

Tender Loving Curiosity

An Interview of Hejo Feuerstein by Kara Hill

Present Day

Hejo (Heinz-Joachim) Feuerstein lives in the southwest part of the Black Forest near the border of Germany and France. He is retired from a long and rewarding career of helping people through his pursuits as a psychologist and over 30 years of teaching Organizational and Communication Psychology at the University for Applied Sciences. In his retirement, he still enjoys teaching students about Focusing and even taking on occasional therapy clients. At this stage of his work he appreciates getting to focus on what he loves and finds most meaningful. He has a particular interest in how Focusing can be combined with decision-making. He works with TAE (Thinking At the Edge) – based experiential coaching for supporting people to develop their own concepts in both their personal and work lives. In addition to his life's work in psychology and philosophy, Hejo enjoys walking, reading, listening to music, attending concerts, and spending time with his family. He is married with three adult children.

Sitting with Hejo, the following words came to me: tender, loving, curiosity, application, synthesis, and transformation. It felt to me that, throughout his life, Hejo's work had been about artfully applying his science for the benefit of people. He was a pioneer in his career, working at the cutting edge of learning and holding a primary role in developing Focusing as a real way of being with people in Germany, both in the field of psychology and in his daily life.

Background

A major theme in Hejo's life is striving to apply what he knows, and to help people become their best selves. This theme came out clearly as he described a pivotal decision early on in his studies at university, in Heidelberg. Though equally passionate about philosophy and psychology, the time came to choose his primary area of study. Believing psychology had the greater ability to directly help people rather than a career limited to academia, the choice was clear. He felt very good about his decision then, and still does today. In his words, "It was just my main thing to really encounter people, and to really develop relationships. For me it's much more a living thing to work with people and not only to think about working with people." He was fortunate to also continue his studies of philosophy as a sideline, eventually even training with the famous German philosopher Gadamer.

I experienced a deep feeling of synergy and integration listening to Hejo share his life's path. Many parts of his story reminded me of Gendlin's concept "interaction first," which depicts life as an unseparated whole prior to differentiation. Hejo seemed to naturally be in touch with this primary connectedness of things across his life's journey. As he developed expertise in psychotherapeutic technique during his post-graduate studies, the various methods for practicing therapy (behavior therapy, systemic family

therapy, client-centered therapy) seemed a natural synergy for him. He integrated as he learned, allowing each new modality to complement the others, and considering it very important to be able to work this way. Client-centered therapy, though, took somewhat of a lead for him; due to its popularity, it provided the greatest opportunity for professional community.

Finding Focusing

It was through client-centered therapy that Hejo became aware of Focusing. At the time, Focusing was studied only academically in Germany, lacking practical experience in the field. True to character, Hejo was unsatisfied with this lack of real applicability and traveled to Chicago with befriended colleague, Dieter Mueller, to experience it firsthand. Studying with Gene Gendlin was a natural, even longed for, fit for Hejo, who held Gendlin's work in high regard. It reconnected something in him. It was in Gendlin's work that Hejo had finally found something that resonated with both his philosophical and his psychological passion. It was in this work with Gendlin, 15 years after that difficult decision in Heidelberg, that man and mission met. In his words, "It was really a reunion somehow."

As Hejo reached this point in the story I found myself reflecting on my own studies of Gendlin's philosophy through his book *A Process Model*. Hejo's life seemed again to be a living example of the native relationality Gendlin speaks of, something which pre-exists separateness, kinds, and categories. Hejo, as a living process, had been instructed to divide himself when he went to university: psychology over here, philosophy over there. Yet he always had an implicit sense of the inherent inner relation between these parts. His pursuits of psychology and philosophy from that point became differentiated into separate kinds of study, one for helping people and one for academic scholarship, until he came to Focusing. Focusing seemed to be a resumptive process for Hejo, a kind of coming home to himself. He smiled with deep satisfaction as he spoke of this return, a kind of aliveness dancing in his eyes.

In Hejo's words:

From the beginning, as soon as I got to know that Gene had this philosophical background, I was very interested in his work and this new way, this new paradigm, to really develop philosophy from the first-person view. This was something I was really fond of, and his way to use psychology also.

Before Gendlin's contributions to the field, he explains, the phenomenological approach with the German philosophers "had not the bodily presence, the person, in it."

After training in Chicago and becoming a Focusing Coordinator, Hejo and his colleague started an institute in Germany. He trained students not only from the areas of psychology and social work (combining Focusing with client-centered therapy) but also

other integrated fields including supervision and coaching. In addition to his work at the institute, Hejo introduced Focusing in his university courses as well, integrating subjects such as Coping with Stress, Intercultural Communication, Decision-Making, and TAE-based Experiential Concept Coaching.

Soon a blossoming of Focusing began in Germany. Gene visited his former pupils, teaching classes when on leave from Chicago. It was a gift and an honor for Hejo not only to continue learning from Gene personally, but to also have him teach in the German language. Hejo speaks about working with Gene:

Learning by experience was so important. Learning psychotherapeutic methods really by experiencing it, not just to explore the method by the book. It is important not only to learn the method and the theory behind, but to really experience what that means...this was a really important chance for me to get to know in a deeper way how Gene works and I found him really very precise. It was a very amazing thing to see how precise and how empathic he worked.

In 1994, the German institute Focusing Zentrum Karlsruhe (FZK) hosted an International Focusing Conference – the first of its kind outside of Chicago, and would host several more over the years with Hejo and colleague Dieter organizing. He describes the richness of relationships at the international conferences, saying the most important thing was the quality of being with the people there. He describes, “It was not so much the presentations or the content but just to have somehow a community which is really listening and that you can really feel.”

Focusing-Oriented Therapy

Hejo tells me, “Focusing is a really rich universe, you can really apply Focusing and how Focusing helps people to get the meaning of what they are suffering from and to how they really want to live, to help them carry forward their lives.” He says that a very important thing he learned from Focusing was that while he often had very good ideas about what the client should do, when he held those ideas inside, stopped, and just listened to the client, there were “totally different and wonderful things; things which [he] never had thought of. The client had this real richness in them and [he] got to witness it.” He emphasized the importance of not suppressing the client by imposing his own guess or direction. He says, “It’s really fascinating to see how people can develop and how rich their own ideas are.”

I note that a core part of Hejo’s mission is to really *be* with others and help them find their own richness. As I reflect this to him he acknowledges the rightness of it with a deep nod and tender smile. He says it is a very constructive process when a therapist can really listen to the client and not interrupt them with their own thinking, but to support the client’s thinking and feeling as their own process. Hejo’s mastery of this technique, which so many therapists strive for, is exceptional.

It Gets Personal

At this point in the interview I can feel that Focusing has become more than just something Hejo is doing, but rather a fundamental part of who he is. I adjust the style of my writing here to reflect this more personal note.

Kara: And it sounds like you experienced that with Focusing as well, that it had a way of supporting your own thinking and being and curiosity and new things coming into the world.

Hejo: Yes, yes.

Kara: Can you tell me more about how Focusing is for you as an individual and not just as a psychologist?

Hejo: I practice Focusing in partnerships and so it belongs to my life.

I hear this really tender note that comes when he talks about how Focusing is part his life. I reflect this to him and he continues.

Hejo: What I learned and what I practiced and what changed the way I live my life is this: If I get stuck in everyday life, if I am aware that I'm thinking and thinking and thinking, it's like I'm stuck, so stuck. And now to draw attention to your body and just feel how it feels now. It's really amazing how to get out of this stuck feeling, maybe because [you] have an illusion at the content level, but [instead of staying there you] just get down to really what you're thinking about and get a feel of your situation.

Kara: It sounds like that's really a gift to you, to be able to rely on that.

Hejo: Yes, I'm used to being kept in very heavy thinking, so this is really a relief to go down and to just look at how it feels.

Kara: And that's always there for you.

Hejo: Yes. That's really a better way to live and trust in my therapies with clients too. I Focus during the counseling and psychotherapy session, and when I Focus by myself I feel more connected with the client.

Kara: You're Focusing internally yourself when you're with the client.

Hejo: Yes. So, I just feel what's in the client how it resonates with me. The clients are also aware of that.

Kara: It allows you to feel in really deep contact with the client, and they feel that too.

Hejo: Yes!

His Position on the ILC

Hejo was invited to join the International Leadership Council at its inception almost four years ago. He agreed to join out of his value for the Institute. He desires to see it grow into a more truly International organization, fostering connections with all of the Focusing work around the world, a kind of hub that carries the living process of Mary and Gene along with it. He said he really wants the institute to survive, for it to be something that reaches people in many languages and gains the trust and commitment of already established organizations and interest groups. As he shared this, I felt that piece of “bringing together” again that seems so fundamental to Hejo’s being. He elaborated on some of the challenges such as the need to collect money but also build trust, and needing to reach people across cultures. He also hopes to see the Institute continue to function as a service provider for activities in which they are already engaged, such as curating the Gendlin Online Library.

Hejo also serves on the Membership Committee and aims to help Focusers become involved. He notes that it is not as valuable if they cannot access things in their own language. I recall that he has some personal experience with this feeling, recalling how much easier it was to be reached in his native language when Gene came to Germany. He acknowledges that these challenges are not quick fixes but a long process.

I note the way it feels paradoxical: Here we have Focusing, as something that can really connect us beyond language and we can feel that inside ourselves, yet it is a challenge for us to create an organization capable of fully conveying that kind of feeling. There’s a human process here that resists easy translation to an entity.

The Future

Hejo would like to see Focusing be a method for addressing societal problems and changing our world. A particular social challenge he speaks to is the anxiety and mistrust that comes from unclearness about things happening in the world. Focusing gives people a way to be with that unclearness, in a place he calls a “free space,” a place one can safely pause and let things unfold in times of uncertainty. He says:

In the unclearness there’s freedom to discover your own way. Another way to say it would be to say I feel unclearness and so I wonder what will come when I stay with that, and then feel it more productively. You have not only one A or B, but you can create new options that are fitting to you.

He says that this is not about just feeling “good” or “not good,” but really letting something completely new come. “Even when things feel stuck you can go into that free space and allow your own creative feel to blossom.”

Changing relationships and improving society, says Hejo, is not done simply by teaching Focusing but by doing it experientially. He has a strong desire to see Focusing applied in the community, with the goal of nurturing peoples’ better selves. He further recognizes that each country has unique needs and it is the people in a particular culture who will have the best sense of its distinctive challenges. He therefore sees a need for people around the planet to be doing this work as citizens and practitioners. Currently he is implementing Focusing to help support refugees who have sustained trauma due to upheaval in their homelands, by providing the volunteers with supervision on Focusing. As he says, “you don’t just get there from learning Focusing, but from living it.”