



PRESENCE



AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF **SPIRITUAL DIRECTION+COMPANIONSHIP**



09

Contemplation
for Liberation

22

Embodying
Prophetic,
Decolonizing
Spiritual
Direction

40

Holding Sacred
Space in an
Era of Artificial
Intelligence

80

The Spiritual
Journey of
Becoming
Integral

92

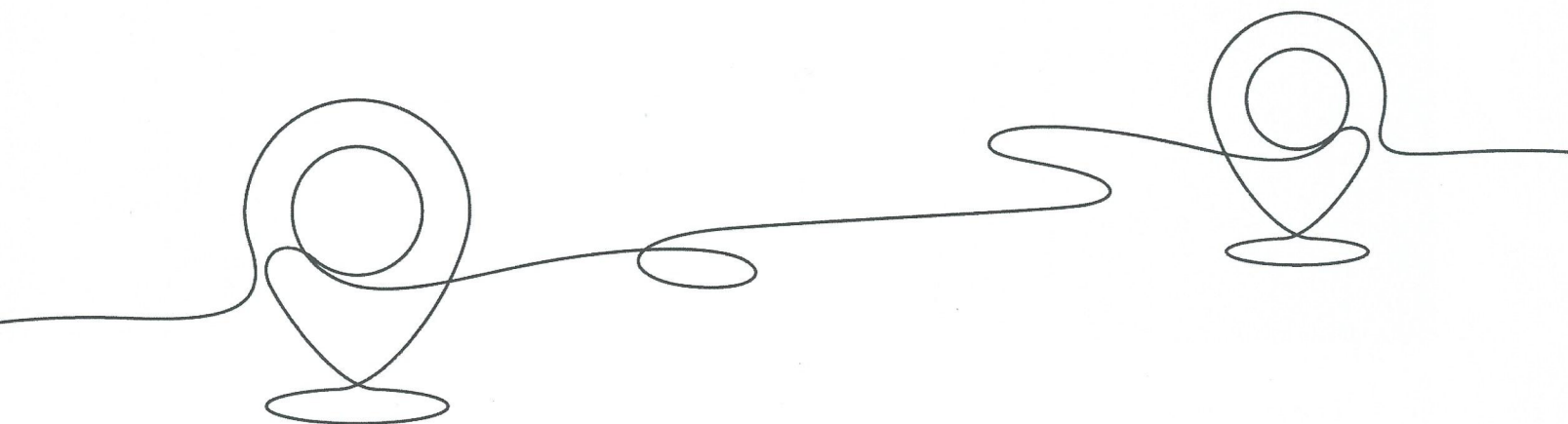
Beholding Love

Vol. **31**

No. **02**

OCT - 2025

*a midlife
journey*
WITH
FOCUSING
AND
SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP

Simone **Grimmer**

LETTING GO OF OLD PATHS

For much of my career, I lived in a world of scientific precision—engineering geology, a discipline rooted in analysis, structure, and problem-solving. With a doctorate in the field, I worked globally in oil field services, navigating complex geological challenges. For seven years in the United States, my work revolved around technical expertise and data-driven outcomes. While it was fulfilling in many ways, it gradually became clear that something deeper was missing.



Life nudged me toward change when I was laid off in 2015. While I had felt somewhat discontented in my career, the shift became undeniable when my boss suddenly decided to retire a couple of years before the merger-related layoff, and my department had been dissolved. In hindsight, I now see that I had arrived at a familiar crossroads then—a place many women find themselves in mid-life, where the life they have built no longer feels aligned with their deeper desires. Like Joyce Rupp’s 1996 poem, “Old Maps No Longer Work,” I felt the call to let go of my well-traveled paths, honoring where they had led me but recognizing the need for something different.

“Toss away the old map...
 It’s of no use where you’re going...
 ... there was a time before maps
 when pilgrims travelled by the stars.”
 ... I will wait for the stars.
 Trust their guidance.
 And let their light be enough for me.

STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

When my spiritual director suggested attending a retreat aptly named *Spiritual Journey* at Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico, USA, I hesitated. Despite being raised in the Christian tradition, religion had never played a significant role in my family. My parents and grandparents, shaped by their experiences during the Third Reich in Germany, had distanced themselves from religious practice. As for me, I identified as a “Spiritual None,” someone unaffiliated with any religion yet deeply engaged in exploring meaning and purpose.

Ultimately, I chose to go—once a scientist, always a seeker. My spirituality was rooted in nature, tai chi, and practices that connected me with my inner self and the world around me. Though I lacked formal religious ties, I believed in something greater than myself, a guiding force that nurtured growth and insight. The retreat proved transformative, leading me to enroll in the Art of Spiritual Direction and Formation program at Stillpoint.

This next step, however, brought challenges. Unlike the retreat, where openness flourished, the program was primarily composed of ministers and led by a director steeped in religious tradition. I struggled with the title “spiritual director,” which carried connotations that did not fully fit me. For a long time, I could not pinpoint the misalignment. In sessions, I found myself repeatedly expressing uncertainty. “I don’t know,” became my refrain. Yet, deep inside, I sensed an answer, lingering just beyond reach.

LISTENING FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

As I struggled with inner conflict and questioned how to transform my certification into meaningful work, I explored online education and stumbled upon a course called Existential Well-Being Counseling on EdX from KU Leuven (Leijssen et al., 2017). The course description stirred something deep within me. So deeply, in fact, that my first instinct was resistance. Yet, experience has taught me that strong resistance often signals something important. The discomfort I felt was precisely what convinced me to engage with the course. Deep down, I had a felt sense that this experience would change everything.

It proved to be rich, profound, and eye-opening. Learning alongside a group of participants, many of them psychology students or therapists, created a collective beginner’s mind that expanded my understanding. Initially, I simply wanted to learn Focusing for personal growth, not to integrate it into spiritual direction. But as I delved deeper into the method, my perspective began to shift.

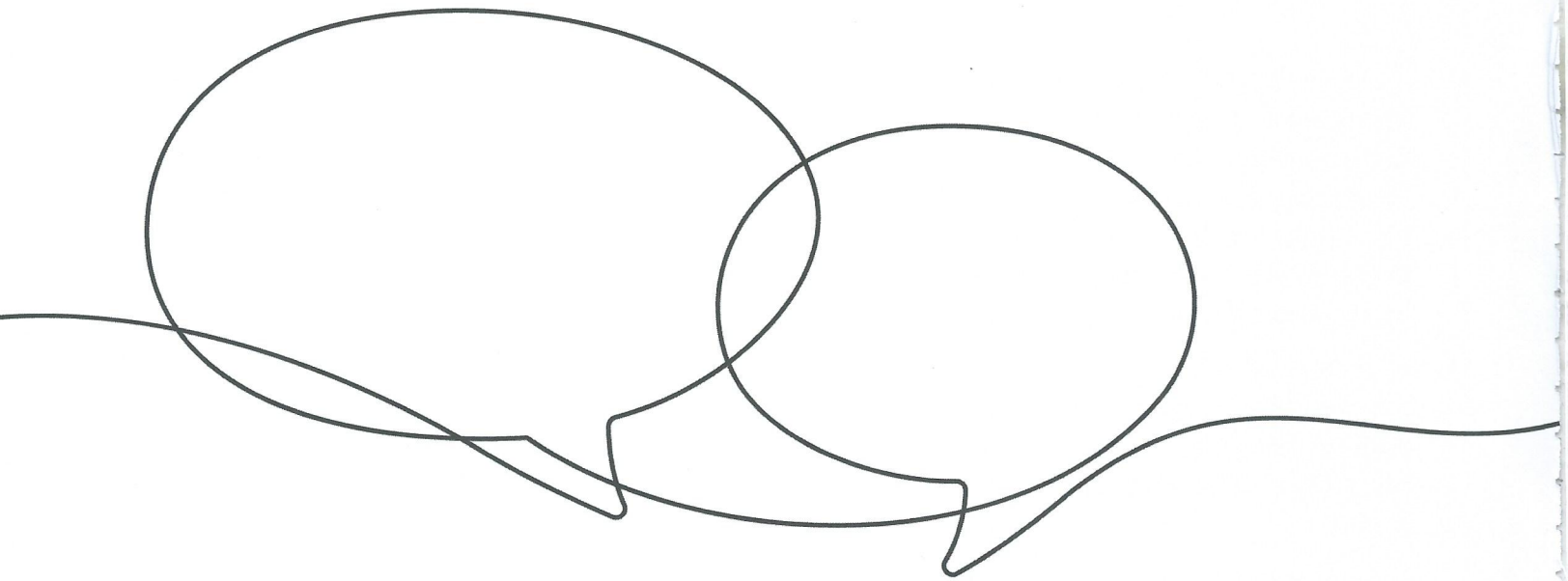
That invitation—to listen inwardly, without agenda—became the foundation for what came next. What unfolded was not just a shift in understanding, it was a new way of being with myself.

Focusing, as developed by philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin in the 1960s, is a process of attending to a subtle, bodily awareness—a “felt sense”—that carries meaning not yet in words. Gendlin discovered this through research with Carl Rogers: Clients who made lasting change in therapy weren’t simply talking. They were pausing, sensing inwardly, and staying with something unclear but alive. This inner sensing was not a technique or belief system—it was a natural capacity, one that could be taught (Gendlin, *Focusing*, 4).

Unlike biospiritual adaptations—which emerged later and often frame the felt sense as a spiritual or theological experience—Gendlin’s original Focusing concept is grounded in phenomenology and lived experience. It does not require belief, doctrine, or religious interpretation. Instead, it invites a kind of radical presence: being with what’s here, even if it is murky, uncomfortable, or implicit.

This distinction mattered deeply to me. As someone who identifies as a Spiritual None—unaffiliated with any tradition yet deeply engaged in meaning-making—I needed a practice that honored the sacred without prescribing it. Gendlin’s approach felt spacious enough to hold my questions, my body’s wisdom, and my unfolding spirituality without overlaying a framework with which I did not resonate. It offered a way to be in relationship with something greater, without needing to name it.

Focusing became a way to meet myself with kindness, especially in moments when clarity felt far away. It did not ask me to believe—it invited me to listen.



YOUR BODY IS TALKING TO YOU—ARE YOU LISTENING?

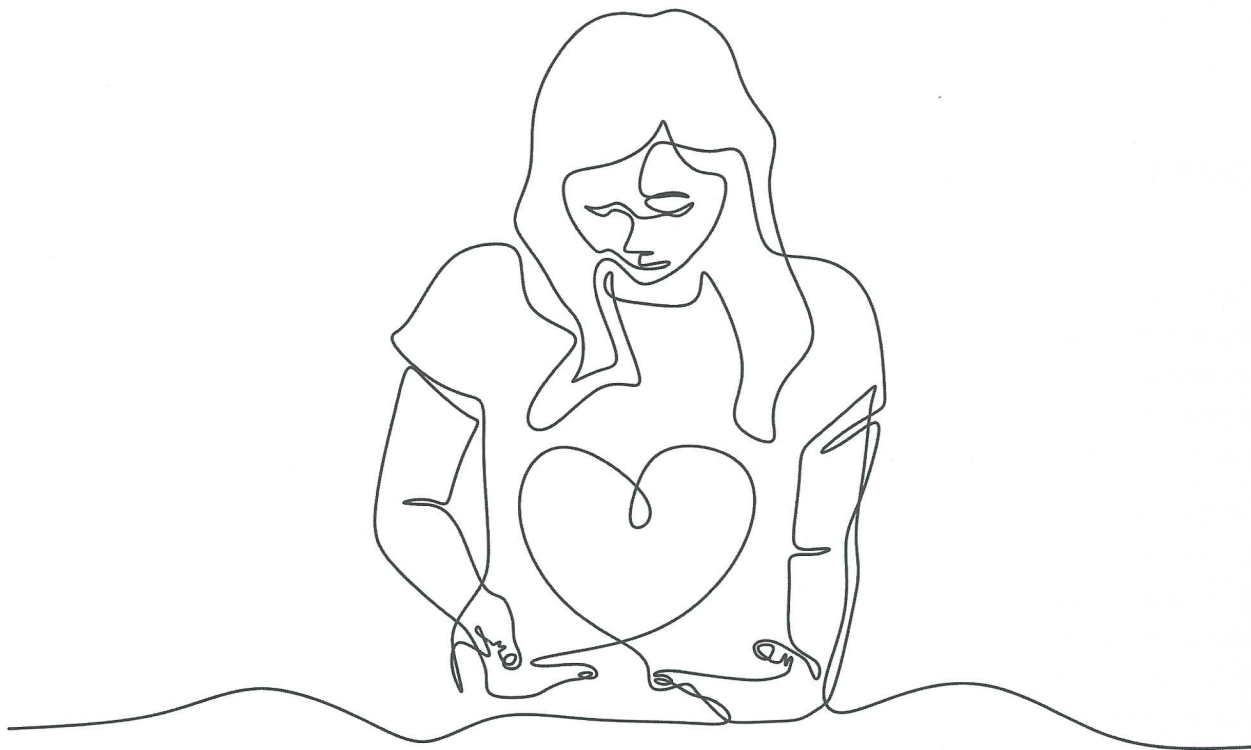
Despite the depth of the course, its self-paced format did not fully support the self-learning of Focusing. I then discovered an online Focusing program in the United States, led by Jeffrey Morrison of the Seattle Focusing Institute. He had recently transitioned his in-person, two-year program to a virtual format. After completing a one-month introductory workshop, my practice partner and I decided to enroll in the first-year program.

Jeffrey was an exceptional trainer, skilled in introducing Focusing to individuals who were not naturally inclined toward it. His instructions were precise, attuned to the needs of participants, and created a solid foundation for deeper learning. Only later, when I started teaching Focusing to myself, did I realize the vast body of knowledge available on how to teach Focusing effectively. Perhaps the true turning point was understanding that Focusing is not merely an intuitive practice—it is something one can learn, step by step.

This realization led me into the second year of the workshop and eventually to the certification process. On a personal level, I learned to feel my body from the inside. Through simple yet profoundly convincing exercises, I gradually developed trust in my ability to listen to my body. That trust became crucial, especially in moments when my body remained silent for prolonged periods or when I felt overwhelmed by the intensity of what surfaced. I discovered that connecting with my body was not about forcing understanding—it was about being present, listening patiently, and letting insights emerge naturally. Ultimately, Focusing became a vital tool for self-care. It also illuminated the edges of spiritual direction for me—what it does not hold, and where my practice needed something quieter, more embodied. Over time, what began as emotional regulation became prayer without name—an inner attentiveness that softened faith into relational awareness.

Before learning Focusing, I had no difficulty connecting with my emotions and staying present with my emotional responses. But learning to stay with my bodily sensations opened an entirely new dimension of experience. As Chris Van de Veire describes in the “Listening to the Body: A Focusing Approach Well-Being” course, listening to my body cultivated an inner attentiveness that allowed me to recognize what was truly alive within me. I realized that my body did not simply react to situations—it *lived* them. In the words of Gendlin, my body became a “direct referent to life” (Gendlin, “Felt Meaning,” 91).

I also discovered “Self-in-Presence”—a concept introduced by Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin (Cornell, 99). It refers to a specific quality of attention toward oneself, a way of creating a more supportive inner environment. Did Focusing solve all my problems? No. Am I happy all the time? No. Has my life improved? Yes!! Simply put, there is more *life* in my life.



FOCUSING, ILLNESS, PERIMENOPAUSE AND MENOPAUSE

Focusing became especially vital as I navigated the unpredictable intersection of long COVID and late perimenopause, two health challenges with few established treatments and often little medical guidance. Amid uncertainty, I found myself in a deeply disorienting experience.

At times, it felt as if my body had betrayed me. The loss of faith in my own physical resilience led to frustration, distrust, and even anger. I began to withdraw, avoiding any awareness of my body's sensations. Instead of perceiving them as valuable signals, I saw them as disruptive threats, undermining my sense of well-being, stability, and control.

During this period, my inner critic grew louder, unearthing childhood trauma long buried. The intensity of these emotions made it difficult to remain present, and for a time, I found myself living at a distance from my own body, avoiding its messages out of fear (Klagsbrun, "Focusing, Illness, and Healthcare," 163).

Amid this turmoil, I was simultaneously learning about Focusing and complex trauma. Applying these insights in real time became invaluable. Focusing was no longer just practice; it became a lifeline, offering patience and care during one of the most difficult transitions of my life. As Joan Klagsbrun aptly puts it, "The body knows the way" (Klagsbrun, "River of Knowing," 76).

Over the course of four years, Focusing helped me rebuild contact with—and trust in—my body. Through a gentle, respectful approach, I began working with my illness rather than against it, reclaiming my body as a source of wisdom rather than an adversary. This shift in awareness empowered me to approach my healthcare providers with greater confidence, advocate for myself, and recognize what my body truly needed.

I came to understand that my body possesses its own awareness, its own feelings, and even its own distinct point of view. This is true not only for my body as a whole but also for individual parts—whether my skin, digestive tract, or the systems impacted by illness, perimenopause, and menopause.

Through Focusing sessions, I realized that even specific body parts—my knees, lungs, and even individual cells—held their own perspectives, knowledge, and experiences. As Katherine Kehoe describes, the body is not merely a passive vessel; it also carries its own wisdom (Kehoe, 77). Learning to listen with curiosity transformed how I related to my body, bridging the gap between illness-induced discomfort and the trust I had lost.

I came to recognize that I was fine—yet my joints, muscles, and cells were suffering. And now, through Focusing, I have found a way to communicate with them, uncover their needs, and begin the healing process. Even more profound was discovering that I was not alone. Focusing Partners—others navigating the same challenges—emerged, offering shared insight and companionship in the healing journey. The progress made in these sessions was invaluable.

I did not have to navigate this alone. Focusing partnerships provided a supportive space for deepening the practice. What became increasingly clear was how Focusing, whether practiced individually or in partnership, carried a profound sense of connectedness and *living forward* energy—almost like a life force with an innate guiding presence. As my awareness deepened and my health gradually improved, my ability to trust this interconnectedness grew as well.

During this time, I noticed a profound shift in my self-practice and Focusing partnerships—an experience of connectedness that had been absent in my work as a spiritual companion. This connectedness had depth and spaciousness; it was a unique way of holding space for myself and, most importantly, *being* with myself. These moments required no “doing”—instead, they carried something sacred, an unspoken communion with something greater.

I remember a pivotal realization: this was my way of being in prayer—yet beyond any conventional religious traditions. It felt like liberation, freeing me from the weight of the generational trauma inherited from my parents and grandparents, shaped by the Third Reich. Becoming aware of this transformation changed so much in my life, and the process continues. It has allowed me to cultivate compassion, kindness, gentleness, respect, reverence, and curiosity toward my unfolding spiritual journey—untangled from the trauma I had carried.

Before Focusing, I struggled to define spirituality in a way that felt authentic to me. During my training courses, presentations and exercises on spirituality became both a revelation and a doorway. They helped me see spirituality as a lived experience—interconnected, expansive, and unrestricted (Klagsbrun, “Opening Doorways,” 84). Rather than something rigid, spirituality became an open and deeply felt space—implicit, vast, and safe enough for vulnerability. It was alive and palpable, capable of inspiring, comforting, releasing, healing, and filling me with awe, peace, or joy.



A DOORWAY TO THE SPIRITUAL

This newfound awareness helped me fully step into my role as a *Focusing-oriented spiritual companion*. Klagsbrun's exercise in the Existential Well-Being Counseling course—asking “What is spirituality to you?” again and again—allowed me to untangle my understanding of organized religion from my experience of being spiritual. At first, I offered familiar words: connection, nature, awareness. But as the question repeated, something quieter emerged. Presence. Not a belief system, but a felt sense. When my partner read my words back to me, I heard something I had not known I knew. That listening inward—not analyzing, not defining—was itself a spiritual act.

Focusing felt free from restrictions, yet simply *being present* created a spaciousness and connectedness far beyond traditional structures. As Gendlin states, “Through Focusing, we can unlock doors and move into dimensions that cannot be entered through the intellect alone.” It was not about *doing* something to *become* spiritual; it was simply *being present*, effortlessly.

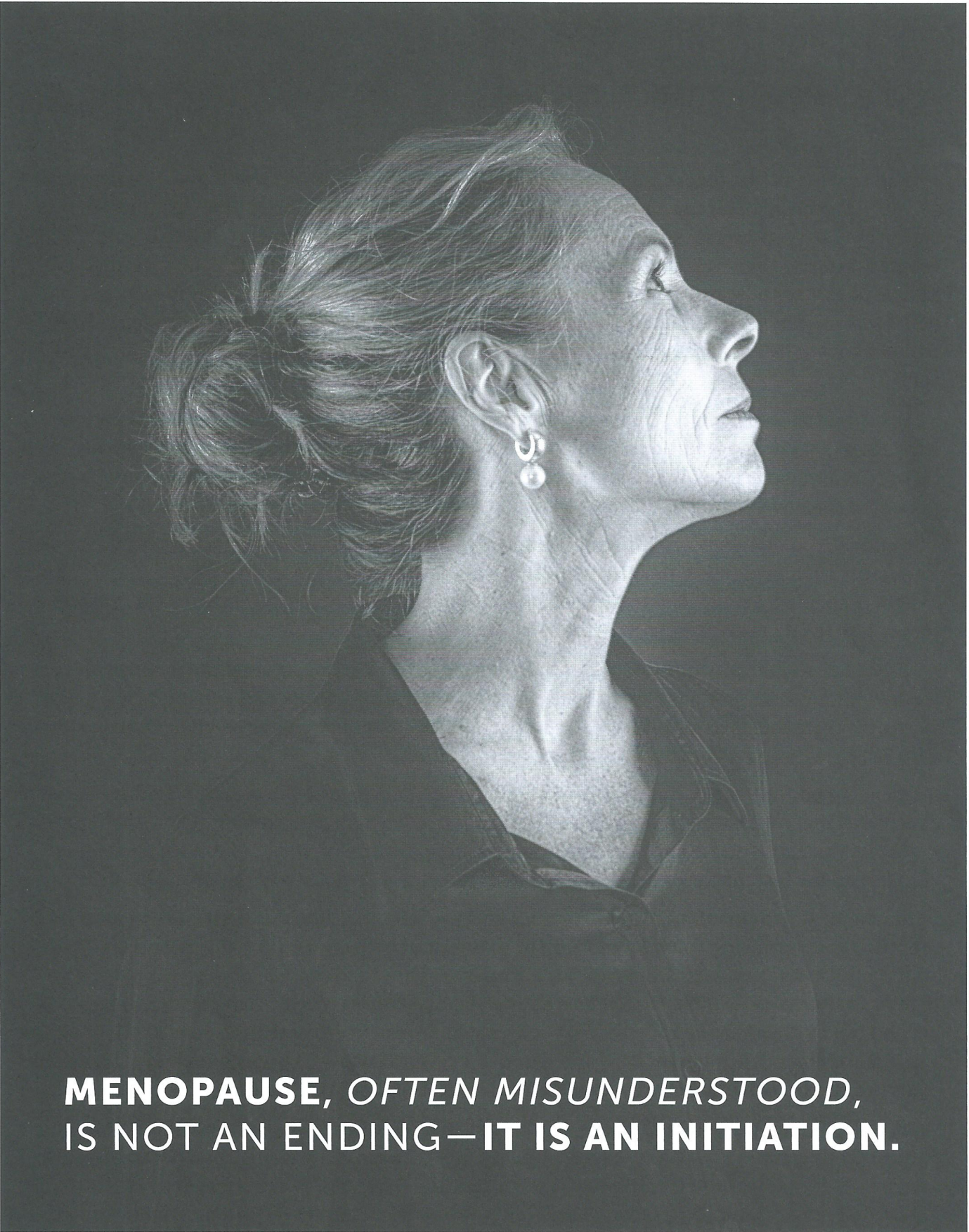
Gendlin also offers an illuminating perspective: “That great big everything is always there. No matter what else you're dealing with, that's always there as a resource” (Flynn 2024). This insight resonated deeply, affirming that spirituality was not something external to grasp but rather something ever-present, waiting to be experienced.

Other questions, drawn from Existential Well-Being Counseling, invited me to sense my life freshly: When did I first feel drawn to the spiritual realm? What opened spirit for me? These were not prompts for performance—they were doorways. They helped me listen to my own story with kindness, curiosity, and a sense of sacred unfolding.

Focusing became the perfect doorway to spirituality for me as a None or Spiritual Independent. With this realization, I found a way to hold space beyond traditional religious structures for those who also identify as None, Spiritual Independent, or Spiritual But Not Religious. Individuals like me feel that a conventional spiritual director may not always be the right fit.

Spiritual Nones—including Independents and the Spiritual But Not Religious—now represent the fastest-growing spiritual movement in the United States, comprising 27 percent of the adult population. Research from the Pew Forum's *Religious Landscape Studies* and Elizabeth Drescher's *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* reveals that this trend extends beyond individuals leaving traditional religious structures (Pew Research Center 2025). In fact, spiritual independence has steadily increased since World War II, affecting not only Christian communities but also Jewish and other traditions worldwide (Drescher, 18).

As one of these individuals, I have found that this path invites deep motivation alongside natural skepticism—a way of approaching spirituality with curiosity rather than doctrine. Many explore wisdom from both traditional and nontraditional sources, seeking freedom rather than prescribed belief systems (Drescher, 53). This is where Focusing serves as a profound gateway,

A black and white profile photograph of an older woman with her hair pulled back, looking upwards and to the right. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of her face and neck against a dark background. She is wearing a dark, collared shirt and a small earring.

**MENOPAUSE, OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD,
IS NOT AN ENDING—IT IS AN INITIATION.**

offering a way to define spirituality in an organic, deeply personal way. It provides a space for self-exploration and healing—helping individuals uncover wounds, triggers, religious trauma, and formative experiences that shape their spiritual paths (Klagsbrun, “Opening Doorways,” 84).

HOLDING SPACE FOR MIDLIFE TRANSITIONS AND BECOMING

Offering Focusing-oriented spiritual companionship, integrating exercises from Mia Leijssen’s Existential Well-Being Counseling course and Joan Klagsbrun’s insights, has proven especially meaningful for clients within this group. Yet another distinct group has emerged: women navigating midlife transitions.

Midlife is often a time of immense change—a period of challenge, self-reassessment, and re-orientation. Many women find themselves questioning long-held identities, releasing outdated narratives, and making room for something new. Through compassion-based soul care—including Internal Family Systems (IFS) and Focusing—these women gain an avenue for exploring their evolving sense of self. In this deeply transitional phase, they discover the possibility of greater inner alignment, meaning, and renewal.

Midlife is an invitation to self-discovery—a time for women to reflect on their authenticity, limitations, and potential for growth. It is a phase of deepening one’s connection to the inner self. This process encourages embracing both the challenges and opportunities of midlife, prompting the question: “Is this the person I want to be in the future?” (Rupp, 83).

This journey provides a safe and collaborative space to navigate the mysteries of midlife and menopause, where the inner critic grows louder, losses and grief surface, and shadows emerge. It is a profound lesson in the art of letting go and radical acceptance.

SACRED PASSAGE AND COMPASSION

Menopause, often misunderstood, is not an ending—it is an initiation.

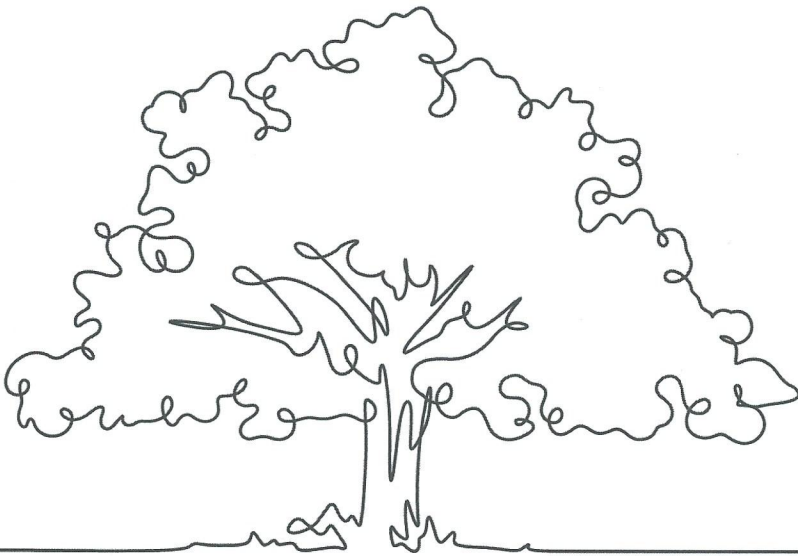
It is a rite of passage into a more integrated, sovereign self—one who cherishes life, attunes to their body and nervous system, and embraces wholeness (Pope and Wurlitzer, 34). Western culture frequently conditions women to fear menopause, framing it as an inconvenience, a marker of aging, a set of symptoms to dread. Many internalize the belief that menopause diminishes them—making them less attractive, less happy, and without purpose.

Yet in other traditions—particularly Indigenous and shamanic cultures—menopause is honored as a sacred transition, a gateway to deeper wisdom. In Japan, menopause is viewed as a

time of renewal and regeneration. Within Mayan traditions, women retain their wise blood, stepping into wise womanhood as healers and spiritual leaders. Intriguingly, societies that embrace menopause as an initiation—not as a medical problem—experience fewer struggles with symptoms. This suggests that when menopause is feared and treated as something to fix, it is resisted, and that resistance shapes the experience itself (Barton 2022).

What if, instead of fighting the transition, women could move through it with curiosity, reverence, and embodied wisdom? Through compassion-based soul care—including IFS and Focusing—women are offered a new way to relate to this transition. Instead of viewing menopause as a crisis, they are invited to explore its *felt sense*, allowing space for integration rather than resistance.

Focusing provides a pathway for deep listening, helping women tune into their body's wisdom. It guides them through the physical, emotional, and spiritual shifts with trust rather than fear. IFS offers a framework for navigating internal parts that may resist this transition—the inner critic, the wounded child, the part shaped by societal conditioning—creating room for Self-energy to lead the way. Together, these approaches form a *midwifery of the soul*, offering guidance through menopause with respect, curiosity, and presence.



RETURNING TO THE ROOT

As I accepted the invitation to listen inward, I found myself reconnecting—with my body, my story, and the deeper rhythms of change. Menopause, once something I feared or tried to manage, became a threshold. Not a malfunction, but a doorway to self-trust and quiet wisdom.

I started to see how women's bodies—like the ecosystems they reflect—have often been misunderstood or treated as problems to solve. And I did not want to keep doing that to myself.

Midlife midwifery, for me, is not about fixing or erasing what unfolds. It is about walking with it. Honoring the wisdom it carries. Letting it initiate me into a more grounded, embodied kind of presence.

Focusing did not lead me into spiritual direction as a role—it led me into a way of being. It cleared away the labels that once constrained how I showed up as a spiritual companion and revealed a form of soul care that is embodied, trauma-sensitive, and rooted in compassion-based practice. IFS helped me meet the inner critic, the wounded child, and the parts shaped by cultural conditioning. Focusing helped me listen to them. Together, they offered a way to hold space that is nondirective, reverent, and alive.

This is the spiritual direction—or better, the Focusing-oriented soul care—I now practice. Not as a guide with answers, but as a companion who listens from the body, honors mystery, and trusts what unfolds. Focusing did not just reshape my understanding of spiritual care—it returned me to myself. It allowed me to meet midlife and menopause not as crises but as sacred thresholds. And it continues to shape how I accompany others—especially those navigating transitions, spiritual independence, or the quiet unraveling of identity. In this work, presence is enough. Listening is the path. And the body, always, knows the way. ✨

REFERENCES

BARTON, NICOLE. *Menopause – An Initiation into Your Wise Woman*. Base Formula, 2022. <https://www.baseformula.com/blog/menopause-wise-woman>.

CORNELL, ANN WEISER. *Focusing in Clinical Practice: The Essence of Change*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

DRESCHER, ELIZABETH. *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

FLYNN, DAWN. "Interview: Joan Klagsbrun." *The International Focusing Institute*, 2024. <https://focusing.org/news-feed/serendipity-social-transformation-great-big-everything-and-giving-gene-haircut>.

GENDLIN, EUGENE T. *Focusing*. Bantam Books, 1981.

———. "How Felt Meaning Functions." In *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical*

and Psychological Approach to the Subjective, 90–100. Northwestern University Press, 1997.

KEHOE, KATHERINE M. "Making Peace with Our Bodies." *The Folio* 26 (1): 74–82, 2015.

KLAGSBRUN, JOAN. "Focusing, Illness, and Health Care." *The Folio* 18 (1): 162–170, 1999.

———. "Opening Doorways to the Spiritual in Psychotherapy." *The Folio* 26 (1): 84–90, 2015.

———. "River of Knowing: A Journey with Focusing." In *Inner Dialogue in Daily Life: Contemporary Approaches to Personal and Professional Development in Psychotherapy*, edited by Charles Eigen, chap. 2. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2014.

LEIJSEN, MIA, AND SIEBRECHT VANHOOREN. *Existential Well-Being Counseling: A Person-Centered Experiential Approach*. KU Leuven, 2017. <https://www.edx.org/learn/>

health-wellness/ku-leuven-existential-well-being-counseling-a-person-centered-experiential-approach.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER. *Religious Landscape Study*. Pew Research Center, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/collections/religious-landscape-study/>.

POPE, ALEXANDRA, AND SJANIE HUGO WURLITZER. *Wise Power: Discover the Liberating Power of Menopause to Awaken Authority, Purpose and Belonging*. Hay House, 2022.

RUPP, JOYCE. *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.

VAN DE VEIRE, CHRIS. "Listening to the Body: A Focusing Approach." KU Leuven MOOC Lecture Series, 2017.