefs of worthlessness, being unlovable to the elements of fire, water, earth, wind or whatever fits for the client. There is a wealth of information in IFS for identifying and releasing Personal Burdens that are formed from an individual's own direct experience and Legacy Burdens that are passed on through cultures, history and ancestors. I'm amazed when Parts identify feelings and beliefs carried from relatives they have never met, and how powerful it can be for them to release these.

Gendlin would remind us that IFS, like all models, is there to serve and carry us forward, rather than to dictate. It is clear to me that so much of IFS is grounded in Focusing and Gendlin's contribution to the therapy world. I'm deeply grateful to have both IFS and Focusing in my life for my own personal journey and to support others.

The IFS and Focusing communities have much to offer to each other.

If anyone would like to talk more about IFS & Focusing or to book a session do get in touch.

*Drawings by Amanda Raine*

### **Amanda Raine**

*I am a qualified Focusing Practitioner and Teacher and have been sharing Focusing since 2012. I am also an Internal Family Practitioner (IFS), Havening Practitioner and retired Nonviolent Communication Trainer. Until my early 30's I struggled alone with CPTSD, depression, eating disorders, addictions, anxiety, challenges of neurodiversity, and more. On my healing journey I have tried many different healing practices and therapies. The ones that helped, I immersed myself in and trained in. Today I walk alongside others sharing the life changing processes of Focusing, IFS and Havening. I work on-line from my home in East Sussex.*

[www.journeysoflife.co.uk](http://www.journeysoflife.co.uk) [amandaraine1@gmail.com](mailto:amandaraine1@gmail.com)



# TIFI Week-Long Gathering in Dublin:

## October 2022

By Marie McGuigan



The International Focusing Institute (TIFI) weeklong took place in the Dominican Retreat Centre, Dublin, from 16<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> of October. It was a tranquil setting with an amazing walled garden and a magnificent, enormous, ancient walnut tree situated in the middle of lots of other trees. This was a perfect setting for Tom Larkin's Focusing with Nature Plenary Workshop.

It was so exciting to meet up face to face with those I had been Focusing with on our weekly gatherings via Zoom as well as meeting the international members of our global Focusing community. We had three fantastic coordinators – Dan Schachter, Tom Larkin and Beatrice Blake, with two collaborating coordinators, Beth Mahler and Harriet Teeuw.

The day began with Home Group sessions then Plenary sessions, and then an on-line international community gathering after lunch. As this was the first combined face to face and hybrid weeklong there were also other platforms like the on-line Living Room for informal gatherings. There was a range of presentations which we could watch in the evenings or for up to one month after the gathering. Some of the topics were: Dreams; Psychedelics; Addiction; Children's Focusing; the Enneagram. We also had Yoga at 8am on a few mornings facilitated by Sandy and Therese which was a delightful way to start the day.

In the evenings we had a range of facilitated in-house workshops with topics such as: Focusing with Poetry; Focusing and the Enneagram; Focusing with NVC. There were many enlightening and nourishing elements within this weeklong, however for the purpose of this article I will focus on three parts: Home Group Gatherings; Plenary Sessions; Final day and Certification Ceremony

## Home Group Gatherings

We met after breakfast and set our own agenda for how we would use these sessions. It was most beneficial to have this space as the week progressed to bring to the group any aspects that arose for us from the previous day's plenary sessions. We quickly established a safe, connected space to bring any aspects that resonated to the whole group's listening presence, with feedback offered if requested. We also had lots of fun in exploring other mediums together, like art, writing poetry and dancing to music! It really felt like we were using all our senses together. This shared experience of music and dance was so much fun and liberating. I felt I had a very real fresh experience of Wholebody Focusing.

## Plenary Sessions

### The ABC of Focusing

Dan Schachter's plenary session was based on Gendlin's Process Model. It was titled 'The ABC of Focusing' with the meaning described as 'about to be changed'. Dan drew on steps seven and eight from 'Thinking at the Edge' (TAE) and asked us to define the word 'direction' – first with our logic then with our felt sense. He used the phrase 'being with patterns about to be changed'. This linked in with Beatrice Blake's and Marta Staapert's plenary on steps six and seven of TAE the following day. Here we explored the word 'instances' and Marta and Beatrice gave a live demonstration of an actual lived experience us-



ing the steps. We were invited to choose an idea, project or theme and then to invite our felt sense to give us 'instances' from our life. In a 1-1 Focusing partnership we both agreed to use this learning experience to practice with.

I experienced deep insights freshly with something new also emerging which felt whole and life affirming. My partner used the step process in a Focusing guiding way which became a real live development of the theory presented by Dan and Beatrice. When I was invited to ask my felt sense to give me any instances from my life related to the theme I had chosen, I received a surprise. What came was related to a very difficult work experience I had fifteen years ago! I could feel a sense of tightness all over with a constriction around my throat area. My felt sense then gave me words, phrases and images. Some were quite powerful and in being with the whole felt sense of it all I could feel ease come as it evolved into something 'closing down my voice' and the word 'injustice'. Something like a knowing came alongside the connections to the current situation in my life.

With further Focusing and guidance my body felt tremendous relief – tears came and the phrase "This is different, this is family, I am not leaving, I am staying the course here." I could feel the whole transformation alongside the insights gained. This experience ended with a clear life forward movement – one step in an ongoing living process. We shared our learning together afterwards and we both agreed that the connection between learning something new in the plenary sessions and then applying it in a Focusing partnership was both powerful and nourishing.

### **Focusing with Nature**

"The land itself and the conditions of that land like altitude and climate, impact our genome just as our human ancestors do. We are born on it, we die on it, we come from it and return to it. The land and the waters, oceans and rivers are part of us, our relations and our ancestors in a very real way..."  
*Dr. Keolu Fox*

The Focusing with Nature plenary with Tom Larkin was another incredible Focusing experience for me. Thankfully the weather was good as it had rained constantly the previous day. We were invited to choose a spot in the gardens. The on-line participants who were unable to go outside were invited to choose a house plant or something from the natural world that they could look at or see from their window. Tom guided us to connect with all of our five senses to the natural world, including getting close down to the earth by using touch or lying down on the earth.

In one exercise we were invited to choose an aspect of our environment to Focus with. I chose the sky, and in particular a bird flying slowly and gracefully through the air. I became immersed in and mesmerised by this bird, really enjoying the whole connective feel to it all. Focusing with my partner afterwards, they invited me, using some guiding suggestions, to go deeper into the whole experience. My felt sense gave me something like an emergence of wholeness, expansion and connection unlike anything I have felt before. It felt so new and surprising – tears came with a sense of sheer joy. I recited out loud something I had read that morning that came back in this moment – "When I choose where I put my attention and see the beauty around me, I will become more able to see the beauty within me".

I definitely experienced quite a few "shifts" over the week and some more...

The following is an account of Focusing with the walnut tree, by Caroline Moore:

### **Focusing with an Ancient Walnut Tree**

"I am amazed by the intimacy that arises with a tree – the safety and support it gives, and how I can see and hear the life of this amazing ancient walnut tree – its resilience and life force. I can see where the bark has split many times as it has grown and expanded and also how, despite lightning splitting it, and some of it rotting and return-





ing to the earth, it is still vibrant with life. New smooth barked branches sprout from older, twisted propped up limbs. It is a home to so many creatures, and provides sustenance for them too. Today it let me sit here quietly, stroke it gently and lie, luxuriously supported. Somehow, I met the tree and it met me and welcomed me. It allowed more intimate contact than any stranger ever would, and this connection has changed me – showing me that there is always change, growth, decay, division, death – a cycle – and that many cycles are all happening simultaneously and I can not only survive them, but also thrive through them...”

## Closing Certification Ceremony

The facilitators and others had set the scene beautifully in a large room in the Retreat Centre. There was a circular timeline pathway of Eugene Gendlin's life and work up until the present day. The timeline was a paper trail interspersed with pieces of trees and leaves and beautiful colourful petals floating in water with music playing in the background. We were invited to walk along the timeline of Gene's life and legacy. We were also invited to leave a little note or to draw something at a time period that resonated, like when one first came to Focusing or when one was certified. This was so moving and I felt such a close connection to Gene and all his past and ongoing influence in the world.

After members had received their certificates, we finished with music and a group dance, forming a train holding onto each other and circling the room in one long human chain – sheer fun and joy-filled moments.

If possible, I will definitely be at the next weeklong and would encourage those who can, to help each other to grow, develop and be nourished together through participation in the global Focusing community.

*Photos by Caroline Moore*

### **Marie McGuigan**

*I live in Belfast, Ireland with my husband. My hobbies are reading, poetry, music and being in nature. We have a caravan by the sea below the mountains of Mourne on the coast of County Down where I can indulge my love of the natural world.*

*I worked for twenty-three years as a nurse specialising in caring for patients and families with chronic and life limiting illnesses. It was because of this experience that I trained as a Counsellor. I was fortunate to have a clinical supervisor who was also the Focusing Coordinator in Northern Ireland. So I began my Focusing journey. I began to use Focusing in my clinical practice and became certified as a Focusing Professional in 2013. Recently I have delivered Focusing with Poetry workshops integrating my love of both poetry and Focusing.*

[mariemcguigan2019@gmail.com](mailto:mariemcguigan2019@gmail.com)



# Making More Space for Body Wisdom: A Group Experiment

By Sarah Paul

"Maybe there are times when a whole-body gesture serves as a better vehicle than words for expressing a felt sense by honouring the precision at the murky edge of a stuck place more closely."



A couple of years ago I took part in an online TIFI workshop on Embodied Play by Mindful Improvisation teacher, Taj Baker. One of the games involved thinking of an unresolved "Why" question to ask the group. But rather than asking in words, we were invited to feel the question freshly, and let the body ask it, without words. The rest of the group watched and listened until they caught some of what was being conveyed through the questioner's gestures, posture, and sounds. Each listener sensed inside for a response and then gave their answer aloud, starting with "Because..." Once all the answers had been offered, the questioner revealed their original question. The game quickly generated a sense of curiosity, interest, spontaneity, laughter and some lively 'Oohs' and 'Ahhs' at some of the surprisingly revealing and fitting answers.

In one example, the asker gave her "Why" question by moving her hands in front of her in a way that gave me the impression of a sculptor trying to form the shape of something, but not being able to because it kept shifting and changing. One of the answers that came was "Because it is still forming". I'm not sure how the questioner felt, but when she revealed her question – "Why isn't the Felt Sense more widely known about?" – I was impressed with the pertinence of the answer.

I wondered what further possibilities lay in this direction. Would we only end up telling the person something they already knew, or might it be a fun way of discovering more of what's implicit in the question, and even of gathering some collective body wisdom to help carry it forward? I had the perfect opportunity to experiment further at the British Focusing Association gathering in November 2022.

It's 11am on a wet Saturday. Seven of us are gathered in the Hayloft at Lower Shaw farm. It's warm and spacious, with cushions and mats for us to make ourselves comfortable. I describe the original game to the group and this generates discussion and questions. We wonder whether the asker has to be limited to a 'Why' question, or indeed whether it has to be a 'question' at all. We decide not, and that we'll try it with any kind of unresolved issue or just a 'something'. We also wonder what would happen if we let the responses come through the body too, leaving a space afterwards for any words that might want to be added. And we agree that, just as the Focuser is in charge in the Focusing process, the same goes for the 'asker' in this exercise. They can say as much or as little as they want about the 'something' they are bringing, and can take or leave any reflections according to their own sense of what fits.

Someone bravely goes first. She stands up and takes her time to let her body find its way into a posture that expresses her 'something'. As in Taj's original game, I notice a pleasant sense of how the absence of words allows me to attune more acutely to my whole body sense as it resonates with what she's expressing. She lets us know when she's ready for responses and soon someone goes up and joins her, also taking their time to find the posture that feels right. Then another person goes up and takes up a position that is quite different to the first. Eventually four or five people are forming a configuration as if embodying or responding to different aspects of the original issue in their own unique way.

Words start to come spontaneously. The asker shares some of the content of her 'something' – "I was thinking about this situation at work... it's a relief to have you next to me there." The listeners share what

images are coming for them and how their physical response is related – “I felt like curling up at your feet, like a cat.” After a while the configuration feels complete. The asker thanks everyone and we all go back to where we were sitting. A few more words are shared about the experience and how the process is working. My sense is that communicating in this way gives rise to a rich sense of immediacy, curiosity and connection in the group, and that the asker’s situation feels met, or fleshed out somehow.

When there’s a space and I feel moved to, I invite my own ‘something’. It’s been a familiar pattern throughout my life and I’ve been aware of it over the previous days: “Something stops me expressing myself.” It comes through my body as a tentative, stuck motion on repeat, as if continually approaching and then flinching away from a threshold. I am surprised how fearful and childlike the gestures feel. Already here is something implicit that I am discovering, the way we do when we allow the bodily felt sense of a thing to form and witness it as it is, without speculating – something new (that was also sort of already there) can reveal itself. When my gesture satisfyingly captures the feel of this issue, I let the group know I’m ready for their input. As they get up and join me with their responses, I sense their care and interest. In a very concrete way I am no longer alone with this elusive, pre-verbal thing. I realise that one of the things I like most is that this ‘something’ is being met on its own terms, rather than having to be awkwardly formulated into slightly ill-fitting words in order to elicit the support of others.

All the responses give me something, though they resonate in different ways to differing degrees. I take some time with each one. For example, one of the listeners is kneeling down in front of me, smiling and reaching up encouragingly. I notice that something in me doesn’t know what to do with that. Then she says her impression is – “You just need a bit more of a welcome.” That lands somewhere inside and I feel moved. I pause to allow both her words and her gesture to sink in. *This is what a welcome looks like.* My body takes in the sense of safety this brings. Something eases and I experience a tangible sense of *having something new*. I also feel a lot of gratitude towards my companions.

It seems that I, and perhaps others, received not only some fresh insight about an issue, but also some of the actual missing experience implied at the stuck place the body had enacted. I also received symbols for this ‘filling in’ – in the form of words and gestures – that continued to feel meaningful and worthwhile to savour for several days.

Sharing an issue verbally is the conventional way to seek input, support, or even just the company of others, and that tends to invite them to respond in kind. And maybe there are times when a whole-body gesture serves as a better vehicle for expressing a felt sense by honouring the precision at the murky edge of a stuck place more closely. Companions might then be able to perceive, through their own body wisdom, more of what is implied at that edge – perhaps the need for an encouraging smile, or the comfort of the company of other sensitive beings, receiving it just as it is, however painful or confusing its predicament.

What unfolded in this group experiment, was a way of offering the body more space to share, and respond to others, in the way *it* wanted to. A happy consequence of this was that aspects of issues that we didn’t even know we knew emerged, and we received satisfying responses that we didn’t know we needed. Towards the end someone suggested letting our bodies find a way to complete the session. It started as a sort of group hug and evolved into an interconnected weaving, with each person taking up their own shape, while connected to the others. There were smiles and laughter. To me, it felt like a wordless expression of wholeness and satisfaction.



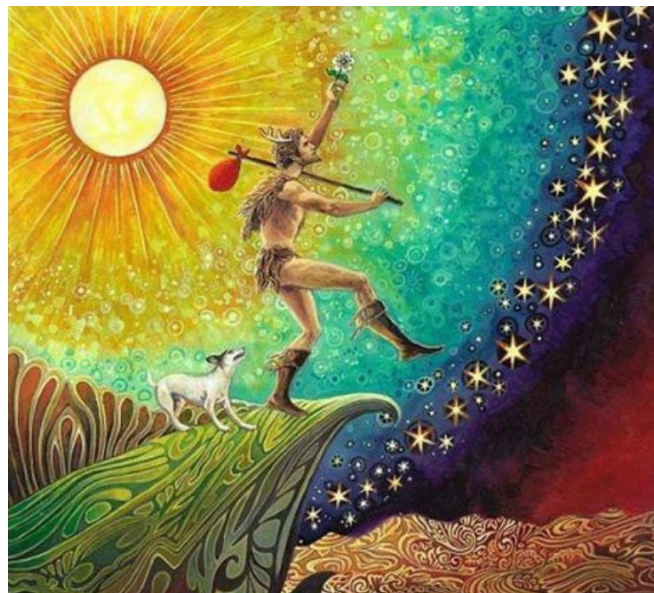
**Sarah Paul** lives in north London with her partner and her dog. She completed her practitioner training with Kay Hoffman in 2022. She wrote her project on ‘stuckness’ and the intriguing way that new steps of living process unfold when we attend to our felt sense in a Focusing way. Sarah also loves how Focusing can be practised in peer partnership by free exchange of Focusing and listening roles, and was inspired to set up a Whatsapp group for finding a Focusing partner at short-notice. There are currently around 120 members in this group, from all over the world, and it is used almost daily to set up focusing swaps. Anyone who has completed BFA Focusing skills modules 1 and 2 (or equivalent) is welcome to join. [sparula@gmail.com](mailto:sparula@gmail.com)



# Focusing, Voice Dialogue and Fool Expression

By Gordon Adam

At the beginning of March 2022, I found myself being drawn to the work of Christie Animas <sup>[1]</sup> (Voice Dialogue and Fool Expression). I'd been seriously depressed, on medication, and off work for about six months at the time, triggered by a health issue that required surgery. I guess I was looking for something new that might help shift my sense of being trapped in a black pit. I find that Focusing doesn't really work for me at these times in my life, nor do the usual one-to-one talking therapies.



I had heard about Christie a couple of years ago from a couple of Focusing friends who had done Fool Expression workshops with her. One day she appeared on my Facebook feed with a link to a video entitled [How to Get Unstuck](#) I watched the video and got a positive sense of Christie and decided to try an introductory Voice Dialogue session with her online. I appreciated Christie's warm, supportive and empathic presence in the 90 minute session, which led to me doing about ten online Voice Dialogue sessions with her over a period of about six months. In April I also took part in an introductory Fool Expression weekend workshop with Christie in Bristol, and more recently, in September last year, I attended an intensive weekend 'Fool Camp' on the farm where Christie lives in north Devon, and a 'Play Day' in Bristol the following month.

## Voice Dialogue

Voice Dialogue <sup>[2]</sup> is similar to Inner Relationship Focusing in that it brings time and attention and an attitude of compassion and curiosity to any 'parts' that arise in the client's experience from a place of awareness and grounded presence. Unlike Focusing, Voice Dialogue tends to be practised one-way, conducted by a Voice Dialogue facilitator with a client. Sessions typically last for 1½–2hrs and can be done in-person or online. At the onset of the session the facilitator aids the client with the identification of 'resources aspects', which help engender a sense of safety and grounding. After this has been established in the central 'Aware Ego' place, there is space for the emergence of whichever of the Selves need to be heard, including more often than not the Primary Selves – these are the 'parts which run our lives and protect us' (e.g. process manager, inner critic, perfectionist, pusher, caring inner parent, etc). These are parts that come up to protect the vulnerable child. When a part is identified, the client is invited to change their seating position or posture and to embody the part that has arisen. New positions are taken if new parts are coming up for attention. The aim in Voice Dialogue is to have these parts heard and honoured for who they are. We can then learn how to tend to them and move in and out of them at will, and in this way gradually reclaim a sense of inner freedom.

Voice Dialogue was developed by Hal and Sidra Stone <sup>[2]</sup>, American husband and wife psychologists, in the early 1970s (the same time that Focusing was being developed by EG). Their work is known fully as *Voice Dialogue, Relationship and The Psychology of Selves* and also as *The Psychology of The Aware Ego*. The Stones continued to evolve their work over the decades (Hal Stone passed away in 2020), developing the theoretical framework and working on their discoveries about unconscious relationship dynamics (bonding patterns) and dreams as consciousness teachers. Over this time their body of work, all under the banner 'Voice Dialogue', like Focusing, has influenced many other personal growth and consciousness teachers and psychotherapeutic systems.

"Each of us 'contains multitudes'. We are made up of many selves, identifying with some and rejecting others. This over-identification with some selves and the loss of wholeness that comes

from the rejection of others, can create imbalances and blind spots. This work is about embracing all the selves. This dance of the selves is an amazing process and we see the dynamics of the world around us shift as our internal world changes." *Sidra Stone* <sup>[2]</sup>

### My Experience of Voice Dialogue

I found in my Voice Dialogue sessions with Christie that I might stay in a particular part for as much as 30 minutes or so, taking time to feel into that part in my body and giving it as much time, attention and expression as it needed. She would accompany me and my part in a kind, compassionate and curious way – maybe asking some questions of the part to encourage its full expression and to help me discover its intricate 'biography' in my life, and giving an empathic response. When that felt complete, I would move back into the central 'seat of presence' or 'aware ego', or if another part arose I would take up a new seat position and give space to the new part. In online sessions there is more limited scope for changing position (I need to stay within camera range), however in face-to-face sessions there is more scope for changing position and posture to embody each part. In my case, all of the parts that arose in my voice dialogue sessions were already familiar to me from my Focusing experience.

These sessions gave much more time and empathic attention to my parts than would usually happen in a Focusing session, and Christie's response tended to be more pro-active (e.g. asking questions, verbally empathising) than in Focusing. At the end of each session, I was given a 'review' of what had happened during the session – I had the option of this being recorded and sent to me if I wished. The sessions didn't enable me to escape from my depression, but my parts and myself did feel fully heard and responded to in a caring and compassionate way. The sessions also helped me build a sense of trust in Christie as a practitioner.

### Fool Expression

Christie has developed the Fool Expression <sup>[3]</sup> process drawing primarily upon the Fooling practice of Franki Anderson and her training in Voice Dialogue and also weaving in knowledge of Focusing, neuroscience, trauma work and somatic culture. Here is Christie's own description of Fool Expression:

"Fool Expression, is a practice that helps you to befriend your body and access gently different parts, or masks within you. It is a supportive process in connection with others where you realise that we all 'carry similar masks'. This practice allows us to bring consciousness, play and theatre to the centre of our community, to explore together what it is to be human.

Fool Expression is calling us as humans to learn to play with all the masks or parts in ourselves – some known, some not yet known. This way we connect to more aliveness, creativity and inner peace; we connect with others and with ourselves.

It is a deeply playful and transformative process. It allows us to dive deeper into ourselves through a safe connection with an audience. In this benevolent container, our human nature is called to open, express and bring transformation."

### Being Space



Fool Expression workshops start with a sharing circle where everyone introduces themselves and whatever they are 'bringing' with them, including any 'parts' that are present. Christie outlines the intention of the workshop as a safe space to explore and give attention and embodied expression to any parts that might be arising in us. What each individual is bringing is also 'normalised' as part of a collective expression of what it is to be alive in this society we live in. This is followed by a period of 'being space', where, to a gentle musical backdrop, everyone is invited to explore what they need

at that moment and explore how it is to give that to themselves. After that the invitation is to start noticing the parts, emotions and thoughts that are present and lastly to enter into each of those one at a time. Everyone has freedom to move around the room (usually a spacious hall, or open space if outdoors) and

to get in touch with anything (e.g. any 'parts') that is present on a bodily level. As well as freedom to move and gesture, there is freedom to make sounds. This generally lasts for around 15 minutes.

### **Player, Commentator, Audience**

We then get into pairs, or small groups, and take turns (5-10 minutes) in being the 'audience' and the 'player'. The player has freedom to continue to move and express any parts that are arising. This might be a single part, or several parts, in which case some space could be given to each, and, the different parts could interact with each other. The player can also step out of a part and into 'commentator' role (a neutral aspect in us or 'self-in-presence') and describe to the audience how a part is feeling, or what is going on between the parts. The individual parts might speak in words, or might remain silent and express themselves in a purely embodied way, through movement, posture and gesture, as well as making non-verbal sound.

The audience sits and 'holds presence' for the player, giving the player their full attention for the duration of the play. At the end of the play the player bows, and the audience applauds. The player then sits in front of the audience, one of whom asks the player "Did you enjoy playing?" This gives the player an opportunity to reflect on their own play. After this the audience asks "Would you like some feedback?" And if the player agrees, each person in the audience can give their own feeling/embodied response to what they have witnessed, phrasing it "What touched me about your play was..." There is no obligation for every member of the audience to speak. The final question from the audience is "How is it to receive this feedback?" or "How does it feel now, having received this feedback?"

The player then becomes the audience (or part of the audience) and the process continues. This is the basic form of Fool Expression.

In the different workshops I've attended, variations on the above basic form include the group being divided equally into audience and players and several players being 'on stage' at the same time. Generally each player doesn't interact with others that are on stage at the same time, however, in the Fool Camp, we did a session where the players were allowed to interact with each other on stage, a bit like improvised theatre.

### **My Experience of Fool Expression**

I didn't find it easy attending my first Fool Expression workshop in Bristol as I was finding it very difficult being around people at the time (we were a group of about 12 people). However, there was something about Fooling that enabled me to connect with and express aspects of myself, and have those witnessed, in a way that wasn't happening in Focusing. The freedom of having plenty of space to move in, and to make noise in, gave an extra dimension that was missing in my experience of Focusing. Even when I've done Wholebody Focusing, the space to move is often confined to relatively small spaces, and generally in Focusing, making a lot of noise is not the norm! I left that first workshop feeling pleased with myself that I'd made the effort to show up for it, and with a glimmer of a sense that I'd discovered something of value, even though I still felt depressed.

By the time of the Fool Camp in late September, a new medication combination prescribed by a psychiatrist had kicked in and I was feeling loads better – my mood, memory, cognition, sociability and energy had all improved dramatically – much to my relief! I was really looking forward to going on the camp, meeting some new people (this time we were a group of eight), and camping outside for a couple of nights.

This time I fully experienced the depth and power of this practice! The 'theme' that arose for me came completely unexpectedly, sort of through a 'side door'. We were in groups of three, and when it was my turn to 'play', I started musing about 'performing', then came the memory of my father 'performing' at New Year parties in our home. There was a sense of him playing the entertainer, and 'sharing his aliveness' with those present – then came a huge sense of anger – *they* were getting energy from him that I never did! I shouted and screamed and swore at him, fully feeling the anger coursing through my body – this was followed by a huge wave of grief and sobbing at the loss of connection with my father – I really felt as if I had been denied my birthright of a 'good father'! My father was largely absent for most of my life (he worked away from home), leaving my mother to 'cope' with four young children on her own. I had never so powerfully been able to allow and express these feelings before, despite many years of Focusing and psychotherapy experience.



The theme of my father returned the following day, when, again in a threesome, I consciously introduced his absence in my life into my play. I recalled an incident, where, fuelled on whisky, he 'tore into me' and harshly accused me of being a worthless no-gooder. I felt furious, but, unable to confront him, I left the house, slamming the front door and walked for a couple of hours on a local common and beamed hatred at him – I really wanted him to die, there and then! It struck me then, and has struck me before, that I never felt the courage to confront my father – I never rebelled against him!

In my play, I played both my father, hurling abuse at me, and then shifted position to a cowed, fearful version of myself, noticing the impact his words were having on my body/being and how they were getting inside of me. I moved from one to the other and back again, adapting my body posture and tone of expression to fit with each part. It became clear that my dad's voice, and 'inner critic's' voice, were one and the same. Then my anger found its voice again, and I shouted at him "I hope you choke on your whisky" – and I fully vented the fury that was arising inside of me. This, again, was followed after a few minutes, by deep sadness, sobbing and feelings of abandonment.

Although the 'play' has some aspects of 'performance', I can assure you that I wasn't 'acting' – these were deep, real, gut-felt feelings that were finding expression at last, and despite the rawness and pain of it, there was also a wonderful sense of release and liberation!

I know that I have more work to do on my relationship with my father (who died eight years ago), but I feel I made huge progress with that on the camp. I experienced lots more on the camp, but I've chosen just to present this one theme to illustrate the power and depth of the practice.

## Conclusion

Both Voice Dialogue and Fool Expression have much in common with Focusing, particularly in the following regards:

- The recognition of the need for safety and trust, and creating a 'safe container'
- A non-judgemental supportive presence: in Focusing in the form of the companion; in Voice Dialogue it's the facilitator; in Fool Expression this takes the shape of the audience and the group facilitator
- All work with 'parts' – this can be aspects of the personality, 'masks', or archetypes
- All have the intention of acknowledging, allowing, giving voice to, and ultimately befriending the different parts, and 're-stating' them as part of the wholeness of our being, toward health and well-being of the whole person

Fool Expression could be described as **"a dynamic, fully embodied, expressive form of Focusing with a (silent) audience instead of a partner."**

I have found my 1-1 Focusing sessions very helpful to integrate the experience and emotions that have arisen during Fool Expression play. I feel that Fool Expression is a powerful healing modality which I intend to continue to pursue.

## References

- 1] Christie Animas [christieanimas.com](http://christieanimas.com)
- 2] Voice Dialogue International [www.voicedialogueinternational.com](http://www.voicedialogueinternational.com)
- 3] [Fool Expression](#)

*Photo by Christie Animas*

**Gordon Adam** lives in Bristol, UK. He is passionate about Focusing and the supportive power of Focusing community. He has facilitated an open monthly 'changes' type Focusing group for the last 15 years, and is co-creator of the BFA Focusing Community Camp. Gordon runs 5-day Focusing retreats on Dartmoor and in the Southwest,, combining Focusing with periods of silence, immersion in the natural world and temporary community. During the coronavirus lockdowns he ran a series of very successful online workshops on 'Focusing with Poetry' which led to the formation of an ongoing 'Focusing with Poetry' group. Gordon also works as a homeopath and supervisor and has been editor of this newsletter since 2016. [www.focusing.org.uk/Gordon-Adam](http://www.focusing.org.uk/Gordon-Adam) [gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk)



# European Focusing Association Annual Gathering in Italy – October 2022

By Fiona Parr

I recently attended this year's annual gathering of the European Focusing Association (EFA) which was in the old town of Bassano del Grappa in Northern Italy. We met from Thursday to Sunday in early October. Some of us extended our stay, to take advantage of very reasonably priced accommodation in a beautiful area. Due to feedback, we plan to extend the gathering by an extra day next year.



I would like to offer here an overview of my involvement with, and appreciation of EFA, and have done so in response to a number of questions posed to me by Gordon.

## How did EFA start?

EFA grew out of a series of European Coordinators' meetings, which met for several years, building our connections with colleagues. I attended the 2015 meeting in Athens and from that I joined the initial steering group to carry forward our new ideas. These ideas consolidated with the next meeting in Tübingen in Germany, and we officially launched EFA at the Cambridge International Conference in 2016. We've had four more annual gatherings since then, in Italy and at wonderful venues in Greece, including the first EFA Conference at Loutraki in 2018.

## What do you value and appreciate about EFA?

I enjoy the connection with European colleagues and Focusers. Just as in BFA, there is a community of Focusers out there, who share my values and have a common background of egalitarian body-based community. Perhaps it's because I am an Aquarian that I enjoy an international mix of people. For me, there's a broader base of connection than just one country, which stops it becoming parochial. It's small enough and local enough to relate to, more easily than TIFI, to which I also belong and value highly. There's something specific to European Focusers that I can't articulate, and yet I can feel it. What is it about being European that is different from other regions in the world?

## Is there anything extra/different that you get from being part of the European Focusing community compared to BFA?

EFA is different from BFA in that it is not restricted to Focusing professionals, and as such it is not explicitly a professional support organisation. Anyone who knows Focusing is welcome to join, so it's more akin to the original 'British Focusing Network.' Having said that, I also find it to be hugely supportive professionally. It gives me access to other people who are also working with Focusing. It feels to me that Focusing is often a very private practice – some practitioners don't even let their clients know it is Focusing they are doing with them (nor is it appropriate to do so).

Just as in BFA, EFA members can initiate groups and activities that they feel are supportive or interesting to them. For the last five years I have initiated and contribute to a monthly group of people who are teaching Focusing to individuals and groups. We explore topics that have a specific resonance or interest for us, and this nourishes me professionally, as well as personally.

## How does EFA compare to BFA – structurally and experientially?

I see BFA as being 'the best possible support organisation' for my professional practice that it can be. It does this by providing: professional ethics and standards that I adhere to; the Peer Consultative Support

practice; a pathway for offering trainings that align with TIFI; the web site; newsletter; email list; annual gatherings; and by being a great umbrella organisation.

EFA does not offer anything formally. It is an informal networking organisation, with no standards or requirements upon joining, except a passion for Focusing. There are no membership fees. We originally thought it would develop into collaborative projects. That has happened with the wonderful Conference held in Loutraki in Greece in 2018, and the excellent two-volume 'Senses of Focusing' book, edited by Judy Moore and Nikos Kypriotakis. Other major projects have yet to develop. Compared to BFA, EFA is still a fledgling organization. I feel we are still building relationships and growing our community. One of my early ideas was to have a European Focusing Academy, where Focusing teachers can be part of the faculty. I soon realised that I don't have that level of organisational ability, so I have dropped the idea.

### **What were the best things for you about this gathering?**

We were very lucky to meet in a beautiful venue – a Palladian Villa, built in the 16th Century in the old town of Bassano del Grappa in Northern Italy, between Venice and the Alps. The Villa was previously privately owned, and has now been bought by a social enterprise as a resource for the local community as well as for international gatherings like ours. People come daily for activities such as yoga, community groups and support for disabled people. Prisoners come on day release to work in the organic gardens. About 150 people are working in some way or another, helping to make it happen.

We were 25 participants, coming from England, Scotland, The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, Finland, Italy, Israel, Greece, USA, and Romania. I enjoyed the international feel, and the mix of people. It was heart-warming for me to see how we all came together as a group to create the gathering, supported by some great facilitation.

Many participants brought offerings and topics to explore in a Focusing way. I took part in small group sharing on our responses to climate change, and also one on ageing. Both were held outside, under trees by the river. I was touched by the sharing in both groups, and I came away with something specific and helpful for me.

Even more than workshops, discussions and interest groups, it was a creative space to meet informally and create connections. I enjoyed meeting up with people in person, some I knew through my involvement over the years, and others who were new to me. As is often the case at these kind of gatherings, I came away with the wish that I had spent more time with this or that person, and feeling we needed more time together.



### **Some reflections from participants**

"Everyone is bringing something more, something very special, in this gathering. I'm really celebrating all that is happening."

"The significant moment for me was witnessing the process of decision-making about how to go on, decision-making that was led in such a Focusing way, and that really touched me."



"I'm taking with me a sense of belonging; meaningful connections with a common language and a common human horizon."

"I felt connected with myself and with the others too, with strangers from myself and also with an old part of me. I am grateful."

"I came with doubts about my physical fitness, which really interfered with my being present in the group – and now I am glad that I did it, and I feel connected to other members."

"Great Focusing Constellation about what is behind this so-called upcoming Fascism in Europe. Nice group. Good luck!"

"This was a great journey towards our European Focusing spirit, and we made this journey in an experiential way, all together, with openness."

"It was like a good home, where you can be free to express yourself every way you need to in that moment, knowing that your 'relatives' will be there for you."

"An amazing and challenging space for co-creation and togetherness. I feel huge gratefulness. The venue is very special and supportive. I hope to come again."

"Here we are on the way... following our inner living forward energy towards each other. We are creating a space where connecting and relating happen, and where shared leadership can grow."

*Photos by Amona Buechler*



**Fiona Parr** is based in Devon, and offers individual Focusing sessions online. She teaches the Focusing Skills Certificate course, and professional training to Practitioner and Teacher level, currently online. She is a BFA recognised Focusing Teacher and Mentor, and Certifying Coordinator. Fiona teaches Focusing on a Presence oriented therapy training at the Just Being Centre in India. Fiona is a member of BFA, and hosts a monthly Focusing practice group. She is an active member of the European Focusing Association (EFA), and she initiated a special interest group for Focusing teachers in Europe. Fiona also enjoys teaching the first seven steps of Thinking at the Edge (TAE).

[www.fionaparr-focusing.co.uk](http://www.fionaparr-focusing.co.uk) [fiona@fionaparr-focusing.co.uk](mailto:fiona@fionaparr-focusing.co.uk)

# EFA Gathering 2023 and an Invitation to Join the European Focusing Community

By Amona Buechler

As in 2022, the Annual Gathering 2023 of the European Focusing Association EFA took place in Bassano del Grappa, Italy. Although we are generally committed to hold the gathering in a different country each year, we couldn't let go of that beautiful location, and vibe of the venue.

I also attended the BFA Summer Camp in July 2023, which took place at Ringsfield Hall Eco Activity Centre in Suffolk. I really appreciated the daily mix of workshops, Focusing partnerships and home groups on the camp. As others were also open to trying the BFA camp format, we adapted it for this year's EFA Gathering. In my experience, the extra time for partnerships and home groups enriched our time together even more. In the workshops, it is really enriching to experience how each person finds different ways to bring the Focusing spirit into this world. Also, letting go of a particular topic or content in partnerships and homegroups gives space to allow the magic of what shows up in an unplanned moment.

I was deeply touched by the heartfelt atmosphere, our great collaboration, and how every single participant grew increasingly comfortable, could relax and just be themselves (this was my perception and also feedback by participants). When I mention the quality of the collaboration, I mean that many did their best to facilitate the most positive group experience possible. In those moments when one of us was confused, hurt, or facing any other kind of 'too much' feeling, many helping hands immediately showed up to support. As I write this, tears come to my eyes.

Next year's gathering will be from **September 24<sup>th</sup>—29<sup>th</sup> in Germany**, in Achberg, near Lake Constance, close to the Swiss, Austrian and French borders. This is known to many Focusers because Eugene Gendlin held many workshops in German there <https://efa-focusing.eu/news/upcoming-efa-events#gathering>

What Peter Afford said about the gathering:

"The meeting was a thoroughly enjoyable experience: the medieval town of Bassano; the splendid villa and its grounds; and the stimulation of conversations with Focusers from Euro countries and beyond. There's nothing that compares with these international gatherings of Focusing people, there's a good-heartedness amongst us that the rest of the world could learn from! I look forward to the next meeting."

For more impressions see <https://efa-focusing.eu/2023-efa-gathering-in-bassano-del-grappa-italy/>

**For photos of the 2023 gathering see the following page in this newsletter**

## Some EFA weblinks

To join EFA (for European residents) <https://efa-focusing.eu/community/become-a-efa-member/>

To sign up for the newsletter <https://efa-focusing.eu/news/newsletter/>

To sign up for the discussion list <https://efa-focusing.eu/news/discussion-list/>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/groups/efaforum>

EFA posts <https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanFocusingAssociation/>



**Amona Buechler** is a Certified Focusing Professional and a TIFI Coordinator in Training. She is also a Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner and Assistant Trainer. She has offered courses, workshops and sessions internationally on and offline since 1998, in German and English. Currently Amona offers the BFA Focusing Skills Certificate Level 1—5 online, live Focusing retreats in Germany, and in 2024 she will offer her first professional Focusing Training. Amona lives in Leipzig Germany, but she considers herself an international rather than a German being, which has led to her passionate involvement with the European Focusing Association. [amona@move-with-life.org](mailto:amona@move-with-life.org) [www.Move-with-Life.org](http://www.Move-with-Life.org) (English) [www.Move-with-Life.org/de](http://www.Move-with-Life.org/de) (German)



## EFA 2023 Gathering

Some photographs capture the essence of this deeply inspiring gathering with the theme 'Belonging Beyond Borders – Listening Beyond'



*Photos by Ria van Hage and Michael Callifronas*



## My sadness

Here you are, my sadness,  
making your home in me  
as though I couldn't do without you

always trying to draw my attention  
to your dark well, wanting me to bring up  
bucket after bucket of black water  
till it spills out of my eyes  
comes heaving from my chest

I don't understand  
why you need me to see you  
why you can't keep yourself to yourself  
why you take up so much room in me  
pushing at my ribcage  
like a prisoner at a barred window

I don't remember  
when you first inhabited me  
how you let life's pain bore into me  
making itself mine

I love you, my sadness  
love your insistent plucking at my heart  
playing an instrument  
you've never properly learned  
teaching me to listen  
until finally I know

how to taste the sweetness under your salt  
how to breathe through you  
into tree-printed sky  
how to let you seep softly into  
the spaces between my ribs  
how to be big enough to feel your joy.

*Susan Jordan*

## The Thousand-Stringed Instrument

The heart is  
The thousand-stringed instrument.

Our sadness and fear come from being  
Out of tune with love.

All day long God coaxes my lips  
To speak,  
So that your tears will not stain  
His green dress.

It is not that the friend is vain,  
It is just your life we care about.

Sometimes the Beloved  
Takes my pen in hand,  
For Hafiz is just a simple man.

The other day the Old One  
Wrote on the tavern wall:

"The heart is  
The thousand-stringed instrument  
That can only be tuned  
With Love."

*Hafiz*  
(Trans. Daniel Ladinsky)

# Focusing and the 'Ego' – A Personal Journey from Spiritual Abuse to Radical Acceptance

By Vicki Thomas

One summer morning in 2018, in Peter Gill's 'Introduction to Focusing' workshop, using some appealing soft toys, he was demonstrating what he was feeling: "Something here feels quite shy and small" he said, with an animal nestling into his shoulder "And something over here is critical of that one" Wow! It really resonated. I finally felt the possibility of accepting all of the often conflicting parts inside me and how they manifest in my body/mind – and that brought a sense of coming home!

Here is an account of my journey up to that moment. I now see that without these 'ego parts', or adaptive energies and patterns, I could not have survived. I also realized that they need me to listen to them with acceptance, respect, empathy and appreciation. This represents a 360° turn in my approach to the 'ego', my inner life and healing process.

For 25 years, from the age of 28, the spiritual teachings I was involved with formed a kind of second 'conditioning' after that of my upbringing. Having never been deeply seen as a child, and desperate for answers to my unhappiness, I had a lack of discernment around 'teachers'. I was attracted to charismatic, father-figure types. You could say it was a search for the perfect mixture of 'Daddy' and God. I now understand that my naivety and gullibility – a result of early developmental trauma together with cultural and religious conditioning – brought me to believe in a 'teacher' who was in denial of his own pain. Unfortunately, many people will do *anything* to avoid the pain of their own childhood. Some of them are 'spiritual types' who claim to have had 'awakenings' and use this 'status' to have power over others who are vulnerable. I call this spiritual abuse.

My first teacher, for 12 years, was Osho (formerly known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh), the Indian guru who was famous, or infamous, for exploring sexual freedom and owning lots of Rolls Royces!

I lived near the Ashram in Pune in India for nine months and in the Rajneeshpuram commune in Oregon for almost a year. I appreciate that Osho was encouraging us to dis-identify from the ego, through meditation and I valued his dynamic and body-oriented ways of becoming aware of something other than personality energies. His books brought about a huge beneficial shift in my consciousness and many experiences I had around his teaching were liberating – but the 'ego' was often referred to in such a negative way – often as a 'false self'. For example, in one text he says:

"Certainly, you will be feeling confused... I am telling you to get rid of the ego, because if you get rid of the ego, you get rid of the rock that is preventing the flow of your consciousness."<sup>[1]</sup>

Here is another quote from one of his talks 'Die Oh Yogi, Die':

"The ego simply does not exist in the present. If you come into the present, then the ego disappears. That is death to the ego. Coming into the present is the death of the ego."<sup>[2]</sup>

This makes sense from one point of view but what about how trauma prevents you from being 'in the present'?

My awareness of different energies/parts in myself and my psyche actually began when I was 38 and living in a shared house in Hampstead. Hal and Sidra Stone, therapists and authors of the ground-breaking book 'Embracing Our Selves', were coming to London from California to share their 'consciousness tool', 'Voice Dialogue'<sup>[3]</sup>. Several of us were intrigued and invited them to give a workshop in our house. We were asked to form a pair, with one person as 'facilitator', and to talk about how we were feeling. If a particular theme or strong energy emerged, we would find another physical place from which to speak as this 'self'. The facilitator spoke to this 'part' of us as if it were a separate 'personality'. It was completely transformational to find that each 'energy' felt so different and also affected how the body felt and acted. With my partner, we discovered we could relate to each other's 'inner child' or 'playful child' more easily and this enhanced our relationship.

Hal Stone himself (who had some sessions early in his psychotherapeutic life with Carl Jung) moved from a 'seeking-enlightenment' approach to 'embracing both heaven and earth', or all of our opposites and our

human-ness. These words of his resonate with the way I now see the Ego:

"If someone has an enlightenment experience, using the term as it is used in the East, does it mean that the individual has embraced all the selves? I don't believe this to be the case. Instead, I believe it means that such people have devoted themselves to spiritual work and practice and have had a direct experience of God and/or cosmic reality/ cosmic consciousness. But do they know how to live in relationship? Do they know how to raise step-children? Do they know how to earn money and invest it? Do they know how to deal with acting-out children? Do they know what their disowned selves are?

It is very doubtful that this is the case. It is our fate to live both sides in the psycho-spiritual path. *Our 'ego states' are simply the many selves within us that we have identified with in the course of our growing up process.* To refer to them as 'negative ego' is sad. They are the selves that have been doing their best to keep us safe and successful. Now *spiritually identified people come along and they say that the mind or arrogance or selfishness or self-involvement are false selves or parts of the negative ego. For us nothing in the psyche is, in itself, negative or positive.*" <sup>[4]</sup>

Sometime after this another 'teacher' appeared in my life and I unfortunately forgot all about 'parts work' and Voice Dialogue. Still thinking that others had the answer to life and suffering, I got caught up in another search for that elusive 'enlightenment'. I met my second spiritual teacher in Totnes in the UK. He had experienced several 'awakenings' and attracted a small group of devoted followers, particularly those of us whose guru (Osho) had recently died. He was young, charismatic and seemingly very 'awake'. He became an important part of my life for 13 years, during which time he gave me much personal criticism in the guise of 'spiritual advice'. Sadly, I accepted the criticism as truth. I remember him saying "You are one of the most disturbed people I have ever met" – such an unkind and damaging comment from someone I had looked up to and deeply respected. It stayed with me for years and even after I left that teacher, it contributed to my becoming seriously depressed and suicidal (including two attempts on my life).

I have a confession to make – there have been occasions when *a part of me* has had a strong desire to shoot the spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle! There is a 'charge' in me in response to how he, and other spiritual teachers, talk about the 'Ego'. My period of depression lasted about ten years, during which time I would read Eckhart Tolle's books and then a critical part of me felt there was something 'wrong' with me when I couldn't stay in the 'now' or dissolve the 'pain-body'. It was a constant sense of torment. When I remember the wounding I've felt from the inferred criticism of the 'ego', and the abuse I personally received from certain teachers and so called teachers, parts of me still feel angry and murderous. It has taken eight years of therapy and inner work/Focusing to completely dis-identify with this aspect of the inner critic.

In a YouTube video of Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey 'How to Overcome the Ego' <sup>[5]</sup> Even the title implies that the ego is something negative to be transcended. One of the comments beneath the video is: "I long to reach that part of myself... to be still... conscious and not thinking". This seeking to transcend is typical of people on the spiritual path who have not found a more embodied, trauma informed, neurological and relational approach. It is often also called 'Spiritual Bypassing'. I acknowledge that Tolle's books help many people dis-identify from their thoughts and feelings, but his words can easily be interpreted to mean that there is something 'wrong' with the Ego and that it – as well as the 'pain body' – needs to be dissolved through being in the 'Now'.

Tolle's approach is *not trauma informed* and does not honour how parts develop as an adaptive survival response. As Laurence Heller says "Traumatized individuals, which includes most of us to differing degrees, need both top-down and bottom-up approaches that address nervous system imbalances as well as issues of identity." I would say that Focusing address both of these criteria. "Many people recognize the 'power of now' as Tolle calls it, but because of their nervous system dysregulation they are unable to remain in the present moment. Falling short of this ideal becomes another reason for individuals with trauma to feel bad about themselves." <sup>[6]</sup>

Eventually after years of trying to find help, and several therapists trying to 'fix' me, a mindfulness coach helped me see that there was nothing 'wrong' with feeling these dark energies and thoughts, and they weren't the whole of me. What a lifting of a burden – a 'lightbulb moment'. After so many despairing years, the healing began.



A few years later, a friend said I should try Focusing – I also came across Somatic Experiencing (SE) and had a wonderful session. I discovered someone near Bristol who did both SE and Focusing and I saw that the two were closely connected. The feeling of relief when I attended that first Focusing skills workshop with Peter Gill <sup>[7]</sup> in 2018, was huge.

My time of 'ego-bashing' on the spiritual path was over. On my first Focusing retreat I found Ann Weiser Cornell's Book 'The Radical Acceptance of Everything'. The title itself inspired me, and when I saw this quote "We (as Focusers) are holders of the open space that includes whatever wants to come. *We are not afraid of what comes in the Focuser. We know that there are no enemies in the inner world*" And this includes thoughts (oh the yes to this!): "What if each thing that comes is somehow a part of the process, and can be welcomed as such?" <sup>[8]</sup> I felt huge tears of relief and reassurance and a very welcome sense of self-compassion.

Thanks to the growth in healing modalities that include somatic aspects of ourselves, such as Focusing, many people now realise the fallacy that the goal should be to reach a still place of consciousness that is free from thought. I have learnt from Focusing that being present means you can *be with* those 'egoic parts', or protectors and defenders as we call them in Inner Relationship Focusing. For example something in me might say: "This essay isn't good enough – my mentor won't like it" and I can turn towards it and hear what it is afraid of. Maybe it doesn't want to fail because people won't approve, which could go back to how I felt as a child. Perhaps these early patterns will never go away – they are very deeply entrenched in some of us. I find this quote particularly resonating and reassuring:

"When a part of me is able to feel loved, it awakens to its own healing." <sup>[9]</sup>

More people are turning to embodied spirituality. In 'Bio-Spirituality' Focusing is brought into a spiritual context: "Focusing offers a practical alternative to those spiritual practices which fail to resolve the destruction and pain of self-hatred. It opens a doorway into the body that is rich in an experience of mystery, gift, and surprise." <sup>[10]</sup> This is a radically different approach to the spiritual teachings that I experienced and needs no hierarchy or belief. 'Self-in-presence', the 'bigger self' that relates to all parts inside us fits my experience of what could be called God or Great Spirit or Source Energy.

I feel so fortunate that I found Focusing. This on-going process of **radically** accepting parts of me that had been criticized is not an easy one. Old survival patterns still appear, which can be physically uncomfortable, and challenging, but there is a strong sense of being on the right track and moving forward. I am also grateful for the opportunity to write this essay – to be able to reflect on, and share my experience with others with whom it may resonate.

After 70 years, to have finally discovered that **no part of me is 'bad'** is a revelation and a true gift.

### References

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4. Hal Stone. (1998) *From Enlightenment to The Aware Ego Process to Source Energy*. (Essay) <https://voicedialogueinternational.com/>
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7. Peter Gill <https://livingfocusing.co.uk/>
8. Ann Weiser Cornell & Barbara McGavin. (2005) *The Radical Acceptance of Everything*
9. Kevin McEvenue. <https://wholebodyfocusing.com/> (Quote on home page of website)
10. Peter Campbell & Edwin McMahon. (1985) *Bio-Spirituality*

### Vicki Thomas

*I live in Bristol and have recently qualified as a Focusing Practitioner, which means a lot to me as I'm passionate about Focusing. It has changed my life in many ways since I discovered it four years ago. My own healing is deepening and I've found a whole new group of conscious and sensitive friends. A recent 'Year of Untangling' course with Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin is enabling me to go deeper into the body's wisdom and into healing trauma. More recently I have been exploring 'embodied' parts work like Voice Dialogue and Fool Expression which I find exciting! I feel blessed to be an active part of a growing community of Focusing folk in Bristol.*

[vickithomas@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:vickithomas@blueyonder.co.uk)



# Practitioner Profile:

## Lucy Hyde

How did I arrive in the Focusing community? The answer to that question is one thing and many things; the one thing is my life flowing towards this place, and also there are many tributaries that have fed into it.

My first introduction to Focusing was in 2013, when my therapist lent me an Ann Weiser Cornell guided focusing CD; at this point Focusing was a remedy when I was emotionally overwhelmed or distressed, something to grab hold of when I felt I couldn't cope, rather than part of life.



Fast-forward 4 years and I was a qualified counsellor who had recently given up work to move with my partner to Venice. All my old script patterns were reactivated as I adjusted to unemployment and living in an unfamiliar place – and part of me believed I wasn't allowed to feel disrupted and distressed because I was also 'living my dream'. Something in me remembered that Focusing was there and I reached again for the Ann Weiser Cornell sound files and began to incorporate regular self-guided Focusing into my routine.

Becoming better able to hear and soothe the scared part of me was invaluable, but Focusing also gave me capacity to hold both/and – "I am joyful at the opportunities to see beautiful places and have wonderful cultural experiences AND I am feeling isolated, scared of rejection and a lack of belonging". This juxtaposition of contrasting experiences is my abiding memory of this period of my life. My Focusing at this time was full of imagery, some of which I tried to capture in my journal (see photos).

I feel very fortunate to have discovered Fiona Parr, who was teaching Focusing online at that time. The 'Five levels' helped embed Focusing more in my life, and brought me two Focusing partnerships that I still have today. After I returned to Scotland I embarked on the Practitioner Training, which I completed in 2022.

During this whole period, the influence of Focusing on my therapy practice evolved. When I first started consciously introducing Focusing to clients some years ago, it was very much as a stand-alone 'technique' or exercise. I would suggest 'here's something we can try' to the client, and we'd have a 15 minute Focusing session, within the therapy session, and then we'd talk about what had come up, or how it had been for them, afterwards.

Over time I realised that really the difference that Focusing makes to my work is the difference in me. I have become 'more of myself', and bring more of my authentic self to my relationship with clients; I have become more comfortable with spontaneity, with taking chances and seeing what happens. Focusing has enabled me to be more confident and comfortable with not-knowing.

Weiser Cornell refers to one of the aspects that *"sets Focusing apart from any other method of inner awareness and personal growth is a radical philosophy of what facilitates change"*, describing how the Doing/Fixing belief assumes that in order for something to change, *"you must make it change"*, and that many theories of psychotherapy carry this assumption. By contrast, *"the Being/Allowing way assumes.....when something seems not to change, what it needs is attention and awareness, with an attitude of allowing it to be as it is, open to its next steps."*

I have had a number of experiences with clients, where change has come about not because of us explicitly addressing traumatic memories or examining our relationship, but because the client has been able to experience, practically, with me, a different way of being in relationship and has made intrapsy-

chic changes in their relationship with themselves, as a result. Through experience I have begun to trust the subtle power of this, even though it feels unspoken or uncertain. It doesn't involve 'working hard', in the way that me explicitly bringing the client's attention to dysfunction, and making them stay with it, does.

Gendlin describes this beautifully when he talks about choosing not to explicitly bring the client/therapist relationship into awareness:

"...what is more helpful is a concrete experience of safety in the actual happening of relating....I am letting the relationship actually be safe, rather than centering on why it feels unsafe. A moment of actual safe relating is worth much more than focusing on feeling unsafe."

By letting go of my urge (or perhaps more accurately, to allow the urge to exist without my being driven by it) to make something happen, to take action, to be seen (by myself) to be doing something, I can better follow the client's lead. Allowing the client more space in this way can promote a direction of change that is more attuned to the client's inner self, or their whole self, rather than the direction of change that they may have previously believed they 'should' be heading towards.

### **References**

Gendlin, E. 1996. *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Weiser Cornell, A. 2005. *The Radical Acceptance of Everything: Living a Focusing Life*. Berkeley CA: Calluna Press.

**Lucy Hyde** (she/her) is a BACP accredited therapist trained in Transactional Analysis, and a BFA-recognised Focusing Practitioner. She lives in East Lothian, near Edinburgh, Scotland. She works in private practice offering one-to-one counselling and Focusing online, in person and walking outdoors, and has particular interests in working with climate-change-related distress, and with autistic women.

[Lucy Hyde Therapy](#) | [lucyhyde@protonmail.com](mailto:lucyhyde@protonmail.com)



# Local and Online Focusing Groups

**Brighton and Sussex Focusing Circle.** Meets monthly in Brighton, usually on the fourth Saturday of the month from 2–4pm. Contact: Anna [anna@workpsychologyhub.co.uk](mailto:anna@workpsychologyhub.co.uk)

**Bristol Insight Focusing Group.** Meets once a month on Sunday mornings. Open to anyone interested in Focusing, regardless of experience. Contact: Gordon [gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk)

**Focusing with Poetry Group.** Meets online every 6 weeks on a Saturday or Sunday morning. Contact: Gordon [gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk)

**London Focusing Circle.** A list of people in the London area who are available for Focusing partnership. £5 joining fee. <http://www.focusing.co.uk/circle.html>

**Online Focusing Group.** Open to those who have done the Focusing Skills Certificate training. Meets once a month on Wednesday evenings. Contact Paula [paulanewman930@hotmail.com](mailto:paulanewman930@hotmail.com)

**Manchester Focusing Practice Group.** Meets in Manchester for a morning once a month from 10.30am to 1pm usually on a Sunday. Contact Wendy [wendy.brocklehurst@btinternet.com](mailto:wendy.brocklehurst@btinternet.com)

**Sheffield Focusing Group.** Meets weekly at Sheffield Central Library on a Saturday morning/afternoon or Wednesday evening. [www.solar-active.com/focusing\\_group](http://www.solar-active.com/focusing_group) Contact: [david@solar-active.com](mailto:david@solar-active.com)

**South Yorkshire Focusing Group.** Open group which meets monthly. Contact: Hugh [hughknopf@rocketmail.com](mailto:hughknopf@rocketmail.com)

**Stroud Focusing Circle.** Meets monthly in Stroud on the first Wednesday or Thursday of the month from 7.30–9.45pm. Contact: Peter [livingfocusing@fastmail.com](mailto:livingfocusing@fastmail.com)

## WhatsApp Groups

### UK 'Find a Focusing Partner' WhatsApp Group

For finding a Focusing partner—either at short notice for a swap, or for an ongoing Focusing partnership. Send an email to Sarah [sparula@gmail.com](mailto:sparula@gmail.com) for further information.

### Bristol Area 'Find a Focusing Partner' WhatsApp Group

For finding a Focusing partner in the Bristol area—either at short notice for a swap, or for an ongoing Focusing partnership. Send a message to Isla 07876 645566 or Catherine 07726 536960

### Bristol Area Focusing Community WhatsApp Group

For sharing information about local or online Focusing or Focusing-related events or courses. Send a message to Isla 07876 645566 or Catherine 07726 536960

## Workshops

Full details of workshops by BFA members can be viewed [here](#) on the BFA website

# Resources and Further Information

## **British Focusing Association (BFA)** [www.focusing.org.uk](http://www.focusing.org.uk)

For further information about all matters relating to Focusing in the UK, including a list of practitioners, articles, events, training, resources, etc.

To see past issues of this newsletter click on 'Menu' on the home page, then 'Useful Resources' or click [www.focusing.org.uk/useful-resources](http://www.focusing.org.uk/useful-resources)

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## **BFA Facebook Forum** [www.facebook.com/groups/206601209671323/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/206601209671323/)

An easy way to quickly connect with other UK Focusers and to see and post events.

## **The International Focusing Institute** [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)

The International Focusing Institute (formerly The Focusing Institute) is the 'world HQ' of Focusing and is a source of all sorts of information about Focusing. The website gives access to the Gendlin Online Library as well as lots of articles on a wide range of subjects by other Focusing teachers. The website also carries over one hundred (30-50min) audio interviews conducted by Serge Prengel with a wide variety of Focusing teachers that have been recorded since 2008. These can be streamed or downloaded from the website.

## **The European Focusing Association (EFA)** [efa-focusing.eu](http://efa-focusing.eu)

## **The Irish Focusing Network** <https://www.focusing.ie/>

### **Newsletter Involvement & Contributions**

Contributions to the newsletter are welcome and invited. This includes articles, poems, book reviews, photographs, news, event & group details, etc.

Articles should generally be in the range of 500—1500 words. Inclusion of articles will be at the discretion of the editors. Some contributions may be held over for inclusion in a future issue.

Please feel free to contact us if you would like to discuss an idea you have for an article.

Help in producing the newsletter is also welcome and anyone who would like to be involved is invited to get in touch—this could be editing, design & layout, proof-reading, distribution, etc.

### **Feedback & Ideas**

Your feedback is invited! We would really like to know what you think of the newsletter and if you have any suggestions or ideas for its development. Please send an email with feedback to Gordon. We hope to add extra features in forthcoming issues.

### **Forthcoming Issues of the Newsletter:**

The newsletter is normally published three times a year. Submissions for the next issue in **Spring 2024** are welcome anytime.

The deadline for receiving contributions for this issue is **29th February 2024**.