

The 'Victim', the 'Critic' and the Inner Relationship: *Focusing with the Part that Wants to Die*

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I first remember wanting to die when I was about six. And while my attempts were doomed to failure – holding one's breath or attempting to smother oneself with a pillow doesn't work very well, and perhaps was less than whole hearted (thank god) – there was within the attempting a sense of there being no hope of real love or contact or understanding from my parents. There was a deep sense that I could not and never would be OK. And I wanted to die – it seemed the only hope of escape from something that was unbearable and would continue forever.

To survive, I stopped trying to be really me and acted more and more the way they wanted me to be. I turned away, locking my heart away, the essential me always out of reach. Throughout the years that followed, there was respite from these feelings of hopeless despair. Being involved in outer activities distracted me and were even enjoyable in their own right. But I can sense how I was never fully connected with my riding or painting or reading or singing or piano playing. There was always a gap between the 'real' me – it feels like a physical disconnection at my navel – and the me who was enjoying all these activities. I could not risk exposing myself. By really being committed to something and putting my heart into it, I risked having the heart of me destroyed. By revealing my enthusiasm for something, really caring about anything or anybody, I was vulnerable to attack. And my father was master of the art of crushing an idea or a feeling or an enthusiasm with just a look or a simple dismissive comment.

I mastered my defense; if I didn't really care about anything, nothing he said could really reach me and I couldn't be destroyed. And life went grey. It has taken me years to realize that the breakdown that I had when I was fifteen, makes sense. I was not crazy or bad or inadequate. I made the only choice that I could have made and still stayed alive. I can feel the contempt my father had for me during this time. There was something wrong with me. I was not OK. Even through my seeing a child psychiatrist (who was a nice man but totally useless -- writing this brings tears, as I realize that he was perhaps the first person in years who just let me be without any pressure to speak or explain myself or be different), there was this weight from my father of wanting me fixed, wanting me different, a silent critical, contemptuous, hateful push, push, push...

When I was eighteen I went to another psychiatrist. I was having nightmares and couldn't sleep, I had outbursts of rage, including more than once when I attacked my father and would happily have killed him. I still remember the extreme anger that I felt when I said that my mother was unhappy and the psychiatrist replied, "Don't you think that your mother is happy and it is you who is unhappy?" Years later I found out that only a few months earlier my mother had tried to commit suicide. I felt so unheard; even my grasp of reality was being questioned. I felt so scared that I was

'going crazy' and this person was only intensifying that. And my father and mother were treating me as if I was sick, that it was all me. The sense of shit inside was so strong, and my sense that I could cope with life was so weak. Thoughts of suicide were with me almost constantly.

By the time I was 21, I was convinced that I was useless and was never going to be able to amount to anything. I was weak, crazy, incompetent, lazy, contempt was too good for me. Worms had more value. I was enrolled in a horticultural course at a local college. To get there meant traveling across town every morning (two buses and the subway). There was a railway bridge that we went over and every time we passed it I fantasized throwing myself off. Traveling the subway became more and more difficult. I hugged the wall in fear. There was such a strong feeling that if I let go even for a minute, I would find myself under the wheels of the train. The struggle between the part that wanted to die and the part that wanted to live was so intense. And the part that wanted to die was getting stronger and stronger. (Although this was not how I experienced it at the time. It just felt like it was only a matter of days before I would jump.) I am very clear that if I had not read a small notice on the board at the college that I would not be here today. It was for the counseling service, open Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons between 2 and 4. It was 2:30 on Tuesday afternoon. A small, dark, bearded, smiling Jewish man came forward when I asked for Jan Shoicet and my journey back to myself began.

Although the changes that happened through the therapy that I entered at that time were helpful and the thoughts of suicide receded and good feelings about being alive grew, my sense of myself as being OK at the core remained very fragile.

After the birth of my daughter, with my relationship with my husband mired in our collective psychological shit, suicide felt more and more like the only way of releasing me from what felt like unbearable pain, impossible impasse. I just didn't feel that I was strong enough to keep on enduring. So, I ignored the future and concentrated on one day, one hour at a time. And slept as much as possible. And then a little book turned up. I read it and part of me prayed that what it said was true. And whole heaps of me said, "Don't get your hopes up. You've done Primal Therapy, Gestalt, Bio-energetics, Polarity Therapy, Pulsing, Psychodrama, Psychosynthesis, Assertiveness Training... and none of them has really hit the mark. All the wonderful promises of this and that have turned out to be hollow, or at least things that happen for others and not for you. You're too damaged ever to be OK. So don't hold your breath on this one either." So you can imagine my relief when something shifted, really shifted for the first time, when I did Focusing, and I found that I felt lighter, and there was real movement, and I felt more like me. And it felt real all the way through – it had happened to me too! Focusing was not just a bundle of false hopes and empty promises. It was the genuine article, the real McCoy. And here, right in here, almost right away there was this sense of a me that was OK, not my problems, not my shit.

One thing that bothered me through the years that followed was that there were still periods, even very recently, where the part of me that wanted to die was still very strong – where I would be very close to being completely immersed in feeling that my essential inadequacy was the reason that I was not able to solve some problem in my life. I would wonder: am I really not OK? Is it the Focusing process? Is it the way that

I am doing it?

It may seem obvious to others that my feelings of wanting to die are directly linked to being under internal attack, but it has taken years for me to make that connection. For a long time I was really confused as to how to recognize my critic, even after reading the many articles in TFC. I didn't really hear words, my critic didn't speak to me.

After many years of Focusing, I have become aware of the signs of being under attack. It is more like recognizing the attacker's spoor. Some of the signs are: when I feel really shitty in my middle for no apparent reason; when I start to feel that I have to hide my feelings or behave differently; when I feel shame. These first three are the clearest and most reliable indicators for me; I know I am under attack for sure. Also: when I find it hard to summon up enough energy to tackle the ordinary tasks of life, when I feel that I want to withdraw from people, when I feel really critical of others, when I feel that my house is not clean enough, when I feel I am not giving my daughter enough attention, when I feel I am not doing enough, when I feel I am letting the people in the British Focusing Network down because I am late with the newsletter, again! All of these are signs that now have me checking the undergrowth.

While it has always been clear that being identified with the critic or with the feelings that the critic brings are not helpful, just putting them to one side has also been more than unhelpful. It has kept me stuck in the past, repeating the old patterns over and over again, sometimes with close to fatal results. When I put them to one side, without their being really experienced and worked through, they just creep back and reemerge later. For years, I was really unclear about just what I needed to do to release this impasse. I tried Ann's three-step process with the critic, I tried Gene's suggestions, I tried sensing what the critic was trying to do for me, I tried backing up and sensing the new life. But none of them really got to it.

This next bit is the most important bit of all. These two kinds of inner experience, being identified with the critic or with the feelings that come when under attack, are perhaps the most difficult to not wind up either dissociating from or identifying with. The way that keeps me from collapsing into the experience or running from it is the same as with anything else that comes: relationship. When I can build a relationship, I can stay there and sense it directly in my body without becoming identified. It has become very clear to me that if the parts of me that criticize and attack me and the parts that suffer from this attack are not sensed in the same way as anything else that comes, with the same kind of relationship of being with, then they will never have the opportunity to be healed. 'They that are abused, hurt, violated, rejected, misunderstood, criticized, want to die' and 'they that have taken on the fear, un-lived, unhealed parts of my parents and the world and abuse me', will continue to act out, undermining my life and my sense of OK until I directly sense in my body the quality of how that whole thing is. I need to sense the place that has been attacked, just how it is for that part and I need to sense the place that is attacking, just how it is for that part. They need to be heard, sensed, allowed to say just how bad it is, and just exactly how it is that bad for them. That is what they want from me. Then there is real movement. And real grief, and real rage, and real regret and sorrow, and fear, and lots and lots more.

It is essential that my relationship is real, that I don't pretend that I am feeling loving

when part of me is hostile and rejecting. If I ask myself 'How friendly am I feeling towards what has come?' then I can sense all the complex and ambivalent feelings that come, and they can all have space. I have found that asking 'Am I feeling friendly?' has an implicit skew towards feeling I should feel friendly. That doesn't seem to happen when I phrase it the first way. I have feelings around the word Survivor. My insides do not want to identify with 'survivor' any more than victim – although I was certainly abused and I survived the experiences. To call myself a Survivor feels like stepping back into the straight-jacket of the past, identifying with my experiences of being a victim rather than being with them. My insides also object to capitalizing Victim and Survivor. When they become named like that they solidify into static structure-bound objects and I stop sensing them directly.

What I can say with clarity and strength is, "I survived. I am aware of the strength and courage that I needed to find within myself to stay alive. I am aware of how hard it was to choose to live. I am aware of how sometimes it felt like cowardice not to kill myself. I am aware of how much pain and isolation I endured. I can really sense that part, and I can let it know that I can feel just how horrible it was. I can feel just how much that part wanted to die, over and over and over again." And I say to that part: "This is hard to say, because there is a part of me that would like you to feel differently, but I promise you that you can stay just the way you are for as long as you need. I will not pressure you to change, or feel differently or be different in any way. I will do my best to make a space where you can change, when and if you are ready in the way that you want to and hear what you need heard and support you in the ways that you need." When I make a promise like that to part of me, then it is easier to make that space and defend it from further attack. And, of course, the parts of me that feel hostile need hearing and defending too – they don't have to change how they feel either.

It has taken years of Focusing (I began in '83) for me to really be grounded in that experience of being the part that is OK. Through my struggles with making distance with something when I was learning Clearing A Space, I have learned to respect my body's need to have me stay with something right now. I have learned to be gentle and compassionate to what comes, to hear its fears that I might abandon it or want to fix and change and deny it. I have learned that something comes as pain when I am trying to ignore it. I have learned that if I can let it know that I hear it and that I want it to be there and to know what it is that it is longing to tell me, that it will ease and then we can just be together for as long as it needs. If I can tell it that it can be there just as it is for the rest of my life if it needs to, (and, of course, mean it) then it can trust me and it can come forward, and let me know what it needs to have heard. And if I can really just hear what it needs to have heard, it changes and moves and I am no longer the same.

It has taken me the best part of twenty years to make a separation between me and the part that wants to die and the part that wants to kill me. I don't want to deny them any more, that is really important. And I don't want to identify or be identified with them any more either. Until now, I could not have spoken of my feelings of wanting to die openly. Only a very few people have ever known about these feelings at all. Although I understood how other people might want to commit suicide and I never felt critical

of them, I felt that people would think I was weak and sick and crazy and despise me for such feelings (as my parents did). People would pity and look down on me. Or even worse, would shy away from me. They would somehow see me and treat me differently if they knew this about me. And I can sense that for some part of me this is still how it is. I can still feel that fear tightening in my stomach. I really don't want people to pity me, or to see me as psychologically fragile or damaged. I'm not. I am actually so strong now that I can be with these parts and love them just as they are for as long as they need. Writing this has helped me to clarify where I am on this journey – and to make several important steps along the way. One of the most important is to come out of the closet about all of this and still love myself. Perhaps even more important, to sense me as essentially strong and whole. Maybe I'll even find that others still see me as strong and capable and fundamentally OK and love me too. As I write this I see the faces of my dear friends all over the world, and feel your love and know that you do.