Fully, Firmly, Finally Focused!
By Valerie J. Shinbaum, MS, LPC, NCC, MAC

I don't listen to music in the car very often any more, because I prefer not to be distracted from whatever I'm thinking about. I seek out quiet places in my busy world, so I can tune in to my thoughts. At home, I don't always turn on the television or the stereo - I enjoy the quiet moments to sit and think. These changes in my life are fairly recent, and as I've made them I'm aware of having much more strength and energy and motivation from choosing to be with my thoughts in a distraction-free environment as often as possible. It's exhilarating to be in this place in my life. I'm open to new things in terms of work, relationships, personal growth - it's all there and so is the balance that naturally comes out of this place. Yes, it sounds "new age" to me too, and I'm enjoying every minute of being fully, firmly, finally focused! And there is room for everything else and everyone else - much more so than ever before in my life.

Well into my adult life, I repeatedly put my own dreams and visions aside for other things I thought were "supposed to" be my priorities. Whether I thought they were priorities or not, I was certainly a participant, if an unwilling one, in the "you should" dance we're all taught as we grow up. It's that whole "family comes first" or "family knows best" thing, and the "you shoulds" that go along with it. They include the following: you "should" go to college right after high school, you "should" get married, you "should" have children (not just one child, mind you, because having one child is too selfish because then when you get old your one child will have to carry the whole burden of caring for you. I'm not kidding, people really say this to their children!), you "should" live close to family instead of moving far away, you "should".......the list goes on and on, and there's never really an end, especially if we want to continue to allow the "shoulds" of others to dictate how we live our lives, even long after we become full grown adults. It's easy to put our own dreams aside when those kinds of "shoulds" are being thrown at us. For that matter, it's easy to completely forget whatever our own dreams might have been in the face of that kind of barrage. And if we're the kind of people who have a hard time disappointing others or facing possible disapproval from others; it's difficult to strike out on our own paths, to find our own focus for our lives. But eventually we come to a point where we know for certain our lives will be happier if they are about us, with our own directions, our own ideas, our own choices, regardless of the possible disappointment and/or disapproval of others. We can take the parts of the "shoulds" dance that may work for us and leave whatever doesn't work behind.

Here's another one I hear frequently: "My kids are supposed to (you can replace the "supposed to" with "have to" or "should" - the meaning and intent are the same) come first." To respond, I offer the airplane example. If you've ever flown in an airplane, you know when they do the safety demonstration, they always tell you if oxygen masks drop down, adults traveling with children are supposed to put their own masks on first, and then assist their children with their masks. So there's a good point in terms of this focus thing - how are you going to be there for someone else if you're not there for yourself first? In the airplane example, if you don't put on your own oxygen mask first, you won't be alive long enough to assist the children you're traveling with. Believe it or not,

it's the same with life, even if having a focus on oneself seems to be counter-indicated if one is concerned with raising children. When children are raised by parents who also have their own lives and their own focus, and therefore their own balance, they bear witness to what that balanced life looks like, and they can see for themselves at close range the satisfaction that comes from that balanced life. Then hopefully they will go out into their own adult worlds and find their own focus, and achieve their own balance.

Throughout my earlier adult life, I kept thinking about those "supposed to" priorities that were dictated to me by others, and they just didn't seem right to me. Every time I tried to fit myself into those scenarios I was "supposed to" want, it just didn't work for me. Consequently, I was unhappy, because I thought there was something wrong with me because those "supposed to" scenarios didn't seem to fit. Then I once and for all realized those "supposed to" priorities had absolutely nothing to do with what would make me happy, or help me achieve the success I have now, or enable me to live the life of my own choosing. I kept thinking I was "supposed to" want other things, or that I was "supposed to" do things in some kind of order that had so little to do with what I value for myself. As I look back on that time now, it seems as if I was living in some kind of other world. It certainly didn't feel as real as the life I live now, where I wake up every day and find so much satisfaction with everything I do. When that "once and for all" moment came, and I realized the time had come for me to be fully, firmly, finally focused, it was like a weight was taken off my shoulders that I'd been carrying around for such a long time. It was so much easier making decisions, choosing directions, taking risks when they were necessary. All of that was simple to navigate because I was doing things for myself, putting myself at the head of the line, and making sure I took care of my own needs and thoughts and feelings first before doing and caring for others. What a difference! And as I said earlier, I have room and time and attention for others in a way that was never possible before, in the professional and personal realms of my life.

This kind of process isn't only about women, by the way. I know just as many men who get caught up in the "shoulds" that are typical for their gender, which means they might not be focused in a way that benefits not only themselves but also the significant others in their lives. I have known just as many men who seemed just as anxious about getting married and having babies by a certain age as they do about being at certain success stages in their careers by a certain age. So why do people of both genders do that to themselves - have this whole "timeline" thing about certain ages and certain "checklist items" they think they are supposed to (again, replace with "should" or "have to" here if you want) accomplish? Doesn't anyone want to just stop and be in the moment in their lives, regardless of age or marital status or children status or career point or whatever else is going on right then?

I meet so many young people, mostly young women, who are determined to be married by age 25 and have all of their children by the time they are age 30. What do these women believe will happen to them if they remain unmarried and/or childless after age 30? Does life end then if those goals aren't met? I meet young men who also have plans for their futures, though often these have more to do with making a certain amount of money by the time they are a certain age, or else they will be a "failure." Is the amount

of money someone has by a certain age the only yardstick to measure success? Sometimes when I'm teaching a class, I ask questions about things they might want in their futures. I once asked how many people wanted to own their own house someday, without saying anything about marital status. Almost every male hand went up. Only a handful of the women raised their hands and when I asked them why they wouldn't buy their own homes, one of them said, "What if I get married, what would I do if I have my own house?" I continue to meet young women who expect that not only will they be married by age 25, but they will also be at-home moms with all of those kids for whom the names are chosen already. Many of these women have no career plans/directions (and also no financial resource plans/directions) of their own. They expect their as-yet-to-be-met-and-married-to husbands to support them and their children financially. Already at these young ages, these women are basing their whole decision-making process on the wishes, plans and priorities of others, some of whom aren't even born yet! Already at these young ages, these women are not focused on what they may want or need for themselves. And already the whole focus is on marriage and children and being an at-home mom. All admirable goals, but whatever happened to having more than one plan for how life might turn out? Not only that, but these women might want to bear in mind that while they have these marriage and children plans, the young men they know might not be on the same page at the same time, since most of them are thinking about that career and financial success number they need to achieve by a certain age.

And what if these young women do fulfill their half of the dream - get married fairly young, have children and become at-home moms? The other half is uncertain for more than one reason. In today's working world, people don't start and stay at one job from college graduation to retirement any more. Those days are gone. At any time someone might decide to change career directions - that brings a different focus into a family household. A spouse may become unable to work for any number of reasons. A spouse might decide to get a divorce, or a spouse might die. All of these things have been known to happen. So if these women expect these men to be the sole earners in the household, that puts a lot of emotional pressure on the relationship. Wouldn't it be all right for these women to remember to stay focused on themselves, and continue to strive forward in more than one direction, even if they do have husbands and families?

I meet women in their 40's who decided in their 20's to make marriage and family the top priority, who chose to be at-home moms for the benefit of their children rather than put their focus on their own goals. Now at this age, their children are grown or very nearly grown, and there is more time for them to think about what they want to do next. But they are struggling to find a focus, and they are facing other obstacles along the way, one of which is a feeling they aren't valued. In a recent conversation, one of these women said, "I spent most of my life to this point being invisible (in terms of serving others before herself) and now I'm over 40 and don't want to be invisible any more but it's hard for people to really see me when I kept allowing them all to treat me as invisible." I'm paraphrasing, but I think the concept is clear. The longer we keep focusing on everyone but ourselves, the harder it is to get the focus back and to get back out into the wider world with more choices, more directions, more options. I'm not talking just about work options, but options in general - plans and dreams and goals and wishes and desires.

When I do goals lists in my classes or with my clients, I always tell them to "dream big," and think about any possible thing they ever imagined trying to do in their lives. I tell them not to use money or education or marital status or any other factor as barriers. I tell them the sky is the limit and there is nothing impossible. I hope to help them see that if they keep focused on themselves, very few things are impossible to achieve. I have found this to be true in my own life, and have seen it in the lives of others. I know women who realized early on they definitely wanted to be mothers, but they have no intention of letting go of their career goals. They find a way to strike a balance between both. One woman I know says she is a better mother to her children after she has had her day in the grownup world of working. I know men who found they didn't really fit into the whole corporate ladder-climbing mentality and struck out on their own to create a successful niche in the world of self-employment. I know couples who are childless by choice, and I know couples who have adopted children. In every one of these examples, they are all people who remember to keep focused on themselves as the first priority, and from there comes the ability to be open to give to others in their lives.

Keeping the focus on oneself also eliminates another major source of stress - competing with other people. I hear so often about people feeling anxious or upset because they are "falling behind," or others are "ahead of them." When did life become a race and where is the finish line? This competition is everywhere. It's in a group of mothers who are all talking about their children and their accomplishments, the inevitable comparisons emerge. It's at a class reunion from high school or college, where it's all about who is married and who isn't, who has children and who doesn't, who made partner and who didn't, and so on. It's in a workplace setting, where it's who got a bonus and who didn't, who got promoted and who didn't. It's what kind of car someone is driving, how big someone's house is, and on and on and on. And it's exhausting, stressful, emotionally crippling, counterproductive and totally unnecessary.

So how about some self-healing, in the form of returning the focus to ourselves? It takes a re-ordering of the priorities, and before you tell me your lives are all incredibly complicated which would make re-prioritizing impossible, I'm going to say to you it's easier than you might think. And of course it doesn't happen all at once. As with the woman who has been "invisible," she's working on becoming visible again, which starts with being visible for herself! She's making that choice to focus on herself, for probably the first time ever in her life, and it's hard work, because she isn't used to how it feels to think of herself and what she needs first as often as possible. It feels "wrong" for her sometimes. But if she continues to keep focused on herself, eventually she will become visible to others - the process takes time and it's worth the effort.

Something else I've discovered about being focused on myself is how my relationships with other people have changed. I used to feel like the cruise director on the Love Boat. It was always me who planned weekend activities for whatever group or groups of people were my friends at the time. I'll never forget one weekend in my 20's when I chose not to make any plans for a group of people I thought were my friends, and the group all went out somewhere and nobody bothered to call me up and see if I wanted to come

along. Guess they weren't such good friends after all - a hurtful lesson well worth learning. I still like to plan things, but now I start with planning for myself. If nobody wants to come along, then I'll go alone and have a good time either way, because I'm doing what I wanted to do. What I find is I'm not going alone too often - there are always others who want to be with me, just as I want to be with them.

Just for today, conduct the experiment of keeping the focus on yourself for 24 hours. Pay attention to how you are feeling in your body and your mind. Step back and observe the larger picture. Widen the lens and get the full view. But most importantly, put yourself at the top of the list, with every decision, every choice, every priority. Yes, it sounds selfish. But this isn't the same kind of selfish as cutting in line at the grocery store, or taking the last piece of cake on the plate for yourself. This kind of selfish - taking care of ourselves and meeting our own needs - enables and empowers us to open our hearts and minds and lives to those we care for with strength and kindness and understanding and love. And the reward for becoming fully, firmly and finally focused? We get the acceptance, admiration, regard, respect, support and validation we know we deserve. Give it a try and see what happens!