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The Politics of Giving Therapy Away: Listening and Focusing

by Eugene T. Gendlin

The focusing method is perhaps the purest statement of the theme of this book, for it seeks to give away the very process of therapeutic change as a teachable skill. Gendlin, a former student and later a colleague of Carl Rogers, defines focusing as a technique for "attending to the physically sensed border zone between the conscious and unconscious." Once people have learned to sense concrete change events in their bodies, they can recognize when they are changing and can better facilitate this process. In this essay Gendlin presents the focusing technique and discusses some political issues in the giving away of psychotherapy – such as the fear among professionals that their clients will no longer need them. Gendlin assures us, however, that the more we teach skills directly, the more in demand we will become. Gendlin also introduces the Changes program (described in greater detail by Boukydis in the following chapter) and makes the point that this peer-counseling group, which actively teaches the skills of listening and focusing, offers free assistance to all its members – and thus "gives away" psychotherapy in another important sense.

Socrates once said: "The Athenians, it seems to me, are not very much disturbed if they think someone is clever. ... But the moment they suspect that he is giving his ability to others, they get angry." (*Euthyphra* 3c). Many professionals fear the day (which is surely coming) when people will learn the skills of psychotherapy routinely in public school and practice them with each other. Actually they need not fear. The more people engage in processes of this sort, the more experts will be wanted and needed. It is true, however, that such experts will have to be more able than the general population. Currently this is often not the case; some of the self-help training is better than the so-called professional training. Many professionals know [Page 288] a large vocabulary of general terms but no specific practical skills. In the future most people will have been

trained in *specific* skills. They will also know what helpful change feels like within themselves. They will be able to recognise when an "expert" can do more than they can do alone or with a partner.

In this chapter I will first discuss the two therapeutic skills we are giving away. I will then discuss some political principles that I think apply to all *genuine* forms of giving therapy away. The principles have implications both for the politics of therapy and for politics in general. Finally I will present our own organizational model.

LISTENING AND FOCUSING

Listening

In our organization we welcome anyone to teach *any* skill to those of us who want to learn it. We do not make a sect out of our group. The two skills we give away are listening and focusing.

Listening comes from client-centered therapy. (See also Thomas Gordon's chapter in this book.) We have specified listening in our particular way. There is a "Listening Manual" (included in Gendlin, 1981), which has been widely used in many public agencies. We concentrate on specificity — exactly what to do when and also exactly what signs show that listening is being done well and exactly what happens when it is not.

We find that the learning of listening makes our whole organisation a good place to be.

What is listening? It is receiving what someone wishes to convey and saying it back to the person exactly as it was meant. One usually fails in one's first attempt to say a message back. The speaker corrects it: "No, that's not what I meant, it's . . ." The listener says "Oh, I see, you meant . . ." Even at the second try the speaker typically says "Yes, that's right, but not exactly — I mean it just this way . . ." The listener grasps that too: "It's exactly this . . ." There is then usually a visible relief in the speaker. What needed to be heard has actually got heard. It was received. There is no need to say it over and over. Now there is a little silence usually. The person feels inwardly freed from what needed to be said, because it was said and heard. There is a freed space inside. Something new can now come up from deeper within the person. Usually it is a further bit of whatever the speaker is working on. If this new bit is again received by the listener, there is again a freed space inside. More and more further steps arise within the speaker. Aspects of the problems develop that are new to the speaker. A change process is inwardly experienced, step by step.

People begin this process by trying to convey what they know and feel. But very soon much more arises than that. There is a bit of inward movement with each such step.

Fifteen minutes of being listened to is worth coming all the way across the city to a meeting. People take turns listening to each other. Sometimes for half an hour or an hour each.

Even apart from therapy, *any* discussion is vastly better if people listen. The nature of group process changes. No longer does one have to fight for the chance to make one fast statement. A listening response invites the speakers to go more deeply

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into what motivates them to make the point. Once that underlying good sense has been heard, people don't need to say their point over and over every time they speak in the meeting.

Most people have no one who will hear and receive their own inward experience *just as it is*. No one wants to know exactly how *you* experience your personal struggle. Everyone wants to edit it, change it, improve it, put his or her meaning onto it. Another person is a very powerful aid in letting one's feelings and meanings open up and develop through steps, but only if that other person can listen. To our organization that means putting nothing extraneous in and receiving each bit of experience just as the speaker means to convey it.

When people experience listening and being listened to, it soon seems like an inalienable right that goes with being human. Then, when people don't listen, it seems a shocking disrespect. How can they not respect the good sense that my inwardly arising experience makes when it is allowed to emerge in its own meanings?

We teach listening to everyone. The first evening people come, they learn it in the "New People's Group." It lets each newcomer discover our climate and become comfortable. We teach it in a round. The person on one's left says something, and one repeats it back. When that has been done successfully, one is listened to by the person on one's right. The leaders first model listening with each other and then help each person say back what the person on his or her left said.

At first we teach listening as repeating. Oddly, we find that only this "parroting" teaches people to pay attention to what someone says. New people are always surprised to discover that they did not hear what the person said and that others do not hear them. Only the "saying back" reveals this! (If you have not made this discovery, and you think you hear all right — just try saying back! You will be corrected and will discover how you don't usually hear.)

After someone has learned to hear what is being said so that it can be repeated (some weeks), then it is time to learn how to say back only what matters — the personal feelings, meanings, and "edges."

I think listening is a crucial new factor in developing free people. A mere ideology of freedom is only an abstraction. Until people experience their own, *inwardly arising* steps of making sense, they will accept ideas imposed on them by others.

Once people are used to being listened to, they are "spoiled" for any organization that violates their own inner source of good sense. They do not accept being told about themselves by someone who has not first heard *them*. Anyone who does not even know that this needs to be done will not be taken as an authority in personal matters. People who are used to being listened to will receive psychological direction tentatively, pending their own inwardly arising process.

Without the individual's *experience* of that inward source of good sense and personal truth, all varieties of political programs add up to the same thing: externally imposed straitjackets, whatever the ideology.

Focusing

The steps of focusing are presented in a paperback (Gendlin, 1981) that includes highly specific instructions for many typical difficulties in learning focusing. It is a simply written book, an example of giving therapy away.

Here I cannot repeat all those specifics. Consequently, you won't know exactly [Page 290] what focusing is. It involves an odd kind of bodily attention that cannot usually be found without a little practice. Most people have one or another typical difficulty learning it.

Let me return to listening for a moment. Listening is taught to the listener. Certain "inwardly arising steps of change" are supposed to happen in the person being listened to. But sometimes nothing like that happens. The person only talks and expresses the same feelings over and over. There has been no way, until recently, to show such a person that it is possible to attend, inwardly, to something sensed very directly but unclearly. It is from that sort of inward sensing that change steps arise. From my description of listening you may not have understood what these "steps" are like. To explain focusing, I shall discuss these "steps" and how they can be helped to come.

Repetitiousness, lack of therapeutic movement, is a problem in every kind of therapy. In a series of research studies over many years we found that those patients who changed did not work only with "feelings" and emotions they recognized. They spent time during interviews directly sensing something unclear, yet physically experienced.

The difference is hard to grasp: emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, disappointment are recognizable. We know what these are. In contrast, there can also be a deeper "sense of something" that is "right there" but unclear as yet.

If people stay entirely with what they clearly feel, then this bodily sense of the problem does not even come. Some learning is needed to know how to let an unclear bodily sense of a problem arise in one's body. Then there are specific ways of keeping one's attention on it so that it shifts in the body, opens, "comes into focus."

Focusing has its beginnings in therapy, although now it is quite independent of therapy. Focusing has been taught to many people not in

therapy — for example, people in business, spiritual groups, children, hospitalized patients, and bright college students. It is used in healing, in stress reduction, and in creative writing. It has been found that if a person wants to write, it is better to begin focusing on the directly felt body sense of what is to be written rather than words and ideas. As one attends to what shifts and opens, one is then more able to write as one would wish.

In any therapy or growth process something new must open within the person. Sometimes this happens and one doesn't know how. But one great aid is to pay direct attention to the border zone (you might say) between conscious and unconscious. What has been called "unconscious" is not completely unknown but has an entry into consciousness that is quite aware: it is a fuzzy, vague, unclear sense one has *in one's body*. Such a "felt sense" can form in regard to any topic of concern.

To pay this kind of attention is odd. Most people don't know about this implicitly complex, vague body sense. Instead, they spend most of their time with *recognizable* thoughts and feelings. The felt sense in focusing is different.

To let a "felt sense" form requires much more specific steps than I can give here. But I can give you some initial experiential description of it.

If you were now to turn your attention inward to a problem of yours, you would find certain familiar feelings. How would you bypass these so that an *unclear* bodily sense of the problem can come?

First we would have to show you a preliminary step: how not to go inside a problem to those familiar feelings. There is another "place" in an odd "space". It is a **[Page 291]**"third" place, neither away from the problem nor inside it. We have specific ways to help people find this "third" place.

When you have found that "place," you can refuse to go inside the problem to the usual feelings. Now you can wait for the bodily sense of the whole problem to come.

At first this is rather like attending very carefully to something that is not there yet. You would attend in the middle of your body and wait.

We would show you a number of ways to let that unclear sense form. One of them would eventually work for you. Just as an example, here is one way:

You know the problem is not solved, but you can say to yourself "This problem is really all solved, all OK; I can feel fine about it — *in my body*." As you say this, you attend to the middle of your body. Very quickly a bodily sense of discomfort with this problem comes. It is a queasy, fuzzy, murky, indefinable sense, but you know it is the unique bodily quality that *this* problem makes in your body.

The body talks back! We ask you to say "The problem is all right" so that the body can respond with a physical contradiction of that statement.

If you are not experienced with focusing, you might not think highly of this bodily sense. You might say "That's too vague. It's just murky. I know

a lot about my problem already. I can't expect anything to come from this confused 'edge' here. *This* can't be what they're telling me to stay with."

And yet, this murky bodily discomfort *comes* when you attend in this way to this problem. It is *the bodily version of this problem*.

A "felt sense" (as we call it) is very different from the usual emotions, however bodily these are "in the gut." Emotions are recognizable: we know when we are angry, afraid, or sad. Emotions are only *parts* of life situations; they are *inside* a problem. The *whole* of a problem feels different. It makes a unique, indefinable bodily sense.

When this sense shifts and changes, all the parts inside the problem change. Later new emotions may arise. These may be quite strong, but at first the bodily sense of the whole problem is usually not intense. In fact, it is slight and fleeting and can easily be lost hold of.

We have specific ways of helping people to stay with such an unclear felt sense. It helps to attend to the "quality" of it. Is it heavy, or jumpy, or how? A word, phrase, or image might fit this unique quality. Finding such a "handle" helps one to stay with the felt sense and to attend to its bodily quality. When words or an image "resonate" with a felt sense, there is a physical loosening, a bodily signal, breath, or energy flow.

Only now, having worked for a while with the bodily sense itself, you ask: What is it about the problem that makes *this* bodily sense?

I have to make all this sound very simple and easy in order to explain it here. Actually, there are again specific ways for letting that question reach down into the body. Otherwise the question rouses only the old answers, the explanations ready in your mind. When the asking reaches down to the felt sense, there is soon (30 seconds or so — a long time to stay quiet) a *physical* shift. A further bit of the problem or a step towards solving it comes.

Any ideas that come without a physically felt easing are simply allowed to fly by. One waits for anything about the problem, any thought, feeling, bit of detail, or direction of solution that is accompanied by a physical release in the felt sense.

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There are specific ways to help a "felt shift" to happen if this simple asking didn't bring it on.

It takes some learning to recognize a felt shift. Sometimes it is huge and unmistakable, but there are often small shifts, little "steps." Most people's tension level is chronically at a maximum, so that they don't recognize small changes. Or they may have learned meditation or hypnosis, a relaxation so deep that the body no longer "talks back" at all. Such relaxed states are valuable, but focusing requires a middle level of relaxation, so that slight bodily changes can be sensed. Only in that way can one work directly with the bodily version of a particular problem.

Today many people are "in touch" with their feelings. They think various thoughts that have "gut-felt" results. This can be very intense and is usually quite painful. It is a kind of "vivisection."

It is very different to let the bodily sense of the *whole problem* form (if it isn't already there). Touching *that* is not painful. Usually there is already a little relief when the felt sense first comes. Then, the "felt shift" always involves a physical relief (even if one doesn't like what emerges).

The main purpose of focusing is the bodily change of the problem *as a whole*. At each "step" the whole changes, and therefore also every part. Therefore one may not immediately find words for what comes at such a step.

The purpose is not the information one may discover. Further steps will change this information anyway. A major problem will require many steps.

"Getting information" is based on the false assumption that a problem is something fixed. Most theories assume that whatever is wrong happened long ago and that we can only find out, relive, repeat. Such theories do not explain change and growth. They assume that we can "throw out the garbage" by reliving it. In fact, the relived experience needs to be different from the original experience. Sensing a problem as a bodily whole in the present is a new living and changes that whole. The problem is then found to be quite different. Further steps let it become still more different.

So much of psychotherapy is just the usual feelings over and over. Emotional discharges can be very intense but soon become repetitious. I don't mean to denigrate catharsis; it is precious and often needed. But reliving old emotions does not alone bring steps of change in the whole way someone is.

Only rarely do people in therapy sense a problem *as a whole* rather than only this or that emotion, which is only part of the problem. A whole problem can be sensed in the body only as a holistic sense. *New* steps and a bit of change come from such a sense, which must form and come in the body.

Focusing lifts out of therapy the essential moments in which the body forms the whole of something, and new steps of change arise. It specifies how this kind of inward attention is found. One can then do that alone, although it helps to have another person's attention and company silently, sometimes interspersed with listening.

Every person is unique. All instructions must therefore be taken in two ways: one should try them out exactly as given. But stop the moment you do violence inside. If that happens, don't quit completely; just stop and sense what went wrong. The steps of focusing feel natural; they feel like physical relief.

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The preliminary movement. In a three-day workshop we spend one day on just this movement. It greatly helps the rest of focusing. Please notice the specifics.

Check first whether you can put your attention in the middle of your body. Some people sense only the periphery of their bodies, shoulders, arms, and back. They cannot bring their attention into the middle. It may take you some time to attend there. If you are not used to that, you might begin by sensing your toes and then your knee. Can you find your knee without moving it first? Then bring your attention up into your stomach and chest. (If that fails, we know other ways.)

Now see how life is going for you, just now. But do it in this specific way: instead of reciting all your problems and situation, ask *only* about what your body is just now carrying. What is now in the way of feeling very good inside your body? You are probably sure you already know. Instead of what you know, here is how you would do this preliminary step:

Put your attention in the middle of your body, and say to it: "Everything is fine. I can feel fine now. Life is going very well." Wave aside your thoughts about this, and wait for your body to answer. Very soon it answers: a not-fine body sense arises to let you know things are not all fine. Your body is not now able to feel all good about life.

As you attend to this not-fine feeling, you can sense that it is a mix of a number of things. If you try to push the whole mix away at once, you will feel only very slightly better. Instead, you let it sort itself out. Very quickly one problem arises out of this mix.

"Oh . . . yes. That's one of them all right . . . ," you say, with a sigh. "Sure, that's there. Yes." You don't go inside it. Instead, you "place" it at some little distance before you. It is *there*. You don't deny it or avoid it. But you also don't fall into it. You keep your fingers on it, so to speak. You shelve it or park it where you can find it again easily. From here you can relate to that problem as a whole. You may come back to it later. You can sense whether you feel ready to go into it today or not.

But this is only the preliminary to focusing. Right now you don't work on that problem, even if you are ready to do so. Instead, you put your attention in the middle of your body, and you say "Except for that problem (if that were somehow well solved), would I feel fine in here?"

Typically, now, one's mind answers: "Sure, I'd be great, all free and easy." But that is not yet the bodily response! One must wait, keeping one's attention in the middle of the body, and *there* ask "Except for this thing, if it were OK, what would come in my body here?"

There is then, after a few seconds, an easing, a release, a flow of new energy, sometimes some specific effect one has not suspected. At any rate the change is concrete, bodily, not just an idea or a visual picture.

"Now, except for that, is life going all fine?" Again the attention is in the middle of the body. "Hmm . . . well, much better but still something uneasy, funny, a little tight, there . . . wonder what *that* is about." Again

after a little while one knows. It is that other problem. Again one puts it in a safe place, slightly aside (not away). "Now, if that were all OK, how would it feel in my body?"

At any given time four or five such concerns are being carried by your body. Some big problems you know of are not here now. Some trivial things are, even though [Page 294]they're the sort you won't even recall next week. What the body now carries is not the same as your mental list of main concerns. It is *this* uneasy mix, now.

For example, you might find that one thing is your main life relationship. "Yes, sure, that's there . . . our fight last night, my doubts about the relationship, what to do . . . that whole thing." When you "place" that before you and return into your body, asking what would come if that whole problem were solved, you feel some new way, physically. Then, sensing whether you feel *all* OK, you don't. Soon another thing emerges: that silly remark you made this morning. You know this isn't important, but you don't argue with it. There it is. You feel uneasy about that stupid remark. A breath comes, "Yes, that's still there . . ." You might have to look into it further, but if so, you will do that later. Except for that, are you *all* fine? In this way your body might give you a few more concerns as the "mix" sorts itself out.

When one puts one of these concerns aside, and then the body is no different (only a visual picture of putting it aside comes), then we say that it hasn't really been put aside. Other ways of doing that are used, until it does let itself be placed aside, with a bodily release.

Usually, after a few minutes one reaches the end of the present list (what is *now* bodily carried), and still one isn't totally fine. There is usually a "background feeling," one that is always there for the person, always tense, always trying hard, always a little cautious, always a little sad — - whatever. Taking this background feeling too as "something" to "put aside a little," one says "I may work on this later. For now . . . what would come in my body if this background feeling were not there, if it were made OK somehow?" After some moments, what comes in the body at this point is usually quite a large free space.

This procedure is very different from turning *away* from everything the body carries and merely stopping thinking and attending to problems *all at once*. That leaves them all in a bunch, in a bodily-carried way, even if one relaxes, meditates, or otherwise spends time in a restful way.

The *specific* way each concern cramps the body is not thereby released. The vast open space isn't found that way.

The "movements" of focusing. All this is only the preparatory movement *before* focusing. At this point one begins to focus on one problem, one concern. (It could be something positive, of course — - something one wants to write, perhaps, or develop further. It need not be a problem.)

Now pick *one* of these "things" you have placed.

Suppose you pick that big relationship problem to work on. Now you could quickly make yourself feel very bad. You might then feel bad the rest of the day. We all know how to do that. Unfortunately, this self-hurting way is called laudable names: facing things, having "gut-feelings," "intense experiencing." But I assume these bad feelings are familiar enough. One more time will not bring anything new. Instead, in focusing you would *stay outside the problem*, and sense it *as a whole*. That will bring a new "step."

Let us say you sense that the familiar bad feelings are very close. You decide to keep that problem at a good distance. You don't think about any of it. You refer to the problem as "all that."

Putting your attention in the middle of your body you say "*All that* is all fine, all solved, isn't it?" Instantly a jangly, uneasy body sense comes.

"OK, let's stay with *that*," you say.

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That is a felt sense. It is at first *unclear*. You know much about your problem, but you do *not* know what that felt sense is.

"*What is the quality of that?*", you ask. In order to stay with the felt sense, you try to name its bodily quality more exactly: "jangly . . . ?" That seems right, but not quite. "Nervous . . . ?" That is also right, but not quite. Then "Touchy!" comes and is *exactly* right. "Yes! It's just like a spot that cannot stand to be touched. Yes! Whew (breath)."

Now you spend a minute or so "*resonating*" the word with the felt sense: every time you think "touchy," there is that flow of bodily agreement and a little breath. There is a tiny bit of loosening in your body.

At this point you would not take five dollars for the word *touchy*. You would not agree to use *nervous* instead, because that word does not have the physical resonance and slight but very grateful easing that *touchy* makes.

When that effect is no longer so fresh and powerful (a minute or less later), you go on to the next focusing movement. You ask "*What is that?*" You mean, of course, "*What is it about that whole problem that is now making this sense here?*"

For a while nothing stirs in your body. Various thoughts interrupt you, and you return each time. "Where was I? Oh . . . yes . . . touchy . . . ah, there it is again!"

Then it opens and shifts, suddenly. "Oh . . . it's the pressure to make a decision! That's too touchy to touch, right now. I've got to stay away from the deciding pressure. That's the touchy spot!"

A felt shift comes with an easing. You feel physically better. But you are quickly interrupted by familiar thoughts: "You have to decide, it won't do to avoid that. Not deciding is also deciding." And so on. You push these aside with an "I know." You protect this little step: "I must not touch deciding ...whew (breath), that's what's so 'touchy.'"

You have now gone through the six "movements" of focusing: (1) the preliminary space-making, (2) the felt sense coming, (3) the quality "handle" — - the word *touchy*, (4) the resonating, (5) the asking, and, after the felt shift, (6) protecting the little step that came.

"Is that it for now?," you ask, sensing your body. You get a sense that your body wants to stop. You do. Or a nervous sense tells you that if you stop now, it's no good. So you continue, doing the same steps again, from here.

Of course, for the moment you obey the little step that just came. You do *not* now attempt to decide whether you want to stay in your relationship.

As with anything that might be called "resistance," anything that comes in the way of working on a problem, you neither run away nor push in. You focus on what is in the way. Instead of trying to decide, you focus on what this "don't touch it" feeling is.

You might take a short break, a few seconds. Stretch. Ease your body. Be in relation to this "touchy" without being too much in it (first movement: making a space).

Now (second movement: felt sense) what's *the whole felt sense that can come along with this "touchy"*? Is it still there? You say "touchy . . . ," and with your attention in your body, you wait: "Ah . . . there it is again. Now, let it be here. Let it widen, sense more coming with it, as one global *unclear* body sense." *What is its quality?* (third movement: handle for the quality). "Hurt? . . . No." "Hurting

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decision somehow hurt itself . . . it's as if that spot hurts *itself*. What *is* that?"

Upstairs, your mind suddenly has a lot to say: "Of course, that's the conflict. You know very well that you are hurt, and that is the side that wants to leave. The good things want you to stay. You have to choose one way or the other." This makes perfect sense, of course, but it is your *old information*. That's what you have been thinking all along: Two sides to this, fighting each other. The good and the bad. As you think these old thoughts, it hurts in your stomach. You are having "gut feelings," all right, but they are being made from your head, downward. Your head has a map and cuts your stomach to fit it. It hurts. We call it "vivisection."

You push all that away, quickly. "Right now we're *not* deciding. What was I doing? Oh . . . yes . . . 'touchy' . . . and . . . Oh . . . yes . . . 'hurting itself' . . . yes, whew (breath), that's sure right there. It feels like deciding hurts *itself*. Yeah . . . that's right."

Now you ask "What is this hurting-itself-thing?" (fifth movement: asking). Slowly, almost with a physical creaking, it loosens and opens a little, and there is some relief. Along with that, you suddenly find an intricacy, all different from what you thought. This intricacy has no ready words. The "territory" as it is in your body sense differs completely from the map in

your mind and the words you know to use. But there it is, "Whew (breath) . . ." After a few seconds you can try to think what you found: "Oh . . . it's just *one* thing, not two that fight. The hurt and anger do *not* push me to leave. It threatens and hurts and argues to leave, but it is really a way of staying! It's trying to hold onto the relationship *by* being angry and hurt." It makes no logical sense, but your body eases. A few more seconds, and it makes more logical sense: "Oh . . . if I *stay*, I have to be hurt and think about leaving. It wants to stay and hurt itself, rather than let go! Whew (breath again)"

Very often what emerges in focusing is utterly different from the obvious old information. Often the whole problem is not cut into those pieces and concepts one had. The way it actually exists in the body has very much its own intricacy.

But finding this out is not the main effect. Rather, this kind of "finding out" comes with a physical change, a shift in the body. In the very moments when you come to "know" how the problem has actually been, that problem physically changes. It is no longer the way you just found.

You can sense that your body does not wish to go on, further, just now. "We just got to this!" it says. So you repeat that last effective phrase a few times, to be sure you won't easily lose it (sixth movement: receiving/protecting), "Yes . . . *by* hurting it is holding on." It seems very important to stress the "by"; that is how the body demands just the right words. "Whew (breath) . . . yes, I won't lose that."

You feel vastly better, and it is only ten minutes later! It also seems to you that this self-hurting spot doesn't need to hurt itself if you keep this phrase. But when you try to think why that might be, your stomach or chest clouds up again. So you accept it as "a step." You know that tomorrow and the next day there will be other steps. You protect *this* step from your tendency to want to go on and "face" everything immediately. You can sense that your body wants to keep and digest *this* step for a while.

In this example I have followed the usual six movements of focusing. Nothing human is that regular or predictable. A felt shift may come anywhere along the line[Page 297]or may not come. Some of these "movements" may not fit at times or may not happen. But the six movements help in teaching focusing and are often just right.

POLITICAL PRINCIPLES OF GIVING THERAPY AWAY

Carl Rogers first opened psychotherapy to the possibility of self-help. He was constantly attacked for "splitting psychoanalysis," for "practicing without a license," for opening psychotherapy to nonmedical people, and above all, I think, for demystifying it and dethroning the medical model. By *demystifying* I don't mean that the process of human growth stops being mysterious. It becomes always more obviously sacred as we learn more about it. But Rogers *specified* what the therapist does. Other approaches can be specified, too.

Specifying makes training systematic, and it makes research possible. Yes, the very same specificity that lets something be taught also enables it to be observed. It lets one decide with sureness whether a particular procedure is or is not being done just then by a given therapist on a given tape recording. Applying that to a large number of cases, one can observe what results occur.

With Rogers it also became obvious that current doctoral training is mostly irrelevant to psychotherapy. Whatever would prevent someone from learning to do it well, it isn't a lack of intellectual knowledge.

In addition to specificity, Rogers's method brought it home that the decisions a person must make are inherently that person's own. No book knowledge enables another person to decide for anyone. That goes for life decisions and life-style as well as, moment by moment, what to talk about, feel into, struggle with. Another person might make a guess, but ultimately personal growth is from the inside outward. A process of change begins inside and moves in ways even the person's own mind cannot direct, let alone another person's mind.

These developments made it possible to think that psychotherapy might be given away.

Tom Gordon has been the one who made all this fruitful with his P.E.T. organization, now imitated by a host of others. Half a million people have been taught Rogerian listening in his network alone, and it is now taught by many others as well.

As self-help skill training spreads and becomes varied, it is necessary to spell out some principles. As I see it, these principles are already being violated — or, at least, forgotten, so that they soon will be violated. Even if not everyone agrees, I believe a discussion of these points will be valuable.

Specificity enables skill training. It is training that we are giving away! What differentiates the credentialed professional from anyone else? It is the pretension — or reality — of training.

1. *If we don't give the training away, then we are not giving therapy away.* In many networks today large numbers of people are given growth-producing experiences, but they aren't taught how it was done. It may be called "training" but what the trainer knows is not available. Then people cannot continue the process in themselves or with others. All they can do is urge others to attend the same

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organization. Therapy has not been given them as a process they can continue in themselves and with others. Someone has kept it for his or her organization, for his or her power, and is not empowering the people coming through. In some networks people are even made to promise that they will not spread what they have learned, that they will not even describe it, so that the mystification of the public will continue and so that people must come to the horse's mouth itself, whoever the horse is.

We want to give people the process, not one experience. We don't want to give them a fish; we want to teach them how to fish.

If this intention is clear, then the skill has to be defined specifically. Giving away and specificity are inherently related because skills that cannot be specified cannot be taught to others.

2. *Skills can be formulated so that they are done by individuals from within and help them to find, rather than block them from finding, their own inward source.* To do this we may have to specify what it feels like from inside when one does the skill effectively, and we may need to define it from a new vantage point. In that form it can be given away.

Each person must find the inner source of growth, change, and life direction. This cannot be done by running people through arranged experiences that have an impact on them that they cannot fathom. Whatever we do, let us rework it until people can do it from inside themselves.

For example, Skinnerian operant conditioning is done *to* people. An institution arranges with a psychologist to reward certain behaviors in some population, perhaps jail inmates or schoolchildren. But the same skill can be taught so that each individual can use it. It then becomes an extension of the individual's own power and self-control over life. In that form it can be given away. People can define for themselves what behavior they would like to eliminate or increase. They can keep a chart of when and how it happens, and they can reward themselves by celebrating or by giving themselves something they like. They can change the "target behavior" when they wish and as they themselves change.

As we become more and more able to enter into the fascinating territory of personal development, we meet the problems that have always come along with this dimension throughout history. One such problem is the rigidity of doctrines and churches. Today both psychological and spiritual offerings show this same tendency. Every network demands that we engage in just some one practice and tells us that all others are bad or useless. The guru says we must find our inner source, but in practice he may demand that we silence it. In our own development — just where we most need to be free — we are also most willing to make sacrifices. Those who want power can use our willingness to control us.

An individual is not an appendage of anyone. Each person is a unique being and has an open life to direct and an individuality to develop. We may make bad messes. But self-direction from inside is the essence of the human kind of being we are. Would we trade that in for some set of "good" results if we could be a different kind of being, one that *can* be managed from outside?

3. *When we teach specifics, we can research and count whether these specifics are indeed being practiced and just what happens when they are.* Research publicly defines what we teach and makes it available, rather than its being the property of some mystifying leader or special group.

4. *In giving therapy away we can come to a kind of knowledge, a way of using concepts, so that each assertion is tied to an aspect of experience.* Mystification is saying truths in such a way that an individual cannot find those truths directly. The [Page 299] statements have to be kept and transmitted, because there is no direct access to what the statement is about. One example is the therapeutic interpretation that does not, just now, corroborate itself within the individual. It has to be believed on the authority of the doctor. Some other time the statement may help bring up something in the individual that is internally valid as soon as it arises. But if this does not happen now, the interpretation must be discarded for now. Therefore it should be given tentatively, as an invitation to sense directly, not as a fact.

Indeed, theoretical concepts in general also need to be like that. They need to point directly to an aspect of experience anyone can find. When psychological knowledge is translated into such an "experience-pointing" form, it can be taught to anyone.

Knowledge need to be reunderstood not as expert property but as directly relating to and articulating someone's experience. Physical technology creates experts who alone know the science. These experts work for politicians who control what the science is used for. The politicians, in turn, take their orders from the powers that be. This social structure is a problem. A human science that is desirable is not like that.

For example, it may help to know that generally a depressed person *may* discover a lot of anger later on, with experiential exploring. Or it might help to know that people who have been violent against others *could* turn the violence against themselves. Such knowing can enable a helping person to be more sensitive. But knowledge helps only if we change how knowledge is usually used. The human process is inherently unique and implicitly complex in everyone. No set of abstractions can equal or undercut what concretely arises. Knowledge of general patterns can only help one to be sensitive to what may emerge. The general expectation cannot substitute for what actually emerges and must be worked with.

What arises directly in the individual must have priority over any concept. A concept may help one lift out some aspect of experience. Even so, at the next moment further steps can move quite differently than that very concept would have led one to expect.

Until now "knowledge" was said to be too complex and too good to give away. I think it has been too poor. If we make "giving away" the model for knowledge, we move toward the kind of human science we want: concepts that refer specifically to what can be experienced and a use of concepts that modifies them by what is newly experienced in a free individual.

5. *People can learn to recognize whether they are helped or not; they can sense concrete change events in their bodies and in their lives.* In

medicine the doctor determines whether there is improvement or not. The doctor tells us whether we have to keep going to the doctor.

People go to traditional psychotherapy for years and believe that they must be changing. To say "must be" shows that it is an inference, rather than a direct sense of change from within. People infer that they must be getting something, since the doctor keeps working. After five years or nine years patients/clients may begin to doubt this. The public has not yet grasped that psychological "doctors" cannot know that something is helping when the person does not know it. Self-help networks that involve trained teachers pose a similar problem. The "accredited" teachers are assumed to be effective. A person who went to someone "accredited" is made to believe that whatever went on "must be" how the offered process is intended to work. I do not deny the need for training. We may keep a list of those we trust to teach it well. We may institute various checks, and we should. But we need [Page 300] to tell the public *not* to trust an accredited person. Rather, let us tell people that they must inwardly check and sense, in a bodily way, whether a good change is happening. If not, they should work with a different person. When the public grasps this, it will be the best quality control.

Focusing enables a person to experience this inward bodily sensing of bits of concrete change. Having once experienced that, people can recognize when they are changing.

Some important by-products of focusing: One comes to know how to find one's own inner source, in regard to almost any situation or concern. It puts one beyond depending on a therapist or a guru for how to live. One also discovers, "Oh . . . I *am* not these problems. I am here, and they are over there . . . I have them, I am not them." One discovers a "me" that is not anything one could name.

HOW FOCUSING WAS DEVELOPED FROM RESEARCH

A series of earlier research studies (Gendlin, Beebe, Cassens, Klein, & Oberlander, 1967) showed that successful clients in psychotherapy could be picked out from their tape-recorded therapy interviews. The successful clients were less than half in most groups studied; sometimes they were few. Various outcome measures and the judgments of therapist and client separately did agree in most cases, with small variations.

The successful clients did something in their therapy interviews that at that time had no name or familiar description. While all clients sometimes intellectualize, sometimes report events, sometimes manifest very strong emotions, the successful ones did something else in addition: At most times they checked themselves. Against what? They can be heard on the tape recording, in a characteristic form of language, such as: "I feel so and so . . . is that right?" Silence. Then "No, that's not right. I don't know what *that* is, but it's not what I said." Silence again. Then "Oh . . . yes . . . uh . . . this just came, so and so . . ." Then "Is that right?" Silence.

"Yes . . . whew (breath), . . . that's right, yes, that's so right, that's what it is . . ."

In this form of language one can observe the person checking what is spoken clearly against something else that is also right there. The person has not only what is clearly thought and felt but also something that cannot yet be described — and nevertheless it is totally certain that whatever that something is, it is *not* what was just said, tried out, which seemed for a moment to be right.

But now I must tell you the negative, puzzling, disappointing side of our research findings — at least they were disappointing when we first found them. If left to themselves, people usually do not know how to engage in therapy in this way, and more often than not, they find no powerful process arising.

In our research studies, replicated several times, the successful clients, those who showed much positive change, were those who somehow approached themselves inwardly in this way. But we found that they did so from the beginning! And those who didn't never seemed to develop this mode and failed, often after a number of years. It was because of this finding, and only because of it, that we moved into teaching this mode of inward approach. This teaching is now called "focusing," and we are finding that anyone can learn it.

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It is so difficult for human beings to overcome their own training and tradition! While one is tradition-bound in a given way, one hardly knows it. To teach people exactly how to engage in therapy? It was against everything we had been trained to think. In my case this was not because I thought only professionals should do psychotherapy. I was trained by Carl Rogers, who never believed that and who wrote about training nonprofessionals back in the 1950s.

But psychotherapy, isn't it an art? Isn't it foolish to want to *tell* the patient how to do it? Besides, if people can't sense this bodily edge, isn't that due to their defenses? Must it not be innocent and futile to try to teach people to overcome defenses? Shouldn't this happen gradually in therapy, anyway?

But the research had shown that this mode of bodily experience is not acquired through therapy if someone doesn't have it already, Research really can put one up against something one did not know!

All these doubts slowed us down considerably. Nevertheless, after some years we now have, through many series of applications and modifications, a group of highly specified instructions that teach this skill, and many studies that show it can be taught. Populations to whom it has been taught include hospitalized "psychotics," "borderline" patients, very bright college students, ghetto kids, and many others.

Among more recent research findings, the "shift" in the felt sense was found to have EEG correlates (Don, 1977). Focusing has been used in biofeedback (Briscoe, 1980), with cancer patients (Grindler, 1982; Olsen,

1981), in dance therapy (Alperson, 1974; Noel & Noel, 1981), with schoolchildren concerning their most difficult subject (Murray, 1978), and in relation to images (Olsen, 1975), dreams (Hendricks & Cartwright, 1978), and meditation (Weiss, 1978; Amodeo, 1981). A longer list is available (Gendlin, 1981), and the most recent work is obtainable from the author at the University of Chicago.

ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

The next chapter presents a description of our organization. Here I would like only to present a few innovations that seem valuable.

"Changes" is our self-help network. We also have focusing teachers all over the country who charge a fee. Changes is free, of course, and if you get focusing there, you are in a good position to know whether you get anything more or better for pay.

We began as a hotline for troubled people but soon found that the best way to work with "them" was to invite anyone calling into "us." We work with each other and we don't ask or know whether someone is most interested in getting or giving help. We have no leaders who only give. It is always good to do both. *No one should go home without having got something. Everyone is listened to for ten minutes or so in a small group, unless someone doesn't wish to be.* This eliminates the service role. One goes home sustained, rather than tired. It is a very important innovation. Many organizations offer those who come only sitting and being passive attendants to "programs" for the evening. People go home as they came, only tired.

Before listening begins, we give focusing instructions to help everyone to come to a deep level where something opens. This can be done with the whole group or in a little group. *Focusing instructions teach focusing, but they also enable people to go [Page 302]deeply to their own edge so that then whatever happens in the group comes from that deep opening.*

There are special subgroups later in the evening that teach focusing and listening, as well as other groups. Some go for many weeks, others just that evening. *Anyone can announce that a group for any purpose will form if others want to join it.* That brings us many viewpoints and skills and takes the leadership away from the usual few who do everything.

From the political point of view, the two most important innovations are the next two.

The group as a whole never does any "business" or makes any decisions. Such business as we have is done by a small group at a different time, usually before or after a big meeting. *The time and place are known, and anyone can come and be a part of the directing group.*

Group decisions bind! Once a decision is made, I must abide or leave. If there are decision meetings, I must convince the group. If you disagree with me, I cannot listen and cannot help you make sense, because the decision will go against me and I'll be bound by it. Instead of helping you

show the good sense of your point, I may have to hope that you fail to convey it to the others, even if I know what you mean.

At the National Training Laboratory, years ago, certain laws of groups were formulated. We have discovered that these laws don't hold when a group is free in this way. The laws hold only on the constraining assumption that all must agree and that all must remain in the group unless the group decides to break into smaller units. And, believe me, we are very well off without what some of those laws state, which is regularly found in most groups!

In most groups a person cannot go *in steps* into whatever is discussed or done. Each person gets one try and must then wait until a turn comes again. On one try one cannot express the deeper layers of what one means. So on one's next turn one can only say the same thing again, the same opener. The pace is frenetic: few listen. To be sure, if the group knows listening, then it is not like that. People invite each other to go more deeply into what they mean, and it is much better. But we must go further to change what *group* has meant.

Although we didn't notice it and didn't think of it that way, what we have meant by *group* and by *democratic decisions* is really a binding structure. We are told that since we attended, the decision is "ours." Usually it isn't. Those few who function know the facts and know how the decision has to come out. If we decide otherwise, there will only be another meeting to set it right.

In our way everyone is a member by being there, and no decisions are made that can bind anyone. This means that those who want to do something do it, without requiring that everyone do it or agree to it. One stands up and says "I (or some of us) will do such-and-so now (or at a given time). All those who would like to do it also, meet in this part of the room during the break (or at a given time and place)." No one's approval is necessary in advance of doing this. It is never assumed that all will do anything. During almost any meeting some people are in the hall talking, socializing. When one wishes, one goes out to join them. Those who are in the room are there because they want to be.

This innovation has many powerful effects: First, it frees the main space for interpersonal processes or whatever the people need. Most organizations spend **[Page 303]** most of their time and effort on business to hold the organization together and relatively little on what the organization is supposedly for. To prevent this, we split business and substance. Business is best handled by those who want to. They are usually few, but since everyone *can* come and is then equal, no one feels helpless. People come either when something they care about isn't happening as they wish or if they happen to like, and be good at, administrative work. That little group is therefore usually surprisingly trouble-free.

Mixing business and interpersonal process is very hurtful and ineffective. We are all told by "participatory democracy" that all should make every

decision. Usually that means even a window can't be easily opened or closed. Bright people can be reduced to a state in which they cannot even leave the room because they cannot decide what activity to do next or whether to break up into small groups. Most of us have been in such sessions, and we know from experience that they have not helped us grow — although we were told that all this wrangling and hurting each other was great training for life.

When business and interpersonal process are mixed, neither can happen. People who care about the issue have little patience to listen to another person who seems in the way of getting things done. Conversely, many people take part in business when they really don't care about the issue and want to engage each other. What two people could do easily, twenty cannot do at all. People hurt each other, express "feelings," attack each other, then pretend to make up, hug each other — and never forget the hurt they felt from the other person, even years later.

When business is dealt with separately, *the main space is open for interpersonal process as such*. The air is free and there is a sense of depth. It is all about me, not bootlegged, not hurried, no fight for air time, nothing indirect. You listen to me and help me discover that my feelings make sense — not about how we should pay for coffee, but about me and my life.

Closely related is our way of not having any policy and of making no decisions. We think we are a whole step past "participatory democracy."

Decision making in large groups is a pretense. Only from functioning can one know what one needs to know to decide. There is always a little group of people who function administratively, and they know everything and run everything. To make things democratic means to open that little group to those who wish to participate in it. Few do, but everyone wants that right.

Now about policies: in Changes anyone can put a statement on the wall and can argue or state any policy. But there is no way "we" can adopt it so that it binds everyone. This is very frustrating to outside agencies, but it has also at times saved the group from them and their pressures and even from being closed down. We do not need a policy! Those who want to follow a particular way will do that. Why do we need to bind the others?

The individuals who begin a Changes sometimes don't grasp this principle. We are all still in the orbit of participatory democracy. The leaders assume they shouldn't be seen as leaders. Instead of arranging training and some structure, they ask the group to decide. Those asked don't know anything about it, but the question becomes the occasion for the usual half-personal, half-business wrangling. People believe that wrangling is "the group process" and that it must be valuable. But soon they don't come back, and others come and have the same experience.

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Instead, our way is for the small group to set up whatever way seems best (and to hear from people who didn't like it or have a different idea

later on). Kristin Glaser, who is the actual originator of Changes (together with four other women and some ideas from my class, but without me), began this new way one day. Wrangling had pretty well been all Changes had done for some time. She proposed that we train everyone in listening and that we not even ask the group about it. We few who met between times to arrange Changes were stunned. How could we foist this on everyone? We knew, as with anything else, that some people wouldn't like whatever was proposed. Of course, those who didn't want the training could do something else (and did). But at that time we had not yet had the insight to open our little conspiratorial leading group to everyone — because we were not yet able to avow it and admit we were leading the group, But leading is fine if everyone can be in the leader group and if no one must follow. Later we could invite anyone into this group. I say "we," but I soon stopped being in it.

Now, wasn't that a policy? Yes and no. Nothing is binding on everyone. But this fact, that nothing is binding, isn't *that* a policy? It is a sort of metapolicy. Those who want a policy can have it but only for themselves and those that agree with them, not as defining what others must do.

POLITICS

Current political organizations don't include interpersonal processes, and political people are typically not interested in them. Indeed, if done without training, personal self-expression tends to be sticky and hurtful in groups, as just described. Some politically interested people have had that bad experience and want no more of it.

Politics is about people organized together. Any organized group, even a small organization, is a miniature society. The vital question of politics is not this or that program. The vital question is how people might better organize so as to be together in a more livable way and one that enables them to act.

Gandhi said long ago that if an organization oppresses its members, then the society that that organization will bring will be oppressive. It is the main blind spot of Marx to have missed that.

Ideas are important for social action. Many people are interested in ideas (I am one of them), but people get worn out just thinking and talking or doing small actions. And then, too, many more people cannot afford to spend time and effort getting dressed and coming if they are only going to listen to abstractions and perhaps now and then say a sentence or two. For them nothing is offered and they go home untouched.

How different would it be if politics were about human organizing! We would attend to how we are together with one another. We would make our organization a space in which each person is inwardly aided and strengthened and finds an inward source of good sense and energy. Each person would go home stronger, having got something of importance from every meeting.

The basic principles would be lived, concerning the freedom and inward source of each person. Each would find that source. Acting together does not mean concentrating only on externals and leaving one another to inward aloneness and starvation for contact and new energy. There is no inherent conflict between the political and the interpersonal if they have the same spirit. Above all, we do not need to bind one another. We don't need to eject people who happen not to want to do something with us, and they need not stop those who do want to do it. We can form subgroups, announced or otherwise, for anything we need, without losing the larger free space.

People can be equals if all are free to join whatever directing group or groups there are. That way the fiction of leaderlessness is not a cover for a few to control others (or carry all the weight of responsibility even when they are tired of it and don't want to).

Under such conditions individuals grow stronger and more able to act; they don't (as some fear) become interested only in themselves. But those who genuinely want to take action are better able to do it when those who don't aren't in the way.

Of course, this is not the whole answer. It is only one piece of the larger political problem. But these developments do move slowly toward a new meaning of politics.

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