

## **The First Felt Sense Conference**

**May 18 - 20, 2018**

By Jan Winhall

### *The Beginning*

Walking towards the menorah at Hebrew Union College...my body returns to a place of goodbye to our founder Eugene Gendlin. First I notice a tightness in my upper chest...and then a warm holding of this place around my center as we are greeted by Focusing friends. The belonging and connection encircle a beautiful felt sense as we enter the space where we held Gene's memorial one year ago.

What a clever idea Catherine Torpey had, in creating an annual conference to bring together and carry forward Gene's work. It was and is, a challenging process, due to the fact that his work stretches across philosophy and psychology. Within these disciplines, his work has been applied to as many areas of research and practice as one can think of: education, health, psychotherapy, community building, dance, art, medicine, business, and more.

Where to start? Catherine began by putting together a program composed of people whom she thought would be able to impart knowledge and insight into Gene's work and life. Harville Hendrix, a student of his at the University of Chicago, connected with Catherine when he heard that his beloved teacher had died. He would be delighted to come to our first Felt Sense Conference and share some of his memories and learnings from Gene.

Catherine then approached Donata Schoeller as someone who would be very helpful in imparting knowledge about the Philosophy of the Implicit. Donata agreed to come. Regretfully, while Kevin Krycka, who chairs the Steering Committee of the Gendlin Center, was able to attend, he was not feeling well enough to present. Hence, we invited Ram Eisenberg to join in presenting his work on the felt sense in environmental design.

I was interested in Harville's work and was connected with one of his lead trainers, Maureen Brine. I had also integrated Focusing into Hendrix's work many years ago. Maureen and I decided to follow up on Harville's presentation with one on The Focusing Imago Dialogue.

Catherine was delighted when Gene's son Gerry Gendlin agreed to join us again. His presentation at the memorial was so moving for us, and once again, he would add a very personal dimension to Gene's life. I couldn't help noticing how much Focusing was

evident in Gerry's life in spite of the fact that Gene had never taught him the Six Steps of Focusing.

Catherine, Kevin, Donata, and I worked with our felt senses to find synergy in the diverse aspirations of the conference. As we shared, we began to experience the heart of it, and a way forward for our community. Something about crossing the many applications of Focusing...and as we Focused together Catherine came to the word bridging. Yes, that was it! A shift came with the words: Bridging Philosophy and Practice.

We would return to our memorial place, one year later, and bridge our philosophy with our many practices. In so doing we would begin a yearly tradition of our own. Something to offer our new, fresh community. And a place for the community to return and build. Without Gene and with a new we.

### *The Conference: Saturday*

Catherine began with a warm welcoming and sharing of her vision of the Felt Sense Conference. She shared her image of a bridge as a kind of handle for our journey together over the next two days.

#### **Donata Schoeller: Felt Sense Is Interaction**

Donata's presentation was a wonderful representation of Gene's Process Model. An initial instruction was followed by a more interactive workshop. After she explained Gene's four environments, she took us through some basic concepts of the model. From my understanding, "interaction first" is Gene's language to help us understand concepts as the interaction of body with environment as one event.

This concept is crucial because it lies at the heart of the distinction between Environment 1, the conventional environment that we are socialized into, and Environment 2, 3, and 4 that are based on *A Process Model* (Gendlin, 2017).

In Environment 1, we view our bodies as separate from our environment. We see them as machines that function in a similar way as computers. We are separate spectators from the world around us. We understand concepts by breaking them down into units, and discarding anything that does not fit into such units of measurement. The boundaries in this model are contained within a discrete entity.

While Gene was very careful to point out the value of Environment 1 thinking (for example, it builds planes), his brilliant contribution was in creating a Process Model, a

model of interaction where embodied experience is placed first. The model honors the deep primary process of bodily knowing and connection with the earth.

Donata then explained the new way of thinking about time. From an experiencing first perspective, “past functions in every present.” Time is not linear. In environment 2 and 3 we are living in a Focusing way and the past and present are part of our felt sense experience. The body also holds a knowing of the carrying forward into the future.

Donata then had us practice moving around the large conference area first experiencing Environment 1. It is the world as we know day to day, often concerned with task completion, often hectic. We then moved around the same space in an Environment 2 way, feeling into the space from an embodied place. Donata’s presentation was very well received, and the exercises helped people to gain confidence in learning more about *A Process Model*.

**Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt  
Reminiscences of Eugene Gendlin  
& Imago Dialogue and Focusing**

Harville began the afternoon by sharing some of his struggles with academic life and how he came to a dead end in Religious Studies. This led him to search out the dissertations of professors at the University of Chicago, hoping to find an area that would offer him more intellectual compatibility. In that search, he found a dissertation entitled *The Function of Experiencing in Symbolization* by Eugene Gendlin (1958).

“Yes!” This spoke to him, and he set off to find Gene in the department of Psychology. He became a student of Gene’s and a life long friend. Harville described his excitement in learning about the phenomenologists and to this day he carries this philosophical tradition into the teaching of his practice called Imago therapy.

Years later when Gene was trying to spread Focusing, he called up Harville to ask him how he had started his Imago community. Gene invited Harville and Helen to come to his home and they spent the day together exploring and exchanging ideas.

Harville and Helen then presented their workshop on Imago Dialogue and Focusing. An Imago is an unconscious mental image of a powerful person in your life that continues to influence your current behavior. Imago therapy is based on the idea that our experiences from the past are carried forward in our felt sense and they impact our behavior and the quality of our current relationships.

Helen described how they developed the Dialogue together as they worked through their own difficult power struggles. The Dialogue is a structured step-by-step process that facilitates deep communication. Harville, like Gene, is passionate about bringing

empathic relating into the world. Harville and Helen did a short demonstration with a couple from the audience. This couple later shared with me that the experience was powerful, allowing them to deeply hear and appreciate each other. In their evolving work together, Harville and Helen are now developing a training program called Safe Conversations, much like the spirit of Changes groups.

### **Ram Eisenberg: Using the Felt Sense to Create Considerate Environmental Designs**

Ram is an environmental designer in Tel Aviv, Israel. He described his work in developing an ecological and democratic park in Tel Aviv. He plans spaces through meeting with all involved and encouraging people to truly listen to each other and to be in touch with nature.

Ram sees nature as anything where natural processes take place. "Natural processes are places where everything interacts with everything else." He designs his spaces from an Environment 2 perspective, crossing practice and philosophy in Focusing with practice and philosophy in architecture.

Ram described the process of using Focusing practice in creating natural spaces that speak to embodied experiences. His work is prolific and well recognized all over the world. You can feel his passion for the work of bringing Focusing practice to new territory.

### **Jan Winhall and Maureen Brine: Deepening Our Capacities for Interaction**

I (Jan) explained that I was first introduced to Imago Therapy decades ago by Ralph Bierman, an experienced FOT. Ralph taught me the Dialogue format into which we then integrated Focusing. I wrote the first version of the Focusing Dialogue many years ago, and found it to be a very helpful tool in my psychotherapy practice.

Maureen Brine and I then created another version: the Focusing Imago Dialogue. Several weeks before the conference I asked our community if any two people in relationship (romantic partners, parent/child, friends, etc.) had an issue on which they wanted work. A couple who had been married for over 30 years volunteered. We asked them to come to the center of the circle and together we created a safe space in which to do a Focusing Imago Dialogue. The couple had a very moving experience of being able to feel heard by each other in a deeper way than before.

Adding the step of feeling into the body was appreciated by the Imago trained conference participants. In a conversation with Harville he told me that he understood how this step deepened the Dialogue process.

In my experience, many Focusers do not practice with people who are the closest to them. A show of hands in the group demonstrated this point. I encouraged our community to try this model. The Dialogue provides the safe container in which to go deeper, taking us higher up on the Experiencing Scale (Klein, Mathieu, Gendlin, & Kiesler, 1969). Our closest relationships provide the most fertile spaces to do our inner work. With this container we can soar.

### **Panel discussion: Bridging Philosophy and Practices - Felt Sensing in Real Time**

At the end of the day, we all gathered here to reflect. What had we learned about bridging philosophy and practice? We shared our long time struggles in speaking about Focusing. How do we explain the breadth or the depth of it? How do we speak about it in ways that do not reduce it into bite size units?

People shared what they enjoyed about the content of the conference. It was wonderful to see so many folks excited about the Process Model. My hope is that we will take this excitement and continue to explore more about Gene's philosophy in future conferences.

It would be interesting to deepen our group discussions by asking provocative questions. What do philosophical folks think about Focusing Oriented Therapy? What do Focusing teachers think about *A Process Model*? How many teachers know about the philosophy? Do we think it is important to teach it? And why?

### *Sunday Morning*

Together with coffee and bagels, a gathering of folks met at a local restaurant for lively discussion about issues and interests that evolved from the conference.

In closing, I want to acknowledge and thank, with deep gratitude, Catherine Torpey. Catherine's creation of the first Felt Sense Conference is an expression of her wisdom in leading us through a time when we have lost our founder, a time when similar communities may go into crisis, even not surviving. This conference revealed our vibrant, nourishing, and sustaining community.

## References

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