

FINDING THE MEANING IN TEARS

By now you have experienced the sheen of tears. Perhaps you have come to treasure moments of being touched and moved. They are an instant channel to energy, a tap root to the core of your Being and to the Universe.

You may find yourself asking some questions:

- What does it mean to "be moved by" something?
Am I supposed to do something?
- Do my tears mean anything? Are they trying to tell me something?
- Why do I always cry when I see a particular thing?
- Are my tears related to something from my childhood?
- Do the same things touch other people as touch me?

What Is 'Meaning'?

You experience the meaning of living by having feelings in your body, not from ideas in your head. "Meaning" lies in your unique feeling response to any situation, based on your own lifetime of experiences. One man might experience a terrible grief when his father is dying: "Oh, I can't go on living. He means so much to me. Everything that is important to me is wrapped up in him." Another man may have a different experience at his father's death, a sadness tinged with joy: "I'll miss him, but it means that he is free. His time has come." By carefully making words for feelings, you can find your own unique meanings.

Being open to tears, anger, embarrassment, love, and other emotions allows you to discover, through the exploration of the "felt meaning," the personal meanings which give value and direction to your life. It might help to think of feelings as "felt meaning"-- your feeling of the meaning of the situation to you. They are your access to the network of thoughts and beliefs which gives a goal and a direction, a meaning or a purpose, to your life.

For instance, when I saw a slender, Asian woman stand up as the violin soloist at a concert and launch into sound, I welled up with tears. The tears indicated that the situation had meaning for me. I found the precise meaning as I made words for the texture of the feeling: "It's not just that she is a woman, but that she is small and

feminine. I can be feminine and be powerful. A small, feminine person can be the vehicle for excellence. I have never seen this before. Always before the vehicle has been a man. Women can do this. I can do this."

If I had not allowed myself to experience the emotion, to taste the tears and look for words to describe them, I would have been cut off from the profound meanings in the situation, meanings that could affect the entire course of my life.

The capacity to feel the meaning in situations, to be moved to tears, is a skill and a gift overlooked in our society. Psychologists and philosophers note the feelings of isolation, alienation, and despair called the "existential neurosis:" "What's the meaning of my life?" The loss of meaning can be traced to the downplaying of the ability to feel and thus to discover the personal values which can guide meaningful action.

In 1993, a newly elected President (Bill Clinton) allowed tears to stream down his cheeks as he listened to a hymn in church. He was not ashamed. A journalist said, "He doesn't just put in an appearance at church. He believes in it." The same month I read in Newsweek that the devastation wrought by AIDS in the artistic community had brought feeling back into art.

The United States sent marines to Somalia to feed the hungry, on a mission of compassion, in part because the public was moved too deeply by the starving visions on televisions to stand by without helping. Perhaps we are ready to be able to feel deeply, for ourselves, our neighbors, and our planet, and to let our actions be guided by the profound moral values found in our tears.

Focusing Upon The Meaning

Focusing, a self-help skill developed by Eugene Gendlin (*Focusing*, 1981), is a meditation-like process for discovering meaning. Focusing can be used for many purposes: creative writing, artistic expression, problem solving, personal growth. You will learn to use it to explore the meanings in your tears.

In Focusing, you set aside everything that you already know about something and pay attention to the "felt meaning" or the "felt sense," the subtle nuances that you can feel but for which you don't yet have words or images. In the concert hall, I used Focusing to discover the meaning in my tears. I asked myself, "Why am I crying?" and looked for just the right words to describe the texture of the feeling. Then I knew that I, too, wanted to strive for excellence.

Focusing is a natural process for finding meaning which happens all day long without our conscious attention. Here's a two-minute example of natural Focusing from a phone call with a friend. He had written that he was always moved to tears by a song where a little boy died in the night, watched over by his toy soldier and stuffed dog:

Him: "I don't understand why that song always makes me

cry."
Me: "Well, the little boy died. Anyone would feel sad about that."
Him: (with some irritation) "No, it's not because he died. It's about the soldier and the dog waiting for him."
Me: "Oh, now I see. It's something about their loyalty that moves you."
Him: (with evident relief) "Yes, that's it. That's exactly right. Something about loyalty."

Without ever learning the technique, he used Focusing naturally, checking my words against his body sense of the meaning and saying no until the words were just right to capture the meaning.

Here's another example. I asked a woman whether tears influenced her decisions. She answered:

"Just today I had tears when I went on a hike in the woods. They allowed me to realize that our move to the city had made me lose touch with something important to me. I decided to make sure that I visit Nature often and even to consider moving back to the country."

She could continue finding meaning by asking herself, "What is it about Nature that is important to me, that makes me cry?" and find more words.

From Tears To Meaning

Sometimes you will find tears in your eyes without knowing why. By Focusing, you can discover the reason. You ask yourself a Focusing question, like "What about this moves me?" and wait quietly, attending to the felt meaning in the center of your torso, in the area of your heart/chest/diaphragm.

When words or images arise, you check them carefully against the felt meaning:

"Is it this?...No, not quite...
Maybe it's...No, not that...
Ah, I think it's...Yes, that's it.
That's exactly right."

The lump in your throat or thickening in your chest, wordless though it is, knows the answer and will stubbornly refuse to respond until you hit upon the right words or image. When you find the right words, the lump will melt, the warmth will spread through your chest, and you will know exactly why you are crying. Such a release is called a "felt shift." You will have found your unique answer to the question, "Why does

this move me?", crafted out of your own life experiences as carried in your body. The meaning will imply actions.

Some experienced Focusers describe how tears alert them to important meanings:

"A tightening in my throat and mist in my eyes often comes as a surprise--I didn't know I felt that strong about that. Tears are not subtle--I can really use them to feel the 'more.'"

"When I'm tired and overly busy, I'm likely to explode into tears of anger and frustration. If I'm able to get by myself, I can often track to the level of experiencing beneath the tears and use the situation to discover something new. Increasingly, tears are for me an indication that I'm not paying attention to something."

"Tears offer a clue that I need to Focus and be with my feelings to see if I can accept and allow some movement to a new place. Many good decisions and insights have come from this, like I can achieve my retirement goals and move realistically through closing the company."

"Tears are an important expression of my real self that has not been listened to and wants to be heard."

From Meaninglessness To Tears

Focusing and tears can also work in another direction. You might choose to Focus because you feel numb or life feels meaningless. Through Focusing, you can hit upon energy and meaning again. A male friend of mine asked to do Focusing with me for a few minutes every day. He worked on an intensive care unit in a hospital and would become emotionally overloaded and numbed out. After a few moments of paying attention and making words for the "numbness," he would hit upon something meaningful from the day, his eyes would well with tears, and he would say, "Now I feel alive again."

A felt meaning is anything that you experience as a feeling, without words. For instance, you might have a "bad feeling" about a conversation with a friend. You can Focus upon the "bad feeling," the felt meaning, again asking open-ended questions and waiting for your body to respond:

"What is it about that conversation that left me feeling so bad?...
Is it that I'm mad?...No...
Am I feeling left out?...No..."

Ah, I think it's that he didn't ask me first...Ah, yes."

The body responds, the bad feeling melts, and you understand exactly what happened. Now, you can decide what to do about it.

Often when you hit upon exactly the right words or images, you will experience a sheen of tears. Your tears of being touched or moved are one more way that your body lets you know that you have hit upon just the right piece of information. You will have found out what matters to you, and, thus, what you want to do.

Here are some more examples from my own experience:

For several months, I used Focusing upon whether I wanted to continue infertility treatment to have a baby or whether I could pursue creativity through a new career direction instead. I really wanted the answer to be the new career. That was a much easier solution.

However, every time I used Focusing, I found tears around the meanings involved in having a child. Talk of the new career option left me dry. I decided that the meaningful direction for me lay in having a child, and I eventually adopted a baby. I have not regretted that decision.

A friend used Focusing on a dream. In the dream, a woman brought her a beautiful, bright shiny necklace, made of silver and other metals. Another necklace, of small quartz crystals, lay knotted and tangled in my friend's lap. As she used Focusing, the tears of meaning came around the knotted necklace.

While the other necklace was bright and shiny and seemed more attractive, the one in her lap was her own. It was like her life: knotted and tangled, but still each crystal lovingly crafted. Saying these words, she welled up with tears. The tears alerted her that she was on the right track. The meaning: I can love my own life, as it is, with its mistakes and small crystals. I do not have to compare myself to the gaudy necklaces of others.

In her waking life, now, my friend wears her quartz crystal necklace as a reminder to follow her own path and feel good about herself. However, if she had analyzed the dream without using Focusing to explore the "felt meanings," she might have made the opposite decision. She might have thought she was supposed to go out and find a shiny, new necklace, a shiny, new life.

I spent several weeks visiting people. I returned home depressed and hopeless, feeling that I had failed in life and had nothing. I canceled a party. I felt much too bad to entertain. As I used Focusing on the depression, tears came when I realized that, surrounded by people who had other lifestyles, women who were married and affluent and good house - keepers, I had lost touch with what mattered to me: the life I had chosen as a writer and single mother. As the tears flowed, I came back to life again,

reconnecting with the meaning in my own life choices. I found a deep feeling of hopefulness and trust in my own choices and even felt like having a party!

Here's what experienced Focusers say about the connection between Focusing and tears:

"In Focusing, I look for the feeling of tears coming as a guide to the felt sense. When I have tears in Focusing, I have the experience of finding Me again!"

"Focusing and tears go together hand in hand to me. While Focusing works with or without tears, the major shifts are always accompanied by some tearing. It is my reflex response to sensing the truth of my being. It always feels so wonderful!!"

"Focusing is the only thing I can really do to help myself cry in a situation. Even when I don't sit down and do an 'official' Focusing session, just being quiet and attending to what I'm feeling can sometimes bring tears."

Tears As A Talisman

When tears come before the felt meaning, they say, "Pay attention. This matters to you. Find out why. Make words for the meaning." When the tears come in response to your attempt to find words for a felt meaning, they also say, "It's here. This is what matters. Take it seriously."

In both cases, your tears act as a talisman, keeping you on the track of what matters to you. Paying attention to what matters can help you decide what to do. Here's what others say about tears and action decisions:

"Tears make my decisions. If I feel strongly enough to have tears about it, it is very, very important."

"In my normal, rather out-of-touch existence, I have a lot of ideas, options, plans, but often have difficulty knowing what I really should think or do--whether I'm rationalizing something, am in denial, deluding myself or what. Crying is one of the times when I really feel connected with some source of wisdom and guidance."

"I am afraid that, if I am not allowed to cry, I will lose my bearings, my capacity to know wrong from right. If deciding between two things, the one that moves me to tears gets my vote. Tears let me know what's important to me, also

what is profound and perhaps universally human."

Tears and Spirituality

When you pay attention to bodily felt meanings, you find yourself listening to the "still small voice within" which many people find central to religious experience. If you are interested in finding spiritual meaning, Focusing can work as a form of prayer, a way of opening yourself to your Higher Power or Inner Wisdom. Campbell and McMahon(1985), Catholic priests who teach Focusing throughout the world, write about "biospirituality." Focusing upon felt meanings as a way of opening yourself to the possibility of Grace, a visitation from the Holy Spirit.

Human beings are touched and moved by many universal experiences: birth and death, excellence and failure, beauty and ugliness, caring and cruelty. These experiences keep us on track about what it means to be human. The information that comes from felt meanings seems connected to the wisdom of the Universe.

Many people cried at the movie, *Awakening*. Some of us went several times, in order to cry. We brought our friends and lovers saying, "You've got to see this (meaning, "You've got to feel this...I want to share this profound feeling with you"):

As the story unfolds, a man slowly becomes paralyzed because of a neurological disease. A scientist finds a seeming cure. Slowly, the man comes to life again.

Through his eyes, we experience life in the moment, the beauty of simply being alive, seeing the sunshine and the ocean, touching another human through affection. We are moved to tears. Yes, life is beautiful. How could we have forgotten?

The scientist also awakens, coming out of his own isolation as he cares about the awakened man and is cared about by the nurse who helps him. We are touched. Our own sense of isolation responds to this moment of human contact. Yes, we want to be closer to other people. Isn't that the meaning of life?

But, slowly, the man begins to go to sleep again. The cure reverses itself, the disease reasserts its paralysis, the man is disappearing. We are all sobbing. This has happened to us, too. We have gone from awakening to the loss of meaning, from hope to hopelessness.

But the man is not hopeless. He faces his loss, glorying in his moment of living, retaining his caring and dignity to the end. We, too, are urged to maintain our humanness in the face of obstacles.

HOW TO FOCUS

You can do Focusing right in the moment that you find yourself moved to tears. Simply notice the tears and turn your attention to your heart/chest/ diaphragm area, asking "What's this about?" Within a minute, you'll find some words or an image about the felt meaning: "Oh, yeah. It's because someone is caring about me."

However, if you want to go further and find out why someone caring about you brings tears, you may want to sit down at a later date and go through a more purposeful, lengthy Focusing process. You commit yourself to sitting or lying down, closing your eyes, and taking ten or twenty minutes to go more deeply into the meanings.

Focusing was created by Eugene T. Gendlin of the University of Chicago. For his description, see his book, *Focusing* (Bantam Books, 1981). I will teach Focusing with special attention to the role of tears. I will relate the steps in the process to the example above about my friend and the song where the child died (Figure 1):

Step One: Getting In Touch With Your Body

If you are aware of tears in your eyes, you are already in touch with your body. You can go on to Step Two, turning your attention toward the feeling sense of the tears in your throat/chest/heart area and asking, "What's the feel of all this?" In the example, my friend noticed his tears and wondered, "Why does that song always make me cry?"

If you have another strong emotion, like being angry, depressed, grumpy, again, you can start simply by turning your attention toward the felt sense of the whole thing as in Step Two.

However, sometimes you won't have such a clear idea of what to Focus on. You may decide to Focus because your body feels numbed out, and you would like to find more energy. In these cases, you can start with some relaxation exercises, like deep breathing, meditation, or guided fantasy. Simple relaxation instructions appear in the article **Complete Focusing Instructions**.

Another technique helpful in overcoming numbness or confusion and overload is called "clearing a space." Clearing a space can be compared to unpacking a crowded suitcase, giving some order to the confusion inside. You close your eyes and carefully begin to list all the different issues which you are carrying inside, giving each one just a little attention and then setting it aside. When they're all listed, you'll be left with some nice empty space, where you can begin to look for a felt sense as in Step Two. Instructions for clearing a space are also in the article **Complete Focusing Instructions**.

In the relaxation phase of Focusing, you can spend some time with good feelings that you find inside, or even create an image of a positive, safe place and spend some time there before tackling a feeling that may seem painful. Then, you can always go back to the good feeling image if you need a safe harbor during Focusing.

Some people find that, after clearing a space, they have left, not emptiness, but a very positive, spiritual experience of Wholeness and Oneness with the Universe. If this happens to you, of course let yourself float there for as long as you want before turning to Step Two.

Step Two: Getting A Felt Sense

Getting a felt sense involves turning your attention toward the inside of your body in the torso area (throat/chest/heart/diaphragm) and asking "What's the feel of all this?" and then waiting silently, for at least a minute, for a felt sense of the whole thing to form.

If you have tears in your eyes, you would be asking, "What are these tears about?", "Why is this touching me?", "Why am I crying?". If you are grumpy, you'd ask, "What's making me so grumpy?" or "What is all this feeling?" If angry, "Why am I so mad?", "What's going on for me here?" Or, if there's no particular issue, you might just ask, "How am I today?" The key is that you are asking an open-ended question and waiting to allow the answer to come as a felt sense, without words, in the center of your body. You resist the temptation to answer with all the possibilities in your head: "Maybe it's..."

Open-ended questions give your body total freedom in its answer and allow you to learn something new. Closed questions are like your critical parent who already knows the answer. They start off with assumptions about what your problem is, and they tell you to look for specific answers.: "Why do you always act so stupid!", "Why did you make the same mistake again?", "What's wrong with you?" They do not give your body a sense of breathing space, a sense that anything that comes will be welcome.

In the example, my friend asked himself: "Why does that song make me cry?" and checked with his body.

Step Three: Getting A Felt Shift

Now, and only now, you begin to look for the right words, or an image, to describe the feeling in the center of your body. You need to go back and forth between any words or images that arise and the felt sense until you find the words that "fit." When I was talking to my friend in the example above, he checked my words against the feel of it: "No. It's not because he died. It's something else, about the toys waiting."

If the words or image are right for the feeling, you will feel a slight "give" or tension release in the felt sense. It's as if the felt sense says, "Ah, yes. That." This is the "felt shift" and is the outcome of Focusing. You may experience a small tension release, or, sometimes, you will have a powerful experience of insight, perhaps accompanied by tears, as you discover meaning. In the example above, my friend got the words, "Ah, yes. Loyalty."

Step Four: Repeating Steps Two and Three

Lastly, especially if you have only had a slight shift after Step Three, you can choose to go through Steps Two and Three again, or even several more times, until you feel a sense of resolution on the issue.

You will take the words or image that you got in Step Three and ask another open-ended question about them: "Why does that matter to me?", "What's so hard about that?", "Why does that touch me so?". You wait for a new felt meaning to form in response to the question. Then, you look for words or an image to capture it. You can repeat these steps until you feel finished.

In the example, my friend could ask himself, "And what is it about loyalty that makes me cry?" Continuing down this path in a Focusing way, he will find interesting information about this deeply cherished value. He will discover why loyalty matters so much to him, and, perhaps, how that relates to his own life right now. He might come upon touching, formative experiences from his own childhood. Nobody could predict or describe why loyalty matters to him so much. He can create the unique answer only by attention to his body's felt meanings, which are based upon his particular life experience.

If any tears arise during Focusing, just let them come in a gentle, accepting way. The tears often indicate a felt shift that will radically change your whole perspective on an issue. It is as though the tears, along with all future steps and actions, have been trapped behind a dam, and, as the tears rush out to rejoin the stream, so do new possibilities, understandings, and energies for taking action steps.

When you have tears, keep asking yourself, "What are the words for these tears?", "What are these tears about?" and watch for any words, images, or memories that arise. These words can be used for the next step in Focusing: "And what about that matters to me."

A First Attempt

Stop a moment now to try out the Focusing instructions below on one of the things which brings tears to your eyes. If you are successful, you will find some words or an image for the meaning of your tears. You will also experience a physical release of tension as your body recognizes the rightness of those words:

Close your eyes and sit comfortably, loosening any clothing that is too tight...

(Pause at least one minute)

Now, turn your attention quietly inside, to your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions...

(Pause at least one minute)

Breathe deeply for a moment, just watching the feelings and thoughts come and go...

(Pause at least one minute)

Now, bring to mind an incident from the past week which brought tears to your eyes...or find another time in your life when you were moved to tears...Take your time to go through your experiences and choose an important one...

(Pause one to three minutes)

Now, go back over the incident, recreating the image of it by remembering who said what, what happened, what you saw...

(Pause at least one minute)

And ask yourself, "What is it about that incident that touches me so?" and wait quietly, paying attention to the center of your torso...look for the feel of the whole thing in the area of your heart/chest/diaphragm...

(Pause at least one minute)

Now, gently look for words or an image that exactly capture the feel of the whole thing...

(Pause at least one minute)

Check any words or images against the felt sense until they fit just right...

(Pause at least one minute)

Now, ask yourself, "And what's so important about that?" and, again, wait and see what comes in the center of your body...

(Pause at least one minute)

Look for words or an image...

(Pause at least one minute)

And check whatever comes until it fits just right...

(Pause at least one minute)

Continue with this process as long as you like, then open your eyes.

Did you find out anything? If not, you might need to take several more steps, asking your body a question, waiting for the felt meaning to come, then finding words. As you go along, however, you should feel a slight tension release in your body every time you find the right words, and, eventually, a larger shift, a sense of knowing the meaning.

Trying out the instructions above, I focused on a recent incident at a new service station:

Even though the sign said "Mini Serve," I bravely asked the attendant to check my antifreeze level, saying there seemed to be a slow drip coming out of the connecting hose. He saw the drip, tightened the connector with a wrench from his pocket, and offered to replace the lost antifreeze. I said, "No, I have antifreeze at home." Then he said, "Let me check your battery." He did so, and we both saw that the water levels were really low, below the safe level. He filled it back up. I thanked him. As I drove away, I burst into tears.

I asked myself, "Why does this make me cry?". The words: "Because somebody took the time to care about me"..."Why is that so important?"..."Because I'm usually taking care of other people, and nobody takes the time to think about me"..."Because it touches me and warms me that someone would take the time to think about what I might need, take care of me, instead of only doing what I ask"...

It was a breath of fresh air, a moment of meaningful contact in a culture too often empty of human touching. I decided I would go back to that station more often. I also had my awareness focused upon the warmth that can come from little moments of care in my own daily life and the need to take action to bring more nurturing into my life. I decided I needed to ask my partner for more touching, more warmth.

I hope that you also found some deep inner meanings during your first attempt at Focusing. The exercises in Complete Focusing Instructions will insure that you learn how to use Focusing successfully by breaking the process into steps. (download available from Creative Edge Focusing™, www.cefocusing.com ; audio CDs of Complete Focusing Instructions are also part of The Self Help Package, also available at www.cefocusing.com)