



BIO-SPIRITUALITY

Focusing as a way
to grow

by Peter A. Campbell, Ph.D.
&
Edwin M. McMahon, Ph.D.



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Foreword

Changes in therapy and human experience raise questions for faith and theology. One such development is noted in Alexander Lowen's *Bioenergetics*: "The failure of verbal therapies to produce significant changes in personality," he writes, "is responsible for an increasing interest in non-verbal and body approaches." (p. 120) In this book, Campbell and McMahon argue persuasively that a similar shift of attention to the body's wisdom is needed today for Christian spirituality. Religion of the head has left us divided from one another and from ourselves. We need to get to deeper roots of the Spirit than formulated beliefs.

The authors have found Focusing, the therapeutic method developed by Eugene Gendlin of the University of Chicago, to be a way into the body's wisdom. At one level, focusing is a therapy that helps people resolve human conflicts and get in touch with their own inner direction. At a deeper level, which is the very core of this book, focusing becomes a form of spiritual meditation that helps people find their own form of self-transcendence.

Meditation has taken many forms in world religions: from wordless, imageless centering of Zen Buddhism and Christian Zen, the mystical mantras of the Orient and the popular “Jesus Prayer” which developed within Eastern Orthodox Christianity, to the mandalas of Tibet, the icons of Orthodoxy, and the Ignatian contemplations on the mysteries of Jesus’ life in Western Christianity. Each form draws a person to a transcendent cosmic truth beyond ordinary life while yet within it. Focusing has many similarities. It is a discipline of attending to the bodily “felt-sense” of what is at work in one’s life. This felt-sense is more basic than words or images. However, when it touches the transcendent ground of our ongoing life, it yields fresh images and words that release life and energy formerly stifled by traditional consciousness. Thus focusing, like traditional meditation, touches a deeper cosmic process, but it does so in a way that is unique to each individual in his or her own time and place. We each share this “cosmic process”—which the authors relate to the divine Spirit in the world—so that it can heal our isolation and fear and lead us to recognize our participation in a dynamic universal truth. If many were growing in this spiritual focusing, God’s image would emerge ever more clearly in our world.

The process of focusing, seen at that spiritual depth, gives the authors a fresh way of viewing Christian truth as well as the truth of other worldviews. Since one’s felt-sense is prior to specific beliefs or formulations, focusing promises to unite persons of various persuasions, to heal wounds of misunderstanding and alienation, and to open people to sharing a common future unfolding in the world. It touches into a level of humanity united in a single evolving world, a “gifted” or “graced” unity that is not caused by ego efforts but rather by surrender to this common underlying process.

Yet we resist this unity for many reasons. Our ego structures, both individual and communal, often mask weakness and pain. Focusing makes one attend to areas

of hurt and weakness lodged deep in the memories of the body, which forgets nothing. Conventional beliefs and orthodoxies often merely protect us from these vulnerable areas. We fight and make war to defend these beliefs, and it is a veritable “crucifixion” to face the insecurity of surrendering them. But further, our ego structures are “moral achievements.” They discipline unbridled sexuality and aggression that our Western Christian culture sees lurking in our bodies. Our permissive generation is in reaction against such Victorian mores, but the same separation of body from spirit lies in both. Sexuality is alienated from responsible spirituality. The body’s desires then get separated from their deeper awareness of “being unto death,” and their deeper ground in God. As Ernest Becker pointed out in *The Denial of Death*, we flee death and escape into idealizations of sexual conquest and success. But the body knows the dying within, and only by facing it can we face our true reality and our true spirituality. Focusing thus contacts our inner vulnerability and repressed pain, but that very contact releases new energy and fresh hope.

The courageous decision to face that inner truth is how Campbell and McMahon understand conversion and faith. That faith is grounded not in formulated beliefs but in the experience of the unfolding process itself. The very process of believing gives us an analogous way of understanding its deepest ground, the triune God. “I” focus on a “felt-sense” which “unfolds” into who I am in the process of becoming. Analogously, the Father (I) forms his perfect Image (felt-sense) which gives rise to an unfolding process of integration and self-transcendence (Holy Spirit). Focusing is a doorway beyond formulations of belief to faith or believing itself. As one moves more deeply into it, every event, every “felt-meaning,” can become a religious event opening one to incarnate Spirit unfolding in evolution. Focusing does not *cause* this redemptive contact with Spirit. It opens the way. The transforming event itself is always perceived as gift—as grace—and a growing grat-

itude and reverence emerge in one who lives out this spiritual type of focusing.

The perspectives opened by spiritual focusing are exciting. Yet several questions will likely come to the Christian's mind that will need to be addressed before he or she can be fully receptive to this new view. For the Christian, Jesus is the unique mediator of relationship to the Father. How does his person appear as one opens to the cosmic process? Should not Christian meditation center on Jesus? Similarly, Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, not just an expression of the self-knowledge of the Father. And the Holy Spirit is "another Paraclete" (*John 14:16*), another person in the triune God, not just a process of spiritual evolution. How do these personal characteristics appear in the focusing process? Further, do we not believe in doctrinal definitions that remain permanently true, such as the Son is of "like being" with the Father (Nicaea) and fully human (Chalcedon)? Are these truths preserved if one takes one's ground at a preverbal level? Or more specifically, can we fully trust our bodily wisdom when we have experienced how narrow desires or angers have led us away from God and others? How is one to discern between movements that are of God and those that are not? Surely not everything that transcends ordinary consciousness is of God.

These are serious questions that will need to be faced. Yet they do not have to be fully resolved before one enters fully into the process of spiritual focusing so well presented in this book. Focusing as a spiritual discipline has been a help to many who no doubt interpret their experience according to their own frame of reference. The theoretical questions do not have to be fully resolved before the reader can profit from the method of meditation presented here.

For Christians who want to pursue the theoretical questions more fully, the following observations may be of help. A first observation regards theological method. Every theologian or reflective Christian frames questions

and understands according to his or her religious experience or conversion. An academician asks academic questions, a mystic mystical questions. The authors show that our bodies and their memories are key to authentic experience. Since how one interprets Scripture or tradition, God or Trinity, depends on what experience one appeals to as analogous, we will have to get beyond concepts to the underlying bodily experience if our interpretation is to be authentic. Focusing is an excellent way to this bodily experience.

This means, secondly, that the body is far more important than Western theology or spirituality has conceded. The negative attitude of Western Christianity toward the body is not biblical. The authors of Scripture saw the human person as embodied. It was the Greeks and the Fathers influenced by Greek philosophy who distinguished between body and spirit in a way that contributed to our modern separation of body and spirit. The evangelists believed in the resurrection of *body*, not just the immortality of the soul (a Greek notion), and they came to see this resurrection as already active in believers. That means that our bodily existence is already being transformed through the Spirit of Jesus' resurrection, and that the believer can touch this Spirit at the depth of inner experience and in the bond of love uniting believers.

Thirdly, however, a caution is needed. Is there such a thing as noninterpreted experience? Or is the interpretation or symbol that arises spontaneously from one's unconscious a final criterion of meaning? It seems already to be a theological option to believe in a universal unity of cosmic process grounding bodily awareness. One may believe, as Jung seems to have done following Kant, that one's experience of God is uniquely individual, and that a "common unity" would only reduce people to a low common denominator. Or regarding death, the body may, as the authors suggest, have intimations of existence beyond death, or it may lead others of a more existentialist bent to see death as a barrier to be faced with Stoic heroism.

Does bodily experience move one decisively to either option? Is it not rather a prior faith or conversion that moves one to interpret bodily experience in one or the other way? What the authors present seems already to be based on a Christian option for universal salvation or an oriental view of the unity of all being. The basis of that option is not simply bodily awareness of spirit, as important as that may be. As Christians, the authors believe in the resurrected Lordship of Jesus and the Spirit as potentially universal. The Zen Buddhist or Hindu Advaitist believes in the nonduality of all experience as revealed through enlightenment. These basic conversions color each one's bodily awareness as well as being affected by that awareness. Ultimately everyone uses some norm to interpret experience, and experience in turn affects the understanding of the norm.

Finally, for the Christian that norm is the person and life-death-resurrection of Jesus Christ. What effect would this specifically Christian perspective have on spiritual focusing? What importance does focusing then have? It would seem to be a very significant way of becoming aware of one's unique embodied being in the here and now in dialogue with the normative Spirit of Jesus' life. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius lead the exercitant into contemplations of the mysteries of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and ask the person to "draw fruit," that is, to bring the Spirit of Jesus' life into dialogue with one's own life. Focusing seems ideally suited to complement such a process, that is, to bring the uniqueness of one's own spiritual process into dialogue with Jesus' life. One's felt-sense gives rise to an image or word which releases a shift of perspective or energy. For the Christian, the deepest meaning of this shift is that it transforms believers into the image of God revealed in the Spirit of Jesus' life. Thus, if one related one's experience to the scriptural portrait of Jesus, one would not only gain new insight into Jesus' life, but also illumine and energize one's own life in a new way.

Without saying it, the authors have used a similar method of correlation by using Judaeo-Christian Scripture to help illumine focusing, and by using focusing to open new meanings of Scripture. All I would add is the interpersonal dimension—the dialogue with the person and life of Jesus and the persons of the Trinity which is at the heart of Christian spirituality. Other religious traditions would find other meanings, but openness to experience as basic to dialogue would lead each tradition to respect the process of the others and thus lead to a pluralistic unity analogous to the cosmic unity envisioned in the book. Spiritual focusing would thus open each of us to the excitement of seeing our lives unfold in a common spirit, which the Christian would see as rooted in the one Spirit of Jesus who also reveals the Father's love. Focusing does not interpret itself, but it may well be an important key to unlock the mysteries of God's work in the depth of creation and in each individual, revealed in Jesus' life and Spirit and ever unfolding in human evolution.

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Preface

Many years ago, Carl Jung noted something that continues to intrigue us. Writing of Western society's desperate need for a more integral spiritual discipline he made the following observation:

No insight is gained . . . by imitating methods which have grown up under totally different psychological conditions. In the course of the centuries the West will produce its own yoga and it will be on the basis laid down by Christianity.¹

We have often wondered whether such an event might occur within our lifetime. Would we be fortunate enough to experience an emerging Western “yoga,” some integral expression of our own culture and spirit that might lead us home to ourselves?

Throughout the past decade, bits and pieces of a potential orientation have gradually fallen into place for us. All the data, obviously, has not yet come in. Much emerges not from religious sources but from the human

sciences. It is there that our Western appreciation of bodily felt awareness has been prized more than anywhere else.

At the same time, we have found buried within the Judaeo-Christian tradition some neglected and little used information that may well unlock the secret of consciousness evolution. In this book we plan to describe certain teachings from this ancient heritage which contain clues about the nature of consciousness and its evolution. These clues are equally applicable to non-Christians as well as to Christians *when they can be approached out of a bodily-felt perspective*. That perceptual shift makes all the difference. It opens a refreshing new direction for anyone interested in spirituality.

The approach to bodily awareness which we describe in the following pages is called "Focusing." It was originated by Dr. Eugene Gendlin at the University of Chicago. Part of our book describes the practical details of how we teach Focusing. But our main point is to demonstrate that what began as a purely therapeutic tool has the potential to become a widespread and accessible spiritual path for ordinary people during the 1980s and beyond.

We have sought to avoid the denominational and dogmatic in what you are about to read. Our work responds to an invitation which Dr. James Fadiman, then president of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology, made several years ago. He asked us to find within the Judaeo-Christian tradition clues that might support Transpersonal Psychology's effort to enlarge and understand the human person and the growth process.

Putting all this together, we have tried in what follows to reach out toward those whom Abraham Maslow has described as "Serious Seekers." Denominational affiliation or lack thereof is not the primary issue. Rather, we address the quest for a psychologically sound, practical approach to an embodied spirituality. One that acknowledges a deeper *felt sense* for ultimate meaning.

The purpose of this book, which has taken twelve years of research, writing, and personal experience to complete, is to make some contribution toward developing a new paradigm for Western spirituality. Not a paradigm of all-encompassing theoretical synthesis, but a transformed way of being in and experiencing ourselves.

There is mystery within bodily knowing. Metamorphosis occurs when we can be faithful to the depth of ourselves. This book is about the journey toward such faithfulness, and about the body of felt experiencing within which it occurs.

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was their key. It was a lookout point from which to peer into the soul of a vast, unspoken civilization.

The inward journey outlined in this book may be compared to the first steps in a venture that can lead not merely into the mysteries of another culture; it can be an opening forward as the human species prepares for the next phase of consciousness evolution itself!

Yet, there are still more parallels in this journey with the finding of the Rosetta Stone. There are significant clues about what lies ahead within human unfolding. A superb humanistic vision can light our way on this journey into ourselves. Much of the revelation about what it means to be human, however, lies coded within the wisdom tradition of world religions. There is a silent treasure there hidden beneath centuries of neglect and misinterpretation.

This book grew from searching, searching for a practical way to enter ordinary living so the meaning of being human and being uniquely oneself might lead each of us forward into the mystery of some larger Awareness. These pages will attempt to describe the ingredients of a lived spirituality which actually facilitates change. We are not concerned with change in the realm of religious *ideas*. Rather, we look toward a transformation which will support human wholeness as this can unfold within a greater organismic evolution—a growing cosmic congruence.

This is not, therefore, a collection of denominational religious teachings or truths. We describe, instead, a quality of human consciousness, a lifestyle wherein an awareness potential of *the body* is absolutely indispensable for spiritual knowing. We call this capacity for more integral presence *bio-spirituality*.

Once our entire consciousness is encouraged to open and mature, then the root of our biological connectedness to some vast Process of Unification can gradually reveal itself within our daily lives. There is an awareness within our bodies that leads beyond ourselves. A bio-conscious-

ness. Bio-presence. It does not confine us to what we can figure out and control with our minds, but it turns, instead, toward *an openness* within bodily knowing.

Whether we choose to recognize it or not, each of us is an integral living cell within the evolution of some Larger Body Process. The maturation of this awareness, however, does not occur by reason of what we *do*, but by virtue of a wholeness we *allow* to break through inside our selves. Unity within the human family, our planet, and some greater cosmic congruence matures inside the knowing that is proper to our bodies. It is not so much thinking as *resonance*. The tuning fork of evolution strikes an inviting chord within the organicity of ourselves.

In the pages which follow we would like to share the beginnings of a bio-spiritual treasure hunt. It is a journey which has drawn the two of us into a dramatic new perspective on the mysteries and revelation contained within our own religious tradition. Certain clues within the Judeo-Christian heritage have opened for us a challenging new way to look at the bio-spiritual implications of *human development itself!*

We believe a time has come in human history, if for no other reason than for the survival of life on our planet, when we must turn our energy and our priorities toward encouraging just such consciousness-potential. We need to find simple, practical ways to support this humanizing capability within millions of people so that an experience of planetary unity may be revealed.

People blocked from growth cannot assimilate the crucial, life-saving data that lies hidden beneath their narrow and limited perception. When personal meaning becomes unblocked, however, they can often be freed from the fear and defensiveness which so often lead to violence.

In this book we want to share with you, our reader, a mode of self-awareness which offers an exciting and significant step toward developing a bio-spirituality that responds to these critical needs. We describe what we feel