

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEEP FOCUSING:  
UNFOLDING THE WISDOM OF THE BODY

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### Introduction

Focusing is an introspective process that integrates body, mind and spirit and can be taught and used for personal insight, problem solving and growth. By using Focusing to deeply connect with the ongoing flow of one's embodied experiencing, one gains access to the source of wisdom deep within.

I first became acquainted with the technique of Focusing a few years ago when I was introduced to a small book entitled Focusing, Eugene Gendlin's principal work describing the technique (Gendlin, 1981). Intrigued by Gendlin's assertion that I could reap the wisdom of the inner self through a process of introspection and somatic awareness, I set about to learn to Focus. To that end, I worked for several years with a Focusing-oriented psychotherapist, Focused regularly with a variety of experienced Focusers, participated in skill-building practice groups, and ultimately trained and became certified as a Focusing Trainer by The Focusing Institute.

The more I Focused, the more I was amazed at the profundity that invariably emerged from the inner self. Each session brought new awareness, a larger perspective on recurrent issues in my life, and positive change. As I continued to build my competence in Focusing and reap its benefits in my personal life, I also grew steadily more curious about the process. In an effort to gain insight into the process, I began to record my own Focusing sessions, first in a journal and later in tape recordings. I taped eighty Focusing sessions between October 1999 and March 2001, sixteen of which form the basis for this exploratory study.

In this study I used Focusing self-reflexively as a method for exploring the phenomenon of Focusing. This paper will explore both the methodological challenges I encountered as I engaged in this experiment in first-person research and my findings about the nature of the inner experience during deep states of Focusing.

### Background on Focusing

Created by Eugene Gendlin of the University of Chicago, Focusing is an outgrowth of both the experiential movement in psychotherapy and the phenomenological movement in philosophy. Through his research with Carl Rogers into the factors that contribute to successful psychotherapy outcomes, Gendlin discovered that, irrespective of the therapist's skill or approach, the factor that most predicted a positive outcome was the patient's own way of closely attending to his or her immediate inner experience during therapy. As a philosopher, Gendlin was deeply interested in the relationship between bodily experiencing, concepts and language (Gendlin, 1962). From the marriage of these two sides of his work, Gendlin created a teachable method that enables an individual to learn more about the primary source material of his or her existence, the ongoing flow of bodily experiencing.

Gendlin described Focusing quite simply as "a process in which you make contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness" which "feels meaningful, but not known" (Gendlin, 1981). When he refers to the body here, Gendlin does not mean the gross physical body. He does not mean the stress-related ache in the back or the muscular stiffness from yesterday's exertions, nor does he mean our feelings or emotions. The bodily awareness to which we relate in Focusing is a subtler matter. It is the interior experience or place where we sense our situation in the environment and tacitly understand how we can interact with the environment (Gendlin, 2000). Gendlin has devoted many pages to articulating his philosophy of the body (Gendlin, 1991; Gendlin, 1996; Gendlin, 1997; Gendlin, 1999; Gendlin, 2000). I do not presume to summarize his philosophical work here. The reader should understand that, unless otherwise noted, I am using language in its ordinary sense and not with the philosophical precision contained in Gendlin's work.

More recently Gendlin described Focusing as “spending time sensing something as yet undefined that comes in one’s body in connection with some specific problem or aspect of one’s life” (Gendlin, 2000). That “something” is the phenomenon that Gendlin termed the “felt sense.” It is this ongoing flow of experiencing and the shifts that occur in the felt sense that bring about the process of helpful change (Gendlin, 1964).

To teach people how to contact their felt sense, Gendlin developed a six-step method. In a nutshell, the six-step method starts with *clearing a space*, a process of identifying and mentally setting aside the mental chatter one finds in one’s head. Step two is *finding the felt sense*. The Focuser scans the inner space in the middle of the body to find that vague but yet unknown sensation. In step three, the Focuser looks for words, gestures or symbols that seem to fit the inner felt sense. This is called “*getting a handle*” on the felt sense. In step four, the Focuser *resonates* the handle against the felt sense to discern whether there is a feeling of congruity between them. He may need to make several tries before finding the right words or other symbols. In step five, *asking*, the Focuser internally asks the felt sense what it is all about, generally using one of a number of open-ended probes or queries that Focusers have found to be helpful. In the last step, *receiving*, the Focuser accepts what the body has offered. If desired the Focuser can go through this cycle as many times as feel fruitful (Gendlin, 1981). Other prominent Focusing trainers have either adopted Gendlin’s six-step model (Campbell & McMahon, 1997; Hinterkopf, 1998) or modified it slightly for ease of teaching (Cornell, 1993; Friedman, 1995).

For purposes of my study, it is important to note that these six steps are intentional acts which the Focuser can take in order to locate, stimulate and stay with the bodily felt sense.

However, these steps do not describe what the body does of its own accord in response to the Focuser's intentional acts. The organismic process that occurs during Focusing is not "caused" or "made to happen." Rather we do what we can to create a hospitable inner climate for the felt sense to emerge, and then we let go. The body takes it from there. When the body responds, the Focuser experiences a sensation of inner movement or a release of bodily tension. This phenomenon is called a "*felt shift*." For purposes of this paper, I will refer to the portion of the Focusing experience when the felt sense takes over as "Deep Focusing."

#### Purpose of this Study

Focusing is like having a genie in a lamp. You just need to know how to rub it. Using the six steps or other techniques for contacting the felt sense is knowing how to rub the lamp. Since there are many excellent references that explicate the Focusing steps and other intentional techniques that can be used to get in touch with the felt sense, I do not need to dwell on them in this paper. This paper explores the structure of what happens when the genie appears, that is, when the felt sense begins to unfold and blossoms with new awareness and wisdom. No manual can teach this. This is what the body does of its own accord.

The following protocol, which I wrote while Focusing, is offered here to illustrate the interplay between the Focuser's conscious intentional acts and the body's own movements. I have identified in the left column which of the six Focusing steps is occurring. Within the text itself, the intentional Focusing steps are underlined and the nonvolitional movements of the body are italicized.

Finding the felt sense	I sit on the carpet in the Radisson Hotel. My buttocks feel that hard floor pressing up on my body. There is a tension in my neck as I lean over the keyboard of the computer. I sit cross-legged and <u>close my eyes</u> . <u>I turn my attention inward and downward into the center of my body</u> . <u>I inwardly ask, "What is here today, right now?"</u> As I go inward to focus, I lose awareness of the gross body and become aware only of the felt sense. Already I feel my body opening in anticipation of coming into communion with
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itself. I scan the space in my chest, gut and belly, watching, alert to sensations there.

I notice after a moment or two *a vague sense in my throat extending downwards into my heart area.* I focus my attention on it and notice that it grows in intensity.

Now I notice that *this sensation extends lower than I originally perceived, right down into my diaphragm area. It has the shape of an elongated flower bulb, bulbous at the lower end and a healthy, thick stalk reaching upward into the throat area. I have an associated visual image of a large healthy bulb, like an amaryllis.*

I sit with that sensation and image and wait for it to change or emerge into sharper focus. I do not judge. I do not push. I wait in patient alertness, wondering what will come into this space of watchfulness that I have created.

Getting and resonating the handle against the felt sense

I'm curious now about the emotional quality of this sensation. I know, it is a "leaning forward, a straining to understand." No, not that, a "waiting to receive"—an openness, an expectancy that from my past experience that this question will be helpful in illuminating more of the meaning of the felt sense.

As I sit with that question, I become aware of a certain darkness or heaviness in the bulb. A dark concentrated area forms at the waistline. I feel puzzled, and a trifle worried about this dark heaviness. It feels like it is calling me into a place I do not know, a place that is unlike my place of ordinary consciousness. I feel as I might if I were standing at the mouth of a dark cave—somewhat curious about what I would find if I entered, but uncertain and in a sense "repelled" by the prospect of proceeding into the unknown.

Asking  
Using a new handle to find the felt sense

Intuitively the next question that emerges, as of its own, is "what does this 'repelled' feeling have to reveal to me?" I use some effort now to find that "repelled feeling" in my body, playing a hunch that it has something new to tell me.

*Yes, there it is. It's in my diaphragm, a little to the left. It's like I am sucking in my breath in that place. My breath slows almost to a stop. I am suspended in inner alertness, watching, feeling and listening to the sense. I turn to it with a sense of portent. This sense conveys an air of deadly seriousness. There is something hyper real in its aspect.*

Using a new handle to find the felt sense	<p><i>A big breath comes, and I am pulled away from the sense momentarily, like being pulled by a wave in the ocean. <u>I look again for the sense, using the words "deadly serious hyper realness" to find the sense.</u> Ah, there it is. It was not there a moment ago—it had wafted away. But now by the use of these words, I have called it back into existence.</i></p> <p><i>It emerges as if from a mist or as an image developing on a sheet of photographic paper.</i></p>
Using a handle	<p><u>I wait, and I move closer to it, curious now to know what this "dead seriousness" is all about.</u></p>
Asking	<p><u>I ask it, "What is the crux of this?" and I wait.</u></p> <p><i>It is expectancy—a waiting for something of massive import and significance. There is some hesitation tingeing the felt sense too—a knowing that when the thing comes it will change me in ways unknown.</i></p>
Refinding	<p>Voices of others distract me. <u>I turn inwards again—I find this spot in me again.</u></p> <p><i>Now I realize, suddenly and with certainty, that this place is an inner temple. It is a place where I go to find my deepest self, to find Self, to realize the reality of my being.</i></p> <p>I want to stay in this spot and to see what more will come here, but the world pulls me back. I feel reluctantly compelled to return to the life world.</p>

The analysis of the protocol of this very brief Focusing session shows several things. First, it shows that Focusing is a dialogue, a duet, between the Focuser in her or his conscious, agentic self and the felt sense in the body. The Focuser is the subject, the "I"; the felt sense is the object, the "It." In Focusing, the felt sense is the grail. The Focuser seeks *It*, waits, watches and listens for *It*, is curious about *It*, loses and refinds *It*, queries *It*, and heeds *It*. As such, the felt sense is not the Focuser as he or she normally knows and experiences the self. The felt sense is separate and unknown. *It* is the mystery, the muse, the oracle.

Secondly, look carefully the variety of intricate ways in which the felt sense evolves! Appreciate the freshness and novelty that it exhibits! First it just peeks out, showing itself initially as a vague sense in the throat. Next it intensifies and expands its location in the body. Then, quite amazingly, it literally blossoms into the very detailed and definite visual/tactile image of an amaryllis bulb. Next it unfolds a delicately nuanced emotional rainbow, from “waiting to receive,” to “openness” to “expectancy of illumination.” As the Focuser watches, the felt sense elaborates visio-kinesthetically when the image of the amaryllis assumes a “dark heaviness.” This dark mystery then begins to beckon, metaphorically suggesting a dark cave. This manifestation elicits a sense of uncertainty, curiosity and yet repulsion about what might be found in the unknown murky depths of the metaphorical cave. When the Focuser is nevertheless willing to watch, feel and listen (notice the multi-sensory alertness) for the felt sense, it takes on a new air of “portent,” “deadly seriousness,” or “hyperreality.” It then wafts away momentarily, but returns when the Focuser recalls it with the words “deadly serious hyper realness.” Then the felt sense reemerges in a transformed way with a new cadence—slowly and gradually emerging as if from a mist or as an image developing on photographic paper.

Notice that in all of the movements up to this point, the felt sense is an *It*. It is experienced as external to the Focuser. However, in the concluding movements of the felt sense in the protocol there is a convolution of the felt sense with the person of the Focuser. A “hesitation” is initially perceived as a property of the felt sense, as “tingeing” the felt sense, but then suddenly becomes interlocked with the Focuser’s knowing that what is about to come from the felt sense will change the Focuser in ways yet unknown. When the Focuser returns to the felt sense after a moment’s distraction, there it stands as a full blown revelation that the inner space wherein dwells the felt sense is an inner temple where one goes to find the deepest self, the Self, and the reality of one’s being. Where before there was only mystery and an unknown quality to the felt sense, now there is a feeling of certitude, of

clarity, of knowingness. The “I-It” relationship between the Focuser and the felt sense has shifted to more of a “Me-Thou” relationship.

It is ironic that there are so few words in the Focusing lexicon to describe this inner symphony, this inner multi-media dramatic presentation, of the felt sense. All of these multidimensional manifestations of the felt sense are lumped into the terms “felt sense” and “felt shift.” Just as Eskimos have one hundred words for snow, we need an equally extensive vocabulary to describe the multiple manifestations and metamorphoses of the felt sense. However, because so much of the Focusing literature is preoccupied with how to conjure up and maintain the felt sense, we have neglected to build a verbal palette multi-hued enough to match the exquisite expressiveness of the felt sense.

Gendlin rightly refers to the felt sense as a “mystery” that opens through “grace” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 59). Nevertheless, we may find that by paying more intimate attention to what the felt sense does during Focusing, as opposed to what the Focuser does, we can go more deeply into the mystery and find there a deeper order. Perhaps by developing more acute sensitivity to the nuances of the felt sense, we can make ourselves more open vessels for the coming of grace. At a minimum, it would enhance our appreciation for the beauty of the inner landscape. By becoming more familiar with the mysterious ways in which the body unfolds, perhaps we will open new vistas in our understanding of our own human inner process. In these days when the adequacy of the intellect to handle the challenges of contemporary life is called into question, it behooves us to hearken more closely to the wisdom of the body. By increasing our literacy in the language of the body, we can learn to dialogue with it in more effective ways.

This paper takes a first step in that direction. While I do not endeavor here to create a lexicon for all of the micro-movements of the felt sense, I have tried to offer a faithful description of the multidimensional aspects of the felt sense as it manifested in my Focusing sessions. I also offer a model

of the larger phases of the emergence and development of the felt sense as it unfolded in my personal experience.

### Method

#### Data collection

The data on which this study is based is comprised of sixteen tape recordings of my Focusing sessions running from the period from October 1999 through April 2000. These include both solo and partnered sessions. When I Focused with a partner, I obtained my partner's prior permission to record my Focusing turn. Since all of the partnered sessions were conducted on a telephone without using a speaker, the recording captures only my own utterances and not my partner's.

I started each tape-recording by dictating a few identifying comments regarding the date, time of day, and salient life events that were on my mind at that time. I then prepared myself internally and externally to create a hospitable environment for the emergence of the felt sense. I first adjusted my body posture to a comfortable, upright position and took the necessary steps to avoid possible external distractions. I then closed my eyes and mentally scanned my inner state.

If I found that there was a lot of mental chatter inside, I used some variant of the first Focusing step called "clearing a space." This step is conducted in the naive frame of mind, with little distortion in the everyday sense of the agentic self. The issues that arise in consciousness during the clearing phase have the familiar feel of what we might call "everyday worries." They are initially experienced as thoughts, familiar acts of mind. In clearing a space, we identify those worries and thoughts and mentally set them outside of awareness. Just as turning down the volume on the television allows one to hear the soft ticking of the clock, clearing a space turns down the volume of the thoughts in the forefront of consciousness, allowing access to the subtler

internal sensations. When successfully completed, the results of this step are experienced in the body as a sense of greater spaciousness, clarity or openness.

After coming as close as possible to achieving that clearer, more open inner space, I was ready to get in touch with the felt sense. I turned my attention to any subtle sensations in the middle part of the torso between the neck and the abdomen. In cases when the felt sense seemed slow in developing, I intentionally employed various Focusing guiding techniques, for example, adopting an empathic, accepting, friendly, and/or curious attitude towards the felt sense, moving to a different psychological distance from the felt sense, or posing certain queries to the felt sense. Each of these strategies is designed to change the inner environment, thus hopefully calling forth an interactive response from the felt sense. However, the use of these techniques is not a logical process. We are not trying to “figure out” with our minds what to do next. We approach the felt sense as if it were a separate entity whose inner attitude is not yet known. We make a gesture towards the felt sense and then just wait, sometimes seconds, sometimes minutes, for the felt sense to respond. I reported out my observations as the felt sense evolved. I tried to report out everything that came into awareness as contemporaneously as possible.

At the end of each session, I placed the tape cassette in an envelope on which I recorded the date of the session, whether it was solo or partnered, and a brief description of the key events of the session to enable me to recall later the general content of the session. Several months later I either transcribed the tapes myself or had them transcribed by a professional stenographer. I instructed the stenographer to type my words verbatim, including verbal pauses such as “um” and other audible events such as sniffles, laughter, etc. I instructed her to mark pauses in the flow of text with ellipsis (...) marks for brief pauses and to time and record the number of seconds elapsed during longer pauses.

In this manner I tried to capture in the transcription as much of what transpired in each session as possible. Of course, a transcript cannot accurately capture nonverbal facial expressions, inflection, volume or gestures. Since Focusing is a whole body experience, videotaping the data would give a fuller record of the experience. If videotape is not possible, at a minimum the transcription should record to the extent possible non-textual dimensions such as the cadence, volume and inflection of speech. In lieu of including that level of detail in the transcripts I retained the tape-recorded texts so that these audible variations could be noted.

### Data Analysis

Via the above routes I was able to capture much of the external features of the Focusing experience in the manner in which they would have been apparent to an external observer. My focus in this paper, however, is on the parts of the Focusing experience that are not observable by an external observer. This posed a methodological problem of how to use the transcript data to get to the underlying phenomena I wished to explore. The texts are like archeological traces of the lived experience of Focusing. Like the bones of prehistoric animals, these traces helped me, with the aid of memory, to reconstruct some of the flesh and sinew of the actual experience so that I could discuss them in these pages. Of course, words can never recreate what is a nonverbal experience. Nevertheless, I found several categories of clues in the data that helped me to locate those portions of the transcripts that corresponded to periods of Deep Focusing.

The first set of clues was to be found in the audible tape recordings. Deep Focusing states are marked by fewer words, more pauses, slower cadence, quieter volume, and a narrower range of inflection than in everyday speech. These variations can be heard on the tapes, and some, though not all, can be spotted in the written transcripts.

As I read and reread the transcripts, I began to note patterns in the structure of the language. I found that there were certain distinctions in the way language was used during my Focusing sessions which was helpful in identifying the depth of connection to the felt sense I was then experiencing. When I was not in touch with the felt sense, my verbalizations were in the form of tightly packed text in normal grammatical form and with few pauses. The language is more abstract and less kinesthetically based. In marked contrast, the verbalizations that relate to periods of Deep Focusing are widely interspersed with pauses, sentence fragments predominate, grammatical form is ignored and there are more nonverbal audible events such as sighs, sniffles and other indications of emotional arousal.

Closer textual analysis revealed that the texts contain four categories of verbal activity, the last two of which correspond to periods of Deep Focusing. Each category is progressively more in immediate touch with the inner sensing, the felt sense. The first category of verbiage has the aspect of everyday speech. These are words I uttered in a fully conscious and intentional manner. These passages included my introductory comments as I was settling down into a Focusing mode, for example by recording how I was adjusting my body posture, describing the life context of my session, exchanging pleasantries with my partner, and identifying an agenda item I wished to work on while Focusing. This category also includes my concluding comments as I wrapped up each session, drew lessons and connections from what had emerged during the session, thanked my partner, and the like. During these utterances I was not in conscious contact with the felt sense.

The second category of utterances includes those that I made in my role as my own Focusing guide. At these times, I was in contact with the felt sense at a low level and I was working on getting the felt sense to unfold further. This category includes my verbalization of

various Focusing guiding techniques. From these passages, one can draw some indirect inferences about what the felt sense may have been doing at the time.

The third category of verbalizations are those in which I attempted to describe for the record what was happening when “I” stopped acting and the felt sense took over. Here there was a lag between my verbalization and the antecedent experience of some non-verbal event in my body, whether it was a tactile sense of movement, the emergence of a visual image, the coming of understanding of an emotion or the dawning awareness of some as yet unknown connection between the bodily felt sense and some aspect of my life. Because each such bodily movement was fresh and preconceptual, a direct experiencing of something new, something that was neither willed nor intended, “I” needed to let each “movement” emerge more fully into awareness before I could attempt to describe it in words. The associated words tended to be more sensorial, more concrete, mirroring the quality of the inner bodily experience that manifested in various sensorial forms, whether visual, tactile, or kinesthetic.

At the far end of the spectrum, the fourth category of verbalizations includes words uttered while in a state of deep Focusing. Those verbalizations were not intentional acts of description as in the previous category. Such words did not describe an inner event; they were the inner event. Languaging, used in this sense, is the organism living forward, just as it lives forward in its breathing, its digesting, its blood circulation and other bodily processes (Gendlin, 1997). This languaging is like languaging in a dream. When we dream that we are speaking, the speaking and the dreaming are inseparable and synchronous. The words that are “uttered” in the dream state seem to flow organically out of nowhere. They are neither willed, intended, nor in conscious response to a prior event. They flow as a natural part of the process of dreaming on an equal footing with the visual, auditory or tactile dream events. In a dream, words, visual images,

emotions and other internal events roll uninterruptedly forward, without logical connection or linear development. Yet from this constantly evolving flow of inner experiences can come an “Aha!” type of realization that we recall when we awake. This same experience occurs in Deep Focusing.

Based on the clues from my data discussed above, and with the indispensable aid of my recollection of my actual experience, I was able to identify the portions of the transcripts that related to periods of Deep Focusing. In order to understand how the felt sense unfolded during those periods, I flowcharted each session, paying particular attention to the structural aspects of the flow, movements and transitions of the inner experience. I also cut across the data horizontally to examine the quality of key aspects of the internal acts of experiencing that occurred during my sessions. Since I was looking for the invariant structure of the Deep Focusing experience, I bracketed the specific content of what the Focusing session was about. In this manner, I was able to discern a pattern, an overall structure, in the manner in which the felt sense emerged and unfolded in my Focusing sessions.

### Findings

The felt sense unfolds in six phases or movements, which I have termed (1) emergence; (2) elaboration; (3) energization; (4) revelation; (5) illumination; and (6) integration. To reiterate a point made earlier, these stages in the unfolding of the felt sense are not the same as the steps in the Focusing instructions that are taught as the intentional method for evoking the felt sense. These movements are gifts that flow from the body when the Focuser provides the necessary time, space and attitude to allow the felt sense to emerge and develop to fruition.

Emergence. The felt sense emerges into the open space that I create as I pause and watch inwardly for its coming, suspending other intentional mental activity. It is as if I am waiting

expectantly in a fog for something I know is there even though I cannot yet find it and do not know precisely what it will be. I catch a hint of it. It is vague and I do not yet know what it is about. I wait attentively and slowly I am able to discern more of its details. The felt sense in its emergent state has four major characteristics: 1) a typical kinesthetic feel of heaviness or constriction; 2) a static quality; 3) unknown content; and 4) a sense of being both in me yet separate from me.

While this may not be true for all Focusers, in my case the felt sense generally emerges in the kinesthetic dimension. When I first locate the felt sense, I experience it as a vague feeling of pressure, weight or constriction somewhere in my body. It may feel like “a mild pressure in my upper chest,” “a weight on my shoulders pressing down,” “a heavy something sitting in the center of my stomach and up to my diaphragm,” a “solid mass” in my stomach,” like “lead in the diaphragm,” or “a great feeling of heaviness in the pit of my stomach.” Most often the pressure is just there as of its own accord. On fewer occasions, the pressure feels like it is being applied from outside, e.g., “like I’m being pushed,” “like the heel of a hand pressing on my breast bone,” or like “being poked with a pencil.” Sometimes the felt sense appears as a spatial constriction, like feeling “tight,” “wedged in,” or as if my body were “encased in a plastic sheath.” Sometimes the sensation of being weighed down or constricted is felt in the quality of the breath, for example, the breath feels heavy or like it is being held.

In all of the sessions I was aware at first only of the tactile feel of the felt sense. I had no knowledge of what in my life it was connected to. Since the felt sense did not yet have any visual image or other identifying or descriptive features attached to it, in the emergent phase its content was unknown.

Regardless of the specific quality of the kinesthetic feel of the felt sense, when I first find the felt sense, it is static, unmoving, stuck. Given the appropriate type of attention, however, this stuck period is brief and the felt sense soon begins to elaborate. While I wait for the felt sense to elaborate, I am conscious of an “I” that watches (the subject) and the felt sense that is watched (the object). I experience myself as in my inner space but outside of the felt sense, seeing it from its outside.

Elaboration. The elaboration of the felt sense usually occurs in several steps and usually involves multiple dimensions. As I continue to focus my attention on the felt sense, features not previously apparent begin to develop. Since I generally feel the felt sense first as a tactile experience of pressure, constriction or heaviness, its next move is often to elaborate in that same dimension. For example, a generalized sense of pressure in my diaphragm may shift to a feeling of having a specific kind of pressure, for example, a V-shaped wedge pressing down there.

Next it may metamorphose into other dimensions. For example, it may transform into or add a visual image. It may develop an emotional tone, or words may spring from it unbidden. For example, what first seemed to be “kind of a lump sitting in my waist” becomes “an opaque rectangle filling me from shoulder to shoulder and down into my belly,” a shift from the kinesthetic to the visual dimension. What started out as a “vague shape in my midriff area” metamorphoses into “a cloud like shape...soft patches...kind of white...can’t see through it...with a touch of frustration to it,” a shift from a blended kinesthetic/visual image to a blended visual/emotional image. A heavy feeling in the clavicle area emits the words, “too much to do, too much to do,” a shift from kinesthetic to the auditory/verbal symbolic realm.

The image or symbol into which the felt sense elaborates can be quite definite and intricate, for example, a “feeling about 6 or 7 inches long kind of traversing the waist ...sort of

like a large spoon, but more graceful in shape, twisted into sort of a F shape...flattened...like pewter.” Through this process the felt sense become more unique, more pronounced and more mobile. At this point, however, I still do not know what the felt sense is all about. I am merely watching it as it metamorphoses, becoming more detailed and intricate. This transformation can take place gradually or very rapidly. The following excerpt from a Focusing session transcript illustrates how quickly the felt sense can move through a multi-dimensional elaboration.

well I think I...I don't know there's...(inaudible) sense of something in there...kind of something in my diaphragm area....

[sigh]

[12 second pause]

sort of throbbing and has the shape of a...half a piece of toast....half a piece of toast..cut..cut..and cut into a triangle...I been having these toast shapes (inaudible) recently. I had a different one the other day. It was an opaque, white piece of toast stuck in my shoulder and that is one of the diamond cut piece of toast...ah..what...can't...(laughter)...put a cherry on top of it...oh....its not..it feels um...its not like this pressing heavy weight...I was carrying around yesterday....but it's.. ah....it's there...it's concerned about...edgy...the word edgy seems to come...

Notice how the felt sense first appeared in the familiar amorphous way as “kind of something in my diaphragm area.” Next it revealed a kinesthetic throbbing aspect linked to a distinct visual image (triangular piece of toast), followed by a recollection of a similar though distinguishable image from a prior Focusing session. The image then revealed an associated emotional tone (“concerned about”) followed by a verbal symbol (“edgy”) echoing the emotional tone associated with the image. Regardless of how intricate the image becomes, however, I generally do not yet know at this stage what the felt sense relates to in my life.

Energization. As I continue to focus my attention on the felt sense, palpable energetic movements of various sorts commence in the body. These range from fairly modest movements

with an amorphous quality to very pronounced, expansive movements with a distinctive and unique quality. At the more subtle end of the spectrum, these kinesthetic movements variously manifested as “a liveliness,” “wiggling around,” “rippling,” “throbbing,” “squirming,” “moving around,” “fluttering,” or “flowing.” At the other end of the spectrum, the energetic movements had a very distinctive and unique feel, such as “flesh involuting,” “wiggling as if there were worms there,” “accordioning with sharp, crisp folds like an accordion,” “filling the entire body cavity with V-shaped light,” “energy coming into the throat—like an atomic explosion—powerful and dangerous,” or “crenellating like intestines or a brain.” Sometimes the energy was so distinct and so unlike my normal bodily sensations that it felt like having another living creature in my body, for example, like a baby with its own heart rhythms, a small living creature or a slow-moving amoebae.

When solid contact is made with the felt sense, there are more obvious and more expansive energetic flows throughout the body. While initially these movements are localized in the middle of the body in the area of the felt sense, they expand to broader areas of the body, including the extremities. In my transcripts I described these energy flows variously as “pulsing in the legs,” “a whole frontal energy—a moving forward kind of feeling,” “a whole body kind of feeling affirmative ...moving out and moving forward,” or a “sense of radiating energy, warmth and tingling in the extremities.” Generally I experienced this expansive energetic flow as very pleasant, or as I described it in one session, as “very good energy...in my whole body right now...kind of a nice purring feel” or “a warm sort of mellowly vibrating warmth.” This whole-body energization is interesting since the Focusing literature generally says that the felt sense is located in the central part of the body between the neck and the abdomen. I have come

to understand that these energetic movements are a very good sign. They signal that whatever was previously stuck is now unstuck and moving in a helpful direction.

Revelation. The vigorous kinesthetic feel heralds a revelation of what the felt sense is all about in my life. The revelation is the turning point of the session. The revelation marks the end of the stage of intensifying awareness of the palpable yet unknown felt sense and the beginning of the illumination phase.

This is the moment when the felt sense names itself, speaks, and reveals what it is all about. This is the moment of “Eureka,” the “Aha.” It is as if all of the kinesthetic gyrations that went before were the birth pangs of a newborn realization. What was just moments ago only nascent experience now emerges into the light of day where it can be seen and examined.

The revelation comes sharply, crisply, to the point. It comes as if the felt sense speaks in words that I, the listener, can finally understand. Imbued with a feeling of certitude, the revelation comes as a succinct, clear and forceful declaration spoken to me as if the words come from a separate entity.

“I am your self-doubt.”

“You are worried you will not be perfect.”

“You are feeling isolated.”

“You are wary of getting involved with [a certain person.]”

“You have a pattern of obsequiousness.”

Aha—the felt sense thus reveals with laser-sharp accuracy the area of tender vulnerability that had been so well masked or pushed down that I could not experience it until the moment of revelation. However, once the revelatory words come, all the incomprehensible visual images, emotional innuendoes, or roiling, bodily movements that went before transform into this moment

of crystal clear understanding. The somatic code has been broken. The nonverbal language of the body is suddenly translated into terms that can be recognized by the intellect.

Illumination. The revelation is followed by a more protracted period of illumination during which deeper and more detailed understanding emerges. The illumination brings to the surface previously hidden information about the point of deep vulnerability named in the revelation. This emergence is not a logical act of mentation. It is simply watching and seeing what emerges from the shadows.

In my Focusing sessions, this illumination came in two different ways. In some instances, a childhood memory long buried under the sediment of the years breaks through to reveal how a recurrent script in my life is connected to significant childhood experiences. For example, just after receiving the revelatory declaration, “You have a pattern of obsequiousness,” I received a crystal clear visual image of being in my aunt’s kitchen as a small child of two or three years of age. The adults were playing cards around the kitchen table. I heard the “shoosh” sound that the adults used to silence me. I learned early that a child must do as others wish, a message that was painfully reinforced throughout my formative years. In another session, a mental picture of my father emerged and I suddenly “saw” how my reluctance to trust as new male friend was related to feelings I held towards my father, who died when I was very young.

In other cases, I suddenly gained access to aspects of my being that are not usually in conscious awareness. I experienced this as receiving wisdom from the body or from certain parts of the body. In one session, I received the clear message to “feel your embodied state” and “spend more time in the physical, energetic, reality of now.” Much of the wisdom I received during the illumination phase had to do with understanding and appreciating the differences between the intellect and the wisdom of the body and learning how to bring those aspects of

myself into harmony. For example, in one session I was frustrated over my inability to move forward quickly in my doctoral work. No matter how many mental resolutions I made, I repeatedly found myself doing anything other than attending to my studies. In the revelation phase of this session, the words came, “I’m not ready yet. I’m not ready yet.” During the illumination phase, I intensely experienced the bodily sensation of being impatient to move ahead. This immersion in the bodily sensation brought forth both the realization that the impatience was really my bruised ego together with the certain understanding that it would be unwise to rush ahead following the urging of the ego without the concurrence of my bodily sense of the situation. This new understanding gave me a more comfortable and productive way of being during this period of incubation and a new understanding of how to harmonize the complimentary abilities of the body sense and the mind to accomplish my goals.

The recovery of pieces of myself, whether submerged memories or unacknowledged aspects of my being, was like finding lost puzzle pieces. Once found, a larger, clearer picture of myself and my situation was thereby revealed. In this new picture, my stance towards that which previously felt problematic shifts. There is a radical reframing of the situation, which either dissolves the problem or gives fresh practical steps to be taken to change the situation.

The illumination phase sometimes ended with an eloquent message that was like receiving advice from a wise, compassionate, sincerely loving and trustworthy friend who fully understands me. I receive the message with a feeling of being guided by a source of wisdom either beyond the self or from “a deep being, knowing place” within the self. I am changed.

Integration. What was asunder is now reunited. Body, mind and spirit are knit together once more. This integration is signaled by a whole body sense of openness, relaxation, and well being. In my sessions, I described this strongly affirming sensation in many ways, including

“relaxing,” “expanding,” “peaceful,” “flowing,” “melting,” “restful,” “lighter,” “freer” and “more open.” This qualitative shift in my inner experience was accompanied by physiological signs of well-being, such as a feeling of easier breathing, the absence of the uncomfortable sense of pressure or constriction that had been present at the outset of the session, or simply smiles and laughter. This period was also marked by pleasant energetic states, described variously as “a peaceful, radiating flow of energy,” “a mellowly vibrating warmth,” a “tingling in the extremities,” or a feeling of being “more alive.”

During this last movement of Deep Focusing, I became aware of the sacred aspect of this experience. I experienced Deep Focusing as a “sanctuary” from which I emerged “cleansed,” “combed smooth,” or “forgiven.” In this sanctuary, I felt a “warm presence,” a “contentless awareness,” and a merger of the divine into the open, alive space in the body. To reiterate a portion of the Focusing session protocol included earlier in this paper:

*Now I realize, suddenly and with certainty, that this place is an inner temple. It is a place where I go to find my deepest self, to find Self, to realize the reality of my being.*

#### Limitations of this Study

I have already addressed the limitations imposed by using transcript data to try to capture the nonverbal phenomena involved in Deep Focusing. Earlier in this paper, I also made some suggestions for how to partially work around that problem by using clues from the way in which language is used in the transcripts to identify the quality of the inner states that existed when the words were initially uttered.

Closely related to that issue is the problem of the inclusiveness of the transcript. While I made every effort to immediately dictate everything that I was aware of happening internally, it is obvious that the recordings were unable to track every single mental gesture. Take, for

example, an instance where I recorded a particular Focusing guiding instruction, such as “Try to be with the felt sense in a friendly, curious way.” Before making the guiding suggestion, there must have been some internal experience that lead to my desire to make a guiding suggestion. Perhaps I felt some resistance to approaching the felt sense, or perhaps I made a judgment that the felt sense was not developing quickly enough. The tape-recorded words do not reflect the experiential antecedents to the verbalization. Often the inability to verbalize the antecedent events is because they fall into the category of tacit knowledge operating beneath the level of ordinary awareness (Polanyi, 1966). Other methods for drawing out more of the implicit events need to be developed.

I am, of course, aware, that the generalizability of this exploratory study is limited by the fact that this is a single-subject study with the researcher as the subject. There are obvious dangers of building models based on one person’s experience, even when that experience is replicated on sixteen separate occasions. At best we can say that I have produced a model of how the felt sense evolved in my Focusing sessions during that period of my life. However, based on my fairly extensive experience of Focusing with other people, I believe that my Focusing experiences are not *sui generis* and that there are similarities between the manner in which their felt sense unfolds and my experiences described in this paper.

The accuracy of the model presented here could be tested in research with other Focusers. Petitmengin-Peugeot’s study of the “psycho-phenomenology” of intuition provides an excellent example of research into the states of consciousness of multiple subjects (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999, p. 45). Interestingly, there is a striking similarity between the steps that Focusers use to prepare the way for the emergence of the felt sense and the procedures that Petitmengin-Peugeot used to prepare her subjects to explicate their intuitive experiences. More importantly, there is

also a striking resemblance between what I have here described as the emergence and development of the felt sense and Petitmengin-Peugeot's description of the emergence and development of intuition. Her work offers valuable guidance on how to extend the inquiry presented in this paper across a wider population.

### Conclusion

Focusing can be used as an organized method for indwelling, the heuristic process of being with the phenomenon under study in order to fully draw out its detail, texture, nuances and meaning. As such, it can be used to enrich the inquiry into phenomena in the life world.

Douglass and Moustakas cited the specific benefits of using Focusing in phenomenological research as follows:

[T]he focusing process enables the researcher to identify qualities of an experience that have remained out of conscious reach primarily because the individual has not paused long enough to examine his or her own experience of the phenomenon. Through the focusing process, the researcher is able to determine the core themes that constitute an experience, identify and assess connecting feelings and thoughts, and achieve cognitive knowledge that includes "refinements of meaning and perception that register as internal shifts and alterations of behavior" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 51).

In this paper, I have explored how Focusing can be used in first-person consciousness studies to reveal workings of the inner subjective world that are likewise generally out of conscious reach because of lack of time and attention. Focusing teaches us how to be patient and attend to the inner felt sense, thus affording deeper insight into states of mind.

The "mind," as we refer to it here, is not an abstract entity. It is an embodied experience (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Varela advocated for Buddhist mindfulness meditation as

a means of observing the mind in situ. He suggested that that particular form of meditation is well suited to exploring the ontological relationship between body and mind through the vehicle of alert, open-ended observation of the mediator's own lived experience. He also argued that this approach helps to solve the paradox of phenomenological attempts to understand the nature of consciousness through the process of abstraction, which inevitably takes the researcher away from the experience itself into the realm of reflective abstraction.

As a body-centered method, Focusing also is an ideal method for exploring the inner terrain. While like meditation in some respects (Welwood, 1982), Focusing may be even better suited to research into states of consciousness because it emphasizes the skill of accessing deep levels of the self without losing contact with one's cognitive and verbal functions. Moreover, Focusing is a method that can be taught step-by-step and has a large body of teaching literature available. Finally, as a process that was developed based on scientific clinical observations and to be used for purely secular reasons, Focusing may be better suited for human science research than meditation, which was developed in other cultures for purposes of spiritual development. It is my hope that the methodological approaches described in this study will stimulate others to explore the use of Focusing either as a subject or as a tool in their own research.

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