

Wisdom at the edges

Peter Gill writes about using embodied awareness practices to access other realms of knowing



Inside all of us lie uncharted territories, lands where everything we know fades and we enter another kind of realm. In this place, we are no longer in charge, and what approaches us seems mysterious and beyond our control. This may sound scary, and it can be, but in these twilight landscapes, something new can emerge. Messages from our larger self can be received and transformation can begin.

There's wisdom in those forgotten landscapes. Martin Shaw, mythologist and storyteller, says that in the old stories, wisdom or transformation comes from outside of the village – the fringes and further edges of the forest.¹ To find that wisdom, you have to enter the forest and cross a threshold into the other world: move from what is known and comfortable to what is edgy. You have to step into the wilds.

I have learnt to access this place through a practice known as 'Focusing'. It is an embodied awareness practice, first developed by Eugene Gendlin over four decades ago. These realms can be accessed through other means than Focusing (though for me, Focusing has been the best way to find them). They lie in every person if we pay attention and approach them in the right way.

Gendlin writes that, 'the word "Focusing" means to spend time, attending to that inwardly sensed edge. When that happens in the silence, the next thing and the next come gradually from deeper and deeper.'² So, what is this realm and why is it important? So far, I have evoked this place through metaphor, but we could speak of it as a boundary between conscious and unconscious: a place where we can directly sense a larger kind of awareness. Dreams are another place where we can find this. You could also speak of it as any encounter with the right brain, which usually brings in a more holistic and intuitive functioning of mind and body. Perhaps it is also a meeting with the collective unconscious. Sometimes in Focusing, we speak of listening to the body. The word 'body' here can be a little misleading, as it is much more than the physical body (though even listening to this is a revelation for some). The word 'body'

in Focusing is more a pointer towards the realms of knowing beyond thought.

The importance of Focusing was something that Eugene Gendlin and Carl Rogers discovered in their initial research into client outcomes in therapy in the 1950s. They noticed what they called a 'different way of speaking' in certain clients, observing that when people paused in their speech and searched for the right word or image to describe what they were experiencing in the moment, something essential happened: a shift occurred that was essential to longer-term change in the client. The clients who just retold their story over and over, without really noticing what was happening inside, did not make such shifts. Gendlin describes it like this: 'You can have lots of feelings and have the same feelings over and over again. It isn't the recognisable feelings that make so much difference. It is sensing the edge, the unclear, what you don't recognise, but it is there, the bodily discomfort that the problem makes, which has meaning; it has its own peculiar quality, implicitly, it is complex, it has in it everything that relates to that problem, but not in a way you can say.'³

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What comes at this edge is new or, perhaps a better word would be, fresh information which changes the whole inner landscape. These are next steps in a process that could not have been accessed through thinking alone. Gendlin spoke of this as a shift. In ordinary language, we could call it an insight or an 'a-ha' moment. In the practice of Focusing, these can be small and subtle, but also big and transformative. It's not so much the scale that matters but more the sense of freshness.

It's at this edge that our bigger knowing can speak. I'll share an example from my own experience. A few years ago, I was exploring a theme around parenting. I had been struggling with connecting with my son in an empathic way and

kept losing my temper. I was curious about what was going on under the surface and if my body knew something more about this difficult situation. I took this whole topic inside and waited. What came quite easily was an image. It felt significant in some way. The image was of a jigsaw puzzle, but an incomplete one. It had all the edges but not much in the middle, just a few pieces here and there. I didn't have to do much checking as it was very clear. So, I sat with it. I knew it meant something. As I described it, the meaning came in the words I spoke. I said: 'I don't have all the pieces.' And then it came to me, the deep rightness in the words spoke truth about my parenting: I don't have all the pieces, specifically, about how to be a father. I was brought up in a family with only a distant connection to my real father, and a fractured connection to a stepfather. My body, or deeper knowing, understood that and communicated it to me through this symbol. What came next was a release of emotion, of held back grief, that I had not had the whole experience of being fathered. I only had a few pieces. What followed was something I would only describe as deep self-compassion or empathy. I just sat with that part of me that struggled with how to be a father. It still struggles to this day, but when I notice this, I remember to be kind to myself and to my son. I don't have all the pieces.

You can see from this example how a deeper wisdom spoke to me through an image. You can also see how I had to wait there, knowing something important was coming, but that I did not yet have the words to describe. I'll say more about this later. Sometimes what comes is more than a personal insight about our history or life. It is something more universal. Gendlin wrote: 'The felt sense, which I also call the edge of awareness, is the centre of personality. It comes between the usual conscious person, and the deep universal reaches of human nature where we are no longer ourselves.'⁴

Before our son was born, my wife Claire and I had three miscarriages. After the third of these, I took some time to be quiet and listen inside. After some time, an image arose from deep within. I saw three small mounds of earth in a landscape, three burial mounds and me mourning by them. Already I was relieved at what my

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body had showed me. Grief moved through me. Then, these words appeared from the depths. They were not like usual thoughts. It was almost like something else was speaking. The words said: 'This is not yours to carry.' And a great burden lifted, like the part of me that blamed myself for what had happened just dissolved. The miscarriages were not mine or anyone's fault. I could put the hidden self-blame down. I still felt sad but no longer burdened and self-blaming. I hope these stories evoke something of this edge and the deeper wisdom that comes there. Here, Gendlin speaks more about this edge:

'One effect of the Focusing process is to bring hidden bits of personal knowledge up to the level of conscious awareness. This isn't the most important effect. The body shift, the change in a felt sense, is the heart of the process. But the bringing up of bodily sensed knowledge – the transfer of the knowledge, in effect, from body to mind – is something that every Focuser experiences. Often this transferred knowledge seems to be part of a tough problem, and it might be expected that this would make you feel worse. After all, you now know something bad that you didn't know before. Logically, you should feel worse. Yet you don't. You feel better. You feel better mainly because your body feels better, more free, released. The whole body is alive in a less constricted way. You have localised a problem that had previously made your whole body feel bad. An immediate freeing feeling lets you know there is a body shift. It is the body having moved toward a solution.'

So how do we find this edge? I could, of course, simply suggest that you learn Focusing, but for this piece I want to draw out some essential qualities and steps that can be applied in multiple situations; in your own life, in professional work with others and more. I want to point to the essence of the process that lays beyond any specified set of steps. After all, this realm of experience belongs to all of us.

Checking words

With ourselves or with our clients, we can take the time to check that the words we are saying actually feel true. An everyday example of this not being the case is

when we are asked how we are and, in politeness, say, 'I'm fine', but inside we feel these words are not at all true. They may even grate against what is true. We feel the incongruence and we know the words we are saying don't fit. We all have this way of checking though it can take some time for some people to find it.

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Gendlin called this *resonating*, and this touchstone can help us to keep in touch with the direct moment to moment experience, rather than get lost in pre-rehearsed narrative, or what we think we should say and feel.

Slowing down

Finding those edges takes time, at least at first, so taking time to settle within and arrive in the present moment can be helpful. We might notice the support of the ground and tune in with our senses. Once we get the hang of this, it can be done in the moment, even in busy and chaotic situations; but to begin with, most people find space and time deeply facilitative.

Noticing what can be felt but cannot be put into words

Here is the crux: noticing what can be felt but not put into words easily. Think of times when you just felt 'off' or 'icky' but could not really say why. Or some decision did not feel right and you couldn't put your finger on it. In these examples we feel that deeper knowing but we cannot articulate it yet. It's a rich territory and ripe for exploration. In our culture, we don't really value the vague and inarticulate, but in Focusing they are seen as gateways to deeper knowing.

Trusting there is something more

For this to work, there needs to be some trust that staying with this edge is helpful. This can be hard, given it can be an uncomfortable place to be. Feeling something, but not knowing what it is, can bring fear, so it takes practice to trust that something will happen. It also takes kindness and patience towards any part of us that might get scared.

Showing curiosity and an open approach

At heart, when we bring curiosity and openness to our experience, it opens the door to change. When we are curious, we step outside of the known and begin to enter a new world. This is a place where some company can be very supportive too; a trusted friend or therapist can hold the space and be alongside you in these unfamiliar waters.

The heart of this is that change comes, not from what we know already, but from gently opening to and accessing the deeper reaches of human experience. I believe that this is nothing new. Mystics and shamans have done this for millennia. Likewise, any person who has walked into nature with an open heart in search of an answer. It's more that, in an increasingly fast-paced world – a world that values the cognitive and logical – we have forgotten these ancient doorways. All it takes is a little curiosity and a leap of trust to find them again. ●

Biography



Peter Gill is a freelance Focusing teacher, workshop facilitator and one of the UK's foremost Focusing instructors. He is qualified with the British Focusing Association and the International Focusing Institute in New York. He is also qualified in Somatic Experiencing, an approach to healing trauma developed by Dr Peter Levine.
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