

The Felt Sense in a Challenging World

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If we're going to meet the challenges presented by climate change, plastic pollution and all the other environmental threats to life on planet Earth, we're going to have to get a lot smarter in how we live together. Focusing can help those of us who practice it, but might the felt sense have the potential of becoming a reference point for everyone else in negotiating what lies ahead?

One of Gene Gendlin's great contributions is the concept of the felt sense, the sort of feeling that's not what we normally mean by the word 'feeling'. Engaging with it can help in many situations where Focusing itself isn't going to happen. It emphasises the need to give ourselves and each other the time to think, feel and express ourselves, whether on small issues or big ones. Simply knowing about the concept is helpful since it encourages us to hold onto subtle inner things we might otherwise miss.

In recent years I've done two work projects that at the time felt among the most difficult things I've ever done: one was my contribution to organising the Cambridge conference, the other has been writing a book *Therapy in the Age of Neuroscience* which should appear this autumn. Being aware of my felt sense outside Focusing time helped me through the difficulties with both. For the book, I found many sections agonisingly hard to write, mixing complex science with my own reflections. Many times I lost my sense of what to write and had to tell myself 'stop, come back to this tomorrow' – the next day, my mind refreshed, my sense returned and new sentences appeared. For the conference, I found the complexity of it and the risk of losing a lot of money pretty stressful. But with the help of colleagues and spreadsheets, I was able to keep returning to my sense that it would all come together in the end – probably!

Gendlin distinguishes the felt sense from feelings that come with familiar labels (happy, sad, anxious etc.), and from emotions that are more intense and visible to others. He describes it as "murky", and how to articulate it as being "unclear". Sometimes he talks about a physical sensation (e.g. it's "a special kind of bodily sensation"), at other times he suggests something more ephemeral (e.g. it's "the source of what emerges"). Although the felt sense is by its nature tricky to pin down, I wonder whether he doesn't confuse people. Whilst we sometimes notice it as a physical sensation, at other times it can be a more mental experience which draws us inside, and which we can best hold in awareness by having our attention in the body. After all, the felt sense carries not only what we feel, but also what we think, that we can't yet articulate. Asking where in our body we feel it doesn't always help – who cares where it is? – it's everywhere! Why is there a physical sensation sometimes but not at other times?

The bodily aspect of the felt sense can be understood by looking at the brain. The right hemisphere has 'richer connections' with the body than the left hemisphere does. Although this gives us 'two minds in one', one body-minded and the other independent of the body, the difference between them generally escapes our notice. Focusers know it implicitly, however: the mind that tries to figure out why we feel something, versus the body-mind that unfolds meaning when we pause to listen to what we feel. Also: the mind that tries to think, versus the body-mind from which fresh thoughts arise.

The right hemisphere is more interconnected within itself (and therefore 'wholistic') and with the body than is the left. It maps the inner state of the viscera (the insides of the body including the organs) and weaves together inner and outer worlds in the background (for example, by adjusting heart rate to what's happening). This frees the left hemisphere to focus attention on whatever is foreground. So right works as an ensemble with the body, while left is freed up to organise the world around us. And, therefore, we sometimes feel at one with our body, at other times disconnected from it.

Right hemisphere body-mapping provides the basis for the felt sense, making it a here-and-now experience involving the body that tends to change over time. Physical sensation is therefore one aspect of it, but may not be prominent when we're not emotionally aroused. The felt sense is a brain-body phenomenon: maybe it comes with bodily sensation, maybe it doesn't – it doesn't matter.

The right hemisphere's weaving together of inner body and outer world is the foundation of our lived experience. The left constructs edifices to overcome the deficiencies of human nature but the right, rooted in the body, always triumphs in the end. We try to understand things with our left, but to *really* understand we need the right's perspective, and the felt sense is the place to start. Hence the power of the concept.

the felt sense as a reference point for everyone

All this means that the felt sense is a normal aspect of experience for everyone. Some people are more attuned to it than others, and we live in a world that doesn't encourage such attunement – always rushing, goal-driven, glued to phone and computer screens, ignoring the natural world, and being blithely unaware of the imbalance of the mind and the hemispheres this creates. How can we encourage more awareness of the felt sense without having to teach everyone Focusing?

We could think of the felt sense as a reference point, a touchstone, for everything. People can find it as their 'take' on a situation as a whole, as what feels right and what doesn't, as the inkling of thoughts and feelings they need time to express. Everyone can benefit from it – in our inner lives, in our relationships, and in the groups we belong to. Similar principles for encouraging it apply in all these contexts: the need for psychological safety, a friendly attitude, openness to learning, willingness to make mistakes, pausing instead of rushing, and so forth.

The felt sense is the natural expression of the right hemisphere and its wholistic way of working, the unhurried way our minds implicitly put things together and come up with an orientation and a way forward. It resolves conflicts, finds common ground amongst people, and solves intractable problems. And everyone has it somewhere inside.

the felt sense zone

Inevitably, the felt sense is personal, so how can we engage with it outside Focusing in our lives we share with others – and ultimately with everyone on planet Earth? One way might be to imagine a felt sense 'zone', a shared space where everyone *can* find their felt sense. In the zone, we have the time to sense where each other is coming from, and to allow fresh ideas to arise. People are in touch with their right hemisphere body-minds, and can be thoughtful and reflective.

Certain things seem to support our staying in the felt sense zone. We know about some ways that work in groups, such as checking we understand what others say before we respond with what we want to say. Other ways might be: keeping a space for the felt sense when strong feelings are expressed, using humour to create a good atmosphere, recognising that the individual may see what the group doesn't see, giving equal weight to process as to content (e.g. pausing to re-connect with the bigger picture when the group gets lost in detail), and remaining open to people we would rather consign to the outer darkness. Plus the principle that everyone's voice can be heard but not every view can be acted on. And so forth.

Much familiar human behaviour, of course, has little to do with anyone's felt sense. On the personal level, anxiety, highly emotional reactions, the inner critic and so forth, can all get in the way. On the collective level, repeating oneself, using slogans, arguing fruitlessly, polarising between opposite viewpoints, putting people down (plenty of all these in the UK political domain of late!) – these all detract from staying in the zone.

To work together in the felt sense zone, we need to pool our experiences and our ideas. To this end, I am creating a new workshop, *The Felt Sense in a Challenging World*, with one eye on our response to the collective environmental threats we face. If we are to stand a chance of dealing with them, we need to rekindle our relationship with the natural world. The inner version of the natural world is that of the body-oriented right hemisphere, of which the felt sense is the natural expression.

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