

Organising the world around the felt sense

notes of 2021 TIFI highlight

the felt sense as an organising principle

a principle that we might adopt for how we live and work together, and how we approach the big problem of our time – climate change

When I first came across focusing, I found my feelings by placing my attention in my body and letting what was happening there ‘come’ to me. Now, I also let my mind ‘come’ to me by placing my attention in my body: sometimes something comes, sometimes nothing comes and I have to be patient, I wait for my felt sense to speak to me. In my personal life, everything I know is within, but if I do something with other people I have to let their thoughts and feelings into my felt sense. And when I think about climate change, I read the newspaper, watch the TV news, and observe the weather and what’s happening in my garden, to get a felt sense of it.

an invitation to expand your understanding of the felt sense to include other people and the natural world, as well as your body

my invitation to you – I want to start a conversation

the felt sense beyond the practice of focusing is already well known e.g. the focusing attitude, pausing, listening

will it help to get the felt sense out into the world as a concept, even if people misunderstand it at first, to encourage them to think about what *their* felt sense really is?

the felt sense is a brilliant concept that opens up an aspect of being human that has been written about by many people...

the genius of Gene Gendlin

others may have written about what we call the felt sense, but it took Gendlin’s genius to name it – he wrote...

“there are no ready-made words to describe it, and I have had to coin my own term: felt sense”

In the focusing world, our understanding of the felt sense comes from our personal experience and Gendlin’s philosophical approach. Now we can understand it also in neuroscience terms, which gives us an interesting new take on the concept of felt sense, and it’s also a way we can link up with the world of science out there.

the felt sense is the natural state of one half of your brain...

let’s get biological – neurobiological!

the image is of the brain from above: it’s clearly divided in two

the right hemisphere forms an ensemble with the body

it triggers emotional arousal in the body and the brain, and it maps the inner state of the body – whereas...

the left hemisphere can stand aside from the body

when it co-operates with the right, we can feel centred in our body, but when it shuts out the right, we can feel disconnected from our body

NB. we try to understand the right hemisphere with our left, but it’s impossible! we have to *experience* our right hemisphere, which we all do

the three big left hemisphere – right hemisphere contrasts:

focused attention – global attention

detail – context

foreground – background

we have two bodies!

our physical body

and...

the whole body (inner and outer) that is mapped in our brain

especially in the right hemisphere

e.g. transgender phenomena: the physical body doesn't match the genetically-expected body in the brain, so the person feels intense discomfort

viscera and internal milieu

refer to the organs and everything sloshing around inside the body, as distinct from the body we observe from the outside

interoception

is our inner sense of the body from within, the viscera and internal milieu (heart, lungs, gut etc.), as distinct from our five outer senses

we have to turn our attention to our right hemisphere to find our interoceptive sense

the inner world of the right hemisphere

we all know this world, our inner world and psyche, from our personal experience, and much has been written about it from a poetic, philosophical and spiritual perspective – now we can add the neuroscience picture of it

the 'wholistic' hemisphere

the right hemisphere is more interconnected amongst its different areas than the left which is more 'modular'

it keeps our inner world, that includes the body, aligned with the outer world, that includes other people and the natural world

it does this in the background, all the time – we would be in big trouble without it

the body: heart rate, breathing, digestion etc.

other people: resonance, attunement, empathy, taking turns to speak and listen etc.

the natural world: awe, wonder, taking it in, feeling at one with it, noticing little details, sensitivity, etc.

it's constantly changing, unstable, in process

unlike the left hemisphere which wants to pin things down

hence: complexity, chaos, creativity – all are aspects of the right hemisphere

it sees the world afresh, moment by moment

if we want our experience to change, we must let go to our right hemisphere world – this is the world of the felt sense

the felt sense of the whole situation is always present (except when it isn't)

we need a little time for the focused attention of our left hemisphere to attune to the felt sense in our right and to what is present in its global attention

however, we don't have a felt sense when we are hyper-aroused, traumatised, depressed etc. – we first need to recover from these states, then our felt sense returns

felt sense

a term coined by Gendlin from his personal experience and the research at Chicago University he was involved in back in the 1950s

in an interview with Lore Korbei, written up and translated from German as 'Escape from Austria', Gendlin tells the story of his family's journey from Vienna and the Nazis across Europe to board a ship to the USA – they arrive in Cologne where his father has the address of someone who was meant to help them on the next stage of their dangerous journey to Holland...

'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.'

afterwards, his father did get train tickets to Holland and they made it to Amsterdam, and from there they went to a port and boarded a ship to New York (I think this is the story)

in his disappointment, Gendlin's left hemisphere tried to understand his father's "feeling" and couldn't – it took him a long time to understand, and for that he needed his right hemisphere too i.e. his own experience of something feeling right or not right

Gendlin's moving story (he was a young boy at the time) tells us much of what we need to know about the felt sense...

felt sense

our felt sense (in our right hemisphere) is always available when we (we may be busy with our left hemisphere) are centred in ourselves – it is often a response to someone or to something that happens, and we don't always need to spend a long time focusing in order to listen to it

vs. physical sensations

the felt sense does not have to involve a lengthy expedition through the labyrinth of our bodies, but it does help to have our awareness centred in our body (which is mapped in our right hemisphere)

vs. our feelings

we may call a felt sense 'a feeling', but it's not a feeling that comes with a common emotional label – it's simply "my feeling" or "my sense"

nevertheless, it's one sort of feeling, and to notice it, it helps to welcome *all* our feelings and emotions – and others' feelings and emotions

we can have a felt sense *of* each feeling and emotion e.g. we may have a felt sense of the authenticity of a feeling that we express or someone else expresses

we have a choice whether we trust our felt sense

in such a situation as Gendlin's father faced, the left hemisphere might say "OK, something doesn't feel right here, but I have to get my family out of here so I will ignore the feeling" i.e. it argues its way out of the felt sense by rationalising it away

the felt sense is about the whole situation and to go with it we have to trust it

the depth of our felt sense: inwardness

in focusing, we dive deep, take plenty of time, and allow what's inside to unfold, sometimes having profound experiences in doing so

but we can also listen to our felt sense in the midst of daily life – a less profound experience maybe, but a pragmatic one of including our 'inner wisdom'

breadth of felt sense: outer world

the more extensive our outer life is, the more extensive the inner world of our felt sense

doing things I don't feel like doing

to do the things I want to do in my life, even to have a fulfilling life with rewarding work, I sometimes have to do things I don't 'feel' like doing (the older I get, the clearer this is!)

what is the role of the felt sense in this: is it that my feeling is not to do something but my felt sense is to do it? e.g. speaking to someone about an issue that makes me uncomfortable and that I would rather avoid, but I 'know' it's the 'right' thing to do

the felt sense doesn't attract attention

when things are organised around someone's felt sense, other people may not notice, they are

just happy that it all goes OK and they can get on with what they're doing without wondering about the process that went on

felt sense: including other people

'going inside' to do focusing can be quite me-centred!

however, the right hemisphere looks after much of the implicit processes of relating and communicating

we have a sense of each other in our right hemisphere

so the felt sense is a good place to start in considering others – for example:

our sense of their feelings and thoughts (that affect us of course)

how someone speaks to us, and how they listen to us

our feeling about them

the quality of the dialogue or the conversation

the nonverbal aspects of communication

we hear what others say, and we are affected by their nonverbal communication – the two may or may not be congruent, our felt sense is our guide

listening vs. really listening

are we just listening to the other person, or are we *really* listening to them?

do we take in what others say?

we may *hear* what others say, but do we take it in to sense what lies underneath their words?

we can take in their experience (as they tell it to us), their views, and what they know (that we may not know)

emotional resilience

by this I mean we can act as emotional buffers for each other, tolerating each other's emotional expression while remaining anchored in our felt sense

the alternative: we react to each other, and things get 'emotional' and 'heated' – the felt sense has gone, e.g. you get angry then I get angry and we spiral downwards

felt sense: including the natural world

most of us like to get out into nature: our right hemispheres calm down and we re-connect with our evolutionary past (that they are more in touch with than our left that gets distracted by our clever modern stuff, smartphones etc.)

so let's think of the natural world as a natural aspect of our felt sense i.e. it's there if we take notice of it

the felt sense as a doorway to the natural world

to attune to the natural world, we must allow in our right hemisphere experience of it

immersing ourselves in nature

our right hemispheres come into their own, we have a felt experience that is very different from that of our urban, computer-oriented, fast-paced lives

noticing what's happening

our felt sense tells us what's changing in the natural world around us

it also gets fed when we hear the news about climate change etc., when we take in facts and expert views about the natural world

understanding the natural world

we can both learn from others about the natural world, and we can learn about it by immersing ourselves in it – solitude may help

what might a felt sense world look like?

a world that includes the right hemisphere and that stops the left from dominating – here are a few ideas...

not knowing

as opposed to: having all the answers, trying to solve the problem too quickly (anything to reduce our anxiety)

the right hemisphere is comfortable with not knowing, the left hemisphere isn't

when my wife asked me what this webinar was about and I said 'organising the world around the felt sense', she said "so, the answer to everything", and I replied "exactly the opposite! it's about being comfortable with not having the answer, so that something new can unfold"

sensing for next steps

the left hemisphere wants the solution, the right hemisphere gives us a series of steps over time

so: living with the felt sense means pausing to allow a sense of our next step to come, and accepting that sometimes it doesn't come and we must pause for longer – hours, days, for some things, years

taking time to make decisions

not rushing, allowing yourself plenty of time – but not too much time! some decisions simply have to be made quickly, but maybe you can allow yourself at least half a second

creative process

living with the felt sense means life as a creative process, allowing something new to unfold in steps over time

my artist client told me how he starts with a felt sense (he didn't call it that, but that's what he meant), then he paints without knowing where he will end up, and if it "goes well" he thinks "ah yes, that's what I was trying to get at"

social engagement

polyvagal theory (everyone seems to know about polyvagal theory these days) distinguishes social engagement from fight, flight or freeze behaviours and collapsing into helpless shutdown

social engagement is a state of the nervous system that enables rewarding interactions with others – interactions that can withstand disagreement and conflict when it arises without lapsing into fight, flight or freeze

what isn't organising the world around the felt sense

it's easy to point to common examples...

controlling behaviour

one person trying to control another = their left hemisphere trying to win, ignoring the felt experience of the other

dominating behaviour

if one person dominates a group, what space is there for others' felt senses?

arguments that lead nowhere

most of us get into arguments sometimes, and they can be fruitful

we can distinguish an argument that goes round in circles (left hemisphere) from one that allows a robust exchange of views and leads to a new place (both hemispheres) – they feel different (right hemisphere)

arguing for the sake of it feels very different from explaining your viewpoint and listening to the other person's viewpoint

when things get heated, we may lose social engagement and do a human version of fight-flight – the key is whether we are willing to listen to what the other person has to say

debating a topic where you have already decided your position: do you then listen to others and reflect on what they say, or do you look for ways to 'win' the argument?

saying things that don't mean anything

it's possible to use a lot of words to say very little – others don't get a felt sense of what we're trying to say

for example: saying something is 'inappropriate' – what does that mean? all we know is that the person saying it doesn't like whatever it is

organisational blah blah blah

the organisational and corporate world loves to put out statements that sound clever but which don't communicate anything meaningful

for example, I was sent a glossy brochure recently by a university where I teach focusing about its strategic plan...

As KPIs [key performance indicators] tend to be lag indicators, meaning we only see if a change has worked after it has taken place, we're also adopting an OKR [objectives and key results] framework to guide our strategic and operational planning... This will give us the lead indicators we need to ensure we're on track to deliver on our top-level KPIs and help our people build alignment around clear objectives so that we can deliver on our core purpose. Within this clear framework, we want to liberate and empower the talent of all our colleagues to shape and deliver on our plans and priorities.

does this sort of guff inform, let alone inspire, anyone? my felt sense of it becomes a feeling of 'yeurch! I don't want to read this stuff'

leaning on great leaders

the human race still seems to be addicted to having great leaders (usually men) to lead them into a better future

I recently came across a wonderful example of authoritarian leadership that is the opposite of making decisions with the felt sense. In 1952 the writer Doris Lessing joined a group of leftwing British writers on a cold war visit to Stalin's Soviet Union. During the visit, she grew frustrated by the endless official Marxist rhetoric from her hosts, so she devised a question she hoped would produce a more honest discussion:

"Always, in every society, even in the most rigid, new ideas appear, are usually regarded as reprehensible or even seditious, but then become accepted, only to be swept aside in their turn by ideas at first considered heretical. How does the Soviet Union allow for this inevitable process, which prevents cultures going rotten, or stultifying?"

Their minder said it was a good question and he would give them an answer tomorrow. The next day, he delivered his response:

"The Soviet Union under the guidance of the great leader Comrade Joseph Stalin will always make the correct decisions, based on Marxist principles."

How far away is this from Trump?!

Of course, we can have good leaders, people who talk sense (not felt sense exactly, but things that fit with others' felt experience) and engender trust. Jacinda Ardern seems to be doing this in New Zealand with her approach to the pandemic (it doesn't mean she's universally popular).

so: what might organising the world around the felt sense look like?

your felt sense is your guide here – not a list of things in a book

human affairs go better when the felt sense is included, and the more we understand the value of including it, the better a position we will be in to deal with climate change

a focusing attitude, pausing, listening

well known already in the focusing world

being informed

when we listen to our felt sense of personal things, all the information we need is within us, but

when it's our felt sense of collective issues (e.g. climate change) we need to be informed – to know enough to have a reliable felt sense without being swamped with too much information

patience, 'sleeping on it'

next steps from a felt sense of something like climate change aren't always there when we want them, but if we give ourselves time, something will come

I am curious about the clarity that comes from focusing, and the clarity that comes after a good night's sleep...

taking in others' views

instead of reacting instantly to what others say, we can pause before we respond – even if only for one second (the left hemisphere is good at fast reactions, the right needs a little time)

making your case

to engage other people's felt senses, we sometimes have to make our case to give them something to think about so they can understand why we believe what we believe (they may or may not be persuaded, of course)

just saying "I feel X is right", or "X is the right thing to do", doesn't give others anything to think about (other than that they either agree or disagree with you)

writing things down

can be helpful for us to clarify what we really think, and if we write it today and return to it tomorrow, our felt sense can tell us what we missed first time round

writing our ideas and thoughts down for others to read gives them time to reflect on them and allow a response to come from their felt sense

group decision making

there are better methods for this than simply voting on a decision

e.g. the British Focusing Association uses a card system: green for agree, red for disagree, yellow for 'I don't entirely agree but I won't block this'

Another example: humming to gauge feelings in groups. The Internet Engineering taskforce, founded in 1986, was a place for people to design the architecture of the internet together. They wanted the internet to be an egalitarian community without hierarchies or coercion: "we reject kings, presidents and voting, we believe in rough consensus". To cultivate 'rough consensus', they devised a ritual: when they needed to make a crucial decision, people were asked to hum to indicate yes or no, and they proceeded on the basis of which option got the loudest hum.

there's no such thing as a group felt sense

lots of focusers say there is – but if the felt sense is a here and now constellation of the inner state of someone's nervous system, it's not possible!

for sure, however, there are group feelings, the contagious power of emotion, and people in groups staying in their comfort zone to avoid conflict

even if you disagree with me on this, please be aware that people in groups may have divergent views yet feel unable to challenge the rest of the group

also...

organising around the felt sense may be quite undramatic! if someone asks "how did you manage to do that?", no one may be able to provide an answer

the difficult stuff

a world organised around the felt sense is not an ideal, perfect world

for example...

disagreement and conflict

felt senses often send different people in different directions, and this can lead to disagreement and conflict

when we disagree, we may hear what others say without taking it in, and then we just react (our felt sense can tell us which it is) – taking in what others say, reflecting on it and letting a fresh felt sense form around it, rather than dismissing it and fighting back, takes time, energy and patience

making mistakes

the left hemisphere tries to organise things to avoid mistakes, which may or may not be successful – the right is bound to get some things wrong sometime, but is capable of learning from the experience

felt senses are not infallible – with a major decision, it's always a good idea to 'sleep on it' if you can

learning as we go

the left hemisphere wants to execute a perfect plan over and over again, the right is flexible and adaptable and learns from experience

emotional pain and trauma – our personal 'stuff'

are unavoidable, they sit in our right hemisphere and can't be ignored forever, so we have to allow for them

our own pain and trauma, and other people's pain and trauma

how shall we address climate change?

humanity's greatest challenge – can our felt sense help us?

a recent example of someone *not* having a felt sense of the natural world was Jeff Bezos after his joy-ride into space that released vast amounts of CO₂ and other pollutants:

"We're going to build a road to space so our kids, and their kids, can build the future. This is not about escaping Earth... When you go to space and see how fragile it is, you want to take care of it even more."

Jeff, no one needs to go into space and destroy the atmosphere in order to realise how fragile our planet is! The people whose lives are already disrupted by climate change have a very real felt experience of climate change. I think he's just trying to justify his having a lot of boyish fun.

protest that disrupts

the picture of a man who climbed onto the roof of a plane and glued his hand to it

are these sort of disruptive tactics, that inevitably annoy some people even if they agree with the message, going to help the world to change its carbon-emitting ways?

Greta Thunberg gets straight to the point!

Greta has a talent for saying it like it is and not worrying about upsetting people, communicating her views clearly and directly – viz. we have to cut our emissions, and everything else (e.g. targets for 2050) may be a distraction

I would say she is following her felt sense! of course, we can't say for sure whether someone is speaking from a felt sense unless we are in their presence when they say it, but we may have our own felt sense from listening to or reading what they have to say

conclusion

the felt sense may be the only way for us to face climate change and address it effectively

our felt sense that arises from our felt experience of living on planet Earth and from listening to the science of climate change

our felt sense that is dynamic, that changes, that is open to new facts and to others' views, that can weigh things up, that gives rise to next steps

It's difficult yet it's also simple. Difficult in that our left hemispheres have become very clever at inventing schemes and solutions to problems that look good on paper but that fail on contact with reality. Simple in that humans have been quietly following their felt senses for millennia, without fanfare, and all the good things of human civilisation that make our world work as well as it does arise from it.

If Gendlin's father could lead his family to safety by trusting his felt sense, can we collectively minimise the extent of climate change by trusting our felt sense and others' felt senses?

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