

**Conversation With Gene:
Life-Giving Resources and Therapeutic Culture
Russell Delman March 2016**

For many years, I have enjoyed a close friendship with Gene Gendlin the originator of Focusing and author of the book by that name. At 89 years old, this philosopher and psychologist remains the most gifted thinker that I have ever encountered. Our conversations, whether companionship each other in the inner inquiry called Focusing or simply exploring the complexities of living, invariably lead toward novel insights. I am deeply grateful for his presence in my life. The following dialogue comes from one of our recent, potent conversations, first a prelude.

In developing The Embodied Life work, the dominant roots have been Zen meditation, the teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais and various experiential approaches to expanded awareness. Although I have been exposed to some of the dominant schools of therapy, I have never seen my approach in the domain of therapy, even as it often can be therapeutic.

My interest from the beginning has been to grow our capacity for “freedom through awareness”. The possibility that ordinary human beings like you and me could be relatively free from our past conditioning has guided my journey in life.

Many years ago, I saw that human beings have a “negativity bias” where we tend to look for what is wrong in ourselves, in others and in the world. This bias has evolutionary significance in that our ancestors without enough mental qualities of worry, wariness and danger avoidance, often did not pass on their genes. Thus, without sufficient awareness, problem seeking can dominate our perception. Unfortunately, this bias can control individuals and societies in very unhelpful ways. Although effective psychotherapy can be a wonderful life-giving gift, this problem oriented attitude has produced what I call a therapeutic culture, in which one often creates or enlarges problems through the way one attends to a challenging or painful situation.

I was thrilled with Feldenkrais’ view that functional human beings are for the most part quite healthy. When working with clients, he taught us that rather than focusing on the problems, we can seek to enhance the healthy functioning that is already present. We learned to focus on the whole organism and not the problems or presenting symptoms. When we help the

whole system to function more optimally, the injured parts or underdeveloped capacities are improved by the overall enhancement of the organism.

This kind of “systems approach” can also be witnessed in some schools of family therapy. Rather than focusing on the IP- identified patient- the idea is to bring greater awareness to the functioning of the whole family system. By improving the relationality amongst all the members, the supposed “patient”, now in a healthier system, gets better.

Resource Growing

I began to see that all human beings, even those of us with very challenging backgrounds, have many positive, life-giving experiences in our histories. We have all known moments of satisfaction, caring, love, peace, gratitude, capability, connectedness, etc., even if these moments were quite rare. Our inner life has had these experiences and they are physically embedded as neural networks in our nervous systems.

Through a practice called Resource Growing, Embodied Life students water the memory seeds of these life-giving states and thus grow these neural networks into thicker, faster and more accessible patterns. In this way, *we grow states into traits, temporary experiences into tendencies*. For this to occur with reliability, the experience we are growing must be integrated so that various brain modules are active simultaneously. In my view, for a moment to be deeply integrated, four elements must be present: 1) physical sensations, 2) feelings/emotional tone, 3) mental representation/symbol, 4) all sensed as a present moment, embodied experience. When all these are present, that experience can go deeply into our brains, into our inner life and form a part of our sense of “I”.

There is much more to say, for now let’s move on to my conversation with Gene:

R- “Hello Gene, how are you today?”

G- “Glad to STILL be here, actually very grateful”.

R- “Do you want to Focus or perhaps explore a question that is alive for me?”

G- “Let’s go with your question”.

R- “So Gene, I notice that when I observe you describing Focusing or how to listen to a felt-sense, you present it as being with something dark, unpleasant and difficult. You often use a strong sound like UGGHH to express this connection at the beginning. This then will often open and unfold. You always seem to start with a heavy, stuck place. I wonder, is that your picture of all experiences of Focusing/felt-sensing or is that more your style?”

G- (takes time) “Well the reason I am going in there or helping someone else go in there is because something doesn’t feel well or feel right”.

R- “I understand, Gene, this makes sense, since your work grew out of therapy. For me, I love how Focusing can transform challenging moments for my students and for myself, AND I have discovered that, just as a Focusing attitude can allow stuck places to move forward, it can also allow positive, life-giving states to grow bigger. For example, when I PAUSE and settle in with a felt-sense of joy it often grows into something more like bliss or grounded-ness can turn into deep peace. Do you see this as different from your version of Focusing?”

G- “Ummm, what your saying is very interesting and important, I want to go very slow. You know just earlier today I had an experience like that. I was feeling grateful for just being alive, even though my old body doesn’t work well. Just speaking out my gratitude, I noticed that it grew. Hmmm and you are saying that you can invite this intentionally.....That seems new....Actually there is a knowing of that also.... (taking much time)...Sometimes I just walk around and count and all of a sudden I am sensing “the larger system” that we are all a part of. I know you know all about that, we have seen that together many times. We could not live a minute without this larger system. When we sense THAT everything feels better. I do go there..... strange... it is not part of my thinking that I do that intentionally.I forget that I can have that....It is a little like when you guided me in just sensing my body without a lot of feelings and I realized that just sitting looking out the window brought the larger place.....

R- Yes, let’s go slow, that touches a place in me that is so grateful for our connection..... for me, growing our direct access to that larger system is like coming home (a big breath)...Ahhhh... it is also kind of like doing acupuncture to enhance your immune system. When you visit the larger place regularly you have more accessibility to your healthiness, to your inner strength and to ‘I am whole, even with this difficulty, everything is really ok as it is’..... The larger system is always like an open door, never hiding, we only need to remember it.....

G- “OH, that’s very good, like an open door, never hiding. I want to stay with that ‘never hiding’ that is new for me. Ahhh, that really moves something, let’s stay there..... OH, that is just right and that other part- ‘like coming home’, let’s stay there also”....

R- “I am sensing that open, vast place right now.... ‘Never hiding’ has me expanding into and becoming one with it All and ‘coming home’ is like settling into a soft, warm, so safe comforter.....Both are so nourishing and affirming.....

In my work, we grow access to this larger space through various practices. We begin to sense that we are permeable and that IT is always here, either in the fore or background. Sometimes we change states by remembering in deep, bodily ways moments when we had this deep connectedness. When invited, our inner life often just wants to go there. We don’t do this to escape difficult moments rather to grow permeability to the larger space. This seems to bring deeper and deeper gratitude.....

G- “Yes that feels just right, let’s go slow again....”

R- “As I sense into this I get a sad place here in my chest....Something dark and big, living around the wonderful place...My observation is that we live in a therapeutic culture in which getting rid of the “bad”, even looking for the problem is in the in fore. Of course I also appreciate being able to be with difficult moments and help them to move toward resolution.....Still, I am saddened when I see that the brilliance of a Focusing attitude can be hijacked by this problem based culture. Even therapists helping patients with specific diagnosable conditions, can serve their clientele through growing these positive resources. Interestingly, something similar is happening in the Feldenkrais world..... This brings a big, kind of enthusiastic inner place that really wants to stand up for our inner resources and something like acknowledging our potent, healthy life forces”.

G- “What you are working with is a very important step, we need a word or phrase for it...hmmm...maybe positive Focusing...no, that is not right.....we need to rest with this for a while”.

R- “I notice that your deep interest in this brings a big, big smile inside my chest, let’s continue next time”.....