

What is Focusing and Why Does it Work?

Bodily Carrying Forward and Felt Symbolization of Experiencing

by Edgardo Riveros Aedo

*to Eugene Gendlin, in memoriam*¹
translated from Spanish by James Doga

1. Background

Focusing as a phenomenon is almost unheard of within academia, and yet as a method, Focusing has spread throughout almost the entire world thanks to the extraordinary outreach of the international Focusing community that Eugene Gendlin and Mary Hendricks formed along with the first directors of The Focusing Institute in Chicago. This reach is due to the effort and will of individuals who have taken it upon themselves to spread its word, ever since its birth in 1981, when Eugene Gendlin published the now historic pocket book, *Focusing*. Currently, Focusing is alive in 53 countries, with 206 coordinators and over 50 coordinators in training.

In this essay, Focusing as a Phenomenon will refer to that which *occurs within us and changes us*. Focusing as a Method will refer to the method by which a person accompanies an Other so that he or she may experience Focusing as a phenomenon. This Focusing as a method is, as aforementioned, quite well-known throughout the world. The Focusing method is known for its virtues and *modus operandi* that, despite experiencing changes via new cultural and personal appropriations of those who divulge it, continues to respect the essential form in which its creator brought it into the world. This essence was initiated before 1981 in the shape of Gendlin's theory of *experiencing*, in 1962 with the publication of *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning (ECM)*.

I believe that the more and the better we understand the phenomenon of Focusing, the more we will be able to advance its theorization and research. Maybe one day the phenomenon of Focusing will be recognized as a holistic bodily process which happens within our inner world and that changes how we feel and act, thus changing how we view and understand things. But if Focusing is *interaction*, and thus an inherently human phenomenon, an unimaginable number of variants of Focusing could arise from the multiplicity of people and cultures which currently have easy access to its comprehension and transformation.

Focusing has been vastly explained by its author throughout his extensive work, which is inherently complex due to the phenomenological novelty which characterizes Focusing. However, we need more time and conjoined effort in order to reach a thorough understanding of this wonderful phenomenon created (or discovered) by Eugene Gendlin. Available to us are explanations prior to Focusing's (1981) birth, which foreshadowed and announced it through the discovery of new concepts: *experiencing*, *carrying forward*, *direct referent*, etc. Also available are the explanations provided by its creator, during the explosion of Focusing since

¹ Dedicated to Gene; 2017 is the first Weeklong in which he will not be with us, but he will be in our hearts.

1981 (in works such as *Responsive Order*, *Beyond Models and Patterns*, and *Focusing Oriented Therapy*). However, the latest and deepest explanations have come from the emergence of the bodily and experiential primacy through the integrative and bodily micro-phenomena described by Gendlin in his final body of work, *A Process Model* (2004). Within this book new phenomena is described and constituted, some of which relate to the inherent renovation discovered on a day to day basis: crossing, formatting, behavioral sequences, instance of itself, etc.

Not having a proper integration of the explicative complexity of the Phenomenon of Focusing, it is often difficult to explain *why* this phenomenon occurs, how it happens to access the wonder of changing the experience or feel of something, which has extraordinary effects on our lives. On the other hand, if we understand the phenomenon of Focusing more precisely and deeply, we will be able to apply it in all present and future domains, which will in turn allow further theorization on the subject matter and create new opportunities for research that may place Focusing on the vanguard of academic thought, particularly within the fields of psychotherapy, social sciences and postmodern humanist philosophy in general. Let us consider that Focusing, inherently bodily and experiential, has now entered the space age, and thus anticipate, visualize, and evaluate the vast complexity of changes that this new era may have in store for humanity: the *experiential era*.

The purpose of this article is precisely to offer an explanation of the Phenomenon, thus enriching the resources available for systematic research and theorization which may allow us to explain and apply it with complete propriety. This purpose does not intend to break the magic of the phenomenon, but rather illustrate its transcendence and highlight its transforming power, all the while maintaining the utmost respect for its complexity and ensuring to keep the authenticity of a person's Focusing experience intact.

First, let's take a look at Focusing as a method or attitude, noting the importance of certain movements contained within the said method, which is founded upon a complete philosophy detailing the process of experiential symbolization. We will then review and highlight central aspects of the Phenomenon of Focusing, making sure to conserve its most original and revolutionary dimension: the bodily and experiential dimension.

2. Focusing as an attitude or method

The word *method* implies a specific way of acting, a studied and finished procedure through which a person or process reaches its destination. The method of Focusing is thus quite well-known within the international Focusing community. It has a specific set of steps or stages to ensure that a) its manifestation is truly experiential, b) it represents the authentic voice of a person's Self, and c) the accompaniment of the said process is truly empathetic. At the core of the method is empathic accompaniment, so that self-propulsion may allow the Focuser to discover from his/her own authenticity the experiential meaning of "something," which in turn initiates a *new interaction*. The creator of Focusing himself has been emphatic in reaffirming

the fact that there isn't one correct posture within Focusing. Rather, there may be multiple ways of interacting successfully.

Gendlin has invited us to get to know Focusing, inviting us to believe, participate in, and even transform it. We have been invited to create *crossings* which may more adequately respond to our personal style, thus embodying the cultural diversity that Focusing implies. But above all, Gendlin has invited us to use Focusing in our communities to *change the interaction* between human beings in a real way. In other words, we can use it to take on a complete and experiential form. Since before it appeared in 1981, Gendlin has invited us to practice Focusing; he has taught us to interact experientially and empathetically with the Other from the foundation of his experiential psychotherapy. We no longer interact to explain to someone what is wrong with them, nor to inform them about what they must do now that they're suffering. We don't interact to direct the Other, to interpret for him, or to ask revealing questions. No, we have discovered the infinite realm of possibilities we can access by simply responding empathetically to the present interaction. By interacting experientially with a person, by honoring his/her authenticity, we offer them our deepest respect through our experiential and existential resonance.

Focusing as a Method is the art of empathetically accompanying another human according to the experiential laws discovered by Gendlin. By interacting empathetically we traverse the different stages of Focusing as a Phenomenon: clearing a space, finding a handle, etc... until we arrive at a panoramic view from which we can offer experiential closure, allowing the person who has just gone through a Focusing-type experiential resignification to rest in complete peace and tranquility.

The Focusing method is thus a known way of operating which allows us to experience the phenomenon of Focusing. However, to simply "administer" this method as if following a manual does not guarantee that we generate or accompany an experiential or felt process. Neither does it guarantee that we may be able to help the pertinent, real, and felt existence of a direct referent to emerge. Only when the person truly "lives" this phenomenon can we assert that we have accompanied him/her through an the experiential process termed Focusing.

However, the problem that lies within developing our own crossing is that we are not always sure that we have managed to create a way of accessing the experiential dimension and a true process of Focusing. What exactly does "true" mean? How can we know if what has emerged through our method of Focusing accompaniment is truly experiential Focusing?

In the following segment I will elaborate the possible experiential signs that provide us with certainty that we have truly produced the experiential Focusing phenomenon.

To achieve our objective, we must first capture the essence of the Focusing Phenomenon, know what constitutes it, and what happens within us when a Focusing process is under way. We must know how the experiential interaction comes forth and how carrying forward begins, creating the conditions for experiential parturition. *Parturition* is the moment in which

symbolization resignifies experience, in quite an explosion. *Nascence* is the later moment when something new has arrived and a new feeling captures a new experiential whole. I will describe the Focusing phenomenon by attempting to showcase its central and essential aspects, followed by an overview of some forms of experiential reassurance. We'll also take a slight detour, in an attempt to highlight that which is defining and authentic within Focusing.

3. Focusing as an experiential phenomenon

Before I describe Focusing as a phenomenon I'd like to mention two unresolved issues which contribute to our difficulties in fully understanding it: the name *Focusing* as well as the overlap of denominations for Focusing existing nowadays. The first problem to understanding Focusing is its name itself.

Focusing refers to paying attention to something, being it to focus, to purposefully place our awareness on what we experience (our *felt sense*), and to offer in our accompaniment an empathic interaction with what currently lies in a state of confusion. That is to say, a non-interventive intervention, a resonance with what the Other feels, and viewing experientially their autonomous, internal images. Focusing involves accompanying the Other as she discovers the true meaning of her inner experiencing, and thanks to the power of empathy, allowing her to approach the more difficult feelings, or to await the arrival of sensations that have not yet been produced.

Focusing also refers to sharpening our focus as we view an image or meaning in an effort to see it more clearly, or to sense it accurately. We can refer to this with a word that Gendlin frequently used: the fit. If we say to someone something along the lines of "this seems to make you sad," and the person Focusing tells us, "Yes, this makes me sad but it also awakens me to a new reality..." the person has in that moment certainly found the exact relevance, the exact meaning, of his felt sense.

The second issue: The overlap of names between Experiential Focusing or Experiential Wheel and Focusing as such, as a phenomenon, which is our main concern in this article.

This aspect is worth noting due to the fact that Focusing was the name that Eugene Gendlin coined for the *experiential wheel*. The latter was comprised of the stages of the meaning creation process: direct referent, unfolding, global application, and referent movement. This experiential wheel often spins as the Focusing Phenomenon takes its course. It is the wheel that guides us from our starting point to our destination, and it is what allows us to move with the Focuser, much like astronauts propel themselves into movement in zero gravity. The experiential wheel is a clear and certain aspect that allows us to become aware of the unfolding process. This wheel allows the Focuser to tread into the implicit with the energy and direction of carrying forward. It is fundamental that we be able to identify and differentiate this wheel in relation to Focusing as such. Thus, I have allowed myself to refer to this wheel as an

Experiential Unit of Change (EUC), including the four dynamic stages that unfold when the phenomenon of meaning creation occurs, as it does throughout the entire Focusing phenomenon. Let's proceed to identify Focusing through the phenomena implied within it; let's also identify its nomenclature so we do not get these mixed up; we may later arrive at a definition.

Focusing is the entire phenomenological and experiential process a person goes through while accompanied by a Focusing listener in search for the felt meaning of a "Something." This begins from the connection with her implicit world to the birth of something completely new which integrally affects a person. This newness includes her feelings, meanings, *new* ways of feeling, decisions, and above all, everything she's now capable of doing and being. I mentioned Doing first, seeing as human existence is made up of work [*quehacer* in Spanish, though this has no direct translation; it implies duty, chores, and an idea of purpose]. Or, to paraphrase Gendlin, experience is pre-conceptual; it is action that transforms us. First we experience and then, as we interact with symbols, implicit meaning is completed. We change when we symbolize; we feel a great explosion and inner relief, an experiential volcano after which *insight* or *realization* occurs and allows us to reflect on what we are feeling inside our true Being. This order was first discovered and described by Gendlin in 1960.

We occasionally use imagery, but in Focusing we pay attention to the process of the Other. This second statement is important.

Imagery is a resource to rationally guide someone using a narrative that translates into an experiential entry or resonance related to a new experience that it builds. Imagery is an external linguistic proposition to which the Other can connect, investing it with his own feelings and content. *Clearing a space* has an initial dimension of imagery to it, but it quickly emphasizes one's own issues and topics. Clearing a space has the goal of gradually submerging us in the realm of the implicit, quieting our minds and allowing our body to speak through experiential images. A patient and empathic listener allows our direct referent to finally arrive and come forth genuinely. If we do not clearly understand this distinction, we may distract the client when we ask him something from our own interpretation and the "why not" subliminal notes we often take. However, we understand that this is a mistake, seeing as it distracts or inhibits the Other's experiential process and may detain the process from carrying forward. The worst thing we could possibly lose is our connection with the Other. Definitely, the use of imagery is not Focusing, because it is not based on the generative experience of spontaneous symbols that come from the client. It is not relating to his direct referent which is arriving and that we wish to pay attention to. One more aspect to consider is that imagery may create change in itself and that change can be explained thanks to the experiential theory which underlies Focusing. But the explanation is always very different from change itself.

In the following lines, I'll use the term experiential unit of change to refer to the experiential wheel, in an attempt to avoid confusing it with the global process known as Focusing since 1981.

4. Internal description of Focusing

Focusing is a recent phenomenon. It came about in the 20th century, but it is still relatively unknown within rationalist theory, which originated with Pericles in the Greek agora. Focusing is a new phenomenon, conceived in an environment of historical, political, and intellectual agitation, an era of great change and desire to change. There was an unprecedented restlessness among different communities throughout the world (beatniks, hippies, historical events such as the Prague Spring, the “May 68” in France, the construction of the Berlin Wall, the civil rights movements of the 50s and early 60s, phenomenological and existential movements, new political powers, Marxism and the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, and political dictatorships east and west of the Iron Curtain). Gendlin began with a powerful opus, ECM, thus kicking off the great experiential revolution of which he was creator. Experiencing is his equivalent of Heidegger’s *existence* in the sense that it legitimates an internal dimension and implies a new concept of human Being. Experiencing is the incessant *interaction* of man with himself and his immediate environment, a process of pre-conceptual experiences in permanent signifying flow.

This view of *the subjective as experiencing*, now including a new unit – the person-context – becomes difficult to comprehend for a person educated within the dichotomies of subject-object, or subject-situation, or within a tradition of content that uses only the rational domain to understand human beings. With ECM, Gendlin inaugurated a new understanding of subjectivity and the preconceptual interaction of the *implicit*. Since then, Gendlin has been known for his innovation and revolutionary vision of the process of therapeutic change. This subject of the experiential and the implicit is so novel even though new discoveries appear on a day to day basis, ever since the now faraway days of the Flower Revolution [*Revolución de las flores* in Spanish, referring to the nonviolent revolution embodied by the hippie movement), when ECM was born.

Let’s consider that Eugene Gendlin first constructed the theory and philosophy of experiencing and later the philosophy of the implicit, adding onto these throughout the rest of his life. Let’s also clarify that Focusing, having just been born in 1981, allowed the world to get to know the theory of experiencing written 19 years prior. These concepts were condensed from the beginning within ECM (1962) and continued in 1964 with “A Theory of Personality Change,” *Focusing* (1981), and later in “The Primacy of the Body, Not the Primacy of Perception” (1992), “Crossing and Dipping: Some Terms for Approaching the Interface Between Natural Understanding and Logical Formulation” (1995), *Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy* (1996), “The Responsive Order: A New Empiricism” (1997), and later *A Process Model* (2004). In each one of his works Gendlin has constructed his conceptual pyramid. Focusing as a phenomenon is a consequence of thinking experientially, conceiving the idea of an experiential dimension, and a consequence of its creator daring to initiate a new model.

The *felt sense* is an extremely original concept; it is the crucible of the experiential system. We human beings have multiple felt senses, derived from our multiple interactions with situations and people. I said “dare” because by emphasizing the primacy of bodily experiencing, Gendlin embarks on an act of philosophical rescue of the primal dimension of human totality. Reason, intuition, sensations, feelings [in the sense of forecasts, hunches; *presentimiento* in Spanish], emotions, etc. are all gathered in the experiential dimension. In affirming the primacy of the body, Gendlin brings back the philosopher that had been cast away and forgotten by Socrates and post-Socratic philosophers: Heraclitus. In this philosophical rescue, Gendlin gifts us a complete human being: the implicit and the explicit, the intuitive and the rational, the magic of feeling and of creating, spirituality, creativity, all gathered in the most revolutionary concept: the *felt sense*. The complex and mysterious totality of human beings, their environment, human life, and its relation to the cosmos are all integrated within the Focusing phenomenon.

Let’s not forget this then, that Focusing as a phenomenon does not reduce nor fragment the concept of a human being, it *dares* to encompass it in its totality. This miracle was accomplished within the dawn of the years between 1939 and 1962, and with *ECM* as its pioneering work. Everything else originated from there, which arrived as a miracle caravan throughout five decades of self-effacing dedication.

5. Internal description of Focusing

We could define the Focusing phenomenon as an empathic intervention within a person’s implicit dimension in order to facilitate an internal, experiential, and self-propelled process which allows the person to discover something, to experience and feel something novel. This “something” is uncomfortable or difficult to rationally understand at the beginning. In attending an unknown *something*, it becomes experientially constituted as a direct referent, and then as a felt handle which provides very original and unexpected images. These images emerge from a vague sense which advances towards new discoveries until it produces a felt shift in the central meaning of the experiential process, in the crucible of our existence, in our *felt sense*.

Focusing as a phenomenon starts as an initial uncertainty or confusion. That uncertainty is an experiential process and the dimension within which we should always remain, throughout the entire process. This is the act of penetrating the realm of the implicit from a conscious uncertainty that seizes us. Focusing is an experiential journey; it is not mental, but bodily. Words are a secondary resource of the Focusing listener. His speech is empathic, but the central aspect for the listener is his empathic attitude, his bodily listening, his flowing resonance. His accepting and precise listening is respectful and free of any judgement. This empathic attitude involves a constant experiential resonance on behalf of the listener, responding to the rhythm, intensity, and direction of the Focuser’s felt sense. From the listener’s perspective, there are three key experiential moments in this macro process that maintain the symbolic emergence of meaning on a deeply experiential level:

- A. The experiential forming of the direct referent and the bodily formation of a handle;
- B. Crossing the experiential abyss of resignification;
- C. The final panoramic view.

But a *sine qua non* function is to ensure that these three moments be truly and deeply experiential, with their direction and depth being determined by the Other's (Client or Focuser) experiential dimension. Because Focusing is experiential in nature, in this manner we respect a fundamental way of being, of feeling, and of symbolizing according to the felt sense of the Other. We must remember that we are always in contact with the felt sense of the You, that harbors the initial uncertainty, discomfort, or difficulty.

But before we move on to describe the crucial experiential steps to ensure that the Focusing phenomenon is produced, it becomes necessary to establish that Focusing is only possible if we understand the experiential nature of personal change and specifically how and why we dialogue with the felt sense and its direct referents. Let us thus proceed to highlight a view of these aspects of the Focusing phenomenon, in order to be able to dedicate ourselves to its steps. Only in this manner can we make sure to sustain the experiential dimension of Focusing, thus ensuring the cetaceous nature of felt resignification, emerging from the oceanic depths of our implicit realm.

6. The experiential dimension, felt sense, and direct referent

The experiential dimension

I would dare to say that we can without hesitation consider the experiential dimension to be the great original addition to our understanding of human phenomena provided by Gendlin. Human beings are a permanent interaction of felt creative meaning. Let's take a look at what Gendlin tells us in his first concepts in 1962:

Experiencing is concrete. It is the felt apperceptive mass to which we can inwardly point. It is a "this" or a "this way I feel." [...] experiencing (or any aspect of it) is a physically felt "this," such as hunger or pain. We can give our attention to it. It is what we inwardly "are," "mean," or "feel" at a given moment. [...] Even the most intellectual ideas and arguments as well as situations and behaviors involve a felt apperceptive mass. (ECM, p. 27)

Experiencing is the equivalent of living [*vivenciar* in Spanish, implying a felt phenomenological aspect of going through something in life; the closest translation would be "to experience," yet that has a different connotation], of feeling the concrete piece of data that informs us that *something* wishes to emerge from within ourselves to inform us about a person or a situation. By diving into our experiencing we get in touch with two major forms of interaction: contextual interaction and interaction with our own inner experience. To speak of experiencing is to speak of permanent interaction. There's nothing that is spontaneous that hadn't been previously felt,

though we may not realize this. Feeling is the central focus of experiencing and within that sensing, something much more palpable is implied: the implicit felt sense beating right when we are about to say something, a felt totality that brings its own meaning, pre-conceptual, originating from our core, and symbolizing our authenticity.

The felt sense

Experiencing is vague; the felt sense is a specific unit of experiencing which carries implied and unknown meaning that relates to our life. The felt sense is a meaningful interaction between us and other people and between us and a specific, historical situation. It is a second revolutionary step by Gendlin. This experiential extract contains a lively sum of interaction; we may in turn interact with it too. Through the intervention of Focusing, it might conclude and broaden its real meaning. The felt sense is a system that generates sensations and symbols relating to the deep meaning generated by our interaction with people and situations.

The felt sense emerges from the experiential dimension as an organized experiential unit. It has six extraordinary experiential characteristics. It is bodily, pre-conceptual, emotional, present and current, immediate and self-propelled. Each one of these characteristics represents a specific point of connection, as we will see with indicators that ensure that a process is truly experiential.

The direct referent

Gendlin defines the direct referent as something conceptually vague yet intensely felt. This is another key and revolutionary concept by Gendlin. The direct referent is a gateway into the inner experiential creation of meaning. The direct referent was rejected by traditional psychotherapy, considered irrelevant or indicative of defensiveness. For Gendlin, change is something alive. It contains the felt meaning of the felt sense as it initially enters our awareness. It sometimes frightens us with its bizarre construction or shape. If we refrain from interpreting and rather “listen” to it, sensing and allowing it to resonate, it then becomes the great gateway into the Focusing phenomenon, the phenomenon of change brought about by empathic symbolization. Herein lies the value of allowing the direct referent to bloom. It will emerge as that great cetacean from the depths, if we allow it to form and know how to talk to it, even when it has yet to appear. When *something* is implied, it looms up to the surface. To speak with something that has yet to manifest is akin to speaking with a ghost. The difference is that this ghost wants to appear, especially if we are empathic and speak to it from the other side of the frontier. This frontier lies between implicit functioning and non-functioning. It is between the functioning space and the frozen abyss of the detained structure. Such *transcendent interaction* occurs both between two people in interaction as well as the internal interaction of the Focuser. This interaction is empathy, which fosters a silence that, much like an invisible bridge that brings us to a sacred space with the Other, allows that ghost to come forth within us. For it has felt “expected” and accepted even before it appeared, as unconditionally as with love.

The direct referent may be evidently manifesting when someone bursts into tears. There, it has taken form, gathered strength, and manifests. But what lies behind it? And what does it bring with it? What can be sensed or experienced behind the crying? For Gendlin that is a direct referent with which we must interact empathically, scaling the hurricane with our empathic interaction. But sometimes the direct referent is heavy, oppressive, and doesn't manifest clearly, making it necessary for us to encourage its emergence. Let's review what Gendlin has said:

Whether a direct referent actually forms, whether it comes or not, cannot be controlled. One can deliberately hold and wait, point and sense, but one cannot get a direct referent to form and come at will. (APM, p. 233)

Let's consider that we are talking about entering the Other's inner world, to the extent that the Other will allow, and to the extent that his felt sense will allow. In Focusing we do not control, but accompany; we do not direct, but rather go with the Other. We walk next to his experience; we allow whatever is being felt to be felt, in his or her own way. We must take in what Gendlin thought of the direct referent: it is just a draft, an initial experiential brushstroke of the felt sense. It is not the experiential meaning in its true depth, and it definitely is not the result of the complete process. It is however the first emissary cast forth by the felt sense, an emissary to whom we offer welcome and who then offers us the wealth he carries.

We must interact with *that* which is forming. We do not know whether or not it will actually form nor what will consist it. Our task is to interact with that process which is forming. We must interact with *that* which has yet to come into being. We grasp it in its implicit dimension, not attending to the content, but only to its peripheral effects, only to its more immediate and broad sensations or feelings. We must attend to the feelings or sensations that propel that draft, though it is sometimes bizarre, terrifying, or "repulsive" as Gendlin states in one of his examples. We must interact with the implicit, resonating with a simple and almost literal reflection, allowing the direct referent to come forth and manifest. Let's not forget that we have a great resource: we may make an empathic shift and manage to configure an unfolding of that which is in the process of forming. In this way we witness the majestic appearance of a carrying forward. The energy of that experiential wheel, the universal energy of authenticity, is set in motion only in the presence of a delicate and subtle empathetic interaction. Then the first manifestation of the implicit realm may appear: a direct referent, an *unfolding* or a *handle*.

We can make the wheel spin subtly by offering a simple resonance and reaching the process of unfolding. This is followed by a *global application* and then the emergence of a direct referent. As we apply empathy, the experiential unit begins to spin. Let's take a look at what Gendlin tells us:

A direct referent does not always form. Certainly it does not form necessarily just when we wish. And, when it forms, it is then whatever it is that formed, and perhaps not at all what we wished or expected. Another way to put this forming

is to say that a direct referent comes. It can come only if we let it, and I will describe this "letting" more exactly.

When a direct referent forms and comes, something has jelled, something has happened, something – a great deal – has fallen into place. Direct referent formation is (a new kind of) carrying forward. (APM, p.225)

We can make sure that the DR appears, just by allowing it to appear. If it has approached us, then it doesn't fear us. If it comes forth and joins us, let us greet it with empathy, so we may be granted entry and implicit permission to access the Other's experiential dimension. Thus it is important to delicately accompany the client's first entries: when she tries to describe what is affecting her, or what is producing so much angst. This is revolutionary, because often times traditional therapists that were unaware of the experiential dimension would state upfront: 'I'll wait for you to stop crying to move on. As if tears were useless and meaningless.

With the experiential revolution, we came to understand that everything has meaning. Ignoring such an eloquent phenomenon such as crying, we lose the gateway that our client was offering to us. To weep is always a direct referent grandly manifesting. The person is going through a complex experience and our empathic silence will allow its broadest manifestation. The knowledge of the direct referent as a phenomenon represented a revolution in psychotherapy. Gendlin discovered that the direct referent requires angst and tension to take shape, it requires something that wishes to manifest but cannot find the words to do so. The client feels his hands are tied by his own direct referent. When something then emerges it is because we have allowed it to. We have been empathic and accurate because we have managed to spin the wheel in the "abyss" of felt or experiential meaning. Thus, central to this process, is the ability to interact with the eye of the hurricane, rather than with its lashing periphery. We reach the eye of the hurricane dressed in silence and compassion, while the Other receives our presence at a distance, and still. Our presence is empathic when it quiets itself for the Other. Silence is the bridge that connects us to the abyss and to the Client's heart. Only silence allows the miracle to emerge.

7. How personal change operates, in the experiential dimension

I believe that at the core of Focusing is the majestic emergence of therapeutic change, occurring at and with the experiential dimension. Where there is Focusing there is always a deep change in the meaning of the issue dealt with. True Focusing undoubtedly leads to change. Let's explore how this helps us better comprehend the Focusing phenomenon.

What is change and how does it operate within Focusing?

Gendlin discovered how the process of symbolizing experience occurs. In order for human experience to emerge into awareness, symbols are required, and these in turn require human experience. He also discovered that the symbolizing process is creative. It spawns from the

meaning of an experience in relation to something felt as one's own. The final assessment of this felt truth comes from an internal voice, a tunnel connected to our authenticity, the confirming exclamation that "Yes, this is what I feel!" The miracle of creating just the right symbol that is experienced belongs to us; it is what we truly feel. Gendlin discovered that our experiencing governs our signifying in a living reality made up of hunches, emotions, intuitions, and our inner sense. Thus, for Gendlin symbolization isn't born out of pure, Aristotelian conceptualizations; it is not entirely rational. Gendlin discovered man walking upside down on its reasoning head and allowed us to return to our erect and bipedal posture, wandering, experiential, and sentient. It is as we were in our ancestral times. How could we possess certainty in such a world of shadows, unprotected as we were, though seemingly harboring a developed bodily wisdom to which we could connect. Gendlin has allowed philosophy and thus, humanity, to believe in intuition and the hunch that tells us: "This is what I feel!" This certainty is experiential and not at all conceptual.

The phenomenon of the creation of meaning discovered by Gendlin was defined as a pre-conceptual process. In this light, the role of empathy becomes fundamental. It is an ancient and forgotten language that allowed our species to become what we are: a species that creates meaning. Empathy developed in higher order mammals, as is the case with mirror neurons in gorillas. In humans, however, empathy has acquired a fundamental role: individuation and neoteny. As humans we have the most prolonged infancy on the planet, which leads to a crucible of learning to signify experience. This ancestral empathy was brought about by intimate interaction and a new scene for our species. Such interaction of relational bonds, which goes beyond family, is affective, emotional, and expressive. This intimate behavior grows the human infant in multiple interactions, with love constituting the solid platform of his authentic being. Unbeknownst to us, as a species, we have developed a boundless empathy towards both our own feelings and those of others. This intimacy among individuals has carried forward into feeling what the other feels. I can capture what you feel because that is how I can feel safe and safe to be myself. Let's not forget that when we are born, humans are the most destitute and helpless of sprouts on the planet among all the animal species. Within a foundational period, we grow amidst feelings and symbols, and the creation of meaning is a mechanism to survive both affectively and effectively. This prolonged lactation and neurological immaturity precedes our ambulatory and linguistic development. Our infants grow in an environment that interlaces with our human ways of being curious and affectionate, ludic and possessive, and expressive of all that transpires. We are experiential and linguistic beings, permanent creators in a process that Jung refers to as *individuation*.

We know now, thanks to Gendlin, how we symbolize our inner experience, our own way of being. In recognizing the phenomenon of symbolization, Gendlin discovered the implicit world that he called experiencing.

He discovered this phenomenon in the domain of psychotherapy, when a human being needs to intervene upon another human being, upon something that had never directly been

touched: the subjective world. Gendlin proposed his theory of change based on his observations of the empathy-led symbolizing process within a client. Gendlin discovered a view of therapeutic change within the nucleus of our human nature: the felt sense. It harkens to the nucleus that Heraclitus proposed as the essence of the cosmos: change. Experiencing is a river of constant change, and our existence is a constant flow. Gendlin then discovered that there are segments of experiences that halt due to incorrect symbolization. Our process of being ourselves suddenly comes to a stop. Its flow is blocked, detained and congealed, as if symbolizing is not in accord with the authenticity of our being. Heidegger and Nietzsche appear here as philosophical guarantors. The authentic being becomes anguished if it strays from itself (Heidegger's ontological guilt, *schuld*). Its authenticity is lost, astray from the *luminous fall* (Nietzsche), or deviating from its process of individuation (Jung).

Gendlin took interest in the phenomenon of change and discovered that the psychoanalytic paradigms of content and repression did not allow such a phenomenon of change. This paradigm was limited: explanation as a rational phenomenon could not lead to change. Explanative language gave way to comprehensive language. The language of empathy is quite different from the language of explanation. Rather than explaining a feeling using a theory foreign to the client, empathy feels what the other feels, and delivers in return an empathic symbol. It binds us to the meaning that the other might give to her experience, but through the intuitive path, relying on intuition and the experiential proximity to the other. Empathy syntonizes and adjusts so that you may feel understood, impacted, and amazed by what you are now able to name.

Gendlin then postulates that empathy proposes a symbol that precisely interprets what the other implicitly feels. It is a symbol that, by interpreting the other's feeling, actually completes it, igniting the flame of feeling that was wet, cold, and unable to catch fire. What is ignited is a fire like Heraclitus', what catches fire is the immediate sense that it is so, that what has been proposed was exactly what was being felt. The aspect of this permanent flow that had been detained has now been carried forward. Empathy ignites carrying forward.

Gendlin states that not only is the flame of felt sensing ignited, but rather the entire experiential flow. What was once halted now rushes forward like the plunge of a waterfall breaching the dam holding it back. This waterfall has burst through thanks to a new carrying forward. The entire body distends; the Other's entire body is relieved and a new mobility is set forth. There is a new standing and walking again, feeling again, acting in accordance with one's vital path, returning to the "luminous fall" that best responds to one's existence and life course. Empathy has allowed the Other to feel his true feelings and to be himself, to unblock that which was stuck or congealed and that generated symptoms. Focusing is a process of gradual resignification and re-symbolization that can access the "hard drive" of many of our behavioral programs and trigger a self-repairing mechanism via its re-symbolization. It is due to this fact that change occurs in the present; its experiential and behavioral outcomes arrive later. Let's

listen to these enlightened words of Eugene Gendlin, who in *A Process Model* states the following regarding this topic:

We call it carrying forward when what occurs changes the implying so that what was implied is no longer implied because "it" has occurred.

(...) Occurring changes the past and the future. (APM, p. 25)

We may conclude for now that empathy is the language of feeling that accompanies the Other in his process of re-symbolization. It carries out a fundamental role: to complete the implicit meaning of those words or images, overflowing with meaning and feelings of the future and of one's own individuality. Empathy manifests what is latent; it shines a light on what is hidden in the here and now, soon to arrive but not yet known. Empathy deals with the living process, with living feelings which are completing themselves and emerging, like a river loaded with different colors and species of fish named "feelings."

Now we are able to describe the experiential moments that are the key to ensuring the phenomenon of change in Focusing. Focusers and listeners possess two key instruments: empathy and the other's living phenomenon of experiencing, or empathy and our knowledge of the experiential wheel, whose movement will depend on the quality of our interaction.

8. The key moments and care for empathy

I remember one of the first articles that reached my hands in the 70s. It was one where Gendlin compared the Rogerian therapist with his experiential colleague, implying that the therapeutic style of the former was akin to driving a car while blindfolded. Gendlin claimed that the experiential therapist would drive that same car with his eyes open, and also knew where he was going. The implicit world is the vast ocean we float in; it implies both the ocean and us. There is a procedural path to travel to the zone where experience has been blocked. Empathy guides us down a path through the procedural hierarchy, advancing from what is working (in other words, speaking about what one feels) in order to slowly and softly get in touch with what doesn't work, that which is stuck or frozen. After that the Focuser continues down the path of the felt sense. He completes his journey when a final scene emerges, which we must salute and bid farewell to in accordance with the implicit rules of change.

After Gendlin created Focusing in 1981, the method would consist of 6 steps. Due to the variation inherent to local contexts, there are multiple ways to do Focusing. Regardless, I will focus on three key moments that are vital to providing a client with proper accompaniment. Allow me to pause on each of them.

Entry into the implicit world

The Focuser must gently close her eyes, and be invited to a journey into her inner world. We ask that she slowly become aware of her entire body, and to remove any topics that had kept

her busy before arriving at this place. We make sure that she removes anything that may interfere with her journey with the felt sense. We follow her imagery, and we offer a situation like the following to allow the person to connect with her inner depth, so that she may sail the seas of the implicit with ease, with us keeping company.

One possible image is to invite her into a house where she does not expect anyone to be. Upon entering she runs into herself, whom she greets with a silent hug. We ask her to dive into the deepest feelings that this person offers her, and receive all of her wisdom and true intuitions. We invite her to feel and sense her own presence from within.

The purpose of this *clearing a space* step is to allow her to get deeply in touch with her inner being. She may truly experience the images that emerge, and feel the novel occurrences that are soon to arrive. The more connected she is, the greater depth there will be. There will also be a greater chance of accessing the latent carrying forward of a felt sense, one that may project a surprising felt image. If this happens, we can say that we have found a *handle*.

Configuring the ignited handle

The handle is the first direct referent that is constituted in a bodily image. It is localized and in three dimensions. If the later path is a gallery of felt images, then each image is constructed with the Experiential Wheel, and it will lead us to what is blocked. From the handle we start accompanying with empathy, and we follow a new creator which appears before us. With the rule of procedural reconstruction, announced by Gendlin in 1964, we follow the experiential primacy of what is working to slowly advance towards what is not, or what is halted.

Gendlin gives us several clues as to how to accompany the handle. We may ask questions such as where it is felt, its size, shape, or temperature. We can lead the client to breathe deeply. Then *that* which appears as imposingly solid and clear begins to vanish, as if squeezing tightly something that suddenly ceases to be. If it was big and intense, its size and intensity have decreased and all of a sudden, a scene in which the person sees someone or something emerges and the felt symbolic creation begins. We are now fully in process and carrying forward is leading and being led by empathy.

The handle is a deeply felt image that kicks off the internal situation of felt symbolization. A new journey begins, a journey in which we may experience scenes which had laid dormant in inaction. The handle is the safe station that will lead us to the phenomenon of change, now that we have experienced a taste of authenticity. From the handle, the path ends up being an exact course, with certainty that we are on the right track to encounter what is there, awaiting our words and sensations. Before the handle appeared we were merely gazing upon the map of the possible journey. The handle instead implies setting sail with our ship as it releases its shackles and sets forth. The handle is the ship braving the ocean, our body fully on course to sail towards ourself.

Crossing the experiential bridge into the depths

The journey may start to flow forward, propelled by the experiential wheel and by our empathy. It proceeds in accordance with the client's rhythm, responding to the directions that allow him to set his own course. We follow walking alongside, as co-creators. The creator is the Focuser.

All of a sudden our flow is lost, the process apparently halts. This fluid journey begins to lose its momentum and self-propulsion seems to be lost, and we face a scene of blockage. The client becomes scared and confused. The creator has lost his inspiration and ceased creating. It is the equivalent of sensing the experiential abyss, with its anguish. We who are accompanying, now enter the greatest of empathies. We accompany at his side, loyal and understanding that he is facing something difficult and painful. We treat this extremely delicate situation with the utmost gentleness.

We have arrived at a territory that symbolization must cross. It will have to brave a disconnection between symbols and sensations. In an extreme case, Gendlin referred to this as a structural bind, a frozen whole. It seeks to join a split, possibly an experience that desperately seeks its symbol much like a mother would look for her lost child in a catastrophe. When we have reached this zone, everything is usually dark and we must cross a bridge made of ice (frozen), a suspension bridge (confusion), or a bridge in shambles (blockage).

Empathy must be simple, a step by step resonance, a complete adjustment and response to the rhythm and depth of what the client is feeling. Our serenity and certainty are the only guarantee we can offer in the interaction. We allow our travelling creators sensations with which to resonate. We accompany him as he walks on a tightrope across an abyss, allowing the depth of his experience to resonate. We are attentive to how his felt sense more than ever now requires our precise resonating. And we give back what he is feeling so that he may more accurately feel the meaning of his sensations. He may then take a small step, saying something new or suddenly getting an image, and we once again accompany this felt sense and communicate as simply and precisely as possible. We communicate like a suspended feather that gently grazes the fiber of the client's experience, a feather that has suspended itself in the experiential atmosphere. Then the person starts to feel something different and suddenly says something new with greater certainty and activates the crucible of the felt sense. Silence continues to carry out its mysterious work, making everything fit in a new order, a soft explosion that carries the person to another scene. The anguish-ridden abyss has disappeared and has been replaced by a new luminous scene, something never before seen by the creator: this will be the beginning of his panoramic view.

Something mysterious has transformed thanks to a carrying forward by the person who interacted with someone who offered empathy and horizontal companionship. The change of scenery is what Gendlin called "a mutation in content," a never before seen stage in the person's life, his relationship with himself, and the cosmos that surrounds him. He is overcome with peace and, between surprise and doubt, starts to visualize a new present as a castaway

that has just awakened after a shipwreck, after just having been thrown into a new existence as Heidegger might say.

9. Panoramic view and closing

Focusing generally culminates with a final image. What generally emerges after the darkness and anguish is a very different scene. According to the model of the implicit, the felt sense creates a new model in its process of precise symbolization and recovery. This scene is without a doubt transcendent because it is an authentic creation of the body. As such, it contains a new version of one's existence. It is our duty to accompany the client to something that now sounds more holistic and total. The client can now inhabit this new scene, as a castaway who now conquers a new territory with a sense of ownership. This territory is entirely his own; it has never been inhabited and not even dreamt about. We witness a scene in which the entire felt and symbolic matrix is at the client's mercy. This is his own discovery and his own territory that was given to him by the wisdom of his felt sense.

It is fundamental that our companionship in this final scene be very effective in the sense of leaving everything perfectly in sync – Gendlin might say fitting – in the implicit dimension. We must help the person be flooded by this new zone, to breathe in the air, ocean, valley, and scenery as he stands on this new stage all by himself. This panoramic view is usually a new scene that is open and solitary. The person is alone, gazing upon the landscape, as if he had suddenly awoken on an idyllic and unknown beach, or in a distant valley with luminous clouds announcing the sunrise. We must accompany this creator who looks upon this new scene. We might facilitate his interaction with it, inviting him to explore and contemplate, completing the picture he now inhabits. Let's remember the Van Gogh scene from the movie *Dreams* by Akira Kurosawa. The observer enters the painting of *Langlois Bridge at Arles with Women Washing*, treading the implied paths of the great painter until finally meeting Van Gogh himself. It just so happens that Focusing allows us to walk with the creator as a living subject within his own opus. I now understand what Rollo May said about being within human drama as both subject and object at the same time. Within this panoramic view we exist as both creator and living witness to our own work, the work of the authentic felt sense.

That's why it is our obligation to accompany the consummation of the creative act. It is our job to help the creator be flooded by his sensations. As he gazes upon the entire picture, what else does he see? We enthusiastically invite him and may use Gendlin's recommendation: to look left and then right, silently, and to breathe in the scene. This allows us to ensure a total experiential flood: to feel the present moment, experiencing through our breathing every vivid detail to be perceived within the panoramic view.

Once we have achieved this total flooding, by allowing him to silently breathe in everything that lies within, we may help him treasure everything that is so clearly viewed with his eyes closed. We can encourage him to physically open his arms in this scene and inhabit it, or better yet, to

allow this scene into his heart. This act of treasuring would be akin to what Gendlin refers to as *bodily sequencing* in *A Process Model*.

In summary

1. Eugene Gendlin discovered the implicit world and described our existence as permanent experiencing. He shattered the paradigm of content and resolved the difficulty of accessing subjectivity. He described the phenomenon of symbolization and discovered it as an experiential and pre-conceptual phenomenon. He conceived the global phenomenon of experiencing as a concrete and lived interaction with people and situations, calling this phenomenon the *felt sense*. Gendlin discovered the virtues of empathy in his interaction with the felt sense, and spoke of change as a day to day phenomenon. We are just now recognizing Gendlin's opus as the seed of a much more humane future than that which was constructed by Aristotle, Kant and others. We now know much about what it means to be human, about how we create and symbolize, and how we may heal ourselves with our own resources. Nowadays, Eugene Gendlin is the philosopher of experiential humanism and social sciences in general, particularly so in psychotherapy. This is the first Weeklong where he won't be with us, but his presence and work will always be with us, especially his smile, his whole sense of humor, and his humility.
2. Gendlin challenges us to believe more in empathy than in our reasoning, to trust the process more than the content. He challenges us to believe in the person and in the power of carrying forward, to believe in silence and to not judge, to believe in intuition and to set analysis aside.
3. As a consequence of the theory of the implicit, our interaction with the rational explicit world has changed, as we can now see feelings in human behavior and speech.
4. Focusing as a Method is an attitude that is cultivated through training and a lot of practice. Focusing as a phenomenon refers to an accompanied experiential symbolization that is carried out by the human body in its bodily and psychological totality and that ignites experiential resignification, leading us to a final moment of inner peace and re-symbolization of our inner experiencing. Focusing operates from the inside out, from the pre-conceptual realm of the experiential.

As we perfect our Focusing attitude day by day, we can also improve it by understanding Focusing's dynamics and *modus operandi*.

Conclusions

1. Focusing as a method is universal and has multiple versions. Thus, we must be careful in ensuring that the experiential phenomena of resignification and/or new bodily crossings continues to be produced.

2. Focusing as a method must ensure that the process initiated in the client be: experiential, self-propelled, and confirmed by the discovery of a felt resignification, a new bodily version of the issue.
3. The phenomenon of Focusing can be described as unique and holistic. The phenomenon of contacting the felt sense and allowing it to drive the process of resignification is led by the process of carrying forward.
4. We must care for the experiential dimension of Focusing, ensuring it by paying attention to three key moments in our traversal through the implicit: the handle, crossing the experiential abyss, and the panoramic view offered in closing.

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