

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE WHOLE BIG THING OF

Facing Climate Change with the Felt Sense



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the whole felt sense thing

What do we mean when we talk about ‘the felt sense’?

It’s different from an emotion which is visible to others if not ourselves, e.g. anger.

And it’s different from a feeling which is a familiar experience we can name and choose whether to express or keep private, e.g. “this makes me feel a bit angry”.

Instead, a felt sense is an inner experience that we may find hard to put into words and which is likely to vanish unless we stop and listen to it, e.g. “I’m feeling something here, give me a moment...”

Also:

a felt sense is bodily: we need to place our attention in the middle of our body

it may or may not come with a physical sensation – often it doesn’t

it’s about the whole of a situation

it can often be written as ...

it feels meaningful and implicit meanings unfold when we listen to it – focusing

❖ you can point to the felt sense, but you can’t define it

‘Felt sense’ is a tricky idea. Nevertheless, it’s a concrete aspect of our inner world of feeling and experiencing. We either feel it or we don’t. And it’s a brilliant *concept* because it comes with its own *practice* – felt sensing.

❖ fresh air vs. comfort

Gendlin pointed out that what comes from a felt sense feels like fresh air, and this can feel different from a feeling of comfort. This means that what comes may bring some discomfort – which nevertheless feels ‘right’, like fresh air.

❖ ahem! there can be no such thing as a ‘group felt sense’

Felt senses are personal, in the moment, and fluid. If you believe there’s a ‘group felt sense’, I think you mean a *feeling*. Emotions and feelings can be contagious.

Also: the notion of a group felt sense can make it harder for dissenting voices to speak up.

❖ an inner compass for anything and everything

Our felt sense is an inner compass that we can check in with to see how we feel about anything and everything. Whatever we think, whatever we say, whatever we hear others say, can be checked against our felt sense: hmm... how does this sit inside? does it feel right, does it not feel right?

This includes everything in this workshop and these handouts! Let me know if your felt sense sees something differently from how I put it, or what more it can add.

❖ depth vs. breadth

We can think of felt senses as having *depth*: sometimes very deep in a Focusing session with the eyes closed.

And as having *breadth*: closer to the surface in everyday life and work, but there, potentially, to guide us in any situation and on any subject.

the felt sense in the crazy world out there

Gendlin's concept of felt sense may be a more significant contribution to the world than focusing. It's a *concept* that comes with a *practice* – felt sensing, or brief focusing if you like.

The felt sense can be present anywhere in human affairs – potentially. Much of the time it's absent. Whether it's present or absent makes all the difference to whether things go well or go badly.

When we cross Gendlin's concept of felt sense with Iain McGilchrist's hemisphere theory, we have a revolution in psychology – a big leap forward.

❖ expanding our awareness of the felt sense beyond Focusing sessions

Let's look beyond what comes inside when we focus on personal issues:

- to our felt sense of things when we're not 'doing' Focusing
- to other people's felt senses, including people who haven't learnt Focusing and who have never heard of the concept
- to our felt sense of topics in the public domain, such as climate change

❖ the felt sense connects us with others

It's natural to have a felt sense of people we engage with, and of how we relate with them and how they relate to us.

❖ the felt sense connects us with the natural world

It's also natural to have a felt sense of the natural world we inhabit. Go for a walk in nature and you feel it.

❖ the felt sense is ethical, intelligent, and evolutionary

I suggest that felt senses are:

- *ethical*: sensitive to others and to the natural world, as well as to ourselves
- *intelligent*: the felt sense has an intuitive, big-picture sort of intelligence
- *evolutionary*: it brings steps forward – although not always immediately

❖ the felt sense doesn't guarantee we'll get everything right

It's not perfect. We all make mistakes sometimes. But we can be open to learning.

❖ the felt sense and hemisphere theory

The felt sense is how the right hemisphere sees the whole situation. The left sees only a part of it and goes into details.

Everyone has a felt sense, potentially at least. But certainly not when they are very emotional or depressed or dissociated or defending against painful feelings and unresolved trauma fragments inside.

The right hemisphere can deal with uncertainty, not knowing, paradox, contradictions – as can the felt sense. The left hemisphere works on certainties.

window of tolerance, polyvagal theory, two hemispheres

❖ the window of emotional tolerance and polyvagal theory

These are neuroscience maps of the nervous system that shed light on what happens in human relationships and communication. To have a felt sense of something, our nervous system needs to be in a state of optimal emotional arousal and of polyvagal safety that allows for social engagement. Outside the window, the nervous system goes into danger or life threat, with overwhelming emotion or no emotion at all, and no felt sense – alarmingly common in human affairs.

window of tolerance	polyvagal theory
<i>outside the window</i> hyper-arousal	<i>sympathetic nervous system</i> danger: fight, flight, freeze
<i>inside the window</i> optimal emotional arousal	<i>ventral vagus</i> safety: social engagement, felt sense
<i>outside the window</i> very low arousal	<i>dorsal vagus</i> life threat: collapse, shutdown, dissociation

Our window of tolerance is personal – someone else's window may be larger or smaller. Within it, we can feel our feelings and have a felt sense of the whole situation, without being overwhelmed or shutting down inside.

'Social engagement' refers to the state of our autonomic nervous system in relationships and group situations when we're in optimal arousal. After millions of years of evolution of mammalian nervous systems, it enables us to engage with each other in fruitful and rewarding ways – including having an argument.

❖ left and right hemispheres

The left hemisphere is where we get stuck on a topic, the right is where we have a felt sense of the whole thing which, sooner or later, gets us unstuck.

The left talks a lot, the right experiences how things really feel.

left hemisphere	right hemisphere
cerebral	<i>embodied</i>
explicit	<i>implicit</i>
details	<i>context</i>
focused attention on a part	<i>global attention to the whole</i>
rationalising	<i>experiencing</i>
reacting	<i>listening and responding</i>
stale ideas	<i>fresh ideas</i>
going round in circles	<i>creative steps forward</i>

Right-left-right: is the natural flow of thinking and feeling. We start with the felt sense of the whole thing in the right hemisphere, something comes, then left joins in to make what's implicit explicit, and finally everything returns to the right to be digested so a new felt sense of the (now changed) whole thing can form.

in the felt sense zone

By this I mean a group or social space in which individuals can stay with their felt sense of what's being discussed – and return to it when they lose it. It's where we can listen to each other, reflect, express our thoughts and feelings freely, laugh, compromise, negotiate, make peace, float crazy ideas, and be playful.

Everyone has experience of being in a felt sense zone sometimes, so please add to my points here. It's all up for grabs!

❖ **say what you mean so others can understand what you mean**

On personal matters, sensing that something feels 'right' without trying to say what about it feels right may be fine. But on shared topics, one person's feeling of 'right' cuts little ice with others who want to know *why* it feels right.

So in group situations we need to make our case, state our argument. Then, others have something to chew over – to have a felt sense about, maybe agreeing or disagreeing or somewhere in between.

❖ **help others to stay in the zone**

We can treat others with respect when we disagree with them so we can continue to listen to them. Anger and aggression just stir up more anger and aggression. We all need to be emotional buffers for each other so we stay in our windows of tolerance.

❖ **when things get emotional**

We can tolerate strong feelings when they arise, supporting each other through emotional upheavals so they don't wreck the discussion. The topic itself may need to be put on hold for a time. The storm will pass, and the felt sense can return.

But: beware over-indulging feelings, your own or others', lest they take over.

❖ **criticism**

Being open to criticism, and being willing to criticise others – sensitively and in a spirit of support and friendship. So felt senses are touched but not crushed.

❖ **disagreements**

Groups work best if disagreement can be tolerated – a little danger amidst social engagement, arousal without flying completely outside our window of tolerance. We may feel frustrated with each other, but we can stay in the room and keep talking. Or take a break and then come back together when we've cooled down.

We can listen to others' views without losing our sense of our own position. People often disagree and later discover they don't disagree as much as they thought.

❖ **take a break**

It takes time to absorb what others are saying, mull it over, and think afresh. Taking a break, maybe doing something completely different for a while, then returning to see if a way forward is emerging that everyone can sign up to.

❖ **feed your felt sense with facts**

Focusing on public-world issues like climate change is a different kettle of fish from focusing on personal issues, since a lot turns on what we know and understand about them. Pronouncing on things we don't really understand can get us into trouble, and disinformation creates havoc (as we know).

creating a felt sense world

What enables people to connect with their felt sense of what's being discussed and what stops them from doing so? Here are some suggestions...

things that block felt senses

rushing
reacting
hostility
going too fast
jumping to conclusions
assuming you have understood
insisting you are understood
waffling
rambling on and on
bullshitting
making stuff up
repeating yourself
chanting slogans
getting aggressive
demanding immediate answers
getting angry
controlling behaviour
dominating behaviour
defensiveness
taking something personally
trying to solve problems
having to be right
forcing an outcome
rules
ignoring your feelings
over-relying on computers
judging others
shaming people
rigidity
anxiety

things that enable felt senses

pausing
listening and responding
friendliness
slowing things down
keeping an open mind
checking you have understood
tolerating being misunderstood
making specific points
being succinct
saying something meaningful
sitting with not knowing
saying something fresh
making proper arguments
having a sense of humour
being patient with self and others
expressing your feelings
letting go
giving way
vulnerability
making something personal
being patient so solutions can emerge
being willing to be wrong
sleeping on it
guidelines
trusting your feelings
trusting people – and yourself
withholding judgement
being careful not to shame people
flexibility
social engagement

And so on and so forth – please add what you've learnt from your own experience!

felt-sensitive approaches to group discussion

Approaches to group discussion that help people to stay in the felt sense zone...

❖ **appreciative enquiry**

Similar to focusing in a small group, but each person reflects on the same topic. For instance, what is most meaningful to you around climate change?

Divide the time equally, and take turns to be speaker, listener, and observer. The listener reflects, the observer writes down key points the speaker makes. At the end, the speaker receives these points and jots down anything else that came.

A large group can break up into sub-groups to consider the topic, and come back together to share key points. A good written record of what is said may be useful.

❖ **felt sense dialogue**

Some suggestions for how groups can dialogue on a shared topic of interest, even where the topic is contentious and provokes strong feelings and disagreement...

A good starting place is the approach to dialogue developed by the British physicist David Bohm – ‘Bohm dialogue’ is a thing. It’s described as “an enquiry into the movement of feeling and of thought”... that’s like a flowing stream where the water bounces off the river banks, finds its way around rocks, absorbing oxygen and being purified as it does so. The principles of this approach to dialogue are:

- the group starts with no predefined purpose or goal
- everyone is asked to suspend judgement and to be as honest as they can
- group members aim to listen to others and build on each other’s ideas

Instead of persuading others that you’re right and they’re wrong, you work together to create something new. Using a talking stick (or stone or whatever) maintains a discipline in talking – one person at a time, with pauses in between speakers.

The dialogue can start with going round the group so everyone says something at the beginning. Then people speak when they wish by picking up the talking stick.

❖ **dynamic facilitation**

This is also a thing. See: dynamicfacilitation.com

What has impressed me when I have experienced it is recording key things that are said in a group discussion by separating them into four threads. The standard four are problems, concerns, data and solutions. Or how about:

feelings	attitudes	dilemmas	good ideas
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Other possible threads are facts, disagreements, pitfalls, action steps, etc.

❖ **other approaches to group dialogue and discussion**

Art of Hosting	artofhosting.org
The Circle Way	thecircleway.net
Open space technology	openspaceworld.org
World Café	theworldcafe.com

things said about climate change

Some things some well-known people have said...

"I've starred in a lot of science fiction movies and, let me tell you something, climate change is not science fiction." *Arnold Schwarzenegger*

"The problem is the speed at which things are changing." *Bill Nye*

"Human exploitation of the planet is reaching a critical limit. But human demands and expectations are ever-increasing." *Stephen Hawking*

"We really need to kick the carbon habit and stop making our energy from burning things." *Sir David Attenborough*

"At the end of the Fossil Fuel Era, we are emerging to a new reality. We are ready to make the next leap." *Elizabeth May*

"Climate change... is the most urgent threat facing our entire species and we need to work collectively together and stop procrastinating." *Leonardo Di Caprio*

"Climate change is the greatest threat to our existence in our short history on this planet. Nobody's going to buy their way out of its effects." *Mark Ruffalo*

"It's important for me to have hope because that's my job as a parent, to have hope, for my kids, that we're not going to leave them in a world that's a chaotic place."
James Cameron

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."
Native American Proverb

"For young people, climate change is bigger than election or re-election. It's life or death." *Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*

"I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic." *Greta Thunberg*

"We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it." *Barack Obama*

"Believe in the power of your own voice. The more noise you make... the more our world will change for the better." *Al Gore*

"Addressing the climate challenge presents a golden opportunity to promote prosperity, security and a brighter future for all." *Ban Ki-Moon*

"The world is reaching the tipping point beyond which climate change may become irreversible." *Kofi Annan*

"What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make." *Dr Jane Goodall*

"I prefer to be optimistic, it feels better." *The Dalai Lama*

