

Focusing is where you are in this moment

by Johannes Wiltschko

With this address Johannes Wiltschko opened the Focusing Conference which took place under the auspices of the 18th International Focusing Summer School at Humboldt House, Germany, August 2-16, 1998.

On the Art of Idleness

I have been on vacation for a week and am staying on my old farmstead in Austria - by myself. A few cats lounge idly in the summer heat, bees hum, butterflies flutter noiselessly, and altogether there is a lot of silence.

As usual I get up at about nine o' clock, the sunshine is already bright and hot. Make myself an espresso, produce hot frothy milk with a whisk and sit down in my breakfast corner, which is situated at the east wall of the former cowshed and is overgrown with wild grapes. Sipping my *café au lait*, I reread the pages that I have written the night before.

I have to admit that I feel pretty miserable. Summer School will start in ten days and I'll have to present a paper there. But there is nothing but garbage written on these pages. I would like to finally write a political text about Focusing. Viewed in broad daylight, however, everything sounds trite. It always is the same problem with Focusing: Whatever you write about it is either so sublime that nobody understands it or so trivial that it might be more worthwhile to weed the garden instead.

Exasperated and bored, I put the pages down, rinse last night's few dishes and slump down in front of the TV - it is too hot to do anything outside anyway. For the next three hours I gape at the *Tour de France* and marvel at those poor fellows pedaling away in the heat. But they are at least doing something. I am doing nothing at all.

Ah, thank God, the phone rings. It is Klaus Renn. He gives me the latest enrollment figures for Summer School. Not bad. This should brighten my mood. But it does not. Yesterday a colleague told me that she had attended a meditation seminar and that she met a man there who exclaimed, "You really know Johannes? This guy is enlightened! I saw him for three hours and it seemed that all my existential problems had disappeared." But even this thought does not help, not at all. There is a bit of an inward grin but otherwise everything remains the same.

Klaus says on the phone that he has prescribed for himself to start writing his conference paper at 10:30 tonight and to refrain from drinking a glass of wine beforehand. He is lucky, I think. The whole day two lively kids skip about him, his wife is around, too, and he has already seen three interesting clients. At my place, there is silence. Nothing moves except the thoughts in my head.

Yet I have voluntarily created this boring situation for myself. I live alone voluntarily, I have voluntarily scheduled no client appointments, and I live voluntarily in the countryside. Once again I want to try to *be with myself*, to investigate what it feels like and how it works. I do not want to substitute that part missing in me by work, clients or a partner.

I want to find my own way through occasional moods of loneliness, boredom and fear. I don't want to feel good any longer simply because there is somebody else, because somebody needs me, because I can help somebody, because I am important to somebody.

There is something that I deeply believe, a deeply rooted confidence. Yet I have great difficulties surrendering to this confidence. Richard Baker-roshi has expressed it well:

„The first practice of Zen is to find your *ease*, to find your own joy and your aliveness. The root of the word „ease“ is to put something down, like to put a suitcase down. We need to feel at ease with our basic aliveness. Can you feel at ease just being alive? Without doing anything, without distracting yourself - just with your own aliveness. *If you are not going to enjoy your life, who is?*“¹

Yes, who else? And one day the Zen master walked towards me, looked at me in a friendly manner and said, "*We are already connected.*"

I know it in a way: This world does not consist of manifold individuated beings, neatly separated like canned preserves. No, we are connected with each other, even if we don't sense it, don't know it, and do not act accordingly.

I simply want to feel well because I am alive. I want to feel connected even when I am not doing anything for or with or because of somebody. This is what I want to find and sense in my life. For this goal, and by it, I want to live more and more. That is why I am alone here on my farm now.

The biggest disturbance in this existential experiment is that I have to prepare something decent for the conference during Summer School. When my paralysis bordering on despair reached its peak my friend Klaus Renn gave me the above mentioned phone call. I told him how I was and he asked me, "What do *you* intend to write about Focusing?" Nothing, I silently say to myself. "A few months ago I sent you a text by Hermann Hesse. Its title was *The Art of Idleness*, I believe." I have thrown it away long ago, I mumble inaudibly into my beard.

I have scarcely put the receiver down when I find myself in front of my bookshelf looking for *The Art of Idleness* in Hesse's collected works, which my parents gave me for my 18th birthday and most of which I actually read at that time. But I cannot find the book in question.

While I reshell the seven India paper volumes I *think* that I am frustrated but *sense* well-being. Suddenly there is energy, inwardly it has somehow made "click".

I carry my computer onto the terrace (I have never done this in the seven years that I have been living here!), permit myself to open a fine bottle of red wine (after all, Klaus is more than 200 miles away!) and cheerfully begin to write. Meanwhile the sun has set and the evening air is wonderfully mild.

The Liberation of the Ego - The Rising of „I“

What has brought this *felt shift* about? What made click? The seemingly simple answer is that I had found my „I“². What does this mean?

(1) I have noticed that Focusing is not a *thing* that one can describe from outside,

¹ Baker, R.: *Das, was ist, ist genug (Just now is enough)*. Focusing Journal No. 1. DAF, Würzburg 1998. p 13-15

² I am aware I should write „self“, „me“ or „ego“. But I deliberately want to use the sign „I“, because I don't mean a content, a thing - but „I“.

objectively so to say. Focusing does not happen someplace else, but rather where I am as an experiencing person. Klaus's question, "What do *you* intend to write about Focusing?" was the catalyst that helped me make the transition from merely thinking about this to sensing and knowing it inwardly.

(2) Where I am now, there is boredom, frustration, paralysis, and despair. This is where I am, and nowhere else. This also is where all thinking begins; it is the source of saying and writing. Here and nowhere else Focusing sets in, too.

(3) "The Art of Idleness" is a wonderful symbol, a *handle* for what is important to me at this moment. It is a superbly fitting title for my present attempt at living.

(4) And this also is all that I can say and write about Focusing at this point. Everything else would be "not I", something arbitrary about the subject of Focusing. The very garbage that I have written the previous night.

In combination, these four aspects amount to something that may seem paradoxical but in reality is unitary and represents a true process. For one thing, I have noticed that all these aspects are not separate or interfere with each other but belong together, are already connected : *I feel bored, etc.; I have to prepare something for this conference; I have this project of developing the art of idleness (Alan Watts called this the *wisdom of insecure life*); and I fail continuously in this endeavor. My growing awareness that all this is really happening here and now, that all this essentially becomes one, that it is one experiential reality connected with me and that, hence, I am at the center of all these aspects, leads to a second realization: *I am here*, by myself and separate, alive and free; and this state of being alive is in itself a bubbling wellbeing.*

What seems paradoxical to our language-bound thinking trying to follow this process is that surrendering, relinquishing yourself to what is now (however terrifying that may seem in this moment) allows the „I“ as center, as subject, to *rise*. This paradox is like a gate that I have to pass through - but it is hidden in everyday life.

Now I am back again where Focusing happens; now I am living, experiencing what we call "Focusing". I am *here*, surrounded by fresh air, and *there* is the content: The things I experience (sense, think, desire, search, where I fail,). My „I“ is free, no longer identified with the present content. Only at this point what deserves to be called "relationship" sets in. "Already connected" now means something different than in the usual, everyday state, where I am covered by, and lost in, the things I experience because there is nobody who could feel connected.

I have already written about this a few years ago³: The „I“ is blank; Focusing is the process whereby „I“ identified with content (that I have called an *ego*) is liberated. Focusing is the process whereby the *ego* is set free to become „I“. Now I have found again *from within* myself what we have always been saying in Focusing: *I am not* a content (a problem, for instance) but I *have* a content; I am bigger than the problem.

Oops! - Again and again it takes a long time, sometimes even days, to experience the whole range of meaning the word "Focusing" implies. No matter whether you have been practicing Focusing for twenty years or whether people think you are enlightened.

Now I remember why and what for I need Focusing. From this point of departure I can begin to reflect on Focusing *by means of Focusing*. But not now, maybe tomorrow.

³ In: Wiltshko, J.: *Hilflosigkeit in Stärke verwandeln*. epubli bei Holtzbrinck, Berlin 2018³

Pausing while you pause

The next evening I again sit on my terrace, which, by the way, came into being because I have covered the farm's cesspool with layers of concrete and red marble. So I sit on top of my cesspool. This time it is night, a night with many stars and chirping crickets. I want to continue to write about Focusing.

I have not forgotten that I have to start with myself. So I renew my question: What is Focusing for me - now? Behind me the kitchen door is slightly ajar and the very moment my computer is ready to receive my first sentence I hear some wonderful sounds from the radio inside: *subordinate theme in the 1st Movement of Mozarts Piano Concerto No. 22 in E flat major, KV 482 (Serkin, LSO, Abbado, 1987).*

Do you know what Focusing is? No? Me neither. I have to search for it again. Unexpected, these sounds have surprised me and have sent ripples through me. So my first sentence about Focusing, my first answer is: Focusing is to allow surprises.

Sometimes you are surprised because something unexpected happens. The way it did to me when Wolfgang Amadé Mozart suddenly peeked through the kitchen door. But it does not often happen that something reaches me inwardly. As a rule, life takes its routine, structure-bound course. If nothing is happening externally and I am not bound to do anything the internal clockwork keeps running mechanically. There is not even a crack surprise could penetrate.

Therefore we have to *do* something before Focusing can begin. This doing aims at making surprises possible.

This doing is *pausing*.

This is my second sentence about Focusing: Focusing begins with taking a break, pausing, stopping. To stop with what I am doing, thinking and feeling in this moment; to pause in how I act or react. This is very difficult. It seems as though the world is going to stop and dissolve. Or maybe as though the world keeps turning but I will fall off. Or it may seem thus: If I do not do, think or sense anything nothing exists, including me.

I mean true pausing; not simply replacing something else with Focusing. That does not work. Focusing begins with true, complete, deep and real pausing. In my opinion, this is the reason why we hardly ever do it. And why not everyone is doing it anyway without learning it (from us). This is the reason why so many people who have learned it (from us) also use it only rarely - be it for themselves, in therapy, at work or in life.

This is what we have to consider, I think. Otherwise Focusing remains a board game that one either never plays or that won't work if one does.

So Focusing is about the basic question of pausing. What is it? How does it come about? What obstructs it? In my opinion, the main obstacle is that one does not take this fact seriously. It is an existential fact, a question of life, a question of death. Please, let us explore and practice pausing. Let us develop a culture of pausing. This seems very important to me. Pausing by itself will change many things radically and fundamentally.

The moment of pausing contains the fear of nothingness and the bliss of nothingness. Most often the first precedes the second. Without the fear of nothingness and shame of our own insignificance we usually get stuck in the habitual, the state we are familiar with anyhow. Often we tend to be content with the habitual aspects marking our daily grind. Yet even half a pause convinces us quickly that the habitual is boring and stale. Shocked by this realization, we tend to return eagerly to our routine lives. *Only full and true pausing frees us.*

My experience shows that it is worthwhile to pause fully. There is nothing more

rewarding than this. And my experience shows that one rarely pauses voluntarily. Only crises force us to do so and then, at the latest, it is good to know how to pause, how to focus. That is why our clients often learn Focusing more quickly than we. Unless some calamity turns us into clients ourselves.

This seems to be a universal issue, which is also common in Japan, too. As Ann Weiser Cornell writes in the first issue of the *Focusing Journal*,⁴ „Professor Takao Murase ... brought Gene to Japan in 1979. ... After Gene's visit, Takao began to teach Focusing, although Focusing didn't quite work for him, himself. Then, in 1991, Takao came to a turning point in his life. He came down with a kind of pneumonia so virulent that his doctors told him he had three days to live. Even so, he felt he would survive. He had survived the extreme hardships of World War II in Japan as a teenager, and he was optimistic. But he couldn't sleep. And he feared that if he couldn't sleep, he really would die. So he focused. And finally, when he needed it the most, Focusing worked for him. He focused, and he slept. And he lived. ...“

This seems to be the first step in Focusing: pausing in the moment. In the terminology of Focusing this is called simply *clearing a space*.

What follows? The next step is to pause while you are pausing. You should not pause and immediately return to thinking, doing and sensing. Stay with pausing. You'll notice quickly that this is not so easy. Something is bound to arise, perhaps a new thought, a new impulse, a new phantasy.

Pausing while you pause at first simply means that you should not jump on to this new thought, that you should not follow this new impulse and should not get lost in this new phantasy. Rather, the aim is to *take note* of all that is occurring.

In old Chinese stories, one frequently encounters the wonderful metaphor that *you do not need to invite your thoughts for tea*. If your thoughts come by you don't need to invite them for tea. Don't resist them; let them be but don't give them further sustenance.

When you notice your thoughts so that they become a „something“ which you are aware of, there must be *more* than thoughts (impulses, feelings, phantasies, etc.). A „something“ needs to be surrounded by something in order to be perceived as concrete and special. Letters only assume meaning if they are printed on something. You only notice the material they are printed on if you don't read them. The next step in Focusing is to become aware of the white paper surrounding the letters. This white paper is called *felt sense*.

Felt sense is that that is also present. It is that we notice when we pause while pausing. The customary thoughts, feelings, impulses and phantasies wash by; the felt sense remains. This is what we are going to dwell in now.

This is also difficult because what happens before the felt sense can arise drags us along and away, again and again. It is like a train tempting us to jump on. Pausing in this repeated process of jumping on allows us to leave the train. Instead of "dwelling" with the felt sense, I sometimes prefer the expression "continuously returning" to it. Dwelling means to keep returning to the felt sense. Focusing means staying with, or in, a felt sense.

Felt sense is the sensed-but-yet-not-knowned, without forms, without words, without signs, something that is behind the signs and *radiates through* them. It is beyond what we already know and what we already can think, sense, express and do. It is the *new*.

⁴ Focusing Journal No. 1. DAF, Würzburg 1998. p 12. Original in The Focusing Connection. Vo. XV, No. 3. Berkeley 1998

We depend on this „new“ as much as we need air for breathing. Without it life is reduced to mere surviving. That is why people see therapists. That is why organizations seek new modes of management. That is why we meditate. That is why we search for novel ways of expression, in thinking and philosophy, too. Creativity is the river, and our new experience is its tributary. These are the overarching themes of this conference.⁵

Dwelling with the felt sense allows the new experience to become tangible, perceptible, manageable and actable. It may translate into action. But this does not always happen. Then Focusing means to stay with the new and as yet intangible, or rather, to keep returning to it: when waking from a dream; when getting stuck in our daily and lifelong so-called problems; and after our never changing fights with those we in fact love most. And being ready for the step which may occur in this process of dwelling, right now or some other time. This is what we call *felt shift*.

If we get a felt shift that takes the shape of an expressible thought and doable doing, an action, we call it Focusing. If we do not get it in this shape we should *also* call it Focusing. The mindful and unintentional act of dwelling often brings about something which we again cannot express. Martin Heidegger might call it a change of "Befindlichkeit" (inner mood, inner state). Something has changed: our mood, our state of mind, our existence (Dasein). We don't have to be able to express this with words. But something in our perception has altered: It is deeper, more real, more open, more liberated, truer and more present. There is more of me and more of everything. Please, let us appreciate that this is something valid and real - also in our clients. They do not always need to talk and tell us about the inner processes our glorious intervention may have triggered.

What I am trying to express here with funny words is traditionally called "getting a handle", "symbolizing" or "making explicit" in Focusing. Something novel and unexpected comes about. No matter what its content may be, this process manifests as joy, aliveness and a zest for living. "A step", we usually comment soberly.

These steps, steps which we sense, come in a very special order: They do not follow logically from the preceding. But neither do they represent an arbitrary movement devoid of continuity with what went before. Steps build on, extend and continue the previous experience. Gene Gendlin calls this *carrying forward* and his term for the order which becomes sensible in this process is *order of carrying forward* or *responsive order*.

One might say that Focusing means to watch the order of carrying forward in progress. One might also say that it means to observe the *Tao* which works without necessarily being noticed. One might also say that it means to practice phenomenology. Each step expresses an element of the universe of things as yet unspoken and continues the entire process.

Dwelling where the Thought-About Manifests

The next morning I sit again in my breakfast corner, sip my *café au lait* and leaf through our new DAF brochure. I notice an odd feeling taking hold of me: Supposedly Focusing helps to enhance creativity; it eases the process of taking decisions and reduces stress; it is a method of thinking; it has something to do with meditation and spirituality; it is connected with movement and dance, writing and painting and sundry situations in

⁵ The conference had the following foci: *Philosophy* (Klaus Renn and Prof. Dr. Hermann Schmitz), *Spirituality* (Zentatsu Richard Baker-roshi), *Management* (Kevin Flanagan, Manfred Sickert and Margot Weibold), *Creativity* (Dr. Sybille Ebert-Wittich, Frank Lippmann and Dr. Mathes Seidl).

daily life; it can be applied in management. Not to mention its importance for self-help, partnership and relationship, counseling and psychotherapy. And the latter even includes special Focusing dream and body work, etc., etc.

Is all this make-believe? Are we merely trying to sell Focusing to as many people as possible? Or perhaps we are not so sure after all what Focusing is? Is it perhaps merely a shapeless and diffuse something that will go with anything? Is Focusing everything? Or is it just any random post-modern phenomenon?

I am starting to wonder how something as small and seemingly insignificant as the thing we call Focusing can have so much meaning for so many areas of life. Perhaps you are sometimes surprised by this as well. And probably you know how difficult it is to convey to other people what this little something called Focusing is about and why it seems so important for your life and work. Maybe it is just a nebulous something after all?

What is it about Focusing, I ask myself, that makes it applicable for so many different areas of life? Why are we of the opinion that it can bring about useful and sensible developments in all these areas? During the next few days we will be able to explore this question in some of these fields, that is, in philosophy, spirituality, organization and management, and creative expression. And if we can find answers for these four big fields we also should be able to discern the principle that makes Focusing so versatile.

Beside the question, "Why and what for do *you* need Focusing?" I would also like to raise the following query: "What is it about Focusing that makes it applicable for so many different areas of life?" As we now set out to find answers, individually and as a group, we'll hopefully remember that answers will come into being with and by Focusing, by means of our thinking and sensing attention to those things we already feel but don't know yet.

Of course, I have also discussed this question with Klaus, and it occurred to us that the great philosopher Eugene Gendlin has come up with a simple definition. To Gendlin, Focusing is first of all a method of thinking, a practical phenomenology (we can also omit the word "practical" because phenomenology is always practice) and only secondly a self-help method and only thirdly a central aspect of psychotherapy. He writes, "I define Focusing as the time one stays with something than one can sense bodily without knowing what it is."

And he also says, "Focusing opens up many different things. There are many small steps of change, and one finds out a lot but I do not call this Focusing any longer. It already is what comes about by means of Focusing."⁶

Suddenly it dawned on us that there is something ingenious about this modesty. The immense value of the shortness and simplicity of Gendlin's statement derives from the fact that *this is all there is* to Focusing. Everybody can do it, no matter what his religious or political conviction may be. Focusing can be done in any situation, with any topic, in any profession and any routine situation. And practicing it provides answers for individual situation-bound needs, be it a fitting decision, a fitting artistic expression, a fitting step towards proper life. Gene Gendlin does not say *what* exactly is appropriate for you, me or anybody. He does not say *what* sort of content is true. We don't have to say this either.

While proofreading the first issue of our new biannual publication, the *Focusing Journal*, I noticed that I had chosen two texts that express similar ideas. Gene Gendlin writes about Carl Rogers: „What Rogers discovered could be observed by anyone, he said, if

⁶ Gendlin, E.T., Wiltshko, J.: *Focusing in der Praxis*. Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2016⁶, p. 13

one simply tried out responding to people with the reflective listening that he taught. He asked people to adopt his method only as an „operational hypothesis“, as he phrased it. You didn't need to agree with him; you didn't need to believe these assumptions. You needed only to try out responding to someone by listening and saying back the crux of what the person intended to communicate. If you did just only this, *you would soon find all the rest for yourself.*⁷

And Richard Baker, who will present a paper the day after tomorrow, writes in the Focusing Journal: „As a disciple of Buddhism you study the arising of consciousness, how it forms and how it functions. You can call this Buddhism, but it is actually a kind of *inner science*. It's a knowledge by experiencing and certainly not limited to buddhism. Zen practice is not just adept practice, it's also a *direct practice* for everyone. Zen has developed direct practice because it allows you to teach Buddhism without simplifying it. If you practice meditation a few times a week and if you do nothing but try to find your ease, to see if you can be at ease, *all of Buddhism will flow from this*. And this will be a gate that will reach deeply into your life.“⁸

The entire "inner science" will flow from the experience of meditating. All it takes is sitting and observing what happens inwardly on its own accord. It takes a short period in which we direct our attention to what we are feeling inwardly, what is nonverbal, not yet defined by language. The Zen master calls this *signless space*, I call it "what we feel but do not know yet", what extends beyond form, in short, the felt sense.

It makes me happy to think that we have found something similar by means of, and within, Western thinking: Focusing serves as a *vehicle* for the "inner science", as a method of thinking, true thinking.

Martin Heidegger has expressed this phenomenon in his strangely wonderful language: „Until now we have not entered into the essential nature of thinking in order to dwell in it. (p 140) ... Dwelling is the basic character of being, corresponding to which mortals are.“ (p 161) „What most calls for thought shows itself in that we do not yet think. (p 130) ... We learn thinking in paying attention to what calls for thought. (p 130) ... In this assertion it is pointed out that the thought-provoking shows itself. (p 131) ...The thought-provoking is that which gives one to think ... The thought-provoking is not at all first posited by us. It is never based only on our representing it. (p 132) ... The basic character of thinking until now is the representing ... (p 141) the representing. (p 142)“⁹

Dwelling where the thought-about manifests, rather than mentally shifting around things we can imagine anyway, this is yet another beautiful way of expressing what is called Focusing. Thinking arises when we dwell in the felt sense. It is our foremost goal to accept this act of dwelling as an „basic character of being“.

The practices of Focusing, meditation and thinking have a common point of reference. During the next few days we might explore together what it is. In any case therapy, spirituality and philosophy are "already connected" deeply within each and every one of us. *Healing Thinking - Bodily Meditation*, this is the title of the book I think I might be able to write now. Its subtitle would be something along the lines of, "Focusing: A path to the beginnings of healing, spirituality and philosophy".

⁷ Gendlin, E.T.: *Würdigung und Problematik der Humanistischen Psychologie*. Focusing Journal 1. DAF, Würzburg 1998 (orig: *Celebrations and problems of Humanistic Psychology*. The Folio, Vol. 13, No. 1, Chicago 1994)

⁸ Baker, R.: *Das, was ist, ist genug (Just now is enough)*. Focusing Journal 1. DAF, Würzburg 1998. p 13-15

⁹ Heidegger, M.: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Neske, Pfullingen 1954. Quotes in English by E.T. Gendlin, *Dwelling*. In R.C.Scharff (Ed.), Heidegger conference proceedings. Durham: The University of New Hampshire, 1983

Meanwhile, here on my farm, my bottle of red wine is almost empty and night has fallen again. This book will have to wait and, like all the books that I have been meaning to write, may remain unwritten. But this is not really important. More important is that all of us here - everyone for himself and together with the others - use Focusing to continue working on the order of carrying forward. This means to let it take effect through each and every one by practicing Focusing.

*(The revised version of this text in German in: Johannes Wiltshko:
„Ich spüre, also bin ich! – Nichtwissen als Quelle von Veränderung“, epubli bei Holzbrinck, Berlin 2017²)*

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