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How To Think Like A Poet - And Make Better Decisions

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This article has been published in *Self and Society*.

Thought, I love thought. But not the jiggling and twisting of already existent ideas I despise that self-important game. Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness, Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of the conscience, Thought is gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be read, Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a conclusion. Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges, Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending

Focusing teaches us to think like a poet. We learn to dip below the surface of the explicit and already formed and to find new symbols for what is implicit, symbols which, in the poet Don Paterson's words, make us 'open to suggestion, vulnerable to reprogramming, complicit in the creative business of [...] self-transformation'.

DH Lawrence's poem 'Thought', which I quote above, evokes something of Focusing's power to help us reflect with the whole of ourselves, and come to new conclusions. But we do not need to be poets to focus. Unlike the poet, the Focuser does not need to find an artful form of words. And whereas the poet must make symbols speak about more than their private experience, striving for some kind of collective relevance, the Focuser does not need to make their symbols relevant for anything other than their own life. But there is, I think, something similar in the process of making a poem and the process of Focusing: this process of waiting for a symbol to form itself from the subtle and implicate layers of experience. Once experience is made explicit in the form of a symbol, it can be re-recognised - known again.

The gift of Focusing is to make the process of 'man in his wholeness wholly attending' explicit and teachable. By learning to attend wholly in this way, we can open up fresh perspectives, new insights, new ways of looking and feeling at and about things. Focusing takes us forward, so that whatever was occupying our attention sits a little, or a lot, differently with us. It takes us to a place, simply, where we are more in touch with our truth.

Once learned and honed with continual practice, this process can be a wonderful friend, offering a path to self-knowledge, deepening and enriching creative work and relationships, and acting as a guide when there are difficult choices to make.

It is in this last respect, as a tool for decision making in both personal and professional life, that I have found Focusing to be a particularly potent ally.

Not Knowing

Now, let go of what you think you know about thinking! To get to somewhere new inside ourselves, we have to let go of what we already know about the problem or situation we are focusing on. As long as we are in what we already know, we are stuck in the 'jiggling and twisting of already existent ideas', in Lawrence's 1 phrase. So we have to allow not knowing. Here I want to call on another poetic voice, for this capacity seems very close to what Keats called 'negative capability':

'That is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.'

Our technological culture does not allow much room for not knowing. There is huge pressure to know, to be decisive, to get it all sorted. This can prematurely close down what can be an extraordinarily potent and creative space: the womb, if you like, of not knowing, with all its receptivity to something new and surprising. Keats believed that negative capability marked out the truly creative artist. It is certainly a feature of the creative focusing process.

It is worth noting here that the word 'focusing' is itself a metaphor, a visual metaphor. It describes one aspect of this 'attending wholly', that aspect of looking closely, bringing something at first indistinct, blurry, vague into focus, so that it can be named. When we look at something, we seek it out with our eyes. We go out to it. Looking is an active process. But what we call 'focusing' could equally well be described with an auditory metaphor: as a kind of inner listening. We listen closely, as if with a stethoscope, to the body-mind's experience of a situation, so that 'it' can tell 'us' what it knows. The listening metaphor captures more of the receptive aspect of focusing than the visual word 'focusing'.

The Inner Relationship

Negative capability is one element of what Focusers call 'the inner relationship' or 'the focusing attitude'. The key to successful focusing is the quality of our our relationship with experience. When approaching our experience in Focusing, we need to be friendly, curious, interested, non-judgemental, and we need to let go of what we know. We bring an attitude of open, friendly, non-judgemental curiosity to our experience. We attend to or with the body; to and with the body's direct and immediate experience of the situation we are focusing with; to and with the felt sense of it.

Once we have cultivated this attitude or quality of relationship, the next step, or aspect (it is, of course, not a linear sequence) is symbolisation. We try to represent the felt sense with a word, an image, a sound, a gesture... . The word 're-present' is apt here. We are trying to make implicit experience present, present to ourselves in an alive, vital and fresh way.

Then comes dialogue. This not necessarily a literal dialogue, although it can be. It is, however, always some kind of relationship - relationship with the felt sense. We are present with the felt sense and with the symbol, resonating with each, feeling for a fit, or for where the symbol does not quite fit. When it does, we get a sense of relief, release, insight, opening, forward movement.

All this takes place in presence. Presence can be distinguished from partiality, to use Anne Weiser Cornell's helpful terms. In presence we are able to attend to the whole of our experience without, as it were, taking sides, or excluding any part. As soon as we do either of those things we are in partiality: we have identified with, or dissociated from, some aspect of our experience.

Focusing With A Decision

To make things clearer, I would like at this stage to give an example of using focusing with a decision. The example is drawn from my own experience. I usually focus alone and use either a piece of paper or a small notebook computer, to write or draw as I focus. This helps me to stay in touch with the process and I find that seeing the symbols in front of me works well as a reflection which allows me to resonate with the symbol, or in Lawrence's words, to test it 'on the touchstone of conscience'. If I use the computer, the process of typing -and mis-typing, then correcting- and then going back over what I have written, works in the same way.

The decision was around moving house. This was and is a major life issue for me, and I have worked with it for a long period, using focusing. Below I present one focusing session on this topic, which was a key session in moving that decision process forward, but which was also the outcome of several sessions of working on it. I choose it because it seems to exemplify the kind of many-stranded, complex choices that face us in life, and which focusing can help with. I will then draw out what I have found to be three very helpful things to try when focusing on a decision.

To start the session I set up a focusing space. I have my own way of altering the physical space to mark out and 'ritualise' the activity, which I find helps me to cultivate presence - that attitude of friendly, interested, non-judgemental, not knowing in relation to experience. I ensure that I will not be disturbed, set up the space and have my computer at the ready.

To begin, I feel into the whole thing, asking something like how does this whole thing around moving sit with me just now?

I notice a warm contented feeling in my belly, like something really appreciates the attention. There is a sense of something about really loving and needing the safety and security of this physical place, and the words come: 'I really don't want all that upheaval right now'. And that sentence feels really right. Then an image comes of a plaster being ripped off a wound which has not yet healed. The words 'Not ready'. A realisation that I have been through a challenging and difficult time this past three or four years, that only recently have I started to feel more healed and resourced, and that this process needs some time to complete itself before taking on something as big as moving, with all the stress, instability and upheaval this entails.

That feels really right. That feels like just where I am right now with it. But I want to feel into the other side of it. I have sat with this problem for long enough to know that this is not the whole story. The part that needs security and safety is very strong right now. But I'd like to feel into the other side of it. So I ask, 'how would it feel to move somewhere new?'

What comes now is a kind of heavy, leaden feeling in my stomach and chest and the words 'more of the same'. What brings this is the sense that even though the physical surroundings might change, even though there would be practical advantages, there would be a sense of oppression, struggle. This is about the pressure of a bigger mortgage, having to pay a bigger mortgage on my own. It is something about being on my own with it. It is this being on my own with it that brings the sense of 'more of the same' and the heavy, oppressed feeling that comes with that.

I am already feeling much clearer about where I stand just now on this. What is new for me here is the allowing of this strong impulse to safety, to 'hold fire' for the time being, and this sense that I do not want to do it alone any longer. I had not realised how identified I was, before, with the part that wants to move. And I had not realised that I was not allowing other possibilities into the

picture. The possibility that I could move on in a different way than I had been imagining.

What is fresh and surprising here - and needs some more processing - is a part that simply does not want to do it alone any more. A part that needs and wants a sharing of life and possibility - a partnership.

Now I try something that has really worked well before. I try turning these thoughts and issues into simple statements that I can then 'test on the touchstone of conscience'. This is like doing one of those questionnaires where you have to choose between, usually, five boxes, which range from 'agree strongly', through 'neither agree nor disagree' to 'disagree strongly'.

The first statement I try is 'I don't feel ready to move just now'. I get a strong felt sense of agreement with that.

Then I try 'I am happy to stay here for several more years'. I get a strong felt sense of disagreement with that. Like something would have to go very wrong for that to happen.

So I try 'I am happy to stay where I am for now and explore possibilities for co-operation and partnership with others'. That feels just right. That feels like where I am right now. And that feels like a good place to stop for now.

In the above description I have telescoped around 45 minutes of time into a few sentences, to convey the essence of what was a key session. I got a breakthrough in what had been something very stuck, where neither staying nor going felt good. What gave this was really allowing the part that needs stability right now to have its voice heard. This led to realising that the way I had framed the problem was too limited: there were other possibilities for moving on besides buying another place on my own.

Now I want to draw out those three 'top tips' for working with decisions, whether alone or with a focusing partner:

1. Ask 'What is the felt sense of the whole thing? How does it all sit with you right now?'
2. Feel into each side of the decision. How would it be to say 'yes'/ to say 'no'?
3. Turn the questions into statements and then feel for the felt sense of agreement or disagreement

A Concluding Story

Focusing can open a door to the mystery of who we are, to the subtle currents of being which poets and artists give form to on a collective level, but which on an individual level can guide us towards what is right, true and real for us in our own lives. This combination of depth, wonder and mystery with the pragmatic and the everyday reminds me of the Zen tradition, and I want to end by quoting Neil Friedman's adaptation of a Zen story, which for me captures the marvellous way Focusing can bridge the subtle and the ordinary levels of reality:

Once upon a time there was a convocation of healers, wizards, sorcerers, therapists, channels, mystics and disembodied spirits. Each had a time to get up and do his or her particular miracle.

Quite the pyrotechnics! One walked on fore. One hypnotised the entire audience without their knowing it. One foretold the future. One read past lives. One stood on one leg in a bizarre position

until his whole body shook. One did medical diagnoses based only on each audience member's name and age.

Then a short, plain-looking man got up. It was his turn. He said 'My miracle is that when I am hungry, I eat; and when I am thirsty, I drink; and I know when I am hungry and when I am thirsty and what I am hungry for and what I am thirsty for'.

Then he sat down.

He was the focuser.

Further Reading

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