

Listening to the Living Body: What Gendlin's Focusing Approach Contributes to Somatic Psychotherapy

By Charlotte Howorth

Notable body-oriented practitioners, Reich, Gindler, Lowen, Pierrakos, Hanna: these early body-oriented practitioners attended to how psychological experience was expressed through breathing, posture, muscular tension, movement, and bodily patterning. More recent developments in trauma treatment, attachment, neuroscience, and relational and experiential psychotherapy have brought greater attention to autonomic regulation, defensive responses, bodily memory, mindful bodily awareness, relational attunement, and co-regulation (Brothers & Sletvold, 2022; Caldwell, 1997; Fosha, 2021; Levine, 1997; Ogden et al., 2006).

These developments have profoundly changed psychotherapy. Eugene Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit further expands this somatic awareness and leads me to ask: what do we mean by "body" in somatic psychotherapy and what is this body that experiences?

For Gendlin, the body is more than merely physical. What we sense bodily from within is not limited to the five senses we usually think of. It is a concrete felt experience of the unity of mind and body – it is palpable as well as inherently meaningful. He points to the "living body," the body felt from inside. He brings our awareness to a subtle, bodily felt grasp of the whole situation in which we are embedded – an implicit knowing that is often unnoticed. It is more intricate than we can think or say. Before experience separates into clearly defined thoughts, feelings, memories, and meanings, a bodily process of interaction with the environment is already underway.



Interaction First

Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit turns our usual understanding of the body on its head. We commonly imagine the body as an individual organism that exists first and then enters into relationship with other people and the environment: I have experiences inside my body, you have experiences inside yours, and through relationship we communicate and affect one another. Gendlin reverses this order. We are not separate organisms who first exist and then interact with our situations; our living is already an ongoing organism-environment process (Gendlin, 1997). As he writes, "A body lives its relationships; it IS interaction" (Gendlin, 1992, p. 21).

Consider something as basic as breathing. We cannot adequately describe the living body without lungs, air, atmosphere and exchange. Eating similarly involves an organism-environment process through which what was "outside" becomes the living body. Gendlin extends this understanding further: relationships, histories, culture, language and situations are not merely external influences acting upon a separate self. They are already participating in how our living occurs (Gendlin, 1992, 1997). The body is therefore not simply in relationship. It bodily lives its relationships. For psychotherapy, this opens a more radical question than simply: What is happening inside the client? Or even: What is happening between us? But rather asking: What is this interaction becoming, differently, in each of us?

One Hundred Percent Each: Distinct Without Being Separate



Lynn Preston describes this interaction-first understanding as not fifty percent me and fifty percent you, but one hundred percent you and one hundred percent me (L. Preston, personal communication, 2026). Each of us participates with the whole living process that we are - our histories, relationships, culture, values, bodily patterns, vulnerabilities, and possibilities. Much of this never becomes conscious, yet it participates in what can and cannot form between us.

This does not mean that therapists and clients merge or have the same experience. We remain profoundly different. Rather, we are distinct without being separate. Who I can be with you is already affected by you, just as who you can be with me is affected by the particular person I am. If anger is difficult for me, that will affect whether a client can experience their protest. With another therapist, that same protest may emerge and move the interaction in a life-forward direction. The “we” is therefore not a third entity produced by adding together an already completed “you” and “me.” I, you, and we are continually forming within one living interaction (Gendlin, 1992; Preston, 2005).

Understanding Bodily Felt Sense

From this perspective, the body is not a thing but a fluid process of inter-being. At any moment, relationships, culture, values, histories, present circumstances, and much more than we can consciously name are functioning together in how we experience this situation. When the body senses itself from within, it senses not simply an internal state, but something of this whole lived interaction. This vast implicit knowing can become accessible through a subtle bodily sense of something present but not yet articulated—what Gendlin called the felt sense.

The term “felt sense” is now widely used, particularly in somatic therapies, but Gendlin’s meaning is easily misunderstood. A felt sense is not simply a bodily sensation - a tight chest, butterflies in the stomach, a clenched jaw - nor is it a familiar emotion such as happy, sad, angry, or scared. These may be part of our experience; however, the felt sense is more like the mood, atmosphere, or felt meaning of the whole thing (Gendlin, 1984). Gendlin described it as “the global bodily way one experiences something” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 13). Initially, it is often difficult to describe something fuzzy, unclear, yet distinctly there.

The felt sense starts as this initially vague sense of the whole of something. As we stay with it and begin to symbolize what we sense there, memories, meanings, fears, hopes, connections, images, and possibilities may emerge that we could not have specified beforehand. We can feel this organic process moving - the discovery, the emergence, the sense of something being carried further. The implicit, then, is not a hidden warehouse of fully formed information waiting to be retrieved. It is dynamic, inherently interactive, and fluid: more is functioning in our experience than we can put into words because implicit bodily experience is beyond words (Gendlin, 1984, 1997).

An ordinary example helps. Imagine leaving home and halfway down the street sensing that you have forgotten something. You don't know what. There is simply an uneasy bodily something. You try: Phone? No. Keys? Got them. Stove? No ... Glasses? Suddenly: Yes - that's it. Before you consciously knew what you had forgotten, your body already carried a surprisingly precise knowing. Wrong suggestions produced a felt no. The right one brought a bodily sense of fit.



With complex personal situations, the process can be much richer. I may know that I am angry with my partner, but when I pause. I discover something less familiar about this whole situation between us. It's like I'm being left behind ... no ... more like I'm no longer beside you. Now we are approaching what Gendlin meant by a felt sense. The distinction matters. Gendlin's body is not merely a container in which psychological states produce physical sensations, but a living, interactive process that continually generates further living.

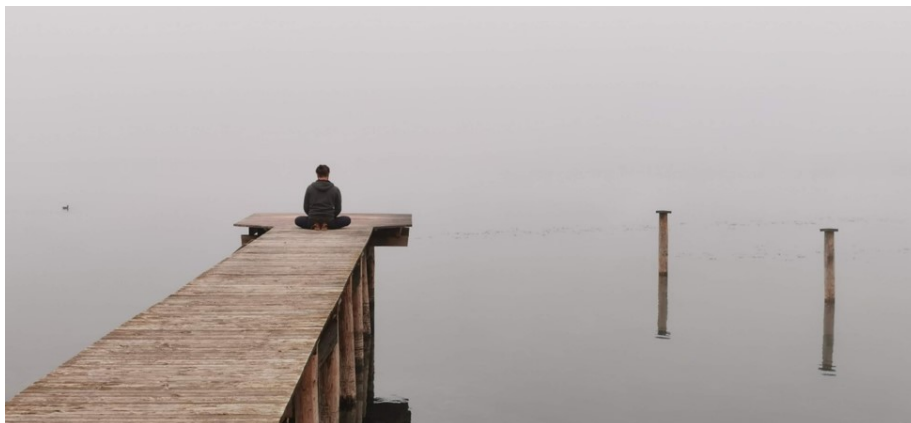
Finding the Felt Sense: The Felt Sense as a Border Town

Over the years, I have come to think of the felt sense as something between conscious and unconscious, explicit and implicit – it connects the linear world of events, logic, facts, and rationality with the non-linear dimension of feeling, emotional realities, and what is beyond words. The felt sense speaks the languages of both realms. Therapy takes place in this zone.

I think of it as something like a border town. Imagine a small European town near the border between two countries where people understand both languages and move easily between them. On one side is familiar explicit experience - the thoughts, feelings, and explanations we already know. On the other is the vast web of our implicit, or what has traditionally been called our unconscious. The felt sense occupies this borderland within one living process. The language it responds to, and that allows both realms to communicate, is often less conventional: unusual feeling words, images, metaphors, gestures, sounds. To work there, Gendlin encourages us to pause and allow the felt sense to form. We wait with an open curiosity for what might come (Gendlin, 1981, 1984). This is where I find it useful to think of the body as a dialogue partner. In a session, a client might struggle with how hard it is to step forward and express themselves at work. They lay out their dilemma with their explicit thinking self that feels stumped by what they describe as self-sabotaging behavior. Then we pause, and as they sense inward and touch this felt border zone, beginning to articulate the experience there, the word muted comes. We check it against the felt sense. No, not quite. Then: covered. Something responds - closer. Then an image comes: It's like there's a big lampshade over my light inside. And then: As a kid, I always had to dim my light when my father was around. It just wasn't safe.

The Therapist's Felt Sense of the Interaction: Listening at the Edge

This gives the therapist's own felt sensing a different significance. As Lynn Preston (2005) writes, "When I look inside myself, I don't find some pure pristine 'me'. I find 'a me-with-you.'" When I pause and attend inwardly during a session, I am not turning away from the relationship to consult a private interior. I am sensing how this particular interaction, with this person at this moment, is living in me. This does not mean that what I feel belongs to the client or that my body somehow has privileged access to their unconscious. What forms in me is genuinely mine. Yet it is forming in this particular way because I am here with you. A tightening, image, hesitation, unexpected pleasure, irritation, or surge of energy can therefore invite curiosity - not as information about the client, but as my bodily experiencing of our one interaction from my particular place within it.



Sometimes I say nothing. Sometimes what I sense changes how I listen. And sometimes, when something from my felt sense enters the interaction and meets the client's experiencing, something becomes possible that neither person could have produced alone (Preston, 2005).

This changes how we listen as therapists. Alongside what the client already knows, we listen for the edges of what is emerging from the implicit and beginning to peek through in their conversation. We notice when speech slows, when a client searches for an unusual word, makes a gesture or produces an unexpected metaphor: "It's sort of crumpled in there." "I'm behind glass." "There's something brittle about it." Rather than translating these expressions into familiar psychological categories, we can reflect them resonantly: "Something brittle there ..." Then we pause and allow the client to check our words against their experiencing.

We can also invite the edge simply: "If we pause there, what comes about that whole thing?" motioning to our body. And then we wait and notice what comes next. As Gendlin wrote, "Sensitivity is not really a magical source for the right therapist response; rather, it consists in carefully noticing the client's next reaction to what the therapist says" (Gendlin, 1968, p. 213). The therapist need not always know the right thing to say. We offer something and notice: Does the client tighten? Relax? Become more alive? "No, that's not it." Or perhaps, "Yes ... exactly." That yes matters. When a word, image, gesture or reflection fits the felt sense, there is a bodily shift - a release, opening, deepening, or fresh sense of movement. For Gendlin, this is not simply the satisfaction of finding the right description. The experiencing itself has changed. What comes next now comes from a different whole (Gendlin, 1984, 2004).

Gendlin said that every human experience, no matter how dysfunctional it may seem, has a life forward movement inherent within it. He understood these shifts as part of life's forward movement: the small developmental steps through which a living organism continually becomes more. One step carries the process forward and changes what can happen next. Some shifts are barely perceptible; others reorganize how a person understands themselves and their situation. Over time, it is this kind of movement - not insight alone - that allows therapy to produce enduring change (Gendlin, 1984, 2004).

The Living Interaction in Practice: David

David came in on his birthday talking about the women in his life - his mother, his sister, former partners, and now his girlfriend Linda. There had been disappointment, hurt, and anger, but David invariably found his way back to blaming himself. He should be the bigger person. He was weak because he couldn't let things go. Even in therapy, he became self-conscious about taking up space with his distress. "What is the point of talking about all this?" he said, shifting restlessly in his chair. "I'm just whining and complaining." I knew this place. We had been here many times, and I noticed irritation rising in me: Here we go again. I felt caught with him in the same familiar quagmire. Rather than push the question back to David, I got curious, paused, and attended to my own felt sense. Underneath my irritation, two words came unexpectedly: static depression. Something changed in me as soon as those words came. What had felt like a dead end became interesting. Static depression had texture, almost the beginning of a story. I found myself turning toward David again with curiosity. "It is your birthday," I said, "and all these painful experiences with these women are here. If you pause for a moment, how does that whole thing feel?"

He became quiet and sensed inside. "Depressed," he replied.

"What kind of depressed? Does it have a particular quality?" I asked.

Another pause. "Static depression."

The words landed between us and opened up a space of felt connection. They had come in me and now, independently, from him. I don't understand this as my having somehow known what was "inside" David. Rather, static depression seemed to be taking form within the interaction we were both living, becoming available differently in each of us, but having the same name.



As David spoke further, the words gathered meaning: the impasse with his mother, relationships he could neither repair nor relinquish, his uncertainty with Linda. Yet when he spoke about Linda, I noticed something else in myself - a tiny eddy of energy in my solar plexus. "There seems to be something a little different when you talk about Linda today," I shared.

"Yes," he replied. "There's hope."

I felt the word land. "There's hope inside the static depression. Almost like a new seed of something," I elaborated.

This description fit for him because he became more animated. He began speaking about his childhood and, with unusual directness and clarity, said that he was only now really facing how abusive it had been. His eyes were brighter. The usual fidgeting and faltering disappeared. For several minutes there was a coherence and flow, as though we were traveling through something together. Then the familiar disconnecting and the muffling blanket of self-consciousness returned.

"But what's the point? It's still just complaining."

I shared that something felt different to me. He seemed, for once, to be on his own side. Saying that he had been abused did not feel like complaining; it felt like recognizing the reality of what had happened. David paused. "Yes. It did feel like that."

Once we are curious and listening to and communicating with our felt sense, finding the words, names, and symbols that fit, more can come, and the interaction can carry forward (Gendlin, 2004). David spoke of living among what ifs: What if his parents had been different? What if his father had not destroyed baseball for him? What if his relationships had worked?

As I listened, another word formed in me: yearning. With it came an image: a wide, bare landscape in muted greys and sepia, a distant horizon and a solitary tree. Everything seemed asleep, yet there was also a sense of the subtle light of dawn about to emerge and that life was present in the landscape, waiting.

"I wonder if there's something here about yearning," I said, and cautiously described what I was seeing.

David became still and centered. "Yes," he said. "That's where I live."



The landscape seemed to open something further. David spoke of returning repeatedly to an explosive former relationship because he could still picture another future with her where there could be talking, sharing, healing. He recognized the same yearning with his mother: returning in the hope that this time she might meet him. But with Linda, he said, the hope felt different. Perhaps something really could be different.

What happened is difficult to divide neatly into what belonged to David and what belonged to me. Static depression arose in my felt sense and in his words. His tentative hope registered in me as a small stirring in my solar plexus before he named it. My landscape of yearning, when offered back, resonated in him and allowed something further to emerge. At the same time, I was changing too. At first, I had felt deadened and irritated by our familiar repetition. When static depression emerged, I became interested; I became more alive with David. This interest was not simply a therapeutic response that I then applied to him. It became part of the interaction in which his depression was now being named, and we kept company with it together. David was encountering a more alive and interested other - something that had been painfully lacking in his family - and his increasing aliveness, in turn, opened new possibilities in me.

Described in sentences, this can sound somewhat like a linear sequence: David affects me, I respond, he changes, I respond again. But the living process is more simultaneous and recursive than that, even as it also unfolds through time. We were each changing within, and changing, the same interaction. What emerged in either of us was already occurring in a situation that included the other.

Perhaps this mattered especially because what David yearned for was precisely this kind of alive, receptive connection. The hope did not simply belong to David, nor was it something I gave him. Hope was becoming possible in the interaction we were living.

The Emergence of the New

This brings us to one of Gendlin's most important contributions: the new does not always exist beforehand, waiting to be uncovered. We often describe therapeutic change as discovering something already there - a hidden feeling, an unmet need, a disowned part. Sometimes that is useful. But Gendlin's process philosophy offers a more generative possibility. Living continually generates its own further living (Gendlin, 1997, 2004).

Gendlin calls this developmental movement carrying forward. What occurs grows from everything already functioning in the situation, yet it is not predetermined by it. Each new occurrence changes the whole situation and therefore changes what can happen next. Development proceeds through these steps: the living process becomes different, and from that changed whole, something further can emerge (Gendlin, 2004).

From this perspective, asking whether David's hope originated in him or in me distorts what happened. It arose differently in each of us, through a process neither of us could have produced alone or predicted in advance. The interaction itself was carrying forward, differently in each participant.

What Does This Ask of the Therapist?

An interaction-first perspective places the therapist inside the therapeutic process rather than outside observing it. We listen in two directions at once: toward the client's experiencing and toward what is forming bodily in ourselves as we are with them. We hold what comes lightly. Our experiences, images, and feelings are not facts about the client, nor must they necessarily be spoken. Sometimes they tell us to wait; sometimes they alter the question we ask, the silence we allow, or how we meet what is emerging. And we cannot know the right next step in advance, because genuinely new experience has not yet formed.

Perhaps our task is therefore less to produce change than to participate sensitively in a living process: staying close to experiencing, noticing what comes next, often checking with the client and allowing enough uncertainty for something neither person yet knows to emerge (Gendlin, 2004; Preston, 2005).



Conclusion

Somatic psychotherapy has taught us to listen to the body. Gendlin invites us to take relational embodiment one step further and listen not only for what the body is expressing, feeling, or remembering, but for a vague yet palpable felt sense of what is emerging and not yet fully known. The body, he notes, does not first exist and then enter relationship; living is interaction from the beginning.

Therapist and client remain distinct, yet each is continually forming within the interaction they are living. This interaction is generative: something new emerges that neither could have produced alone, changing what can happen next. Perhaps this is the deeper implication of listening to the living body. We are not only listening for what is already there. We are participating in a living interactive process through which what comes next can become possible.

The felt sense brings us to this edge of awareness between what is explicit and implicit. When therapist and client can pause there with curiosity, something new may emerge - a word, image, gesture, memory, or meaning that matches what is bodily sensed. When there is a bodily recognition, and something shifts, the person is not simply understanding the same experience more clearly; the experiencing itself has moved forward (Gendlin, 1984).

For Gendlin, these shifts are small steps in life's inherent forward-moving developmental process. Each step changes the whole from which the next step can come. Some are subtle, others more transformative, but over time these moments of carrying forward are how new ways of experiencing and living become possible (Gendlin, 2004). Perhaps this is Gendlin's particular gift to somatic psychotherapy: the living body does not only tell us what has been. If we learn how to listen, it participates in forming what comes next.

Author's Note

I am profoundly and enduringly grateful to my mentor, Lynn Preston, whose guidance, thinking, and way of being over more than twenty years have deeply shaped how I practice psychotherapy and how I understand the work.



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Her work is grounded in Gendlin's process philosophy and shaped by the relational dimension of FOT (Focusing-Oriented Therapy) - the understanding that the therapeutic relationship isn't the container for the work but its primary medium. She is especially interested in bringing focusing seamlessly into therapeutic conversation, and in helping practitioners feel FOT as a way of being, not only a way of doing.

For more information about Charlotte's work please visit www.howorththerapy.com

Artwork

Gendlin. By Aparna Sandeep at [English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gendlin) ; Lynn Preston: <https://www.lynnprestonforp.com/home>; Felt Sense Painting: [Slowrabbit from Pixabay Image](#); Listening on the edge: [Patrizia08 from Pixabay](#); Hands: [Photorama from Pixabay](#); Tree: Photo by [Jan Huber](#) on [Unsplash](#); looking inward: [Hello Cdd20 from Pixabay](#)

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