

## An "Experientializing" Way of Responding

Interviewing Susan Rudnick, by Maria Skoufas

I had the privilege of interviewing Susan Rudnick for this issue of the *In Focus* newsletter. Susan is a Focusing Oriented Psychotherapist. Her major contribution has been in expanding and articulating the ways that Focusing can be integrated into therapy work. She was part of the leadership group for FORP (Focusing Oriented Relational Psychotherapy), led by Lynn Preston. Susan supervised, taught, and ran workshops from that program both in New York and South Africa. Susan has been passionate about how the therapist can use Focusing for self-care, for experiencing the relationship with the client, and for getting a felt sense for what is happening with the client. She developed and facilitated a monthly drop-in peer supervision group and developed a study group model that she facilitated with Joan Lavender. Susan is a Zen practitioner who loves to explore the interface between spirituality, Focusing, and psychotherapy. She has run workshops at FOT conferences and has published a chapter, "Coming Home to Wholeness" in *Into the Mountain Stream: Psychotherapy and Buddhist Experience* (2007, ed. Paul C. Cooper).

Susan is a haiku poet and a writer. She recently completed a (2019) memoir: *Edna's Gift: How My Broken Sister Taught Me to Be Whole*. She is the mother of a beautiful 29-year old, daughter; motherhood has been the most significant life changing process of all.

I was fortunate to meet with Susan in person in her New York office and enjoy her warm and gentle presence. I took in her wonderful insights about Focusing, Focusing Oriented Therapy, meditation and Focusing, and the art of haiku. I left her office feeling truly inspired and grateful that she is one of the Board members entrusted to safeguard and carry forward Gene Gendlin's legacy.

*We all love to know about each other's Focusing beginnings. What led you to Focusing?*

**Susan:** How did I get there? I was a psychoanalyst trained at the Karen Horney Institute and I gave a public education talk about Zen. After the talk, this lovely woman came over to talk to me. She is a therapist and a Zen practitioner. Her name is Anna Christensen. We started meeting, talking about our common interests, and she said, "You've got to learn this thing called Focusing." She was in Mary Hendricks' first training group in New York. So off I went to an introductory weekend with Mary and she was an amazing listener. Two seconds and you're in another planet. It just felt magical. It started to really fill a gap that I wouldn't have been able to articulate in my training and work with people. It was something that had to do with really slowing down and going into the experiential mode, which people sometimes do, but you kind of do it by chance. It's not emphasized. If it happens, great. But Focusing – this was a process to facilitate that. To Focus, to pay attention to how that can happen.

*Did you find a difference in how your patients responded?*

**Susan:** It's changed everything forever. I work very differently now than I did then, which doesn't mean I don't include the analytic framework, which is also very helpful to me. What I've learned about theory is all great. But how I work has changed. I work from my own felt sense first. That's why I say I'm a Focusing Oriented Therapist. That's the bottom line. When someone comes to me, I try to be connected to my own felt sense of the situation and then see where that takes me in terms of helping someone else.

*You use Focusing to connect with your client?*

**Susan:** It's how I get to know and help someone move into their own felt sense. I was working on Skype with a client. She had a dream. There was something about a lot of children that weren't hers, but she was feeling responsible for them.

"Wow," I just said, "how was that for you? What was that like? Let's just really be with that." And it opened up a whole avenue, which related to other stuff in her life. I felt that this part of the dream was so important to me and I didn't know where that was going to go. That was really interesting in my mind, but I also had a felt sense about this. So, I just said. "Wow, let's be with that. How was that in the dream for you to have these other children that weren't your children?"

And then that led her to make a deep connection. Another therapist might say we do that too and they might. But they might have the tendency to put their interpretation on it or they might just say, "Oh tell me more about that." It might be similar; I am being guided in a way that it feels like that can happen more often.

*There seems to be difference between "tell me more about that" and "how was that for you?"*

**Susan:** Yes, that is an "experientializing" way of responding. I might know something about her family dynamics from a theoretical point of view. It all fits in and we can have a nice conversation about it. But I might offer that only after she's had her experience. My offering my own awareness is one difference between having a Focusing partnership and being with a Focusing Oriented Therapist. I do apply everything that I have ever learned at any given moment and it includes all the rest of the trainings that I ever had.

*I was interested in your work with fertility issues.*

**Susan:** I found out when I was sixteen that I could not have biological children. I'm very sensitive to the pain of struggling with this issue, and have worked with single, married, and LGBTQ people who are longing to be parents.

*Is there an underlying experience that most people struggling with this issue go through?*

**Susan:** Well yes. I always think that I was lucky in that from being a teenager on, I knew that I would become a parent through adoption, and I dealt with my feelings around it early on. Most people struggle with infertility for years and then they have to go through a grief process of letting go of giving birth to a child that will bear their genes, before they can even begin to think about adopting a child. It's really hard. You have to process that, so you can be whole in relation to some other being that you bring into your life. And the grief does remain. It's still there. It's not huge, but it's something; nothing ever goes away. It's all still there. It's how you are holding it. Focusing gave me that in such a big way. It's your relationship to it. And that's what Focusing is all about. Being in a larger space and how you hold it all.

*You are a Zen practitioner and a Focuser. I was curious about your thoughts on meditation and Focusing.*

**Susan:** The Western mind has a need to process what comes up. You can't just focus on your breath and just sit. You can do that for a while but if something is there it needs to be worked with. Focusing is a way to do that while you're meditating.

*Do you feel that individuals of Western culture have more of a need to process their experience than in Eastern cultures?*

**Susan:** Do you know the term spiritual bypassing? Spiritual bypassing happens when you are meditating but the suffering is pushed away and it's not dealt with. You're not really dealing with the stuff that needs to come up. That's what the term means and there's an awareness now that's happened around spiritual practice with some of the Buddhist teachers, especially some of the Americans that have studied in the East and then come back. You can sit in the woods in peace and then when you come back all the stuff is there. There have been some articles in Tricycle magazine about Buddhism and Focusing. Buddhism uses a concept called "skillful means" for approaching difficult situations. And I think Focusing is a skillful means within the Buddhist framework. The two practices, meditation and Focusing, work well together

*Tell us about your haiku practice.*

Haiku is the experience of the moment of presence. Real haiku is a 17-syllable poem with a seasonal reference because we are always in a season. You are always in a season; even if you are inside, you are in a season. It's a moment of being present in wherever you are. That is where that practice came from, and really, it's a felt sense moment.

*Please share one of your haiku poems*

**Susan:** I have a little cabin in the Catskills and it's on a hill, and I often walk up and down it. This was a September day, end of summer but fall is beginning. It was beautiful. I noticed something as I was walking up the hill. Here's the poem that came from that moment:

repainting the house  
yellow covering yellow  
in September light

*I am wondering what that evoked for you.*

**Susan:** For me it meant what is there is almost redone in a new light; the yellow of the autumn on the yellow of the house gives it a new light. It is so many layers of light. It is exactly what I was experiencing in that moment and that lovely light; yellow and that is the beauty of a haiku. It is not a metaphor. It has to stand as an exact thing that is happening. Repainting the house, yellow covering yellow, and yet it becomes this very evocative thing when you really slow down and get the exact thing that is happening. So that is why I love haikus – because it's just the way it is! And all the layers are felt. This haiku is one of my favorites. It was published in a book.

*As a member of the Board, do you feel there is something that you are entrusted to preserve?*

**Susan:** Yes! It is preserving this precious legacy that reaches into so much, in both philosophy and psychology. I am in psychology, so I see where new schools of thought that have coopted Focusing without giving it its due credit. It's gotten into the general culture, which isn't bad, but on the other hand I want to safeguard this amazing legacy. Passing it on and seeing how it can develop.

*Does the Board have a vision for the future?*

**Susan:** We are in a transitional period after losing our founder and we are concerned about how to be the best stewards of his legacy. To that end we are

redoing the website so that it's more easily accessible all over the world. Lots of different languages. We want to increase membership by offering more programs like the Roundtables and Cafecitos. We have also initiated the Eugene Gendlin Research Center. We want to make his work more accessible.

Maria, this actually is the first time I have ever been interviewed, and I feel so grateful for the experience of sharing something about the arc of my life work. You are a wonderful listener.

*Maria Skoufas is a Certified Focusing Trainer. She currently works as a Client Support Manager for a telecommunications company, facilitating communication and connection for her business clients.*

### **References**

Rudnick, S. (2007). Coming home to wholeness. In P. C. Cooper (Ed.), *Into the mountain stream: Psychotherapy and Buddhist experience*. Jason Aronson.

Rudnick, S. (2019). *Edna's gift: How my broken sister taught me to be whole*.