

## **A new way of thinking about Focusing    Campbell Purton**

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In this paper I want to suggest a new way of thinking about Focusing. I would like to think that this new way will help us to understand a bit more clearly what we are doing when we engage in Focusing, and also that it may help to resolve some of the difficulties that Focusing teachers face when they try to explain Focusing to newcomers.

Many Focusers, whether newcomers or ‘old hands’, may never have been troubled by the problems I will be discussing. That is in itself an interesting fact, which I think is due to the problems in question being essentially philosophical problems. Philosophy, from the time of Socrates onwards, has been interested in questions such as ‘What is time?’, ‘How is knowledge possible?’, ‘How can we know what other people feel?’ The more a philosopher digs into such questions, the more difficult they turn out to be. But for most people, most of the time, the questions don’t arise. The fact that there seem to be deep philosophical puzzles about time, knowledge and other people’s feelings doesn’t usually interfere with our abilities to use these concepts in everyday life. On the other hand, the philosophical problems can every so often come to the surface and cause real trouble. An example would be that of behaviourist psychology, where the philosophical problem of our knowledge of other minds led some psychologists to try to develop a psychology that reduced mind to behaviour. Similarly, there are neuroscientists today who, without much understanding of the philosophical problems involved, try to explain our thoughts and feelings in terms of processes occurring in the brain.

In the same way, people can learn the basic Focusing concepts, such as ‘felt sense’, ‘handle’, ‘resonating’, without being troubled by philosophical questions such ‘What *is* a felt sense?’ or ‘How is it possible to learn about one’s situation by attending to a vague murky feeling in the centre of the body?’ Yet, as I hope to show, the philosophical problems lurk in the background, and can interfere with our attempts to explain what Focusing is.

### What is a ‘felt sense’?

Probably the central concept of Focusing is that of a *felt sense*. Kevin Krycka (2014, pp. 54-5), a professor of psychology at the University of Seattle discusses the importance of Focusing to psychotherapy in general and says, and says “By far the chief contribution FOT makes is bringing the felt sense to the field of psychotherapy”.

However, Focusing teachers don’t always find it easy to explain to students what a felt sense is. Some sort of explanation is called for, because Gendlin means something quite specific by the phrase, and in his more theoretical writings spends a lot of time explaining how felt senses are different from ordinary bodily sensations, or emotions, or images, or other ‘mental phenomena’. He writes that there is no word in English that means what he means; that is why he had to invent the phrase.

Ann Weiser Cornell (2005, p. 219), who probably has more experience of teaching Focusing than anyone else in the world wrote a few years ago: “After 33 years with Focusing I feel as

though I am just beginning to really understand what a felt sense is”. When I myself first learned Focusing from Barbara McGavin in the early 1990’s she was already saying, along with Ann Weiser, that she thought that use of the phrase ‘felt sense’ could do more harm than good, because students naturally want to know what a felt sense is, but the explanations given usually don’t enable them to decide whether what they feel *is* a felt sense or not. And then they spend much of their Focusing session in trying to decide.

Ann wrote in 1996 “The biggest barrier to successfully finding a felt sense is wondering if you are doing it right – if you ‘really’ have one” (Cornell 1996, p. 29). But the reason that students can spend so long wondering about whether they have a felt sense is that the *teachers* find it very difficult to explain what the phrase means. Occasionally, people have tried to say why it is so difficult to explain what a felt sense is. For example, Peter Levine (1997, p. 67), who wanted to make use of the term ‘felt sense’ in his work on trauma wrote: “The felt sense is a difficult concept to define with words, as language is a linear process and the felt sense is a non-linear experience”. However, I don’t think that sheds much light on the matter.

Here are some more reasons why people can find the notion of a felt sense puzzling: Gendlin says that a felt sense is a special kind of bodily sensation, and that it is usually located in the centre of the body. However, other Focusing teachers hold that a felt sense may form anywhere in the body. Ann Weiser writes that felt senses can be located *outside the body*, as when a Focuser says that something scary that was inside their body has now moved to being behind their right shoulder. Other Focusing teachers hold that felt senses may have no bodily location at all. These disagreements are puzzling; is it that felt senses take quite different forms in different people? But why then do they all count as examples of the same thing?

Another thing that can cause difficulties is that the phrase ‘felt sense’ has been picked up by therapists and others who use it in ways of their own. For some writers, the felt sense of a situation is simply the ‘feel’ of a situation, so that if someone is asked how they feel about their situation, and they reply “It feels very embarrassing!”, then this embarrassed feeling would count as a felt sense. But for Gendlin, feeling embarrassed is not a felt sense; it is an emotion. A felt sense is a *murky*, unclear feeling that leads to steps of change, not something that can be expressed by a familiar emotion word.

In thinking about these things I have been helped a lot by looking at the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>. Wittgenstein is an unusual philosopher in that, at least in his later work, he is not concerned to develop a *system* of philosophy, in the way that many philosophers have, such as Kant or Schopenhauer, or indeed Gendlin himself in his philosophical work *A Process Model*. Wittgenstein is sceptical about such systems and approaches philosophical problems in less systematic way. He sees many philosophical problems as arising from misleading pictures that we have about the way our language works, and sees the aim of philosophy as simply to remove the intellectual confusions that we can

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<sup>1</sup> It is hard to give brief references for relevant material in Wittgenstein’s writings. Within his major work *Philosophical Investigations* (1963) one could begin with what he says on pages 4-6, 89-92, 97-104, 178-80, 187-9 (in the revised edition (Wittgenstein 2009) the corresponding pages are 7-10, 95-98, 103-111, 187-9, 196-8). Wittgenstein (1992) is also especially relevant. For those unfamiliar with his work, it might be better to start with secondary sources such as Jolley (2010) or Canfield (2007b). Other especially relevant secondary sources include ter Hark (1990), Vesey (1991), Moyal-Sharrock (2000); Canfield (2007a,).

get caught up in. Philosophy thus becomes in a way analogous to psychotherapy, though unlike therapy it is concerned with widespread, intellectual confusions, rather than with personal, emotional confusions. Rather like good psychotherapy, this way of doing philosophy tends to be slow, and sensitive to detail. It is not a matter of quick definitions and logical arguments, but of looking closely at how we actually use words, and also of noticing how our ways of *picturing* the use of words can mislead us. I hope that what I mean by this will become a clearer as we proceed

I hope to have shown so far, that there are some real difficulties with the notion of a felt sense, difficulties that should be of interest not only to philosophers, but also to Focusers. Quite apart from it being satisfying to feel clear about what we are doing, there is Ann Weiser's point that the difficulties with the notion of a felt sense may help to explain why Focusing has not caught on in the therapy world in the way that mindfulness has. Kevin Krycka (2014, p. 60) makes the same kind of point when he writes:

...the felt sense, the core of FOT practice... remains elusive and difficult to describe....This reality makes it very difficult for FOT to find and hold a place in contemporary theory and practice because, although many may be genuinely interested, it is simply too difficult to grasp the approach without continued experiential practice with a teacher or therapist.

### Feelings

One thing that seems clear is that a felt sense is a special kind of feeling. Now, in English there are many different things that are loosely called 'feelings', for example, *emotions* such as anger or fear; *moods* such as anxiety or depression; bodily sensations such as itches and muscle tensions; desires and impulses; likings and dislikings; feelings of familiar situations such as 'the feeling you get when someone gives you a present that you don't want'; hunches such as the hunch that a decision is wrong, though you can't say why. The dividing lines between these different kinds of feelings are not always sharp - for example, it can be difficult to say how some examples of fear differ from some examples of anxiety. However, there is no doubt that in the everyday language of feelings there are many useful distinctions. A feeling of tension in the jaw is somehow different in *kind* from a feeling of jealousy, even though they might be present at the same time.

Feelings are only one category amongst what we could call mental phenomena. There are also, for example, beliefs, intentions, attitudes and several others. The category of feelings could be compared with that of marine animals. There are plenty of other animals apart from marine animals, but also within the marine animals category there are many different kinds of creature. There are fish, which tend to look rather similar to each other, but also lobsters, crabs, octopuses, all of which are very different from fish. Then there are whales and dolphins, which *look* a bit like fish, but which turn out to be very different when examined in more detail. Also, you may have seen natural history programmes on TV which show us very strange creatures from the depths of the ocean, which are almost transparent, have no obvious heads, but long spindly legs, or possibly antennae. It is hard to know where they fit in with the more familiar creatures - they are a special and unfamiliar *sort* of marine animal

If we compare the classification of marine animals with the everyday classification of feelings, then perhaps felt senses are analogous to these strange creatures. Gendlin says that the felt sense is a feeling, that it could be classified as a sensation - but it is a special sort of sensation. It is also rather like an emotion, but nevertheless isn't an emotion.

Now consider another analogy, which I think will be more helpful. On a computer keyboard there are 26 alphabetic keys, 10 numeric keys, several more keys for asterisks, hyphens, brackets and so on. Each of these is used to produce a particular character on the screen, and later on a printout. The characters are given code numbers in the ASCII classification, so that uppercase 'A' is number 65, 'B' is 66 and so on. We might explain this to someone unfamiliar with keyboards by saying that each key corresponds to a printed character. After watching us type for a bit they say "But what about the space key - it doesn't print anything!" We say "No, that one just leaves a space, but you can still think of it as a character. Admittedly it is a rather odd sort of character. But it is listed as character 32 in the ASCII system." They say "OK, but what about this one - marked 'RETURN'? What character is that?" We explain that pressing this key brings the cursor back to the beginning of the next line. It doesn't print a character at all. They say "But couldn't you think of this as a *very* special sort of character?" What should we say? Perhaps "Well I suppose you *could* think of it that way. It *is* character 13 in the ASCII list." They say "This is fascinating - what a *very* strange character". But of course there is nothing at all strange here. It only seems that there is something strange, because we had been picturing the keys as all working in the same way, so as to produce something on the screen. And in a way that is true - the space key could be said to produce *something* on the screen, but that something is a nothing. How strange! But again, of course, there is nothing strange here. The feeling of strangeness is a kind of illusion which is generated by the way we have been picturing the use of the keys.

In the comparison of feelings with kinds of marine animals we ended with the strange deep-sea creature. It really exists, and really is strange compared with the other creatures. In the comparison with keyboard symbols we end instead with a strange way of speaking. Wittgenstein suggests that in thinking about what are called mental phenomena, we often get into strange ways of talking, and then think that we are dealing with strange kinds of things, *inner* things. But for him these strange kind of things are in a sense illusions. It is not that we don't have feelings. Of course we do. But picturing feelings as inner things or processes is like picturing SPACE or RETURN as strange kinds of character.

I hope that all this will become clearer as we go on. For the moment I just want to convey something of the flavour of Wittgenstein's approach to our ways of talking about feelings.

As I said earlier, Gendlin regards a felt sense as a feeling that is in some ways like a bodily sensation, such as a feeling of muscle tension, and in some ways like an emotion, such as fear. I will say a bit more about bodily sensations later, but will first discuss the nature of emotions.

### Emotions

Emotions, I think, are always linked with particular kinds of situation. For any named emotion, we can, with a bit of thought, say roughly what the relevant kind of situation is. For example, we speak of fear in situations where there is a response to some perceived danger. We speak of jealousy in situations where person A is upset because person B has preferred person C to them. We speak of hoping for an event to occur where the person would be

disappointed if the event did not occur. Embarrassment involves one having done something socially inappropriate. Feeling guilty involves one having done something one considers to be wrong. These are just rough sketches; our emotional language is subtle and complex, so that more may need to be said to specify what the relevant kind of situation is. The important point is that we can, at least roughly, set out what the situation is that corresponds to each named emotion.

But emotions are not limited to those which have names, and within each named emotion there will be varieties of emotional feeling that can be specified in various ways. For example, we feel jealous, but it is a particular *sort* of jealousy. Thus someone might say, not simply that they are jealous, but that they are jealous in a resigned sort of way, rather than in an aggressive sort of way. In some languages there could be different words for these two kinds of jealousy. Or someone might say “Yes, I *am* jealous... but... I was thinking of *Anna Karenina* .... I’m jealous in the sort of way that Dolly is jealous of the governess, not in the way that Karenin is jealous of Vronsky”.

These varieties of an emotion are often specified by novelists by telling a story of the sort of situation which gives rise to the emotion. And often in Focusing sessions, little stories are told, some of which are expressed in imagery. To take an example from Ann Weiser (2005, pp. 228-9), a Focuser speaks of

having an image of seeing a row of blackbirds on a wire. They are huddled together and a cold wind is blowing....Then she says that some of them are flying away but some are just staying there. It’s like they are resigned to the cold, the ones that are staying...Those are the ones that no other bird is near. They’re on their own....There’s especially one of them. It’s huddled...and cold...and sad”

This story-imagery specifies the emotional response much more exactly than it can be specified by a single word. Nevertheless, we are still speaking of a *kind* of situation here. The person listening might say “It sounds a bit like what John felt in that story you mentioned last week”, and the Focuser might say “Yes, like that - exactly.”

When she was around three or four years old my daughter liked being read stories about Little Grey Rabbit and a rather boisterous character called Hare. She had listened to one of these stories the previous night, and when her mother next morning did something that upset her she exclaimed “Oh Mummy - *just like Hare!*” Little Grey Rabbit’s situation and my daughter’s situation were no doubt different in many ways, but my daughter recognised the same kind of situation, and the same kind of emotional feeling.

Thus while there are many emotions for which we have names (far more than those in the lists that psychologists are fond of), beyond these there is an indefinite number of emotions that correspond to kinds of situation that are familiar within a particular culture, and can only be expressed by telling little stories. I will call these un-named emotions ‘emotional feelings’. One source of confusion in talking about felt senses is that we may be inclined to think of a felt sense as the emotional feel of a situation. The blackbirds story was the expression, in imagery, of the emotional feel of a situation, but such an emotional feel is not a felt sense. In fact the blackbirds story continues as follows “It’s huddled... and cold...and sad... No not exactly sad...he’s more... hard to put into words...” *Here* is the felt sense, and it is here, as Ann says, that the person strictly speaking begins to Focus. In Focusing

sessions the expression of emotional feeling, and the expression of a felt sense, often interleave with one another. Another example, taken from Gendlin (1996) is this: A client says

What came to me was like, the image I have, when I got it I had an image of a fence, and part of it is really treacherous. Its like ... barbed wire ... you don't touch that; you can't go through or get past it, but another part of it has a little hole, and that part I could slip through...A part of it is just poles and a little barbed wire, and I could really crawl over it if I wanted to. [What] felt the best right now was to crawl through that little hole, that felt...like... felt like saying "Here I am; I'm coming through," a really neat part coming through, and looking back to see the reaction, at the same time feeling, I don't care what the reaction is.

Here there is the expression of emotional feeling through words as well as imagery, but every so often the client pauses, and waits for either a *further* image, or *further* words. "It's like...<pause>...barbed wire" or "felt like...<pause>...saying 'Here I am; I'm coming'." As Gendlin uses the term, the felt senses here occur in the pauses; they are not the emotional feelings that are expressed in the words and images. But it is easy to get confused here. In his first paper on Focusing Gendlin did not use the term 'felt sense' but instead spoke of trying to get the feel of a problem as a whole. Suppose we ask someone to do this, and they say "Yes, I can feel it as a whole – it is a feeling of being put in a position where, whatever I do, I will hurt someone". That is a clearly articulated emotional feeling, but just because it is clearly articulated, it is not a felt sense. A felt sense, Gendlin says, is something vague or murky. By contrast, if someone says, "Yes, I *can* feel it as a whole...but it's hard to put it into words", *that* tells us that they have a felt sense.

I will return to the question of when, exactly, we speak of felt senses, but first we need to look at another issue that has been prominent in the discussion of felt senses This is the question of whether a felt sense is a bodily sensation, whether it is felt *in the body*. In order to approach that question it will be helpful to consider whether emotions, and emotional feelings, are felt in the body.

### Do emotions involve bodily sensations?

I said that to have an emotion involves responding to a situation of a particular kind, but there are many different types of response. If we see someone running from a bull, we say that they are afraid. To run in that context *is* to be afraid. But another person, on seeing the bull charging towards them, might freeze, and that too would count as fear. Someone else, seeing the bull from a distance, might experience tension in their chest or stomach, and feeling these bodily sensations could be said to be their fear. Or *after* being chased by the bull, the person, now sitting at home, might have recurrent thoughts and images about the incident, and *these* responses could be said to constitute the fear that they still feel following the episode.

Consider the emotion of hope as another example. We say that someone hopes that an event will occur, if they would be disappointed if it did not occur. A person's hope for something could be manifest in their imagining the occurrence of the event, or in their pacing excitedly up and down, or in a holding of the breath, but these responses only count as manifestations of hope if the situation is one in which the person will be disappointed if the event doesn't occur. The responses in *themselves* do not constitute hope, or feelings of hope. The same responses could be manifestations of an *expectation* that the event will occur. But hoping is different from expecting. We often expect events that we certainly don't hope for, and we

can hope for things that we don't really expect to occur. These two feelings are not distinguished by any differences in the bodily sensations involved, but by the fact that in hoping we would be *disappointed* if the event doesn't occur, while in expecting we would be *surprised* if it doesn't occur.

So, emotions *may* involve bodily sensations, as well as many other kinds of response. But none of these things are essential to the emotion being the sort of emotion it is. For there to be an emotion one has to respond in some way to a particular kind of situation, but how one responds can involve behaviour, thoughts, impulses, imagery, as well as bodily sensations. In some cases, the response to the situation may involve quite intense desires or aversions, and the accompanying impulses and bodily sensations may overwhelm us. It is a familiar view that emotions are to be contrasted with rational beliefs, but that is not *generally* true. We may quite *reasonably* feel hopeful that an event will occur, and our feeling of guilt could be entirely appropriate to the situation.

In some cases the response may be almost entirely linguistic. We learn to use the word 'wistful' in certain kinds of circumstance (though I couldn't say right now what those kinds of circumstance are, and probably you can't). Nor need my feeling wistful involve any specific behaviour, or bodily sensations, or thoughts or images. My *saying* I feel wistful may be my *only* response to the kind of circumstances I find myself in.. But don't I have a wistful *feeling*? a 'datum', or 'direct referent', as Gendlin sometimes calls it? Well, I can *say* that, but it doesn't seem to add anything to my saying that I *am* wistful. There is no feeling here that is independent of what I say, no feeling on which I *base* what I say. I don't base what I say on *anything*; certainly not my knowledge of the circumstances in which the use of the word is learned. For I can't say what these circumstances are. I have learned to use the word, but I haven't learned to say how it is used. I have simply picked up the use of the word as an articulation of my response.

If that seems puzzling, compare it how it is with having a hunch or intuition about something: Hunches can form a helpful bridge to the notion of a felt sense. Suppose that on returning home from a walk, we have to decide whether to turn right or turn left. I say "To the left!". My companion says "How do you know?" I reply "It's just a hunch, but I bet I'm right!" We go to the left and indeed this turns out to be the way home. To have a hunch is to think that something is so, without being able to *justify* what one thinks. It is not just a *guess*; we sometimes are very sure that our hunch is right. Now suppose someone says "When you said 'To the left!' surely something must have gone on in your mind that *made* you say that. Perhaps you had an image of turning left? Or maybe the word 'left' just came into your mind? There must have been *something* that made you say 'To the left!'." I reply that there really wasn't anything like that. We came to the junction and I spontaneously said 'To the left'. That was all that happened. I had a hunch, but that is just to say I couldn't justify what I said. But now the sceptical person says "But you must have had a *feeling* that you should turn left! The hunch was that *feeling*!" What should I say to that? Perhaps "How do *you* know what went on in me? I'm telling you that nothing went on, but you have a picture or theory that says something *must* have gone on. Well, so much the worse for the theory!" This talk of the hunch as a 'feeling' adds nothing at all to a description of what happened. It seems to be the invention of a person who believes that we *must* always have feelings, in the sense of inner data, going on in our minds before we can speak. Yet that is clearly not true. Usually we speak without anything special going on in our mind.

In sum: we could say that to have an emotion is to respond a particular kind of situation. The response may be a matter of having certain bodily sensations, or other things such as characteristic behaviour, facial expressions, impulses, thoughts or images. It is misleading to say that the emotion *is* the response: that the running away, or the inclination to run away, or the dry throat, or the facial expression *is* the fear. But nor is it right to say that the response is simply a sign or accompaniment of the emotion.

We want there to be a thing or a process that *is* the emotion, but not all words function as the names of things or processes. Emotion words draw our attention to particular kinds of lived situation, but there need not be anything in the situation that *is* the emotion. If someone hopes that an event will occur, that is a particular kind of situation; it is the kind of situation in which they would be disappointed if the event did not occur. But it does not follow that there is a thing or process in the situation that is the hope. We are inclined to picture the hope as something going on in the person at the time, but the fact is that *nothing* need have gone on in them at the time. They *might* have thoughts or images of the anticipated event, but there is no necessity for such things to have gone on. All that is necessary is that they would respond to the non-occurrence of the event with disappointment. If we know *that*, then we know that they hope for the event.

The picture of feelings as inner events or processes is a captivating one. Wittgenstein suggests that it arises partly from another captivating picture, that of the *meanings* of words being the *things* they refer to. In an infants' school classroom there may be pictures on the wall of dogs, trees, tables and so on, each being intended to illustrate the meaning of the word that is written alongside the picture. We think of the meaning of the words as being displayed in the pictures, and say that the meaning of a word is the kind of thing it picks out. But there are many, many words for which that is not true. There are no things in the world that are picked out by the words 'Not', or 'Therefore' - Wittgenstein argues that to specify what a word means does not usually involve presenting examples of the things or processes it refers to, but specifying how that word is used. 'Not', for example, is used to make a denial, 'Therefore' tells us that what has just been said is a reason for believing what is about to be said. There are no 'nots' or 'therefores' in the world.

If we can free ourselves from the picture that for each word there is a kind of thing, we may be able to see that there doesn't have to be a feeling that a person has when they hope for something, or fear something, or experience some other emotion. But as Wittgenstein says, it is hard to free ourselves from such pictures, because they are embedded in our language. I just referred to 'experiencing some other emotion', and this form of words suggests that there is, in addition to the emotion, the *experiencing* of the emotion. Then this can bring us back to picturing hope as an inner process, that we are now calling an experiencing.

It is not that there is anything wrong with saying that a person feels hope, or experiences a feeling of hope, just as there is nothing wrong with saying that a person feels that they should take the right-hand path. But if we try to take these feelings out of their contexts and ask what they are *in themselves*, we are likely to end up talking nonsense. We might for example ask whether the feeling of hope is a bodily sensation, and wonder whether that tingly sensation we feel *is* the hope. Or we might ask where in our body do we have the hunch that we should take the right-hand path? Can we detect the hunch in the way our legs are inclined to move? Such questions, I think, lead us only into confusion. They are not sensible questions to ask, because they presuppose that words for feelings are names of things or processes going on inside the person.

## Felt senses

In the previous section we have been concerned with one important group of feelings, those that are called ‘emotions’. As I said earlier, there are many other kinds of feeling, but the one we are especially interested in is the kind of feeling that Gendlin calls a ‘felt sense’. Gendlin had discovered in his work with counselling clients that the clients who make best progress are those who engage in therapy in a special way. Rather than simply talking about their difficulties, or speculating about what is wrong with them, or directly expressing their emotions, they say what they are thinking or feeling, but then *pause*. The therapist can see that this is a special sort of pause; it is not that the client has run out of things to say, or that they are afraid to go on. Rather they are searching for words for something that they can’t yet express. They may screw up their face, rotate their hand in the air, or say things like “It’s not that I am afraid of him, but...<pause>...I’m not easy with him...<pause>...He makes me feel sort of tangled up inside...<pause>...I can’t put it into words...” They are clearly responding to some difficulty in their relationship with this person, but they can’t *articulate* that response. Or rather, they can’t articulate it *yet*. Their situation is one of being on *the way to* articulating their response.

It is in *this* kind of situation that we say that the person has a felt sense of something. They have, as it were, reached the edge of what they can say. Gendlin discusses an example where a person is talking about their fear of approaching someone at a party: They say “I think I know what goes into that fear; it’s that I’ve always been scared just to make a decision on my own. I’m scared it will be wrong. But... uhm...”. This person, Gendlin writes, “has a sense of the edge. ‘Uhm’ is the felt sense.”

What the “Uhm” tells us is that the person hasn’t yet found a way of articulating their response, but that they hope to do so soon. Instead of saying “Uhm” they might rotate their hand in the air. Or if they are familiar with Focusing they might say that they have a peculiar sort of feeling, a felt sense. But it is misleading to say that there is a thing there that they feel when they have a felt sense, just as it is misleading to say that there is a thing which one feels when one hopes for something, or that there is a feeling called a hunch when one has a hunch.

As in the case of hopes and hunches we may experience *various* bodily sensations when we have a felt sense. We might feel tension in our chest, or a gnawing feeling in the stomach, or bodily sensations associated with rotating our hand in the air, or drumming our fingers on the desk. Are *these* the felt sense? Well, it is the same as it is with the emotions. We do speak of feeling anger in our chest or fear in our gut, and may be able to identify the bodily sensations involved, such as muscular tightness or contraction. But as we have seen, it is misleading to say that the emotion *is* that bodily sensation; rather we are responding to a situation in which we are being insulted or threatened, and for that reason are said to be angry or scared. Just by attending to the bodily sensations we couldn’t tell which emotion we are feeling. It is only in the *relevant contexts* that we can say that the tightness is the anger or the contracted feeling is the fear.

In the case of a felt sense, the relevant context is that the person is responding to a situation, but can’t yet articulate their response. That is the point at which they pause and say “Uhm”. When Gendlin says *the “Uhm” is the felt sense* we know what he means, but clearly he is not saying that the felt sense is the utterance of a word. In the same way the felt sense is not the rotation of the hand in the air, nor the gnawing sensations the person might have in their

stomach. The difficulty is that we picture a felt sense as some sort of inner thing or process, but fail to realise that in saying that someone has a felt sense we are not reporting on anything going on in them. What we are reporting is that they can't yet find a way of articulating their response.

It may help to reflect on what happens when the person *does* succeed in articulating their response. They may let out a deep breath, smile, say "Now I've got it", or they may simply say "OK, I'm jealous (or scared or whatever)". Now, *just before* they said or did these things, did they have to have a *feeling* that they had found what they were looking for? They may well say "No – it just came to me". But doesn't saying "Now I've got it!" or the deep release of breath express a feeling? Well, as with hunches, someone might say that there *must* be such a feeling; but I think we have a right to be suspicious when a person insists something *must* be so.

What I am suggesting is that to say that someone has a felt sense is to say that they are responding to a situation, can't yet articulate their response, but hope and expect to do so soon. More briefly, we can say with Gendlin that the felt sense is the "Uhm". However, there are many places where Gendlin says something much more than that. In discussing where the change steps in therapy come from he says (Gendlin 1984):

The steps of change and process do not come directly from the recognizable feelings as such.

They come, rather, from an *unclear*, fuzzy, murky "something there", an odd sort of direct datum of awareness.

And:

What do we assume the client will do with a listening response? We hope and assume that clients will check the response, not with what they said or thought, but with some more inner being, place, datum... "the felt sense," we have no ordinary word for *that*.

It is this notion of an inner datum that Wittgenstein questions. Undoubtedly we talk of inner thoughts and feelings, and we may picture them as inner things, or processes going on in our heads or bodies. But this is surely picture language: we do not mean that if a surgeon opened up our head or body they would find the thoughts or feelings there. It is *a way of talking*, a picturesque mode of description, and one which does not mislead us in everyday conversations. The problems only begin when we suppose that the inner processes constitute *explanations* for what we say and do. *Then* we will start to say things like "He said he was afraid because there was a scary feeling (or process or datum), inside him, and he recognised it as fear". But *that* is not why an English speaker says "I am afraid"; the real explanation is that they have learned to use this phrase in situations where some danger threatens.

The same misleading picture of the inner datum is what causes the difficulties with the phrase 'felt sense'. A person may pause in a Focusing session and speak of having a vague feeling that they cannot put into words. To have such a feeling is to have a felt sense. There is no problem with that. The problem comes if we now try to explain why they pause by saying that they have a special sort of feeling, or inner datum, to which they now need to give their attention, and from which may soon come other feelings that are helpful for them. The inner

datum, or felt sense, is supposed to contain all the intricate detail of the problem, and within it, the person may find something that is of help to them. That is the *picture*.

However, the real explanation of why the person pauses is simply that they can't yet find the words to articulate their response, although they are seeking them, and with luck will soon find them. They find them through attending to the problem as a whole, and realising that just these words give expression to some aspect of the problem.

The difference between the two formulations is that in the first formulation the person attends to an inner datum, and describes it, whereas in the second they attend to their *situation*. Wittgenstein (1992) is especially relevant. *ation* and articulate their response to it. I think that the reason Gendlin prefers the first formulation is that he is concerned with an important difference in the way clients speak in therapy. It is the difference between simply speaking, and speaking after pausing to check whether this really is what one wants to say, or is all that one wants to say. Gendlin thinks that in the pause one consults an inner datum, whereas I think Wittgenstein would say that this inner datum is a fabrication, or an illusion. For Gendlin, the inner datum is an "it", a direct referent, something one can attend to, *in there*, there where we have our feelings. The job of the therapist is then to respond to the client in a way that helps the client find the inner datum.

The alternative formulation is that the client is responding to their situation in a way that they can't yet fully articulate. The job of the therapist is to encourage the client to attend further to their *situation*, and to articulate further whatever new responses come to them. I would like to end by looking in a bit more detail at how this alternative formulation would work in practice.

Much of the traditional Focusing framework can remain in place, beginning with Clearing a Space. This is not something one always needs to do, but it can be an important way of bringing attention to a specific problem. The point is to attend exclusively to *that* problem, for the moment. How do we do that? Well, by not letting ourselves be distracted by the other problems. We attend to one thing by not allowing ourselves to attend to other things, as we mind our own business by not minding other people's business (White 1964). It can help if we give some *brief* attention to the other problems - we are not just ignoring them - and then attend to the problem we wish to work with. Then the next step is to attend to this problem *as a whole*. Before the session we may have spent some time thinking about the problem or noticing various things that are involved in it. We may need to remind ourselves of what the problem is, and what seems to be upsetting or concerning about it. In other words we bring that whole problem to mind. We are going to Focus on the problem, but we want to go beyond what we already know about it, beyond the familiar difficult feelings that it arouses in us. To get to something new, we need to attend to the whole of the problem. What might help us is not to be found in what we already know, but nor do we know *where* it is to be found in the situation. It could be anywhere, or we might need to construct something new. So we need to keep the *whole* problem in mind.

How do we attend to it as a whole? Well, by not attending to its particular aspects. If we find ourselves attending some particular aspect of the problem, we need to stop doing that, and let our attention come back to the problem as a whole. This is probably the most difficult part of Focusing; we are so used to attending to details, that we find it hard to attend to something as a whole. Yet we *can* do this: the problem *is there* as a whole; we chose it from

amongst other problems. All we have to do is to open ourselves to *all of that*, putting aside any specific aspects that come to mind.

Familiar Focusing questions may now help. As we keep our attention on the problem as a whole, we can gently ask ourselves “What is this really all about?” or “What is the crux of this?” or “What is needed here?” Then we *wait*, and see if anything comes. Often something does come, and often it is a surprise to us. It could be a word, a bodily sensation, an impulse, a wish, a liking for something, an image, a fragment of music, a memory. It is something that has come from our awareness of the problem as a whole, and is likely therefore to have some relevance to the problem. It is something *new* in connection with the problem. So now we gently ask “What is it about the problem that brings *this*?” “What is it about the problem that makes me think of this, or feel that, want to do this, remember that?” And again we wait. Then other feelings, or words and so on, may come, and whatever comes, we may try asking “Is that exactly it?”, and then sense the reply “Yes, it is”, or “No, not exactly; more like *this*.” or, “No, not *just* that; also *this*”. Finally, if we are fortunate, we may find ourselves saying something like “Oh, so *that’s* what it’s about!” or “So there’s a whole new side to this!” or “I never thought of it like *that*”.

All this can be explained without using the term ‘felt sense’, but it is clear enough where that phrase *could* be brought in. It is at the point where we attend to the problem *as a whole*. At this point someone might say to themselves “I’m feeling the problem as a whole”, and they might *picture* this feeling of the problem as a vague, fuzzy thing that they sense in their stomach, but which nevertheless contains within it all the familiar aspects of the problem, together with innumerable other aspects that could be helpful. This picture need not cause trouble, so long as the Focuser remains aware that they need to be attending to the feel *of the problem* and its unarticulated edges. What *would* cause trouble would be if they started to ask whether this fuzzy image they have really is a felt sense, or whether they should be attending to the tight feeling in their stomach. Then, I think, they would get lost.

As I mentioned earlier, in his very first paper on Focusing in 1969, Gendlin himself did not use the term ‘felt sense’. Instead, he laid out in the following way some guidelines for therapists who would be teaching focusing to patients. He writes (Gendlin 1969, p. 5):

One must explain that it is possible to sense a problem as a whole... People rarely let the crux of the problem come freshly to them from their feel of the problem as a whole. They already know what the crux is, or they decide what it is. Therefore, before we begin, we instruct the patient on this ... point: ‘When you have a feel of the whole problem, don’t decide what is important about it. Feel it all and don’t decide anything. Wait and let the main crux come to you freshly’.

I think that way of putting it is much less likely to cause difficulties than the way in which he formulated the Focusing instructions later on.

The crucial point is that one is to attend to the feel of the problem, and then wait to see what *more* there is to it, or where the ‘edges’ of the problem are. But ‘Attending to the feel of the problem’ should be understood to mean no more than ‘Attending to the problem’. It is one of those cases where referring to a feeling adds nothing to what can be said without referring to the feeling. For example, to be hopeful, to feel hopeful, to have a feeling of hope are just different ways of saying the same thing, namely, that one will be disappointed if the hoped-

for event doesn't occur. There is nothing wrong with picturing hope as an inner feeling, but this *is* a picture, or a way of speaking.

As a final analogy, consider the fact that instead of saying that a person has a felt sense of something, we might, in English, say that they have something 'on the tip of their tongue'. That says the same thing, namely that they can't yet articulate their response, but it is clearly just a way of speaking. Someone who started to wonder about *what* exactly was there on the tip of their tongue when they were trying to articulate their response, would surely be deeply confused. In the same way, I think, a person is confused if they start to wonder about what exactly is there in the centre of their body when they are trying to articulate their response..

### Conclusion

This discussion has been quite elaborate, but that is not because Focusing is itself something elaborate. It is the confusions and misunderstandings surrounding Focusing that give rise to the elaborations. In Wittgenstein's metaphor, the untying of a knot has to be as complex as the knot itself, but the result of untying it is something simple.

It seems to me that there doesn't *have* to be any fundamental difficulty in teaching Focusing. I am a bit sceptical about the extract I quoted from Krycka, that "it is simply too difficult to grasp the approach without continued experiential practice with a teacher or therapist". After all, Gendlin wrote his original Focusing book as a self-help manual, and it has sold over half a million copies. I think that in practice people are able to read past the picture-language that Gendlin often uses in speaking of the felt sense as a murky inner datum, and appreciate that what he really means is that we need to give attention to those places where we are responding to our situation in a way that we can't yet fully articulate. That may not always be easy to do, but it is not anything complicated or mysterious.

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