

THE RELATIONAL HEART OF FOCUSING-ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

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INTRODUCTION

There are many focusing oriented psychotherapies emerging all over the world from different traditions with which focusing has intersected, each with its own emphasis and style. What they all have in common is a careful attention to the processes of experience itself, the accessing of what is right beneath the surface of thoughts and words. Focusing is often thought of as an "inward" process, pointing to the essentially bodily nature of experience. A focusing orientation shows us how each micro-moment of experience has within it the potential for forward movement.

What is less well known and appreciated, however, is the radically *relational heart* of both the focusing process in psychotherapy and the underpinnings of its philosophy. I have always been fascinated theoretically and clinically by the indissoluble unity of the person and his relational context.

I first met Gendlin in the early 1970s when I was a young therapist. I was immediately entranced by his unique combination of broad, encompassing philosophical thinking, and his acutely astute down to earth clinical teaching. I was struck by the originality of his zooming out to the nature of life, coupled with the precision and detail of his zooming in to the therapeutic moment. I knew

his approach offered me a home base for both the theory and practice of psychotherapy. I have studied, taught and written about his work and its interface with relational psychoanalysis since that time—dialoguing, collaborating and debating with him through the years. There is always more to learn, more to say, more of the implicit vastness to tease out, with my "inner Gendlin" guiding and inspiring me along the way.

In this chapter I want to give an overview of the fundamentally relational nature of focusing oriented therapy and its clinical implications, and to suggest some expansions of my own about the workings of the therapeutic relationship.

INTERACTION FIRST

Gendlin's concept of Interaction First is the cornerstone of his philosophy. It speaks to the nature of living as inherently interactive. If we look at an individual as a *process* rather than an *entity*, it changes everything we think about and do in our work.

"I think living bodies are interactions with the air and the ground and food and other species members..... If you're looking at me, you can see that I'm interaction...And not just on the physical level. I'm interaction with other people...If I think of a person as being interaction, then, of course it makes sense that in interacting with a new person, they're going to be different. So, my job then as a therapist is to be the kind of interaction that will make the person better. Even if the person says all the same words that they've said to themselves alone in their room, it's different to say them to *you*. It's a different living process. *And that's where the possibility of change exists*" (Gendlin

2005).

The crucial question then for us as clinicians is: *What is the kind of interaction that makes the client better and how can we be that?*

MAKING A RELATIONSHIP WITH *THE CLIENT'S CLIENT* - "*THE ONE IN THERE*"

My neighbor, Teddy, confided in me. "I'm so lonely! My wife of thirty years walked out on me. She said she was leaving—get this—because she had to 'find herself.' What the hell does that mean?" he bellowed. I imagined myself as Teddy's wife's therapist, my job now being to help her "find herself." What would I be looking for? Where would I find it? As therapists we are always helping people to find lost selves. But what do we actually mean by this *self* and by this *finding*.

Gendlin gave this self the catchy name The Client's Client or The One in There (Gendlin 1984, p. 76). It's the self that the patient is struggling with. This is the one speaking through the cracks of the conversation. She is the unheard voice of protest, hope or longing. Gendlin keeps the distinction between the self and The One in There indeterminate. He is talking about a level of felt-sense experience, not about internal "things." At one moment it is a child, the next a wise inspiring voice. Gendlin doesn't want to reify this voice—to shove it into a pre-cut box where it won't have air to breathe. He doesn't want to assign this self a static identity or a singular function. Instead, he wants to tease out and engage the immediacy of its strivings, needs and offerings. The One in There must be invited, welcomed and brought into the family of therapeutic interaction. When I share Gendlin's article "*The Client's Client*" with colleagues and

students, they often identify with his description of the problematic ways we can relate to ourselves. He says:

“The felt sense is the client inside us. Our usual conscious self is the therapist, often a crudely directive one who gets in the way of our inward client all the time. That therapist frequently attacks in a hostile way, or at least wants to use all the old information, claims to be smarter than the client, talks all the time, interrupts, takes up time with distant inferences and interpretations, and hardly notices that ‘the client’ is prevented from speaking” (Gendlin 1984, p. 83).

He goes on to say that the growth process necessitates becoming the kind of therapist to oneself that listens respectfully and puts aside his agendas, values and interpretations. These inner therapists are receptive, willing to wait and follow what The One In There is saying or trying to say. These inner good “therapists” have what is sometimes referred to as a “focusing attitude.” Even when they disapprove of or oppose what The One in There is coming up with, they can be curious and willing to listen to the opposition. Such openness is the primary goal of therapy and is also the precondition for the ability to tap into the vast implicit dimension of oneself that we associate with the carrying forward of focusing. The focusing oriented therapist wants to help the client to be a better “therapist” to her inner self, to have a focusing attitude, but this can be easier said than done. Although focusing guidelines give us clear and helpful ways to conceptualize optimal self-responding, we know that self-alienation is not easily overcome. It is not often vanquished through just learning the skills of focusing. All too often The One in There cannot be found, or, the self and the inner client are in a life and death battle, or even worse, they are not on speaking terms.

It is here that Gendlin's concept of Interaction First comes to the rescue. We are faced with a conundrum: What needs to be healed is self-alienation, but we need receptive self-responding for such a healing process. The resolution of this conundrum is the understanding that since we *are* interaction, a new kind of relating with another person will constitute a new living, a new system, a new self.

This understanding is freeing and empowering for me as a therapist because I no longer feel it is my job to “get” the client to change, to focus, to do or be some different way. Instead, I can find that new way in myself and bring it into the interaction. I can wholeheartedly take on the challenge of being the "New Other," the "Partner" the "One" with whom The One in There can confide, find solace, take risks and fight.

Although it is empowering to know that I, myself, can *be* a new living instead of teaching, convincing and interpreting the client into being different, it is also a hefty responsibility! You, the reader, may say: *You mean it is up to me to change the dynamic? To be the one to whom The One in There must be able to bring all the unmet needs, longings and primal protest? Yes, it is the therapist's job to make a new interaction, a new beginning. You may continue: How can I bring something new when the client sits silently scowling in the corner, contradicts everything I say, rants and raves at me or cancels session after session and then demands to be seen when I don't have time? Can we still be a new interaction?* Perhaps it is just the perspective of interaction first that can help us in this daunting task.

QUOTES THAT HAVE GUIDED ME IN MAKING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ONE IN THERE

1. Calling Forth

"An individual is an entirely unique and particular substance which is his own... an essence which can be recognized and *called forth in the encounter*....the person feels his feelings... he is more fully alive ... and is just thereby and just in that way changed from how he was before!" (Gendlin 1966).

When we therapists deeply take in the unique particularity of the client, the mystery of this "one" and the special quality of the moment of meeting, there can be recognition of The One in There that is an invocation, calling her forth. It is a reaching for The One in There. We want that inner self to hear our voice and recognize that we are looking for *him!*

2. A New And Different Life Experience

Change "Comes from making this now ongoing relationship into a new and different concrete life experience, a kind of experiencing he could not be, and was not, until now, thus, the effects of a personal relationship must be understood as the new and different experiential process that a genuine relationship makes possible" (Gendlin 1966).

It is not *what* we are talking about, but how we are relating, that makes the difference. Whatever brings the interaction alive—laughing, telling a story, sharing food tips. The quality of contact we are making is the relating.

3. Putting Nothing Between

"Because I keep nothing between, the client can look into my eyes and find me..... I won't hide" (Gendlin 1996, p.286).

This bare, undefended "being with" requires a letting go of role consciousness and expectations. It is a radical allowing that comes with giving oneself fully to the supreme priority of this particular relational.

4. Being A Real Other

"However, far most powerful in this regard is a real other person who responds not merely like a tape recorder, but who is himself still another dimension along which the client's incipient reactions are carried further into lived-out interaction with an environment" (Gendlin 1968, p. 220).

We therapists are, first and foremost, real particular people with our own longings and needs, our dreams and dashed hopes, our inspirations and prejudices, our wounds and vulnerabilities. We don't want to hide behind our role as therapist, nor pretend to ourselves or the client that we are "healthier" and "above all." We are part of the human predicament. We can be most open and connected if we can shamelessly accept our own foibles.

5. Allowing Your Reactions To Be Visible

"The therapist must be a person whose actual reactions are visible so that the client's experiencing can be carried further by them, so the client can react to them. Only a responsive and real human can provide that" (Gendlin 1968, p. 221).

Our real feelings, thoughts, intentions and reactions are the stuff of the new interaction that is

needed. They are the blood running through the veins of this interaction. The One in There is often exquisitely attuned to every nuance of what is occurring in us and how we are reacting to every moment of interaction; not just what we are saying, but what we are implicitly hoping, fearing, hiding, meaning. The most vital and powerful moments in therapy are often the ones in which the therapist's heartfelt reactions are openly shared.

6. The Positive Intentionality Of The Negative

"The behaviors are negative. But here, in this interaction, the therapist's aim is to enable the positive tendencies to succeed nevertheless... There is always a positive tendency which we can 'read' in the negative behavior" (Gendlin 1968, p. 224).

Some theories see aggression and destructiveness as basic to human nature. From a focusing perspective, destructiveness is never the bottom line. We therapists want to seek what is trying to come through. (My suicidal client wants his mother to miss him and mourn his loss.) We can evoke and interact with that positive underbelly.

7. Looking At The Trouble As Stuck Interactions

"We can look at the present therapeutic interaction as an instance of what is stuck in the person and needs carrying forward...If we conceptualize psychological contents (issues) as originally bits of stopped and incomplete interactions, we can easily explain how relating with a therapist might carry it further beyond the old stoppage...." (Gendlin 2010).

The stuck interactions imply needed healing interactions. They are needs for very specific kinds of relating in order to live the stuck interaction forward. These may include primary needs such as the need for a sense of belonging - a feeling of being deeply understood, known and

appreciated. The therapist can sense and reflect on what kind of interaction the therapy is calling for.

8. Finding How I Am Always Part Of The Difficulties

"What the client stirs in me is always partly me" (Gendlin 1968, p.224).

Even if the client is "always this way," (angry, depressed, oppositional, lifeless, self destructive) she is this way now with me and my way of being is part of the mix. The good news about knowing this, is that if I sense into what is most troubling for *me* and focus on the very personal meanings it has for me, the knot often loosens and something new can emerge between us.

9. Carrying Our Own Reactions Forward

"I turn toward any discomfort and make it a *something* and carry it further before stating it... I carry my incipient responses further past the defensive covering reactions" (Gendlin 1968, p.220).

The issue of how we can make a healing interaction when we get caught in our own vulnerabilities and problem areas is one of the greatest challenges we face. We may feel like only our *positive* feelings should be shown, but when we try to hide what we deem un-therapeutic, we create an atmosphere of mistrust and carefulness. One of the lessons I learned early on from Gendlin is that I don't have to *identify* with my defensive reactions. I can be on the side of The One in There as well as being empathic to my own inner struggles. Gendlin told a story about his working in the returns department of a store when he was a college student. He went home exhausted each day after defending the store against the accusations of angry customers. He finally realized that he didn't even like many of the store's products. He then

commiserated with the complainers and went home energetic. "Even if I am the store," he said, "I don't have to spend my energy defending it" (Personal Communication). This story reminds me of the bumper sticker: "I don't believe everything I think!" In the spirit of this guideline, I try to find something deeper and more precise than my judgments or reactivity to share. I try to stay connected to my client and to his meanings as well as to myself.

10. It Is The Doing In The Saying

"Everything we do in therapy is interaction...the therapist reflects back, 'Talking feels useless.'" But the implicit interaction experiences by the client's body is that the client has just affected someone (the exact opposite of the verbal statement)" (Gendlin 1996, p.284).

Sam, a member of my group supervision, talked about confronting his client: "I think it was inappropriate for you to send such a Valentine's Day card to your daughter." I commented on the judgmental word "inappropriate." "Can't a judgment be *right*?" he challenged. Without a pause to take in our interaction, I retorted, "*Maybe* a judgment can be *right* but it can't be *helpful* therapeutically!" Was my judgment of Sam's judgmental language helpful? I intended to sensitize the group to authoritarian language. But what was I doing telling him that *I* am the one, not *he*, who knows what is helpful?

THE NEW US

Looking at the therapy process through the lens of Interaction First, we can focus on either the "you" of the client, as we usually do, or the "I" of the therapist, who is just as essential to the

process. Or we can look through the window of the *interaction itself*, the "we", the unfolding relatedness that must be the vehicle of change. We can look at one interaction from three different sides. I find it incredibly helpful in therapy to be able to use all three lenses and to shift gracefully from one to another.

We have explored features of the therapist's relating, but what about the nature of the relatedness itself? Through this lens we see the therapeutic couple, each with her own unique personality, core struggles, emotional needs and longings, bringing her own experiential world into the mix. The New Us is my way of talking about the evolving developing interaction that we are, and are becoming. The therapist/client bond that creates a new living context, new air to breathe; The New Us is the birthplace of the new "I." We want to develop an "us" that is open, trusting, resilient, permeable and attentive to the feeling level. We want it to be able to engage, welcome and carry forward the new emergent self.

CULTIVATING A FELT SENSE OF IMPLICIT RELATIONAL INTRICACY

The sense of the "us" is a vital dimension of experience. We are all subliminally aware of more strands of implicit relational intricacy than we can consciously process. Somewhere we register, for example, the imperceptible shrinking away, or breath of release, or slight tone of disappointment in the other, as well as our own tinge of defensiveness, pleasure, concern, anxiety. As a therapist I want to cultivate the *accessibility* of my felt sense of the interaction. I want to "feel in my bones" the micro-movements of the partnership in its striving to connect, to grow and to be free. When I have the impulse to say something to my client and I don't know if

it will be helpful or distracting or even hurtful, I can look to this under-the-surface awareness for guidance. When I do say what is on my mind, I pay close attention to the reaction of my client and also to the quality of “us-ness” registering in me.

AN IMPROVISATIONAL SPIRIT

Improvisation is a skillful, spontaneous interaction—one that comes directly from the implicit realm, unmediated by conscious deliberation. Gendlin talks about it as an experience of coming freshly from underneath. As a therapist I want to cultivate an improvisational spirit in my interactions, an ambiance of lively, unguarded, playful interchange. My willingness to respond in a spontaneous, perhaps surprising, manner can be an invitation to the client to join me in a freer, less careful engagement that draws from the well of the implicit.

CARRYING THE RELATIONSHIP FORWARD

The power of a focusing approach is the premise that *every bit of human experience has a forward movement inherent in it*. I am continually amazed at the clinical power of this perspective! It is not only that the developmental thrust of life is the fuel that motors psychotherapy in the large scheme of things, but that each moment, *every bit of experience*, no matter how dark it is, has within it an implied *way ahead*. Working with the natural inherent tendency toward development guides the path of the therapist step by tiny step. Each moment of interaction anticipates a “more” in the next moment. Therapists can look for *what is trying to happen here*.

This same awareness can be brought to the step-by-step development of the therapeutic relationship. The unique life of the particular connectedness of these two people needs to be carefully carried forward. We can ask ourselves, *What does this relationship need? What are we up against now, together? What are we implicitly trying to do? What are we hiding from? How are we missing each other? Are we trying to keep our balance or find common ground? Are we pulling in different directions? Are we awkward and careful with each other? Are we trying to negotiate issues of closeness and distance?* These focusing questions will bring intricate connections different than the ones we ask about the client or ourselves. The language of *we* can be very helpful in exploring sensitive or volatile issues, i.e. We seem to have trouble ending our sessions. Our discussions about money are difficult for us. Talking this way seems new for us.

TALKING ABOUT YOU AND ME

There are times when the workings of the relationship are not in the foreground and are a living forward, not a verbal exploration. Talking about it can detract from its natural, spontaneous, unselfconscious unfolding. And there are times when putting the detail of our relating into thinkable, shareable words is one of the most vital aspects of building the "new us." Therapy can be thought of as a process, of *making the unsayable sayable*. Of going to the edge where what is unpackaged and untested can be sent forth to be witnessed. The intimate edge of finding words for our direct experience of each other builds relational strength, trust and resiliency. What we are allowed to know and to share about how we experience each other delimits the horizons of our sense of belonging. Talking about you and me is a delicate and *care-full* process—not careful meaning unspontaneous, but caring.

CLINICAL VIGNETTE

My buzzer rang. I answered, expecting my client Pat. Much to my surprise, a stranger stood at the door. She handed me an envelope and said, "I'm Dee. My friend Pat gave me her session. There's a check in the envelope."

I sputtered, "She didn't mention this to me."

"It happened quite last minute," Dee explained. "Is it okay?"

I paused for moment thinking, *What does this mean?* Then I felt a little letting go, like finally surrendering to the rain in a downpour. "Well, let's see what happens."

I invited the stranger in. She smiled and began to tell me how she had a meltdown over the weekend and was uncharacteristically at her wit's end. Dee said that she has always done well in her career and had wonderful jobs until the recession hit and she was laid off. She's been sending out hundreds of resumes but getting no response. She said that she has always been a "push-through" person," but now she's come to the end of the line and there's nowhere to push through. Although Dee has always been the person that others rely on for her resourcefulness and stability, she now feels invisible, resource-less. She had poured out her heart to Pat and said that she feels like nobody knows how much trouble she's in, so Pat had given her the session. I was engaged and impressed with the way she was speaking—right from the feeling level. Dee was what I call a natural focuser.

L: How is it to be a "push-through" person with no place to push through?

D: It's demoralizing, confusing, disorienting. It's like the world has turned upside down and everything is different. I've always been able to go after what I want and now I can't.

L: The world is different—not responding to you in the same way—and you feel different.

(Inviting a focus on how The One in There is different)

D: Nobody is reaching out to me maybe because everyone always has seen me as the one who has it all together. The one who is blessed.

L: (Sigh) Yes, I see. Maybe they can't conceive of "the one who has it all together" needing something from them. (Carrying her sense of it a little further)

D: (Shrill) WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO? I've always been the responsible one. How can I be responsible? How can I push through when I get no response?

L: What a question! (I say emphatically, matching her intensity) Maybe *we* can pause here and see what might come from that question. Let's listen and see if something shows up. (focusing invitation)

D: I...I think I'm supposed to ask.

L: Ask? (A checking and marking)

D: Yes. (She looks down again as if to find what is there) I never had to ask for anything. Even as a child, I didn't ask my parents for anything. They saw me as the strong one in the family and somehow I think that I need to learn how to ask.

L: Ask for help? To be a new way? (I am chewing this over with her)

D: It's hard for me.

L: Hard in what way?

D: It feels weak and ungrateful to ask. It's not appreciating all I have, all I've been given.

L: Asking doesn't fit with who you feel you are in the world. It doesn't seem right for you, just for other people. (Reflecting the point she is trying to make)

D: Yes, that's right. *I'm* not the one who asks.

Pause

Dee looks up, appearing stuck.

L: Did it feel like asking when you turned to Pat and she gave you her session? (Asking her to check inside to see how the inner self actually experienced what she did, helping to make it acknowledgeable)

D: (Looking surprised) I guess I was asking, then, wasn't I? I cried. I told her everything. I was even angry at her for not noticing how distraught I've been.

L: How did it *actually feel* to ask? (Inviting her to check with her felt sense)

D: (Smiling) It actually felt strong and direct. It felt like it took courage and I had it. It felt good. It didn't feel weak or ungrateful. It felt straightforward.

L: Straightforward! Strong! Courageous! What a recognition that is! The actual experience was so different from how you thought about it. (Reflecting and validating)

D: It really was different! (Resonating, both of us taking this in as if we were savoring the taste of a new food.)

L: And is this coming to me, a stranger, a kind of asking? Are you somehow asking me for something? (Carrying the theme further)

D: (Laughing) Yes! That took a lot of courage—was really a risk. I've never done anything as difficult as that.

L: How is it? (Smiling, inviting a further articulation)

D: It feels very good. You know, *I am the kind of person who can say what is really going on. I am someone who can take risks.*

L: You were a push-through person about being able to ask. (Helping to name the new living)

D: Yes, I am that person, even though I've never done it before. This is truly who I am.

DISCUSSION - A few comments about the relational dimension.

The One in There that Dee was struggling with was one that felt demoralized, confused and alone. We made an interaction of company, welcome and acceptance. When she demanded advice, I offered her *guidance* and companionship to facilitate letting something come. That moment was a negotiation of what she wanted and what I offered. We both took a risk of trying something new together and stretching toward each other to encompass the other's way. We both felt that wonderful sense of opening when something surprising did come. It was also a step of forward movement in our partnership, a successful coordination. I was asking to speak directly to The One in There in the focusing and also when I asked how it actually *felt* to *ask*. This was a moment when she seemed stuck and was implicitly asking me for help. We were making a relatedness in which the needs and the *strengths* could both be embraced. We were both delighted to find the new self emerging from the new interaction; a push-through person asking for help.

CONCLUSION

Gendlin's radical idea that *our job as therapists is to be a new interaction from which a new self emerges* puts therapeutic relatedness at the heart of all that goes into focusing oriented Psychotherapy.

As the “felt sense self” is evoked, heard, welcomed and carried forward, a unique quality of therapeutic relationship evolves; a most intimate, delicate and powerful interactional dance from which the client is able to find a *new*, more alive, more trusting, open and resilient self.

In this chapter we have discussed a framework for the relational dimension of FOT and have begun to outline some of the principles of *being* a healing interaction. There is a vast territory to be explored here and we need input from clinicians from many different cultures to carry this subject forward.

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