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Direct Engagement with the Cleared Space in Psychotherapy

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Abstract. *Clearing a space* was first developed as a preparatory step for *focusing*. Since then this process has been expanded to include a direct engagement with the cleared space. Research results show its impact upon increased self-care and positive body image, recovery from trauma, and experiences of wholeness. Little attention has been paid to exploring its value within ongoing psychotherapy. This paper demonstrates how this expanded approach to clearing a space shifts one's relationship to particular issues towards a greater unification of the person and alignment with higher values and purpose. A summary of research and the presentation of six common characteristics of direct engagement with the cleared space are presented. Discussion of two philosophical concepts sheds light on the difference this process makes in psychotherapy. A final discussion examines how this expanded approach to clearing a space may contribute to a more spiritually informed change process.

Keywords: Clearing a space

Gendlin and colleagues empirically demonstrated the experiential process that leads to successful personality change in psychotherapy and called it *focusing* (1969). The key to this process is pausing and attending to a *bodily sense of* an issue. This *felt sense* is distinctly felt but conceptually unclear and carries a multiplicity of potential meanings. Paying attention to the felt sense allows its meaning to become clearer because an interaction occurs between felt meaning and emergent symbolization. This is the central change process in focusing-oriented therapy (FOT) (Gendlin, 1964).

When the felt sense is acknowledged and placed at a right distance, a space opens between the "problem" and the wider person. Gendlin (1996) describes this space as a place of wholeness, separate from our problems. Clearing a space became the method to access this space and enable a fresh felt sense to form (Gendlin, 1991). Yet, little attention has been paid to how this space functions when directly engaged in the psychotherapy process.

Transpersonal psychology posits that human beings are constituted by and participate in an infinite source generative of all of life (Kierkegaard, 1954; Merton, 1968; Walsh & Vaughan, 1996; Wilber, 2000). This source is often described as space, formlessness, or emptiness. Spiritual practices, such as meditation, engage this dimension. Transpersonal theorists claim that whether or not the person is in direct relationship to this space effects the kind of growth and development that is possible (Assiglioli, 1976; Boorstein, 1997; Epstein, 2005; Walsh & Vaughan, 1996; Tart, 2000).

Psychotherapy often begins with what is not going well in one's life. This paper will discuss the value of directly engaging the cleared space within psychotherapy and show that this engagement generates a specific kind of change process.

I hope to demonstrate how this expanded version of clearing a space enhances the capacity to center one's life in one's essential interconnection with all of life. The central focus is no longer on solving particular problems, but becomes instead the desire to live one's life in alignment with one's higher values and purpose. First, I describe the development of the expanded version of clearing a space and then summarize the research results demonstrating the value of this way of working. Second, I present six

characteristics of direct engagement with the cleared space. Next, I discuss two concepts formulated in Gendlin's Process Model (1997), which clarify why this process is an important aspect of psychotherapeutic change. Finally, I reflect upon how direct engagement with the cleared space contributes to a more spiritually informed psychotherapy.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE CLEARED SPACE:

“It’s like I came home to myself...It was like I had been away from myself for a long time. It was incredible. I could just rest there with all of Me. I did not know about this, that there is this inner home, that is like the essence of me...and it is free of my ‘problems.’”

Originally, clearing a space (CAS) was understood to be a preparation for focusing. This “first step” invites us to bring our attention towards the center of our body and listen to what issues in our life *currently* “keep me tense inside.” In this first step we do not go into any particular issue, but rather *sense* each as it comes in the body, and place each at a little distance. This is done in a metaphorical way by imagining stacking them in front of us, or putting them in a filing cabinet, etc. However, this is not *only* an imagery process. The putting-out has to be a bodily experience that changes the body. After each issue is acknowledged and placed at a distance, we ask “Except for these things am I OK now?” When this process is complete a space opens up inside the body that has the quality of “Me” without these issues for right now (Gendlin, 1981). Our situation does not change externally, but internally we create a space between the issues and “me”, and a greater bodily relaxation occurs.

Ordinarily our issues are carried in the body all stacked up together, and surface issues are noticed first. Therapy sessions usually begin with talking about problems rather than speaking from what is directly felt. CAS is an experiential way of enabling the body to discern which issue wants to be explored in *this* therapy session and allows a felt sense of the issue to form freshly. Thus an experiential process unfolds towards the beginning of the session.

Since this initial application, new discoveries have been made about healing and development when CAS included a focusing process in relationship to the cleared space

itself. When an issue is placed at a distance, the body eases noticeably, and a "space" opens. When this process includes bringing one's attention to the space that opens and staying with this experience in a focusing-oriented way, a different process occurs.

First, one is invited to appreciate what it is like to be in this space and to allow words or images to come that capture the qualities of the experience. This is called the *handle*. To find these qualities the person brings a word or image back to the felt sense of the cleared space and checks for its accuracy. This "trying on" of a symbolization continues until there is an exact fit. This is called *resonating* because the body confirms the fit through a physically felt recognition. This is followed by the invitation to stay with the sense of this quality. Then the person is invited to ask the following question and to notice what emerges: "What is needed to bring something of this quality into my daily life?"

People describe experiencing a larger sense of "how my life wants to go without these problems" and new energy and resources. Over time, a shift in the locus of the self develops including a connection to a kind of "vastness or spaciousness", an experience of a natural state of well-being which brings a profound realization that "I am not my problems." Often spiritual language or images become handles. It is as if CAS is a doorway into a source of life. This connection brings something to one's situation that generates a positive attitude towards the body, release from trauma, steps of life-style change, and a spiritual connection with implications for how one wants to live one's life. The original problems often shift or take on a different meaning placed in the context of this larger sense of self.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Several research studies have evaluated the usefulness of CAS for people with health concerns. In one single case study, high focusing activity correlated with a lower subjective experience of pain (Wadhwa, 2007). Two studies showed CAS led to sustained weight loss and increased commitment to self-care (Holstein, 1990; Antrobos, 2009). Grindler Katonah investigated its usefulness for people with cancer (1991), finding that practicing CAS resulted in a statistically significant decrease in depression and increase

in positive body attitudes. Qualitative results in the same study revealed that patients experienced steps of change that increased self-care and experiences of well-being separate from the illness. These results were sustained six months later.

Klagsbrun, Rappaport, Speiser et al. (2005) showed that a combined intervention of CAS and expressive arts therapies significantly improved the quality of life of 18 breast cancer patients. In another study, Klagsbrun, Summers and Lennox (2008) taught CAS to 20 cancer survivors and found reduced somatic concerns, increased emotional self-regulation, mental clarity, and calm mood. Clearing a space has also been investigated as an intervention for treating trauma. Preliminary results from a study of CAS with trauma survivors indicate a significant reduction of trauma symptoms after six weeks of practice. The subjects developed a new purpose for their lives (Bhat, 2008). Leijssen (2007) demonstrated how CAS helped a trauma survivor overwhelmed by flashbacks. She states: “This process is in itself a healing one; it creates the experience of a ‘new me’, untouched by difficulties, but capable of finding a better way of relating to one’s problems...” (p. 30). There are also case study results related to war trauma (Coffeng 2003); Omidian & Lawrence 2007), abuse in indigenous cultures (Young 1998), traumatized children (Santen 2007), suicidal ideation (McGuire 1984), and borderline personality disorder (Grindler Katonah 1984).

The research studies show these consistent findings: lower depression, increased self-care and positive body attitudes, reduction of trauma symptoms, and experiences of well-being separate from problems.

These changes are experienced bodily because clearing a space is not just a mental process. The changes that emerge are formed *from* the body (Gendlin, 1997). Knowing and further living are one process. Thus the person lives differently creating a new bodily sense of further possibilities. In addition, CAS creates a different bodily experience of self. My hypothesis is that this shift in the locus of the self leads to the reported results.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CLEARING A SPACE

These results merit further analysis of the subjective changes described both in research and clinical data. The following characteristics reflect aspects of this process leading to this shift in the locus of the Self. The examples are single excerpts; however, the characteristics describe what develops over time through ongoing practice. This requires holding one's attention in relationship to the cleared space for this dimension to interact with the psychotherapeutic change process. Focusing on particular issues also occurs but is not the emphasis of this paper.

1. Each issue finds its 'right' place

When practicing CAS in this way, one does not *automatically* put something out at a distance. Instead, each felt sense of a situation is involved in the process. We ask: Is 'It' ready to go out? If not, what is needed? Then, each felt sense generates an image of where to place itself. The felt sense carries an intricacy that is greater than we can think. Allowing for this intricacy even in this step is necessary for the issue to be released to its *own* place. A kind of beauty is revealed when each issue places itself in relationship to the larger whole and the *whole* organism's living is carried forward. Contrary to the emphasis upon detachment in spiritual disciplines, in this process, the issue *releases itself* while remaining part of the whole at the same time.

Example:

- C. It is interesting I had this reaction: "You can do it." Then I felt fear.
 (Silence) I'm sitting with the fear. I'm going like this (gesture) – like how about you go out here, but there is some resistance...like a bowling ball that wants to roll back.
 (Laughter) It keeps rolling back.
- T: OK, maybe 'It' needs more attention- like 'It' needs something before it can go out.
 Sit with it and be interested in what it may want to say or need.
- C: (Silence) It's like I am trying to be tender with the fear. "It's OK for you to be here." I feel more at peace...I'm not in a hurry...It's further away now...the fear is lighter and luminescent. It's not scary.... It's healthy.... It's companioning me now...

2. Brings increased well-being

Entrance into the cleared space releases the tightness that comes from all the issues stacked up inside our bodies. Often a breath occurs when an issue is placed at a comfortable distance. Energy is freer. One is no longer burdened by “all of that.”

Laughter may spontaneously emerge. One tastes *a way of living* unencumbered by a particular difficulty.

Example 1:

Upon discovering the Cleared Space, a cancer survivor exclaimed: “Oh, this is how I felt before I became ill... healthy again!”

This increased well-being helps one act differently. Action steps are crucial to experiential change (Gendlin, 1996). Taking a step can be difficult, however, once something new occurs, everything is changed by the impact the action has on everything else (Gendlin, 1998).

Example 2:

“I suddenly feel like I have the energy to stand up to my husband. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time, but I felt dragged down by guilt.”

3. Direct experience of one’s essence

Through focusing we can find what is true for us about any experience or concern - the exact symbolization that carries forward the *situation*. Yet, there is another experience of "Me" that is more central, a directly felt connection to an essence of one’s being that lives through all of one’s situations. Even in the midst of a deep loss or failure this “me” remains intact and whole. Difficulties in life can leave us fearful of "losing ourselves" or fearing "a part of us has died". Even with this fear, when we find our way to this opening into the cleared space, there we are! Alive. Free! In touching the cleared space we experience wanting life more for its own sake. It may even come for someone who is terminally ill - even then, it is there...a kind of force or strength that “rolls through all

things” (Wordsworth, 1964, p. 92) and can never be destroyed. Over time, entering the cleared space stimulates a desire to center one’s life in this wider self.

Example 1:

There’s nothing cluttering my space...yet*I still sense something but with a different quality*..... I feel like I have come home (sigh)...like I’m connected to the stream of my life. (Breaths)...It’s an unfettered feeling. Like a path had been cleared and I can now move ahead from my essence. ...(head nods)...

Example 2:

T: Is there a word or image that fits the quality of the Clear Space?

C: Clean.....andlight.

T: Clean and light. Is that the quality that exactly fits?

C: Mm...(head nods).... (Pause)

C: I just want to stay here. It’s so free. I feel free.

T: You feel free.

(Pause)

C: I never knew I could experience anything like this! (Eyes open wide.)

(McDonald, 1984, p. 125).

Example 3:

“What comes is that the cancer is a tunnel, which is limited and constricted, but I sense that it’s the *illness* that is limited and constricted, not me.” (Klagsbrun, Rappaport, Speiser et. al. 2005, p.132).

4. Increased confidence

Existential uncertainties often carry fear. Fear itself may block one’s experiencing. Fear tends to constrict one’s view or ability to sense what feels right from within, thus no felt sense can form (Hendricks, 2003). This direct encounter with the cleared space releases fear and increases confidence that an answer will come, without trying to figure something out. With this connection to the “more” one realizes something larger is participating in one’s healing. Confidence in life and life’s process is strengthened.

Example:

The client faces a difficult decision whether or not to continue chemotherapy after the fourth return of ovarian cancer. Fear about making the ‘wrong’ decision grips her.

T: There is so much you’re feeling right now...how crucial this decision is and how you don’t really know what is right for you. Let’s take some time now, to imagine putting "all of that" outside you at a little distance. This doesn’t mean getting rid of it. I am inviting you to put "It" out in a place where ‘It’ can rest for a few moments, while we are together here.

C: (Breath)...(Minutes pass)...OK...I did it...I was noticing all that is there and then the thought came...."put it in God’s hands". But it wasn’t just a thought...I could really imagine placing it outside of me...in the center of a flower.... (begins to cry)...Oh, my God.... I feel such relief...just in letting go like this.. I really need this.... (Sighs)...

T: Take time to experience that relief ...

C: (silence).....But I still need to make a decision...

T: Yes, ...perhaps you could begin by asking that sense that is in God’s hands and held by a flower....what will help?

C: (Silence)...What came was....Wait....and the answer will come...That feels right...I know that will happen....I feel more relief and confidence...that in time I will know what I need to do.

5. Awakening to the Significance of one’s Life

The experience of sitting with the cleared space often includes recognizing the unconditional significance of one’s life. One realizes that one’s value is not contingent upon outcomes. Rather, one’s life is inherently significant. Thus, living itself, “my life” as it is, is what life is about. This felt insight begins to change one’s sense of purpose - being becomes more important than doing. A way of life that expresses one’s values becomes more central. Over time a greater commitment to self-care develops. Change steps emerge relating to exercise, diet, spiritual practices, attention to relationships, etc.

Example:

She was a student waiting to hear from her choice internship sites. She was preoccupied, anxious. She was not sleeping well and had a cold for a week. She made a place for the anxiety, for the cold that wouldn't go away, and a sense of "my self-esteem is at stake." She said: "This defines me...I have to succeed...She found a place for "This" to rest at a distance. Then she brought her attention directly to the cleared space and waited. Tears arose...and then the words: "More than success I want to be accepted just for myself...no conditions of worth..." Her eyes opened and she smiled: "I had no idea that was what was under all of that!"

6. Not one quality but many: What emerges fits what is needed

Qualities that emerge in the cleared space resemble a kaleidoscope. Handles frequently described are: peaceful, still, comfort, clear, whole. Other handles describe "something so big and significant that it can never be grasped; yet it is real". The choice of language may have an explicit spiritual valence – like sacred, profound, and awesome. Images and gestures become handles as well: "I'm on a hill overlooking a valley, there are cows dotting the hillside, and the words that come are 'simple and divinely peaceful'. I can feel the presence of something...sacred" (Klagsbrun, J. 2007, p. 8).

The purpose of finding a handle is not to define the experience but rather to access more of what the cleared space offers for this moment. When the explication fits exactly, one's relation to all the issues shifts towards a sense of greater unification.

Example:

In this example the person found several issues he was carrying. One involved a business project demanding attention. Another was a wish to devote more time to musical development. Another concerned his research. As each was laid out he found "fighting for attention", a background feeling they shared. He acknowledged feeling pulled by each of these commitments, yet none get fulfilled. When the cleared space opened after setting each concern at a comfortable distance, the quality was *gratitude*. He felt this quality and tears welled up. Then he listened for how to bring this more into his life and said: "I suddenly have this sense that all of these seemingly divergent issues could

become harmonized - no longer competing for attention. If I trust that they are actually all interconnected there will be a rhythm for engaging each in relationship to each other".

Transpersonal psychology posits that human beings are constituted by and participate in a unified consciousness that dynamically generates life. What it means to be a person is that we are both/and - the unique and the universal, the personal and the transcendent constitute each other.

Whether or not the person is in direct relationship to this space affects the kind of development possible. Structural theories of personality see change as occurring within the personality; thus this larger source is not accessed or explored. When focusing only on our problems this larger dimension becomes obscured. Psychotherapy can restore this connection and the ability to interact with our daily lives from this space.

TWO PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

One implying

Gendlin (1962) illuminates how *the implicit* functions in experiencing. "The implicit" refers to how our current experiencing is carried by the organism on a bodily level as an intricate, yet-to-be differentiated mesh of potential meanings. The implicit functions outside of our awareness and includes one's past, present, and future direction all felt together as one whole. For example, if you speak *from* what is felt in the moment something new emerges. The implicit includes our participation in the larger consciousness that moves through all things.

It is easy to forget during psychotherapy that when we focus on a particular issue, we are focusing on a part of this larger whole. Gendlin (1998) explains that all subprocesses of the organism (situations, cellular process, creative endeavors) imply each other and each is changed by how each affects all the others. Thus, it is a mistake to address a particular issue as if it stands alone. "The body's implying is always one implying.... The whole process implies the next occurring of the coordinated processes..." (Gendlin, 1997). Thus the implicit functions to move the organism forward towards the person's widest development. When one includes CAS in an ongoing psychotherapy process, one

directly senses the whole. New resources become available, including expressions of the ultimate meaning of one's life as it relates to the larger patterning of the universe.

Attention as action

When we make a felt sense the object of our attention we are applying *attention* in a certain way. It is a kind of seeking, looking for, and waiting. The felt sense forms in response to the attention, and becomes more distinct. (Gendlin, 1997). This is a kind of action because it creates the interaction that enables the felt sense to open. When we bring our attention to the cleared space we generate the interaction that elicits the forming of a particular quality needed in this moment, for example, stillness. This enables a new kind of carrying forward. By asking "How can I bring this quality into my daily life?", something from this larger whole becomes available as a resource in one's life. This is a wider place that allows for more possibilities.

A NEW FUNCTION OF FOCUSING

Focusing on the cleared space differs from focusing on our felt sense of a situation in important ways. First, the process of resonating the handle with the cleared space serves a different function. In regular focusing, the handle serves to carry forward a newly explicated meaning of the situation. The handle found within the cleared space brings forth a quality of the larger source so that it can transform our way of living. Second, when we do notice these felt qualities, our attention is drawn to them. There is something different about both these qualities and our attraction to them. Although they carry an affective valence, they are not usual emotions. These are ways the body experiences coming into direct contact with our true nature. Over time, these experiences develop a staying power that balances whatever issues are troubling, making it possible to explore them within a larger context. The power of these qualities is more akin to a kind of desire, a wanting. It is as if the equanimity (or joy, or peace, etc.) wants more of itself,

producing a kind of inner stability to this connection to the larger self, that then functions in relationship to difficulties in one's life. The sense of wholeness and well-being is already there and cannot be threatened by an obstacle as one may have felt it was before. This staying in the cleared space generates its own forward movement and so more life comes from this direct source.

Spiritual development is often understood to include strengthening our ability to pull ourselves back to the center. Having a strong keel in the sail boat means that it rights itself easily no matter what the wind or wave pattern.

CONCLUSION

Human beings, even in the midst of their suffering, want to reach towards the *more*. We want to live from the larger self, even with pain and constricted patterns. This expanded process of clearing a space shows us a space that is directly sensed and not defined by our current life issues. It brings into focus an experience of being alive unconstrained by these same issues. When the qualities of the cleared space are directly sensed from the body, they have a kind of power, an inclination to sustain themselves. Over time a desire to live from this center arises, and a way of living becomes more important, while the particular outcomes of situations become less important. Often steps of living supporting this alignment emerge. We are strengthened in our ability to bring these qualities into our daily living. Whether or not the person is in direct relationship to this larger whole has bearing upon the kind of growth and development process that is possible. Living from our undivided wholeness creates our integrated participation in the life before us, fresh, open to all that comes. Psychotherapy needs to engage these farthest reaches.

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