

Exhilarating pessimism: Focusing oriented existential therapy

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No more talk about hitching your wagon to that star.

Few of us have wagons and there are no stars.

James Matthew Barrie

Introduction

Intuitively we know that every therapist *is* his or her own ‘integration’. Our whole living process, much more than we could ever say about life, is the foundation out of which we understand people and practice therapy. In this sense there is no such thing as a ‘focusing’ therapist, an ‘existential’ therapist, a ‘person-centred’ or ‘psychoanalytic’ therapist, as if knowledge of a particular theory could wipe out our living experience and become a new foundation for being. *Every* moment shapes us by evoking a response; the world rouses and elaborates us, affecting how we live in the next instant and how we respond to the world as it further affects us.

Theory, culture, hope and despair, and much more than we could distinguish conceptually, is doing its work in each moment. When I sit across from my client, I am *all that*, forming freshly; a therapist who tries to be ‘professional’ in the sense of reducing the impact of their unique life experiences, their confusion, fear, biases and questions, bereaves their clients, leaves them with gaps where another real person should be. We need to be thoughtful, not absent. First I am a person. Thinking as a

psychologist or psychotherapist, though it consumes most of my daily activity, remains a small strand of who I am.

In this chapter I want to show how these attempts to be ‘experientially inclusive’ impact upon the practice of focusing oriented therapy (FOT). Who and what I am existentially, including the events of my life *and the facts of life itself*, are the foundation into which professional ‘knowledge’, skill, and sensitivity integrate.

I also need to confess how often I fail; fail to achieve the openness I value, fail to live from the subtle awareness that I am, and fail my clients by backing into theory or homily when I am confused and at a loss. This is not a chapter about achievement, but rather a humble attempt to return to an existentially inclusive awareness of life.

Three decades of focusing (Gendlin 2003) has not made me perfect or even good, but it has honed an embodied awareness for those frequent moments when I back away from what feels true. Practicing focusing has imbued my living with the potential of experiential process and the pessimism of sometimes finding no way forward. This lived integration of *potential* and *pessimism* resonates through my life and my work as a focusing oriented existential psychotherapist. However, it is ‘pessimism’ which I feel is neglected in focusing therapy, hindering its promise to be profoundly inclusive of all human experience.

A positive bias

As I see it, part of the issue is that in our understanding of focusing we ‘read in’ cultural assumptions, exemplified in words such as ‘positive’ and ‘life-affirming’, which then hinder existential insight. In order to uncover these assumptions it helps to focus on the felt meaning of terms such as ‘positive’, ‘life-affirming’, ‘carrying-forward’, each time we use them. These concepts cannot just be adopted; focusing is meant to open up concepts experientially. Each term must be *continually* unpacked.

Focusing and focusing oriented therapy grew out of Gendlin’s work at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s. As a movement, method and philosophy, focusing has roots in the particularities of its American origin. Although focusing and FOT are now international, elements of that original culture remain within focusing writing and practice. In *Smile or Die: How positive thinking fooled America and the world* (2009) Barbara Ehrenreich reminds us of the diversity of cultural orientations. ‘Some cultures, like [America], value the positive affect that seems to signal internal happiness; others are more impressed by seriousness, self-sacrifice, or a quiet willingness to cooperate’ (ibid p.3). Ehrenreich differentiates between the culture of positivity and the values of what she calls ‘existential courage’. ‘The truly self-confident, or those who have in some way made their peace with the world and their destiny within it, do not need to expend effort censoring or otherwise controlling their thoughts’ (Ibid p.6). While we cannot assume that the ‘positive’ experience is a censored, controlled, or less true event, the cultural reinforcement of ‘positive’ demands that each insight gets a pink bow before it can be accepted as true.

What I am referring to is described in the book, *The positive power of negative thinking* (Norem 2001). ‘Precisely because the positivity zeitgeist is so strong and

compelling, we need to work to reframe the oversimplified picture that equates optimism with all that is good and pessimism with all that is evil' (ibid p.13). Norem believes that to propose a positive attribute to negative thinking 'sounds almost heretical in American society, bastion of full glasses, silver linings, and the ubiquitous yellow smiley face' (Ibid p.1). However, 'positive thinking' requires a selective perception that does not resonate for everyone. For some of us, holding a 'pessimistic' insight *is* 'positive' when its impact is expansive, connecting us to the experiential depth of an 'existential truth'.

It may be true that 'positive psychology's approval of "positive illusions" [offer us] a means to happiness and well-being' (Ehrenreich 2009, p.158), but for some of us at least, this insistence on happiness feels claustrophobic and flat. The *truth that resonates*, even in its unpalatable forms, feels more expansive and 'life-affirming'. It is exhilarating to stand in the space that is created by symbolizing one's deepest truths. But, according to Ehrenreich, 'We've gone so far down this yellow brick road that "positive" seems to us not only normal but normative - the way you should be' (Ibid p.195). Later I will argue that focusing and FOT rather than another instance of this subtle norm, could in fact become a way through it.

Exhilarating pessimism

Gendlin is clear that we don't want sloppy optimism, 'With so much suffering and destructiveness all around us, optimism is an insult to those who suffer' (1996, p.23). However, he believes that 'pessimism is an insult to life' because such an attitude could defeat life's forward direction and 'To follow or encourage a

growth direction is very different from promoting a set of values... good and bad must be rethought just as all notions of content must be rethought' (ibid.).

Gendlin is careful to protect an unfolding experience from being dumped upon by something 'positive' in the sense critiqued above. He does not want a pre-defined 'good' or 'bad' label applied to what is still in process. The process changes its description and therefore what 'good', 'bad', 'positive', 'negative', optimism' and 'pessimism' even mean. But his use of 'pessimism' above seems normative; equivalent to 'defeat of the forward direction' and this is what I am trying to avoid with the term '*exhilarating* pessimism'.

Gendlin and his colleagues clarify that the energy of the forward movement 'is not optimism or preference for the positive' (Gendlin et.al 1984, p.272). 'It comes, in fact, as one is both separate from *and in touch with* one's negatives' (ibid.). The life energy that is released from 'being-with' *any* experience is what is valued, not some preference for 'positive' and 'optimism'. So a description that sounds pessimistic is no less valid if it resonates with life experiencing. Resonating, that flow of energy, is the key.

But what kind of 'pessimism' is also life affirming? This points to the *exhilarating* in exhilarating pessimism: The expansive feeling of bodily resonance even when the content looks negative, even hopeless. The 'life energy' is released by acknowledging how things *really* are, without any spin that they are moving towards something sunnier. 'Exhilarating pessimism' is a re-thinking of pessimism that in fact prioritizes

the bodily experience above cultural norms, even the contemporary demand to find the positive in everything.

Explicit statements that come from this ‘exhilarating pessimism’ may *sound* negative. Even the term ‘exhilarating *pessimism*’ sounds like a contradiction: a life-enhancing negativity? Really? But here ‘pessimism’ is not negative, but an antidote, a corrective, to the claustrophobic insistence of ‘positive’. It is the attempt to connect with what *actually exists* without any spin, the valuing of truth rather than convention, happiness, or even health. You can sense that from this view the meaning of the concept ‘life-affirming’ changes.

Exhilarating pessimism is the act of staying close to embodied life and not assuming the outcome should be called ‘positive’ just because there is a moment of relief or expansiveness. The body knows that many of its longings have been defeated and unfulfilled, that it will die; perhaps that each body is a pawn in the survival of the species (of course the body knows its limitations pre-conceptually, not like the suppositions I list here).

Is this life worth living? How could we know? We are taught that our goals are achievable but not to question what the purpose of achieving them would be, given the whole context of a human life. Pessimism is both ontological and epistemological. We don’t know if human existence is worthwhile and we don’t know *how* we can ever answer that. Yet, we live.

Pessimists are often seen simply as dissenters and cranks, but ‘we must learn to avoid

thinking of pessimism as a psychological disposition somehow linked to depression or contrariness' (Dienstag 2006, p.17). It is not mere complaint or defeat. In fact it has been argued 'it is optimism, rather than pessimism, which is best understood as a negative emotion or disposition (resentment of the present or of time itself)' (Ibid. p.42). The pessimist reminds us that life is fleeting and not under our control. All striving is in some sense futile, all claims to 'knowledge' in some sense arrogance. Perhaps it is the desperate denial of what our bodies most deeply know that makes us import 'light' and 'angels' before our eyes can adjust to the dark?

The *existential* in focusing oriented existential therapy

Exhilarating pessimism develops from wanting to realistically confront our human condition. Existentialism values this intention and uses phenomenology to bracket our assumptions in order to confront existence as clearly as we can, given our capabilities at any given time. It is an attempt to value what is 'true' over what is 'life affirming' in conventional terms of happy, adjusted, and comfortable. The existentialists do not share the 'cynical hopelessness' of the misanthropic strand of pessimistic philosophy (for example Schopenhauer), but instead try to maintain an inclusive description of human existence that rings true for the whole spectrum of what we actually live.

Existential philosophy depicts us as homelessness, thrown into a world that cannot meet the claims of the human spirit. 'Our natural and social environment oppresses us with its foreignness, its unsuitability as a home for all that is specifically human about us as individuals' (Gray 1951, p.114). This sensitivity to the human condition means we remain cut adrift without an omnipotent anchor, wagon or star, to manage the

undercurrents of everyday life. The only ‘anchor’ is the ever-shifting experiential process.

However, awareness ignites the body and when we pay attention to our experience of homelessness, something already expands. Heidegger says that ‘rightly considered’ and ‘kept well in mind’; ‘it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling’ (Heidegger 1964, p.363). Without any positive spin, openness to the *question* of how to dwell, can result in an ‘exhilarating pessimism’ which is not an answer to the question but it is an experiential ‘home’ for those who are not convinced by what is proffered in the marketplace of answers. This is a home of flow, not substance. As I have suggested elsewhere (Madison 2009) we are homeless not because we have been exiled *from* home, but rather because we have been exiled *by* home from the flow of the self. The coziness of the tranquillized 'substantial' distances us from the self that calls to be known as the elusive and ungraspable.

Through its ability to ‘unpack’ concepts, Focusing offers a method of inquiry that transports us from the explicitly substantial back to implicit process. However, we must be willing to focus on our most closely held assumptions, including positivity, otherwise focusing cannot break through to the vast expanse.

In the expanse we may feel a deep sense of unease that the existentialists believe has metaphysical origins and which experientially is a doorway to unfolding insight, ‘... we, human creatures, perceive dimly in the experience of the uncanny, that the world rests on nothing. It has no basis or ground’ (Gray 1951, p.116). Or as the philosopher Karl Jaspers says it, ‘The bottomless character of the world

must become revealed to us, if we are to win through to the truth of the world' (Jaspers 1932, *Philosophie*, p.469, c.f. Gray 1951, p.117).

The *therapy* in focusing oriented existential therapy

Existential-phenomenological *philosophy* offers a relentless questioning of what we take for granted in human existence and does not flinch from the so-called 'pessimistic' side of life. Existential *therapy* is consistent with this attitude and so also implies a deconstruction of therapeutic orthodoxy; the 'received wisdom' of psychological theory, therapeutic frames, therapist neutrality etc. Existential therapy offers no prescribed theoretical canons to hold onto, no practice manuals for reference when things get rough. Typically there is no pre-set goal and no prescribed outcome to measure. Received meanings fall away so that the uniqueness of the client's way of being can shine through. Therapy without wagon or star. However, the 'pessimistic' inclusion by the existential therapist often gives FOET a demeanor that differentiates the practice from more 'positive' versions of FOT.

Elsewhere I have described how FOT can be a form of existential therapy (Madison 2010). The common values include:

- unfinished process and open questioning is prioritized over conclusive answers
- non-objectifying dialogue takes the place of expert diagnostician with specialist knowledge
- overall appreciation for the unpredictability of an unfolding engagement rather than the clipboard agendas of protocol therapies
- Gendlin's philosophy (evidenced in these two volumes), rather than just the

focusing method, is increasingly the practice base for FOT. The existential-phenomenological tradition has always been primarily philosophical.

Likewise, Gendlin's distinctive philosophy has practice implications for all psychotherapists (Madison, 2010), for example:

- the conception of 'lived body' as ongoing unfinished process
- the potential of therapy as social emancipation
- the principle of 'interaction first' and the palpable therapeutic relationship
- the implication that cognitive analysis alone is not a reliable guide to change

If we converge the experiential and existential we create a practice within which the *whole perspective* of human life, not just our current dilemmas, are welcome; the unavoidable tragedies, mortality, as well as the inexpressible beauty of existing, address the client and therapist through their moment-by-moment embodied connection. Existence and experience can be taken as one. Anything existential that is not experientially given remains theoretical conjecture (including what I've said here), no different from any other dogma or therapeutic creed.

Specific illustrations of FOET

I would like to suggest that it is through exposure to the unfinished experiencing of human dialogue that we can respond meaningfully to the absurdity of human existence, including its exhilarating pessimism and sublime tragedy as much as its moments of optimism, joy, and clarity. We open up to continual discovery of what it means to be human in the presence of other beings like ourselves. We have 'truthing'

but not the truth, questions that temporarily elicit answers that only shift the questions...

Understanding is 'interaction first' and 'cognition last'. Therapist interventions arise from the therapist's 'internal' felt sense of what is alive experientially in the moment, not from theoretical postulates of what is important or even explicit indications from the client. When an intervention occurs to the therapist it can sometimes be a good idea to pause and rehearse the intervention to oneself to see if the therapist's body resonates with the words before sharing them with the client. Such an intervention can make explicit something that was, until then, inchoate 'in the flow'; we speak in a way that expands the whole feeling of the session. But it is not exactly the feeling that we pay attention to, but the 'knowing' that is implied within the feeling. So, a 'negative' feeling can feel good when it is acknowledged not because we are affirming the 'negative' but because we are acknowledging the deeper 'truth' implied in the feeling. It is that embodied connection to a true moment that is our guide in FOET.

At any moment in therapy we can ask into either side of the same living event: 'How is the person living their personal situation, including any stuckness?' and 'What is life's view of this current moment?' When a word or image comes that resonates, the therapist does not make this happen, nor does the client, except in as much as both abstain from all the usual assumptions that obstruct its happening.

Sometimes I feel my deep continuity with a universe that accepts me *as I am* *but* is indifferent to that fact *that* I am. Such experiences feel exhilarating, expansive, but not carrying forward. Strictly speaking there is no 'carrying' and there is no

‘forward’. Gendlin’s other term for how the body shifts, ‘self-propelled’ (1964), is a more neutral description. And the body propels itself towards what? Increasing expansiveness, as well as aging, and death.

The cross-cultural example

In *A Process Model* (1997) Gendlin offers the example of how a person who lives across cultures acquires an implicit understanding of people’s complexity that makes coming to know the next new person easier (see p.55). This is a positive account of the abilities that generate in a person who has been exposed to cultural difference, but it avoids the other side. From research I have done with this population (Madison 2009), I can say that such a person is also less likely to fit into any one place anymore. The person has developed more intricately than any one culture – no one place can hold the interactions their body implies. No place feels like home anymore, except in temporary moments.

Sally: ‘There is a lot of ... sadness really. I don’t mean regret, I’ve loved my life so far, at least compared to the lives I see around me, it’s been good. It’s just...What will happen to me? [becomes emotional] I’ve lost so much by not staying anywhere. Who will know me when I’m old? So, this is my life? Why didn’t anyone warn me? I don’t belong anywhere anymore... [crying]...’

The client is acknowledging that her lifestyle has been 'good' *and* it has left her feeling sad, alone, and worried about her future. This feeling can continue to shift for Sally, and learning to live with her sadness and loss may become valuable to her. But every decision she has made and each shift that comes not only brings new potential

but also forecloses other possibilities. Exhilarating pessimism is the stance of wanting to be inclusive about the facts of life, doors open and doors close. A therapist who is willing to stand there alongside the client, without reframing or spin, can share a 'between' that to some extent redeems both. Focusing and FOT have spread around the world into diverse cultures because these practices offer a way to connect through to the living source that usually gets censored. More on this in the next illustration.

Co-presencing reality

Our common humanity is palpable. It is not based upon shared knowledge or collected information. Our commonality is the living process 'between'. We understand each other because we are the same process 'source'. Connection, surely, is something we are all concerned with. Our relatedness is an aspect of our existential condition – it is unavoidable that we move towards and away from others. We do not need to assume that this is something that needs to 'shift' or be 'focused away' into something 'adaptable' and 'positive'.

In FOET, clients learn to bring their awareness to what was labeled 'not-me', or driven into oblivion because it was 'negative' or 'pessimistic' and made others feel uncomfortable. It is deeply healing when the therapist celebrates the return of what culture said could only be repugnant to others. It is even more healing when the therapist says 'me too' implicitly, 'through this we belong with each other'.

Rick was trying to sense into a decision about his career path but quickly realized something else was underneath his indecision. In the session he looked me in the eyes and said 'I just don't think either job will make any difference. There's still something about me...' He took a deep breath and said 'sometimes I think everyone feels this

way. *Maybe everyone feels there is something wrong with them, they aren't good enough or something'. Rick pauses, looks down and says, 'Maybe it's about being adopted, like I can't ever get over that'. We had spoken a lot about Rick's early life and adoption. I wanted to catch the other statement too, it was new, so I said 'yes, and maybe we all have something like that feeling, that there's something wrong with us and we aren't quite good enough?' Rick was silent, then he asked, 'Well, does everyone? [pause] Do you?' I smiled. I liked the question, though I had to stop to feel into an honest response, 'Yes, in the back of my mind, sometimes right in the front, I do wonder if I'm good enough, if there is something wrong with me. Maybe we keep it secret from each other because we make it personal. But maybe its just part of being human. Does it make a difference to you to know I feel the same, and maybe we all do'? This was a challenge to Rick; to reconceive his 'personal frailty' as an indication that he qualifies as human. He relaxed and breathed deeply, hardly speaking for the rest of the session.*

Human frailty

Human being is a carrying forward to death, a 'being-unto-death' as Heidegger (1964) proclaimed. So although experiential carrying-forward has a feeling of 'rightness' or a sense of 'truthing', it need not be a kind of Pollyanna optimism or a yellow brick road. What we find may not make us happy, unless truth makes us happy.

The hospital physiotherapists asked me to visit Julie a young mother who had collapsed a week before from a rare neurological event. They had reassured Julie that she would make a full recovery and be no more likely than anyone else to suffer a repeat of this episode. However, Julie stayed in bed and refused to engage in exercises despite the encouragement of her loving husband or the pressure to 'think of

your little boys, they need their mother'. Julie could not imagine being able to live while knowing this kind of collapse is a possibility. She could not put it to the back of her mind and just assume life would be ok again. As I listened I felt the urge to contradict her bleak outlook with something positive but nothing came to me. What happened to her could just as likely happen to me - this is the truth. I left our initial meeting feeling anxious and vulnerable. The body is a fragile machine as well as much more. Would I make it back to my office? I felt haunted by Julie's realization that every moment is uncertain. Two days later as I approached the ward the physiotherapist stopped me and asked what I had done to Julie. I assumed she must be much worse, but instead I was told that she was engaging in her rehabilitation and talking about returning home where she was determined to make a full recovery. When I asked Julie about the change in her she said she had needed someone to really hear how devastating it was, without minimizing it or trying to convince her that she was being silly or worse, a bad mother. She felt better because I had listened openly to her deep experience of devastation without any attempt to resolve it or to look for a 'forward direction'. I had allowed myself to be affected, and by both of us facing the truth of our human vulnerability, sharing it in that hospital room, she had found she could in fact live again.

Existential insights

Therapy is one place where we should be able to enter into explorations about life and death as far as we dare. Of course this requires therapists who are willing to accompany their clients into deep territory. Those rare sessions that become 'existential' throw us into a world of death and anxiety, where we are exposed, vulnerable, and on unfamiliar ground. Usually our way of conceiving of mystery falls

into quotidian euphemisms, for example, 'of course everyone dies, what's the big deal?' We flee death by falling into the everyday, into cultural formalities and rituals surrounding death, thereby avoiding an experiential confrontation with our palpable existence. The existential does not override the experiential; they go back and forth between grounding and symbolizing, informing and refining each other. In experiential-existential therapy the point is that the therapist must be willing to enter this realm when/if it appears in the session. As moments of existential insight they are valid for client *and* therapist.

Years ago I participated in research into the possibility that focusing can facilitate 'existential insight' into the deeper personal meanings of one's own mortality (Kuiken and Madison 1987). We invited young university students to engage in an age-progression fantasy right up to the moment of their own death. Then half the participants filled out scales and questionnaires about their experience while the other half were guided through a 30-minute focusing experience on the feelings aroused by the guided fantasy. The focusers seemed more likely to temporarily see through the camouflage of life. They cared significantly less about conventional success, career, money etc. but cared significantly more about personal growth and spiritual understanding. I remember one young woman who emerged from her session in tears. She assured me that she was not sad or distressed. Until that day she had thought of herself as career-driven; relationships were not a priority. The tears indicated a new understanding of how much she wanted to have her own child and to express love to another human being.

Concluding Thoughts

At moments the interaction of therapy goes all the way in, from individual significance, to deeper existential/transpersonal levels, inviting exploration of the therapist in their professional role, both the therapist and clients as unique persons, and therapist and client as examples of human existence generally to which both parties may have meaningful responses.

In discussions about optimism and pessimism with Gendlin, he suggested, ‘It wouldn’t be so sad if it weren’t so beautiful. The latter is wider and explains the first’ (personal communication). In response I said ‘it wouldn’t be so beautiful [or exhilarating] if it wasn’t so sad’.

I say both ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’ are culturally corrupt. But for me *exhilarating* pessimism gives me a balance, something full of vivid life without it taking on the soft tones of spiritual niceness or sunny cheerfulness that I find so stultifying. For me exhilarating pessimism is the larger space that holds moments of optimism, moments that feel wonderful but make no difference. It is the lack of any source of redemption that redeems most deeply.

We do not only need to learn how to die, we also need to learn to be born. We are not born all at once. We spend our lives trying to midwife the aspects of self still stuck nascent, waiting to see the light of day.

This chapter is a fragment of what is emerging as a model of therapy: experiential, existential and focusing oriented. Of course, none of what I say should be concretized and imposed upon the reader's experience. What I say about exhilarating pessimism, existential insight, truth, and death, should be held up to one's experience to expand it, if indeed it resonates at all. Perhaps most succinctly I could say in response to Barrie, *we* are both wagon and star. And that is our mixed blessing...

‘To continue on the pilgrimage into the unknown was nothing heroic; it was the only real option - to keep walking away from the familiar, the patterns and processes that affirmed my identity. ... such journeys are known as "going tudong," from the Pali word dhutanga meaning "that which shakes off" - "shakes off" the protective skin of your normality, because whatever is habitual becomes dead tissue, dressed up as "me," "myself." Realising you can't shake off your own skin, you take on a practice that does it for you. Maybe undertaking that jolting and confusion was a kind of heroism after all. And it might even entail being kind to yourself’ (Sucitto and Scott 2010).

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