

Experiential Focusing and Twelve Step Recovery Work

by Steve Crawford, MA

After being in Sacramento for a year, my life had truly become unmanageable with the unhappy demise of yet another personal relationship. I sought out a 12 Step recovery meeting which I attended faithfully and shortly thereafter I joined a supportive, and liberal, church. I continued in these groups for several years benefiting greatly from both. One day I came to the surprising realization that I had not gone to either group in over six weeks and had not missed them. What had changed, I wondered, that I did not even notice my non-participation in these formerly strong supportive pillars of my recovery? I had learned Focusing and was practicing it regularly.

Experiential Focusing can be quite useful for allowing the spiritual program of the Twelve Step recovery process to be experienced and realized in a bodily way. Actual change in one's life of recovery goes faster and is realized at a deeper level than without Focusing. In this article I will examine how Focusing allows personal growth to occur and how the experiential Focusing process parallels the 12 Step recovery process. We will see how the integration of disconnected parts within is the equivalent of personal growth and ultimately is the equivalent of spiritual development. I will discuss what is and what is not spiritual from my understanding of both the 12 Step process and experiential Focusing. I consider how a refined sense of connectedness within leads to an appreciation of enhanced qualities of relationship in Focusing oriented recovery. Along the way I will examine each of the 12 Steps and consider its relevance to the process of growth and personal evolution as well as spiritual development.

Focusing Oriented Recovery

I have found that using Focusing with my own issues in recovery and personal growth has helped me resolve feelings of shame, fear, grief, and anger. Focusing has also helped me to let go of symptomatic behavior such as depression, denial, and addictive behaviors themselves. As I have developed the capacity to be with the bodily sense of each of these in a Focusing way, *they* have had the opportunity to feel heard, understood, and accepted. Carl Rogers said that to be deeply understood and accepted is to feel loved. My experience is that when parts within feel loved by me, they de-escalate in intensity and move in the direction of resolution or just relaxing. It is this shift into relaxation of previously impacted or denied parts that is a hallmark of personal integration. It is also a hallmark of a growing inner sense of connectedness and to life. I call this deep sense of inner and outer connectedness our inherent spirituality. It feels good.

Integration as Personal and Spiritual Evolution

Focusing helps with the integration of previously disconnected parts which is so important in recovery work. This includes the strengthening of self-identity, identifying the parent/critic and child subpersonalities within, and empowering the adult persona. By using the experiential Focusing process one learns to identify the particular sensations in one's body as these states are active and through the willingness to be with them *they* unfold. Rather than acting out these states and feelings unconsciously or simply ignoring them, one becomes aware of how they are manifesting bodily right now.

“Ah” you may find yourself saying, “there you are again, my poor hurting little boy” as you put a figurative arm around the hurting part while its fear and grief claim your soothing attention for a time. Or to the critical parent within: “I hear you, yes you do want the best for me, thank you very much for sharing”. These are familiar self-Focusing scenarios. A Focuser encountering such an inner drama who is familiar with the 12 Steps might remember at this point to “Let go and let God” (Step Three) and not displace the inner conflict into the outer world but continue to stay with the inner parts which are present. This is key: staying with the part as it appears to tell its story until it feels heard, understood and accepted, then enjoying the shift into a sense of connectedness.

As I will discuss later a bodily sense of meaningful connectedness feels good and is the equivalent of a “Higher Power” or God. Letting go and letting God in this context is the same as not resisting what appears inwardly, in other words a willingness to be with what is currently being experienced. This willingness lets God or “Higher Power” manifest bodily. Since “Higher Power” is manifesting in the body core I prefer to call it “Deepest Power” which is in here and not out there or up there somewhere else.

Likewise a 12 Step practitioner who knows Focusing and experiences an inner event such as fear, grief or anger relating to her hurting inner child or critical parent might inwardly recognize it as a key piece of her personal inventory. She would then have additional resources with which to process it (Step 4 through 7). “Ah” she may say, “there you are again my scared and sad inner little girl. Sit down right here next to me and tell me what is so scary”. And she may recall many things which relate to this particular subpersonality or feeling sense (Step Four) which she tells her Focusing partner (Step Five). Continuing Focusing in a recovery vein she may experience a deep willingness to be with all of this as she experiences it in her body right now (Step Six). Finally she may assume the Focusing posture of “asking”: What else wants to come and be known? What does it need or want? What does it want for me? What does it not need or want? What does it believe? What does it believe about me? Her posture remains one of willingness to hear, fully understand and unconditionally accept what is now present for her (Step Seven). She is willing to love what comes. She has opened herself to the action of grace in her life. She has put herself in a posture to receive the manifesting gifts of her deepest power, a sense

of meaningful connectedness to ‘more’ and perhaps to ‘all’, in her body core right now.

She has let go and let God (Step Three) through the combined action of experiential Focusing and the 12 Step recovery framework. For her this conscious participation in the manifesting of her deepest power feels good and right or certainly better. She begins to enjoy a growing confidence that she can experience personal evolutionary growth through enjoying a deep sense of meaningful connectedness to her life. Her inherent spirituality emerges from the deep background into the forefront of her present life and she begins enjoying the Promises of a 12 Step recovery program. It feels good.

Relationship In Focusing Oriented Recovery

Focusing oriented recovery results in an enhanced ability to differentiate from others and create secure personal boundaries. Such recovery work with a Focusing component supports getting in touch with one's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, needs, and wants. As parent/critic and child subpersonalities are integrated, one experiences growing certainty about who one is. Core self identity, a friendly, competent, secure, and humorous adult persona, emerges. One begins to understand who one is not as well. There evolves a long list of previously *identified with* inner parts and outer people which one discovers is not who one *is*. Disidentification with inner parts or subpersonalities yields an expanding ability to discern the actual qualities of life relationships. As one notices an increasingly enjoyable stable inner quality of relationship to oneself attention is drawn more and more to the quality of relationships in one's life.

In addition to the power of letting go one enjoys a growing ability to say no. How do I feel when interacting with Joe or Sally? Can I trust him or her? Who are my genuine friends? Who can I count on to have my best interests at heart? Who is guaranteed to hurt me? Negative interactions are no longer ignored or accepted as the way things have to be. Painful or awkward interactions are noted. If a negative or positive pattern is detected it is taken fully into account. Naturally one draws closer to those with whom one can feel emotionally safe, with whom one resonates. Just as naturally one may shun those who chronically cause pain or who are unreliable. One ceases to pursue the unavailable. Ultimately this leads to the rediscovery of a capacity for compassion, altruism, joy, and the development of wonderful friendships of encompassing intimacy, extending eventually to an improving ability to discover creative aspects, life goals and life purpose. Relationships begin to feel good.

Just as relationships with others improve as our inner sophistication increases, we also gain the ability to discover where our creative abilities lie. As we note the positive pleasure of performing an activity we have the opportunity to explore how

to be with the activity or task in greater depth. By staying with the enjoyable activity over time our pleasure and enjoyment increases. One may discover goals and purposes which extend the reach and scope of our newly uncovered creativity. If one chooses to base a career on such an expression of creative enjoyment it may be found that work has become fun. Fun, as we all know, feels good.

Twelve Steps of Focusing Oriented Recovery

Let's take a look at each of the Twelve Steps of Co-Dependents Anonymous as they relate to Focusing.

Step One: "We admitted that we were powerless over others--that our lives had become unmanageable." In Focusing oriented recovery the compulsion to control the social environment is replaced with the capacity to be with and hear the parts within ourselves. As *they* feel understood and accepted, there is a growing understanding that our power is within and not in others. Paradoxically, we also gain the ability to be with, hear, and know others. By developing the quality of our inner relationships, our life relationships, life purpose and goals can clarify and qualitatively improve. But as the First Step suggests, we must initially recognize that our power to control others is inherently weak and that by exclusively attempting to meet our needs by controlling others our lives will be unmanageable. To effectively manage our life we must look not to others but to developing an inner sophistication of our own selves through means such as the experiential Focusing process.

Here in the very first step of a recovery program we are given a broad framework to guide our experiential processing efforts: our inner psychological sophistication will net us far less satisfaction if we persist in the delusion that we can or should control others. This distorted belief merely leads to chaotic and painful relationships when put into practice regardless how refined is the quality of our inner relations. A practitioner of Focusing will be disposed to understand that the First Step urges us to adopt a similar posture in our life relationships as we assume with what appears within: non-control, a willingness to be with what is.

For one familiar with a 12 Step recovery program, experiential Focusing processing offers the opportunity to explore precisely what it is within that wants to control or have power over others. She can discover in intricate detail the roots of her compulsion to manipulate others, even for their own good, and the attendant unmanageability of her relationships. Through the practice of Focusing oriented recovery one can determine how the need to control feels right now in one's body. A graceful gift of the experiential Focusing process is that as these felt body sensations are attended to, heard, unconditionally accepted, and deeply understood they change in the direction of resolving or relaxing. This feels good and eventually is accompanied by an extinguishing of the compulsive need to control the social environment. Life relationships synergistically become manageable, indeed pleasurable.

Step Two: "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Focusing leads directly to a bodily experience of connectedness to such a power. This can be experienced consistently and progressively and it feels good.

Step Three: "Made a conscious decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God". This is not an invitation to *spiritual co-dependence* but to becoming a co-creator in our lives with a power greater than ourselves. Since it feels good and safe to connect with *more* and *all*, need I fear turning my will and life over to this sense of connectedness? Not at all! It really can be safe to trust something besides my need for control.

Step Four: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." This is the equivalent of the process of assessing "what is there that wants to come and be known"? Love what comes.

Step Five: "Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs". Admitting the exact nature of our wrongs (or of what is there) paradoxically allows for transformation towards something more, towards "all."

Steps Six and Seven: "Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character" and "Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings". Where there is no sense of separation, i.e. compassionate connectedness rather than judgment, "defects of character" gracefully unfold over time as I remain willing to be with and hear them.

Step Eight and Nine: "Made a list of all people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all" and "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible". With Focusing, relationships improve as I take responsibility and wrap up unfinished business.

Step Ten: "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it". I have found that ongoing processing of "what wants to come and be known" leads to increased honesty with self and others.

Step Eleven: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out". This is the equivalent of a conscious, experiential relationship to "more" and to "all" which is a great thing and still feels good.

Step Twelve: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs". Others will notice if Step Eleven is in effect and they will benefit particularly if I am approaching life with a willingness to be with what is. Focusing

has allowed me to enjoy a deep sense of connectedness to what Twelve Step language called a "Higher Power." I call it the deepest power which is within myself and my body and connects to everything. It is in here, not up there or out there in someone else.

Focusing helps me connect to "more" and also to "all" in a bodily way. Connectedness expresses the process of relationship with "what is" and experiential Focusing facilitates the "radical acceptance of everything" (in Ann Weiser Cornell's words). This willingness to be with what wants to come and be known is a prerequisite for experiencing connectedness, the deepest power. Thus Focusing brings the ability to experience the process of evolutionary growth towards "more" and "all" directly and personally right now.

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