

## Armstrong, Mary Katherine What Keeps You From Being All That You Are?

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### Abstract:

*This is one of a series of workshops I have prepared recently to explore how we can optimize well being through Focusing. The following notes discuss relevant Focusing theory and present some experiential exercises.*

Focusing recognizes us as unique beings in the universe. By teaching us to tap into our organismic wisdom, we learn to relate to ourselves wisely and compassionately. This organismic wisdom is unknown to most people in our society.

The ideas which follow are grounded specifically in Focusing theory and more generally in sound psychological theory. Focusing is psychologically sound. That makes it safe to relax into. If we are true to the basic principles of Focusing, the wisdom of the body will not allow us to enter places we are not yet ready to encounter.

We live life in our bodies. With every thought we think, every emotion we experience, everything we do, our bodies register and respond. Every moment, in every situation, we are picking up subliminal knowing: knowing that does not reach our ordinary level of consciousness. Generally, our society disregards body wisdom. The intellect is important, but overvalued at the expense of body knowing. That is sad. What we know in our heads is just the tip of the iceberg. Most of our intelligence, including our real wisdom, is embodied from the neck down.

### 1 Gendlin's Blueprint Theory

is important in understanding the role of the body. Gendlin says that the newborn comes into the world with a blueprint, an inward bodily felt knowing of how things should go. This "felt sense" continues throughout our lives.

When a baby is born, the infant is all suck, a mouth attached to a digestive system. If during the first hours, the baby is able to suck and the breast is waiting for it with that clear fluid that is somehow just right for the newborn, then we have a happy baby. The world is a good place when loving arms and milk greet the baby's arrival. The baby is blissful. On the other hand, if something goes wrong - the baby cannot suck - there is no food, no loving arms, the baby is very uncomfortable and experiences the world as a threatening place. In other words, the baby's bodily felt experience is very uneasy.

If our lives and our choices pretty much follow the original blueprint, if we pass through life's developmental stages satisfactorily, we feel comfortable in our body's felt sense. If life does not unfold according to the blueprint, then we experience body signals like tightness in the throat, restriction in our chests, tension through the diaphragm, burning or heavy sensations in the abdomen. The list of possible body signals is endless.

In Focusing we often look at depression or anxiety in a way that may seem strange to non-Focusers. Depression? What's this awful feeling trying to tell me? Anxiety? Is this a warning that I'm not relating to myself in a caring way? Focusing can put us on our right track and keep us there. I'm not suggesting that all depressions or anxieties fall into this category. Some may be genetic, for example. Nor am I suggesting we use the body as a mystical Ouija board which gives us instant answers to complex questions. It may take repeated Focusing sessions to come to our own right answer. And in matters whose outcomes are serious, we would always consider both our rational intellect as well as our body knowing.

## 2 The Affect Bridge

was developed by John Watkins to help people connect irrationally powerful emotions in the present to earlier life experiences, thus enabling them to put the feelings where they belong - in the past. Watkins used hypnosis. The affect bridge works just as well with Focusing. All of us occasionally become unreasonably angry over something much too small to warrant our rage. Or perhaps we get inappropriately upset, sad or intimidated by some petty occurrence. We wonder where all that powerful emotion came from. After all, the situation is not that bad. This is a sign that we are reacting to something which has its roots in the past. Something from long ago is being triggered. It is not about now and there is a way you can work with it, thereby removing one more block to our being as big as we really are. Here is the exercise.

### Exercise

*Think of a situation where you overreact. Something that makes you more upset than you consider rational. Maybe you get unreasonably angry with your children or your spouse. Maybe you are terrified of speaking up for yourself and getting the fair deal you deserve. It does not make sense in your head, but it is very upsetting. Your emotions are paying no attention to what your head is telling you.*

*Place your awareness in the centre of your body. Ask yourself to identify the situation in your life where your emotional response is out of proportion to the reality of the situation. Take a moment to identify such an incident.*

*Once you recall that situation, what is the feeling in your body? It may take a moment or so for the feeling to form. Take your time. When you do have a bodily felt sense about the event that makes you irrationally emotional, use the felt sense as a bridge to carry you back and back in time to when you felt that body sense a long, long time ago. The felt sense will know how to carry you back. Just allow it to do that. It will carry you back to the origin of this intense emotion.*

## 3 The Critic

Cutting the Critic down to size makes the difference between having a peaceful, content, joyful life and living a shrivelled up version of our true selves. The Critic is Focusing's term for what every psychological system recognizes. It is that voice inside us that tells us anything we do could never turn out right; that we are lazy and worthless. Other people can be successful, but not us.

Sometimes the Critic makes itself known through a very uncomfortable felt sense. It might be a heavy thud of a feeling in your middle that makes you feel badly about yourself. Or a sudden, physically felt "whack" inside. Or a sudden headache, accompanied by a feeling of worthlessness.

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Most psychologies believe that these voices or punishing physical feelings represent the authority figures from our early lives; the parents and teachers who were great giants and who held enormous power over us when we were small. Decades later, now that we are the adults in our own world, and those adults who withheld their approval from us - those voices from long ago - exist only in our own minds where they still hold power over us.

Mastery of the Critic is vital to being as big as we are. First we have to recognize it. What does your Critic feel like? Get to know when it is diminishing you. You know it is the Critic because you were feeling just fine and then - in a flash- your self esteem vanished and your world soured. Learning to live with your Critic without being demolished is essential to peace and happiness.

### **Exercise**

To close this discussion, you may wish to take the time to do the following exercise about finding your own happiness. Here it is:

*Pick a time in your life when you recall feeling really good - your self esteem is high, your mood is humming. Evoke that feeling in your body again. Notice where you carry this feeling in your body. It may take a few minutes for it to register. And when it does, it will probably be vague and hazy, not very interesting. But stay with it. It will become clear around the edges. Note the feel quality of it, the physical quality. Stay with the feeling and just hold it gently until you're ready to allow the feeling to spread out to every cell of your being.*

### 4 Bio

*Mary Katherine Armstrong is the former Director of The Centre For Focusing in Toronto, Canada and was a certifying coordinator for the Institute. These days, besides her private practice as a Focusing Oriented Psychotherapist, she is rediscovering the profundity and the promise of Focusing to enable us to live life to the fullest.*

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