

**Embodied Democracy:  
SEA Conference Presentation  
2015, London**

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**Abstract**

This report evolved from contributions to the 2015 Society of Existential Analysis conference in London. I briefly describe opening the conference with a guided Focusing session since this practice is fundamental to my report on the other contribution, a Panel Discussion entitled “Being at the Heart of Activism”. What follows is an account of my own interests in this area as an existential psychologist and Focusing therapist. I present Focusing as a source of democratic process that forms an experiential continuity from ‘within’ each person ‘outwards’ to interpersonal and community situations. For this publication I have incorporated some references to Eugene Gendlin’s (1987) *A philosophical critique of the concept of narcissism*. Keeping with the ethos of the approach described below, this report is presented in first-person language to make it as direct and accessible as possible.

**Keywords**

Focusing, Gendlin, Experiential-Existential Therapy, Embodied Democracy, Implicit Experience, Focusing-oriented Therapy, Activism

**Focusing**

To open the conference I was invited to offer a brief 10-minute Focusing (Gendlin, 1981) session. Focusing is a phenomenological practice of embodied self-awareness whereby a person can access and follow the unfolding of feelings that step-by-step help to clarify our experience of anything we are living through. At professional conferences we typically interact only from the *eye-brain-thinking* level of human experience. So I wanted to offer a different starting point, an intention to include all the implicit responses that are simultaneously happening at the body level but that we typically don't “drop down inside” and attend to. At that level we can sense more than is easily said and more than is usually included in thoughtful dialogues between colleagues. This is an excerpt from the last minute of the Focusing experience:

*“So as we begin our day together, just know that this whole responsive world is down there, available to you. Your body will generate all sorts of responses as you listen to people during the day, pause and notice the feelings that come in here - even the subtle feelings - there is creative thinking in the body. If an idea is making you feel a bit constricted inside, or a presentation brings an expansive feeling in your body, consider dropping down again and checking “what is it about this idea or presentation that makes me feel just like this?” Let the answer come from your body. If you can understand something from the feeling, you will usually feel a bit of release inside. Then consider sharing what came to you at some point during the conference, it might also resonate for others. If you speak, you might let words come from the body as you continue to attend to the feeling, sensing with each word “am I saying this right”? And correcting yourself as you speak, so that what you say resonates bodily. This may be one way of inviting unformed and implicit being into our doing here today. And welcoming all the voices present, not just those that are easily expressed or those that have an explicit platform”.*

## Workshop Panel

Alison Playford (Occupy, Disabled People Against Cuts), Mark Weaver (Occupy), Luke Flegg (Change the Future), Greg Madison (London Focusing Institute)

Later in the day we offered a panel discussion entitled 'Being at the Heart of Activism'. Ali, Mark, and Luke introduced themselves sequentially, showing how our interests overlap and suggesting that increased personal awareness is important in their activities and how existential therapists might be able to follow their individual passions and get involved in areas of social change and activism. The workshop was followed by an Open Space Session, in the hopes that any discussion provoked by our panel and questions from those attending, could continue in more detail in the open space, where anyone's voice might be heard and all are welcome to contribute as equals. This *openness to all voices* continues the value of inclusivity inherent in the initial Focusing session at the start of the day.

## Focusing as practice of 'Embodied Democracy'

This is an account of my own emerging experiments in 'experiential democracy' or 'slow democracy' or 'embodied democracy' or 'social Focusing' or 'inner activism'; many descriptive terms will do and having many prevents getting stuck at the conceptual level. Each term points at the same implicit experiencing level but by having such different terms, it should be clear that the actual terms themselves are not to be obsessed over and analysed. For this paper I am using 'embodied democracy' as a term to point to the concrete practice I am describing. It refers to how the body 'makes' and 'carries forward' its own sense of a situation, whether personal, communal or more widely political (Gendlin, 1997; Madison & Gendlin, 2011).

I have been involved in existentialism and socialism since the beginning of my university years, when students were still political and university was about education, not just a *training* for the competitive job market. But the socialist/communist groups with whom I associated were as evangelical as any religious movement, replacing 'the second coming' with the 'inevitable workers' revolution'. The dogma and strategising of these leftwing groups left no place for doubts or dissent, deep questioning, the individual perspective, choice, meaning or mortality, concerns about the structure of human life itself. Social change inspired me but the means of change left me disillusioned.

On the other side, in the academic philosophy world there was a kind of inactive quietude that obscured an underlying superiority or even cynicism towards those who wanted to actively change the world. Meanwhile, psychology was colonised by either soulless behaviourism or the emerging human computer analogies from "cognitive psychology," both of which shared an arrogant assumption that psychology was somehow above political and social influence and could study society without already being totally immersed within it.

I spent years unable to convert to the world of activism, while in a parallel life I remained frustrated at the ivory tower attitude of philosophy and psychology. There seemed no way to bring them together. Focusing, as a personal practice (Gendlin, 1981), was the only 'bridge' I had between the academic tower of ideas and the everyday hive of living. The practice of Focusing and the existential *process philosophy* of Eugene Gendlin (1997), not only came out of psychotherapy research but it also formed during the turbulent 1960s, especially the anti-war protests across American campuses.

Focusing pays attention to the body's ability to form a holistic 'felt sense' of our life situations (Gendlin, 1979). "Felt sensing" offered me a touchstone from which I could challenge the dogma and doctrine of both activism and academia. Focusing practice exemplifies particular values in the study of human psychology and in political action. For me it is a stance that avoids both the isolation of the individual and the claustrophobia of the collective. It prioritises palpable implicit experience over explicit conceptual doctrines or external authority and offers a kind of 'decentralised anarchy' that, because of the inherent order of the experiential grounding, avoids chaos and despotism. But everything around us calls us not to pay attention to our own sense of existence in this way. It is a struggle. More than just a personal struggle, it is a political struggle. The order of bodily experience offers a source of meaning that deconstructs conventional understandings. It has the potential to be subversive.

Recently I have stepped back into the world of social activism and political change movements. The Internet and social media is fundamentally changing our ability to communicate and organise "grass-roots". The world seems to have woken up its new possibilities. The economic crash in 2008 and the increasing inequality it has created has become too obvious - ordinary people are looking for ways to respond and to innovate for themselves new forms of living that address the challenges of daily life. It seems that more of the general population is starting to call for a system change, a chance to influence things, a return to more 'participatory democracy'.

Some recent developments in participatory democracy include: a people's convention to crowd-source a constitution for the UK, new voting apps that make it possible for politicians to canvas feedback from their electorate on any issue, the development of free universities offering secondary education to those whose circumstances prohibit high-fee education, open space conferences where everyone has an equal say and the themes of the conference develop organically, groups of professional therapists (Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Psychologists Against Austerity, Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, Psychotherapists and Counsellors Union) who are actively engaging in political struggles - particularly those that protect the ethics of the psy-professions, the Open Dialogue and Soteria programmes offer a relational-existential alternative to service-centred and medical-model NHS psychiatry, Teal organisations that are modelling non-hierarchical democratic structures for businesses.... This time the social engagement is more often 'movement' and 'issues' driven rather than encapsulated by rigid and totalising political ideology.

For me there is another significant difference between the activism of now and my earlier experiences. Ordinary people have changed significantly since the '60s. We have become more intricate as the culture takes up therapeutic ideas and self-awareness practices. In Gendlin's words,

'Today we must let intricacy guide us, rather than the old clear roles and norms. These old forms still exist, but often as official demands, ideal models that we rarely fulfill. As expectations they are just one "social reality." But body-life is no longer carried forward by them. Our more complex and partly undefined situations are another "social reality."' (1987: 265).

Social activists now seem aware of the necessity of taking into account the sphere of personal psychology and interpersonal dynamics. Within the groups I have met with, there is interest in incorporating listening skills into decision-making, finding action that is

congruent with feeling, and sensitive facilitation of community engagement and conflict. They are open to forms of embodiment that open a space between the binaries of imposed rigid structure and structureless tyranny.

Focusing is a useful phenomenological practice for contemporary activists because the 'individual' body-sense has a continuity that reaches out to a deep consensual community with other people. *Focusing brings democracy to each individual body and each body into the workings of democracy.* Focusing-style democracy slows down decision-making so that the whole being of each person has the potential to be involved in the process. Yet I am not convinced that the 'slow democracy' I am describing is actually slower in achieving change than any other democratic process. Decisions are arrived at with a feeling of rightness; action can have a felt continuity with the group as a whole, making the action grounded in experience, with a sense of "I can stand behind this", so the agreed action is actually carried out and does not have to be constantly revisited or half-resisted.

For me it has always been crucial that the *process* of change remains consistent with the ethical principles that motivate the change. Too often the method and the intention are inconsistent. Focusing helps with this. The gentle respect and primacy of a deep listening process makes Focusing compatible with efforts to humanise society because as a practice, Focusing already *is* that care for humanity.

### **What is 'Embodied Democracy', or whatever you want to call it?**

'... a genuinely political self-experience is possible. It is not only a question of jobs and money; our deepest self-responding also has political dimensions. There is a way to move from the "merely inner" psychology of self to a self-understanding within the larger system. We can learn from how the Women's Movement moved from what seemed to be only psychological issues to politically understood issues....The "inner" is never just inner. When you consider it "inner," you keep the tension within yourself and cut experience off from the social change it implies' (Gendlin, 1987: 291-97).

Embodied democracy feels like a continuity - a continuous expanding with no pre-set border or boundary: It does not artificially end at the edge of my body, or at the bottom of my road, or at the local community level or once we have voted on a decision. There is no level of organisation where we default to a dictatorship of the majority or accept that some expert's voice carries more weight or should be louder than the less-informed multitude. It is a living democracy that never stops re-opening concepts and roles and structures that become subtly rigid and thus enslave the very life they were created to serve.

This continuous democracy always comes from the "individual" (where 'individual' is re-thought as body-world interaction) concrete feeling of being bodily alive, trusting that experience as a creative source more important than just cultural tradition and convention alone. This kind of democracy goes all the way down to the present experience of being a person, all the way 'inside', and then it carries itself all the way up and all the way out to be expressed in our way of gathering together.

'Anything human is both social and individual; it is ordered in many systematic ways (not just by two large systems: individual and social.) ...The systems meet each other, not as separated entities, but as they are implicit in each event. A change in one system will change that event, and, as the event affects other events, the change may have an effect on the other systems' (Gendlin, 1987: 285).

## The Person is already their own democratic community

I would describe an individual person as a 'generative community', not a 'unified oneness'. At any time we all have various 'parts' of ourselves, for example, processes of vulnerability, courage, resistance, and insecurity, aspects that we are ashamed of or have cast into exile, manipulative or critical defensive parts... Each 'part' (temporarily generated by our living in situations) is welcomed back with equality. A person is a democracy when she/he can openly listen to (not necessarily agree with or automatically act upon) all parts of her/himself with equality and compassion. Can't this attitude in the inner world roll out in a continuous expansion to the largest human gatherings? Embodied democracy values the process of listening to oneself and to each other in a way that feelings and opinions begin to naturally loosen and shift. It is the opposite of attempts to achieve agreement through the pressure to conform, subtle group oppression or rejection, attempts to compel, convince, control or cajole rather than listen carefully for the wisdom contained within each person in the group and within each part of each person.

To reduce a person to only their rational capability or their logical thinking is to silence and oppress the essence of the creative human spirit. In every decision, opinion and thought, there is feeling. Even if the rational decision is 'correct', feelings need to be listened to or the decision will be half-hearted, will leave some people behind, or never be carried out. Our feelings are informed by our unique experiences of life – they are deeply personal yet also contain wisdom about the whole current situation. A good decision includes each person's unique sense of the question at hand. Thinking, feeling, and action, are not three separate spheres; they occur as one before we arbitrarily split them up.

A feature of this democracy is that it asks us to be open with one another, not to put our presumptions, our technology, the 'project' or 'organisation', or some mission, in-between self and other so that we cannot directly contact another person. Can we put the personal contact first? I want to make sure I can feel connected to the living person looking back, that we are connected as two (or more) people, then let an idea or a project be discussed. But don't let the project or task cloud the connection. Don't mediate the connection through an abstraction, have a clear connection first and try to keep it clear... If our connection as humans does not matter, then nothing else matters anyway...

*"What matters is to be a human being with another human being, to recognize the other person as another being in there. ... I am just here, with my eyes, and there is this other being. If they happen to look into my eyes, they will see that I am just a shaky being. I have to tolerate that. They may not look. But if they do, they will see that. They will see the slightly shy, slightly withdrawing, insecure existence that I am, I have learnt that that is O.K. I do not need to be emotionally secure and firmly present. I just need to be present. There are no qualifications for the kind of person I must be. ... The minute something goes wrong I go right back to trying to sense this person; to what is happening. Because this is another being, a different being" (Eugene Gendlin, 1990: 205).*

### Questions for audience reflection

1. Having listened to our various discussions, what really calls to you most, what do you feel most excited or alive about in this general area?
2. 'If you could bring what you understand from therapy into the wider world outside your consulting room, what would you bring and what difference would that make?'
3. 'How would you really like the world to be?' 'What would be a way forward in that direction, something you might actually want to do?' Talk to people about it? Write

about it? Make some space to flesh it out for yourself? Find some allies who you could work on this issue with?

## Summary

These are very preliminary thoughts, being tested out with social activist groups that are interested in learning Focusing. Everything is being refined and re-thought in response to how groups feed back their experience of learning to sense through their bodies and learning to listen deeply to each other's experience. What works, how is it useful, what is not appropriate, what is useless or confusing ...?

I have very briefly suggested that Focusing practice can offer the world of social change and activism a form of collaboration that consistently values care and inclusivity from the personal to the community. I have not pointed out that the Focusing world likewise needs the attitude of activism. Focusing groups can still prioritise the individual or prioritise teaching Focusing over Focusing as a vehicle for change. We need to broaden the reductionistic idea that Focusing is just an individual process, useful in therapy. That model is well developed even if it still isn't well acknowledged. A 'social' form of Focusing makes explicit how individual bodies can carry forward the group into new fresh edges of understanding and action. This is an experiment that attempts to address real life, real people, in the midst of everyday living and our need for grounded social change.

**Greg Madison, PhD**, is an existential psychologist and Focusing-oriented psychotherapist contributing to various activist, academic, and professional communities across Europe and North America. For some years Greg has avoided exclusive affiliation with any institution and instead enjoys creative collaborations as an independent practitioner. He has written and co-edited books and articles on Existential Migration, Focusing-oriented therapy, existential therapy, and contemporary topics related to psychology and society. He is a Certifying Coordinator for the Focusing Institute, founder of *The London Focusing Institute* (a team of teachers working according to democratic and transparent principles) and co-editor of *Existential Analysis*. Greg lives in Brighton and southern Spain. Contact Greg at [info@gregmadison.net](mailto:info@gregmadison.net)

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## **Further resources**

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