

A REPERTORY OF FELT SHIFTS

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In my practice of Focusing I have noticed two kinds of felt shifts: those that come within a session and are related to the felt sense of the session, and those that do not seem related to the particular felt sense of the session, but that are constant over time. I would like to share with you this distinction as an opening to further dialogue.

I reach for our common language, extending my arms horizontally across the table to the written texts I knew I would want to connect to, as they have been foundational in shaping our specific Focusing discourse. I have placed them neatly in front of me: Gene's writing in his seminal essay "A Theory of Personality Change" (Gendlin 1964) and his book *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy* (ibid. 1996) and Marion Hendricks's essay "Focusing-Oriented/Experiential Psychotherapy" (Hendricks 2001).

Gendlin has defined felt-shift as "the body talking back" (Gendlin 1996: 97) or as a kind of resonating that occurs when we check with our body about the accuracy of a felt-sense, or an initial handle for a felt-sense. This shifting of the body is a way of recognizing the appropriateness of a felt-sense, which in and of itself is already a fulfillment, a carrying forward of the whole, a "symbolic completion" (Gendlin 1964: 10). Hendricks similarly defines a felt-shift as "a body-response, like a slight physical easing of tension, or tears, or a deeper breath." (Hendricks 2001: 3).

I lean back into my seat to find my own felt-referent for this discussion. I relax into my own sense of self, letting go of words and agendas, and then positioning myself into this issue of felt-shifts. From there I let myself fall into the body-self of my experiencing.

I feel an itching in my arms, and a desire to scratch. This itching is the beginning felt-sense of my being in a situation. I spend time with it: "Yes, this urge that I feel, it gets worse when I follow it. What seems to satisfy it actually aggravates it. Yes, that which it wants, it hurts it." The itching actually intensifies as I spend time with it, learning the intricacy of its connecting to this ... and to that.

As I welcome the sense of itching, I can sense my whole body relaxing. Something that the whole body carried is now recognized and specified, concentrating in this sensation of itching, which while unpleasant in itself, lets the rest of the body relax into its own natural processes. My shoulders roll backward and downward, I lean back into my seat, the uncomfortable little grin on my face uncreases.

When a felt-sense forms there are ripples in the body. The whole body responds to this new way of experiencing a situation. As the felt-sense settles in the body and takes shape, the body responds: there can be a yawning, a peaceful crying, a sitting up straight as the person finds a new alignment. More felt-shifts can come as one fully embraces a felt-sense, accepting it wholly/whole (perhaps it came before and it was quickly rejected and shut-down).

I experience felt-shifts as secondary shifts, that is, as a rippling effects from the primary event that is the formation of a felt-sense and the further resonating with an unfolding felt-sensing.

A felt-shift functions like a sign performing a kind of indicating, letting me know that the direction of the Focusing process is flowing in a life-affirming way. It can also let me know when I am taking a wrong turn in my Focusing, as when my body closes down, an initial felt-sense disappears and stubbornly refuses to come back. Felt-shifts do not offer meaning in themselves, unlike felt-senses which are pregnant with meaning and open to a generative complexity of symbolic relations. Rather felt shifts give information about the direction of the Focusing process in an organismic and practical way. They point like a sign saying: “ Yes, pass this way” or “Beware, here you will enter a dead end.”

As a focuser I have at times been impatient with my felt-senses, feeling nothing was changing, yet I was gently reminded by my teachers (most notably Ann Weiser Cornell) and companions to check back with the whole-body sense of my being. I was then able to notice felt-shifts, attuning myself to a subtler scale of change. These subtle changes are profound if delicate in their tender smallness, and they are easily over-written by engrained habits. For me, one of the greatest gifts of Focusing has been the capacity to recognize these small shifts. Focusing has taught me to recognize these shifts as they come and to give them time to ripple through my whole corporeal field, thus carrying the body-forward, altered in delicate, light, and yet profound ways.

What about the other kind of shifts that I mentioned at the beginning of this writing? Let me tell you a little story as to how I came to know them. This was before I knew about Focusing.

I had been dancing for many years, in many kinds of settings. I also had been doing yoga since I was 18 years old, and from the time I learned it I practiced yoga by myself, in my home. Over the years the dancing and the yoga merged into my own practice. One day, after I witnessed three astounding Butoh performances in short succession (Butoh is a Japanese postmodern dance form) I began to systematically bring slow motion into my practice. I would spend hours moving slowly, with a few minutes of fast changing motion in between long bouts of slow moving. During those sessions I started to experience a clicking in my jaw.

It felt like a bubbling, as if some air-bubbles trapped in my jaw would release from the bones and come to the surface. For whatever reason I knew it was good. I understood it as bio-feedback: I was moving into a beneficial direction, literally.

With time I observed that if I paid careful attention to this clicking and followed it in a way that I now call *riding the felt-sense*, the clicking would slow down. By *riding the felt sense* I mean a (movement) process in which I follow a felt-sense of something with the whole of my body, and then again from that edge I reform a sense of the whole, and on and on, I keep riding to the shifting edge.

This process was (and still is) rather mysterious and yet I knew that the slowing down of the clicking was good: it meant that I was entering a natural process, and without knowing how (and yet knowing how, since I was doing it), I was riding this process in the direction of positive flow, like a surfer riding on the momentum of a wave.

As the clicking became a reliable feedback in my practice, I slowly noticed it came up in other situations: at times in which I felt a grounded softness, a safety and freedom of movement for my whole being, which includes my spirit. Those times of clicking came mostly in the intimacy of my relation(s) with my partner(s). I/we clicked, and in the restful silence of close contact, they could hear it too!

I also came to discover another set of directional shifts: my bio-feedback alerted me when I was moving in the wrong direction, as well as when I was moving in the right direction. This new awareness of felt-shifts came from years of listening--this time not into my movement practice, but into a chronic condition.

Having lived for years with a thyroid disease, I came to notice that although taking the appropriate medication, at times I would enter a state of exhaustion that was no ordinary tiredness. This state was characterized by a particular buzzing starting in my thyroid and overtaking my whole body. Once I entered this state, no matter how much I rested, it would take me days, at times even weeks, to recuperate.

With time I learned to recognize this buzzing in its incipient form. At the first signs of it, I learned to rest. And I learned to pay attention to what elicited it: I would know then that I was moving in the wrong direction, that I had to retrace my steps, back up and back off. For example I learned that making photocopies would trigger the buzzing. With more listening I found that I could do about 20 minutes of photocopying at the time before getting the alarming buzz signal. I learned to respect this bio-feedback, guiding me to recognize a range of healthy activities and processes, and the overstepping of my energetic boundaries.

As I learned to pay attention to this buzzing in my thyroid, I discovered yet another kind of buzzing, albeit rare in its occurrence. This sensation came as a cool energy with a distinctive vibrational pattern. It felt like a shower of healing energy addressing my thyroid as a sensitive organ in my being, capable of noticing this gift.

When I learned Focusing and heard about felt-senses and felt-shifts I experienced a sense of recognition and validation. In turn my body recognized the affinity of Focusing to my way of sensing by a showering of that distinct coolness. After my first Focusing workshop, I plunged into my first Thinking at the Edge workshop (TAE) at Garrison, taught by Eugene Gendlin, Mary Hendricks and Kye Nelson. During the workshop I felt a steady flowing of the cool energy to my thyroid, with an intensity that I had never experienced before.

Now that I have been practicing Focusing and TAE for years I have come to experience two more recurrent felt-shifts. One that has come with more and more frequency in my Focusing sessions, involves a popping of the ears, similar to the popping that we may feel yawing in an airplane, in response to slight changes in pressure. With the popping comes a shift in my hearing: suddenly I hear better, literally, within and without! I have also noticed a slight sensation of wetness in my ears, as if a bit of natural lubricating helps the hearing process. I laugh at the kindness of my body, and how straight forward its communicating is. If only we would listen!

During the last year I began to notice yet a new recurrent shift. It resembles the cool energy I can feel in the thyroid, but it is even subtler and with a slightly different vibrational pattern: a bit tighter, with a shorter amplitude, as well as shorter crests and troughs. It starts at the root of my tongue and moves toward the tip, creating a kind of vibrational field. It lasts a few minutes. Usually I become aware of it toward the end of a session, or at the end of a session.

Again I interpret this occurrence as bio-feedback of the directional kind: here I am being able to verbalize in the safety of the Focusing interaction what would otherwise remain unspeakable. The sensation in my tongue lets me know that this speaking is beneficial to my whole being. It carries forward the whole of my being.

I welcome my growing repertory of shifts, which come no matter what the content of a Focusing session or the contextual felt-shifts that occur in the session. These recurring shifts tell me I am moving in the right direction, engaged in a holistic carrying forward of my being in the world.

As I recognize them, I am more able to enter the kinds of situations that open up these shifts in me. I continue to learn to follow this bio-feedback, not by being plugged to a machine, but by being deeply sensitive to my corporeal field. I felt-sense my way into these shifts, riding into the naturally beneficial unfolding of my being.

I pause for a moment searching for a kind of completion. Do these recurring felt-shifts deserve a name of their own, to distinguish them from the varied felt-shifts that come during the course of a Focusing session? My first impulse is to say they do not: like the contextual felt-shift that arise as the body responds to the formation of a felt-sense, these recurring shifts are a response to the direction of the life-process. They indicate when such direction moves toward further opening and living and when it does not. We can say they are felt-shifts that come not in response to the Focusing process but in response to the life process. And as Focusers and non-Focusers our living includes the formation of felt-senses.

As an open conclusion, or rather as a beginning of a dialogue, I would like to invite you, as part of a community of practitioners, to give attention to your felt-shifts so that we can discover more about them. Have you found yourself building a repertory of shifts, the way I have described? I would also like to wonder with you: is there a common, maybe finite repertory of felt-shifts, or are they as varied and as infinite as our own uniqueness? And I wonder if our bodies tend to respond in patterned ways to certain activities: for example has the inner listening that we practice in Focusing translated for you too in some kind of shift in your hearing? I am aware that some recurring shifts, like the sensitivity in my thyroid that I have described, are peculiarly related to each individual embodied history. Getting to know these idiosyncratic and yet not arbitrary embodied responses is another way of getting to know ourselves and appreciating the gifts of our being--even the gifts of chronic diseases as peculiar sensibilities and opportunities for heightened sensing. Have you found a chronic condition gracing you with a peculiar felt-shift? I would love to hear from you.

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