

Bringing Ourselves Into Focus

There is a particular frustration that accompanies being unable to see something clearly. We know the thing we want to look at is there—perhaps we see patches of its color or some bits of its texture. And to a greater or lesser degree, we feel the impact of its presence on our own energy. But when its finer details won't yield to our examination, we're left on the outside somehow, wanting to take in more information but constrained by the blurriness of the landscape.

Anyone who wears glasses or has used binoculars knows that distinct moment of satisfaction when the world snaps into focus. Lenses are fabulous tools. We don't expect them to reveal the world exactly as we'd like it to be, but we do count on them to show us what *is*. Perhaps the satisfaction and relief we get from seeing clearly springs from our awareness, conscious or not, that recognizing where we are is a first step that will guide all the subsequent steps we take.

It can be hard to recognize where we are within our own inner landscape, despite or maybe because of our proximity to it. We may experience “blurriness” in any of the large or small stuck, uncomfortable places in our lives, perhaps in the form of feelings that don't make sense to us yet, or situations about which we can't seem to make decisions. Sometimes we pretend we don't even notice the blurry places and sometimes we theorize about what they might contain. Sometimes, we come upon a way to put ourselves in just the right relationship to our blurry places, at just the right distance, and in those moments, we bring ourselves into focus.

Fortunately for those of us who yearn for more of such moments than may come to us by chance, a path has been mapped that can lead us to them. The mapmaker is psychotherapist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin, and the path is an aptly named process he created called Focusing. Drawn from research on how psychotherapy helps some people to create positive changes, Focusing is a crystallization of the process that successful therapy clients seemed to use naturally—a process so powerful that its presence as early on as the first five or ten minutes into a first or second therapy session was enough to predict the success of that treatment overall.

For all their power and effectiveness, the key ingredients of the Focusing process are simple, and gentle on the user. We can get wonderful benefits from them in a targeted way, by learning and practicing Focusing. In addition, and as with all practices that emerge from deep truths about being human, we also are enriched in countless ways by becoming more aware of the key ingredients of the practice and cultivating them in our ordinary experiences of life.

Key number one: the Felt Sense

What would it be like if the multitude of thoughts and feelings and memories and sensations we had about a particular experience in our life were available to us all at once--in one “gulp?” And

what if we had one of these compact, composite packages of personal data for every person and thing and place and situation we'd ever experienced? What an incredible, exquisitely individualized database that would be! Surely, we would find rich answers to some of our most compelling questions about ourselves with source material like that. Of course, we'd have to know how to read it. We'd also have to realize we had ownership of it and access to it, and the truth is, we do.

Gendlin named this personalized source material the “felt sense,” and found that the successful therapy clients in his research referenced it and allowed themselves to be guided by it as they spoke about their difficulties. Rather than reciting what they thought, or what they thought they thought, and rather than emoting, they would pause, attend to the bodily held experience of what they were speaking about, and then search for just the right words to capture the unique quality of their experience—their felt sense. This kind of process accesses different information than does analyzing at the mental end, or catharsis at the emotional/physical end of the spectrum. The felt sense seems to be located at the intersection of mind and body—not entirely a thought and not entirely a body sensation, but a bodily-held awareness that possesses meaning.

Rather than thinking about all of this, you can experience your own felt sense by trying this exercise: Imagine that as you're sitting here reading this, you hear someone come into the room, turn to see who it is, and find someone there whom you are delighted to see—someone whose presence is completely welcome and appreciated. Take a moment to notice how it feels to you to see this person and how your body responds to being in his or her presence. As you let your awareness rest on that felt sense, invite a word or a phrase or an image or gesture to come that can capture the particular flavor of how it feels to you to be with this person. And when something comes, check it against your felt sense to see if they match completely. If there's something “off” about the match, just allow another word or phrase to come so that ultimately you find the perfect expression of your felt sense. When you find it, you'll likely experience a kind of inner “yes!,” or a feeling of release as the fuzziness of the felt sense is brought into focus by being named in just the right way.

Perhaps you can notice that when you imagined your welcome person, you didn't think about their individual attributes or qualities, or about the last conversation you had with them, but you accessed an overall, bodily-held sense of your reaction to them—a kind of composite of everything you know and remember and feel about and with them, all at once. Maybe the word that came to you to describe this feeling was something like “light,” or “warm,” or “bubbly,” but probably not “brown eyes,” or “fun personality,” or “good driver.”

Our felt senses have a tremendous amount to tell us about what is true for us, along with or despite whatever else we think we know about our own truth. Our minds can bring us exotic worries about the future, elaborate ruminations about the past, and all manner of sharp-edged

judgments about what we should or should not be feeling. But our bodies are always situated in the present moment, interacting with our world, and carrying the raw data of how we are experiencing this interaction. Without the features of time-travel and analysis that the mind possesses, our bodies cannot lie, and therefore they are a living repository of how things feel and what they mean to us—the felt experience of our lives.

Key number two: an attitude of friendly curiosity

Sometimes a felt sense is obvious and dramatic, like the racing or pounding heartbeat in our chest or even in our throat that accompanies fear or dread. Chances are we're all too aware of this kind of felt sense when it's present, and accessing it is not an issue. But what about a subtler, quieter felt sense, like that vague feeling of unease we sometimes experience, maybe in a new situation, or maybe after a conversation that just didn't feel quite right? These "fuzzier" felt senses need some encouragement to yield their full meaning and come into focus. They may not attempt to compete with the noise of our thoughts or the inhibitions imposed by our judgments. And as surprising as it can be to those of us who routinely treat ourselves harshly as a way to motivate ourselves to do better, or to be better, these shy felt senses need a safe space in which they feel valued and welcome in order to relax and unfold, just as we ourselves actually do.

Our best and wisest instincts are often elicited more readily on behalf of others than they are for ourselves. If we imagine seeing a child or even a grown-up friend in distress, and we imagine wanting to understand what's wrong, it's unlikely we'd select as an intervention some of the types of inquiry we wield on ourselves, like "when are you going to get over this already," or "what's wrong with you," or some other form of "you shouldn't be feeling this way and it's annoying that you are." We'd probably sit patiently beside this child or friend, speak soothingly, and communicate our real interest in what it was that was going on for them. As they experienced the safety of our support, not only would they be able to tell us what was wrong, but they might be able to more fully understand it themselves.

Maybe you can remember a time you've experienced the blessing of being in the presence of a good listener—the way your words developed more meaning for you as you heard them come out of your mouth, or the way a compassionate expression on your listener's face seemed somehow to release something clenched inside of you that finally could be unburdened. The compassion, interest, and respect of a good listener are gifts we can give to ourselves that not only feel good in the moment of receiving them, but also create an environment in which we can access and be with our felt senses and thereby connect to what is most deeply true for us.

As we all know, what is most deeply true for us in any given moment is not always what we most prefer for ourselves! So why "go there" if we're not necessarily going to like what we find?

One part of an answer to that question has to do with the enormous amount of energy it can require to push the truth away—to suppress, deny, rationalize, minimize, shame, scold or otherwise resist what is inside of us. Despite all our efforts in this endeavor, the energy of the truth “leaks” out, often in a disguised form that becomes all the harder to resolve as we lose our ability to recognize the original difficulty.

If we reverse that process by moving toward the truth instead of away from it, we reclaim the energy that had been devoted to resistance and we realign with ourselves—we bring ourselves into focus. No matter what we might find ourselves looking at, there is a relief that comes with that clarity and recognition, and the releasing of the effort of not looking. We see where we are, and in that moment, who we are. As upsetting as it can feel to be lost, and as lost as we might sometimes feel ourselves to be, the best, surest method for finding our way out is to know our current location. With that spot on the map pinpointed, we can make good choices about the direction in which we want to go and the next steps we need to take. Our felt sense is our compass and our friendly curiosity helps us to hold that compass steadily and securely so that we can read its direction. And where are we going? We may have many outward destinations, but when we steer ourselves by what is deepest and truest for us, we are coming home—home to ourselves.

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