

Felt sense: an ethical compass for a world in danger

Focusing international conference, France 2022

The concept of 'felt sense' helps us understand our inner world of feelings. Rather than a particular feeling, it's our feeling for, or our sense of, a situation as a whole. And it comes with a practice – actually, many practices. We can have a felt sense of anything we turn our attention to, not just our personal lives but the world out there, human affairs, and the natural world.

If we want to be more in tune with the natural world, we need our felt sense of what's happening in it and of our place in it. And if we want to engage with others to find ways forward with big global issues such as climate change, we need our felt sense – and they need their's.

the felt sense is ethical, intelligent and evolutionary

Our felt sense is an inner place where we can find our feelings about something, our thoughts about it, what we know and don't know. We need our awareness centred in our body, whether or not we notice a physical sensation there (it doesn't matter). We may not be able to articulate it very well, but it feels meaningful and we sense that there's something more there...

Felt senses are *ethical* (sensitive to others and to the natural world as well as to ourselves), *intelligent* (an intuitive sort of intelligence), and *evolutionary* (they bring steps for going forward). They come in degrees of *depth*, profoundly deep when we have plenty of time in Focusing, or just under the surface in the run of everyday life, when what we lose in depth may be made up for by their *breadth* – in the sense of the scope of things we can reflect on if we pause for a moment or two.

The felt sense is a source of imagination, fresh ideas, and of common ground amongst people. It's an inner reference point, potentially, for everyone about everything – including for addressing big global issues like climate change together. We have practices for engaging the felt sense: Focusing obviously, also Thinking at the Edge (TAE), experiential listening, pausing (the simplest one) and, for working in groups, appreciative enquiry and dynamic facilitation are good for felt senses.

the felt sense is the right hemisphere's view of the situation

A little neuroscience illuminates the felt sense. Your brain is really two brains: two hemispheres which are asymmetrical, since nature doesn't do perfect symmetry. While our left hemisphere does focused (nothing to do with focusing here) attention to details in the foreground of our awareness, our right does 'global' attention to what is implicit in the background, at the edge of our awareness. This distinction may stem from the evolutionary need for all creatures to focus on something in order to eat it while simultaneously keeping an eye out for predators so as not to be eaten.

Our right hemisphere forms an ensemble with the body: it keeps our inner world (think heart rate, for example) in sync with what's happening around us, and is the dominant hemisphere for mapping the ever-changing state of the viscera and internal milieu. It gives us our inner sense of our body – interoception – which normally stays in the background of our awareness but which, if we turn our attention within, becomes foreground. We call this 'focusing'.

Modern life requires a lot of outward left hemisphere attention that takes us away from our body, but when we turn our attention there, the inner world of the right opens up – and if we're not in a highly emotional state, or very cut off inside, we find our felt sense there.

The neuroscience of the right hemisphere clarifies our appreciation of the felt sense. Since body and environment are forever changing, this hemisphere is always 'in process'. It's relaxed about sitting with contradictions, with not knowing, with paradox – the left hemisphere isn't, preferring consistency and dividing things up into named categories (Gendlin's 'units'). It likes to explain, rationalise and justify, while fresh thoughts and feelings emerge from the right, from our felt sense.

the felt sense of others

A large part of our 'environment' is other people. Our left hemisphere likes to talk, which it can do in tandem with the right (congruence) or without it (incongruence, where what we say doesn't match how we are). Our right hemisphere communicates. It looks after background aspects of relating and nonverbal communication: eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, taking turns to speak in conversation, and so forth. We need it for attunement, empathy, and sensitivity to others.

My felt sense in my right hemisphere lets me know whether I'm really listening to you or not, whether you're really listening to me or not, and helps me 'get' your real meaning (as well as express *my* real meaning). It makes talking an engaging process, so we don't just 'talk at' each other.

the felt sense of the natural world

Our environment also includes other species, the plant kingdom and our atmosphere that's getting hotter. We can immerse ourselves in nature – I do so by looking after my garden, walking in the countryside and, for my summer holidays, pottering around Greek islands on a sailing boat. I get a feeling for the natural world around me, and sometimes a sense of how it's changing. The natural world can be a doorway to the felt sense, and the felt sense a doorway to the natural world.

feed your felt sense with facts

With issues like climate change, it helps if we read and listen to people who research what's happening so we have facts as well as feelings. For example, here are the numbers for levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere, expressed as parts per million:

June 2022:	421
June 2021:	419
June 2012:	396
pre-industrial times:	280

The safe level of CO₂ is around 350. We're already well past it, as you can see, and we know that annual CO₂ emissions are still rising. These numbers present a simple picture of what's happening in the atmosphere, and we can take them into our felt sense of climate change.

the felt sense is not always a comfortable experience

One way to follow our felt sense in life is to do what 'feels right'. But what does this really mean? Gendlin made an interesting distinction between the feeling of comfort and the feeling of fresh air – the latter being the felt sense. So, what feels like fresh air?

How about following my felt sense by doing what I know I need to do but don't much want to do? What 'feels right' may be the harder thing to do. Or what about raising uncomfortable subjects with others, ones that may make me feel uncomfortable or may make them feel uncomfortable? The facts about climate change, for example. I make a point of doing this when we have friends around our kitchen table – other people generally don't. Following my felt sense can land me in trouble.

Another example: listening to what I want to hear versus listening to someone who will challenge my thinking – and stretch my felt sense. We could find many more examples of the felt sense making us feel uncomfortable but in a 'fresh air' way – true to our conscience, perhaps.

Other felt senses are pragmatic and useful, if I listen to them. If I have a sense of wanting to say or write something but the words aren't flowing, I can wait until tomorrow and then, my felt sense refreshed, some may come (they generally do). If I have a problem to solve, giving myself time, rather than trying to force a solution, is best – my felt sense can get to work on it in the background.

everyone has a felt sense!

Well, everyone probably *can* have a felt sense. It's normal for most people to have a felt sense in the background much of the time, though whether they pay attention to it may be another matter. People have their 'take' on a situation – the more reflective they are, the more felt sense-ey it will be. Everyone has inklings of thoughts and feelings they need time to be able to express. And other people have a felt response to us when we engage with them – they warm to us or they cool to us.

in the felt sense 'zone'

By this I mean a shared space in which people *can* find their felt sense – it may be down to them whether they do. There needs to be time for each person's voice to be heard, time for thought and reflection. It helps to have pauses in the discussion and to have breaks so people can ruminate on their own for a while. Conversations can be kept open rather than closed down prematurely. There's a process underneath whatever content is being discussed.

Other things that help... a friendly attitude. People feeling safe to express their real feelings. When things get heated, keeping a place for the felt sense to return later. Checking we understand what someone has said before we respond with what we want to say. Humour helps to create a good atmosphere and to defuse trouble that's brewing. Remembering that the individual may see what the group doesn't see. Giving equal weight to process as to content, such as pausing to re-connect with the bigger picture when everyone gets lost in detail.

working with the felt sense in groups

What's good for encouraging the felt sense in groups that work together? We know we must do a lot of listening to others, but there are many other things that help. For example, making your case. Instead of simply saying that you feel X is the right thing to do, you can say *why* you feel it's right – then others have something to feed into their felt sense of the issue.

Another: putting your ideas in writing. This helps you to clarify what they really are and it gives others something to chew on as they look for their felt sense of the issue.

What about being informed? We can't know everything about a subject, but we ought to know something about it if we're going to work with others on it.

Taking your time wherever possible, being patient, and 'sleeping on it' all help felt senses to unfold in a group. Also: remembering that the loudest voice in a group is unlikely to be from a felt sense.

what gets in the way of the felt sense?

Rushing, being in too much of a hurry, for starters. Anxiety. Being overly goal-driven, and demanding solutions and quick results. All this is the left hemisphere in action, whereas we need the right to allow the felt sense in.

Then there's bad behaviour in groups, of course: being controlling, dominating, needing to win the argument (rather than trying to win it), putting others down, hiding behind slogans (repetitive, everyone's heard them before), not bothering to learn more because you think you already have the answer. Such lazy and aggressive behaviours stop people from connecting with their felt sense.

Something else that gets in the way of the felt sense is staring at our phones and computer screens for too much of the time. They demand left hemisphere focused attention and discourage right hemisphere global attention.

inevitable downsides to the felt sense

The obvious one is that it can be hard to articulate a felt sense. But there are other reasons why people may steer clear of their felt sense. One is that you can't go far with felt senses without running into whatever emotional wounds and unresolved trauma you carry around with you. Things become personal. Perhaps that's why so much attention in the focusing world goes in the direction of therapy, self-help and healing. Our vulnerability is centred in our right hemisphere.

Another is that felt senses, by their very nature, tend to send people in different individual directions – they're great for anarchy. Of course, they can also bring people together if the atmosphere is good.

Also, our felt sense may send us off in a direction that we later find to be more wrong than right. Felt senses don't get it right all the time. So we all need to learn as we go.

a 'felt sense world'

It won't be a perfect world. But what might such a world look like? Perhaps one where people start with a conceptual understanding of the term, so they have a reference point in their minds. And one where people have practices for engaging their felt sense – pausing and listening, for example.

And... it's a world where we're relaxed about not knowing the answer to problems. If you have to know the answer all the time, you're unlikely to listen to your felt sense. It's a world where we accept mistakes will be made. Everyone makes mistakes, and if we try to reduce them to zero we create a sterile world where there's no space for the felt sense.

It's also a world where we tolerate disagreements and conflict, because humans don't go far without them arising. But we need to keep talking with each other despite them. Arguing and battling can kill the felt sense because we switch into survival mode.

'gut feelings' and feeling 'right': a warning!

When people talk about such feelings, they may be talking about their felt sense. Or maybe not. There's no way of knowing unless you're present when they express these feelings.

But we know for sure that often they're not a felt sense. There are some glaring examples from the political domain. George Bush famously said he followed his "gut feeling" to invade Iraq. And his buddy in military madness, Tony Blair, when challenged even now about his decision to join Bush in the invasion, says he did so because it "felt right". What can one say? This is no basis for the very serious business of starting a war.

Another politician has said “I have a gut and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else’s brain can ever tell me”. Trump.

the felt sense of climate change

How can we address this with the felt sense in mind? Some ideas...

One is to keep talking about it. There’s a lot of *avoiding* talking about climate change going on. Maybe it’s too overwhelming, too scary, it introduces a deeply troubling topic into an otherwise happy conversation. But we need to talk about it, otherwise we stick our heads in the sand.

We must take care of our feelings about climate change. It’s not enough to just go over the evidence and think about what to do. It’s an emotional topic.

We need to allow for different views on the subject without walking away from each other in frustration and anger. At the same time, we need to sense when it’s time to walk away from a conversation that is leading nowhere – as when you try to talk to a climate change denier. I lost a good friend and a focusing partner this way. It wasn’t an issue I could just put to one side as if it didn’t affect our friendship.

Also: sensing who we can trust on the subject, the voices we feel are worth listening to and those that aren’t. Top of my list of trusted voices these days is Greta Thunberg – her talent for getting to the point, no frills, no rage, just clarity and passion, is inspiring. Straight from her felt sense.

knowing it vs. believing it

The other day I read a brilliant example of the mind crushing the felt sense of something in the world out there. It was in a review of a book that tells the story of Rudolf Vrba, the first Jewish person to escape from Auschwitz, in 1943, to tell the world what was happening there. The reviewer writes:

‘whereas younger Jews believed Vrba, the majority were with philosopher Raymond Aron who said “I knew, but I didn’t believe it. And because I didn’t believe it, I didn’t know” ’.

The facts of Auschwitz were out there, but human minds struggled to take them in, so they squashed those facts out of existence. This is also a good example of how easy it is for the left hemisphere to triumph over the right.

We know about climate change, we all have a felt sense about it – so can we also believe what the scientists and our felt senses are telling us?

Peter Afford

June 2022

peter@focusing.co.uk