

THE INNER JOURNEY: Focusing and Jung

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While Jung and Gendlin's theories have many striking differences, they are in agreement on something quite fundamental: that the act of looking inside, of spending time and attention with what is interior, both felt and imagined, is a worthy and therapeutic endeavor. Focusing is clearly a method that engages inner process, but arguably the most influential pioneer of inward journeys is Carl Jung.

One of the most important crossings in the inner process work of Gendlin and Jung is the field of dream-work. Gendlin's dream-work methods incorporate many Jungian techniques but with a key difference: in Focusing, the final arbiter of dream meaning is not the therapist armed with expertise in symbolism and theory but the dreamer's own bodily-felt sense. Because I have recently written in detail about Focusing and dreams (Ellis, 2013; in press), this article will focus on the more fundamental processes of Focusing and Jung's active imagination, which are both methods of listening inside and interacting with what we find there. (This can include, but is not limited to, dream material). I hope to demonstrate that despite a difference in emphasis on body (Gendlin) or image (Jung), there are many ways these processes overlap. And where they differ, there are ways they can work together to deepen and enhance the other.

While Gendlin (1986) said that Jung offered "deep and indispensable insights" in his writings about human life, archetypes and dream-work, he took exception to the fact that Jung mainly offered theories and interpretations of dreams and images rather than encouraging and exploring the patient's direct experiencing. Gendlin (1974) noted that Jung said very little about how to actually conduct psychotherapy, and that the psychological writing of the time seemed to be focused on content rather than process. This is mostly true, however some of the instructions Jung provided about how to work with patients using active imagination suggest that Gendlin and Jung were not always so far apart in practice.

In fact, many of Jung's methods are process-experiential, and there are instances in his writing where the experience of the patient is stressed over intellectual interpretation (Jung, 1928) and where he follows the client's lead in the therapy process (Jung, 1961). In this article, I will briefly touch upon theory of the unconscious and how Gendlin advances this with his philosophy of the implicit. I will then demonstrate with clinical examples how the crossing of Focusing and a modern Jungian approach provides a way to practice psychotherapy that takes something from both great thinkers: the emphasis on the image and active imagination from Jung, and the importance of bodily-felt experiencing from Gendlin.

In any good crossing, the cumulative effect is always greater than the sum of its constituent parts, and I have found this to be the case in combining Jungian and Focusing-oriented therapy. The methods complement, enrich and deepen each other: Gendlin

brings experiential depth and ‘life-forward’ movement with his focus on the body, while Jung brings imaginative richness and numinosity with his deep fascination with the image.

The ‘unconscious’ as incomplete process

I will begin with a brief theoretical note because it has a bearing on how one might go about crossing Jungian and Focusing-oriented practices. It concerns the notion of the ‘unconscious’ which was treated, at the advent of the practice of psychotherapy as a great storehouse of hidden content that needed to be unearthed or ‘made conscious’ if the patient were to heal. The importance to psychology of Freud’s and Jung’s discovery and elaboration of the theory of the unconscious cannot be overstated. However, as with most theories, it is a helpful but imperfect lens through which to view the psyche, and I would suggest that Gendlin’s revision of this theory adds to its value.

Gendlin does not view the unconscious the way Freud or Jung conceived of it. He wrote, “When ego or self-systems are said to exclude some experiences from awareness, usually it is assumed that these experiences nevertheless exist ‘in the unconscious.’ Our discussion, however, leads us to the conclusion that they do not. Something exists, to be sure, but it is not the experiences as they would be if they were optimally ongoing” (Gendlin, 1964, p. 24). Gendlin stated that what exists instead is a narrowed or blocked interaction or experiencing, an interrupted or unfinished condition, in short, an *incomplete process*.

Gendlin continued: “The felt datum which is there, in a sense, contains everything. In what sense does it? In the sense that, *given fully carrying forward responses* to it, everything will be here as aspects of ongoing process” (Gendlin, 1964, p. 25). Later in the same article Gendlin described the difference between content and process more simply: “Content theories assume that one completes the process of knowing, experiencing, interpreting, reacting but that some of this process does not reach awareness. The present theory holds that the process does not completely occur” (1964, p. 38).

As an example, suppose something unfortunate happens to my friend ‘Susan’ and a few days later she comes to realize, maybe in talking it through with me, that she feels angry about it. Gendlin argued that to have a strong feeling and then bury it is less plausible than the notion that one was aware of something, maybe a physical tension or a feeling of dissatisfaction that “must be responded to and carried forward. Only thereby does the process go to completion and anger” (p. 38). In the example, it is more likely that Susan did not fully experience and then repress or forget their anger, but rather that she had not yet fully felt the anger; it was there as a potential not yet developed fully.

How might this be useful in practice? This revised theory would still allow for the idea that thoughts, conclusions and actions that would result from explication, but which are vaguely felt as unacceptable, may be blocked and not be carried through. Gendlin would say these do not then become ‘unconscious’ (i.e., completely unavailable to our senses) but rather they become implicit, unfinished processes that are held in the body in some form such as somatic sensations, general anxiety, tension or other symptoms. The point Gendlin

(1964) stresses is that these pieces of unfinished process are *in awareness*, even while their full meaning is not. This is where Focusing can help move the situation forward because it invites the person to welcome what is implicit, and then allow it to fully develop. Once the felt sense is carried forward, there will be a sense of remembering, as though what came was already known. To fully articulate the truth of the situation can come as a great relief, even if the truth is painful.

A beautiful example of this kind of relief was provided by Nowick who described how Focusing helped her come to terms with her son's struggle with addiction, not by providing a solution, but by allowing her to feel into the truth of how bad the situation was and how completely helpless she was to do anything about it. At first, when she sensed into her felt sense of the whole situation, she felt terror in her body, but it slowly transformed into "a vague downy comforter" that she could relax into...

And at that, I felt a gradual release of tension throughout my body, as though I no longer had to fight against how deeply grieving and exhausted I truly felt. For here, in my gut, was the simple, stark truth: I was helpless against his addiction. You might suppose I sank into even greater despair at this insight, but just the opposite happened; my spirit was lifted! Huge waves of relief poured through me...(2013, p. 153).

According to Gendlin, "The more we focus directly upon the felt meaning and the more of it we symbolize correctly, the more relief we feel" (1964, p. 12). The Focusing process does not change the situation, and in fact, can bring one to realize just how dire it really is. But still, this brings relief. "Even when the solution seems further away than ever, still the psychological tension reduction occurs, and a genuine change takes place...it changes the whole manner in which one experiences" (p. 13-14).

Sticking with the image

The view of the 'unconscious' as unfinished process is one way that Gendlin's philosophy carries Jung's forward. Gendlin seems to provide a better explanation for the methods Jung was already using.

Now the converse: how does a Jungian approach add to Focusing? One of the main biases from my early Jungian training that I could never bring myself to fully abandon, even after years of Focusing, is the primacy of the image. While imagery is considered a part of the Focusing process, the felt sense is primary. In a Jungian approach, the image is treated with the same reverence and attention as a Focuser treats the felt sense.

Gendlin (1984) suggested that the image is just a *part* of a situation, a visual representation that is only one of many possible meanings one could make of a situation. The Focusing process, on the other hand, works with the *whole* of the situation and the body's natural forward-implicating. In my practice, however, it has not always been my experience that the felt sense will carry forward more so than the image. Often, living images have the

quality usually ascribed to a felt sense; they unfold and represent far more than what one could explicitly say about them. They operate with a certain autonomy such that they can interact with us as much as we can interact with them. And, like Focusing, the process of active imagination is seen as a natural human tendency that was discovered, rather than a technique that was developed. “Jung reminds us that active imagination is a natural, inborn process. Although it can be taught, it is not so much a technique as it is an inner necessity” (Chodorow, 1997, p. 3).

I have worked with many clients whose process is moved forward more deeply by image than by bodily-felt sense alone. It is not as though the body’s felt sense is absent in these cases, just that it is not the prime mover. Sometimes it is attention to the image that keeps the felt sense vibrant. For example, in one personal Focusing session, I checked inside and what came to me was the image of a horse, a chestnut gelding with a shaggy, unkempt winter coat. The horse was circling a track, and as it progressed, its step got livelier, its coat shinier until, by the end of the lap, it was brimming with youthful vigor, its coat coppery and gleaming. While there was clearly a felt sense in my body in relation to this image, if I stayed just with the bodily sense, the felt sense lost its potency and forward momentum. However, if I stayed with the living image of the horse itself, I sensed its increasing aliveness inside of myself.

This exhortation to “stick with the image” (Hillman, 2004, p. 21) is a central tenet of the school of archetypal psychology, a branch of Jungian psychology that is most compatible with a Focusing-oriented approach. Archetypal psychology is not only concerned, as the name suggests, with Jung’s idea that our dreams and images can carry universal meaning. It is also an experiential, image-oriented and relational approach to Jungian psychology that modernizes and moves it away from a purely ego-driven and personal approach toward a more ecological, interactive view of inner world as inseparable from the outer world. This moves a Jungian approach closer to Gendlin’s process model that views all living things as interactions inseparable from their environment.

The following is an example from my clinical practice of how attention to the image itself can carry forward differently from the felt sense that comes *in response* to the image. For my client, a woman in her 40’s who came to therapy for treatment of severe anxiety, images always appeared immediately upon clearing a space and checking inside. Recounting and experiencing the inner events depicted in these progressions of images always brought forward movement. Asking the client to sense into her body about its *response* to the images brought a completely different process that was often uncomfortable and not as helpful. This may be because the client’s anxiety was very body-oriented, and she was highly attuned to her physiological sensations. While Gendlin (1964) has suggested that turning toward an uncomfortable felt sense often dissipates the discomfort, this was not always the case for my client. Also, deliberately attending to the body pulled her away from what seemed for her like the most natural process. When asked to check inside, she immediately saw vivid, living images. These images repeated but with progressive changes through the course of our work together. They seemed to parallel her progress.

One of the most striking series of images was of a young girl in an underground bunker. She was neglected, disheveled, non-relational, and non-verbal. As our work together progressed, my client was able to gradually establish a connection with the girl, who then started to interact more and to look more grown-up and well cared-for. The encounters with the girl, who eventually emerged out of the ground and into the sun, were always filled with emotion. And these encounters seemed best left to speak for themselves without interpretation or process guiding. The visceral felt sense of the image was clearly present, and yet the image itself had a life of its own.

If ever I did specifically ask for a felt sense of the whole of the experience, the client would most often get an empty and very uncomfortable feeling in her stomach. Sometimes it was a great gaping hole, and other times, it felt stuffed and bloated. The sensations were usually strong and almost unbearable, and with gentle attention, they would often move through a process where they would eventually calm or lessen in intensity. Yet the original images would vanish, and the session would become something quite different than it would have been otherwise. My sense of it was that the encounter with the images, and staying with them, brought more forward motion than when I asked the client to find her bodily-felt sense of the whole situation.

This conclusion is counter to what generally happens in the Focusing process. I am speculating that in some cases (such as with those who have experienced severe neglect or trauma) attention to the felt sense, or the whole of the situation as it is felt in the body, might be overwhelming. Images can make inner work more manageable because they are a step removed from the person experiencing them. They can more easily be experienced as ‘not-me’ than an inner bodily-felt sense. While I make a practice of suggesting that the Focuser find a little distance from a too-intense felt sense, this is not always as easy as getting a comfortable distance from an image, because a felt sense is, by definition, an embodied part of oneself. An image, on the other hand, can feel very *other*, even if it also represents a part of oneself.

Gendlin said that Jung rarely made it clear that “the patient must move his attention *from* the image *to* direct feeling. Only if the patient works with directly felt concretes will there be change. Jung called this the *transcendent function*...If it is ignored, people watch chains of images go by, or speculatively interpret an image, and very little happens” (1974, p. 240). This suggests one can *either* observe the image *or* attend to the directly felt sense. I think it is possible, and often advisable, to do both. The felt sense and image formation can happen in either direction: an image can evoke a felt sense, and a felt sense can evoke an image. While Focusing-oriented therapists will always privilege the felt sense, sometimes in doing so, something vital is lost.

It strikes me that there are many different kinds of images. There are daydream images of passive fantasy that may be enjoyable but are unlikely to engender growth or change. There are the images that come in dreams or active imagination that are imbued with life, mystery and power. And there are images that come from the felt sense that provide a picture of what a person is experiencing inside, images that change as the felt sense moves the process forward.

The steps of active imagination

Engaging with powerful, living images is at the heart of Jungian active imagination. Although in his writings Jung did not provide much information about how to actually practice this method, he deeply engaged in the process himself, and spoke about it often (Cwik, 1997). This allowed others close to Jung to describe the process in more detail. For example, Marie-Louise von Franz, who founded the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich and worked closely with Jung for more than 25 years, described four steps of active imagination. These are an expansion on Jung's two steps, simply put: allow the unconscious surface and then come to terms with it. Von Franz's steps flesh these out and share some processes in common with Focusing.

Step one is to empty the mind, which is like clearing a space, although in active imagination the client is invited to go into a deeper meditative state than when one does when clearing a space.

In step two, the image is sought, focused on, and objectified in some form. Images can come from a feeling, life situation, or dream image, as well as from a felt sense. Von Franz (1978) identified two common mistakes at this stage: to 'fix' the image so nothing further happens, or let the fantasy run wild so it changes too quickly to truly engage with.

The third step is to give inner images and fantasies form in a concrete and material way, such as inner dialogue, painting, sculpting, movement, or poetry. There is some debate about whether to use a medium in which one is competent or not: the unconscious can express itself through mistakes, but we cannot be nuanced in a medium in which we are clumsy. Von Franz (1978) said the main point of making the imaginal concrete in some way is to *engage the body* in the work. In this way, even if the client is moving through a series of gestures or painting a picture rather than quietly sitting and sensing inside, there is something happening that is similar to Focusing; there is an ongoing dialogue with an inner felt sense that feels meaningful and moving.

The fourth step is what von Franz (1978) calls the *ethical confrontation* with the preceding steps. In Jungian terms, one's ego needs to come to terms with the imaginal. One must "have it out" with the unconscious (Cwik, 1997, p. 152). In other words, one should allow oneself to be affected by the image, and as well, possibly make some impact on the image itself by interacting with it. The Focusing process is useful here as the engagement is very similar to the way one would engage with a felt sense. Finally, one has to apply what has been discovered to ordinary life, to live out what seems to be called for by the interaction with the image.

The underwater woman: a confluence of Focusing and active imagination

The following is an example of a blending of Focusing and active imagination. "Joan," a client in her early 60s, who was devastated by the loss of her husband of 30 years, dreamt that she was taking care of a very young child for a strong, wise woman who lived underwater in a cold, torrential current. It took all of her strength just to hold the child and hold on to something to anchor her, but she was not afraid and could tell she possessed strength. This image of "just barely holding on" was a powerful metaphor for her life situation.

Both Focusing and active imagination begin with attention inside to a life situation, dream image, emotion—something that will bring a felt sense. Though the language differs, finding the sense of something living and interactive in the inner realm is the starting point for both processes. In sessions like the one I have just described, I can't always tell where Jungian and Focusing techniques begin and end. I tend to use them interchangeably; they feel to me like the aspects of the same process, but with different language or emphasis. One benefit of starting with a living image like this one is that it brings a clear and tangible felt sense that is easy to find and stay with.

For Joan, the whole of the dream image brought a powerful, complex felt sense. She could work with that, and we also separated out certain places to interact with: the environment, the child, the wise woman. The process helped her to feel in her body that she *did* have the strength to hold on, though the grief process often felt as if it were sweeping her away. She expressed wonder that the woman whose child she was tending could live so easily and comfortably in such a cold, inhospitable place. Yet there was a surprising new feeling of knowing she was going to be fine, and also that the child would be fine. Sensing in, she found the assurance that she could manage the situation, but also that she did not want to live there. She felt comfort in knowing that her visit to the harsh underwater world was temporary.

The wise woman was a helpful force in the dream. Even though she was absent, there was a sense that she would be back soon. In the session described and others that followed, my client engaged in an imaginal dialogue with the underwater woman that put her in touch with her own personal strength and wisdom. This is a common technique in active imagination, and the woman could be seen to embody an archetype. Over the ensuing months, the living image returned when it was needed most. The wise figure tactfully communicated something of the relative nature of Joan's situation: that it was a small thing in the grand scheme of life. She also brought Joan the embodied felt sense of an ability to manage adversity with grace. And Joan did just that. Her grief process was long and, at times, intense. While the wise woman dialogues and other Focusing/imaginal work like it did not change her life situation, she was able to change her experience within the grief process, to increasingly rise above it and become aware of her own strength.

The ultimate goal of any inner process is to develop a relationship to what is encountered inside. Whether one calls it the unconscious or the implicit, or whether one privileges the body or the image seems to me to be less important than the attitude or spirit one brings to the process: ideally one of openness, curiosity, even *reverence*. In both Jungian active imagination and Focusing, there is deep respect for inner life and a belief that it is only through attending to and interacting with what is inside that one can live authentically and engage the outer world with one's whole self.

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