

Exploring the key role of focusing in a personal experience of healing trauma

By Emily Agnew

Last summer, my doctor sent me to get a magnetic resonance imaging scan, or MRI, for a medical issue in my left shoulder. I was puzzled by the comments he made about staying relaxed, closing your eyes, and pretending you were somewhere else, because I wasn't the least bit worried about the procedure--until the technician brought me into the room in my gown, and I saw that coffin-like tube. I wasn't conscious of being scared, but the stress must have been evident in my body language, because the technician asked me several times if I was OK. I thought, "Why is she asking me that?!" and said, "Yes, I'm fine!" I lay down on the slide that slides into the machine.

She packed me in with metal and plastic pieces to immobilize my left arm and shoulder, told me to hold as still as I possibly could, and gave me a squeeze bladder to hold in my right hand in case I needed to get her attention once I was inside. But I never got that far. As she slid me in to the tube, a terrible feeling came over my whole body. It was unbearable, overwhelming. The technician asked kept asking if I was all right, and whatever answers I was giving caused her to say, "Do you want me to pull you out?" Her words cut through the immobilizing terror and I heard myself saying, "Yes! Please!" She pulled me out. I sat up, feeling shaky and queasy, and began to cry. A voice in me said, "Don't be a baby! Stop crying!" I must have been apologizing because the technician kindly said, "Don't even worry about it...this happens every day here." She sat with me for a little while then helped me back to the dressing room, suggesting that I could re-schedule for another facility where the machine had open sides.

It wasn't until the next day that I found myself thinking, "Why didn't I do my meditation practice?!—or one of the breathing techniques I know? Or some focusing?" I was stunned to realize that it hadn't even occurred to me to try one of these things. This was remarkable to me as in the past, I had consciously chosen to use these supports to help me handle intense situations. Meditation helped me stay with the pain of labor as I gave birth to my daughter at home, without any drugs or interventions. And more recently, I had used focusing very successfully to stay calm while experiencing acute post-surgical pain. That's when I realized just how stressed I must have been in the MRI machine.

So I sat down to do what I always do, several times a week: Focusing. I sensed into my body, providing a friendly space inside myself where anything that might need attention could come. Immediately, images popped into my mind of being slid into the MRI machine. I acknowledged and welcomed the images, understanding that something in me was sending them, wanting me to understand or know more about this experience.

As I sat quietly, curious and open, memories began to come. I was three years old. We were in Pittsburgh for a visit with my grandparents, and I had slipped on the carpeted stairs, crashing into the newel post and splitting my forehead open. Now I was lying on something hard, in a room with bright lights overhead. I couldn't move. I was scared, but I could see my mother over to my right, standing there in her familiar dress, the one with bunches of light purple grapes on it, and that was reassuring. Then someone put a cloth over my face, and I couldn't see her any more. I panicked, and there it was again: that terrible, unbearable, overwhelming feeling.

But this time, as these memories came, I was able to be present with the panic. I was conscious of the terrible feeling—and conscious of myself in present time, an adult in an adult body, holding the feeling in a kind, curious, accepting way. I thought, “No wonder! No wonder all that terror came up in the MRI machine.” And as I stayed with that place inside me, I found myself saying internally, “No wonder you were terrified! They were holding you down...you were trying so hard to deal with it all, and then they covered your face...and then they must have held you down harder to try to get the stitches done...” I stayed with the intense feelings, the tears, keeping them company. I ended up feeling much calmer.

Two weeks later I went in for the re-scheduled MRI. This time, the machine was open at the sides. It was like lying down with a massive coffee table hanging four inches above me. The feelings came again, but less overwhelming this time, and again, the adult “me”—the “me” that in focusing, we call Self-in-Presence-- kept company with that scared place in me.

As the technician slid me in, I felt my body getting more and more tense. I tried to find a word or phrase that described exactly what I was feeling, then I checked back with the tense place to see if my description was right—just as I might do with a little child: “You say your tummy hurts, huh...and it’s right there? Right there, I see, ahh...and is it a sharp kind of ouch, or a dull kind, or maybe it just keeps going? Ah, a sharp kind... I see...” And, in fact, this scared place in me did feel like a three-year-old child. Attended to in this way, her tension subsided to a bearable level. She was not happy to be in the MRI machine. But neither was she panicked: she could now feel me with her.

Next I sensed what kind of company she might like from me; you can do this in focusing, once you have made deeper contact with something in you. Images came to my mind of myself as a little child, and could clearly sense she was scared and that she wanted to be held. So in my mind’s eye, I held her—in the way I’m sure my poor mother would have held me in that emergency room in 1963, had she been allowed to. Tears squeezed slowly out of my eyes. It felt as if all the sadness and fear were finally having a chance to be released. Now, it felt OK to be in there, observing with curiosity all the strange hammerings, bangings, and buzzing, droning sounds. Not great, but OK: I doubt MRI’s will ever be on the list of my top thousand things to do. But the feeling was, “OK... I can do this now if I have to.”

Weeks later, I came upon this passage in Peter Levine’s groundbreaking book on trauma, *Waking the Tiger**:

“Much of the trauma associated with medical procedures can be prevented if health care providers do the following:

1. Encourage parents to stay with their children.
2. Explain as much as possible in advance.
3. Delay procedures until the children are calm.”*

From this point of view, no wonder I experienced that emergency room visit as traumatic. I understand now that this was a re-experiencing of the earlier traumatic event. According to my mother, I had been relatively calm until they put the cloth over my eyes. But after that, the adults around me were not allowed to stay with me; nothing was explained to me; and the procedure was completed with me in a state of extreme duress. The reaction to this incident must have re-surfaced due to similar stimuli in the MRI room: lying supine under bright lights in a medical facility with its characteristic sounds, colors and smells, having my

movement severely restricted, and being unable to see anyone else, having been told to close my eyes in the MRI machine. Once again, I was completely identified with this feeling of rigid terror: that is to say, it felt like *all of me* was terrified. I had only the most tenuous connection with the present moment reality of myself as an adult person with choice and the power to act.

This time, though, I was fortunate to have a kind, experienced technician, who perceived my level of stress much more clearly than I did. In fact, she followed all three of the suggestions that Peter Levine makes on behalf of children. With her attentive inquiries about my well-being, she effectively stood in as a parent: her gentle, persistent inquiries—“Are you *sure* you are OK?”-- helped me access just enough sense of my present-day, adult self to make a decision on the behalf of that child-place in me which was virtually immobilized with terror. She explained everything that would happen. And in the end, she delayed the procedure indefinitely, when it was clear that I wasn’t able in that moment to access the internal resources to calm down.

Had she been irritated or dismissive, or had she insisted on trying to go through with the procedure, I would have been left with confusion and shame on top of the original distress. Instead, her response gave me the time and opportunity to go home and access those internal resources. I did that through focusing. With the resource of Self-in-Presence, I was able to provide a present-time context for that scared child place in me, both honoring the real feelings of terror *and*, at the same time, allowing in the reality that I was OK and that I had choice over my actions. By describing, checking back, and keeping this place company in an open, respectful way, I came into a new kind of relationship with the fear and powerlessness, and they dissolved away, leaving tears of sadness that felt like a release.

* Levine, Peter A., with Ann Frederick. *Waking the Tiger—Healing Trauma*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997.

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