

Creating Containers of Safety for Connection and Growth ¹

Setting the Stage

As Focusers, we regularly pause—inside ourselves, with a listening partner and among groups of individuals--with the goal of learning, growing and being nurtured at the learning edge of our unfolding lives. That said, many of us still feel a bit puzzled and self-conscious about creating containers of safety either in personal or professional settings. On the one hand, we cherish the safety, comfort and support that surrounds us within our beloved communities. Yet, we also know that true growth will always demand that we (at least temporarily) surrender our often hard-won sense of security.

This workshop provides an opportunity to gather our individual and collective embodied wisdom as we **Honor**, **Open**, and **Welcome** “how” we (as Focusers) can create containers of safety within the communities in which we live and work. We’ll draw on the teaching wisdom of Bebe Simonⁱ and Janet Kleinⁱⁱ, within the general context of Suzanne Noel’s H.O.W. Model of working with groupsⁱⁱⁱ. We’ll have opportunities to sense inside ourselves as well as to speak within small groups and the group as a whole.

As Focusers, we already have a shared sense of the kind of container we value. We come together with open hearts, committed to deep listening and authentic speaking. We honor confidentiality - what we say is held in trust and with deep respect. Plus, we respect each individual’s right and responsibility to maintain their own internal sense of safety—so that each may choose to speak or refrain from speaking as their own inner wisdom dictates.

There exists a much deeper aspect to connection (especially within a community) than merely comfort level among like-minded individuals. (After all, a miserable person can remain quite “comfortable” being miserable in a community of other miserable people.)

In contrast, we as members of the Focusing community, strive to create containers of safety so that all who participate can be “like-hearted” enough so that each member can experience it as a *safe* and supportive place to be. Even if (and especially *when*) we feel uncomfortable--either within ourselves or with each other--as so often happens as we approach the “learning edge” of

¹ Workshop presented at the International Focusing Conference 2016 in Cambridge, UK

our unfolding lives. For learning--as with *any* change--starts from a place of finding ourselves uncomfortable with what currently *is*.

To set the stage for what follows, I'd like to begin with a brief exercise to help you briefly experience a felt sense of "connection".

- First, I invite you to first get a word or phrase of your own in your head that describes the way you want to be "connected" both with your inner self and with others. What is an attitude you wish to exhibit? [You might wish to jot it down.]
- Then, take a moment to pause, as you sense the chair supporting you and the floor supporting your feet. Noticing your breathing and gently inviting your attention inward—into the center of your body.
- Next, offer that "head word" [re: "being connected"] down into your inner body to invite a bodily felt-sense of it to come. This may be a sensation, image, feeling, memory or sound. There's no need to rush – simply notice what comes inside.....[You might want to make a brief note of what came.]

[At this point in the workshop, we each had an opportunity to add our voice into the gathered circle by introducing ourselves and offering a brief word or phrase describing our inner felt sense of "feeling connected".]

Honoring: Differentiating between uncomfortable and unsafe

As a transition into the core of the workshop, I offer the following quote from Dr. Janet Klein [a much-loved teacher from within the international Focusing community]:

"It is fruitful to work from your 'uncomfortable place.' It is impossible to work from your 'unsafe place.' Uncomfortable points to or starts the process. Unsafe stops the process. I like to point out that only you can keep yourself safe. That is empowering. The other person can't keep you safe. However, the other person can make it unsafe for you. Then it is up to you to sense this 'unsafe' and do something about it." [Janet Klein, PhD, 1995, pp. 14-15.]

At this point, we have a sense inside of what connection feels like for each other. I'm guessing whatever has come could also be defined as "what feels safe". Yet, we also know that learning can only begin from within a place of feeling uncomfortable with what currently *is*.

Which leads us to confront what might seem to be a paradox: *Creating a place where all can feel "safe", even within our own "uncomfortableness"*.

During this segment, we will simply start with our own sense of "uncomfortable" and notice how it differs from "unsafe", so that we can then better understand why the distinction is so important for our interactions with others.

Before going into our first breakout session, I offer a brief 2-part exercise:

1. Take a moment to think of something that you know makes you feel "uncomfortable".....think about that feeling - and how you might describe it when you are aware that you are uncomfortable. [pause]

Since this is a two-part exercise: take a moment to remember what came for you (feel free to jot it down if you wish)--and then just set it aside.

2. Now, think about something that makes you feel (or has made you feel) "unsafe". [pause]

Again, take a moment to remember what came for you (jotting it down if you wish). Notice the difference between "uncomfortable" and "unsafe"--and maybe even go back and forth a few times inside between the two separate feelings.

[At this point, we spent about 15 minutes sharing what had arisen inside when exploring the distinctions between "uncomfortable" and "unsafe".]

Opening: When (and what) have I witnessed?

Now that we've begun to differentiate between uncomfortable and unsafe, let's dive a little deeper.

First, let me share a quote from another of our Focusing colleagues, Bebe Simon, from whom I've learned so much about creating safe spaces for growth and learning.

In her YouTube Video entitled, ***Keeping Safe***, Bebe says: *“Uncomfortable is a wonderful place to go and focus and find out why it’s uncomfortable. Unsafe is a place that says “don’t go there”. And you listen. And, then you will be safe. Because you won’t go against something that says, no, no, no, not for me.”* [at 1.56 min. marker]

In preparation for this next discussion segment, please take a moment to recall a time when you witnessed one or more of the following:

- *There were distinct feelings of “uncomfortableness” in the situation; however, there was still a palpable feeling of safety in the room.*
- *Something initially felt unsafe, but then something happened to be able to bring a sense of safety into the group.*

[During this segment, we spent about 20 minutes exploring around the learning edge between feelings of “uncomfortable” and “unsafe” and how this impacts our lives.]

Welcoming: What wants to become?

As we transition to the end of our time together and our final “stringing of the beads”^{iv}, I offer the following quote by Mark Nepo, from his “Book of Awakening”^v:

“We can go below our hardened ways to the soft impulses that birth them. Instead of breaking the bone of our stubbornness, we can nourish the marrow of our feeling unheard. Instead of breaking the bone of our fear, we can cleanse the blood of our feeling unsafe. Instead of counting the scars from being hurt in the world, we can find and re-kiss the very spot in our soul where we began to withhold our trust.” (**Mark Nepo, The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have**)

As a final invitation to sense inside: *What is one new insight or practice from today’s session that you wish to take back out into your own everyday life?*

[We then spent the remaining time together to honor and celebrate all that had come—both individually and together.]

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Bebe Simon's YouTube video, **Keeping Safe** => <http://youtu.be/x8N7nZexOV0>
- ⁱⁱ Klein, J. (1995). **Empathic Felt Sense Listening and Focusing. A Workbook for Learning and Teaching**. Chicago, IL: Focusing Institute.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Noel, S.L. (2014), *Enlivening Recovery and Expanding Felt Relating*. **The Folio 25(1)**, pp. 58-68.
Retrieved from: http://www.focusing.org/folio/Vol25No12014/SuzanneNoel_2014.pdf.
- ^{iv} "Stringing the Beads" is a practice described by Craig Neal as a way of "creating a space for both the presence of the sacred and the hearing of all voices". Retrieved from:
http://heartlandcircle.blogs.com/aoc_book/2011/03/stringing-the-beads-from-arrows-for-your-quiver.html.
- ^v Nepo, M. (2000). **The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have**. San Francisco: Conari Press.