

The Essentials of Teaching Focusing: The Four Building Blocks

In the beginning-

I have developed a method for teaching the essentials of Focusing, Interactive Focusing and Compassionate, Empathic Listening which I refer to as the *four building blocks*. I think this is the way I think I could have learned these disciplines the simplest and easiest. It is the most efficient, understandable and lasting method I have thus far used to teach these processes. As with all of my work, I always try to come out of my own experience, and this is the result.

The *four building blocks* are: 1) The right environment including the right attitude and safety, 2) The bodily felt sense (which I will refer to as bodysense throughout), 3) Compassionate, empathic listening from the bodysense and 4) The storyteller as the teacher.

Note: I have used "exercises" liberally throughout my articles. This is my way of teaching experientially. Please read through the exercise first and acquaint yourself with it thoroughly, as often the instructions include allowing your eyes to drop down or closed. By referring to the table of contents at the section marked "exercises," there is a summary with succinct instructions for each exercise. You can refer to this to help you perform the exercise. I have noted these exercises with an asterisk () in the body of this text.*

Actually performing the exercise in the sequence in which it appears builds a foundation, adds life to the learning process and forms a deep, experiential knowing from the bodysense. As you work your way through these exercises, you will be building what I call an "experiential lexicon," a set of working definitions from your own, inside experience. This is not jargon, but meaningful, experiential definitions of things you need to know to move forward and develop.

Clearing-a-space-

I have kept *clearing-a-space** separate from the building blocks as this is one of those life practices the need for which appears frequently. Consequently, it is a good practice to develop inside and outside of Focusing-based practices.

I especially want you to become familiar with the practice of clearing-a-space both to find a right place from which to process your own issue and to clear some internal space from which to listen to someone in process. Clearing some internal space is useful in many parts of your life, and it is indispensable in this work.

Gendlin (Bantam, 1978) named it as the first step in his six-step Focusing method. For me, it is not only an initial step, but one I perform

throughout the entire session. It is a practice that I introduce early in any training I do, often using it as a group centering when we initially meet.

I was recently rewarded in a workshop where I presented clearing-a-space to the participants as the initial centering. Shortly after the centering we did an exercise with a partner. Two women who had been life-partners for many years did the exercise. One woman shared that because she had cleared her space, she saw her partner "as for the first time." Needless to say, this opened up their work in a totally new way allowing them to process through issues in which they had heretofore been hopelessly stuck.

The Four Building Blocks-

Building Block 1: The right environment including the right attitude and safety-

When you begin anything that involves a process for touching deep inside of yourself, to your very place of truth, you must enter with trust – trust in the safety of the process and trust in yourself and your ability to keep yourself safe. Because this is an interactive process it also requires trust in the caring and sincerity of the people who will engage in the process with you. There is no foolproof method for insuring your safety, but there are signs to alert yourself and strategies that you can develop to help you *protect* yourself.

Defended against versus protected by*-

I consciously choose the word *protect* over the word *defend*. To explain this choice I will ask you to join me in an exercise. Allow yourself to relax and let your awareness come down inside your body. Become aware of your center, the area between your throat and your lower abdomen. You may want to lower your eyelids or let your eyelids drop closed if that is comfortable for you. Take a few breaths, breathing in relaxation and breathing out tension.

As you sense an opening and sense a calming in your body, I invite you to take the words *defended against* down inside that center area. Gently say the words to yourself. Take a full minute of silence to see what comes inside with *defended against*. See how your body holds *defended against*. What feel quality, what images, what sensations or gestures come with *defended against*? Give yourself a full minute with this first set of words.

Now take some more cleansing breaths. This time take the words *protected by* down inside that center area. Again see what comes, how the body holds this phrase. What feel quality, what images, what sensations or gestures come with the words *protected by*? Give yourself another full minute of clock time.

I will share what comes for me. With *defended against* I get the image of a fortress with thick masonry walls. I am behind the walls and nothing can

penetrate them. There is a rigidity in my body, almost stopping my breathing. With *protected by* I get the image of a mother cradling a child. I get the feel quality of being gently but firmly held at the same time I have the sense of being the holding arms.

When I first did this "discernment exercise" I did feel defended by this thick, brick wall. As I stayed with this image, I realized that "yes, it did keep the enemy out." Suddenly it came to me that it also kept my friends out. I could feel my loneliness with this realization. But the worst of it was that it kept me a prisoner inside a fortress of my own building. It is what psychologists call a maladaptive defense – a primitive defense that, early on, a child might construct to stay alive, but a defense that acts like a hermit crab's shell and prevents growth as you age.

When I got a firm sense of *protected by*, I realized that my adult self didn't need to be confined by this child-constructed wall-defense. I could protect myself. I was those strong arms cradling that young feeling self that didn't have a chance to grow forward, to grow big and strong. I now had options as an adult that weren't available to me as a child. I could say, "No, that isn't okay with me." I could walk away. I could ask for help. With this sense that I could protect myself came the ability to let myself stay vulnerable in a very healing way. With this healthy vulnerability, I could stay "soft" and feeling. I could let myself be aware of my feelings and my *bodysense*. I realized that I needed to stay vulnerable in order to grow, and that I needed to feel protected and safe in order to stay vulnerable.

Unsafe versus uncomfortable*-

While I can't, for you, tell you how to keep yourself safe, I can tell you that the first strategy is for you to listen to your bodysense to detect at the earliest moment when you are feeling *unsafe*. Another discernment exercise can greatly help you with this. As in the exercise above, I will ask you to draw in some nice deep breaths, breathing in relaxation and breathing out tension. Let your eyelids drop down or fall close, whichever is better for you. Allow yourself to become aware of your center area between your throat and your lower abdomen.

As you sense a clearing there let the word *unsafe* come down into your center. Let your body sense how you carry that word. What body feel, what sensations, what images form as you spend a minute with *unsafe*?

After you have spent time with *unsafe*, take a moment or two to clear that center area, with some slow, deep breaths. When you are ready, take the word *uncomfortable* down inside. Again, see what comes in your body, what body-feel, image, gesture.

What comes for me with *unsafe* is a very tight feeling, I can't breathe, my jaw clenches, there is a glaring light that makes me wince. With *uncomfortable* comes a sense of wanting to squirm, like trying to find a comfortable spot in my bed. With *unsafe*, I am in a *cul-de-sac*. There is no way out. I am stuck. With *uncomfortable*, I can adjust, I can move.

When I am processing something, I get stuck when I feel *unsafe*. The *unsafe* may come from going into my issue too quickly and too deeply. It may come from processing with someone I don't yet know well enough to trust. It may come from being in a bad place to process – being too tired, not clearing a space and the like. It may come from being told what to do or being told what my material means by my listener.

On the other hand, when I am processing, ironically, I need to feel *uncomfortable*. If I don't feel *uncomfortable* I know that this isn't something that needs my attention. If I feel comfortable, I am in a good place with that issue. Processing this would be a waste of time.

The *uncomfortable* bodysense comes to tell me that this is alive in my body in this moment. The *uncomfortable* is the precursor to *unsafe*. If I leave the *uncomfortable* unprocessed, it will turn into *unsafe* before too long. In other words, if I can listen to the signal while it is still a whisper, I can do something about it. When it becomes a scream in my ear, it is too late. My defenses aren't strong enough.

I say about myself, I have a huge deafness at the mid-range. I can hear at the whisper level, and I can hear again when it is a scream. My maladaptive defense is the mid-range deafness. For myself, I need to pay particular attention to those little, niggling, *uncomfortable* bodysenses.

Being aware of the small voice of the *uncomfortable* is a strategy that helps keep me from being overwhelmed by the screaming. Each time I successfully deal with the *uncomfortable*, I get a sense of growth – of empowerment. Successively, as I have had my small victories, I have built a confidence in my competence which sets itself against my sense of failure at being overwhelmed. I realize that I don't have to let myself get to the place where the scream overwhelms me. Everything starts with a whisper, if I can just catch it early enough.

As you learn to listen to your bodysense and discern between *unsafe* and *uncomfortable*, you will learn to process the *uncomfortable* before it deafens you – before it becomes *unsafe*. You will learn to just say "NO" to the *unsafe*, to refuse to let yourself become *unsafe*. You will generate your own healthy strategies to protect yourself from the *unsafe*.

Each unsafe situation requires its own unique way of safely dealing with it. It may be firmer boundaries. It may require saying no. It may require asking for help (including the prospect of calling 911). It may require taking a time-out. It may require walking away. It may require agreeing on ground rules. It may require the full range of strategies. You need to get to a place where you can both generate and implement these strategies. It requires the adult realization that you are responsible for keeping yourself safe, whatever that takes.

The remarkable thing about facing issues that contain embers of ancient events is that you have a whole new way of being able to deal with these situations as an adult. As you realize and exercise these new ways, you start to become unstuck. This is a new, liberating and empowering experience. This often includes the ability to protect that young place that didn't get a good-enough environment in which to grow forward, that part of ourselves we often refer to as the *wounded, inner child*.

The healing attitude and the right environment*-

One of the most surprising experiences I've had on my inner journey of discovery will be conveyed by this next exercise. This is about how we want to be listened to and how we want to listen to others.

Each of us probably has a word or phrase that captures this way of being with ourselves and others in the listening process. They are words such as respect, attentive, caring, empathic, compassionate, accepting, unconditional, without agenda, genuine, open, gently curious, prizing, being in relationship, acknowledging, allowing, embracing, welcoming, equal and the like. The list can be quite long. Perhaps I've already mentioned a word that captures this special attitude you prefer. If I haven't, take a moment to think about what that word or phrase would be for you.

When you get that word in your head, again, I invite you to relax and clear a space in your center area. Take some gentle, deep breaths in through your nose and release the air out through your mouth. Let your eyelids drop down or closed. Take that word that you identified, and let it come down into your center. Spend some time here with it to let yourself get a body-feel of it. Again see what the bodysense produces. Is there a touch quality, an image, a sound, a gesture, a scent? Spend two minutes of clock-time with it. Resonate the word or image against the bodysense. It may have its own story to tell. Let it come fully in your body.

Over the time I have been doing this exercise, and I do it often, many words have come. What astounds me is how different are the thought of the word as it resides in my head and the experience of the word as it manifests

in my bodysense. What this exercise taught me is that it isn't the word as defined in the dictionary and caught by my mind that I want to take with me into the listening experience. It is the bodysense of the word that I want to have present inside of me as I listen to another – or as I listen to myself.

When I let the essence of the word form inside of myself, I am able to keep the spirit of the attitude alive within me with no further effort or concentration. It transforms my listening from *trying* to *being*. I am no longer *trying* to be in the right attitude, I am *being* in the right attitude. This exercise is an one that deserves daily practice, both to get better at it and to remind you of the difference between a head-word and a word living in the bodysense. It can act as a valuable daily meditation.

Healing comes from within-

Carl Rogers, father of client-centered psychotherapy, put forward the very logical and empowering notion that the “client” is her own best expert. His thought was that the therapist could be most therapeutic or healing if he could keep the client company as she discovered her own healing way.

In listening to another, whether you are a therapist or lay person, it is important to keep this in mind. It will help you, as listener, avoid the common pitfall of many listeners. It will help keep you from intruding with analyses, questions, interpretations, solutions, prescriptions, sermons, rescuing, protecting, fixing it and the like.

An exercise to identify what kind of listener you are*-

You may want to take a moment to identify what kind of a listener you are. Are you analytic? Do you try to make meaning for the other person, analyze, interpret? Do you try to rescue or protect? Do you try to fix-it or solve the other person's problems? Do you preach?

After you have identified your own listening style, you can use this information to help you avoid doing this when you are called upon to *just listen* to another human being. The various kinds of listening I mentioned each have a value in an appropriate context.

In the particular listening we will be teaching, however, the basis is *reflective responses*. We can suggest this basic listening form with confidence if we truly believe that the person is her own best expert. It is she who knows most about herself, and it is she who truly knows how it should have been, what she needs in order to heal. *Acknowledging the truth of the storyteller's being her own best expert and her knowing how it should have been is the foundation for listening empathically*. The listener learns from the storyteller how to be empathic, how to listen in a way that is sensed as empathic by the storyteller.

Healing is natural-

I like to point to the natural, physical phenomenon of healing we all have experienced. Each of us has been cut, and each of us has bled. Our physical bodies know exactly how to heal this wound. First the blood vessels constrict (vasoconstriction). As the bleeding slows to a stop, a scab forms to seal off the wound. Later scar tissue forms as new cells knit the wound together permanently, often with a strength that exceeds the original skin. The body spontaneously knows just when and where to send the healing. We don't find this happening on our shoulder when we cut our finger. It does require from us that we keep the wound protected, germ-free. Our healing mechanism does the rest, naturally and spontaneously.

For me, psychological or spiritual healing follows this same natural and spontaneous course. We need to provide a protected environment, a right environment. We need to trust that our inner wisdom or bodysense will discover and start the healing process.

Time and space-

There is a physical dimension to the right environment. Part of this is attention to time and space. The process is aided when we slow down, take enough time, sense our own energy level, check to see if this is a right time to be processing.

We also need to attend to spatial concerns. Are we close enough to our issue to really sense into it? Are we too distant from our issue? Is there enough space between us and our issue to feel safe? Is there a breath between us and our issue? Can we step back enough to see the separation between our self and our issue? Is our inner space clear enough to allow us to process some significant part of our life right now?

Building Block 2: An experiential definition of the bodysense using the approach exercise-

Dr. Eugene Gendlin in his seminal book *Focusing* (Bantam, 1978) discovered and identified a place of inner wisdom located inside the trunk of our bodies. He called this the *bodily felt sense*. While that term is descriptive, it has caused many problems for the people who came after. I have chosen to call this bodily felt sense the *bodysense* for simplicity, and, for me, as a more direct and more powerful way of describing this phenomenon.

This said, what is the *bodysense*? It is an inner knowing we all have experienced. We give part-descriptions of the bodysense with many words such as premonition, intuition, gut-feeling.... The bodysense is an inner sensing, an inner sentience or consciousness which combines the strengths of both the body and the mind. At first it is vague, unclear, out of focus. By

using this direct referent within ourselves, we can invite this unclear sense about a situation in our lives to come into greater clarity, into focus, hence the term Focusing.

Focusing, Interactive Focusing and Compassionate, Empathic Listening are all ways of discovering your own bodysense-knowing. These are methods for being in continuous touch with your bodysense and living life forward from this place of inner wisdom.

We may have an inkling of what the bodysense is, but it is very difficult to convey what it is without an experience of it. For me, the most convincing definition is an experience of it in your own body. For this I have designed an exercise based on an exercise someone in the Focusing community shared with me many years ago. I call it the *approach exercise**. I will describe this to you and invite you to perform the exercise yourself. You will need a partner in order to do this.

The approach exercise instructions:

1. Two participants stand about ten feet apart. I will call the person approaching, Joan. I will call the person being approached, Phil. In this exercise, Phil, the person being approached, is the equivalent of the Focuser. Joan is the equivalent of the listener.
2. Joan will ask Phil to keep his eyes open and to look at her while she approaches him. She will ask Phil to let his entire awareness come down into his body, from his chin through his groin, and to monitor what is happening inside of himself. Phil will put words or images or sensation qualities to what comes in his body as Joan is approaching. Is it jumpy or tingly or bubbly or tight or pressured or pushing away or pulling toward...? What is the body-feel quality as Joan approaches? Phil will wait until the end of the exercise to share what came inside his body or bodysense, as it accurately can be called.
3. Joan lets Phil know that he can stop her any time he wishes.
4. After giving Phil the instructions in numbers 2 and 3, Joan will check with him to see if it is okay to start approaching.
5. As Joan approaches, she will also monitor her own body for what is happening for there are two people here doing this exercise.
6. After Joan stops (either she has been stopped by Phil or she can't go any further) she will tell Phil she is going to take two or three steps backward. She asks Phil to continue to watch her and to monitor what is coming in his body as Joan moves away from him.

7. Phil can share with Joan, at this point, what came inside of his body as she approached him. Joan can then share what her inside experience was as she approached Phil.

Teaching the approach, bodysense exercise in a group-

When I am teaching a group, I will demonstrate the approach-bodysense exercise. I ask for a volunteer participant. I carefully describe the instructions for the exercise, being sure to mention that the volunteer can stop me at any time she wishes. Then I actually approach the volunteer.

Sharing: At the end of the exercise I ask the volunteer to share whatever she feels safe saying. The volunteer typically gives her description of her bodysense as she was being approached by me. She may say it was tight feeling. I would reflect 'tight feeling,' and, to help her identify that this was an inside-the-body experience, I might ask her where in her body that was. Could she point to it? She shares, and I reflect each piece back to her. Reflections help her resonate the words against the experience so she can get it as clearly as possible. I then ask the participants to pair off, to find a quiet place to work, and to 'have fun' with the exercise. I invite them to do it as I demonstrated, starting with giving their partner the instructions. They can experiment with other versions they create, spontaneously. I ask them to return in about fifteen minutes so we can share what happened.

What we can learn about the bodysense, boundaries, safety, bonding and more-

The discovery of having a concrete experience of the bodysense in your own body: When the participants regroup and start sharing their bodysense experiences, much becomes clear. Each participant actually had her own experience of a bodysense in her own body. This makes it much easier to start teaching Focusing, Interactive Focusing and Compassionate, Empathic Listening. When we only *talk about* the bodysense it stays in a gray area. When we talk about the *actual experience* of the bodysense, things become clearer. We share a common, though obviously person-by-person unique experiential definition of the '*bodysense*.'

Bonding: The exercise encourages a sense of safety in the group. This exercise is one of the first things we do. We usually start the workshop with a centering and brief introduction of who we are. Then comes the approach exercise. When you pair off and work with one other participant, you have made one contact. You no longer feel so isolated. When we regroup to share the experience, you make contact with the whole group, each person speaking from a genuine place within. There is a sense of group connection now. The sharing is safe and deep. And in sharing, each person is encouraged to share

only to the extent they feel safe. The participants share from a place within themselves, their bodysense. As group leader I try to reflect back each person's sharing about her own bodysense. The speaker is learning to take the reflection back to the bodysense, to *resonate* it against the bodysense of what she described and to check it for accuracy.

The bodysense and its diversity: When many people share their bodysense experience, it becomes clear how diverse the bodysense can be. The diversity acknowledged in the sharing immediately dispels any notion that there is only one, singular, right bodysense. The spontaneous sharing is usually filled with energy. People are aroused by the potential. I am careful, during this sharing, to point out that where the approaching participant was stopped isn't a statement about that person. The distance has to do with the context or the inner place the person being approached is in.

Safety and empowerment: Built into the exercise is the instruction for the person being approached to stop the approacher any time she wishes. Sometimes the person being approached lets the approacher come all the way in. This may be a statement about needing companionship in the moment, and how that would feel safe right now. It is an empowering moment to invite company into your space.

If the person being approached senses something shift, usually from uncomfortable to unsafe, she may say "stop" or hold up her hands to halt the approacher. The person being approached has sensed what is right for her in that moment. She can take the action of stopping the approacher. This, also, is felt as empowering. It indicates the person being approached sensed her boundaries, and she can say "stop" to maintain her sense of feeling safe.

This concrete exercise does much to help the approached person identify that she has boundaries and that she has the right to keep herself feeling safe. This in no way implies that there is anything unsafe about the person approaching. It simply puts the person being approached in touch with her boundaries and how she can protect them. The ability to say stop usually permeates the workshop. The person being approached knows she can and should say stop when she feels unsafe. People take responsibility for keeping themselves safe throughout the workshop, and this can generalize to their life outside the workshop, also.

Safety and boundaries: This exercise helps people get in touch with their personal space or boundaries. Some participants say they didn't even realize that they had boundaries. One woman reported, "I stopped him two feet later than I should have." She then said she lived her life like that. She let people come in closer than she should. She didn't know how to say stop.

Others could sense their boundaries but didn't realize they could say "stop" or "no" or "that's far enough."

The exercise also helps point out that there are two separate experiences here, one for the person being approached and one for the person approaching. Sometimes the person being approached will say, "I stopped her because I sensed she wanted me to stop her there." That may or may not correspond with the other person's wants. You must check that out with her. All you really know is how you are experiencing your situation in the moment inside of yourself. This exercise underscores the truth of that assumption.

Some of my learnings from this exercise-

The diversity of the experience: Some "approachees" feel a sense of connectedness with the "approachers;" some feel their spaces are invaded. Some have a well-defined bodysense; some have a vague sense. The words and images that come are "warm, smooth, joy, jumpy, exploding bubbly, fireworks, tightness, pressure, touching a wall, hard, solid, scary," and the like. Some people don't have words. They say they just sensed or knew it was time to stop the approacher. I like to take time with this response. Many people have a bodysense but aren't able to put words or images to it. This clearly shows them the phenomenon of "knowing without knowing you know." Taking time to discover the quality and how to describe it can be very helpful to the whole group.

Sometimes the person approaching gets the sense she wants to stop approaching before the person being approached stops her. One person who was approaching said, "It was like tripping over an invisible line." Once she passed the point at which she wanted to stop, she was off-balance. She wanted to be saved by her partner's reaching out and stopping her.

Relationship: An obvious outcome of this exercise is to point to "how it is for yourself in the moment in the presence of the other person" and how it is for the other person. This is an important relationship measure. Sharing this in a straightforward and non-threatening way is good relationship skills training.

Safety (unsafe vs. uncomfortable): This is a good introduction to safety and safe spaces. I like to experientially illustrate the difference between unsafe and uncomfortable with this exercise. The point at which the approacher is stopped is often where the approachee's sense of uncomfortable changes to unsafe. It is good to point out that the bodysense can put us in touch with the difference. It is fruitful to work from your *uncomfortable place*. It is impossible to work from your *unsafe place*. Uncomfortable points to or starts the process. Unsafe stops the process. I like to point out

that only you can keep yourself safe. That is empowering. The other person can't keep you safe. However, you may sense that the other person makes it unsafe for you. Then it is up to you to sense this *unsafe* and do something about it. The *bodysense* is a good way to distinguish between unsafe and uncomfortable.

Body wisdom: The exercise is also very useful in pointing out the *wisdom of the bodysense*. It is apparent to the participants that getting in touch with the bodysense has a usefulness in their lives. The bodysense is able to carry information, clear up a confusion, point to something, indicate an action step. The bodysense knows.

The survival mechanism as a bodysense: I believe this exercise is especially powerful in demonstrating the bodysense because it taps into an ancient, internal system. This exercise can be used to illustrate the *fright – flight, fight* response.

Each of us has a *safety* detector called the survival mechanism or *fright – flight, fight response*. Animals have it. You know that an animal like a gazelle will take flight when endangered, a fast runner will choose to flee. A strong animal like a lion will choose to stand and fight, offense sometimes being the best defense. A rabbit may choose to *freeze* in order to be safe, hoping that the predator won't notice it (protective coloration) and won't be triggered into action by the rabbit's motion.

Different *survival* or defense styles are also apparent in humans. It may be indicated by where I'm stopped as I approach someone in this exercise. As an aside, I speculate about defense styles according to where I'm stopped.

When I'm stopped about two to three feet out, I ask the person how she handles conflict – does she take flight, is she a runner, a bolter, a withdrawer.

If I am allowed to come in about a foot or so away, I suspect that this person is a fighter – confrontational – they would rather confront or explore the situation than flee from it. A fighter needs to be able to make contact, land a blow.

If I'm allowed to come all the way in, I suspect this person is a freezer or a joiner or an embracer. The freezer may have been made to feel helpless as a youngster – perhaps even from a physically or psychologically abusing encounter. Like a bunny, if she or he stayed perfectly still when being abused or tormented, the freezer felt it wouldn't hurt as much. The joiner (Freudians call this identification with the aggressor) intuitively feels that it is safer to be on the side of the powerful person than against her or him. The joiner seems to use the strategy of letting the approacher come all the way in. The embracer

seems to intuitively know that she or he needs warm, human contact for survival. This is purely speculation. It is fun to check this out with the participants – if it seems appropriate.

The approach exercise in conclusion-

The approach exercise was originally used to let a participant have a direct bodily experience of the bodysense. The exercise has expanded to illustrate the variety of bodysenses and the usefulness of the bodysense. It helps us experientially discern unsafe from uncomfortable. It helps us become aware of our internal and external boundaries.

We can choose strategies for keeping our boundaries and ourselves safe by heeding the signals from our bodysense. The approach exercise is powerful because it seems to trigger our fright – flight, fight mechanism. Exercising our right to say “stop” or to say “no” is sensed as an empowering, adult ability and responsibility. We can and must keep ourselves safe. With the sense that we can keep ourselves safe comes the possibility to remain vulnerable, and the ability to trust, to bond and to process our inner material.

Building Block 3: Compassionate, empathic listening from our bodysense-

Listening to the story and for the person-

Everyone has a story to tell. It needs to be heard. The person experiencing that story needs to be seen and acknowledged.

The listener can use empathic, bodysense listening to select the reflections that will indicate to the storyteller that the story is being heard. The listener can remain open to feedback from the storyteller to help the listener get the story accurately and empathically. The reflections need to be carefully selected not only for accuracy but to avoid staying just at the story level. Bodysense-listening helps you select the experience-bearing part of the story so you can reflect back the crux of what is being said.

When the person behind the story has peeked out, she needs to be received in that moment, just as she is. When I listen empathically from my bodysense, I connect with the storyteller at the level of the “more.” I take a moment in my listening to get “it” empathically. I don’t verbalize this moment, but I let it come in my body with awareness of it.

I am pointing to listening to the “more” because it is easy to get trapped into listening to the story which sits above the experience. We can think we are doing good listening because we are accurately reflecting everything back. This sometimes has the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the defense of staying at the surface.

I have a favorite story I tell in my beginning listening classes. I obsess for a time before I drop down to my bodysense to say where I am inside. The story is an exercise to exemplify not only how to listen from the bodysense to select the reflection, but how to listen for the person who is experiencing the story. I ask you to listen from your bodysense as I relate this story.

As you are listening for what you may want to reflect, actually frame the reflection – just how would you reflect it back? I will make some suggestions at the end of the story about what might have felt like empathic responses to me, the storyteller. I invite you, the reader, to sit back and listen and to reflectively respond to me. Before you start reading my story, check inside to see if there is a clear space from which to listen. Take a couple of deep, cleansing breaths and....

The ‘refrigerator’ story-

Me: For Mother’s Day my children got me a new digital alarm clock. I have had an analogue alarm clock for many years, and I mentioned to them that I could set it for an approximate time, but I was noticing that it was getting less and less accurate. Anyway, thoughtfully they presented me with this lovely new digital alarm clock – well it really wasn’t as good looking as my other one, but I was hoping it would be much more accurate.

The next day, Monday, I planned to use the new alarm clock. My garbage collector comes on Mondays and Thursdays. He comes just before 8am. I like to set the garbage out by 7:50am so I don’t miss him. So I set my new alarm for 7:43am. This would give me enough time to collect my various wastebaskets and empty them into the big garbage can in the garage, and set it out in front of the house before the garbage collector arrived. I got up at 7:32am and waited for the alarm to go off at 7:43am. Sure enough, it rang right on the button. I got up, put my robe and slippers on, got all the wastebaskets from the upstairs bathrooms and went down to the garage with them. I live in a split level house, and there are seven steps from the bedroom level to the main level, and, again, seven steps from the main level to the garage level. I found myself counting the steps and remarking to myself that there were the same number of steps between both levels. Anyway, I got to the garage, emptied the wastebaskets, opened the garage door and set the garbage can out well before (three or four minutes at least) the garbage collector arrived.

This done, I remounted the seven steps back to the main floor and decided it was time for breakfast. I wondered what I would like for breakfast. “Peanut butter and jelly,” I said to myself...thinking that was a little unusual. But that was what I decided on.

(As your listening skills increase you will learn to give process suggestions such as the one that follows) There's a sense of a young child there who might not ever have been heard. Would it be okay to take a moment here just to be with that young place in you? If it's right, maybe you could spend some caring time with that part of you...put your arm around her. Could you just check here to see if that would be right?

The teaching-

If the whole first part of the story had been reflected back to me, it would probably have had the effect of increasing my obsessive story-telling. I tend to use an obsessive presentation to avoid or stay away from my deeper, more personal experiencing.

If only the experience-bearing part about the blast of cold air and the revived memory of being shamed by my third grade teacher had been reflected back, I think I, again, could have skipped over processing what was really there for me – a hurting child scolded by an overbearing, critical adult. With the process suggestion, I was being asked to listen to myself compassionately and to let my adult self take care of my wounded child part. The process suggestion asking me to spend some caring time with that wounded, ancient part of me would help me care for that third grade child who never really got attended to. That creates a whole new climate. Now something could shift.

The invitation-

Listening for the "more" is subtle and requires much practice and development as a listener. You must first practice simple listening skills starting at the level of reflective responses. The model of empathic bodysense listening asks you to take a step in stretching your listening skills by selecting the reflections from your bodysense. It takes time and practice to get to a level of competency with this.

Adding process suggestions to your listening is another big step. Process suggestions need sensitivity and practice, also. Asking you to listen for the "more" is yet another broadening.

The invitation is for you to learn and practice this way of listening. It leads to profound shifts for the person being heard and to deep, empathic connection for the listener. This is the gift of being a listener. And, of course, it isn't just listening to another person. Listening to yourself in this same way is the extreme gift you can give yourself...and perhaps the best way to learn to listen for the "more." This may be the spot from which we grow into personhood.

Parenthetically, process suggestions seem almost unnecessary in Interactive Focusing where compassion and empathy are emphasized and are part of the model itself. It is empathy and compassion we are learning and developing.

Building Block 4: The storyteller-as-teacher model-

1. The storyteller speaks from her body sense about an issue in her life.
2. The listener listens from her body sense and selects a reflective response (which may be followed by a process suggestion).
3. The storyteller takes the listening response back to her body sense and requests it for accuracy and fit. Did the listener get it the way the storyteller intended it? Does more come? Does it shift?
4. The storyteller gives the listener feedback -- "Yes, that's it exactly," or "I really needed you to hear the part about how heavy and sad it feels," or "Something more is coming. Could you just sit with me quietly for a little," or "It was just like that, but when I take back what you said it's shifted. Now it's..." It is this feedback that helps the listener gain accuracy, really get it experientially and then lets the closeness of the empathic experience form. For the empathic bond form. The storyteller's sensing and asking for what she needs helps the empathy come into being... and it is experienced as empowering.
5. The listener takes in the feedback and modifies her listening response from this feedback. This lets the storyteller sense the listener's support and wanting to get it right, wanting to be empathic. Again, this allows the storyteller to have a sense of empowerment. Someone listened and responded to her feedback and requests.

An example-

Request: It takes for a minute or two to get a body sense of an issue in his life right now. I'm... at first when I listened to John tell me about his transcendent experience of companionship his uncle through his death, I was a little numb... not jealous, but really wanting an experience like that for myself. It seemed so important. Then I felt small. I can't explain it exactly, but how it comes in my body right now is like a small or narrow piece... silver... and I don't know what that silver is all about. I can't put my finger on it. There's a big piece there, and running through it, near my water, it is like a...

Listener: Can I just say that part back to you to see if I got it?
Request: Yes. It would be good to hear it. I really can't get it clear.

The teaching comes in the form of feedback. The storyteller takes the listener's response back to the bodysense and resonates it for accuracy and fit. The storyteller gives the listener gentle feedback so the listener can adjust her responses accordingly.

The model of storyteller-as-teacher-

1. The storyteller speaks from her bodysense about an issue in her life.
2. The listener listens from her bodysense and selects a reflective response (which may be followed by a process suggestion).
3. The storyteller takes the listening response back to her bodysense and resonates it for accuracy and fit. Did the listener get it the way the storyteller intended it? Does more come? Does it shift?
4. The storyteller gives the listener feedback – “Yes, that’s it exactly,” or “I really needed you to hear the part about how heavy and sad it feels,” or “Something more is coming. Could you just sit with me quietly for a little,” or “It was just like that, but when I take back what you said it’s shifted. Now it’s....” It is this feedback that helps the listener gain accuracy, really get it empathically and then lets the closeness of the empathic experience form, lets the empathic bond form. The storyteller’s sensing and asking for what she needs helps the empathy come into being...and it is experienced as empowering.
5. The listener takes in the feedback and modifies her listening response from this feedback. This lets the storyteller sense the listener’s support and wanting to get it right, wanting to be empathic. Again, this allows the storyteller to have a sense of empowerment. Someone listened and responded to her feedback and requests.

An example-

Ernest: (*Pauses for a minute or two to get a bodysense of an issue in his life right now*) Hmm...at first when I listened to John tell me about his transcendent experience of companioning his uncle through his death, I was a little...umm...not jealous, but really wanting an experience like that for myself. It seemed so important. Then I felt small. I can’t explain it exactly, but how it comes in my body right now is like a small or narrow piece...a sliver...and I don’t know what that sliver is all about. I can’t put my finger on it. There’s a big piece there, and running through it, near my waist, it is like a belt.

Linda: Can I just say that part back to you to see if I got it?

Ernest: Yes. It would be good to hear it. I really can’t get it clear.

Linda: When John told you about his transcendent experience, you wanted to have one of your own. In your body now, it's like a sliver – a big piece with something like a belt near your waist.

Ernest: (*Resonated it*) Yes. That's it. (*Feedback*) And I needed you to hear that I felt small.

Linda: (*Takes the feedback in and reflects*) You felt small.

Ernest: Umm...yes. When I take that in and check it, it isn't that I felt small, but it is really that I felt I had a small part of it. I think I understood it all. But how it came in me was that of all his big transcendent experience, I really had a small one of my own that touched his. So I felt I really got in my body a small part of his big experience.

Linda: You had a small experience of your own that touched John's big experience.

Ernest: (*Resonates it and gives feedback*) I wanted you to hear that part about how it is in my body now – from my own experience I can get in my body a small part of his big experience.

Linda: (*Adjusts her response as she takes in how it really is for Ernest right now*) What you really wanted me to hear is that from your own experience you can get in your body right now a small part of John's big experience.

Ernest: Yes. And it's so exciting – so bursting and alive.

Linda and Ernest continued past this. It was a short four or five minute exchange. Ernest got a really important piece which helped clear up the interchange John and Ernest had earlier in the day. The "small" part wasn't what he'd suspected earlier – a sense of smallness or pettiness about wanting John's experience. What came into focus for him was that his own small experience allowed him to get a real body experience of John's large, transcendent experience.

Empowering for the storyteller, relieving for the listener-

The storyteller-as-teacher model allows empathic listening to be easier for the listener to be accurate and to be truly responsive to the storyteller. The huge burden of needing to be perfect is lifted from the listener. She has a partner in the empathic striving. It is relieving, and it allows the listener to just listen.

It is empowering for the storyteller to ask for what she needs. It is important for the storyteller to check the listening responses against her bodysense, to resonate it and to give feedback from there. This is how the storyteller can be the teacher.

A word about criticism versus feedback and a discernment exercise*-

I have simplistically stated that the storyteller-as-teacher model rests on the openness and ability to give and receive feedback. Each of us knows that this

is not simple at all. Each of us has probably been endowed with a critic that outstrips King Kong. This means that feedback needs to be clearly separated from criticism. To start the process of disentangling feedback from criticism I invite you to join me in another discernment exercise.

Take in some deep, relaxing breaths, inhaling relaxation and exhaling tension. As you start to open your center area, allow your eyelids to fall down or shut. Let your muscles go soft.

First let the word *criticism* come down inside. Get the way your body senses *criticism*. What images, feel qualities come? You may want to get the last time you experienced criticism, from another person or yourself, to help you with the body-feel. Spend a minute of clock time letting the sense of criticism form. Resonate the words or images against the bodysense.

When your minute is over, again take some cleansing breaths and open up a space in your center area. This time take inside the word *feedback*. You may want to go to a time when you experienced feedback and get back the feel quality of that experience. Take another minute for yourself to sense into feedback. Again, resonate what comes against the bodysense.

For me when I sense into *criticism*, I get tight. My breath comes hard. I get red-faced almost to the point of tears. I feel as though I am flying apart. It is a process stopper. I feel my brick wall of defense going up. I won't let anything in. With *feedback* I feel I'm entitled to that. There is an open feeling in my body. My breathing is deep and easy. I really get a sense of being fed...by someone who is caring and careful. I want as much of that as I can get. I welcome whatever might be of help.

About discernment exercises*-

The sets of words I have presented and call discernment exercises (defended against vs. protected by, unsafe vs. uncomfortable and criticism vs. feedback) have been chosen because discerning the sometimes subtle differences between pairs or sets of words and phrases can be instructive and healing. Discerning these differences using the bodysense is a powerful practice, bringing our awareness down into our body and readying ourselves for change. As a simple example get, at a body level, how you carry "expectation" versus "hope." With expectation, I am disappointed if I don't get what I expect. With hope, I just hoped it would happen. If it does, I'm thankful. If it doesn't, I can let go of it.

The purpose of these discernment exercises is to establish some understandings, at the bodysense level, for words that are essential to the healing practice of bodysense work. These words are necessary for remaining *in process* in life in general. Getting these meanings clear, from the

bodysense level rather than just conceptually, helps to initiate the healing practice of Focusing and bodysense-based work and then to keep and maintain these practices in our inner process.

A referent-

Once you have bodysensed or understood at the body level these words, you can refer to the bodysense of that word whenever needed. The need can be signaled by a bodysense that indicates the process stopping or process enhancing condition evoked by that word.

For example, "unsafe" might feel like suffocating inside while "uncomfortable" might feel like a too-tight belt around the middle. "Unsafe" is process stopping. The feeling of suffocating would indicate this. When the you get that signal (tightness at the throat, shortness of breath, choking, gasping, however it might have come in the body) in everyday life, you can use the signal as a cue to re-center yourself and to take steps to unstick the process. If you can't re-center, you might want to call a time out from whatever you are doing that causes the suffocating feeling.

You may use a strategy to fortify yourself in some way so the unsafe can be newly sensed as uncomfortable. Uncomfortable is generally a process enhancing state. There are many strategies available once you are aware of being endangered. The awareness will probably first come in the body as uncomfortable. Without this awareness, it is difficult to re-position, and an endless circling around, a stuckness will ensue.

The underlying practice of bodysensing and an exercise to strengthen the bodysense*-

It may be necessary to strengthen the bodysense. Often we have moved away from using this natural and spontaneous mechanism or ability. A daily awareness-strengthening exercise is just to notice the bodysense as it is in our everyday life. How is it when we are driving in our car and someone cuts us off? How is it when our child comes through the door from school? How is it when we hear a favorite piece of music? How is it when we see a sunset? How is it when we are washing the dishes?

You don't need to do anything else with the bodysense. Just notice it. As you begin to do this more and more, you will begin to realize how the bodysense is in your life but just below the awareness level. It isn't only the process stopping bodysense to which we want to be alert. It is essential to note the *healing* as well as the *hurting* bodysense. It is desirable to repeat, strengthen and augment the enhancing condition. It is desirable to heal the hurting conditions.

As an example, criticism is a deadly, process stopping behavior. Feedback can be experienced as a life-giving, process enhancing behavior. Being able to not just re-label but to actually switch from criticism to feedback affects the relationship you have with yourself or someone else. In the discernment exercise, quite often it is being able to get to the healing part of the word group that brings the *righting* with it. This is not merely a reframe. It is a different state of perceiving, being, and/or doing. It is a *re-sensing*, finding the healing, right way that is contained in the problem or issue itself.

Neither the concept of discerning nor that of reframing are novel. We are often with the wounding or hurting condition and the word that captures it. Finding the healing word, discerning between the wounding and healing from the bodysense and then finding how to move to the healthy way brings a dimension of growth with it that is experienced as healing at a very deep level. The sets of words and phrases I have chosen are especially important to me (unsafe vs. uncomfortable, defended against vs. protected by and criticism vs. feedback). Though there are many other sets of words, these are foundational.

The Essentials or the Four Building Blocks, in conclusion-

For me, there needs to be a great consistency between the process I am describing and the way I go about teaching it. The four building blocks provide an almost seamless consistency for me to teach Focusing-based methods. It is an experiential way of teaching an experiential method.

The basis of the process lies in the bodysense and what this bodysense will reveal to us. I use the approach exercise to experientially identify the bodysense. Therefore, my definition was experiential...a unique way of defining. I then use the bodysense to identify the ways we can keep our process and consequently our processing safe. I use the bodysense as the basis for identifying our issues, speaking from the bodysense of our issues and listening from our bodysense to our own and other people's issues. I use the bodysense as the avenue for the storyteller's feedback to insure her being empathically listened to.

Bodysense-based practices are healing practices. It is a gift to be able to teach them in a way that they can be learned.