

*

Transforming Fear: What We Can Learn from Some People with Cancer

Joan Klagsbrun, Ph.D.

The Folio: A Journal for Focusing and Experiential
Psychotherapy (Vol. 20, No. 1, 2007)

Facing 9/11

I had heard the news earlier in the day. Now the media's new understanding was that this was an attack and not an accident. Many of my clients arrived in states of full anxiety and speculation; others simply cancelled. As I listened to the reports on a radio my level of fear grew. By one p.m. the sense of horror and helplessness was palpable.

I came to the waiting room to find Jody, whom I instinctively knew would show up for therapy. She came every week at this time and I knew that she had her chemotherapy infusion scheduled for an hour after our meeting. We hugged each other in the way that people did that day, full of grief and fear and a stunned sense that we were in the midst of a collective nightmare.

As she entered my office she took a tissue from the table, dabbed her eyes and suddenly blurted out, "Well, I must say this all feels quite familiar to me. Today the whole country knows what it feels like *every* day when you have cancer." I asked her to say more. She looked down at her hands, which were clenched together. "It feels familiar to be so vulnerable and helpless and...scared about all the implications. So we have to reach out." "I called both my kids, and my husband at work," she added, "did you call yours?" I nodded, almost unwittingly. I had felt an urgent need to hear my son's and my husband's voices just to reassure me they were all right. "This is so scary" she said, in almost a whisper.

Jody was referring both to the events of that day and to the terrible uncertainty and fear that she had experienced with her two recurrences of breast cancer. She was also referring to the way that reaching out to others seemed to mitigate the fear. Now she thought other Americans were experiencing on a visceral level the fear that she lived with daily, and which had violently overturned the normalcy of her life, as 9/11 did for many of us. She was a veteran in this territory of intense fear, where so many of us were novices.

Fear and Process Skipping

I realized in the months that followed how much Jody and other people with cancer had to teach us about living with fear. Through the intensity of their fears, like those experienced by people right after 9/11, these patients had practice and skill in transforming stark and pervasive anxiety. Now, six years later, with color-coded risk levels, an invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, genocide in Darfur, the threat of nuclear proliferation, and war in the Mideast, it seems that we have become inured to high levels of fear. It is crucial that we again remember those lessons about how to be with the experience of fear.

Many of us have difficulty dealing with fear in a constructive way. We armor ourselves against fear rather than sit down with it and listen to it. As the level of fear rises, we respond by armoring ourselves more strongly. Often, we try to distance ourselves from our fears through what Ed McMahon, Ph.D. calls “process skipping,” an unconscious psychological habit. Process skipping is a mechanism by which we numb ourselves against feelings that are unpleasant. As soon as we feel the discomfort of feeling scared, we typically occupy ourselves with distracting activities that suppress that unpleasant feeling. In many ways, process skipping is the opposite of Focusing. Process skipping avoids while Focusing welcomes. Process skipping numbs while Focusing opens us to feeling. The pattern of process skipping, which is a common way

to react to fearfulness, obstructs our ability to find and listen to a fresh felt sense from which forward movement can evolve.

A Culture of Avoidance

The culture we live in is typically unsupportive in acknowledging and working with fear. And, when we do express our fears, for example, saying, “I am afraid this biopsy might reveal that I have cancer” we are often told: “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.” Or if we say, “I am afraid that my neighbor might die in the war in Iraq,” we are told, “Don’t worry. He’ll be fine.” These reflexive responses of “not to worry” might be an attempt by the listener to bring comfort, but they simply leave us alone with our fears.

Despite the prevailing cultural norm of silencing fears and the individual tendency to “process skip,” some cancer patients in my practice have discovered better ways to come into constructive relationship with their fears through Focusing, And, as one might imagine, their fears are numerous. There is the fear that comes with being diagnosed with this dreaded disease; the fear of the treatments which can be harsh and are not always effective; the fear of the side effects of treatment; the fear of making the wrong medical decisions; the fear of disclosing the diagnosis at work, and a host of other psychological threats including fears about the effect on close family members, on one’s identity, and ultimately on one’s mortality. Some people stoically attempt to deny the fear, and some seem to be overwhelmed by their fears. However, the majority of people I see in therapy rally and adapt to their diagnoses by developing reliable ways to relate to their emerging fears. These individuals who have learned to keep company with their fears have a great deal to teach the rest of us about managing this basic human emotion.

Fear is Intrinsic To Our Nature

Fear is an instinctual, primitive response that is rooted deeply in our biology. It is designed to help us survive by warning us of threats to our wellbeing. If you are hiking and you see a grizzly bear running towards you, you will feel clear body signals that something important needs your attention *immediately*. However, most of the events around cancer (and other “threats” in our daily lives) that produce fear *cannot be remedied* by a fear response. The fight-or-flight response that might help one face a charging bear is not a useful response for dealing with cancer, and often proves to be counterproductive.

When facing cancer we need methods that directly speak to our uncertainty. Taken as a whole, having cancer is commonly experienced as a loss of self-control, stability, and predictability; one may feel suddenly cast adrift in a vast and stormy sea. As clients try to get their bearings it helps to have tools that will assist them in navigating in this new and strange environment.

Focusing As A Guide

Focusing can serve as an inner compass during this period of disruption and heightened fear. Focusing teaches people to consult their *felt sense* (those bodily sensations that have meaning). The myriad of feelings that arise, and the numerous decisions that one faces (ranging from which doctors to select, to which treatments to choose) can be overwhelming, but when they are connected to the deep reservoir of knowing that resides in the body, a kind of clarity emerges. One can sense a life-forward direction. Focusing can help people keep their bearings and feel more anchored in choosing a course of treatment that feels uniquely right for them.

Jody’s Story

Jody was in dire need of such an inner compass when she first consulted me. She was a 35-year-old teacher with two young children who felt adrift and overwhelmed. Her breast cancer had metastasized to her hips and spine and she was in a good deal of pain. “Well,” she began before she had even settled in her chair, “I’m stressed out so much of the time. I’m not sleeping well, and I’m impatient and irritable — not so much with my kids, but I sometimes snap at my mother or husband. Afterwards, I feel so angry at myself, it’s as if another, more unpleasant person has taken over my body!” She looked directly at me. “What I really need is some way to deal with all this fear. I try to think positively, but I’m afraid I’m not going to get back in remission. I’ve tried meditation, but I’m just too anxious; I start to worry, and then I get more and more fearful, and then, somehow, I can’t go back to my breath. And I don’t want to take any meds. I hope you have some new ideas.”

Clearing A Space

I appreciated Jody’s direct manner and on that first day I led her through the first step of Focusing called Clearing A Space. Clearing A Space is a way to take an inventory of what you are carrying in your body that is “between you and feeling fine.” The process seemed to work well for her. Jody felt great relief right away and each week as soon as she settled in her chair she would say, “OK, glad to be here. Now I really need to clear a space.”

Although Jody was a woman with a large supportive social network with many friends and family members who cared about her, she felt she could not be fully honest with them. The fears that she was able to find and verbalize with me as she cleared a space each week were ones she could not easily reveal to others. She believed these unspoken fears would be too upsetting for others to bear.

One day when she seemed particularly agitated, I asked Jody to notice what was between her and feeling fine. The first thing she noticed that was in the way was the bone pain in her hip. She described a drilling sensation, not excruciating but constant, like a dentist's drill that wouldn't stop. I asked if she would like to get some distance from it. "Yes, definitely," she said, and then imagined that her hips were cushioned by three large soft and colorful pillows which protected her so well she could barely "hear" the drilling. Using the pillow image she was able to imagine placing the pain a few feet away in a corner of the room separated from her by these pillows. The image alone induced her to take a big exhalation, and I could see that the muscles in her face had begun to relax.

"OK, Jody, except for pain, which is cushioned for the moment, please see if you are fine. She frowned and slowly shook her head, no. "So, let's see what else might be in the way today". "Well," she said hesitantly, after a long silence, "in my abdomen I can feel a kind of achy indigestion, like there is a terribly tight ball of tangled yarn. It feels like a fist of worry, and it's really weighing on me." She was silent for a couple of moments, then began again: "It's about my youngest child, my 3-year-old daughter, Diana." She paused again and a tear rolled down her cheek. "I am afraid that if I die before she turns four that she won't remember me." As she placed that ball of fear on a shelf in the room, she and I both had tears. I reflected her being afraid and then said, "Is there more"? She nodded her head.

The next aspect of fear that she experienced appeared as tightness in her throat, as if, as she said, "I have something stuck there, and I can't swallow." She waited and finally said that what she feared was that her children would not be raised as Christians. "I'm married to Sam, who's Jewish. I'm afraid that when I die, my children won't be raised as Episcopalians. My religion is as

important to me as Sam's is to him." We acknowledged that one and put that aside. Her final fear was that her 10-year-old daughter Sally would not remember her in a way she wanted to be remembered. "Of course she will remember me," Jody said, "but I think she won't remember me as a happy person." Jody felt that she was basically a joyful person, and Sally would not know that the last couple of years of her life, even though she was living with cancer, were still among the most joyful of her life. During Jody's chemotherapy treatments of the last few months she was often in bed resting and recovering and unable to play with her daughters as much as she had previously. And so she placed that fear on an empty chair across from her.

"All right," I said. "Except for those really difficult issues, is there anything else between you and feeling all right?" Jody waited and checked and then replied, "No, if it weren't for those, I'd be fine". I reassured her that we would come back to work on those issues, but in the meantime to allow herself to enjoy what it felt like to be in the cleared space, a place where she didn't have to do anything, and could allow herself to just "be". I could see her breathing deepen and her shoulders drop. Some of the lines of worry went out of her face and her expression softened. I asked if there was a word, phrase or image that captured this clearer space.

She smiled. "I'm back in the French Alps in the summer, a place that I visited once, and the word that comes is...simple, and divinely peaceful. I'm on a hill overlooking a valley, there are cows dotting the hillside, the sun is shining, and I can feel the presence of something here, something...sacred." I reflected what she had said back to her, and asked her to allow herself to remain in that place, and see if a step might come right from that sense of beauty and sacred peace. "I want to remember the quality of this peace," she said. "It fills me up. And I feel it will last forever, even after I'm gone." "There is something about the quality of this peace that fills you up and will last, even after you are gone," I

reflected so she could hear her words back to see if they resonated for her. She waited a while. “Yeah, this place really speaks to me,” she said. “This place speaks to you,” I reflected. “Can you sense what it might be saying?” I asked. Jody waited. After a while she took a deep breath and sighed. A small smile crossed her lips. “It says, ‘be at peace,’” she replied. “It says, ‘all will be well.’” She opened her eyes. “Whether I am here or not, all will be well.”

How Clearing A Space Enables Us To Deal With Our Fears

The process of Clearing A Space allowed Jody to enter protected space for a while and to recover the part of her that lived without worry and was truly at peace. She found the capacity to reconnect with a deep-seated sense of wellbeing despite her physical symptoms and anxieties. Jody has been able to name and enumerate her fears and place them at a safe distance. By doing so she has tapped into the aspect of self that is witnessing the fear, but not enveloped by it. As Albert Einstein reminds us, “You cannot solve a problem with the state of mind that created the problem.” Clearing A Space allowed her to find a new state of mind.

This process of naming and clarifying issues also helps us to identify and validate them as legitimate concerns. By allowing these issues to surface and to come into the light of our compassion and caring, we give a home to a part of ourselves that needs acknowledgement. Engaging in this process of *taking inventory of what the body is carrying* allows us to release much of the bodily tension and free-floating anxiety that accompanies those issues.

Instead of dealing with fear as a clump of concerns massed together, we separate them and thus will find them more manageable to work on when we return to the Focusing process.

But for the moment we remain at peace. And from the sense of peace that comes in a cleared space, people often discover a spiritual perspective on their concerns. Often they report feeling more equanimity, more gratitude, more hopefulness, more aliveness and a greater ability to get a larger view of their situation. By spending time in the cleared space they are dwelling in the present moment, which many spiritual traditions agree is the path to the sacred.

The Spiritual Component

Clearing A Space brings us back to a deep peacefulness. When we have some regular experience of feeling that sense of peace and wholeness, we begin to connect this personal sense of well being to the larger universe to which we all belong. The cleared space can offer a glimpse of an internal state that is real and available. In the West we tend to be problem-oriented and often motivated by habits of anxiety so that we spend very little time in a state where problems, anxiety, and fears are absent. Taking time to dwell within, in an “all clear or all fine” place is a rare experience. As Mark Nepo, a cancer survivor reminds us in his book The Exquisite Risk (2005), “Just as food is the only thing that will keep us alive when starving, joy and peace are the things that will keep us alive when we are lost and suffering — if we can find them.” Clearing A Space is the practice of finding peace by devoting ourselves to naming and removing, through the imagination, obstacles that are in the way of this state of true wellbeing. Many find that discovering this place, and being present in it returns them to a sense of wholeness even in the midst of illness.

When clients connect with this spiritual experience in the cleared space, I frequently make the following suggestion to them: “See if it would be right to ask how you can have *more* of this in your life?” From that question often comes a life-forward direction.

Sometimes answering that question results in their resolve to get out in nature more regularly or finding time to “be” instead of “do”. After tasting this experience of discovering the wider perspective of a cleared space, it is not unusual for clients to begin to engage in a creative or spiritual pursuit that elicits the feeling they found in the cleared space, whether through creating art, playing music, taking photographs, journal writing, or spending time with people they love.

The Experience of the Cleared Space

In a research study that used Clearing A Space with women who had breast cancer (Klagsbrun et al, 2005), some of the participants used the following words to describe the cleared space they achieved:

“I imagine an elastic band stretching, kind of like a clothesline, and all my problems were put out by hand, to dry. My clear space is bright and calm.”

“I was just noticing all that is there and then the thought came...put it in God’s hands. But it wasn’t really just a thought.... I could really imagine placing it outside of me...in the center of a flower...(begins to cry).... Oh, my God...I feel such relief...just in letting go like this...I didn’t know I could feel this way at this time.... I really need this...(Silence)...Oh...I feel more relief and confidence...that in time I will know what I need to do for myself.”

“What I find there is bits of hope, multiple bits of hope. But this is real stuff - these speckles of hope are actually very promising.”

“The cleared space is kind of relaxed, light, soft and fluffy, very comfortable. I didn’t even know I had that place in me; now I can come back to it.” “Oh my, this is how I felt before I got sick. I didn’t think I could feel that way again.”

Clearing A Space Helps Us Transcend Fear

As these examples illustrate, Clearing A Space functions on many levels as a method for helping us to get beyond our fears to a place of peace. We get there only by first attending to the fears. This process helps us to tease out specific fears from a generalized and often overwhelming sense of anxiety. It allows us to identify, label, and appropriately distance ourselves from each specific fear. By asking, “What’s between me and feeling fine,” it implies that “feeling fine” is a natural state and one that can be recaptured. Clearing A Space also provides a wonderful way to begin the Focusing process by tuning into the inner world via the felt sense, and by becoming an active agent within it. We not only discover obstacles to our wellbeing, we gain some control over them by putting them “at a safe distance.”

The Fear of Not Being Remembered

After Jody spent some time in her cleared space, I asked her “which one of those concerns needs your attention most today?” She chose her fear that Diana would not remember her if she died within the year. I asked her what that fear felt like in her body. “It feels cold and dark and empty to think of her growing up without me—and without even a memory of me. The image I have is of a

boat unmoored floating around in the sea. I want to reach out and protect her; I am so scared that she will be harmed by not remembering her mother, and I don't know what to do!" "So there is a part in you that is scared," I reflected. "And you would like to reach out and protect her—to keep her from becoming unmoored." She nodded. "Can we be gentle with that part and just spend time with it?" I inquired. "I guess this is every mother's nightmare," she said, softening, her self-compassion growing, "and it is happening to me. It feels very hard.. She waited, eyes closed. "Now I am noticing that it feels like heaviness around my heart." "I wonder if you could speak right from that heavy place," I suggested. After some silence she began to speak, "I have a deep, deep sadness that she will grow up not knowing how loved she was by me." We spent some time being with sadness and letting it speak. Then she said "I wish she could have some way to remember me in her childhood. It was such a sweet time." She then spoke about what it was that she wanted Diana to remember, what legacy she wanted her to have. It all came out in a rush.

She recalled the pleasure that she had in reading to Diana before bed, the fun they had drawing pictures together and cooking waffles in the morning, the games they played while walking to her daycare center together and the stories her daughter had told her. And she also wanted Diana and Sally to know about her work volunteering at the hospital with other women with breast cancer that she'd started after her diagnosis, and which she found so fulfilling. "I want them to know all this, so they can remember me, and know I was there for them. But I don't have much energy to write any of this down. I'm getting weaker, and I don't think I can do it now," she told me.

"So you are not sure how to do it. But see if having something written would make a difference." She closed her eyes and after a while said "Yes, it eases the heaviness imagining that Diana in particular would have some way to remember my time with her." She considered this idea further. "And it would be there for her to

come back to when she gets older.”

We spoke about her recording these memories using a tape recorder. She contemplated that idea for a while, and then shook her head. “No, that doesn’t feel right.” I suggested we sit together and see if a right step might come to her, one that would speak to the sadness and heaviness. I have found that often clients have a sense of next right steps even when I don’t.

Jody sat in silence. After a while she sighed as if there had been some inner shift. “I can’t do this alone and don’t want to give my husband yet another task to do. I need a friend to help. I just remembered that Betty is taking a class in memoir writing. A small smile crossed her lips. “Maybe she’ll come over and write all my stories down for Diana.” She took a deep breath. “I bet she will.” The smile came more easily now. “Now the heaviness is starting to disperse a bit,” she said. She seemed both lighter and calmer when she left the office that day.

Paying Attention To What We Are Afraid Of

In Focusing, instead of denying our fear we sit next to it in order to hear what it has to say to us, to find what it needs. Focusing allowed Jody to open more deeply to the implicit intricacy of what she had been worried about, something which enveloped and oppressed her but which she hadn’t been able to articulate fully. Through the focusing process she was encouraged to speak about what she most feared, and to listen to herself with compassion. Finally, steps came that brought both relief and hope.

Jody’s friend Betty agreed to help her. Over a month’s time Betty interviewed Jody, took down her stories and her memories of each child, and recorded what Jody wanted them to know about the childhood she had spent with them. From these memories a separate book was created for each child. The one for Diana had

photographs in it of drawings Jody and she had done together. “I feel lighter to have these books done,” she told me.

A Life-Forward Direction

Jody had been able to both identify and speak about this painful fear of not being remembered by her three year old. The steps that evolved through her focusing, produced a life-forward direction that spoke to her felt sense of heaviness and transformed it. “It’s not just that I’m leaving them with something real and concrete,” she told me, “although that does make me feel good. But it’s not all of it.” She opened her eyes and looked at me. “Something’s shifted. I feel like they’ll be OK,” she paused, “even without me.”

Jody had come to a place of acceptance. It was a privilege to have accompanied her on that journey.

Mini-Focusing Moments

Once clients learn how to find, stay with and be guided by their inner felt sense, they discover they have a compass to help them navigate the stormy waters of their illness. This compass is available in each moment. Every decision and every experience related to the illness can be checked against this reliable inner barometer that we all possess. It does not need to be a long, drawn-out process. Teaching people that they can pause and wait and see how the whole thing feels inside, with a sense of curiosity and kindness, can be a revolutionary act for patients—moving them from passive helplessness to active engagement. Their lives then become oriented towards healing rather than just bearing the weight of their disease.

When Susan came in saying she felt dizzy with the rushed feeling of being moved from diagnosis to surgery, I suggested that she pay attention to the dizziness with an attitude of interested curiosity to see what it was trying to tell her. “It says I need to slow this train down,” she reported. “It’s going at a hundred miles an hour. I need time to collect myself and prepare for this fight. I’m not there yet and will need more time to get there.” It turned out that “more time” for her meant ten days, a change to which her doctor easily agreed. The extra time helped Susan and her family prepare themselves for this unexpected development. Listening inside to that voice of dizziness helped her to get on track and feel more in control of where the “train” was going.

Teresa, who was in remission from breast cancer, decided to have a lumpectomy that her team of doctors said was medically unnecessary—they were pretty sure that the unclear something on the ultrasounds and mammograms was simply necrotic tissue from radiation. But Teresa had been reassured before and the reassurances had turned out to be false. Her felt sense told her that she would not have peace of mind unless that “something” was removed. If she listened to her doctors’ recommendations she would have had to live with a background sense of chronic fear. By choosing the surgery she felt empowered and released of this worry. Of course someone else might have had a different felt sense and made a different decision. The felt sense honors the implicit intricacy that differs from person to person and helps each person to find what is “medicine” for him or her with utter specificity. The felt sense will change over the course of the illness but it can be freshly accessed and seen as a trusted ally through all the phases of cancer.

Support Groups

As Jody understood, intense fear is often reduced by close connections to others—as was the case for Americans in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Cancer Support groups often provide those close connections for people with cancer—in that they normalize the stages on the journey, offer a peer group who are living at the same frontier and give people the opportunity to support others while gaining perspective on their own situation. But people with cancer who know how to attend to the ‘felt sense’ learn that they have the capacity to check within to see if a given support group or relationship is life enhancing or life constricting. They can sense whether the group experience, or even an afternoon visit with a friend will be a pick-me-up or a drag-me-down experience. Attending to the felt sense empowers people to choose those groups and those relationships that are truly healing.

How Focusing Can Be An Antidote To Fear

Some people with cancer, unable to deny and avoid their feelings of fearfulness have learned how to make the regular practice of focusing a part of their daily lives. Since fear can impair decision making, increase the stress response of fight-or-flight, and overwhelm other feelings including positive ones of love, humor, compassion and inner peace, it is important to find methods that can lessen fear’s ongoing negative impact. Focusing, through its combination of inner attention, silence and listening to the felt sense enables us to gently acknowledge and be with feelings of fear. It allows us to hear from hidden parts of ourselves that are waiting for our attention and which then can be released and lived forward. The Focusing process “turns up the volume” on our wisdom, perspective, hope and courage, and “turns down the volume” on disembodiment and worry. We would all be wise to learn what these patients have come to know. In Focusing we have a powerful way to listen to, honor, and transform our fears.

References:

Klagsbrun et al, "*Focusing and Expressive Arts in Therapy as a Complementary Treatment for Women with Breast Cancer*",
Creativity and Mental Health, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 2005.

Mac Mahon, E. <http://www.focusing.org/biospirit.htm>

Nepo, Mark *The Exquisite Risk* 2005 Random House, New York.