

Hemisphere theory 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 thing, promising to resolve my personal issues, but weird and mysterious? It took me two years to learn Focusing. 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 1997 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 and, in his own way, he was writing about the felt sense. He distinguished emotion, feeling, and 'the feeling of a feeling – the feeling of what happens' – another way to say '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 and felt sense sat more easily with me 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, named for the first time.

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 explain the felt sense are gloriously unclear: having described it as "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 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 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. Perhaps it doesn't matter. A felt sense can come as a physical sensation or just 'a feeling'.

I said you can't define 'felt sense', but with neuroscience you can: it's the way the whole situation I am engaged with sits in my right hemisphere. 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.

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 separates body and mind. In the right hemisphere, they come together as an ensemble. The point is that to find our felt sense, it helps if we place our attention inside our body – this orients us towards our right hemisphere, as I'll explain.

The right hemisphere forms an ensemble with the body. The left hemisphere doesn't – and that's where the trouble starts. We inevitably try to understand things conceptually with our left hemisphere, but you can't understand your right hemisphere with your left hemisphere. You need to reflect on your inner experience of your mind to appreciate your 'right brain-body ensemble'. The experience of Focusing helps a lot with this.

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 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 one are joined by the corpus callosum. They are asymmetrical in size, shape, neurochemistry, and neural pathways – the right hemisphere has more long distance connections than the left which has more short distance ones.

The differences between the hemispheres are small, but Mother nature exploits asymmetries for evolutionary gain. The human brain has taken this a long way. Brain lateralisation explains a lot of human psychology – maybe nearly everything!

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 an aspect of whatever is foreground. Details.

For example: computers, phones, emails, social media all demand focused attention, but when we do Focusing we use global attention to notice whatever is there inside. Or when we go for a nice long walk in nature. These activities feel quite different, do they not?

Think evolution. A creature needs focused attention to catch and eat prey 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 represent our experience in words, concepts, theories, systems of thought. Re-presentation. We're prone to mistaking the map for the territory – our languaged world for our inner world of lived experience.

The left hemisphere needs to be embedded in the bodily reality of the right hemisphere. Our mental life needs to be embedded in our felt experiencing via the felt sense, because they can come apart all too easily.

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 is dominant for examining details, the right is where we notice a detail that doesn't look right. Something odd that doesn't fit the big picture, a discrepancy, a felt

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

4. the right hemisphere is the 'wholistic' hemisphere

This is due to the right hemisphere's advantage in long distance connections – it's more interconnected within itself. This explains 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 constructing grammatical sentences. So: left for 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, areas of the brain that are closer to the body. The difference is small but significant enough for evolution to have kept this hemisphere closer to the body and the left more separate.

Spending too much time in left hemisphere dominant activities, we may feel cut off from our body, disconnected. Turning attention to a more right hemisphere activity, such as Focusing, we are likely to feel more connected, 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 syncing doesn't work well.

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 is mainly in the background, but when we turn attention within, it becomes foreground. It enables us to have a felt sense. Whether or not it includes a physical sensation, such as a tight muscle, the right hemisphere has a dynamic picture of the inner state of the body.

What happens in the body is always changing 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, something changes, sooner or later. 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 like it or not – anger, grief, fear, joy, and so forth. Then we feel the emotion in our body.

The left hemisphere is prone to suppressing emotion so that it can get on with whatever it is focused on. 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, this integration stops, 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 as a way to resolve old trauma, and taking attention into the body is likely to 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 flow 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 daily life and ordinary human activities. Gendlin said that the felt sense forms, but I think the felt sense is already there and it takes our left hemisphere a moment or two to tune into our right. And 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 the emotion to subside to have a sense of the whole situation. Also, in depression. And when we suffer traumatic experience, when the integration of mind and body comes to a halt.

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 more on the surface at any time, without going deeply into it. This way, the less-deep felt sense has breadth, any place, any situation, any time. And someone who hasn't learnt Focusing can do this – and maybe they do.

The felt sense is often invisible. When people listen to their felt sense and allow others the time and space to listen to their felt sense, 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 coming from their felt sense.

The other thing that happens is left hemisphere representation: these words for felt senses are just that, words. They may or may not be a good representation of a person's actual inner experience.

And... when we move from personal inner life into situations in the public domain, we need to be informed. Collecting facts, listening to different viewpoints, and then returning to the felt sense.

Examples of the presence of the felt sense

It's easy to find examples of all sorts of people leaning into their right hemisphere, their right brain-body ensemble, and referring to a felt sense.

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.

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 in words – 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 suspect we can. Although we never really know without being present with the speaker, we can sometimes hazard a good guess.

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, placing loyalty above felt sense: *"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."*

In President Obama's White House in 2013... A TV documentary about the failure of the USA to intervene in Syria after Assad started using 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 left hemisphere paralysis and Obama's inability to get a handle on a felt sense of the situation and do something. The outcome: Putin waded in, joined in the bombing, and felt emboldened to intervene outside Russia in the years that followed...

"What is the tool in the toolbox that will help prevent people being tortured like this?" Obama asks his staff. He didn't find one. Tools are associated with the left hemisphere, not the right with its capacity to let a felt sense emerge.

"She was his bad conscience," says someone of Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the United Nations at the time, who disagreed with Obama. Conscience arises in the right hemisphere – Gendlin links it to the felt sense

"The mistakes were allowing our fear of the unknown to prevent us from doing what is right," Samantha Power continues. This sounds like left hemispheres prevailed: doing what we know is morally right requires leaning into the right hemisphere, where we have a felt sense of what is right and what is not right. The right hemisphere is better than the left at dealing with unknowns.

"We spun ourselves around the axle on this, just over-thought, over-analysed, over-played-out the scenarios to a point of paralysis," says Wael Alzayat, Obama's Syria outreach coordinator. Over-thinking and over-analysing is what left hemispheres do, 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, a Democrat and a member of Patriotic Millionaires who advocate taxing the rich, 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... a 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.

While we're here, a wondering...

I have some other examples from the political world that leave me curious whether our leaders are talking about their felt sense or not. George W Bush famously said about the 2003 Iraq war, *"my gut instinct told me to invade Iraq"*. Of the same dreadful war, Tony Blair still says *"I joined in the war"*

because it felt right". And now with the Iran war, Trump is reported to have said that he started it because he had "a feeling" that Iran was preparing to attack the USA. And later, asked when the war will be over, he replied "when I feel it in my bones".

Arghh! What are we to make of these statements? Are these politicians fooling themselves and us that they are listening to their gut feelings and felt senses when they are really just entrenched in a position they are trying to justify? Or are they bemused by the complexities of these situations and resorting to an ill-informed felt sense? For sure, while listening to your felt sense is a good thing to do, what emerges is not always perfection. And the felt sense is not a divine oracle.

Perhaps the point here is that it's not so much about having a felt sense of a situation but more about what you then do with it – hang out with it for a while, look around at the edge of awareness, check out what comes with others, allow it to unfold a little...

In the felt sense zone

By felt sense 'zone', I mean a shared space where people, whether focusers or non-focusers, are able to stay in touch with their felt sense of what they are working on together.

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 someone correctly, making a space for people's feelings, making a space for whatever is at the edge of awareness to emerge.

I think we can go further. Creating a friendly atmosphere that supports people in speaking from their felt sense. Use of humour. Allowing time and space for people to mull things over. Being open to new ideas, even if they sound weird or unworkable. Making a space for dissent (there's no such thing as a group felt sense). When things get heated and people argue, being careful to return to a place where the felt sense can be present again. Looking out for bad group dynamics, such as shaming, scapegoating, uniting against one person with a different view. Looking out for steps forward, rather than desperately seeking solutions. Feeding felt senses with facts. Not having to get it right.

This isn't always easy in a group, because we are so anxious to say what *we* want to say!

Conclusions

The felt sense is Gendlin's best idea: it's the easiest way into the embodied mind of the right hemisphere. Felt sense and right hemisphere help to balance the brain.

It's a breakthrough in understanding human psychology. 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 what it really is, and to the significance of the right hemisphere's natural capacity for sensing the whole of a situation.

It's a concept that comes wrapped up in a practice – felt sensing – that anyone can do. The felt sense is an inner point of reference, a touchstone for anyone and everyone. In our personal lives, and in our participation in the human drama of the big world out there.

Can the felt sense help us find our way forwards? On an individual level, focusers will say that it does. And on the collective level, can it 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 to tear our world and our lives apart in a way that we cannot put right. We need all the help we can get, so let's get 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.

Peter Afford
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peter@focusing.co.uk