



FOCUSING IN THE WORKSHOP

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Condensed by the author from "Clearing a Space on the Workbench: How Focusing Helps Me Build", THE FOLIO, Volume 21-1, Fall 2008.

A craftsman aspires to be nimble, responsive, and accurate--not only in the fingers but throughout the body, throughout the mind, and throughout the feelings. Both Focusing and craft share a fundamental attitude of orientation toward the nuances and the often ineffable experiences of the body and the world. Focusers understand how language is both useful and inadequate in helping us stay attentive to this bodily-felt knowledge. In craft, this attitude toward language is native. At higher levels of art and craft, this nuanced understanding also extends to technique. It is of course required, but is not adequate. Focusing and craft note the loss of intricacy in language, ideas, in emotion and in techniques, and both work in steady, organic ways to return to the body's more complex knowledge. The usefulness of simplifications, of concepts, of emotions, or of solutions is not denied, but when there is a stoppage in the expected flow of human life, of human projects, or human skills, this body knowledge can be invoked. These inner "skills" offer a renewed, supportive interaction between the infinite/ineffable/intricate and the fundamental human need to solve problems of all sorts.

In any kind of workshop you will see several kinds of tools--tools for assembling and tools for cutting. There are as many tools for separating and cutting as there are for assembling, maybe more. Consider the variety of saws, chisels and gouges of every size and shape, the half-dozen hand planes, a spokeshave, the cabinet scraper, shears, grinders, and plasma cutter. The craft of a careful, well-timed cut is a thing of beauty, sometimes a terrifying beauty to be entertained after much consideration and a good night's sleep. The separation is necessary, but it will all turn on the sensitivity of the timing, the relative precision, the restraint, the respect for the material, and the watchful eye on the unfolding process. A careful cut can move things forward. A thoughtless cut will set things back.



Bronze Funeral Urn



Walnut Table, dining, coffee or side table configurations

Focusing also requires such moments. Consider that Clearing a Space is the critical act of separating from overwhelming emotions and defeating opinions. This is a careful break from the usual current and gravity of things. Gendlin understands that a separation from inner reactions is necessary, but that it must not be an absolute or sloppy separation. As in craft, it must be just so.

Getting the useful distance from the emotional reaction is a critical part of the craft of Focusing, i.e., making room for the Felt Sense. Too little separation, and emotional static continues to overwhelm any further study. Too much separation, and the event is lost. It is too far away to study. Just as in craft, Clearing a Space is not an absolute nor final separation. It is just so, and allows for a greater intricacy and new connections.

Focusing, as I had understood it in the early 1980's when I first started using it, was a therapeutic way of facing, understanding, and transforming my inner anxieties and abundant reactions. But in time, I realized that Focusing had also become part of my work as an artist and craftsman. I found it right there with me, informing both the design phase and the craft phase of my daily work.

Lunchtime is a break from the dirty, loud, intensive environment of a working shop. We wash our hands, take a seat, have a drink to wash down a little sawdust and let out the breath. Once a week, we take turns raising a question or observation about our work. Someone brought a polished, black marble sphere about five inches in diameter and passed it around. It fit the hand nicely and the weight of it could be felt throughout the body. The question was then raised, "What is the meaning of a sphere?" This was certainly an odd question and seemed to make a category mistake. How could an object or shape mean something? And yet there was this undeniable satisfaction in holding this inedible, inoperative thing. The satisfaction clearly ran throughout the body, the mind, and the feelings. Slowly, tentatively we entertained the idea that various meanings were clustered about this thing. One by one words and phrases were ventured: unity, completion, simplicity, singularity, intelligence, responsive, infinite, fluid, impenetrable, mysterious, inwardness, consciousness and primordial. Designers also have a use for Handles.

Focusing is a self-correcting model for understanding. Several important characteristics follow from this. Focusing is a procedure that requires us to walk through a series of distinct, even contradictory, steps. We separate from something. We join to something that we had forgotten. Progress is often small, but it accumulates greatly over time. Simplicity is coaxed out of complexity. Fresh complexities emerge out of simplicity. Understanding slowly aligns itself with something more genuine. Feedback in the system reflexively guides future interest and questioning. I am both stuck and intelligent. My craft is also stuck and intelligent. Craft and Focusing both operate in the barely perceptible space between where we are and where we are headed.

With practice, a bit of magic begins to happen. Practice is not simple repetition. The "repetition part" is the visible part of an iterative exploration of how the body, its effort, and the task can come into a closer accommodation to each other. During the iterations, something is being "looked for." In classic Focusing, what is being looked for is the Felt Sense, a Handle, and a Shift. In the practice of a craft, one is looking for a variation on these very same things.

When I am stuck, I must stop simply manipulating the wood. I relax my frustration or fear and try to receive something. I don't necessarily stop trying to cut that dovetail, but something attentive comes forward that can listen at the same time. The tunnel



Walnut Display Unit, a sprite shelf system or room divider inspired by Japanese tansu.



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I feel as if I have been looking through shortens and opens up. My felt sense stretches from the inside toward the end of the blade. I feel the wood directly now. I am no longer receiving distant messages through the tool. The tool is now an extension of my hand. My tool now sees, even as it acts on the wood. The work is actually magnified. The tiny area of my focus expands within and opens up new detail. My body has positioned itself differently. Now the force comes up from the ground and through my body and does not stop until it reaches the wood. I feel a circuit close between the ground and the action at the wood. Something clumsy, dark, and stopped is now full of light and current.

When we bring Focusing to our physical work or play, whatever that may be, it has the effect of elevating routine activities to a new level of craft. The distances from head to heart to body--and from all, to our work--are distances to be measured, triangulated, spanned and relished, by all.



David Orth's most recent work, SACRED TREE.

