

**Dr. Michael Picucci is interviewed
by psychotherapist & health journalist
Nicholas Cimorelli**

Focalizing An Energy Psychology for the 21st Century

Nicholas Cimorelli: This afternoon I have the privilege of speaking with Dr. Michael Picucci on the subject of Focalizing. But before we go into our discussion on that new field, I'd like to tell you a little bit about Dr. Picucci. He's a psychologist, psychotherapist, trauma expert, and author. His publications include, "Ritual as Resource: Energy for Vibrant Living" and the recent, "Introduction to Focalizing: Organic Solutions to Real-Time Challenges." For part of today's journey we're going to go a little bit back in time to 1989, because I know that was a very pivotal year for Dr. Picucci. It was a moment when he went through a shift; going from what I think he may describe as a linear perspective to some organic, non-linear visions for himself, and the way that he saw his work emerging. What was happening for you in 1989?

Michael Picucci: In seeing my work emerging, the first thing that comes to me is that it was more of a personal insight than a work-related one. I had been a psychotherapist, and I had just endured ten years of very traumatic events in my personal life. During my first experience having a polarity massage, which had been intended to be part of singing lessons I was taking at the time, a totally surprising event occurred, I was lying on the table while the polarity massage therapist was asking me what I was noticing as she very gently manipulated my body. After a few minutes, I started to get images, feelings and sensations. They all had to do with what had gone on in the last ten years of my life. I saw myself in my early 30's, sitting in the first house that I ever bought. (I had been fortunate enough to buy a house on Long Island.) And on the day of the closing I was sitting in the house, with no furniture, totally alone on the floor just smelling all of the cedar wood from the house. That was what was coming up for me on the massage table. I was actually smelling the cedar wood of that house. Then, little by little, I began to see a slow cavalcade of other images having to do with that house. I went through cancer in that house, and chemotherapy, and I was nursed through that there. Then, when I got well, my partner became ill. For two years I cared for him in that house until he died. What was amazing to me was that while I was laying there having those visions, with quiet tears rolling down my face, I never felt so calm and so present in my whole life. I'm not really a singer; this was something I was doing just for fun. But, when I got off the table and sang afterwards, I had the fullest voice I ever had. And when I left there that day and walked out into the Manhattan streets, I felt more in my body than I ever had in my life. It felt like something totally different; a real healing had occurred. I hadn't even thought of it as a healing at that moment; I just knew I felt good, and I liked it.

But, of course, as I reflected back on it in the days and weeks ahead, being a therapist I thought, where did that come from? That came from inside of me, it didn't come from outside. It didn't come from a psychotherapeutic discussion, or stimulation, or anything like that. It came from my body all by itself. And it led from one thing to another as its own organic process. It was completely new territory for me, it set me off... I wanted to know more for my own healing and the responsibility I felt to my clients to learn about this. It then spun off a double-decade-long course of studies into many, many body or somatic-oriented and energy psychotherapies.

NC: What is so fascinating is that you had this moment, this seemingly serendipitous event, where you found yourself experiencing presence. It raised a question about how one arrives at presence, seemingly through intention, as opposed to waiting for it to happen by chance. If you can tell me a little more about that journey of yours, since you're someone who's always been a curious observer. What is it about presence that you've come to know over the last twenty years?

MP: What I've come to know about presence is probably what in Buddhist terms, would be called "non-attachment." When all of the voices that go on inside of me, all the conditioned thinking, all the stuff I've picked up along the way, even perhaps inherited through ancestry, all of that is not me. I am something separate from that. There is a subject/object relation to me, and to how I'm feeling, or how my foot is feeling today, or the flu that I had two weeks ago. Then I have to ask myself, "If I'm not all of those things, if I'm not my conditioned thinking, then who am I?" The more I've asked myself "Who am I?" over the years, the more I'm aware that I am a manifestation of consciousness, an energy. And since energy takes form, I take the form of a human being. Just like everyone else, and like the tree and the rock, I am a manifestation of consciousness. The more I can sit back in the seat of that consciousness, that awareness, and just notice everything for what it is without judgment or agenda, the more present I can be to everything. The more *just there* I can be.

NC: Recently, I had the opportunity to read your monograph, "Introduction to Focalizing: Real Time Solutions to Organic Challenges," and I found that the whole idea of suspending judgment in the context of being present seemed quite central to this concept you're beginning to educate others on. Can you give us a bit of an overview of what Focalizing is, because I think for many it is a new concept?

MP: Focalizing is my personal matrix of all the energy psychologies and somatic psychologies that I've been exposed to in the last twenty years. It's like grandmother's special version of her favorite cake. It's an amalgam of my own experience, and what clients have brought me over the years. All of that comes together to become what I'm calling Focalizing, and it fits into the realm of energy psychology, which I believe will be *the* psychology of the 21st century. Let me say what I think are the two most important things about it: One, it helps a person get unstuck, from whatever that may be from. It could be from how they're holding onto a personal problem, a serious illness, or the possibility of death; it could mean getting unstuck from an addiction, or getting unstuck from a business related matter, from wherever they see no way out and they're really stuck. Focalizing is an

excellent tool for helping a person move forward gracefully from being stuck. Second, it's giving a person an experience to know what it is to be an expression of consciousness; to actually be disconnected from their conditioned thinking, from their voices of judgment, so that they can know what it feels like to just *be*. They can know a calmness of being, and that sense of resilience and aliveness that's totally separate from all of the worries of everyday life. The experience part is fundamental, because unless the central nervous system and our whole being have opportunities to perceive it experientially, we will never wake up to knowing there's another way we can live our lives. If our central nervous system has exposure to something refreshing several times it will naturally begin to grow in that direction, like plants naturally growing towards the sun. Once the body's central nervous system gets an exposure of something that feels better, something that feels like sunlight coming in, it's going to naturally want to move in that direction. We are going to unconsciously (and consciously) make choices that move us more toward a place of calm and resilience rather than a place of confusion and angst.

NC: Going back in history a bit, you received an award a number of years ago from the National Institutes on Health recognizing you as an outstanding leader in research. Since your work had largely been in addiction recovery, you have traveled a long way now talking about the nervous system and the body. How does this tie in with your earlier work, and where are you taking us forward moving into the somatic piece and the nervous system?

MP: My education and experience in addictions made me understand that we get addicted to something as a way of protecting ourselves, or to feel better about something. As I studied further about addiction recovery, I began to understand it was a process that happened in stages: The first, which I call Stage One, is getting over the primary addiction and managing it. What surfaced for me next was an awareness that I call Stage Two recovery. That is what my second book, "The Journey Toward Complete Recovery" is about, which is actually what the NIH Research Award was based on: the research and the identification of what Stage Two Recovery is. It is what a recovering addict has to go through in Stage Two in order to become fully whole and complete and healthy. All of Stage Two is about recovering from trauma. Based on ten years of my deep research working with people in addictions recovery, I found there was a constellation of eight things, or desires, that people exhibited. The first was just the desire in helping to accept, identify and express complex feelings. As human beings, most of us have been conditioned not to be able to do that. The second one was the desire to connect in more meaningful ways with others, to really be able to connect meaningfully. We are typically able to connect superficially, but many of us are very challenged when it comes to connecting in meaningful ways and in being participants of our communities in meaningful ways.

I'd like to do a little sidebar here for those who don't identify with being in addictions recovery. As far as I'm concerned, addiction isn't limited to alcohol, drugs, sex, or gambling; we can be addicted to our conditioned thinking. That is a serious addiction that keeps us from feeling whole and alive and having our needs met. So, in one-way or another, we're all addicted. We all can fit into this Stage One and Stage Two recovery paradigm.

Another is the desire to heal what I've come to call the sexual/spiritual split, or sexual/love split, because as far as I'm concerned spiritual and love are synonymous. What we've discovered is that everyone in Stage Two addictions recovery has an internalized schism between their sexual, or Eros energy, and their loving energy. That usually only shows itself, or most dramatically appears, after bonding occurs in a significant relationship. Sometimes it is invisible until that happens. Certainly after bonding occurs it makes itself known, which is why so many long term couples have difficulty with sex after six months, a year, two years, depending on the degree of the bonding and the depth of the bonding.

Another in the constellation of desires is to grasp our role in power dynamics, thereby resolving difficulties with authority figures and intimates. Everyone in Stage Two recovery seems to have difficulty with authority figures and with intimates. Once a period of bonding occurs in those kinds of relationships there is a power dynamic that often takes over the relationship; that power dynamic in Stage Two gets dismantled, or dissolved.

The next desire is to sustain consistent loving relationships and experience real intimacy on all levels. This one is enormously difficult because culturally speaking, there are few examples offered where it's not an uphill struggle.

The sixth one is a desire to achieve a shame-free presentation of self, because I've found in my research that everyone has some shame about who they are. However they've cloaked that, it gets in their way from fully being in the presence of who they are. This is something that gets integrated in the healing process of Stage Two.

The seventh is the desire to discover our individual life purpose. What are we here for? What's life about? Is it about buying a new Toyota? Or the work we do? Or is there something deeper and more important to it? It's an age-old existential question, but it's one that comes up as soon as one starts to reflect on deeper levels.

The last one is a yearning to know who we are on a real and spiritual level. My experience is that people who address these issues in the constellation of desires in Stage Two recovery often come to the other side of it, with the sense that they do know who they are. They do get a felt sense of what their life purpose is, and they're living their life purpose, which comes with a certain joy. If they have the capabilities they work through the sexual/spiritual split and find a whole new world on the other side of that also.

NC: So many people in various kinds of recovery really want the very things you are describing. They want to live in a state of feeling expansion, yet they have nervous systems that are in some state of constriction. One of the analogies that I often make is that our nervous systems are somehow in jet-lag; they haven't caught up to the rest of our consciousness. I'm really curious how Focalizing can help us get our nervous systems out of jet-lag so that we have bodies, somatic cells that are actually resonating with where our consciousness is, because there is often some disparity getting from a place of constriction to one of expansion.

MP: That is exactly what Focalizing is about. Focalizing is a re-regulation of the central nervous system allowing for a re-regulating of DNA, as well, so that we can be in time and in tune with ourselves in the present day. Part of that process is positioning the central nervous system through various techniques we've learned through somatic and energy psychologies, helping the central nervous system find its way to a place of resource and calm. Even getting to that seat of consciousness within us can re-adjust itself so that frozen trauma energy in the system can be released and dissolved. When we come back to ourselves after a Focalizing session we feel more whole. Quickly and automatically we feel more whole because what frozen trauma energy does is disconnect us from parts of ourselves. When it is dissolved we feel more of ourselves, and even a little more wholeness feels really great. And it doesn't have to stop there. I'm in my silvering years, still doing the work myself, and it continues to feel more alive and more whole.

NC: When you are actually in the experience of a Focalizing encounter with yourself and a practitioner, something is actually happening to the body, changing the way we process information to experience innate intelligence. Can you speak more about that profound shift?

MP: As soon as we disconnect ourselves, by detaching from or simply suspending our conditioned thinking, which is the first stage of the Focalizing process, our innate intelligence begins to take over. This process, which happens much easier than people would expect, has a language of its own. It normally speaks through felt senses of the body, through imagery. One of the gifts of a Focalizing process is that we get to experience another intelligence that we can count on, and this intelligence comes from nature. I don't want to go too much into neurophysiology, but as soon as we suspend our conditioned thinking we begin engaging in what we call the Old Brain, often called the reptilian brain. The reptilian brain comes right out of our spinal cord and central nervous system, and it is the closest thing to being informed by nature that we have. That's where the innate intelligence comes from. What we're engaging in a Focalizing session is the Old Brain, and the Focalizer has been trained in how to seduce, wake up, or engage the Old Brain in a way that produces a concrete experience; that means an experience that someone feels very solidly within their soul, their being, that nobody can take away from them. And we're talking about unseen realities, even though we have not been conditioned to talk about unseen realities. But when we go into a Focalizing session, we're working in the world of unseen realities. What's happening? How is our body talking to us? What is it saying? What are the feelings? What are the feelings of release that we're experiencing? What is that tingling? What is that shift that I just felt in my chest? What is the quiet tear rolling down my face? (By the way, the quiet tear is one of the most dramatic releases of trauma energy, which is very different from what we used to know in experiential therapy as a cathartic experience.) There are no cathartic experiences in Focalizing; it's very, very subtle. A quiet tear is about as cathartic as it gets, or a little shake or rumble of the body. But again, some very important re-adjustments are happening. It reminds me a bit of seismic activity, a quaking happens in the body. Often I'll see these during a Focalizing session, the person's torso shifting, and I'll check in with them to see if they've noticed. And not only do they notice, often shortly after such a shift, they receive some sort of message from inside. It will appear as a different voice than what we get from outside, those that we get from conditioned

thinking. It will always have a kind of directive sense to it. I was in a state of struggle at the point in my life where I received such a message, thinking that I *had to know* all of these things and I was in a great deal of stress. I felt a small shift in my body and right after that it was almost like a balloon came up with a message, “You don’t have to know.” That caused me such a release bringing me so much relief that it helped me re-organize my professional life in the year or so after that. I think the concrete experience with each event is different than psychotherapy, where the process is part of a continuum. Focalizing can be part of a continuum, but every time one does it, it’s going to be a totally different experience informed by the intention that they bring to the session.

NC: You spoke quite a lot about the Focalizing that you do with individuals and I’m also aware that you work with couples, and organizations, as well. I would imagine that there is a great deal of resonance that is incorporated and observed in the process of entering into the field of your client, how your body becomes an instrument to really engage into that interpersonal field. What is that experience like for you as a practitioner, in terms of observing the intuitive messages you’re receiving when your nervous system is interacting with the client’s?

MP: It’s all about resonance. Once we drop into the Focalizing session, suspend from the conditioned thinking, not only has the client done it, but I’ve gone along too. I no longer know where we’re going; I have no idea. I just want to be with them in the moment and let my innate intelligence communicate with theirs. And it’s magical how it happens. Sometimes I’ll just get an instinct like looking at their legs and asking them if they are noticing something going on in their legs. They always report that there is a sensation going on in their legs. There’s the unseen language going on of resonance between us, and that’s where all the activity really takes place. Again, it’s all about resonance, and it happens whether it’s an individual, a couple, or in an organizational situation. There is another process called, “presencing” and the “Theory U”, which comes out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, developed by senior faculty member C. Otto Scharmer. He speaks of going down the “U” as surrendering the voices of judgment, surrendering fears, surrendering personal and cultural cynicisms, and replacing them with feelings of being grounded and energized with nature, with the earth. By that time people get to a very authentic level; they’re in what I would call the “Focalizing zone.” I use some of that framework when I’m Focalizing with couples or organizations. We need to get down there to draw illuminations from the earth rather than going to our conditioned thinking, which is all based on old news. If we want fresh, innovative ideas, and ways to move forward with grace that feel good we have to go into the earth and nature. The only way we can get there is by getting the other stuff out of the way.

NC: You just so beautifully explained the subtitle to your recent publication, “Organic Solutions to Real-Time Challenges.” Organic actually describes an experience of resonance that happens with the suspension of judgment.

MP: Yes, it’s quite amazing.

NC: Can you describe your work with couples?

MP: My experience is that working with an intimate couple is surprisingly more challenging than working with an individual, or with an organization. The couple has to be at a pretty evolved state to be able to do this work; they have to both know that they want to move to higher ground together, while not getting caught up in making each other the bad person. Before I can do Focalizing with a couple I usually have to do one or two sessions with them involving psycho-education about the issues it would be helpful to get rid of. Then they can understand that the reason that they haven't had sex in twelve years, for example, isn't because either one of them did anything wrong. It's more of a cultural problem than a personal one. That they haven't had sex in X number of years is because after they bonded, they lost their ability to communicate about sex in a spontaneous way. I also have to teach them about the power dynamics, or the polarity stage that every couple hits after bonding when usually a power struggle begins. Once couples bond, all early child body-memories with their first caretakers come in to the picture. After you've achieved a certain level of intimacy, it can feel like you're now having sex with someone who diapered you. It's not as spontaneous as when they first began the relationship. I'm oversimplifying it, but I think you get the point. In our culture, most couples either settle and live with resentment and bickering here and there, or they cheat, act out in one way or another, or they break up. It's not the most pleasant, harmonious way to live. We can actually get to the other side of this polarity stage, but first we have to acknowledge that it exists and be willing to say, "OK, this is a normal part of development."

NC: My sense is that you're really doing something radically different from the modality of more conventional couple's therapy. You're directly engaging in a non-linear way with their nervous systems, along with their cognition and their emotional bodies. There may be some dominant patterns in their nervous systems that haven't been serving the relationship very well, and you're helping them find an alternative. Perhaps you're actually helping them grow some additional neurons so that their synapses can fire differently.

MP: Absolutely, and that's exactly what happens.

NC: Is there an area where you feel you wouldn't recommend Focalizing?

MP: I would attempt to apply it in any area. I know that it's more challenging to apply with people who have very high levels of dissociation. People who would typically be diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Disorder have a great deal of trouble suspending conditioned thinking. It comes back and haunts them a lot. Yet, I keep developing my skills in this area, and I'm glad to see that I'm making progress with some new ways to help that move along better. That's just a challenge of Focalizing. I can't believe that there would be anyone where Focalizing would be contraindicated. Focalizing suggests that you get in touch with your own nature, and your own innate intelligence, and invite it to guide you. There is no time when that would be inappropriate.

NC: We talked about organizations, couples and individuals. Is there an area where you would like to see Focalizing expand into?

MP: There are many areas where would I like to see it applied. I was part of a documentary film project having to do with the holocaust and intergenerational healing; that's an example of the kind of place I'd like to see Focalizing used. There are also processes like Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations, which as far as I'm concerned, is Focalizing. They're doing the exact same thing in a different format. If we could use these processes to demonstrate the healing potential from traumas like that of the holocaust, then we can show how powerfully they could be used for healing in a global context. Our only hope is to find a new source of intelligence to guide our way. As Einstein said, "You can't solve new problems with old ways of thinking." We can't solve the problems of the 21st century with the way we thought about them in the 20th century. We need to access a whole other level of intelligence to enter a future that's unforeseeable. I believe that the future that we're entering very shortly is beyond any of our imaginations. Hopefully it's a good one, with more and more people raising their consciousness. If people choose not to raise their consciousness and stay in fear and avoidance, then I think there's going to be a lot of suffering on those levels. But that's just my own point of view.

NC: Now I know that you're a teacher as well as a psychologist and therapist. Can you tell us about training that you offer in Focalization?

MP: Right now, I only train people in Focalizing on an individual basis. I am presently talking to some well-respected Yoga schools because some of the processes come out of Yogic traditions. So I think that a Yoga center would be a good home for training. That may happen over the next year or two. Right now it's my own creation and it's in its infancy.

NC: Is there a place for the curious to receive more information?

MP: www.focalizing.com

NC: Any final thoughts?

MP: Focalizing is about getting unstuck. It's about getting unstuck and moving forward with grace.

NC: Thank you, Dr. Picucci.

MP: Thank you, Nicholas.

Dr. Michael Picucci is author of *Organic Solutions to Real-Time Challenges: An Introduction to Focalizing* (2007 monograph), *Ritual as Resource: Energy for Vibrant Living* (Jan. 2006), and *The Journey toward Complete Recovery* (Oct. 1998). He was the recipient of the U.S. National Institutes on Health "Outstanding Leadership in Research" award for his findings and applications. He has a private psychotherapy and consulting practice in NYC; visit www.focalizing.com and browse through additional research at www.theinstitute.org. Contact: michael@focalizing.com or 800-409-5713.