

Teaching Focusing in Afghanistan

Summer 2005

The Journey Here

In February 2005, out of the blue, I received an email from the Focusing institute in New York asking me if I would be interested in assisting on focusing training in Afghanistan. At some level this request made sense. I'd had a sense from my first focusing course in London that I was going to pursue focusing as far as this path led me. As I continued attending weekends in Bath, and progressed through the programme something was unclear about where all this was leading me. By February I had run some training and introduced individuals to focusing but I felt in limbo with where I was going as a trainer. When I read the email something in me said - 'this is why you couldn't see the way ahead - it was too far out of your realm of possibilities to be seen - even as a dim sense'. I took the request to Quaker meeting for worship on the Sunday to pose a question and sense for an answer. As soon as I sat down in my seat the answer was there. I felt the familiar presence of something powerful that was telling me this was right.

My rational self said I was too inexperienced in focusing training to do this. But whenever I focused on it - with various people - I had a sense that I could do this and that this felt right - from the inside. I also had a sense that any obstacles on the path would be overcome - support from my family, getting time off work, having funds for unpaid leave, and the ongoing security situation.

Arriving

The last few days were difficult. I felt I was on an escalator and couldn't get off. The prospect of parting from family was particularly hard. Boarding the plane in Frankfurt I suddenly wondered what I was doing and why. I noticed a part of me that will be very glad to get back here in 12 weeks time. Arriving in Kabul I went through a dilapidated immigration hall and then waited in a small lobby to be picked up. Armed guards asked us to leave the airport. Then we were moved further away down a dusty track to a rough car park. In the end I took a taxi to the British Embassy and got picked up by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) driver. However, all this time I liked what I saw of Kabul - in spite of the strangeness of it all. The people I met were friendly and helpful and I felt safe in a strange kind of way. I was welcomed when I got to AFSC was met by Patricia Omidian the co-ordinator, and there was a special welcome lunch - however I was still a bit dazed. I think that feeling lasted much of the first week.

Starting Out

The first week was spent settling in but then I needed to prepare to deliver my first course - through a translator. I suddenly felt totally deskilled, I wondered why I had come - there was this panic inside. What if I couldn't do this, what was my plan B if this didn't work out -- there wasn't one! Anyway, the first course went well - a bit hard using a translator. Patricia helped to clarify meanings. I had adapted the programme to include some of the concepts taught here such as finding a safe space inside and the concept of the inner guesthouse. I was also getting things translated as handouts as I went along where possible. The course went well and I felt calmer. By then I'd got to know people and was bowled over with their friendly cheerfulness of everyone. In spite of how much people must have been through here.

I went on to teach level 2 shortly after and then prepared programmes for level 3 and 4. I'm now at midpoint of my stay and the place has become familiar and very interesting. I still have no sense of what is ahead for me here but I have an overall sense that it will be good. Focusing yesterday I

sensed into trust, trust in moving into more of the unknown, trust in what I could bring, and the need to bring the concept of trust into the training I'm bringing. I've also been letting go of uncertainty and doubt. Gaining confidence that focusing enables us to keep company with people who have been through unimaginably painful situations.

Focusing Teaching and Learning

Focusing has been well received here and the training has been adapted to make links with Afghan and Islamic culture. The biggest difference is the Guesthouse model. Based on a poem by Rumi a 13th century poet from the Sufi tradition - inside all of us is a guesthouse - and we welcome all guests - comfortable and uncomfortable. So instead of parts we talk about guests. We can teach people to welcome inner guests just as they would welcome someone into their home. People here seem to be more receptive to focusing - and more willing to teach others - even after a 2 1/2 day course. The majority of people on the first course said they would teach it to others. The concept of acceptance is hard to translate - Patricia explains it as - 'we should be with our Guests

- without judgment,
- without taking sides and
- without having a goal'.

This clarifies for me what we mean by acceptance in the UK. It becomes a useful checklist to see whether people might be identified. We've encouraged people to check that out when talking about a focusing session. Often the process of discussing the translation of words has really helped the understanding of focusing.

There is also the impact of the training - people moving on from big psychological issues. One woman wanted revenge after her son was killed by another boy. Now she has been able to spend time with the guest that wanted revenge, and says she doesn't want that any more. Another who couldn't stand up properly or speak properly started to stand up erect and said happily that the pain in her back had disappeared.

One impression is the spiritual connectedness of people here. The comfortable way people talk about their relationship with Allah and the connections made between Allah's compassion towards us being like our compassion towards our inner guests. As a Quaker working for a Quaker NGO here I could relate to the way both Quakers and Muslims had found a process like focusing in their spiritual practice. The emphasis of journeying inward made by Rumi and other Sufi poets in the 13th century has some parallels with the discoveries of early Quakers in the 17th century and I feel sure connects with the mystical roots of other religions.

Jerry Conway, August 2005.

jerry@jerryconway.co.uk

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house,
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of all its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Jelaluddin Balkhi - Rumi
1207 - 1273.