

WHY I VALUE FOCUSING PARTNERSHIP by Emily Agnew

What is focusing partnership?

In focusing partnership, two people take turns keeping each other company in a special way.

One person, *the Focuser*, turns inward to invite and make space for what Eugene Gendlin, who was the first to identify and teach the process he named Focusing, calls “the felt sense.” The felt sense is the whole feel, flavor, or sense of a situation or issue, as experienced in the body through feelings, sensations, images, thoughts, knowings, gestures, memories, and more. As the Focuser offers attentive space to this felt sense, what was fuzzy, vague, and still implicit becomes clearer, more known, and more explicit. The Focuser may move from confusion to clarity, from pain to relief or peace, or from stuckness to action.

The other person, *the Companion*, lends the spaciousness of their attention to the Focuser, creating a bigger, clearer field of awareness in which this whole-body sense can form and shift. This attentive presence is the most important aspect of companionship, so being a Companion often means just silently staying with the Focuser. If the Companion does speak, it is with the intent of supporting the Focuser in staying with the felt sense in order to access their embodied wisdom. Unlike a typical, “normal” conversational listener, the Focusing Companion refrains from offering opinions, judgments, information, personal experience, or sympathy. And the Companion refrains from any comment on the content of the Focuser’s session after the session is over, unless the Focuser explicitly requests it or offers permission.

What I value about focusing partnership

Trust and learning

My several partners are from different countries. They have very different styles. Some are men; some are women. But there’s the same deep trust with each one, and it has grown over time. I’ve observed this growth can be scientifically tracked by counting the number of belly laughs per session, since spontaneous humor, for me, is a sure sign of comfort and trust. We’ve covered the gamut of topics and feelings: relationship issues, areas of stuckness, impending decisions, vague yearnings, excitement, physical pain, feelings of expansive peace and joy, intense stress, physical pain, grief, rage. We can tell each other honestly what is working and what isn’t. Because I trust that, I feel free to experiment and try things. Because I try things all the time, I’ve learned a lot. And the more I learn, the better I’ve gotten as a companion.

Safety and synergy

I’ve found that the Focusing partnership agreement of “no comment” (which includes no judgment, no sympathy, no sharing of related issues) frees me up to go into tough places in myself. On the other hand, I when I have talked to my partners

afterwards about things that came up in my Focusing, or theirs, startling synergies have arisen. The key is having choice and handling our conversations in a mindful way.

A big space

Through their presence, my Focusing partners create a field of shared awareness much deeper and wider than I can create by myself. By myself, I've got a little TV tray onto which I can empty out all my "stuff" to be sensed and known. Working with one of my partners, I have a whole dining room table. It makes it way easier to feel, sense, perceive patterns, and stay present with whatever comes up.

Coming out of my self

On the other side, as a Companion, I find I lose myself in the best possible way. I get out of my own head. For me, Companionship is like surfing: constant subtle adjustments in service of staying with my partners as they focus. It's pleasurable, even joyful, and with the right kind of presence, I can do it even with a lot of my own stuff going on in the background. Realizing this unshackled me from a limiting belief that I had to be like the Dalai Llama internally before I could be present with someone else.

And that is a big relief, since my Dalai Llama project isn't showing signs of being finished in this lifetime.

A model for intimacy

My Focusing partnerships have provided me with a model of intimacy that I can apply in my relationships with others. The idea of exchange of meaning wasn't new to me, given my training in Nonviolent Communication©. But engaging in focusing partnership has greatly refined my skill and understanding of how to know myself enough to share myself, and how to meet another person right where they are.

I imagine that communication is like weaving cloth at a loom. By choosing to interact, we take our places together in front of the loom. By communicating with me, you send a thread my way. If I choose to respond, I grab the shuttle carrying the thread, and I send it back. But let's say I was distracted, and I didn't really grasp your meaning. Or I don't feel comfortable responding honestly to what you said. I send back a thread that doesn't match yours in length or quality, and the weaving goes no further. It's as if I dropped the thread. The fabric of our relationship is not strengthened by the exchange. Many of our daily interactions may consist of these weak or dropped threads, as most people are not conscious of the way their communication increases or decreases connection with others.

Now imagine a Focusing partnership. You, as focuser, express something you are experiencing in this moment. Already we are weaving cloth of a higher quality, because the truth of what is actually happening in you or in me, in this moment, is the strongest, most beautifully textured, vividly colored thread. I receive what

you've sent me, then I reflect back the essence of it, returning the thread to you in a way that invites you to sense further. This returning stimulates a new round of expression in you. Perhaps the same color thread: a, "Yes! That's it exactly!" Or perhaps a subtly different shade: "Actually, it's more like...." We are engaging in a mutual creation, and a deeper connection of great beauty, strength and suppleness is the result. Focusing partnership principally emphasizes intimacy with myself as the focuser, with the support of my companion. I've learned that this self-intimacy is the raw material of my authenticity in relationships.

Equality and sustainability

I love that my Focusing partnerships are an equal exchange between me and my partners. Support from a trained, licensed therapist has been a lifeline for me in the past, particularly as I went through a difficult divorce. But there's something about Focusing partnership that feels like home to me. The quality of mutual support is one key to that.

Another key is the financial sustainability. For me, Focusing regularly with a partner is like exercising or eating well: it is part of a healthy emotional life. If there's a lot going on in my life, I can schedule as many focusing sessions in a week as I need to, without worrying about cost, since our currency of exchange is Focusing companionship, not money. But there is more to it than my finances. For years now, a voice in me has been saying, "This is great you can afford to pay for therapy when you need it, and for supplements, organic food, health insurance...but what about others less fortunate financially than you? Is it right that this is only accessible to people with certain financial resources—resources the great majority in the world don't have?" Focusing partnership has highlighted my values of integrity, caring, and interdependence. My gratitude for all I have has been mixed with a troubled feeling, knowing that the way the world currently operates, these things are out of reach of a majority of people. When I Focus with my partners, I have none of that uneasiness. I know anyone who wants to can access the resource of Focusing partnership, with the minimal initial investment of a book or some kind of class.

An elegant solution

Focusing partnership represents the kind of exchange of value that I'd like to have in every area of my life: free, flexible, mutual, synergistic, universally accessible. Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." For me, Focusing partnership is a wonderful way to live that principle: an elegant tool in service of connecting with and contributing from my highest integrity, moment by moment. To know myself well enough to act from a place of integrity, to know others intimately, to foster creativity and growth, and to do all that in a sustainable way: that, for me, is "being the change."