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### **Focusing comes to Cambridge Meeting (Quakers)**

In the early part of the 90's I started a Focusing "Changes" group at a Quaker meeting in Cambridge, MA. A "Changes" group is a regular gathering where people practice Focusing partnership. In a Focusing partnership one person does Focusing while another does empathic reflective listening. Then they change roles. Focusing itself is a process of listening carefully and deeply to oneself so the two roles (Focuser and Listener) are intricately related to each other. A "Changes" group is self-directed and no one receives a fee. This article is written 5 years after the group stopped meeting (1992). My purpose is to make a record of this event so that others interested in bringing Focusing to Quaker meetings, can benefit from my experience.

I organize this story into four parts--1) the preparation that led to the group's formation; 2) the training in Focusing and the group's structure in its early stages; 3) issues in the group's development and its termination; and, at the end, 4) an evaluation of the whole process with ideas on how to proceed in the future.

#### **PART 1--PREPARATION**

I had been a member of a Changes Group in Cambridge, MA. It was known as the "Sunday Night Group" or sometimes as the "Center for Supportive Community". It was one of the most successful Changes Groups in the world in terms of longevity, training of Focusing teachers, and establishment of spin-off groups. I had been teaching Focusing in that "Sunday Night Group".

I was a member of Cambridge Friends Meeting (Quakers call their church, a "Meeting") and of its Oversight and Fellowship committee. The committee was charged with caring for individuals with special needs in the meeting and for fostering fellowship generally within the meeting. The nature of Cambridge Meeting was such that there were usually more needs than time and people to meet them, and fellowship was a bit challenging in a highly diverse group with the typical problem of shortage of time.

I was struck by the fit between Focusing and Quaker process and I thought a Quaker Changes group would be a great combination. I mentioned the idea at a committee meeting but the response was lukewarm so I didn't push. About a year later there was lots of general discussion within the meeting about the need for more meaningful fellowship between meeting members generally. That issue also included the need for more psychological support of members of the meeting. So the Oversight and Fellowship Committee was charged with responding to that issue. At a meeting where that issue was discussed, I spontaneously realized that the idea of a Quaker Changes Group could be exactly responsive. So I mentioned the idea and it had a warm response. The committee asked me to make a formal presentation about carrying the idea further. I learned how incredibly different it was to be proposing a "neat" idea versus proposing a solution to a current problem.

In thinking about the presentation I would make, it occurred to me that the Quaker tradition was extremely strong spiritually and politically but not as strong psychologically. This is not to say that Quakers are weak on the psychological side, just that the intrinsic spiritual and political strength of the Friends is often immediately apparent to a newcomer. Could Focusing strengthen this modern need of a Quaker community for psychological support?

Within this framework I made my presentation. My main point was about the fit between Focusing and Friends' process. These include the following ten areas:

1) Focusing in general and Focusing "changes groups" in particular are very **egalitarian**. A changes group can be defined as fee-less Focusing exchange between peers. In the classic Quaker meeting, there is not a specific minister, everyone is considered a minister, and the members wait in silence for someone to be moved to speak. Such is the presence of the Quaker egalitarian value. The egalitarian value in Focusing and Quakers is a natural link.

2) Friends' process and Focusing are both based on **simple** ideas **with** great realms of **complexity** coming from the elaboration of the simple ideas. Both approaches have a high degree of emergent consistency and a high tolerance for variation. This makes for a natural fit in this aspect between Focusers and Quakers.

3) In Focusing the process can be seen as **waiting** for the felt sense. For Friends, they wait to be moved by direct spiritual experience. Even though, the waiting of Friends is much longer, that emphasis on waiting is common ground. Might the two kinds of waiting enrich each other?

4) Interiority in Focusing becomes the ground for deepening and then when the shift has happened, there is a new implying with new possibilities. Quaker prayer in silence brings a deepening in **interiority**. That new interior space coming from prayer is a fundamental process for living and gaining clearness. Looking for a better interior space as a way to live forward, is common to both processes.

5) In Focusing the **listening** is as important and sometimes as healing as the Focusing. The listening is non-judgmental. The Friends' business meeting process is based on consensus and it requires careful listening to find the places of agreement. In a Quaker meeting one listens carefully to the ministries of people speaking rather than preparing one's own testimony. A primary Quaker tenet is answering to that of God in each person. This contributes to a non-judgmental listening. Nonjudgmental listening is common to both approaches.

6) In each approach there is an emphasis on the **here and now**. One doesn't stand to speak in meeting because they decided to 5 minutes ago. Inspiration comes in the moment. In Focusing we can only get deeper into the felt sense by being with it in the moment, not staying with a fixed image of it, but with the thing itself.

7) Quakers subordinate doctrine to spiritual experience. Focusing similarly subordinates doctrine and its philosophy to the emergent clarity. In fact both Quaker process and Focusing process share in this **subordination to experience** and in building that subordination into the fundamentals of the process.

8) Quakers revere **silence**. Focusing is known for its silent pauses--sometimes lasting more than a minute. Both approaches value **silence**.

8) Focusing is not a panacea with a prescription for each dilemma of life, but instead leads you to discover how to respond in the **complexity of the moment**. Quakers also shy away from standard rules and prescriptions; Quakers give great value to the complexity of the moment and draw inspiration from their "in the present" spiritual experience.

9) Focusing and Quaker process are both known for **gentleness**.

10) Focusing shares the general **liberalness** of Quakers, and it also shares a hesitancy to go too far in defining that specifically.

These 10 areas are places where Focusing and Quaker process "fit" well. I am not claiming that they are the same in these areas, just that they go together well.

When I explained to the committee how a "Changes" group works with its emphasis on trading turns there were several members who knew of Reevaluation Co-Counseling (aka "RC", "co-counseling"). Is this the same or different, they asked. How different?

I had been around RC enough to know that some people really liked it and some people really disliked it. How could I be respectful of both viewpoints in making distinctions?

My own knowledge of RC was that it had a similarity with Focusing in the exchange of turns and in using active listening descended from Carl Rogers. However, whereas Focusing relies on listening to oneself RC relies on various counseling techniques. In a Focusing partnership, the listener does not typically intervene or take responsibility for the process of the focuser. Thus, the listener does not add or use or suggest various techniques. My understanding of RC was that the listener did intervene with suggestions much like a counselor or therapist. In this sense a Focusing partnership is very **distinct** in its **process** from most psychotherapy and counseling. It is not just in the exchange of roles that it is different. You are not acting as an amateur therapist in Focusing partnership. Focusing partnership is not a peer version of counseling. I have understood that these aspects are different from RC.

I have also understood that RC emphasizes emotional catharsis. Focusing makes a clear distinction between emotional catharsis and "felt meaning" and emphasizes the latter. "Felt meaning" may include emotion but emotion can also obscure and hide the subtlety of meaning which is so important to the spontaneous forward steps that are so important to Focusing. I have heard some complaints from people who have tried RC and have not liked it, that it can have a cultish tendency. I have rarely heard this complaint from those exposed to Focusing. (See [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) for extensive information about the philosophy behind and research about Focusing).

The committee was concerned about any dangers of Focusing. I said it was quite safe but not perfectly safe and significantly safer than RC because of RC's emphasis on catharsis which can be tricky.

The committee was concerned that people coming to the Focusing group might start processing psychologically in a worship meeting. This is a common problem that Quaker meetings experience when psychologically inclined newcomers confuse a Quaker meeting's silence and attentive listening with group therapy. I assured the committee that I understood this issue and that the Focusing--Quaker linkage would be taught in a way that would not confuse the clarity of Quaker worship.

The committee also wondered about more needy people. Would they be able to survive in the Focusing group? I acknowledged that some particularly needy people could have difficulty feeling a part of the group. I agreed to make inclusion of particularly needy people a goal of the project.

Zack Boukydis, a Focusing Coordinator/Psychologist and a founder of the Cambridge Sunday Night Group, had been renewing his interest in the Quaker tradition and he agreed to accompany me to the committee meeting and to help. The committee was very pleased to hear from an outside expert, and Zack's articulation and presence were very helpful.

The committee deliberated carefully. Someone knew of a meeting where RC had come in and then threatened to take over the meeting and ultimately it had fostered a tension in the Meeting. They wanted Focusing to be a positive unifying force in the Quaker community. They approved my plan of announcing a few introductory 2 hour sessions in the newsletter and then starting a full training. All training was done for free as I saw this as simpler and as my contribution to the meeting.

## PART 2--TRAINING

The introductory sessions were quite essential to the whole process. One might think that simply offering something for free that one usually charges for would be enough to attract a good-sized group. But, in fact, people need an easy way to gain some familiarity with what is being offered before they will come, free or not.

The second introductory meeting went much better than the first. I think this is common. Adapting a Focusing presentation to a particular subculture like Quakers takes time and practice even when one knows the subculture well.

The success of the introductory sessions allowed me to start the training with 17 or 18 people. I emphasized people coming to the training with a commitment rather than just trying it out. I sometimes had an assistant. We had 4 hour workshops on the weekends 3 times with a 2 hr weekly meeting in between each. Then we stayed with the 2 hour weekly meetings. After 4 or 5 more weeks the group was doing well on its own which is unusual after only 25-30 hours of training. Training was greatly facilitated by the Quakers' readiness to pause as a focuser and wait, and their valuing of listening. Quaker commitment was evident in great attendance and in most people doing the optional reading of either Gendlin's Focusing or McGuire's Building Supportive Community or both. The training went quickly and easily.

All of the original members completed the initial 20 hour training process. A few dropped out leaving a group of 14 for the ongoing weekly meetings. This is a low attrition rate compared to other trainings I know of and have done. For months in the ongoing meetings we typically had 90 percent of the members present (12). This percentage was also quite high compared to the Cambridge Sunday Night Group where more like 40 or 50 percent would come each week.

In the weekly 2 hour meetings we continued the training with small 20-40 minute talk/demonstrations I would give on various aspects of Focusing. Then, we would go into our adapted Quaker Changes format.

There were 4 adaptations we made to the Cambridge Sunday Night Group style of a "Changes" group:

- 1) Rather than beginning with 3 minute (no talk back) turns for each person who wanted to take them, we began with silence that would last a set time--depending on the numbers. People who wanted to speak out of the silence--as in a Quaker meeting--would do that, but we agreed the speaking would be more oriented toward psychological issues which they might work on in their dyads and triads which we would subsequently move into. I can't remember ever having a problem of someone talking too long or not having enough time for everyone in this opening "whole group" space.

- 2) Our way of dividing up into dyads and triads also was different from the Sunday Night Group where each person stated their preferences until there was consensus. Each week we would start with a different person and let them choose their triadic or dyadic partners if it were ok with the others and also if it supported the general principle of working with everyone periodically. Then if the remaining number was still high (7 or more) a second person would pick, again somewhat according to whom they had not worked with recently. When the group was now smaller, as the first and second dyad/triads had left, a simpler process of "I haven't worked with you recently" would happen very quickly and informally and people would go to do their turns.

- 3) In the teaching sections I would adapt some of the Focusing processes in a Quaker direction. A shift question (a step in the Focusing process) was added as an option to the familiar ones of: "what makes it so \_\_\_\_", or what does it need?". The new question/suggestion was "Ask God what it needs and wait?"

In listening training I added to the typical emphasis on being non-judgmental. I used the familiar Quaker "answering to that of God in everyone" as a way to create open space for the turn. I.E. "can you answer to that of God in the person you are listening to?" We were looking for Quaker innovations and finding them.

### PART 3--ISSUES

I went to almost all the meetings for the first 6-8 months except for a retreat that I could not make that the group spontaneously planned. There were excellent reports around the meeting in general and I decided to train another group. Zack Boukydis, who had helped in the initial proposal to the committee was excited about the kind of participation and outcomes the first group was having and he joined me in doing the training for this second group.

The **2nd group** had 8 people. It had a similar success in training. It stayed separate from the first group for a while, but it did have more attrition leaving smaller numbers which eventually led to its merging with the other group, which at this point, many months after beginning, was getting smaller.

Boukydis had advised me that combining 2 smaller groups could be difficult. The resulting much larger group often quickly contracts to a size only slightly larger than before. Indeed this was what happened despite my attempts to facilitate an integration.

A **small rift** developed at a retreat the group organized independently which I was unable to attend. The rift had many aspects but one aspect had arisen before the retreat when people asked if they could practice on their own apart from the weekly group and I said, "of course". In fact independent Focusing partnerships are a strong part of the Focusing tradition and often Focusing groups support the development of these independent partnerships. One triad had such a good time when they practiced independently that they formed one of these partnerships and continued meeting weekly in addition to the group meeting. One person wanted to practice with them but they said no.

That person was upset and turned to me and the group. The group and I were gentle and careful. The person feeling "left out" had been very enthusiastic about Focusing and had been a leader in the group's development. As the discussion continued, I did support the principle of freedom of choice in one's own time away from the group and supported the development of ongoing partnerships which are so much a part of Focusing. In my own mind, I regarded her protest that it violated Quaker principles of inclusiveness as an appropriation of Quaker ideology to her own psychological issues though I avoided saying that. The person and a couple of others did stop coming at that time, but the rift did not carry into the meeting or become a wider place of contention.

I would handle this problem differently now. Focusing does carry some ideology. It is bound to conflict with the modus operandi of any organization even a very compatible place like a Quaker meeting. When the conflict does manifest, even if dominated by an individual's psychological make-up we should be very attentive and make a lot of room for the conflict. Only then can the combination of Focusing + \_\_\_\_\_ (in this story, "Quaker Process") go forward with that so important ingredient of enthusiasm.

One of the issues when the groups merged was which group's time would become our **standard meeting time**. A group that has developed gradually has a sense of leadership which helps it resolve such seemingly simple issues. The outcome of the meeting time left one more leader isolated from the group even though that person could still come occasionally.

A **construction project** at the meeting took away our accustomed meeting place which had become a source of comfort. We eventually found a house a block away from the meeting where we could meet but it was never quite the same. Often the house owner could not be present and the claiming of the space never quite happened.

The **loss of informal leadership** happened in the rift, in the time change, in the place change, and in natural ways (one person married into a large family and no longer had time). The

redevelopment of leadership was difficult without a sustaining force and the periodic addition of new people.

I was unable to continue **my leadership** as consistently as before. I was transitioning from Focusing being my avocation to it being more a part of my work. My practice as a psychologist was growing. On top of all this, I started an intense long distance relationship which eventually led to my marrying and moving 40 minutes north of Cambridge. I began coming to the Meeting only once a month and then eventually only once every quarter.

In the transition to becoming a professional Focusing teacher, I knew I needed to charge for the training I did. But this was difficult to do with a group that was accustomed to my **training them for free**. It was also difficult to think of going back to the committee and changing our understanding--I hardly had time to stay involved with the committee. In the future I would explore ways to charge for the initial training but keep the training very affordable. Perhaps the Meeting could co-sponsor the initial training.

The "**needy people**" issue did come up. There were some people who were clearly less sophisticated, less easy to like and harder to be comfortable with than the rest of the group. The Quaker value for inclusiveness enabled the group to hold on to these persons better than perhaps any other group I have seen. However, some of the women did not feel so safe with a man who was not so easily likable and that affected the "dividing up" into dyad and triads some. I don't know what ratios of "needy people" to "regular" can work.

Despite some of the obstacles the group lasted some 18 months. The last year was sustained independently with little leadership on my part. This is a testimony to the ability of "Changes" groups **to continue on their own** despite naturally occurring difficulties.

One **independent partnership** came out of the group and continued regularly for years and sporadically in the present. The two people regularly thank me for that gift.

A few years later one person entered my teacher training program, and became an excellent Focusing teacher. She has incorporated Focusing into her drawing workshops.

The group had a **great reputation** in the meeting as a whole. I was invited to present at a Retreat of the Social Witness committee and my presentation on "Focusing with Social/political Projects" was well received.

There was lots of **gratitude** expressed in many settings. Many people would come up to me who were not part of the group and tell me how valuable it was for people and for the meeting. The committee was pleased in general and especially with our holding on to the "needy" people.

#### PART 4--EVALUATION

- 1) Being experienced with Focusing "Changes Groups" helps with the planning and the success.
- 2) Being involved in the Meeting, presenting the idea, and looking for the explicit need that Focusing can meet led to a wonderful situation where the Meeting structure was very behind the process.
- 3) Starting with a large group--15 or 20 is important. Several introductions are necessary both for people to come and be exposed, and for the Focusing teacher to learn to adapt Focusing to the particular Meeting.
- 4) Starting a second group requires the same size as the first group, because merging of groups is a problem to be wary of. It is better to plan on there being two groups rather than one renewing the other.
- 5) Finding the places of commonality and fit between Focusing and the Meeting is exciting and begets enthusiasm.
- 6) Distinguishing Focusing from RC (Reevaluation Co-counseling) or some other psychologically oriented process that the Meeting is familiar with (e.g. Marriage Encounter), and doing this respectfully can be important.

- 7) Incorporating elements of the Meeting process into the Focusing teaching and structure of the group helps.
- 8) Anticipating conflict at some point with Focusing conflict resolution training is a great idea. I would do more of this and early in the training in a future project.
- 9) Anticipating continuity issues with plans for leadership development, periodic retreats, gradual addition of people, needs attention. A system for adding 1 or 2 people occasionally is best for handling natural attrition. I would develop this kind of system in a future project.
- 10) Pay attention to basic structures such as standard meeting time and place of meeting. Disruptions can destabilize the whole process. Do some thinking through seasonal changes such as a summer time schedule ahead of time.
- 11) Consider charging for the initial 25 hours of training and subsequent special training groups. Propose that the Meeting co-sponsor initial training to make cost low. These changes would allow the formal leadership of the Focusing teacher, but still keep the cost quite low. Developing a small special training for people most interested in the group on keys to sustaining the group would also help.
- 12) Anticipate that some minor conflict between Focusing and the ideology of the Meeting will develop. Make lots of room for the creativity which can come from this conflict.