

## **Tools for Teaching Disidentification: Some Exercises, Games, Metaphors, Humor**

Marcella Calabi

May 3, 2013

“Get some perspective.” “See the forest for the trees.” “Bird’s-eye view.” “You can’t see the swamp when you’re up to your ass in alligators.” “Get the wide-angle picture.” We all long for a way out of feeling trapped within our own muddles, and we all have the idea that the view from *higher up* or *farther out* would be a good thing.

How?

One of the extraordinary things about Inner Relationship Focusing is that it offers an answer to that question. I know I am not the only Inner Relationship Focuser for whom the major life-changing a-ha is the unmerging of Self from – well, not only from Parts, but from everything: from the “everything” in the Radical Acceptance of Everything, so that there is a Self to do the accepting.

Philosophically one can say that our Larger Self is always there, always available. And like everything else, with practice it gets easier. As I Focus, whether alone, with partners or “on the fly,” I can sense my ability to unmerge from the voices within becoming stronger.

But in experience it can seem as unreliable as a weak muscle, and perhaps as unavailable as a muscle so weak we have no sense of access to it at all. When my fitness instructor first said something to me about accessing my deep abdominal muscles I said “I don’t have those.” I was joking, but I was also wryly describing how I felt.

So I smile when I hear Ann suggest that a guided Focusing session has aspects that can be compared to a bodywork session. As a Focusing Guide, I feel sometimes like a Pilates instructor for core Self in my clients. And I’m hoping that all that practice will make me as “toned” in my ability to be SiP as my gorgeous fitness instructor is “toned” from doing 20 classes to every workout client’s one.

Those of my clients whose sense of self was compromised early in life by severe trauma are especially likely to feel that that “muscle” is so weak as almost not to be available at all. Like all of us who have not learned yet how to do otherwise (and even expert Focusers, at least once in a while), these people merge – they identify with their strong feelings. And like all of us they benefit radically from discovering an alternative to doing so.

For people with a sense of self as fragile as these clients’, it is difficult at first, if not virtually impossible, to follow what is presented as the most basic advice and most necessary requisite in Gendlin’s original prescription for Focusing: *Don’t get*

*snagged!* [p 52]. *When some concern comes, DO NOT GO INSIDE! Stand back from it.* [p. 44].

Where Gendlin says “*You need not believe, agree with, or do what the felt sense just now says,*” [p.60]... well, this is just plain hard. So is holding *the attitude of receiving* [p.61]. We all have trouble sometimes, but some people either merge immediately or dissociate. For those who dissociate, I should say they merge first and then, unable to tolerate the feelings with which they have merged, they dissociate. In either case, they are swept away.

This is also a matter that I have been thinking about, in other ways than from a Focusing perspective, for many years. And some of my most fragile clients have been Clarityworks or Voice clients since before I began Focusing.

One day in Module Two I mentioned that some clients in my Voice class can’t keep track of the feeling in their bodies, from longstanding habits of protection – it doesn’t seem safe to feel. Ann reminded me that they don’t need training in feeling as a first step. As a first step, they need training in Self in Presence. Ah, yes!

I have been using the word “fragile” to describe clients whose grip on the sense of Self is tenuous, in this paper and also since before I read Margaret Warner’s article *Fragile Process*. She writes “I believe... that more complex processing requires a basic skill: the ability to hold relevant personal experiences in one’s attention in an accepting way.” I understand her to be saying the same thing as Ann: what’s needed is a strengthened ability to be a Self, available and capable of attending to whatever is not the whole self.

In other discussions, Ann made the point that the Shy Animal Exercise is especially helpful because it capitalizes on what people already know how to do. And I agree that it would be a pity to suggest or imply that operating out of Self is foreign and has to be learned. And yet...

In class I struggled to put into words my feeling that some people need a more glaringly explicit introduction to the experience of Self, more help finding it. Since a lecture on the subject just doesn’t do the job, what else could we be doing? With what I heard as both enthusiasm and challenge in her voice, Ann responded that she would love to know what I might come up with.

This paper is a step in that direction.

Grappling with this challenge, I found it helpful to notice that there are several elements in the achievement of Self in Presence that can be considered distinctly, including: disidentification; the observing Self; the Self’s attitudes of curiosity and of empathy. It occurred to me that the first step on which my clients were foundering was disidentification. I did better at inventing exercises for them if I thought of it as training in disidentification rather than training in Self in Presence.

What follows here presents a few of the strategies that are intended to be useful for everyone and that have worked best, so far, with fragile clients. As you will see, the strategies range from individual metaphors to more complex conceptual frameworks and exercises. I also tested and tweaked the exercises in a group workshop. They are in no particular order. The descriptions and the details of each thing on the list, and the list itself, will change. I expect to add to it. I hope to hear from others what they would add to it as well.

I have nowhere near enough experience to say how many people these tools might help, that is, what percentage of the people who need that help. I can only say that so far I am having some success at helping some severely traumatized people strengthen their sense of self. These are people who had given up on therapy and who have been grasping at the barest of twigs on the bank of a river that threatens constantly to – in fact usually does – sweep them away.

One of my clients in particular has not only found a real foothold on solid ground, but she is also articulate about a shift in her attitude towards the whole idea. At first the notion of stepping back was itself frightening – like most people contemplating whatever might be the next level “up” in differentiation, she was afraid it would turn her into a person who was cold, hard, detached, uncaring, and thus even more terribly isolated from the world than she already felt. The other day she said, “Now I see it. No, now I *feel* it. Being able to step back and engage from that place feels like deep involvement.” This is our beautiful reward for developing a strong sense of self: connection through empathy.

-----

### **Observation Exercise: “Event and Narrative”**

The “game” is simple and totally flexible to the circumstances.

The leader introduces the concept and whatever happens next, in actuality or in participants’ imaginations, provides the examples. Or one can grab people’s attention without introducing the concept, as I did in my latest workshop.

In my workshop, I started this at the very beginning of our time together, when people were just getting to know each other and we were gathered in a farmhouse kitchen with snacks. I said, “Jerry, would you pass the pistachios please?” And then I asked the group, “Say... what just happened? What event took place?” Of course this immediately raised the question *which event is she talking about?* That in itself surprises the mind into considering that everything that happens is an event, and that there are different levels of perspective: the workshop is happening? we’re here? someone said something? what?

I got them off that hook by saying, “OK, I’ll be more specific. What happened involving me with respect to Jerry a minute ago?” All the answers had narrative interpretation in them such as *You wanted the pistachios*, or went farther into the complexities of the interaction, like *You asked for the pistachios and Jerry gave them to you*. These seemed so obvious to people that they continued to be – as I intended – bemused by the question.

I then introduced the notion that my asking for the pistachios had been an *event*. If a social psychologist were taking notes he would observe that I had turned towards Jerry, made eye contact, pointed, and uttered some sounds. And that in English, which it happens both Jerry and I speak, the sounds add up to “Jerry, would you pass the pistachios please?” And that all the rest is *narrative*. We don’t even know if I actually wanted the pistachios! Thinking I wanted the pistachios is a story that Jerry might decide to write for himself.

I invited the group to think of all the stories Jerry might write. Discussion became lively immediately. People even went for the drama of all the ways that a person can take things personally, especially in the context of intimate relationships:

- *She wants the pistachios or She’s doesn’t even want the pistachios, she’s messing with me*
- *Why ask me? Lori is closer! versus Sure, why not?*
- *She never pays any attention to me unless she wants something versus Oh, lovely at least she’s acknowledging my existence.*
- *I dunno, that’s a lot of salt, I’m worried about her. Do I just pass them or do I say something?*
- and so on and so on

Everyone provided an example of an event, and we all concocted multiple narratives that could go with it.

We used my jargon “event” and “narrative” for the rest of the evening – indeed for the rest of the workshop – as a shorthand. Over and over it happened that someone would suddenly say, “Ok, wait a minute, the event was.... and I was thinking.... and *that’s* a narrative....” I was frankly amazed at how well it “took.”

The relevance to Focusing is the pause; the observation; the chisel-point prying open a *distance* between triggers and feelings; the experience of *somebody thinking or feeling something* in response to an event, and of noticing that the *somebody* is the person doing the noticing. With the “observing I” activated to this degree it’s a much smaller step from there to recognizing a disidentified Part.

### **Humorous versions of the name “Event and Narrative”:**

1. *Just the Facts, Ma’am. Then what’s the story?*

2. In everyday life when I am practicing non-reactivity to stressful scenes I call it by the purposely irreverent if not downright rude title “Monkeys at the Zoo Mode.” At the zoo, you can just observe: “My goodness! That big one just hit the little one with

a branch, and the one in the corner is playing with itself.... and there isn't a single thing I have to do about any of it." This image gets the point across with a laugh.

### **A note about words:**

It is useful to make an explicit point of the fact that when *words are spoken* – when those sounds that someone emits means something in our language – we are very readily hooked into narratives and far quicker to be sure that our narratives are the “one and only right” one. So when words are spoken I might say “Event with words” and “Narrative” rather than just “Event and Narrative”. A smile-inducing story I use for this is about a phrase I heard from a friend’s grandchild who didn’t like what she was hearing from her mother: “*Mommy! What is your mouth doing!?*”

### **Note about “Event and Narrative” in a Guided Focusing Session**

I’ve found that this framing can be incredibly helpful when a client asks a question in the course of a focusing session. As the guide, I can try to decide if it’s a question for me that should trigger a teaching moment or a “something that wants to know”; I can test one approach and then go to the other if it becomes clear that’s more appropriate. Now, with a client to whom I’ve introduced the “event and narrative” concept, I can do something that’s very efficient: take this opportunity to model the concept. If I am willing to let the moment slip into a more teaching frame, I can say, “Well, ok, I can address the topic of your question and answer it, or I can reflect the event that something in you came up to ask it.” The client will direct me, and is also learning what it is like to step back from being merged with either the question or the questioner. I have had some major “click” moments happen this way for people.

---

### **Sorting Exercise: Counting the I’s ... and “Thing 1 and Thing 2”**

At Treasure Maps to the Soul, Ann and Barbara used stuffed animals to render the idea of Parts more visible and tangible. This exercise comes out of a related notion. I call it the Sorting Exercise because the emphasis here is on “sorting out” parts from whole, without someone needing to be expert about that concept.

Participants make up sentences with “I” in them, and we make up random names such that there is a different name for every “I” in the sentence. Leader prompts for emotion-neutral sentences and then invites more and more emotion-laden sentences, or versions of the first sentence. Follow an example like this one:

I had eggs for breakfast. >>> *Harry had eggs for breakfast.*

I had eggs for breakfast, and I hate eggs! >>> *Harry had eggs for breakfast, and Lucy hates eggs!*

I had eggs for breakfast and I hate eggs so I wish I hadn’t eaten them. >>>  
*Harry had eggs for breakfast, and Lucy hates eggs so Bill wishes Harry hadn’t eaten them.*

More “serious” examples can then be brought into play. Again I am talking about teaching moments, not mid-Focusing.

“I’m scared” can be turned into Presence Language “Something in me is scared”. If that just doesn’t register or if the client is saying it by rote but not really feeling the difference, then try “Harry is scared” as an interim step. It’s startling to go from “I’m scared” to “Harry’s scared.” After all, who’s Harry?? Where’d he come from!?! From there it makes that much more sense – it’s positively a relief – to let go of “Harry” and go to “Oh, I get it, it’s *something in me* that’s scared.”

When there is a real muddle going on, and a client is tangled up with more than one part, it can help to propose this “rule” for the sake of exercise: the only “I” that’s allowed to stay in place is the one in the phrase “I’m sensing.” The “I” is the *observing I*.

A good example of this is what I am now calling the Three-I sentence. Begin with the Two-I sentence, if that’s what the client is providing. Trade both of those “I’s” in for “A” and “B” or for names:

I wish I’d just quit it. >>> *Harry wishes Lucy would just quit it.*

The client is liable to find this striking – ‘what happened to *me*?’ The answer is, this sentence is missing a third “I”, the *observer*:

I’m sensing that I wish I’d just quit it. >>> *I’m sensing that Harry wishes Lucy would just quit it.*

The client, the Big Client, the client’s Self, is in that first “I.” And the Parts war is exposed at the same time.

I recognize that there is more to Self than just observing. When this exercise is truly needed, it’s likely that making contact with an observing I is welcome progress if not a breakthrough.

I also have not forgotten that Inner Relationship Focusing discourages the naming of parts and I agree that it is a bad idea to give them a fixed identity that can entrench them. So it’s important to be clear about the “names” being given here. They’re not identities. They can also be traded in for “A”, “B”, and “C” and the like. I find that people recognize “Smith” and “Jones” immediately as placeholders rather than identities. If a third is needed people appreciate a bit of absurdist humor: Smith, Jones, and Shostakovich.

The point to the names is simply to separate them from “me.” I have a client, Connie Heymann, to thank for saying with a smile, “Oh, I see, kind of like Thing 1 and Thing 2”:



... who reveal themselves as contained within a bigger self:



Connie was referring to a time several years ago when we had been working together on her singing. I had been using Tim Gallwey's pedagogical concept of Self One setting goals for Self Two to carry out (from the "Inner Game" revolution of the 1970s) and she had come to a lesson wearing a Seuss t-shirt with Thing 1 and Thing 2 on it.

The applicability of this notion to Inner Relationship Focusing is in the very idea of identifying separate components, which automatically supports a disidentification from those components. As with "Event and Narrative," I do not mean to imply that this *is* Focusing, only that it helps people experience a necessary step.

---

## The Halo Around the Eclipse

When a Part has a strategy that's actually a good idea, it's especially easy to fall into – or perhaps I should say especially difficult to climb out of – identification with it. It comes up, it expresses its idea, and the next thought is *agreement*. Agreement is of course not the same as merging, but the overlap can be very confusing.

In my own experience I find this especially true when a Part states a *belief* (not just a strategy) in a statement that contains some incontrovertible truth. That's when the Part may really seem the most nearly indistinguishable from the whole.

Here's an image that has helped me and some clients with this issue: photographs of a total solar eclipse. The two have “merged” – that is, they overlap perfectly. The moon (the Part) seems to dominate. And yet, and yet.... that halo of light reminds us that the sun is still there.



As the sense of Self strengthens, the light grows:





And ultimately the separation of the two shows itself to be undeniable. This brings with it a growing feeling of inevitability and a deep, whole-body, downright primitive if not atavistic rising of hope:



---

### **Group Game: A Puzzle Argument**

Here is a way to shake things up a bit and make an essential point at the same time. I recommend it for any time that the energy can use a shift. It can be humorous and cathartic, and the “aha moment” potential is high.

Pass around a box of puzzle pieces. The 35-piece Ravensburger children's puzzles are just the right size, but it doesn't matter. Each person takes one. The box with the image is withheld.

The more sedate version of this is to ask people to describe their puzzle piece, and to do so as if holding the attitude that "this is the way all puzzle pieces should be." This will turn into a role-play of Parts, each of which is sticking up for a particular and limited point of view. It demonstrates why trying to convince Parts, to talk them out of their opinion and persuade them to another opinion, is pretty hopeless. At some point the leader can ask "if each of us is limited to a single puzzle piece's view of the world, who has any chance at all of settling an argument among us, or – better yet – of making it not an argument at all but a team contribution to a greater whole?" The answer is, the only person who can do that is someone with a bigger perspective, someone who sees more than one puzzle piece.: the person putting the puzzle together. In the case of an *internal* puzzle, the "person" with the perspective is Self in Presence.

In my experimental workshop, I did this game at a meal, passing the box of pieces as if it were one of the family-style dishes going around. And I made it a little more outrageous – I actually began by saying, with a grin, "There's been altogether too much thoughtfulness and harmony around here lately. Let's have an argument!" People looked rather quizzical. I held up my puzzle piece, which happened to have a straight edge and a lot of white on it, and what was obviously part of an animal's eye. I chose an especially emotionally-robust member of the group and said, "Page, hold up your piece" – I could see she had an inner piece. With the same grin I said, "Page, you're supposed to have a straight edge! *Whatsa matter wid'you??*" People's heads swiveled. Page understood and took up the mock argument, and lights began to click on in people's faces. One person who is especially bedeviled by inner critics said, "Oh..... when I hear something calling me crazy, it's one part in me, that sees only a single puzzle piece, *calling* another part in me, that's also seeing only a single puzzle piece, 'crazy.'" "Right, Brian," I said. His piece had mostly dark fur on it. "Dark fur!" I said, holding up my piece. "But white and an eye is *right*. From my point of view, dark fur is just *craaaazy*." He got it, and someone else chimed in, "yes each one sees everything in light of its own limited way of being!" And Page added, "The only one who can really do any listening is the guy with the box." The whole thing lasted five minutes and people were nodding thoughtfully about it for the rest of the session.

---

### **Sharp Phrases for noticing when identification is going on**

I call these "sharp" because they bring a person up short. And they are questions. These are exceptions to the gentle, non-questioning, reflecting protocols of typical

guided Inner Relationship Focusing. I have resorted to these with the clients who slip so easily into identification, especially when a critical part is spewing:

*Wait, who said that?  
Who's talking now?  
Who's got the mike?*

The implication to “who?” is *Well, it ain't Self in Presence, so check again!* If I ask this question firmly but without judgment it has the effect of hauling someone back from the brink. Naturally I would only do this with a client who is already somewhat trained and at least intellectually understands that Self would not be talking like that. And I would only do it when the risk of falling off the brink is rather grave – the client is liable to start looping, with stress escalating and emotions spiraling out of reach.

---

### **Some Phrases to use with parts**

#### One part:

Whoa, what's up with “Harry”?  
troubled friend sitting on the park bench next to you  
neighbor knocking on the door

#### Many parts:

members of your committee  
members of your team  
cast and crew  
bunch of people each holding a puzzle piece  
classroom full of kids

#### When too many things come up at once

put it on the list  
put it in the screenplay

---

### **Humor:**

Sometimes a laugh is very helpful.

For oh-so-many many parts: *Snow White and the Forty Dwarves.*

I am struggling with this one, because on the one hand, it works: (1) crossing *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* is a genuinely funny play on concept; (2) it makes people laugh when they might otherwise be overwhelmed that “Ack! So *many* are coming up!” – 40 rather than 7; (3) the idea is

that each “dwarf” has its one character and point of view and mood as in the Disney presentation so deeply embedded in all Americans. On the other hand I hesitate – I worry about offending persons with dwarfism by making this use of the fairy tale that is part of the history of their marginalization.

When a part interrupts or distracts from another part

*Photo bombing*

The younger generation calls it “photo bombing” when someone sticks their face into a picture or makes a gesture behind the person being photographed. Like this:



[Regretfully I do not have the attribution for this picture, which a friend gave me. I am searching for it. It’s marked as having come from the imgur Reddit site]

Parts rushing in to defend and protect.... feelings about feelings about feelings:

*A pile-up on a goal-line play*

Such a little feeling or part or issue, with such a huge ruckus on top of it! And each player thinks of himself as having a particular role to play in attempting to hide or get or protect or shove the ball. The NFL standard length for a football is 11.9 inches, and on a goal-line play the entire manpower of two teams might be on the heap, some three tons of team-member parts....



### *A rugby "scrum"*

In a rugby "scrum", almost all of the players are still on their feet engaging in a mass push toward their own goal line while in-fighting for possession of the ball is going on in the middle of the scrum. It goes on for minutes at a time until the referee decides that there is no real progress being made by either team. He then blows his whistle stopping play and the teams line up to scrummage anew.

This is a distressingly accurate metaphor for what the internal wars can feel like, no? Even if you don't know this about the sport – which I didn't until recently – the photo makes the point.



### **Last but not least, the “MSU Graduate”**

As noted in the “Event and Narrative” section of this paper, we interpret everything that comes our way. It is our interpretation to which we react, and from which we may suffer, and which may start wars or wage peace. As I heard a speaker say at a conference on interconnectedness, we are all graduates of MSU – Making Shit Up. To do differently or even to make up better, more useful and less damaging shit, we have to realize that we made it up.

This is not for Focusing use, as it would denigrate a Part; but it is helpful when discussing the space between topic and event into which we inject our interpretations.

This graphic always gets a laugh of recognition. Courtesy Alan Lurie

