

EXPERIENCING PHILOSOPHY

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I am not a philosopher. But I love ideas, especially what I call “big picture” ideas — ideas that transform my understanding of the world in some way. So a few years ago, I signed up for Neil Dunaetz’s telephone class on Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy, and for the next year and a half struggled through *A Process Model*, five pages per week.

It wasn’t easy. I read through each five-page segment three times before our weekly phone meeting, at which point we spent two full hours reading and discussing the pages. Those of you who have studied Gendlin’s work know that it is comprehensive, dense with meaning, carefully — precisely — worded, and frankly mind-boggling in content. There were moments when I found myself asking, “Who is this guy? What kind of mind comes up with this weird stuff?”

And then there were those moments when it all came together for me, and my world shifted. I felt almost high with delight — like a kid in a candy store.

I was amazed by how Gendlin’s philosophy made immediate and profound differences in how I experience everything I see and do. Where before I had seen a dog, a field, a window, a road, now I saw complex interactions and possibilities. I saw life nourishing life, environments shifting, a planet turning. And I understood that I was a part of this.

It is *not* the purpose of this essay to summarize or explain Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit. Rather I want to share with you the impact it has had on my daily experiencing of my life.

I have gone through as rich and profound a transformation as when I first learned Focusing.

Some of you may know that on my seventieth birthday I began an adventure — an attempt to fulfill a “bucket list” dream of walking across the United States. I started at the beach in Florence, Oregon and am now somewhere in southern Idaho. I go out for two or three weeks at a time in a little camper trailer with a travel companion who delivers me out on the road each day and picks me up when I am done.

I’m old and fat and arthritic, so I walk slowly with my grandfather’s old wooden cane and walk for a limited time each day. My goal is Atlantic City, New Jersey. I might make it by the time I turn eighty. I might not make it at all.

Whatever the result, I am having a wonderful time. The old bones creak, the summer sun slows my steps, the early morning breeze enlivens me. I stop frequently to take pictures — often just an excuse to pause in order to catch my breath. I struggle to recollect names of wildflowers encountered along the way. I sing to cows, who line up in their field and stare at me with lively interest. I have conversations with earthworms crossing a rain-slicked

highway. I keep a lookout for rocks — the right height and shape to sit upon. I wave at the passing cars and the people in them wave back at me. Sweat slides down my forehead and runs into my eyes. I pause to luxuriate in the shade of a leafy tree. I stumble the last few steps to the car where my travel companion waits for me. I collapse onto the car seat. I laugh out loud for the sheer joy and insanity of my adventure.

I would have done all of these things before reading Gendlin's philosophy. But now, my experiencing of these things occurs on a deeper level. I'm not just a person on a linear quest, walking from one point on a map to another. I am *in a process*. *I am myself processing*.

ENVIRONMENT

I'm not just an isolate being moving about in space, interacting with a separate environment, I am an integral part of my environment: *In process* with everything about me. As I am living and walking and breathing, I am creating and recreating my environment. *I am myself the environment*.

Just the experience of walking down the road, step after step is an interaction between foot and road. Not two separate things, but a single process, an interaction that was implied before it even began, the shape and muscles of the foot implying the interaction, implying the ground. The ground equally implying the foot, or something like it, in order for movement to be possible.

I feel the way the road supports me and meets my foot with the same energy my foot applies to it. I feel the way my gait changes when the road is banked, when there is loose gravel on it, when it is slippery with wet leaves, when there are puddles too big to circumvent. When I step gingerly, the road meets my foot gingerly, when I am stepping confidently and firmly, the road is equally confident. I use a cane when I walk and my arm and elbow notice the same process, meeting the road (interacting with the road) more firmly when my arthritis is acting up than when it is not.

Because of Gendlin's philosophy, I can sense myself being of and in and intrinsic to the environment I am moving through. The cold sends shivers down my spine, the rain drips into my eyes, the mosquitoes feast on my blood. When I breathe the air, I am aware of an exchange of gases. I nurture the green plants with carbon dioxide essential for photosynthesis and receive their life-giving oxygen in return.

My fellow humans contribute as well. Of course they are breathing, like me, but there are also innumerable interactions through which we enrich and affect each other's experiencing. We wave at each other — fellow travelers on the road. Careless cars cause me to jump, boys riding their bicycles backwards make me smile. I tremble with delicious terror while creeping through a tunnel, hugging the walls as trucks rumble past me. We are all part of each other's environment.

IMPLYING

My walking also embodies the essence of *the implicit*. Because I'm experiencing myself as a being *in process*, each step implies the next one. There is a forwardness, an ongoingness about my walking. Even when I pause for breath, the next steps are *implied* by the very concept of *pause*.

Before reading Gendlin, I understood the concept of life being full of possibilities. But now I find myself vividly aware of the constantly shifting possibilities implicit in each moment. I could go this way or that. I could fall into a ditch and break my leg. I could meet someone and have a conversation that might change my life, or hers, or both of our lives. I could save an earthworm's life, entertain a cow. I pass mysterious roads going off to the side and wonder what might happen if I chose to walk up them. Unlike Robert Frost, I tend to stick to the more traveled highway. This is a quest after all, and there are thousands of miles ahead.

Multiple possibilities await me as I move forward. I may complete my journey, I may become too arthritic to continue, I may get sidelined somewhere along the way. Some of these things will happen, will become explicit as I move forward, and each moment, each new step brings a fresh array of possibilities.

One might say that anything could happen, but of course *not* anything. Only that which is implicit in where and how I find myself at any given moment. Only that which *can* happen will happen. I won't, for example, suddenly start to fly, though my heart might soar at a splendid view. But Gendlin's philosophy has opened my eyes to all that *could* happen in a way that wasn't there for me before. He has given me a way of thinking about the world I am walking through, a new way of experiencing my being in and of it.

And the role of the implicit is bigger than just that. I am also experiencing what actually does occur in a new way because of what might have occurred but didn't. The path not taken, the very possibility of that path, affects my experiencing of the path taken. This is a version of Robert Frost's "*And that has made all the difference*". He would not have been conscious of that difference if there had been no alternative road to the one he took. And in Gendlin's world, I am continuously aware of *not* taking of a multitude of implicit paths.

EV-EVING

My walk also embodies Gendlin's concept of *ev-eving* — "everything affected by everything." How my walk goes on a particular day is affected by the interactions of many things — the weather, of course, and the condition of the road (especially how wide a shoulder it has), but also whether I am wearing the shoes that are springy or the ones that are feather light and make me feel like I am walking barefoot. And how I am feeling, whether I have a cold, or whether I am just one day away from having passed a kidney stone and am giddy with the absence of pain.

Figure in, also, the terrain — a mountain pass or a valley filled with orchards. Uphill or down, or level, or all of the above. An urban setting filled with busy people, or a vast and

empty desert — just rocks and sagebrush for company. I find that whether I'm alone on the road or have a walking companion makes a huge difference. I might say my mood on a given day is a factor, but I find that just the simple act of walking lifts my mood, makes me happy. So the walking itself affects my experiencing of everything — me creating my own environment — affecting me as a part of that environment.

So many things to shape my experience...Did I wear enough layers to keep out the cold, or did I put on too much? How much time do I still have before my travel companion comes to check on me? Is there an obvious goal for the day that makes me a bit more determined as I walk? Something like a mountain pass a few miles ahead, or small country store where I can buy an ice cream bar on a hot summer afternoon. What did I eat for breakfast and how fast is it working its way through my body and where oh where is there a place around here to go to the bathroom without flashing all those passing cars?

This long list is just the beginning of ev-ving. For all of these things don't just affect my walk, they also affect each other. And how they affect each other changes how they affect my walking process.

For example, suppose a truck has pulled off the highway and then re-entered traffic spraying gravel across the paved shoulder of the road. If I am wearing my barefoot shoes, I feel each pebble. It is not painful, but annoying, so I step carefully to avoid the pebbles, slowing my pace, maybe enough to prevent my reaching the country store that day for my ice cream bar reward. But if I put on my bouncy shoes instead that morning, I scarcely notice the gravel unless one very tiny shard of pebble gets caught in the tread of my shoe. Then I have to find a place to sit down and a sharp twig to use to pry out the sliver of rock. And maybe miss out on my ice cream bar.

And of course, my walking, too, affects everything I have mentioned, sometimes making just a minuscule difference, like displacing the twig I used to remove the pebble, but perhaps also potentially saving a life. (Think of an earthworm gently transported to safety.) And when it affects them, they in turn affect me differently. The persistent earthworm who repeatedly resumes his fatal course across the wet highway, for example, can delay my progress. Or I may defer to his earthwormy instincts and let him go on his way as I go on mine. And that may dampen my spirits more than the chill of rain.

Because ev-ving is so complex, I find that just by putting these few aspects into words, I have restricted the concept, which is much larger, much more all-encompassing than an explicit listing like this would suggest. That which is implicit is always larger, more subtle, more alive and more filled with nuance than that which has become explicit. On the other hand, once something actually occurs, there is always a whole new complex range of possibilities for the implicit — the next step forward.

STOPPED PROCESSES

And then there are the *stopped processes*. Just as walking suddenly stops if the ground goes away and the walker finds himself sinking into quicksand or thrashing around in water — my walk across the country comes to a halt when I encounter difficulties. Gendlin's

philosophy allows me to experience my own stopped process differently. Gendlin sees stopped processes as points where either the process ends permanently (an animal dies when its food source disappears), or a fresh, new thing happens so that it can resume differently (the animal discovers a different food source).

I started out from a stopped process. My age, my weight, my arthritis made a cross-continental walk seem impossible. I had given up on my fantasy of walking across the country. Then, following Gendlin's logic, I found a "new way" to go forward. I increased my arthritis medication and exchanged my crutches for an old wooden cane. I gave it a try and the walking itself seemed to improve the functioning of my knees.

New problems arise that could stop the process of my walk — and do. So I look for that new way. After one embarrassing incident where I literally got caught with my pants down around my ankles, I had to accept that my knees were not up to squatting. I was okay if there was a small tree to hold onto, or a sturdy fence post, but I was approaching a desert area where there were no trees at all and nothing but barbed wire lining the highway.

I thought that problem might do me in (me and my aging bladder). Then a friend made a suggestion and I found a place online that sells little cardboard funnels. My process resumed differently, freshly new, with a "paper penis" tucked in my pocket.

My most frequent stoppage occurs when someone who has agreed to come out with me as a travel companion cancels at the last minute. Sometimes I quickly find a replacement. Sometimes I don't, and then I sit at home in good walking weather, frustrated and a bit irritable. And irritability, too, becomes a part of my process as it goads me to search for new solutions.

I tried driving myself and walking out and then back to my car. That "fresh" new effort lasted just one day. It didn't take me long to understand that I haven't enough time or energy left in my life to walk *twice* across the United States. I could hitchhike back to my car, but so far I haven't mustered the courage for that.

I've tried recruiting people locally through state employment offices, but the bureaucrats don't consider driving me to and from the highway a job worthy of listing. I make a point of telling at least one person every day what I am doing, hoping that word of mouth will enlist travel companions. After all, it's an all-expenses-paid vacation. I walk in the morning and we play all afternoon — go sightseeing, visit the local swimming hole, lay around in the sun with a book. My next companion is a writer, who views the trip as a writer's retreat.

I'm not giving up. Where before I might have struggled with tedious "logistical" problems, now I see my stopped processes as an opportunity to find a something new. I may reach a point where I can't find a new way forward. But not yet. So my adventure continues.

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I cannot say that my understanding of *A Process Model* is complete or always accurate. I *can* say that I am experiencing my walk — and my life — differently. Focusing helped

me to live more in the moment, but now my attention goes to the ongoing process of each moment, feeling the dynamic of my living as it is occurring.

And the coolest thing? I find myself relishing the unfolding of my life, living it more richly, experiencing it always freshly, because of Gendlin's philosophy.

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