

Clearing A Space: Expressing the Wholeness Within Using Art¹

By Laury Rappaport, Ph.D., ATR-BC

Eugene Gendlin developed a six step method for teaching Focusing, a mind/body process for accessing the inner felt sense of experience, out of research he and Carl Rogers conducted on what contributed to successful psychotherapy (1981). The first step of Focusing, "Clearing A Space," can be used as a beginning entrance into the whole Focusing process, or it can be done as a complete step unto itself. Originally, "Clearing A Space," was included in the Focusing instructions as a means of getting distractions out of the way, in order to "Focus" on something—much like clearing your desk before tackling a project. However, over time, Gendlin and others began to notice that just the process of "Clearing A Space" had beneficial results, such as stress reduction, centering, relaxation, and access to spiritual dimensions (Gendlin, 1981,1996; Grindler, 1991; Klagsbrun,et al, 2005).

When "Clearing A Space," the Focuser is guided to take a mindful inventory of the "things" (e.g. issues, feelings, etc) that are in the way of experiencing a sense of wellbeing; the Focuser then imagines placing the issues at a distance outside of the body. The Focuser continues setting each "thing" at a distance, outside of the body, until there is a sense of reaching an endpoint. The "Focuser" is invited to sense the place inside the body that is "all fine"—or at peace, or cleared. The Focuser can stop after "Clearing a Space" to take in the relaxation and sense of wellbeing, or may choose to pick one of the issues placed at a distance and continue with additional Focusing, (e.g. Gendlin's six step method or variations of Gendlin's instructions² other Focusing approaches, such as Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy, Whole-Body Focusing, Inner Relationship Focusing, etc).

"Clearing A Space" helps the client to dis-identify with the issues or problems she is carrying. This Focusing step helps the client to know that she is not her problems—that there is a deeper self separate from the psychological difficulties. As troubles are set aside, the weight is lifted and a new freeing energy comes into the body. "Clearing A Space" puts the client in touch with a natural life affirming energy that is always available yet is often buried or blocked by issues or problems. From this *cleared space* and vital energy, the

1

*Excerpts in this article are a part of Laury's forthcoming book, *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy*, which is nearly complete. For information, e-mail: laury@focusingarts.com

² See www.focusing.org; "learn Focusing"; "Focusing Partnerships

client is more able to turn towards the stacked concerns and choose something to work on. The client has clearer energy and a stronger sense of self to work on the identified issues.

How To Incorporate Art into Clearing A Space:

Follow the guided instructions for “Clearing A Space with Art.” At the end of the guided process, use art materials to express the felt sense of the experience. Some people like to create an artistic representation of just the “All Fine Place”—feeling like they set things aside and want to keep a distance from them while taking time to experience the “All Fine Place” more deeply. Others like to have a way of showing the issues set aside along with the “All Fine Place.”

Guided instructions: The following instructions can be used on your own, with a Focusing partner, or in a psychotherapeutic setting.

“Clearing A Space” with Art*

Clearing A Space: Invite the “focuser” to find a comfortable position...Take a few deep breaths...inviting your body to relax... if you feel like it, you may close your eyes ...or keep them open...whichever is more comfortable for you...Take another few deep breaths...and when you’re ready ask, “So how am I from the inside right now? Just listen...Give an answer time to form in your body...Turn your attention like a searchlight inside to your body and just greet whatever you find...Be accepting to whatever you find there, without judgment...

Now imagine yourself in some peaceful place...it may be a place you know already, or it may be one you create in your imagination...When you’re ready, ask, “So, what’s in the way between me and feeling all fine right now?” Let whatever comes up, come up...Don’t go inside any particular thing right now...As each thing comes up, imagine placing it at some distance from you, perhaps out on a park bench...or in a box...or using imagery like relaxing on the beach and putting “all of the things in-between you and feeling all fine” on a boat...as each thing arises, place it at a comfortable distance from you, while you stay in your peaceful place...

After you place each thing at a distance, check inside again, and ask in a friendly way, “So what is between me and feeling all fine right now?” Again with each thing that comes up, find a way to put that thing at a comfortable distance from you.

If the list stops, gently ask inside, “Except for all that, I’m all fine, right?”...If more comes up, add that to the stack. Keep a comfortable distance from your stack.

Background feeling: Sometimes there’s a background feeling that we’re always carrying...it may be something like, “always a little anxious”...or “always a bit

depressed," etc. Check inside and see if there is a background feeling that's in the way of feeling all fine, that wants to be added to the stack.

Check again. How is it now?

When the focuser lets you know that s/he has stacked all the things:

Now, I'd like to invite you to sense ***the all fine place***. Turn your attention inside and let it rest on the all fine place...See if there is image that matches or acts like a handle for the all fine place...Check it against your body to make sure it's right. If not, invite a new image that matches or acts like a handle for the all fine place to come. If a word or phrase comes, that's fine being accepting of that.

Expressing the felt sense using art: When you're ready, use the art materials to create something expressing the "All Fine Place." Some people like to just stay with the "All Fine Place." Others like to include the things set aside. Include what feels most meaningful to you right now. If you received a word or phrase, feel free to express it creatively through colors, size, variation of pressure, etc.

Completing the Focusing round:

Invite the Focuser to share about her art and its representations of clearing the space. Inquire as to what the Focuser noticed in her body from the beginning clearing a space to the completion.

*** Variations of imagery for clearing a space can be used, such as:**

Use imagery that helps a client to imagine placing things at a distance. Some ideas are:

1. Imagine being in a peaceful park and you are sitting on a park bench. At some distance there is another bench where you can stack all the things between you and feeling all fine.
2. Imagine you have a beautiful kite that you can attach all the things between you and feeling all fine.
3. Imagine sending each issue or concern up in a balloon. Check to see if you want it to be connected to a string. If so, imagine the string lets the balloon just the right distance from you. Or, check to see if you'd like the balloon to just go off into the sky.
4. Imagine making a package out of each issue that you can set at some distance from you.
5. Imagine there is a large vessel that can hold each thing that is in-between you and feeling all fine. As each thing comes up, imagine placing it in the vessel.

Use of Art Materials for “Clearing A Space”

Allow the felt sense to be the guide—listen to the body sense as to which materials want to be used to express the felt sense image. For example: Does the felt sense have a fluid feel...that water colors would best match. Or is the felt sense light...where feathers may add something to capture its quality.

Appropriate use of art materials: When using “Clearing A Space” in a clinical setting, it is important to consider the appropriateness of materials for specific populations. For example, clients who are more disorganized and needing more structure need art materials that offer a sense of control (e.g. magic markers and colored pencils offer more control than paint). Simple materials, like pre-cut out shapes from construction paper, can be put into a box as a way to Clear a Space with a greater sense of control. Creating shapes out of clay or painting images requires a higher skill level and mastery. Higher functioning clients will appreciate a choice and range of materials.

Art Material Ideas for Clearing A Space:

1. **Drawing materials:** pencils, pens, colored pencils, colored markers (thin and thick), oil pastels, chalk pastels, and charcoal.
2. **Paints:** Acrylic, poster, watercolor and other nontoxic paint products. Various size brushes can be used for painting the various issues, concerns, and all fine place. Sponges, and other objects for dipping into the paint can also be used.
3. **Assorted Papers:** Construction paper, textured papers, rice paper, drawing paper, etc. can be used to represent various issues and concerns. Papers can be cut with scissors or hand torn into shapes representing each issue to set aside, as well as the “All Fine Place.” Individual colors can be chosen to symbolize each issue., as well as combining various colors and shapes.
4. **Clay, dough, and modeling materials:** Pieces of modeling materials can be shaped, rolled, flattened, formed, etc. into symbols representing each issue and the “All Fine Place.” Additional objects can be used with the modeling materials including sticks, feathers, buttons, etc. to express various qualities of the felt sense.
5. **Found Objects and Construction:** All kinds of found objects such as wood pieces, rocks, stones, leaves, natural feathers, etc. can be used to symbolize the issues and “All Fine Place.”
6. **Craft Materials:** An array of craft materials including yarn, twine, felt, boxes, containers, ribbons, sequins, etc. can be used to create representations for the issues and “All Fine Place.
7. **Containers , boxes, and bags:** An assortment of containers, boxes, and bags that clients can put their “issues’ into during Clearing A Space.

"The All Fine Place": Art Expressions



Art Therapist, 2005
AATA Conference



Art Therapist, 2005
AATA Conference

The healing power of clearing the "background feeling"...



Art Therapist, 2005

"...becoming aware of the "background feeling" became a primary experience for me—the background I carry is a feeling of a low intensity feeling of shame. Being friendly to it and setting aside brought clarity to the "All Fine Place." I felt myself as a woven basket—a quite sturdy, functional, and aesthetic container... the deepest 'All Fine Place' being smooth and golden."

Clearing A Space for Stress Reduction



Student, 2004

During the focusing exercise, I imagined walking underneath an apple tree ripe with fruit... some of the apples were rotting, but not yet ready to throw away--like a lot of the experiences I was having in my life . During the Clearing Away stage, I put all the apples in a basket and pushed it aside so I could sit down, lean against the tree, and focus on the scenery. I drew the image of me underneath the tree, with a basket within site, and a lone apple sitting at arms length. I slept better that night than I have in a while, so thanks!



--Mary, client

"I used construction paper to symbolize each concern and wrapped them up in a package. I found a luminous gold center, with colorful light. What amazed me was to see the issues wrapped up in a beautiful package—now I see the gifts in the issues—as they take me to find my true self—the gold center within."

Summary

The use of art in conjunction with the first step of Focusing, "Clearing A Space" brings an added dimension for concretizing and deepening the connection to the All Fine Place," or the aspect of self that is already whole. "Clearing A Space" as an inwardly sensed Focusing exercise brings the following benefits:

- Calming and centering

- Stress reducing
- Dis-identification with issues and problems
- Helps one to know there is a “me” separate from the issues they are carrying
- Helps one to access the part of themselves that is “all fine” or whole.
- Accesses life affirming energy
- Facilitates clarity and stronger energy to proceed to later Focusing steps of choosing something to work on.

The addition of art to “Clearing A Space” helps to make tangible both the “things in the way of feeling “All Fine” and/or the “All Fine Place.” Art is used symbolically to concretize the felt sense of each issue or concern that the Focuser sets aside. As the Focuser creates the art, the issue becomes externalized. The Focuser/client gains some distance to the issue by being able to take it from an internal experience to an outside experience where she can then look at it. This distance happens experientially through the art making process, which is one of the powerful healing aspects of art therapy. In art therapy the client gains distance from the issue by being able to externalize it into an art form. With art, the client can place the art at a distance that is comfortable, step back, and look at it. Being able to step back from an issue often helps a client be able to see it more clearly.

Sometimes the Focuser prefers not to create the “things in the way of feeling “all Fine,” since they may already feel that they have set things at a distance and accessed the “All Fine Place.” In this situation, the Focuser/client may prefer to simply express “the All Fine Place” in art. This is often a powerful experience because the Focuser/client has an inner felt sense of “The All Fine Place” and through the art making deepens the inner connection to it. As art is being created, there is an internal kinesthetic exploration of the colors, textures, and whole feel of the wholeness within. The visual art can be looked at again and again; it can be hung up on a wall, placed in a journal, or scanned onto a computer screen. The visual art serves as a reminder of the felt experience—the “all fine place”—or wholeness within. Each moment of viewing the art expression helps to reawaken the awareness and connection to the place within that is already whole.

References:

- Cornell, A. (1990). *The power of focusing*. CA: New Harbinger.
 Gendlin, E. (1981). *Focusing*. New York: Bantam.

- Gendlin, E. (1996). *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy: A manual for the experiential method*. NY: Guildford.
- Grindler, D. (1991). *Clearing a space and cancer: The use of focusing as a psychological tool for adaptive recovery*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Illinois School of Professional Psychology, Chicago, IL.
- Klagsbrun, J., Rappaport, L., Speiser, V., et al (2005). Focusing and Expressive Arts Therapy as a Complementary Treatment for Women with Breast Cancer in *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, Volume: 1, 1
- Rappaport, L. (1988). Focusing and art therapy, *The Focusing Connection*. 5(3),1-2.
- Rappaport, L. (1998). Focusing and art therapy: tools for working through post- traumatic stress disorder, *A Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy*, 17 (1), 36-40.
- Rappaport, L. (1993). Focusing with art and creative movement: a method for stress management, *The Focusing Connection*, X(2),1-3.