

**In honor of  
Eugene T. Gendlin**



## **The USABP Life Time Achievement Award Winner 2016**

### **GENDLIN ON FOCUSING**

Focusing is simply the little, specific essence of directing the person's attention to what is not yet clear. And what is not yet clear can be directly sensed in the body. There is a special level, a special kind of space, a special kind of attention that most people don't know, to allow the body to form a wholistic sense of some problem. If one can stop and allow the body to respond to that, that problem or anything, there will be a bodily sense that will not be clear at first, no matter how much one knows about the problem. It includes everything one knows, but it is always a single whole, a single sense. This bodily sense has his own directions. It has its own need to form a further step. And something comes there, which one can't get any other way (Gendlin & Lietaer 1983).

# Eugene Gendlin, Somatic Pioneer

By Ann Weiser Cornell



**One of the most** important and influential figures in somatic psychology is... a philosopher. Odd? Actually not. Because the more we learn about Eugene Gendlin's revolutionary philosophy of the body, the more it makes sense that he is known as one of the originators of modern body-oriented psychotherapy.

**Gendlin's influence** is well-documented. In October 2010, when Peter Levine received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the U.S. Association for Body Psychotherapy, he recommended Gene Gendlin from the stage to be the next recipient of the award, citing Gendlin's seminal contributions to his work, *Somatic Experiencing*. Gendlin's Focusing was incorporated by Ron Kurtz into his Hakomi Method (1997), and both SE and Hakomi led to Sensorimotor Therapy (Ogden et al, 2006). Bessel van der Kolk (in his foreword to Ogden et al, 2006) lists Gendlin's Focusing as one of the primary ways to help traumatized individuals feel safe with feelings and sensations. In fact, anyone working somatically today owes a debt to Gendlin's paradigm-shifting discovery of the bodily "felt sense" as a source of meaning and change.

**Eugene Gendlin** was born into a Jewish family in Austria in 1926. At age 11, young Gene watched his father make intuitive choices, trusting one person and not

trusting another, that enabled them to escape the Nazis, when many other families were blocked from leaving the country and later were sent to their deaths. When Gene asked, "Papa, how did you know you could not trust that person?" his father tapped his chest and said, "I follow my feeling" (Korbei, 2007.)

**When emotional reactions** can famously lead us astray, what kind of feeling is it that can be trusted to guide us through life-and-death decisions? That would be what Gendlin calls a "felt sense," a freshly forming, wholistic sense of a situation that has a "more than words can say" quality to it. Throughout human history people have had felt senses, but until Gendlin came along no one had named them or explained them. What was the unique life journey that led him to see what was under all of our noses?

## The Road to Focusing

**Young Gene** arrived in the US with his family in 1938, and they settled in Washington DC. He served in the Navy in the Pacific theater at the end of World War II, and on the long night watches he began thinking about the nature of time. On a bus ride, he picked up a volume on the history of philosophy, and discovered that other people had been thinking about the same

# The key to successful psychotherapy outcomes was in the body.

kind of thing. When he went back to school, philosophy was the ticket.

**In 1952**, as a philosophy graduate student at the University of Chicago, young Gene joined Carl Rogers' psychotherapy training program and began a collaboration with Rogers that ultimately transformed both of them. Gene's input changed the type of research being done by the Rogers group and ultimately caused Rogers to reformulate his theory of the human change process. In *On Becoming a Person* (1961) Rogers gave credit to Eugene Gendlin "whose demonstrated ability to think in new ways about [psychotherapy] has been particularly helpful, and from whom I have borrowed heavily." Gene (in a personal communication) summed up their connection this way: "Without Carl Rogers I would not have been possible."

**What Gendlin brought** to Rogers in the psychology department was a question he had been wrestling with in the philosophy department: how an experience that comes before words becomes an idea framed in words. We know more than we can say . . . and the place where we know it seems to be, remarkably, the body.

**Gendlin and Rogers collaborated** (along with others) on important early research on psychotherapy outcomes. The research showed that clients who "freshly referred to ongoing felt experiencing" during the therapy sessions tended to have significantly more positive therapy outcomes than clients who merely talked about their problems or their emotions. The raters, listening to the tapes, could tell from how

the clients spoke – "Uh . . . I'm not sure how to say this . . . It's right here . . . It's not exactly anger . . ." – that they were in touch with something immediate, real, and hard to describe. Furthermore, these clients often gestured towards their bodies when saying things like "it's right here." The key to successful psychotherapy outcomes was in the body.

**Focusing was Gendlin's name** for what these clients were doing naturally, and also the name he gave to the method of facilitating this process in anyone. He gave the name "felt sense" to the bodily experience of something immediately felt and hard to describe. For Gendlin, a felt sense is actually the organism forming its next step in the situation the person is living in. A felt sense is like a doorway that opens in the wall of frozen structure. When a felt sense forms there is always some kind of pausing, some kind of turning toward "something." What we then find may be murky, unclear, vague, and not feel like much – but the fact that it formed is already the beginning of our life moving forward in new and fresh ways.

**Given these exciting** developments, you might think Gendlin would have switched from philosophy to psychology. But Gendlin remained a philosopher. He received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1958 and taught there from 1964 to 1995. During the same years he was an award-winning psychotherapist. (In 1970 the Psychotherapy Division of the APA gave him their First Distinguished Professional Psychology Award. He has since been honored by the APA three more times.)

**In 1963 he founded** (and for many years was the editor of) the *Journal of Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* and helped to found the APA's Division of Psychotherapy (Division 29). He is also the founder and developer of a method of psychotherapy called Experiential Psychotherapy, though today his influence is more directly found in the method known as Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy.

**In 1981 his book *Focusing***, published for a popular audience in 1979, was picked up by Bantam Books. It has sold half a million copies and has appeared in seventeen languages. In 1996 his ground-breaking book for psychotherapists was published by Guilford: *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*. His non-profit organization, The Focusing Institute, has been the hub of a worldwide community of Focusing teachers, Focusing-oriented therapists, and people using Focusing for self-help, emotional and physical healing, creativity, leadership, spirituality, and much more (Cornell, 2013).

**At the same time**, he has made huge contributions to philosophy, especially on the relationship between logic and implicit intricacy. Over the past sixty years he has published three books on philosophy and over 100 articles, appearing recently in such books as *After Cognitivism: A Reassessment of Cognitive Science and Philosophy* and *Knowing Without Thinking: The theory of the Background in Philosophy of Mind*. Within philosophy his work is just as revolutionary as it is within psychology, a "reversal of the usual philosophical order" (Gendlin, 2004) in which felt bodily experiencing underlies and precedes divisions into formal categories. He has developed a process called Thinking at the Edge (TAE), which points to the way that felt body process forms the basis of all original thinking and concept creation. Once again, the body is at the core.

### **Gendlin's Redefinition of the "Body"**

**Even today**, many people speak of the body as "instinctual and

nonconscious" (Ogden et al., 2006, p. 5), and describe processing from this level as "bottom up." Many of us who work in a body-oriented way know intuitively that the body is more than that. But we need the concepts that Gendlin's philosophy offers, to really think about the body in a new way. Gendlin defines "body" as the interactive process of being alive, experienced from the inside. Images, emotions, moods, even many "thoughts," are experienced in and from this body. This "body" is not separate from mind, and is not "bottom-up" as opposed to "top-down." This body, as lived from inside, can speak to us not just about physiology, but about life, meaning, purpose, intention, and connectedness.

**Lynn Preston**, developer of Focusing-Oriented Relational Psychotherapy, told me: "What Gene says about the body is that all of our history, our emotions, our thoughts, generations of trauma and knowledge, our genes, all of this that makes up the vastness of our experience, we can touch into in the sensual palpable realm of internal space. Gene is developing our understanding of how people are not chopped up into body and emotion and thinking. They are all part of one system, and we are part of a system larger than we are."

**Today more than ever** we need a theory that shows how we are all woven together rather than torn apart, and practices that include the body essentially in healing. Our deepest gratitude to Eugene Gendlin, somatic pioneer, for showing the way to put body at the center of our understanding of life itself.

**Ann Weiser Cornell** became a student of Eugene Gendlin in 1972 and is still learning from him. She is the author of *The Power of Focusing* and *Focusing in Clinical Practice: The Essence of Change*, and offers over 75 seminars each year through her business, Focusing Resources. <http://focusingresources.com>

*References on page 138*

REFERENCES

- Cornell, A. W. (2013). *Focusing in clinical practice: The essence of change*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Gendlin, E. (1961). Experiencing: A variable in the process of therapeutic change. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 15(2), 233–245.
- Gendlin, E. (1981). *Focusing*. New York: Bantam.
- Gendlin, E. (1996). *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy*. New York: Guilford.
- Gendlin, E. (2004). The new phenomenology of carrying forward. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37(1), 127-151.
- Gendlin, E. (2009). *We can think with the implicit, as well as with fully formed concepts*. In Karl Leidlmair (Ed.), *After cognitivism: A reassessment of cognitive science and philosophy*. Springer. pp. 147-161.
- Gendlin, E. (2012). *Implicit precision*. In Z. Radman (Ed.), *Knowing without thinking: The theory of the background in philosophy of mind*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2012).
- Gendlin, E., & Lietaer, G. (1983). *On client-centered and experiential psychotherapy: an interview with Eugene Gendlin*. In W.R. Minzel & W. Herff (Eds.), *Research on psychotherapeutic approaches. Proceedings of the 1st European conference on psychotherapy research, Trier, 1981, Vol. 2*, pp. 77-104. Frankfurt am Main/Bern: Peter Lang.
- Korbei, L. (2007). *Eugene Gendlin*. (Elisabeth Zinchitz, Trans.). Unpublished manuscript. From [http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol\\_2181.html](http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2181.html)
- Kurtz, R. (1997). *Body-centered psychotherapy: The Hakomi method*. Mendocino, CA: LifeRhythm.
- Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin.
- All Gendlin's papers are collected online in the Gendlin Online Library: <https://www.focusing.org/gendlin>