



# Focusing in Ireland

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## Focusing and Christian Living

I was introduced to Focusing in the early 1990's by Kathleen Kavanagh when I was director of the Dominican Retreat Centre in Tallaght, Dublin. Kathleen encouraged me to host a Focusing retreat to be given by Marie Cahill from Canada. That was the beginning for me. It was also the first Focusing retreat in Ireland. Over the years I learned and practiced focusing. I looked at ways it could be linked to spirituality and used on various retreats. I found it a wonderful help. It has led me on a path of discovery which leaves me with feelings of surprise and excitement. It has helped me to see the Word as something 'alive and active'.

At present I am in my second year of a Research MA on 'Focusing and Christian Living' at All Hallows College. The Focusing Method has been applied to many disciplines with success, and there is a big interest in Focusing and spirituality. Over the years I became aware of a connectedness between Focusing and Christianity. I often noticed parallels between focusing and scripture passages, focusing and prayer and the celebration of liturgy. I found very little written on the relationship between focusing and Christianity, with one exception, the work of Edwin McMahon and Peter Campbell, founders of the Institute of Bio-Spiritual research in California USA. I felt that more exploration and research needed to be done. Too many questions were surfacing for me: Could Jesus have been a Focuser? Could Jesus have been a Focusing teacher? How aware was he of his felt sense? Did he pay attention to his body feel of a situation? Was his preaching directed to the felt sense of his listeners and if so how did they listen from their felt sense so that they understood and became changed? Can we say Jesus is the perfect Focuser, the model Focuser?

Is there evidence in the Scriptures of what we now call focusing? Could focusing unfold the deeper meaning of the scriptures and one's faith? Could the gospel stories be brought into everyday focusing in a way that enriched the focusing process?

Along the way I had discussed my theories with Peter Campbell, Edwin McMahon and with members of the Focusing Institute in New York, particularly Mary Maguire, Mary Hendricks and Gendlin himself. It was their encouragement that caused me to embark upon the journey I am still on.



In my research I have looked at the difficulty of spirituality today. In focusing we talk of a stuckness that can prevent us from changing and growing, a stuckness that can stop the development of a healthy spirituality. Focusing can help find a way out of our stuckness so that we can move forward, becoming real, and live in a way that is connected with what is true.

I found myself looking at the history of the role of the body as a way to wisdom and knowledge, and from the perspective of the body as a reliable source in knowing God. My search brought me back to the early

philosophers beginning with Plato (427-347 BC), who is probably the first philosopher to debate in depth the physicality of the body and the role of the emotions. He called for a balance between the intellect and the emotions. The intellect and reason were seen as more trustworthy and reliable while the emotions/passions/feelings were looked upon as dubious and not to be trusted. Aristotle was a student of Plato and many would say that he was the first philosopher to make a real contribution to psychology. He stated that the body was not a hindrance in the search for knowledge. He believed we can trust our senses to yield an accurate representation of the environment. He also gave value to dreams.

The coming of Christianity challenged the high ground of reason over the body and feelings. Ed. McMahon and Peter Campbell would say that there are signs that many early Christians were what they would call 'Christian Bio-Spiritual Focusers' or 'in-the-body Christians'. St. Paul was comfortable with this 'in-the-body' spirituality. Paul can be misunderstood when he speaks of the flesh. The word flesh for Paul is not the same as human flesh, but rather humanity. When Paul speaks of the human body he is respectful and gives it strong emphasis.

As the Church changed it became more legalistic and dogmatic in order to bring order to its followers. The body became less appreciated, with emphasis on control and mortifying the flesh. St. Augustine paid much attention to the inner conflicts of the soul and his language at times reflects what we speak about in focusing. St. Thomas Aquinas revived the debate in the Middle Ages. He gave attention to the soul and the psyche and the relationship between the soul and the body. He said that the soul moves the body as does inner feelings. St. Ignatius of Loyola gave attention to the role of feeling in prayer. He exhorted people to 'ponder with feeling' and to pray that they may feel interior knowledge.

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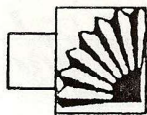
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The debate between reason, the intellect and the passions, emotions and feelings continued down through the centuries. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychology brought much to the debate, especially Freud and Jung. Carl Rogers brought a whole new dimension to inner bodily feeling and the need to listen to that feeling. Eugene Gendlin, a student of Rogers developed what we now possess as the method of Focusing.

At the International Conference last year it was heard how focusing is making a contribution in many areas of life. At that conference I spoke with Buddhist priest Shoji Tsucchie from Japan who uses focusing as part of his Buddhist spirituality. He uses it to clear the space in meditation so that he can be more present in what he calls 'emptiness'. Focusing can bring a richness to Christianity. It can bring out the deeper meaning. At present I am looking at the Gospels in relation to focusing. For an example of Jesus as a Focuser look at Luke 24:13-35, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and see for yourself the focusing connection, especially the shift when their eyes were opened and how 'their hearts' burned.

What I am now doing is only scratching the surface, but what I find is exciting. There is a long way to go, much to be explored. Focusing can bring new felt meaning to words like spirit, soul, heart, Holy Spirit, grace etc., which can facilitate change and growth in spiritual and human development. In my research I am happy to have Jim Bagnell as my supervisor.

As I am still in the process of my research I would welcome any input anyone would like to make in relation to the above area. I would be happy to meet with anyone to explore what works and what doesn't work in relation to Focusing and Christian Living. I would be interested in hearing how focusing has affected one's Christian spirituality. Has it made a difference?

Adrian Farrelly O.P.

## CHECK OUT THE INSTITUTE'S WEBSITE FOR

### RECOMMENDED READING

Interested in reading about the following subjects;

**Psychotherapy, Self help, Healing, Philosophy, Education or Creative Arts.** Why not check out the website of the focusing institute [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org). Click on Store, click on Books and click on Recommended Reading to find a fascinating list of books which discuss, develop, cite or have integrated FOCUSING in some way. Most of them are available through Amazon Bookstore.

The following are some examples:

**I know I'm in there somewhere;** A Woman's Guide to Finding her Inner voice and Living a Life of Authenticity. By Helene G. Brenner, Ph.D. with Laurence Letich.

*"At last! Finally! Yes!" These are my reactions as I hold this beautiful and inspiring, warm, wise, and funny book in my hands. How rare it is that something appears which is so validating of the Focusing viewpoint, yet positioned for such a wide audience! We Focusers tend too much to write and speak for and to each other -- I'm as guilty of this as anyone -- and forget that our messages and methods have wide application for a world of people hungry for ways to understand and heal themselves and their relationships. I Know I'm in There Somewhere delivers on every level: the deep veins of the Focusing philosophy are offered in a nurturing matrix of wisdom, speaking directly to the hearts and souls of women (and by implication men as well) who are yearning to find again the inner guidance to en-spirit their lives. (Ann Weiser Cornell)*

### Food and Healing.

By Ann Marie Colbin

This book suggests using Focusing Questions to Tune into Body Signals about Food.

### Thank You For Being Such a Pain.

Spiritual Guidance for Dealing with Difficult People

By Mark I. Rosen.

### A Community of Writers – A

Workshop course in Writing

By Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff

### Getting Out of Your Own Way:

Unlocking Your True Performance Potential.

By Nancy Shainberg

Nancy is a certified Focusing Trainer. Her chapter "overcoming negativity" is a clear, excellent presentation of the use of focusing with performers to work with their "negative" feelings.

### Writing from the Felt Sense - the Haiku

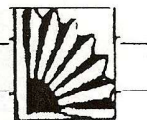
*Pale briar blossoms*

*Keep their secret like Autumn*

*I love blackberries.*

These three short lines make up a Haiku, the 17 syllables poem form that originated in Japan in the 17th century. In terms of its structure the haiku is quite simple; It is divided into three lines, of 5 - 7 - 5 syllables respectively and composed of two phrases. The first phrase tells something about nature or the seasons - about one little moment in time taken from real experience and the second deepens the meanings and feelings associated with it. If we were to think of it in visual terms it's a little like a snap shot freezing a moment in time. Thinking in those terms we can see that Haiku are always there waiting to be noticed,





waiting for us to stop and look and listen to what is happening around us. It is the experience of capturing the moment. That one moment is like a surprise when we say "Ahhh!" or "Oooh!" so the Haiku must be short to recapture that moment.

The simple and rhythmic structure and form of the Haiku have been found to facilitate the process of writing from the felt sense and one day in the Focusing Retreat, Glencomeragh, July 2003 was devoted to Focusing through Haiku.

Having been introduced to the format of Haiku, the participants were invited to walk with the beauty of nature "giving it all a friendly space so that it can tell its story". They were encouraged to write from their felt sense about this experience using Haiku to facilitate this process. The Haiku at the start of the article and the following are some of the many wonderful Haiku which emerged from that day.

Shadows on the grass  
Moving, lacy patterns make  
Artist's paradise.

Blue green yellow and red  
Nestling among hills and trees  
Birds, singing from their cage.

Honeysuckle vines  
Colour the dense forest trees  
I smell memories.

Summer downpour clears  
Mist lingers on Sliabh na mBan  
Hiding her summit

Muggles do not see  
The beings in front of them  
I'm a Muggle too

The valley slumbers  
Mist enfolding it gently  
Soft raindrops falling.

*Monica O'Loughlin*

## Focusing Group in Galway.

The Focusing Group in Galway has been meeting for the last two years. Some years ago there had been a Focusing group in Galway, but it fizzled out after a few years. There are now about ten members. As a group, we try to follow the principles of the original "Changes" group set up by Gendlin and others in Chicago, which has been defined as "a free-of-charge, peer-led group that meets so people can exchange Focusing and listening turns in an atmosphere of safety and mutual respect" (Ann Weiser Cornell).

We begin each meeting with a body-awareness exercise for the group. Sometimes, one of the members presents a topic on an aspect of Focusing to the rest of the group.

We then choose focusing partners by randomly selecting cards — two people with matching cards focus together. About one hour is allocated to focusing/listening, and each focusing partnership decides how they want to spend their time.

After focusing, we meet as a group to share our experiences, exchange books and tapes on focusing, and have a chat. We recently decided to start a small library, and our first book will be "Integrating Spirituality in Counselling: Using the Experiential Focusing Method" (Elfie Hinterkopf).

To encourage new members and to promote focusing in Galway we held a Level One workshop last September, which was presented by Carmel Raftery and Siobhan Tiernan. Twelve people attended the

workshop, and some new members joined the group. We meet on the second Tuesday of the month, in the Suaimhneas Centre in Renmore where we rent two rooms and have access to a kitchen to make tea or coffee. Why Tuesday? you might ask — it's the only day that was available in the centre! We contribute 5 euro for each meeting, which goes towards the rent for the rooms and any other expenses.

We rotate roles, for example, the person who brings refreshments, the person who guides the body-awareness exercise, the person who collects money, and so on. We also decided that a person must know how to focus and listen before joining the group, otherwise, experienced focusers would spend time guiding/teaching, which was not the purpose of the meeting. This is a dilemma, but we hope to attract new members by holding at least one Focusing workshop every year, and by encouraging people to attend other Focusing workshops of the Focusing Association. As a group, we agreed the following principles: mutual respect and equality, privacy, confidentiality, and protecting a safe space.

On a personal level, I find the monthly meetings very rewarding. The social experience is unique and special. After a meeting, I always find that my enthusiasm for focusing has been invigorated. It's great to be part of a group of practising focusers, where we can be present to each other on our focusing journey.

Peter Duffy