

The Wider Body

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The place in the body to which I point is quite different from emotions and feelings. The body has a much wider organization, and it also moves on into a step of further living.

When you attend to this level in the body, what comes there will move you on through whatever is stuck just now. When you have inhaled, your body moves on into exhaling. In the same way it also moves on from any stuck moment, even in quite complex new

problems

Eugene Gendlin, 2000, p. 258

Empty yourself and let the universe fill you.

-Yogi Bhanan.

Starting Place

The purpose of this paper is to extricate how the body is viewed in Focusing. I come to this interest in the body and focusing through a deep and sustaining belief that the sum is greater than the parts. The body of this paper has six sections. 1) I first look at definitions of the body from the dictionary, encyclopedia and with a psychological lens. 2) I examine how the body is seen in Somatic Experiencing as an example of a body-based psychotherapy. 3) I turn to looking at how the body is described in Focusing. 4) I describe how I have looked at the body. 5) I give a personal example of the body that lifts up some focusing ideas. 6) I look at some implications for clinical practice if one starts from where Gendlin does.

Definitions of the Body

The Encyclopedia Britannica (2008) gives a definition of the body that emphasizes the physical aspect: “the physical substance of the human organism, composed of living cells and extra cellular materials and organized into tissues, organs, and systems”. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the body as: “the organized physical substance of an animal or plant... the material part or nature of a human being” (2008). The commonality is the emphasis on the physical, natural systems and material aspects of the person. I searched for psychological definitions of “the body” without success.

The related idea in medicine and psychology is the soma or somatic aspect. WordNet (2006) defines somatic as “bodily, corporal, corporeal, somatic (affecting or characteristic of the body as opposed to the mind or spirit)...[for example] *"bodily needs"* [as in] *"a somatic symptom or somatic illness"*. To me the defining characteristic is how soma is set up in opposition to the mind and spirit. This is of course not a new or surprising definition

but lifts up the way we view humans as having distinct parts. The definitions could say characteristic of the body *in relationship with* the whole of the mind/body/spirit of a human.

The way we have organized medicine in the west is to create different disciplines that address the assumed split of the human being. For the mind we have psychiatrists, psychologists and counselors. For the physical body we have medical doctors and specialists like physiotherapists. For the soul we have religious specialists like priests, ministers and spiritual directors. This is not always the case in Eastern cultures where there has been a tradition of medical professional being holistic such as with the disciplines of ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine, which address all parts of the person. Leitch (2007, p. 13) states, “Unfortunately, until recently, the tendency of Western countries and practitioners to approach mental health in a way that splits the mind and the body has been firmly entrenched...”. Levine (1997) in the introduction of his main book on trauma states, “The welded unity of body and mind that, throughout time, has formed the philosophical and practical underpinnings of most of the world’s traditional healing systems is sadly lacking in our modern understanding and treatment of trauma” (p.2).

In pastoral psychology we actively seek to integrate the spiritual with the psychological. In twelve classes I have taken at St. Stephen’s (aside from Focusing) there has been little or no talk about the body. At times students have brought up the body or mind/body psychology but it has been conspicuously missing in the course work and readings. To me this is indicative of the general lack of taking the body into consideration in psychology. One would think that in pastoral psychology there would be more of a tendency toward viewing the human holistically.

The Body as Seen in a Body-Based Psychotherapy: Somatic Experiencing

There is a newer area in psychology, which has been called body-based psychotherapy, which looks to integrating the body and mind. When I did a few online searches of psychology databases for journals, using the search term body or body-based psychology the only results that appeared were body image studies. Where the body does seem to get addresses more clearly is with modalities for trauma resolution.

One such trauma modality is Somatic Experiencing (SE). Leitch (2007, p.11) says, “SE is an integrative, mind-body trauma treatment developed by Peter Levine that focuses on the resolution of posttraumatic-stress activation through re-establishing self-regulation”. Within Somatic Experiencing it appears that the body is still thought of as separate from the mind and emotions and the emphasis is on the body as the access point for work. Leitch (2007, p.15) states that somatic experiencing is “...a manual-based protocol with specific interventions that focus primarily on self-regulation (i.e. restoring equilibrium to the nervous system) and secondarily to working with associated emotions and cognitions”. Levine asserts that western medicine is now discovering that it is not only the mind that affects the body (as in psychosomatic disorders) but that the body communicates to the mind (1997, p.2). In fact Levine goes on to say that the body “...has a psychic representation in the fabric of the mind (ibid)”. He describes the body as a “living body” (p.3) with the capacity to heal. Later in the book Levine goes on to describe a much more holistic way to look at the person, not as a body but as an organism. “Body and mind, primitive instincts, emotions, intellect, and spirituality all need to be considered together in studying the organism (p.8).

What are the Ways the Body is Described in Focusing?

There is a plethora of ways that Gendlin describes the body and many poignant metaphors are used. The writings by Gendlin have been difficult to decipher and extract a clear definition of the body. This may have been my experience given that I am not familiar with philosophy and much of the academic work is built on philosophical underpinnings that are foreign to me. A clear definition also seems elusive as what Gendlin is describing is a new way to look at the human body and thus there is not really adequate or satisfying language for the concept. The body is a complex philosophical idea in Focusing. I have found at least eight ways the body is described by Gendlin. I will approach this section of the paper by looking at each of these descriptions or categories in turn. I obviously rely heavily on Gendlin's writings and on direct quotes. I do this for two reasons: the purpose of the paper is to extricate the idea of the body from Focusing and because the concepts are difficult to describe. I trust that Gendlin describes his thinking about the body with more poetic and technical language than I could manage on my own.

The Body: A Whole Organism That Is Intricate

The body is seen in the literature I read as referring to the whole organism of the human, encompassing all the parts. "Mind, feelings, and body are one system. This is not a general assertion. Anyone can find, in themselves, a bodily felt sense (of any problem or situation or aspect of life) that is all three *before* they were ever split (Gendlin, 1978, p. 348).

Gendlin asserts, "It's [The body] *not* a structure that fills space and time. We need to *consider* it that way, so we can analyze it and have medicine and chemistry and neurology and all these very important things" (2007, June p.2). The writing that is geared at a general audience such as in the descriptions for focusing steps, the body is used in a very

generic sense. But when he is addressing psychotherapists or philosophers he is very clear that the body is the human in one organism, not just physical.

Gendlin also time and time again refers to the body and the knowledge and ‘implying forward tendency’ as intricate. For example he states, “You have to think that the tissues are not just structure and space, the tissues imply forward... Compared to what we can usually think and feel, what comes from the bodily sensed edge of awareness is characteristically more intricate and multifaceted, and yet also more open to new possibilities” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 2). Again when he speaks of how to use focusing he states, “Your body “knows” the whole of each of your situations—vastly more aspects of it than you can think. Here you find an intricate bodily knowledge and new steps that want to come, and will come if you can wait here” (Gendlin, 1978, p. vii).

The Body is Systemic or Situational

The situational body is the aspect that the body is a body in relationship with the environment similar to how a plant is in relationship with its ecosystem. Gendlin states that “*Our bodies feel a situation directly*” and “*Everything and anything is lived by our bodies in an intricate way that we could open and enter*” (Gendlin, 1993, p. 22, 24). Gendlin says we have what he calls plant bodies, meaning that we take in information and meaning in many ways, not just from the five senses that human have and assume are the only sources of information. “*A situation is never just something external*” (Gendlin, 1993, p. 24-25).

Hendricks-Gendlin articulates a similar position when it is stated that, “The body is not first a static self-contained object which is then placed into situations... We are not bags of skin full of feelings and inner states which we somehow attach to situations. Rather, the bodily felt sense **is already** a direct send of our situation. Since the body is always actually

body-environment, therefore the body sense is also situational. This is a different conception of the living body” (Hendricks-Gendlin, M. extracted from unpublished article).

When Gendlin is looking at how philosophers usually start with perception not the body he states, “Animal bodies—including ours—sense themselves, and thereby we sense the interactional living we are. In sensing themselves, our bodies sense our physical environment and our human situations. The perception of colors, smells, and sounds is only a small part of this. Our bodies sense themselves in living in our situations. Our bodies do our living. Our bodies *are* interaction I the environment; they interact as bodies, not just what comes through with the five senses. Our bodies don’t lurk in isolation behind the five peepholes of perception” (Gendlin, 1992, p.344).

Another metaphor used for the body is as information. Gendlin states: “The living body *is* an ongoing interaction with its environment; of course it therefore *is* environmental information. The bodily ... (felt sense) can contain information that is not (or not yet) capable of being phrased. But can we conceive of the body so that we could understand how it can contain (or *be*) information? It is not the usual use of the work ‘body’” (Gendlin, 1992, p.349).

The Body is Relational

Building on a systems way of looking at the body in the environment, is the related idea that the body is relational or interactional. This is a way of looking at client-therapist relations that is consistent with a Person-Centered modality but also refers to what are called the Focusing Attitude, which is the gentle and accepting way, one works with their own content and situation. Regarding a Focusing Attitude, Gendlin states: “Focusing

involves certain attitudes toward the felt sense and whatever comes up from inside. Such attitudes are *relational*, like those of the client-centered therapist toward a client. Focusing requires self-responses that create a climate of safety and receptivity to anything that arises from inside (along with making room separately for other reactions that also must be acknowledged)” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 304).

When Madison (2005) is thinking about how Gendlin approaches therapy “...He points out that we usually separate a relationship into the ‘individuals’ involves and focus on them. According to Gendlin our being-in-the-world is fundamental...Gendlin points us back to how our bodies live ‘opened up to’ situations, especially other humans – the two people are *derived from* their specific situational relationship...” (Madison in van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005, p. 200). In fact Gendlin goes as far as saying the body changes according to whom we interact with: “In different interactions the ‘same’ individual body is differently ongoing. The individual’s ongoing living is always interactional, it is always with others in context (Gendlin, June 1970, p. 8-9).

Many times Gendlin asserts that the body is not a machine, it related to people and the environment. Here he states it poignantly, “It’s not a machine. Well, it certainly is a machine in so far as one can deal with its cells, blood vessels, chemicals and genes, but it isn’t only a machine...The body is a situational system. It is an interactional system. We can do more with somebody than we can do alone...Living things *are* interactions. You might be sad alone, but if somebody is there who can hear you, then you cry. Your situation is carried by your body. When the situation changes, your body changes, and vice versa (Gendlin, 2000, p. 259).

The Body From Outside, Inside And Deeply Inside

Gendlin often describes the body as sensed from different vantage points. The usual way we sense things, and the way the dictionary, encyclopedia and most psychology approach the body is from the outside. For example the body is tissues and biological material and systems. Gendlin (1996, p.2 & 2000, p. 257) refers to another way, which is from the inside. "...the body referred to here is not the physiological machine of the usual reductive thinking. Here it is the body as sensed *from inside*...". Gendlin (2000) is talking about how we feel the body from the outside, from the inside (emotions) and on a much deeper level (felt sense). "How we live our situations is much more finely organized on the bodily level. The body carries much more detail than we can have in our minds or our feelings" (p.257).

The Body As Space Created Within

The subtlest way that Gendlin refers to the body has to do with space or spaciousness and is sometimes referred to as the living body. He says, "The living body is always going beyond what evolution, culture, and language have already built. You can sense your living body directly under your thoughts and memories and under your familiar feelings. Focusing happens at a deeper level than your feelings. Under them you can discover a physically sensed "murky zone" which you can enter and open. This is the source from which new steps emerge. Once found, it is a palpable presence underneath...My philosophy...centers on the body sensed from the inside, where new things arise" (Gendlin, 1978, p. ix). Here he is meaning what I have called the deeper inside, deeper than emotion and physical sensation.

To me this is a very energetic or spiritual way to look at the body. Another example of this way of describing the body is: "The door into the bodily living of a situation is right in

the center of our ordinary body, for example the one that is filling up your chair right now. But once you come in there and enter through this door, the whole space changes. An altogether different kind of space comes there after a while. It is an imaginary space that is physically felt, but much larger in the body” (Gendlin, 2000, p. 264). How can a “space” be imaginary *and* physically felt?!? The way to describe it is very difficult. I understand what he means as I have experienced that space experientially through focusing.

The Body is Something Which Engenders The Felt Sense

Moving directly from the idea of the body as a deep and imaginary space is the experienced of a felt sense forming. In describing Focusing Gendlin says, “It is a process in which you make contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness. I call this awareness a *felt sense* (Gendlin, 1978, p. 11). Another way he describes the felt sense in Focusing is” ...we mean spending time with the at first unclear body sense of a problem, so that new steps come. Focusing is a little door...focusing is just attending to the bodily uneasiness of a problem...it means letting that which arises from the focusing depths within a person define the therapist’s activity, the relationship, and the process in the client” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 303-304). In some ways he is saying here that *where* the felt sense comes from is a real space, an imaginary space and a mind-state or consciousness of awareness.

The Body Has Implicit Next Steps

Gendlin (1993, p.30) describes the body as an organism which implies the right next step for carrying forward the living of that organism. He states, “The living body implies each next step of complex life processes” such as the inhale that implies the exhale or the hunger that implies the food (Gendlin, 1993, p.30). This inherent ability of the human

being to allow the next steps toward health or life to emerge from the body is powerful knowledge for counselors.

The Body as A Process

Over and over Gendlin points out that the body is a process. For example he emphatically states, “Your body is not a machine, but rather a wonderfully intricate interaction with everything around you, which is why it “knows” so much just in being” (Gendlin, 1978, p. vii). A more radical and spiritual statement is that, “The universe is not without you and you are not without the universe”. “You are not an is, you are an interaction with the universe... Life is living through me.” (E. Gendlin, April 08 New York lecture as in G. Madison, personal communication in lecture, April 5-6, 2008). Gendlin also provocatively states, “There is no body” which I take to mean that it is not a static, fixed, material identity. He goes on to say, “Any living process is forming aspects of itself freshly now” (ibid.).

Another way he puts it is that “Human nature is an experiential process in which biological and cultural contents are carried forward” (Gendlin, 1967, p. 152). This carrying forward is a state of constant change. “To understand the process, one must first see that the body life is organized change...body and person *is* change, inherently.” (Gendlin, 1978, p. 335). One of my favorite ways that he says the body is process is, “A living organism is a moving system, a process a flow. It is a breathing, circulating, ingesting, and excreting process on the physical level of observation, and an ongoing living, and experiencing on the psychological and spiritual level. The body is not a machine...” (Gendlin, 1978, p. 336).

Summary of My Understanding of The Body

My understanding of how Gendlin sees the body is as a whole metaphor for the human. This body is a body in relationship with all beings and the environment or context. It is through the space that can be found within (deeper than the physical, thoughts or feelings) that information arises in the form of a felt sense. This felt sense is a set of information with an edge of change inherent in it. The change that comes from this deep level of the body is always in the direction of growth, health and Life. It can be a surprising and new direction. In fact the felt sense contains many many possible carryings forward out of the current situational context.

How I See the Body

I do not believe we are mind/bodies and spirits but that we are whole beings in deep and energetic relationship with other beings and the environment. For at least ten years I have held the belief in a yogic and Reiki way of looking at the body. In Kundalini Yoga it is said that there are ten bodies, only one of which is the physical. The ten bodies are: soul body, physical body, positive mind, negative mind, neutral minds, radiant body, subtle body, pranic body, auric body, and the arc line (Khalsa, 1996, p.183-186). My understanding is that the body is made up of these various aspects like planets in a constellation and they range in denseness and subtlety. The physical body is important but not more than any of the other bodies.

In reiki the body is also seen as containing several systems including the physical, mental, spiritual and energetic. I have not thought of the body as only the dense physiological material and systems for many years. I certainly resonate with the idea of the body as a multifaceted concept and experience. When I encountered Focusing and began to read the literature I was surprised and delighted to find something within psychology that

seems to concur with this other way of knowing the body. The paper has been hard to write to some degree because what Gendlin says, although radical in the psychological worlds, seems to be a more common way to look at the human organism from the other paths I have studied.

Personal Experience of the Body

I recently had an experience of the body as situational and relational. In some ways it was an everyday occurrence that I have come to understand in another way. Last night I was sleeping. The sleep was light and restless as I had worries on my mind. Some part of me was waiting for my partner to come to bed. As soon as my partner came to bed, I could relax. There was a little bit of holding and some sleepy talking and like magic I could relax and have a good sleep. The problems that my mind was working on and causing the restlessness did not change but my situation did. In response to my partner's energy and body I felt comforted and could rest. What happened was not really a verbal or physical thing, it was a whole reaching out and being encompassed but my partner's energy and the couple space together.

Practice Implications

I have just begun a practicum and struggling to transition my way of thinking about therapy into a way of practicing therapy. I have used some Focusing and Guiding with a few clients. What I find very helpful is the way of looking at the body. As Gendlin says, "Even therapists who do not know focusing can markedly improve therapy with some proportion of their clients, simply by asking how what is being discussed makes them feel *in the middle of the body* and then waiting quietly for the client to sense there....Focusing

is a way to enter regularly and deliberately *there*, where therapeutic movement arises” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 1).

I have already discovered the power that the client has of continuing in the same way-of-living that is causing them pain. I look to focusing as a way to help people learn “how to use the body’s own life-centered and inherently positive direction and force” (Gendlin, 1978, p. 9). Given my understanding of how we are relational and an interaction with the environment, I am again struck with how important a healthy and authentic therapeutic alliance is for the client to change.

I was heartened to discover that Gendlin thinks that many interventions or ways of theorizing therapy can work. He states, “Experiencing is a being-with others and the environment...The person is bodily, cultural and then an individual making oneself. Thus bodily and behavior procedures of therapy, as well as interactional, verbal, and feeling methods can be used, as a single organism may be authentically carried forward on any of these ‘planes’” (Gendlin, 1973, p.351).

I am philosophically drawn to an existential view of humans and a Person-Centered way of working. I take to heart what Gendlin says about slowing down the interactions and “*Moment by moment, after anything either person says or does, one must attend to the effect it has in what is directly experienced...*If there is no effect, we can discard what was said or done....Checking for a physical effect happens to be a no arbitrary touchstone. With it the therapist can make use of what the various approaches have to offer – and *swiftly discard* anything that does not have a physical experiential effect” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 10). I resonate with how humbling it is to be a therapist. It is the client who knows what is best and how Life can best live through them.

I am again reminded that the only thing that matters is paying attention to what brings the client forward. It is not my theory or the new technique I am testing or my own projections that matter. It is how the client is interacting with her/his inner world that matters. “If there is an inwardly sensed connection or any physical sensed response to what was said, it is vital to attend to it and stay with it, because further steps will come from *there* –from the inward response, even if it is only a slight stirring without words...If there *is* an effect therapist and client must instantly stop talking. The client needs to attend silently to it, stay with it and pursue it” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 11). I am encouraged that it can be that simple, to deeply attune to the client and reach for the carrying forward. I look forward to seeing the growth in myself and those I journey with as I integrate these beautiful and challenging teachings.

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