

Encouraging the “Felt Sense” of Self

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Abstract:

This article touches on the origins of the emphasis of the felt sense – or experience – of the self in various psychotherapeutic methods and then goes into detail of an exercise that can help a client find this ‘felt sense of self’.

Key Words:

Rogers, Gendlin, Bodily Felt Sense, Self, Mindfulness, Meditation

Introduction:

The “Bodily Felt Sense” is a significant phenomenon in both psychotherapy and body-oriented psychotherapy. It is mentioned specifically in both Carl Rogers’ (1951 & 2003) work, and also by Eugene Gendlin in his ‘Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy’ (1983 & 2003). It is essentially the observation and experience of one’s own “*sensory and visceral experiences*”.¹ Rogers gave significance to this and wrote:

This experience of discovering within oneself present attitudes and emotions which have been viscerally and physiologically experienced, but which have never been recognized in consciousness, constitutes one of the deepest and most significant phenomena of therapy. (Rogers, 1951, p. 76)

Rogers also described what is now called (in Gendlin’s work) the ‘felt shift’ or ‘experiential self’ – a significant step forward when the client has “*a vital and releasing experience which has many similarities from one client to another*”.² However, Gendlin took up the concept much further in his psychotherapeutic work that he called ‘Focusing’ – where the client is encouraged literally to focus on their inner experiential processes.

The *raison d’être* for this emphasis on the internal process and the ‘felt sense’ is (what Gendlin calls) “the repression paradigm”, where certain aspects of our life experiences are blocked off from conscious awareness. Freud believed that certain impulses and memories became blocked because they created a conflict between the person’s inner nature, the ‘id’, and introjected (learnt and incorporated) societal norms, the ‘superego’; Rogers maintained this basic paradigm, and theorized that the ‘concept of self’ (similar to the Freudian ‘ego’) was developed from the combination of those experiences that were denied, because of conflict, and those accepted as

¹ Ikemi notes that this phrase is mentioned in Rogers’ *Client-Centered Therapy*, dated 1951, which pre-dates Gendlin working with Rogers in 1953.

² Rogers (1951). *Client-Centered Therapy*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin: p. 4

being congruent with one's early environment. But, I do not want to spend too much time in historical analysis of who theorized what first.

It is sufficient for it to be said is that, when one experiences conflict as a child, externally at first, and then internally as one tries to absorb and integrate those experiences: some experiences are indeed painful or upsetting, and, rather than experiencing the internal conflict, it is therefore 'convenient' to suppress them. This is an emotional 'survival technique' – but unfortunately it carries with it several costs. Not only is a lot of 'energy' taken up in the actual suppression, but the act of suppression itself also results in creating limitations both for the body and for the psyche. Thirdly, there is the 'opportunity cost': if you are engaged in doing one thing, then you are *not* doing something else.

Wilhelm Reich's view was somewhat similar: the energy of, and the energy for, emotional suppression gets locked into the body, which impairs healthy physical functioning, distorts the psyche, and reduces pleasure and sexuality. Suppressed emotions get stored in the body as 'bio-energetic' tensions and this builds up and eventually leads to the formation of neuro-muscular 'armouring' and the direct repression (or distortion) of pleasure: the character structure. He equated the free flow of energy with Freud's libido, and therefore the widespread suppression of this energy and pleasure as the source of many social ills, abusive and violent behaviour, as well as narrow-minded and repressive attitudes.

Whilst these childhood survival techniques were relatively successful (as we have all survived and are here, now), we ultimately emerged into adulthood usually somewhat impoverished; to an extent, either limited or even damaged, possibly even 'neurotic' (however that term is defined): and we have also probably not actualized our full individual potential.

Reich's (and his immediate successors³) views were that therapy, which usually involved a form of catharsis, repeated often, was about the only way they knew how to restore mental and emotional health. (In all fairness, Reich was also very interested in prevention – trying to keep children in relatively unrepressed situations – hence his admiration and support for A.S. Neill's work at Summerhill School.) So the theory went that, if we (the skilled therapist) can help the client to 'break through' or 'break out' of their armouring, then they can become free. However later, and possibly more successful Body Psychotherapy therapeutic techniques⁴, looked at how to 'melt' the client's armour, allowing the person's 'core self' simply to emerge, and encouraging them to reclaim their lost potential: perhaps in a form of gentle bioenergetics or body-oriented spiritual growth.

³ Like the work of the various Orgonomists, Myron Sharaf, and Alexander Lowen's & John Pierrakos' Bioenergetic Analysis, etc.

⁴ See the work of Gerda Boyesen, Eva Reich, Ron Kurtz, and others.

Whichever road one takes, the first step, the absolutely necessary and vital first step, is to overcome a form of anaesthesia (or amnesia) that is associated with this physical, emotional and mental repression. Since the traumatic memories are painful, and the process of repression and suppression is also painful, the body eventually ‘cuts off’ this pain by ‘blocking’ the sensations, and also the person’s feelings. This is done in a number of physiological and emotional ways, by numbing the synapses, cutting off from the feelings, and by ‘dumbing’ down the memories. The ‘trauma’ is thus moved into the subconscious, and later into the unconscious.

If the repression is to be lifted, the first and vital step is to increase the person’s awareness of their inner processes: they have to go ‘inside’ and become aware of what they are doing. Freud tried this through analysis; Reich through cathartic vegetotherapy; others have used biofeedback, hypnosis, abreaction, sleep deprivation, trust in the person’s inner health, spiritual practices, or various forms of meditation. Increased self-awareness is absolutely essential for this process to succeed: even Socrates stated that, “*The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.*”⁵

The process of what Jung called “individuation” is the separation of the self from its childhood and parental constraints: people like Joseph Campbell (1993) claim that this is often the basis of many of the archetypal myths and legends. It is a ‘maturational’ process that involves discrimination: deciding which of our survival techniques and ‘given’ attitudes are useful, and which are increasingly dysfunctional; what aspects of the parental and societal messages we keep, usually those that work for us, and what we have to discard. It is a process of self-realisation, and it does not happen easily.

As an example, in the story of *Psyche & Eros*, interpreted by Jungians as a road map for feminine development & empowerment, Psyche has to perform four seemingly impossible tasks or ‘labours’, set by a jealous Goddess (Eros’ mother, Aphrodite). In a more generous interpretation (Johnson, 1976a), these tasks were designed to ensure that the naïve, adolescent girl, Psyche, grows into a sufficiently strong, wise, independent and determined woman, worthy to be married to a God (see also Brenner, 2004). There are similar legends and archetypal stories for men.⁶

In our own – more human – maturational processes, we will also have to discover new strengths, wisdom, determination and courage, and then spend a fair bit of time integrating all of these. We will have to face the ‘Shadow’ side of ourselves: often where we have made an earlier mistake, which now has to be redeemed.⁷ It is a desperately difficult and lonely process, even

⁵ In Greek; “ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ” [ho de anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpōi].

⁶ Viz: The story of Parsifal (Johnson 1976b), the 12 Labours of Herakles (Hercules), or as told in Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (2001).

⁷ See also Ursula LeGuin’s (1968) *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

though it may be ultimately quite rewarding. We will need to have done it ourselves, as individuals, in our own way, and we now need to be able to help our clients to do it for themselves, in their own unique way. This is our task as therapists: how do we help our clients get in touch with their essential Self? – And this help really has to be an ‘embodied’ process.

As Body Psychotherapists, we have traditionally used the medium of physical contact and touch, to help the person get in touch with their own bodies, and hence their own inner feelings and core energies, and to assist them to move out, through and beyond their restrictions (not just the physical armouring, but also the limited mind-sets and world views that become associated with it). But this has marginalised us, as therapists, especially in countries or cultures where therapeutic touch is something of an anathema. Things are changing. Allan Schore, world-famous neuroscientist and author of a seminal series on attachment, writes:

Whatever the nature of the clinical issues, there is now solid evidence for the critical role of touch in human psychology and biology. Recent neurobiological research indicating that critical levels of tactile input of a specific quality and emotional content in early postnatal life are important for normal brain maturation supports Harlow’s classical research that early skin-to-skin contacts are essential for future socio- emotional and cognitive development and Taylor’s assertion that the sensations impinging on the infant’s skin regulate aspects of the infant’s behavior and physiology. Furthermore, it is now clear that in cases of tactile-emotional violations of early relational trauma, a common element of borderline histories, “the body keeps the score” (van der Kolk, 1996). Now that psychoanalysis accepts the primacy of attachment and not Oedipal dynamics in the earliest development of the self, it is time to reappraise the central role of the operations of the bodily self in psychopathogenesis and treatment. A number of authors are now addressing the urgent need of bringing the body back into psychoanalysis. ...⁸

We cannot rely on the world to change for us. However much they might have read or heard previously, we have to consider where our clients are essentially coming from and what constraints they bring with them into the first therapy session. Besides their immediate problems – illness, relationship difficulties, additions, work problems, etc. – they also want to ‘feel better’ in themselves. Gustl Marlock (2006) also addresses this point in some depth in a chapter on ‘Sensory Self-Reflexivity’ in the massive *Handbook of Body Psychotherapy* and makes a significant point of differentiation about ‘being’ in one’s body and ‘having’ a body:

“ ... when ‘being embodied’ becomes objectified into ‘having’ a body, the inner entity that we call the soul fragments into an ego that is nowhere to be found. It merely keeps postulating and reasserting itself and becomes an assortment of psychic and bodily faculties and capabilities.”⁹

⁸ Introduction to a series of papers for the *Psychologist-Psychoanalyst* (the official publication of Division 39 (Psychoanalysis) of the American Psychological Association: and introduction to Aline LaPierre’s article (see references).

⁹ The translation of this chapter in the English-American edition is in the process of being published.

I work a lot in doctors' surgeries with primary care 'patients', suffering from mild to moderate anxiety and depression: most of which is caused by exogenous factors: a variety of stressful life events. There is nothing wrong with these people – in themselves – but they don't feel that: they feel that there is something 'wrong' with them. I have a massive caseload, very restricted hours and a limited available supply of sessions¹⁰ (and this is not uncommon for anyone working in the public health services). So, there is no way on earth that I can see all of these people regularly, once a week.

Therefore, I believe that we also need to 'throw off' some of the shackles of our history and 'upbringing' as therapists, and change some fundamental aspects of our approach and methodologies, as therapists, if we are to stay relevant in the modern world and respond to the real needs of our clients. We need to move towards encouraging self-help and active self-empowerment; we need to move towards more brief psychotherapy techniques, rather than the luxury of an extended course of therapy over several months or years; we probably need to adopt a more pro-active approach, with (of course) the necessary regard and respect for the client's process. This is all possible.

If we begin to incorporate some other concepts, if we widen our horizons a little, one 'technique' that seems to be very effective and is increasingly popular is something called "mindfulness practice" (Hahn, 2008). Ron Kurtz uses a form of this 2,500 year-old Buddhist practice in his Hakomi body-centered psychotherapy (Kurtz, 2008): it is being widely introduced now into Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (Williams et al., 2007); it encourages people to be 'in the moment' and in their bodies, paying close attention to their breathing (Kozak, 2010); it is a useful technique in psychotherapy (Weiss, 2009); it helps us stay in the here-and-now (Jones, 2009); it calms our brains (Hanson & Mendius, 2009); it is peaceful, when done daily (Hahn, 1995) and aids compassion (Germer, 2003). It also does not involve touch – something that I personally cannot do when working in the UK National Health Service. This therefore 'ticks' quite a lot of boxes.

So, in my slightly more directive approach in counselling, I often suggest or recommend something like this form of "mindfulness practice" to my clients, as an initial exercise, a piece of homework for them to work with in between our sessions, hopefully even developing this exercise into part of their everyday 'practice'. I am trying to encourage them to discover their own 'Felt Sense of Self'. This is – I believe – quite a good start.

¹⁰ In one GP surgery that I work in Edinburgh, at any one time, I have about 40 people referred for counselling; however, I am there for only 10 sessions per week; there is an expectation for an average course of counselling of about 6-8 sessions per client. This is therefore usually spread over about 3-4 months, with sessions at 2-3 week intervals.

THE FELT SENSE OF SELF

If we are feeling better about ourselves, then we hold ourselves differently; we walk differently; we speak differently; we react to situations and other people differently; and we see things differently. It is subtle, but quite powerful: it is also quite pleasant. In order to ‘feel’ a whole lot better about ourselves; we need to ‘feel’ our Self; and we need to ‘feel’ a better sense of our Self. This is not necessarily a revelation that happens in a single moment; it is a process that builds up and then integrates itself into the whole psyche.

How can we get this good feeling about our Self? Or, more precisely, how can we get back to having this good feeling about our Self? We almost certainly had it when we were a child, and then we lost it: things happened! Now we need to get that feeling back again: now we need to re-claim that feeling again. We might get a good feeling about ourselves if we ... win the Lottery, fall in love, get a new job, etc., but these are all dependent on outside circumstances. You can actually get that good feeling about your Self back, by yourself. You just need to re-claim it: it is your right, as a human being, to feel good about yourself. You just need to start feeling your Self properly; not criticising or judging yourself, not feeling bad about yourself, just by allowing yourself to experience your Self. Here’s how!

The ‘Felt Sense of Self’ Exercise

This exercise is designed to help you to get back a ‘felt sense’ of your Self. It is in three sections and each section has three parts. The exercise should take about 15-20 minutes. It is probably best to do it whilst sitting down, rather than lying down. You might want to start off by doing it alone, in your bedroom, or somewhere where you won’t be disturbed, so that you can concentrate. You might need a clock with a sweep hand (for the seconds) to get a sense of the timing, but it isn’t essential. In due course, once you have learnt it, you can do it whilst walking (say) on your morning exercise route, or with the dog. It is also best to practice this regularly until it becomes more like second-nature: until you become more in contact with what you feel is your proper sense of Self. Then you can do it anywhere: and at any almost time (though obviously not when you are working, or driving a car). You can do it on a bus, or on the train to work, or in your car, in a lay-by, before you start work, or before you get home to the family. Any time that you want to feel more yourself, you can re-claim the right to be your Self. Just by doing this.

This exercise is just one way of doing this, if you start using it, on a regular basis. There are, of course, many other ways, but these usually involve other people or events. This exercise you can do for yourself, by yourself, quietly and regularly. As you do it, you can build in your own changes and modifications – you will adapt it, so that it works for you! As you do it, you should find that you get an increasing feeling of your Sense of Self: a Felt Sense of Self.

First Section

First Part: Become more aware of your breathing. You are (obviously) breathing all the time: every moment of every day: but how often are you aware of your breathing? We breathe in several different ways. There is the belly-breathing method that is encouraged in Yoga. This is where your belly moves in and out, and - because of your diaphragm - the movement in the belly draws air in, or pushes it out, of your lungs: so it works a little like a bicycle pump. The second basic method of breathing is a 'bellows-type' of breathing. You often do this if you have just run up a couple of flights of stairs. This is where your chest expands and your rib cage expands, and the air is drawn in and out of your lungs by a bellows-type of action. And there are combinations of these. When we are anxious or afraid, our breathing becomes quite shallow and quite 'high'; panting a little, with most of the breathing action happening in the throat. When we are very anxious, we also tend to breathe in and hold; and then breathe in and hold; and then breathe in and hold: we take more air in (because we have to), but we don't breathe out very much. When the fear or stress or tension goes, then we can breathe out a lot and start to relax. So, how are you breathing now? How much, how often, how deep, and where? Just become aware of your pattern of breathing. When you do this, it might change a little: that's OK. Just notice that it is changing. Spend a couple of minutes re-connecting with your pattern of breathing.

Second Part: You are not just breath: you also have a body. So, spend a couple of minutes becoming more aware of your body. You are probably sitting on a chair: become aware of the chair against your back and bottom. You may be sitting in a particular position: arms folded, or not; legs crossed, or not; become aware of this position. You may be wearing a watch, or a belt, or a necklace, or something: become aware of the physical sensations of wearing these objects. Become conscious of the feeling of your clothes against your skin: your shoes may be a little tight, or loose - whatever! We receive all of these sensations into our body all of the time: just become more aware of many of these sensations. Become aware of your body as a living, functioning organism: you have quite an amazing body: it mostly works very well for most of the time: 60-70 years of non-stop functioning: wow! Appreciate it a little now: spend a couple of minutes being more aware - and even perhaps a little amazed!

Third Part: So, you now are a breathing, aware body, but you are not in a vacuum or a void. Now, become aware of the environment that you are in. There are lots of things around you: sights, sounds, smells, textures, temperatures, qualities of light, noises inside and outside, etc. Spend a minute or two becoming aware of your breathing body in the environment that it is in, at this moment in time. Become more aware of the sensations and affects of the environment around you: the smell of the room you are in; the hum of the computer (if there is one); the noises in the

street outside; birdsong perhaps. Spend a couple of minutes ‘being’ in the environment around you. This is all part of you being ‘You’, and becoming more your Self, in the Here and Now.

If at anytime during one of these parts or sections, your mind drifts off, or thought patterns creep in, don’t worry: it is very common. Just banish the thoughts and come back to the exercise. Focus again on your breathing, or your body, or your environment, or whatever part you are working with and just continue. As you do the exercise again and again, these disturbances will become less. The more you practice this, the better you will be at doing it.

Second Section

First Part: You are not just a body in the here-and-now: you also have feelings: lots of them. There are those feelings that are more on the ‘surface’: more easily accessible; you are more aware of them. Today, you are reasonably happy because – (hopefully) – the sun is shining; or you are not feeling so fine because you have just had an argument with your partner, or child, or work colleague; or someone who you thought liked you (or didn’t like you) said something nasty (or nice) about you; or you are looking forward to the weekend, because ... or you are not, because ... and so forth. Don’t get stuck in any one of these feelings, just notice what they are and (perhaps) how many there are. Spend a little time, a couple of minutes, in just contacting and being more aware of all those different ‘surface’ – here-and-now – feelings.

Second Part: Underneath the surface feelings, there are lots of other – often contrasting – feelings. People that we basically like, also have some irritating (possibly infuriating) habits; whilst we may love someone, we can also really dislike ‘this’ or ‘that’ about them, or dislike them when they do ‘this’ or ‘that’; we love our children dearly, and we are also sometimes really infuriated by them; we may *really* want to move to another town, but we are also scared to lose our friends here. We are basically a nice person, and sometimes we can get very angry, or jealous, or we can have mean thoughts.

It isn’t a very nice part of the exercise, but this part is very necessary. We have to become aware of these ‘mixed’ or ‘secondary’ feelings, and then perhaps we can work through, or with, some of these conflicts – over time. You won’t be able to sort them out in these few minutes, so just notice them, and hold your awareness of them. Let them bubble up. And then breathe, and let them go on out. Let the next one surface for your attention, and then let it go. Spend a couple of minutes just allowing your awareness, or extending your awareness, of some of these conflicting emotions.

Third Part: Below these conflicting emotions, there are our deeper, basic feelings: our ‘gut’ feelings. These feelings are beyond dispute: they cover things like the horror of warfare; the fear of violence; the basic human desire for peace and calm; a love of gentleness and beauty; the

pleasure that we get from being in nature - those things that touch us all deeply. We may never, ever vote Conservative – or Labour: that is just not who we are! We are either deeply religious, or we are indifferent, or we are a convinced agnostic! We really love music, or reading, or books, or eating, or whatever. These ‘gut’ feelings probably won’t change: they don’t often change: they help to form something of our identity.

Sometimes we have had a crisis, or a trauma, or a near-death experience, or something – and that is when some of these feelings might change. This level of feeling is also where we can feel our common humanity; and our connectedness to other people, or beings. These deep feelings go to confirm our identity, and, from here, we can also begin to feel something of our spirituality. Spend a couple of minutes at this level, just contacting these deeper feelings. You can come back here, anytime.

However, you can’t short-cut the process and omit the second part, the bit about the conflictual feelings. People try to do this all the time, by joining a political party, or by following a sect, or getting a guru, or by joining a movement: then there is less conflict inside. But, only by going *through* these emotional conflicts, can we really make sense of these things, and then we can retain a sense of the deeper understanding and connectedness. Then we can be more our Self. So spend a couple of minutes contacting these deeper feelings that go to make up our Self.

Third Section

You are not just a body and a set of feelings. There is much more to you than that. Who you are now is who you have become. There were many influences throughout your life; you made many decisions along the road to getting here now, and there could have been different choices, and there were missed opportunities, and so on and so forth. You may have a frustrated musician inside of you, because you had to give up piano at age seven when your family moved house; or there may be dreams of crossing the Gobi Desert on a camel, writing a book, sailing across the Pacific, being in a film, having children, or of climbing Kilimanjaro – as yet all unrealised. What might have happened (or not happened) if you hadn’t gone to that party, or that college, or taken that job? This section deals with that part of the whole ‘You’ that is not manifest at this particular point in time. However, I don’t want to be too precise or detailed, because otherwise I may indicate something that isn’t there, or you may inhibit or overlook something that is there. You will have to ‘feel’ your way into this section, over time, and through regular repetition.

First Part: This first part is to do with your dreams and aspirations. You may feel you deserve to be the branch manager, or the section head: you may have fantasies about how you would do ‘this’ or ‘that’; or you might have always wanted a child, or another child – the girl that you have always longed for, or the boy to carry your name forward. These thoughts, dreams,

hopes, aspirations, are absolutely fine: all of these are possible; they may (or may not) happen; whether they do or not is relatively irrelevant; all of the dreams and aspirations in this part are manifestations of your present potential, of you trying to exert yourself, to move forward, or do something more in your life, or with your life. This leads you gently forward from the 'here-and-now' towards new possibilities. 'Dream up' the rest of your Self a little. Take a couple of minutes for this part.

Second Part: This part is a bit more vague, as it is to do with your unrealised potential. You have millions of brain cells that you don't use very much: what or how would you be like if you were using them? With a bit of a push in a particular direction, and with some determination and specialist training, you could be (or have been) – a musician, a university professor, a lawyer, possibly even an astronaut – whatever! In the theory of alternative universes, there are millions of other You-s, all with exactly the same DNA, but in slightly different places because they chose slightly different courses. You chose differently, which is fine, ... and the potential is still there: latent within you. If you want to be more like one of these alternative You-s, then choose; start to move in that direction. You can start to tap some of that potential now, if you want to. It is like a bank of reserve batteries, or alternate sets of clothes, waiting for you to use them. Spend a couple of minutes on this part: tapping into this potential, exploring your possibilities and future directions.

Third Part: This is the place, or the level, where you can go to contact 'That' which is 'greater' than yourself: that which is 'Other'. This is your personal connection to God, the Universe, or where You can be at 'One with Everything' – however you envisage this. There are no good descriptions for this part: it is almost beyond words. But most people can connect with something they can call their Inner Self, their Higher Self, or their Guardian Angel, or that part of Them that touches the 'Other', or God, or Allah, or whomsoever you pray to: 'That' which is greater than your Self. I am sure that you know what I mean.

You don't have to do anything, like pray, or worship, or talk to the 'Other', or receive anything from the 'Other': just practice being there – in some sort of connection with the 'Other'. Spend a couple of minutes just being 'Here' with the 'Other'.

The whole exercise has taken only about 20 minutes. See if you can find the time to do something like this fairly regularly. 3-4 times a week perhaps, as part of your relaxation time, or as a quiet meditation in your lunch break, or (as I said) on the bus or train to work. As the weeks unfold, your sense of your Self will increase and deepen. You will start to change. And that is what this is all about!

What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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