

## **Felt sense: an ethical compass for a world in danger**

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The concept of 'felt sense' helps us understand our inner world of feelings. And it comes with a practice – actually, many practices. We can have a felt sense of anything we turn our attention to – including the world out there, other people, 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 can take in the whole of a situation – what we know and don't know about it, all our thoughts and feelings about it. We connect with it when our awareness is centred in our body, whether or not we have a physical sensation (whether we do or we don't doesn't matter). We may not be able to articulate it very well, but it feels meaningful and we sense there's something more there...

Our felt sense is *ethical* (sensitive to others and to the natural world as well as to oneself), *intelligent* (an intuitive intelligence), and *evolutionary* (it brings steps forwards). We can think of the *depth* of the felt sense: in Focusing we have time to go deep, but in daily life we can look just below the surface and listen to our felt sense about whatever our mind is engaged with, if we pause for a moment.

Everyone has, or can have, a felt sense. It's a reference point for everyone with everything. It's good for imagination, fresh ideas, shifting feelings, resolving conflicts, and addressing issues such as climate change that threaten to overwhelm us.

### **felt sense practices**

There are a number of practices that work around the felt sense: Focusing obviously, also Thinking at the Edge (TAE), experiential listening, having a focusing attitude, pausing. There are some ways of working in groups that are good for the felt sense – dynamic facilitation, appreciative enquiry.

### **the felt sense is our right hemisphere's view of the situation**

While our left hemisphere pays attention to explicit details in the foreground of our awareness, our right hemisphere maintains 'global' attention to what is implicit in the background – our environment and our body – at the edge of our awareness. Our right hemisphere weaves inner and outer worlds together: it keeps our viscera and internal milieu in sync with what is happening around us (heart rate, for example). It's the dominant hemisphere for mapping our body's continually changing state, which enables interoception, our inner sense of our body – the basis of the felt sense.

Modern life requires a lot of left hemisphere attention, but when our awareness is centred in our body the world of the right opens up – and if we're not in a highly emotional state, we find our felt sense there. Right forms an ensemble with the body, while left can stand aside from it.

The neuroscience of the right hemisphere backs up our experience of the felt sense. Since body and environment are always 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 putting everything into named categories (Gendlin's 'units'). It likes to explain, rationalise and justify, while fresh thoughts and feelings arise in the right, from our felt sense.

### **the felt sense: including other people**

A large part of our 'environment' is other people. Our right hemisphere looks after the background aspects of relating and communicating. We can have a felt sense of this background, and the extent to which we include it in our awareness probably depends on how centred we are.

These background aspects include nonverbal communication (facial expression, eye contact, posture, tone of voice, taking turns in conversation, etc.), attunement, empathy, 'getting' each other, and so forth. So I can have a sense of whether I am really listening or not, of whether I am really being listened to or not, of where each of us is 'coming from', and of each other's real meaning.

The left hemisphere may do a lot of talking but ignore the right hemisphere stuff. A lot of human communication happens in familiar, routine ways with little reference to a felt sense.

### **the felt sense: including the natural world**

Another major part of our environment is the natural world of other species, the plant kingdom and the warming climate. We can immerse ourselves in nature – I do so in looking after my garden, in

going for long walks in the countryside, and in sailing a boat around Greek islands for my summer holiday. I get a feeling for the natural world around me and my place in it – a felt sense.

Our felt sense can be a doorway through which we attune to the natural world. We can allow our intuitive understanding of it to develop. And our felt sense can alert us to what's changing there.

We can also feed our felt sense of the natural world with facts by reading and listening to people who research what's happening and know what they are talking about. For example, what is the current atmospheric CO2 level, what was it at this time last year, what was it 10 years ago? The felt sense can weave the numbers together with our personal experience of the world.

### **the felt sense outside of Focusing sessions**

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 some may come. If I have a problem I need to solve, giving myself time, rather than trying to force a solution, is generally the approach – my felt sense can get to work on it.

There are lots of ways the felt sense can guide us when we're not Focusing. I can do what feels right, and not do things that don't feel right. That's relatively easy. But what about... acting on my sense of what I need to do but may not particularly want to do, such as to write an awkward email. I can listen to what I want to hear, or I can listen to what may challenge my thinking and stretch my felt sense. I can speak up when I feel uncomfortable about something, even though it may get into trouble.

Gendlin made an interesting distinction between feelings of comfort and of fresh air – the felt sense lets fresh air in. Sometimes it brings vulnerability or sadness, but somehow it feels good to feel this.

### **the felt sense as a reference point for everyone**

I believe the felt sense is a normal aspect of experience for everyone. OK, this isn't always the case, some people are more attuned to their felt sense than others, and some people don't seem to listen to their felt sense much at all. But it's a touchstone for everything if people want one: their 'take' on a situation as a whole, inklings of thoughts and feelings they need time to express.

### **a felt sense 'zone'**

By this I mean a shared space where people can meet and be supported to find their felt sense – an atmosphere in which people *can* find their felt sense, even if they don't. There needs to be time for everyone's voice to be heard, time for fresh ideas to arise, time to be thoughtful and reflective. It helps for there to be 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 them down prematurely.

Other things that help... a friendly attitude. People must feel safe to express their real feelings. When strong feelings are expressed, keeping a place for the felt sense to return later. Being relaxed about making mistakes. 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. Remaining open to others we would rather consign to the outer darkness – often challenging!

### **working with felt senses in groups**

Being well informed – you don't have to read everything but you do need to read *something*.

Reflecting on others' views, including those you (at first, at least) disagree with.

Making your case – saying why you hold your view so others can think about your point.

Writing things down – to clarify your thoughts, and allow others to ponder them.

'Sleeping on it' – I don't know just now, but maybe tomorrow I will be clearer.

Decision making processes in groups that allow for feelings – such as the BFA card system (green for yes, red for no, orange for neither yes or no, etc.), humming to gauge the strength of feelings.

### **what gets in the way of the felt sense?**

Rushing, being in a hurry. Anxiety. Being overly goal-driven, trying to achieve a result or find solutions. Staying glued to phones and computer screens (bad for right hemisphere global attention).

A lot of human behaviour in groups is anti-felt sense. Not really listening to others (you've made your mind up already), being controlling or dominating, putting others down, needing to win the argument (leaving others feeling annoyed or humiliated), repeating oneself, hiding behind slogans, not

bothering to learn more about a topic because you think you already have the answer. What about saying things that don't really mean anything – such as “doing X would be inappropriate”, Tony Blair saying he decided to join George Bush and invade Iraq because “it felt right”?

### **inevitable downsides to the felt sense**

People can find it hard to articulate their felt sense, which is often a sense of ‘not knowing’.

Felt senses often send people in different directions, so there's a divergence of views.

Inevitably, we all make mistakes: the felt sense isn't always right in the bigger scheme of things.

We all have to learn as we go: there's no perfect plan for anything.

Old emotional wounds and unresolved trauma: the inner world of the right hemisphere and the felt sense is full of them.

### **a 'felt sense world'**

It helps when people understand the concept of felt sense and are open to learning more. And it helps when people have practices they have learnt that keep bringing the felt sense from the background into the foreground. And when they get more sensitive to their felt sense in the moment, whatever they are engaged in.

### **the felt sense and climate change**

How can we address climate change together with our felt sense in mind?

We can look for solutions – electric cars, renewable energy, and so forth. We can also talk about it rather than keep it under the table. We can turn to our felt sense as an ethical compass:

- making space for our anxiety about the future
- having a sense of whose voices we can trust on the subject – sometimes I feel that Greta Thunberg is the only person really talking any sense!
- allowing people to have different views without walking away in anger
- sensing when continuing a debate, for example with a climate change denier, is not worthwhile

Finally... a brilliant example of the left hemisphere silencing the right and sidelining the felt sense from a book review I read yesterday. *The Escape Artist* is the story of Rudolf Vrba, a Jew who escaped from Auschwitz to tell the world what was happening there: “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.’ “

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

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