

# 1994 Portrait of Gene

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It is a hot August evening as I arrive at the Focusing Summer School at the Humboldt-Haus in Achberg, Germany. As so often here, there is a summer camp atmosphere full of colorful, cheerful company. Glasses clink, and metal scratches on porcelain in between hugs, shouts, and intensive conversations.

Is *he* already there? Gendlin, the guru? A lanky, hard-to-describe man with dark hair sits there at Johannes Wiltschko's table. That's him. I compare what I see to my memory of him in the video, "The Body's Own Psychotherapy." His short-sleeved shirt and "'50s" trousers bring back memories of my father's dress style.

I know his CV by heart, since we have been exchanging letters for more than a year in preparation for my article about him in the book *Wien, wo Sonst!: Die Entstehung der Psychoanalyse und ihrer Schulen*. He had sent me photos of his parents, childhood photos of himself, and his national school certificates – all illustrating a boy's life in the 9th district of Vienna in the 1930s. But this life came to an abrupt and cruel end with the invasion of Hitler's troops, and the flight of his family under dangerous circumstances.

As days went by at our summer school, Gendlin's Jewish-Viennese accent and syntax re-emerged more clearly from his usual American-German one.

The coming days are filled. Gene, as everyone calls him, seems not to tire despite the unrelenting, sweltering heat, penetrating even the walls. He also has family with him, including his young, musically gifted daughter. In the evening he apologizes for his "loyalty to children" when concluding our meeting on time.

In the morning, Gendlin disappears with a small group to discuss mainly philosophical topics, such as how change steps happen or the nature of "I." Then there are discussions about Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy, which includes all modalities ("avenues" as Gene calls them) in a colorful sequence of emotions, imaginations, body sensations, cognitions, dreams, family interactions, relationships, dance, movement, Gestalt, and role play.

Gendlin's lecture during the second evening on these same topics includes all participants of the summer school. There, I experience him for the first and last time to be rather weary and disinterested, and the audience seemed so as well.

The afternoon large groups seem to make him happy in any case: about 70 people would sit in the truest sense of the word "at his feet." The areas that Gendlin suggests for discussion are 1) Focusing and dreams and 2) working with "difficult clients."

His dream work differs from his dream book like a gourmet menu prepared by a master chef from his recipes. We are all surprised at how little Gendlin himself adheres to his own detailed instructions. Yet I learn, for example, the importance of the question, "What does the dream say?" in comparison to "What does the dreamer say?" I learn to look closer for places in the dream that are fresh, living, or having a "drive."

As for the "difficult clients," he advises that they be met where they are, and I would have the chance to experience this myself through role play.

Gendlin trusts the powers of self-healing. He takes seriously Carl Roger's dictum: "The facts are always friendly." Defense mechanisms must be recognized if they are to open and be expressed. But he suggests more rigorous measures for countering the inner critic or super ego: sending it to the kitchen; laughing at it; cutting it short.

The person who is there must be able to really exist. Gendlin puts it this way: "I have to invite the person to say more about it; I have to; it's an ethical law."

He has a picture of a psychotherapist, representing the curious tension that moves him to work with difficult clients. It is that of a burglar in a bank about to crack a vault. My picture of him is that of a quick and gifted fencer who succeeds in a touché because he can wait quietly – and who returns seconds later to be a shy, touched and touchable counterpart. And if that does not work? If his attempt to relate to the client's felt sense fails, then he looks innocently impish: "Well, you can't blame me for trying."

During his part-didactic therapy demonstrations, Gene is fully present, even during the breaks. A precisely perceiving and reflecting therapist, Gene is client-centered in the best sense of the term. His brown eyes at times sink, directing inward, tracing. Then suddenly, his eyes flash fully. Gendlin lives Focusing. The space he gives himself and his clients is shaped – with unobtrusively soothing distance – by his warm acceptance of everything that may come, by his interested curiosity, and not least by his waggish humor. Like a chorus, the phrase, "making space is more important than anything else," is a recurring theme.

There is no guru sitting here, no "fixed personality" in the classical sense, but a living person, a human being who does not have to be congruent or transparent all the time, but just sufficiently so as to be honestly present. ("We both have to be here"). This contact, this consistent staying-close, even by mere sounds, is the main focus and precedes any Focusing session.

#### *A few more samples*

Asked about the difference between client-centered therapy and Focusing, he answered, "I'd rather let everything confuse you than let you go out and say, 'He said there's a

difference.' Then people will start quarreling and that would be the worst thing."

Or when asked about the inner critic versus one's conscience, he replied: "Conscience, the Bible says, is a very small, quiet voice. The super-ego is not a small, quiet voice." With flashing eyes, it can say: "I create chaos."

To conclude, Gene's credo, acquired in the late 1960s when working with severely disturbed people, is: "You know, there is always someone inside.... The whole idea is to open doors for people, not to shut them up."