

THE PINK SILK ARROW: A VISIBLY BIG CHANGE FROM FOCUSING

by Ann Weiser Cornell

This year, 2012, I joyfully celebrate my 40th anniversary with Focusing. The gifts I have received from Focusing are very many, from the little shifts I get every day to the really huge transformations that have changed my life. One example: it was through Focusing that my writer's block released. That was truly a gift, a gift of my own life path, because writing is what I love. And now writing is easy. (I tell the story of my writer's block transformation in *The Power of Focusing*, pp. 57-59.)

In this article I want to tell about another big transformation that I got from Focusing, just last year. This one is especially striking because anyone looking at me now can see the transformation that happened... and people often do remark on it!

It all started when I got a feeling that becoming a public speaker would be a next step on my life path. I could spread the wonderful message of Focusing, and enjoy myself, because I love speaking in public. It felt like a natural next step. I took a great training program for speakers (www.speakingcircles.com), but I didn't know how to go about getting myself actually out there on the speaking circuit. So I bought a book of advice for would-be speakers, and started to read. Here is what I found:

Before you open your mouth, you have already delivered your first message. Will your audience perceive you as attractive and successful – someone they want to emulate? ... Does your visual message match the fabulous speech or workshop you have so carefully prepared? (Hurley-Traylor, 2011)

I closed the book right there, and said, "Forget it." The image that rose in my mind when I read those words was as far from me as the moon. It seemed *impossible* that I would ever be comfortable wearing nice clothes and looking professional. I had no doubt that the author was correct – but to me it meant the door to public speaking was closed.

My relationship with wearing "nice" clothes had always been a troubled one. I hated clothes shopping and would feel judged by just walking into a clothing store, as if the clothes themselves were criticizing me. "Nice" clothes felt stiff and uncomfortable; I could only relax in casual clothes. The same was true of hair and makeup. I must have had dozens of makeup lessons over the years, and none of them ever "took" – the new makeup supplies I bought each time languished in a drawer unused, and eventually were thrown away. Wearing makeup and nice clothes always felt like wearing a mask – "Not me." This had been true forever and it was simply a fact. If changing this was what it would take to be a public speaker, then forget being a public speaker, it ain't ever going to happen.

Except I didn't forget it. In August of that year, a few months later, I remembered it again. That was when Barbara McGavin and I were together in the Netherlands teaching our six-day Treasure Maps to the Soul retreat.

Treasure Maps to the Soul

Treasure Maps to the Soul is a methodology of theory and practice that applies Focusing to difficult, hard-to-change life areas. Barbara and I developed this methodology as a way to apply Focusing to the tangled life issues that we were facing, including “action blocks, addiction to alcohol, addiction to eating for comfort, and obsessive longing” (McGavin & Cornell, 2008). Although initially the work was for our own healing, we soon began receiving requests to teach it to others. At the same time that our own issues began to untangle, we began teaching the Treasure Maps to the Soul process in six-day retreats. The process has developed and elaborated quite a lot over the past 18 years, and a description of it is beyond the scope of this article; see McGavin & Cornell (2008) for an introduction to the key concepts.

The Treasure Maps to the Soul six-day workshop is structured as a journey; each day’s Focusing process builds on the day before, moving from identifying the Tangle, to gathering resources, to shifting one’s relationship to warring parts, to holding it all from a new perspective.

When Barbara and I teach Treasure Maps to the Soul, we lead the way with our own Focusing. We each choose a real issue to work with in front of the group for the week. Over the years, with lots of Treasure Maps Focusing, it has become harder and harder for us to find tangled life issues to bring to the retreat. Life feels pretty good! Luckily, moving forward brings its own new issues. (Someone once asked Gene Gendlin, in a workshop, “If I do enough Focusing, will I be so healthy that I have no more problems?” Gene replied: “Health is not *no* problems, health is *new* problems.”) The issue about changing my relationship with nice clothes, hair, and makeup was a good example of an issue that wouldn’t even have come up if I hadn’t resolved a lot of other issues first.



Ann at the workshop in the Netherlands, August 2011

The Tangle

This article is supposed to be about one life-changing Focusing session – and it will be. But there were also a number of sessions leading up to the life-changing one. That is important to say, because one Focusing session never takes place in a vacuum. Even if your life-changing

Focusing session is your first encounter with Focusing, you did other kinds of growth processes leading up to that one. A life-changing Focusing session is always the culmination of a series of steps of change.

In the Treasure Maps journey, each person starts the week with what we call a “Tangle.” By our definition, a Tangle is a kind of problem that resists change and cannot be resolved at the same level that we encounter it. It’s the kind of problem where whatever we try seems to fail, and years can go by with no perceptible progress.

This issue with my image, appearance, clothes, hair, makeup, etc. was definitely a Tangle. It had all the indicators. So that was the issue that I decided to spend the week Focusing on.

The first exercise in Treasure Maps is designed to help one get in contact with a Tangle and take a few Focusing steps into deeper contact with it. We have participants do an exercise in pairs which involves completing unfinished sentences from an inner sense of the Tangle.

Here is the exercise:

It has to do with _____

What happens is _____

I should or should not _____

It also connects with _____

How it feels in my body is _____

It’s a whole thing about _____

As I sat with Barbara at the front of the room, ready to do this exercise in front of the group as a demonstration, I could feel a draggy, hopeless, this-will-never-change feeling about this Tangle. I could feel the impulse to switch to something easier, something less weighted with shame and hopelessness. But I have learned to trust the process, and to trust my beloved Focusing partner whose trust in the process sustains me even when I can’t trust it myself.

And if it got to be too much, I knew I could always stop.

“*It has to do with* wearing nice clothes, having nice hair, wearing makeup, feeling like that’s not me and it never will be, so I can’t move into those public roles where people do that.

“*What happens is* I go into clothing stores and I can’t stand being there, it’s like the clothes are criticizing me, so I just don’t go.

“*I should* get over this. *I should* be able to wear whatever fits the situation and be comfortable that way.

“*It also connects with* how I feel about myself, whether it is OK to be seen... can I be myself in public... something in me afraid of being judged in a larger world.

“*How it feels in my body is* tense... uneasy... especially in my stomach... wanting to hide or escape...

“*It’s a whole thing about* being myself in the world.”

At the end of the process – which took about fifteen minutes – I opened my eyes and smiled at Barbara. I felt lighter, more solid, more hopeful. From one perspective nothing had changed – yet something had changed. And the journey had begun.

Gathering Resources

The next step in the journey is to gather resources. The key resource for transformational Focusing is being able to *be with* how we feel instead of being sunk or caught up in our

emotional material. Barbara and I call this being “Self-in-Presence.” Without the resource of being Self-in-Presence, Tangles will never change.

Self-in-Presence is the ability to be with whatever is coming up for us – emotions, thoughts, warring parts – without getting caught up in the struggle. As Self-in-Presence, we hold a compassionate space of empathy and compassion for our inner experience. (See McGavin & Cornell 2008 for a discussion of ways to cultivate Self-in-Presence.)

For the next stage of my Focusing with my Tangle about “being myself in the world,” I took care to cultivate Self-in-Presence with the various aspects of my Tangle. One powerful and essential way we do this is to use “Presence language,” for example: “I am sensing *something in me* feels hopeless about this issue ever changing.”

I took time to feel the difference it made in my body when I was able to turn toward these various parts and aspects. In Treasure Maps we call this *being the space*. Within a Focusing process, I say the words: “I am the space where all of this can be as it is.” Then I take time to feel that in my body, and find words and images that describe it. “Solid, supported, strong, spacious, calm...” were some of the words that came. An image was: “Planted, rooted, like a tree.”

Shifting One’s Relationship with Warring Parts

In the Treasure Maps theory, Tangles are conflictual relationships among partial-selves (“parts”) that have arisen around a stoppage of life-forward energy. After connecting with a Tangle, and gathering the resource of Self-in-Presence, the next step is to start to identify and connect with the major players – the parts that are clashing in the Tangle.

“Parts work” is an important aspect of Treasure Maps to the Soul. We share with methods such as Internal Family Systems (Schwartz 1995) the working model of human beings as systems of parts, or, as we prefer to call them, “partial selves.” We differ from Schwartz and other parts work modalities in that we see parts as temporary stoppages of the flow of life-forward energy. We are careful to speak and work in a way that builds relationships with parts as long as they are there, but leaves open the possibility that parts evolve and dissolve as the Focusing goes forward. (For example, we use behavior descriptions instead of fixed terms to refer to partial selves: not “the inner critic” but “a part that is criticizing right now.”)

In my Tangle about wearing nice clothes and “being myself in the world,” I had a part that just didn’t want to do it, didn’t want to deal with the whole thing about clothes. I had another part that was judgmental of me for not having resolved the whole clothes and appearance thing.

For my next Treasure Maps Focusing session (accompanied by Barbara, in front of the group) I took time to acknowledge and get the body feel of the warring parts in my Tangle. There was a heavy, sad, scared feeling at the pit of my stomach, and I was drawn to be with that. Staying with it, I could feel that *something in me* was pulled in, not wanting to be hurt. I sensed what kind of contact it needed from me, and it needed me to stay close but not push.

Over the next twenty minutes a story unfolded. This inner place showed me memories from when I was eight years old, going to a new school in a rural area and being met with mockery and ridicule for my clothes and behavior. I gave the eight-year-old part of me lots of empathy for how hard that had been – when all she had wanted was to make friends and be accepted. After a while the body feelings eased and got lighter – and a new insight followed. “It

wasn't personal; they would have treated any outsider that way." Somehow that was a shift.

There were other sessions that week, exploring different sides and aspects of the Tangle. After each one, there was some change, deeper breath, some relief. Gendlin (1990) writes about "steps of change." We don't always know what it is that brings the change, but the body tells us, through relief and release, that something has happened. As the week went on, it became clearer that the desire to speak in public was a desire that brought joy to my whole being.

Holding It All – The Pink Silk Arrow

Now at last we come to the remarkable, transformative session that this article is about. This was the culmination of the week's journey with Treasure Maps Focusing, the last morning, a sunny day in the cozy library of Woodbrookershuis in Barchem, the Netherlands. The group was relaxed and eager for the last day's Focusing. I felt warmly held by their attention and of course by Barbara's steady, skillful companionship.

The final exercise we offer in the Treasure Maps process is one we call "Holding It All." This is one we've developed just in the last few years, when we realized that we needed a final step to the process that gave full scope to the "level-shifting" qualities of getting a felt sense. After all the work with parts, this exercise invites a a fresh felt sense of the whole Tangle.

Our close study of Gendlin has led to a realization that the key moment of change in Focusing is the *forming* of the felt sense. This has not been widely understood; many people have assumed that the felt sense is a bodily expression of the problem, and the change comes with the "felt shift." But Gendlin clearly states in a number of places (1) that the felt sense is not just any body sensation but rather the *freshly forming whole sense* that is invited in a pause, and (2) that the forming of the felt sense *is already the change*.

When the [felt sense] forms, one has lived past the stoppage. Now one formulates what the problem was in a new way. One formulates the problem in a world in which the problem is solved, in a context changed by that solving. One cannot always instantly speak and act so as to resolve the situation. But any speech or action now [that the felt sense has formed] instances the solution, and feels right. They will change the situation so a new action becomes possible." – Gendlin (1997) p. 236

I give the credit for identifying this key point and for creating this exercise to Barbara McGavin, who leads the way in so much of our work both in practice and in theory. That August morning I got to experience the full impact of this exercise – which is, as you will see, a quintessential Focusing process.

Gathering my resources at the start, I refreshed my sense of Self-in-Presence: felt the contact of my body on the chair, enjoying that sense of support. I said out loud: "I am the space for all that wants to come about this whole thing." Then I *gathered* – both remembering and sensing – all the elements and aspects of the issue with clothes and being myself in the world. I sensed the Tangle as it is now, and invited a *fresh felt sense* to form.

In the middle area of my body, *something* began to be there. The instruction in the exercise was “Let it be there without words at first,” and that was helpful, because there were certainly no words... except perhaps the word “something.”

I took time. I let *it* take time. I could feel that slowly it was taking form into something that could be described. “It’s like a cushion... It’s like an arrow... It’s like a cushion in the shape of an arrow, pointed forward... It’s a pink silk arrow-shaped cushion, it’s a pink silk cushioned arrow, pointing ahead.” Getting this description brought an enormous sense of relief and elation. I loved my pink silk arrow-cushion! Where had it come from? Who could have invented it? It was certainly not from logic or thinking! My body had formed this, from all that was included in the whole issue about clothes and being myself in the world, from all the processes that had gone on up until this moment, and the inner sense of what could happen next. It was a beautiful moment. And there was more.

Barbara as my Focusing Companion helped me acknowledge and take time for this body feeling of a pink silk cushioned arrow, and enjoy and savor how good it felt to have it come. Then she asked if I would be ready for another invitation. “Sure,” I said.

“You might sense,” she said slowly, “what feels possible now that wasn’t possible before.”

Even before I tried doing what she suggested, I could feel it was the perfect invitation. There was an inner “yes” at even being given that invitation. I paused... making sure that I was sensing inside instead of answering “from the head.” Here is what came:

“I could go into a clothing store – and be curious.”

I acknowledged that, enjoyed the sense of rightness that came with it, and thanked my body. And that was the end of the session.

What Happened Then

The rest of that day, and the next day, and the next, nothing was outwardly different. I had enjoyed the process and I let it go. I didn’t know what would happen, and I didn’t worry.

It was when I got home again that things began to change. I asked a close friend if she would go shopping with me, and we went to a mall near her home. I looked for stores that fit me. The first store I went into, I could tell just by walking once through that these styles were not for me, so we left. I had no feeling of being judged by the clothes, just “these are not for me.” In the next store, I was drawn to some colors and styles. I tried on a suit in a fabric that was really enjoyable to touch... liked it... bought it.

The next weekend, I got a feeling about a shopping area in a different town, a sense I might find something there. Again I asked my friend to go with me, and we visited a few different boutiques before we found one that really clicked. The styles, colors, and fabrics spoke to me. There was also a very helpful store employee. I walked out of there that day with ten items, feeling elated. All of them were flowing, comfortable, stylish, and suitable to wear on stage.

I found myself asking inside, what hairstyle I was drawn to. I asked a client if I could take a photo of her haircut, and she consented. I noticed on TV what styles I liked, clipped pictures from magazines. I took all this with me on my next visit to my hair stylist – and she pulled it all together into a cut that worked for me.

I felt moved to ask my daughter if she would go with me to buy makeup. We ended up at Bloomingdales in a mall near her apartment. With her help, I stayed close to what worked for me and what I was likely to actually use. Again, I found a really helpful saleswoman. The makeup I bought that day has been well-used, hasn't just stayed in the back of a drawer.

About three months into this process, I went to the Second Focusing-Oriented Therapy Conference in New York (November 2011). I wore my flowing clothes and makeup, new shoes and jewelry. Most of all, I had the inner sense of fun, enjoyment, elation at being myself meeting the world. It was remarkable the reactions I got from people who had known me for years. Heads were turning, mouths were dropping open. Most people thought I had lost weight. (I had not, but a few months later I dropped 20 pounds as part of the continuing process.) There is a video online of a clip of me speaking at that conference, made by Nada Lou – you can see for yourself how I looked (Cornell 2011).

In May 2012 I was a keynote speaker at a day-long conference for psychotherapists in New York. A photo was snapped by one of my co-presenters. The invitation to present at this conference had come two months after my transformative Focusing session.



Ann speaks at NYU to a conference of psychoanalysts, May 2012

Inner Change, Flowing Action

The point I would make about this change is something Barbara and I have observed about change from Focusing in general. After the inner change, outer action comes in a flowing sequence. There is not a knowing in advance exactly what will happen. If plans are made, they are plans for a next step, not for the whole process that will unfold. We know – if we know anything – what will come next, but not what will come after that.

When action comes – like asking a friend to go shopping – it is not a struggle, not a big deal. It doesn't have angst attached, because it is just this action. This is the action that feels possible, and taking this action makes the next action possible. I don't have to know the whole sequence – and in fact I cannot know it.

Another notable characteristic of the post-transformation change process is how often other people are involved – both people already known, and people one meets serendipitously. I “found myself” asking a friend to go shopping with me, and in the process met a helpful saleswoman. This kind of thing happened repeatedly, in fact.

Action that feels unforced, that emerges one step at a time, and that involves other people in roles of support and partnership – these qualities are what we have come to expect after transformative Focusing sessions.

The feeling is of being in a flow. Actions don't have to be “decided on.” They simply occur. Phrases like “I found myself...”, “I felt drawn to...”, “I felt moved...” occur in the descriptions of these actions. In our experience this is usually what the flowing action after a Focusing transformation feels like. Not “I resolved to –” or “I decided to –” but rather “I found myself...” taking the action. Certainly there is a sense of agency and responsibility; I am not just floating along. But there is not a sense of struggle, of having to decide and then do. There is a notion, then there is the action. What is notably absent is the struggle. Life opens, and I – interacting with others – flow forward.

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