

Hemisphere patterns and Gendlin's best idea: felt sense

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I first met Focusing in 1984 on a 'self-transformations' course in Sydney, Australia. I didn't get it: what was this 'felt sense', all weird and mysterious yet promising to resolve my personal issues? It took me the next two years to learn Focusing. And then I realised I had often followed my felt sense as I found my way in the world, sometimes taking the road less travelled.

Fast forward to 1999, and a book *The Feeling of What Happens* fell off a shelf in a bookshop into my hands. Having practiced and taught Focusing for some years by this time, the title drew me in. It was by Antonio Damasio, a big name in neuroscience who, in his own way, was writing about the felt sense. He distinguished emotion, feeling, and 'the feeling of a feeling – the feeling of what happens' which sounded like Gendlin's idea of the felt sense.

I then delved into neuroscience. My experience of Focusing helped me to understand this complex subject, and the science-based perspective on feelings, felt sense, and the body was more my cup of tea than Gendlin's philosophical one.

To understand better what we mean by felt sense, we need to look to the brain as well as the body. We have Gendlin's philosophical take, we have our personal experience of Focusing – and now we have a third perspective, that of neuroscience and our biology. There's a lot of interesting stuff here.

Gendlin's concept of felt sense is his best idea! It's a fundamental part of our human experience, and the neuroscience angle on it may open doors to getting it out into the world in new ways.

What Gendlin said about the felt sense

You can't define felt sense. You can only point at the experience of this aspect of feeling and sensing, and let people find it inside for themselves.

"There are no ready-made words to describe it", Gendlin writes, "and I have had to coin my own term: felt sense". His attempts to describe the felt sense are gloriously confusing: having said it's "the holistic, unclear sense of the whole thing... murky, fuzzy, vague", he goes on to say it's an "internal aura" and we should "think of it as a taste... or a great musical chord" for it "contains a maze of meanings, a whole texture of facets, a Persian rug of patterning". Puzzled?

One major cause of confusion is whether the felt sense has to be a physical sensation. On the one hand, he says it "occurs bodily, as a physical, somatic sensation... in the viscera or the chest or throat, some specific place usually in the middle of the body". While on the other hand, he says "it is a special kind of bodily sensation... not... tight muscles... a tickle or a pain".

So what is this special kind of bodily sensation that is also like a musical chord containing a Persian rug of patterning? Gendlin's understanding of the felt sense probably went all the way back to his childhood when he left Vienna with his family to make the dangerous journey to Rotterdam to board a ship for the USA. In an interview with Lore Korbei, he spoke about one part of the journey:

My father went into a room with a man, and I waited maybe for a quarter of an hour. When my father came out, he was pale and said "let's go". Outside, he explained that he could not trust this man. My father said that his feeling had said "no" to him. My father had already said this many times: "I follow my feeling." But this time I did not understand his trusting his feelings. We were in a strange city and without any way out. We had put all our hopes on "the address", and now this hope was destroyed, only because of what he had "felt".

I was surprised then, and often asked myself what kind of feeling it is that tells you something. Sometimes I tried to find such a feeling within myself, but I could not. But I had started to look for it and eventually this had an effect. Forty years later when I was asked how I could discover focusing, I remembered these circumstances.'

No mention here of a physical sensation. Maybe his father noticed one, maybe he didn't – it doesn't matter. He had a felt sense which guided him, successfully as it turned out.

I said you can't define 'felt sense', but with neuroscience you can: it's the way your right hemisphere perceives the whole situation you are engaged in. I'll explain.

Gendlin's 'body' is the right hemisphere!

Heresy! But when Gendlin talks about the body, he doesn't always mean the literal, physical body. This reflects neuroscience: as well as the physical body, the brain has neural maps of the body – the

body in the brain. Because the brain's first job is to look after the body of which it is a part. So we have a 'neurosymbolic' body as well as a physical body.

And why not look to the brain as well as the body? Gendlin says "a felt sense is body and mind before they are split apart". It's the left hemisphere that does the splitting. In the right hemisphere, they live together as an ensemble. And to find our felt sense, it helps if we place our attention inside our body – this shifts our centre of gravity into our right hemisphere, as I'll explain.

While the right hemisphere forms an ensemble with the body, the left hemisphere doesn't. Herein lies a problem: we try to understand things conceptually with our left hemisphere. But you can't understand your right hemisphere with your left. To understand your right, you have to reflect on your inner experience of your mind doing all the different things it does. The experience of Focusing helps a lot with this. Alternatively, you need to read Gendlin's *A Process Model!*

Gendlin was describing the natural processes of the right hemisphere before neuroscience was able to. He wrote from a right hemisphere place – his genius – which is why his writing is both difficult to read and yet profoundly illuminating. It was only towards the end of his life that he became interested in neuroscience, after (I think) someone told him to read Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary* which goes into depth about the difference between the hemispheres.

The left hemisphere likes to ignore the body so it can look at details in the foreground. In the background, the right hemisphere weaves the inner world of the body together with what's happening in the environment. The felt sense arises naturally in the flow of experiencing in the right.

The hemispheres are anatomically separate, although a few percent of neurons in each are joined by the corpus callosum. They are asymmetrical in size, shape, neurochemistry, and neural pathways – the right hemisphere has more long-distance connections, the left has more short distance ones.

These differences between the hemispheres are small, but Mother Nature exploits asymmetries for evolutionary advantage, and the human brain has taken this asymmetry a long way. Brain lateralisation explains a lot of human psychology – almost everything, maybe!

Ten things about the right hemisphere

And the contrast with the left hemisphere...

1. The right hemisphere is dominant for global attention

'Global attention' is our background awareness of the world around us and the inner world of the body. Context.

The left hemisphere is dominant for our focused (usual use of the word) attention to whatever is foreground. Details.

For example: computers, smartphones, emails, social media all demand focused attention, but when we are focusing we use global attention to notice what's happening inside us. Or when we go for a nice long walk in nature. These activities feel quite different, don't they?

Think evolution. A creature needs focused attention to catch and eat prey (or plants) while simultaneously using global attention to be alert to any predator wanting to eat *it*. Predator and prey. Two hemispheres with different modes of attention enable you to eat without being eaten.

2. The right hemisphere experiences reality – presence

The right hemisphere feels what's happening, in us and around us, whether we're aware of it or not. Our felt experiencing. By contrast, the left hemisphere is where we *re-present* our experience in words, concepts, theories, systems of thought. Representation. We're prone to mistaking our verbal representations for the reality of our presence and lived experiencing.

The left hemisphere needs to be embedded in the bodily reality of the right hemisphere. They can come apart all too easily. Our felt sense can keep our mental life embedded in our body.

Iain McGilchrist: "the single most profound difference between the hemispheres... is the distinction between the experience of something as it 'presences' to us in the right hemisphere, and as it is 're-presented' to us in the left."

3. The right hemisphere notices what doesn't seem right

Although the left hemisphere dominates for examining details, the right is where we notice a detail that doesn't look right. Something odd that doesn't fit, a discrepancy, a felt sense of 'something's

not right here'. Peripheral vision is a good example – we see something at the edge of our awareness. We can ignore what doesn't seem right, or we can take it seriously and look into it.

4. The right hemisphere is the 'wholistic' hemisphere

This is due to the right hemisphere's advantage in long distance connections which mean it's more interconnected within itself. This is why, in Focusing, a felt sense can lead to a surprising image or a memory or a new feeling or a fresh thought. The left hemisphere's advantage is in short distance connections, making it more modular for specific functions – such as speaking in grammatical sentences. So: left for step-by-step logical thinking, right for allowing something new to emerge.

5. The right hemisphere and the body form an ensemble

The right hemisphere's advantage in long distance connections also give it 'richer connectivity' with the lower, evolutionarily older, (subcortical) areas of the brain that are closer to the body. The difference with the left is small but significant enough for evolution to have kept the right closer to the body and the left more separate.

If we spend too much time in left hemisphere dominant activities, we may feel cut off from our body, disconnected. Engaging in an activity that leans more to the right, such as Focusing, we tend to feel more connected, more centred and grounded. For the left hemisphere "I have a body", whereas for the right "I am my body" – the right brain-body ensemble.

6. The right hemisphere keeps the body in sync with the environment

In the background, the right hemisphere keeps your breathing and heart rate, and a lot else, in sync with what's happening around you. So you don't have to bother with this.

For example, when you speak, your heart rate needs to speed up a little as more energy is needed. When you listen, it needs to slow down a little – otherwise listening becomes hard or even impossible. You may have noticed this in some people – their heart rate prevents their listening.

7. The right hemisphere is dominant for interoception

The body signals what's going on inside back to the brain – heart, breathing, gut, blood, hormones, and a lot more. It all contributes to your inner sense of how you are inside – your interoceptive sense. While each hemisphere maps the periphery of the contralateral side of the body, only the right has a full map that includes the viscera and internal milieu.

Interoception happens in the background, but when we turn attention within, it becomes foreground. It feeds into our felt sense. Whether or not it includes a distinct physical sensation, such as a tight muscle, the right hemisphere has a dynamic picture of the inner state of the body.

This inner bodily state is continually in flux in response to changes in the environment and in our mind. The left hemisphere likes order and stability, the right hemisphere likes the flow of experiencing. So when we look within, sooner or later, something changes. In this, you can trust!

8. The right hemisphere triggers emotional arousal in the body

An aspect of keeping the body in sync with the environment is that the right hemisphere triggers emotional reactions and states, whether we (left hemisphere) like it or not – anger, grief, fear, joy, and so forth. Then we feel the emotion in our body.

The left hemisphere often suppresses emotion to deal with whatever is foreground. It may inhibit signals from the right, ignoring its contribution to mental life – not always a good idea.

9. The right hemisphere is the centre for painful feelings and traumatic experience

If we suppress our emotional reactions, something of them remains. In Focusing, having turned attention into the body and therefore the right hemisphere, we often run into old painful feelings.

The right hemisphere keeps feeling and thinking, mind and body, integrated into a whole. But during a traumatic experience, integration becomes fragmentation, which is why it's traumatic. We don't function normally. If the trauma remains unresolved, aspects of it are re-enacted when we're triggered. People are often drawn to Focusing to resolve old trauma, and taking attention into the body may lead to our encountering old trauma – which is why safety is so important in Focusing.

10. The right hemisphere is the source of fresh stuff

The associative nature of the right hemisphere, and its being in a flow state as body and environment change, means that it's a good place for fresh thinking, new feelings, good ideas and

so forth to arise. Then the left hemisphere is needed to make what is implicit in this fresh stuff explicit – to manifest our creativity in the world.

The felt sense is everywhere – except where it isn't

Felt experiencing is always there in the background, and we can refer to our felt sense of what's happening inside as we go about our life and work. Gendlin said that the felt sense forms, but I think the felt sense is already there and it takes the left hemisphere a few moments to tune into the right. You don't need to have learnt Focusing: everyone has a felt sense – or *can* have a felt sense. Focusers don't have a monopoly on it.

Sometimes there's no felt sense. When we're overcome with emotion, we have to wait for it to subside to have a sense of the whole situation. Also, in severe depression. And when we suffer a traumatic experience, when the integration of mind and body breaks down.

Depth vs. breadth. In Focusing, we can go deep. We have time, space, and often a willing listener. But we can also touch into our felt sense of a situation that's closer to the surface at any time, without going deeply into it. The less-deep felt sense has potential breadth: any place, any situation, any time. And someone who hasn't learnt Focusing can do this – and maybe they already do.

The felt sense is often invisible. When people are centred in their felt sense and allow others the time and space to stay centred in theirs', the outcome is often a good one. A friendly approach. Steps forward. Feelings shift. Good ideas. Fresh thinking. Peace. People hone in on the content that emerges and may not notice the process in the background that allows it to emerge.

Gut feelings, intuition, hunches, funny feelings, inklings, instincts... there are many ways in the English language that people refer to their felt sense. We can never know for sure whether someone is speaking or acting from a felt sense, but there are clues – pauses, reflection, listening, not rushing. We can have a felt sense of someone being centred in their felt sense.

Also, these words are left hemisphere representations. They may or may not be a good representation of a person's actual inner experience.

Examples of the presence of the felt sense

All sorts of people lean into their right hemisphere and brain-body ensemble, and refer to their felt sense, in all sorts of scenarios and situations. Here are some examples I've collected recently.

Take mountaineering. Here's a climber who had a narrow escape in the Himalayas. She went climbing despite her 'gut instinct' that it didn't feel right. If she hadn't been bundled into a helicopter to come down from the mountain one day, she would have been in it the next day when it crashed, killing everyone on board...

Since then, I have learned to listen to my gut, no matter what. ... I have also learned that fear and intuition are not the same thing. Fear shouts and wants you to stop; gut instinct is often quieter and doesn't always explain itself. It just asks you to pay attention.

Or artists. Here's English artist Grayson Perry on his creative process...

My visions are usually a vague, blurry golden mist at the back of my mind, a certain tone or atmosphere that I want to conjure up. During the process of making, that gradually comes into focus, with all of the inevitable disappointment. The creative process is one of controlled disappointment, because the nature of inspiration is that it's vague. I get towards finishing a piece and it's not exactly what I hoped it would be, but it's good.

And musicians. Paul McCartney says of song-writing where, obviously, he tunes into his felt sense, "*I don't particularly know what's going to come out*".

Scientists too turn to their felt sense to make progress...

"science-in-practice is often driven by hunches and vague impressions", say Yale psychologists Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil

"scientists... hypotheses appear in their minds along uncharted by-ways of thought... they are imaginative and inspirational in character... they are indeed adventures of the mind", says biologist Peter Medawar

"we could clearly sense that he had reached his results not so much by calculation and demonstration as by intuition and inspiration, and that he found it difficult to justify his findings", said Werner Heisenberg of the physicist Niels Bohr

And even an English Premier League football manager...

That intuition... is based on years of observation and experience. But that capacity to smell the game, not only to understand the technical detail but to ride and shape the shifting emotional dynamics of the occasion, often seems overlooked. That is not a way of thinking much enjoyed by modern football. It likes statistics and provables. But sometimes, football – life – is about feel, sensing the moment and seizing it.

Note the rich language used to describe felt senses – left hemisphere representations of right hemisphere experiencing.

Examples of the absence of the felt sense

It's easy to spot felt senses in the above examples. But can we also spot the absence of the felt sense in the public domain? I think we can. Although we never really know without being present with the person, we can sometimes hazard a good guess. Doing so sheds light on the things that get in the way of the felt sense.

In the political sphere... an example comes from a British Labour MP, Jon Cruddas, who says the Iraq war in 2003 had a corrosive effect on Tony Blair's government. But he didn't oppose it when it came to a vote in Parliament and he could have done:

I had a sense of foreboding, but I had a loyalty to Blair. I had loads of family on all the marches. Every single one of them was against it. And I regret it. It was tragic.

His loyalty overcame his felt sense.

In President Obama's White House in 2013... a TV documentary about the failure of the USA to intervene in Syria after Assad used chemical weapons against his own people, despite Obama having said their use would be a red line which left everyone expecting a US intervention, contains striking examples of Obama's inability to get a handle on his felt sense of the situation and act on it. The outcome: Putin waded in, joined in the bombing, and felt emboldened to intervene outside Russia in the years that followed. Here's what Obama's Syria outreach coordinator, Wael Alzayat, said about it:

We spun ourselves around the axle on this, just over-thought, over-analysed, over-played-out the scenarios to a point of paralysis.

Over-analysing something is of course a left hemisphere phenomenon, whereas imagination and courage, which emerge from a felt sense, require the participation of the right.

Moving on to the current US president... here's Abigail Disney, grand-niece of Walt Disney and a Democrat, responding to Trump and his cutting off aid to the poor...

That natural human proclivity to say 'hmm... that doesn't feel right' – he doesn't have it.

Finally... an American writer on the way social media is an obstacle to listening to the felt sense:

We have a country full of megaphones, a crushing wall of sound, the swirling lights of a 24/7 casino blinking at us, all part of a system minutely engineered to take our attention away from us for profit. Under these conditions, anything resembling democratic deliberation seems not only impossible but increasingly absurd, like trying to meditate in a strip club.

Too much messaging and not enough deliberation means... no felt sense.

There are probably many, many ways that the felt sense gets squashed, side-lined, and ignored in the public domain – leading to bad outcomes.

In the felt sense zone

By felt sense 'zone', I mean a group or work or social space where people, whether focusers or non-focusers, can be anchored in their felt sense and help others to be anchored in theirs'.

In the Focusing world, we know a lot about how to do this: creating a safe space for everyone, pausing, felt sensing, listening, reflecting, checking we've heard correctly, welcoming feelings.

We can go further. Using humour to lighten the discussion. Not having to get it right. Taking breaks so people have time to mull things over. Being open to new ideas, no matter how seemingly weird or unworkable. Making space for dissent (there's no such thing as a group felt sense). When things get heated and people argue, returning to a place where the felt sense can be present again. Being careful not to shame others, or gang up on the person who sees things differently. Allowing for small steps forward rather than desperately seeking solutions.

Many things that help people stay in the felt sense zone, and return to it when they fall out into other emotional places, are perfectly normal ways of engaging with others in respectful ways. But knowing about the felt sense enables us to refine these. How about the following that don't get much of a mention in Focusing circles:

- feeding your felt sense with facts and others' viewpoints – having an *informed* felt sense
- saying something that makes others *think* – simply saying what you *feel* is right is not enough, try to say what it is that feels right so they can resonate it with their felt sense
- making your point as clearly as you can – fast felt sensing to let a sentence or two come that communicates what you believe is important or significant
- being an emotional buffer for others, tolerating their strong feelings, cutting them some slack – rather than instantly reacting
- zooming out to take in more: as we hear and learn more about something, we can make space for the more and widen the field of our felt sense
- designing in some 'tension of the opposites': to draw out what is implicit in individuals' felt experience and felt knowing in a group, it can be more productive to have a debate between opposing sides than try to create a feel-good group uniformity – this reflects our left and right hemispheres which complement each other and which can compete and co-operate at the same time (for example: in an organisation, having a chief executive and a chairperson who can work together *and* challenge each other)
- finally: our felt sense is not only of ourselves, it is of those we interact with, and of the natural world we inhabit – we can broaden our focus to include them

There are many more things about being and working together in a felt-sensitive way. They can be a challenge to put into practice – especially as we are often so anxious to say what *we* want to say!

Conclusion: point to the presence of the felt sense, and point to its absence

The felt sense is Gendlin's best idea: it takes us into the embodied mind of the right hemisphere. It may or may not come with a physical sensation, but it does require our attention to be centred – and centred means centred in the body. Felt sense and right hemisphere help to balance the brain, especially in our modern human world that is so lost in the left hemisphere.

Felt sense is a concept anyone can reflect on – you don't just 'get' it and that's it, you have to keep coming back to it, sensing into your felt sense to appreciate what Gendlin meant by 'felt sense'. And to the significance of the right hemisphere's natural capacity for sensing the whole of a situation – and the left hemisphere's predilection for ignoring what it doesn't see and not realising it's not seeing it. The concept comes with a practice – felt sensing – that anyone can do. The felt sense can be a touchstone for everyone in our participation in the human drama of the big world out there.

Focusing with a small 'f', the natural felt sensing that Gendlin began with, is not so special and different from what plenty of non-focusers do – it's everywhere, except where it isn't. It's what the right hemisphere does naturally when nothing gets in the way. The problem comes when it goes out the window and we don't even realise it's gone. So: 'let's pause and take all this in', 'use your whole brain! both hemispheres', 'let's take a step back and look at the whole thing afresh'.

Can the felt sense help the human race to find its way forwards? We can sometimes sense its presence out there, but more often we probably notice its absence. Whether it is present or absent can make the difference between good and bad outcomes in human affairs.

And human affairs are not doing very well, overall. Wars, inequality, pollution, damage and destruction of the natural world. And climate change, that threatens damage we can never put right. We need all the help we can get, so let's get the concept of the felt sense out there into the world!

Participating in life from our felt sense seems to require some mental energy and resolve. The line of least resistance is often to ignore it and just go with the herd. Gendlin's father didn't do this, Gendlin didn't do this, and nor should we.