

AWE AND THE CELEBRATION OF LIFE'S MYSTERY

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.

Albert Einstein, from *The World As I See It*

Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, from *Who Is Man?*

Awe as Fundamental

It seems right to begin with awe. "Awe" celebrates the mystery and wonder of life, but, unlike wonder, it can also include an element of fear or dread; it is reserved for that which is more powerful than we are or aspects of life that we can never fully know or understand. And because the feeling of awe must strike or grab us, we are not really in control of our experience. We cannot will ourselves to feel awe, although we can establish certain conditions or take on certain attitudes which are more conducive to strengthening the power of awe in our lives.

Most of us would probably agree with Einstein that there is something "fundamental" about recognizing the mysterious in life and being able to stand in wonder. Being in touch with mystery connects us with a sense of limitless possibility, both within ourselves as well as in the larger world. To experience awe is to feel momentarily liberated, a recognition that there is something magnificent that has the power to transcend our daily cares and concerns--but it is not just "out there," because we belong to it as well. We are part of it. When we feel awe we sense that we are operating from the place of our greatest wisdom and seeing ourselves and the world from the most enlightened and ultimately accurate perspective.

Mystery Is Where the Action Is

Descartes concluded that the presence of infinity was the basis for the proof of the existence of God. Another interpretation is to see infinity as proof that life is far bigger and more complex than we can imagine and as proof that actual life does not fit into the neat boxes or categories that we create to try to explain it. Whether we believe in God or not, the existence of infinity suggests that mystery and the unknown or unknowable is woven into the fabric of life--that there is a kind of magic to it, and that life cannot be reduced or simplified in the ways that some of our traditional scientific thinking might imply.

In a sense, being in a state of awe is the opposite from believing in any specific doctrine or explanation of life. Awe is about the encounter with mystery and our inability to ever come to terms with the infinite. When we think of it this way, mystery does not represent a problem that we should try to solve or conquer. Quite the opposite: mystery is where the action is. And knowing this changes everything. Because mystery pervades all of life, from the infinite vastness of open space to the infinite complexity

of an individual atom or cell, awe becomes a rational response to any aspect of life that we choose to examine, depending upon our ability to be open to it. As Abraham Joshua Heschel says, "Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things."

FINDING THE "MORE" IN THE MOMENT

Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.
From the Jewish Prayer Book,
Gates of Prayer

It is fair to say that most humans are guilty of walking "sightless among miracles." While we may have moments when we are struck with awe and experience the world around us in its true glory and infinite complexity, this is not our characteristic mode of being. It is easy for days to pass and years to vanish while we remain focused on our personal agendas and lose sight of the bigger picture and the mystery of this life that we are a part of.

Cultivating awe may require that we adopt a different vantage point. Awe is about the wonder that we experience when we stand still and observe reality closely enough to really take it in. Contemporary spirituality, mindfulness practices and experiential psychotherapy all encourage this kind of stillness; they help us to focus on and experience the richness of the present moment and the fullness of our possibilities as people. Much of what unites psychotherapy with contemporary spirituality is this emphasis on leaving room for awe by remaining receptive to what the present moment offers.

Spirituality and the Present Moment

More than any of the other spiritual emotions, a contemporary spirituality is, at its essence, about awe--about using mindfulness meditation and other practices to help us to wake up from the sleep of unconsciousness and discover the possibilities that exist in the present moment. Just like psychotherapy, contemporary spirituality is about leading an examined as opposed to an unexamined life, but the emphasis is somewhat different. From the Buddhist perspective, the danger is that we remain lost in our ordinary level of consciousness and end up living like robots, as if in a dream from which we may never wake. When we are lost we are out of touch with ourselves and with the truth about who we are and what is out there in the world.

The problem, as many spiritual teachers might explain it, is that we lose touch with the mystery or magic of life because we resist being in the moment, in the "now." We fail to realize the basic truth that the present moment is all we have, that we will never be living anywhere but in the present. That is why mindfulness practices emphasize the "pause," the importance of consciously deciding to make the time to be in touch with whatever is real for us in the particular moment, no matter what type of moment it is. Without pausing, how can we take it all in, examine it and begin to appreciate or understand it?

Yet it is very human to resist doing this. So much of the time we experience a kind of restlessness or vague sense of dissatisfaction that we would just as soon run away from. Focusing on the past, thinking about the future, or taking actions to help move us forward in our lives usually feels more promising or productive. Particularly for young people who have most of their future ahead of them, the pressure to create the right future would appear to be a higher priority than lingering in present moments that are far from "awesome."

Our modern lifestyles contribute to the problem by offering the luxury and the curse of endless

distractions that appear much more enticing than sitting on a meditation mat. But these pursuits can become counterproductive when we seek from them a level of gratification that they cannot ultimately provide, leaving us to assume that we just need more. Whether it is an updated kitchen with granite counter tops and stainless steel appliances, career success, a shopping spree, a better body, more money, more food, alcohol or drugs, the “highs” that these activities offer are often followed by “lows” if we are not finding other reliable sources of sustenance in our lives. As a culture, our quest for more may be better addressed by learning to find the “more” in the richness of the present moment.

The Attitudes of Mindfulness

So how do we go about finding this “more” and rekindling the sense of awe in our lives? The answer may be that what is needed is a type of spiritual practice where we redirect our attention and our attitudes so that we begin to experience our present moments differently. The mindfulness practice that we are most familiar with is meditation, where we are instructed to sit quietly for a certain amount of time each day and disengage our minds from the normal pursuit of thoughts. But mindfulness in the broader sense is not just about a meditation practice where we sit and let go of thoughts. It is also very much about self-observation and truly being in touch with where we are, and in order to do this, we need to adopt certain attitudes.

What is required is a willingness to look deeply at one's present moments, no matter what they hold, in a spirit of generosity, kindness toward oneself, and openness toward what might be possible.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, from *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Professor of Medicine Emeritus and founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is one of the leading figures in the world of contemporary spirituality, especially when it comes to teaching mindfulness practices and the attitudes that go with them. He emphasizes three key elements of a mindfulness attitude: the "willingness to look deeply" and honestly at what is actually there in a given moment; the importance of doing this in a spirit of "generosity" and "kindness toward oneself"; and the need to maintain an openness to what is possible.

We commit ourselves to taking on a different perspective--one that is focused and purposeful but, at the same time, allows us to be open and free of our usual judgments and expectations. While this takes some courage, it is also meant to be a heartfelt experience, not just a cold and analytic assessment. When we think about meditation we may not immediately associate it with an attitude of generosity or kindness, and yet this willingness to be kind to ourselves is an essential part of the practice.

We Are Welcome as We Are

Pema Chodron, another prominent voice in the world of contemporary spirituality, is an American Buddhist nun who is known for her fresh and often counterintuitive views, particularly when it comes to making room for the pain and suffering in our lives. Not surprisingly, she summarizes key features of a meditation practice in much the same way as Kabat-Zinn. As she describes in her book *Awakening Loving Kindness*, the path of meditation is about curiosity and inquisitiveness and involves three key attitudes: “being gentle, precise, and open.” The challenge is to combine a spirit of good heartedness towards ourselves with a willingness to observe precisely what is there in the moment, "just as a scientist is not afraid to look into a microscope."

Of course it can feel a little scary to be asked to look closely and deeply at what is actually there in a given moment in our lives. We may be inclined to put off doing this until some future time when we imagine that the process might seem easier or more rewarding. But Chodron would disagree. She explains how people often tell her how they wanted to contact her earlier, but that they felt they should wait until they were more “together.” And her response is to think, “Well, if you're anything like me, you could wait forever!” She encourages us to come as we are; this is where the real magic lies.

Chodron makes it clear that meditation is not about trying to get rid of our egos or even trying to change or improve ourselves; in fact, the essence of the practice is just the opposite. She says it beautifully in her book *Comfortable With Uncertainty*: “Meditation practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we are already.”

Parallels With Psychotherapy

It is not a big leap to see parallels here with psychotherapy. There is a great similarity between psychotherapy as it is practiced today and the approaches and attitudes described by Jon Kabat-Zinn and Pema Chodron. Just as mindfulness practices like meditation provide a structure for creating the opportunity to be quiet, listen and experience oneself in the universe without our endless mental activity, psychotherapy is a type of ritual we have devised which creates a structure for quieting our normal thought process and making the time and space to look honestly and precisely at our inner reality and to do so with kindness, respect and an openness to what we might discover.

You would not expect to see the word “awe” appearing frequently in psychoanalytic journals or academic books or articles assigned to students of psychology, yet the concept of awe has tremendous significance in the psychotherapy world. It is not so much that we establish a goal for our clients to experience more awe in their lives, although that would be a desirable outcome. The emphasis here is more on the need to make room for awe in the psychotherapy process.

As with contemporary spirituality, psychotherapists attempt to stay receptive to what the present moment offers. What is different is the way that we are receptive. In meditation we are encouraged to witness and let go of thoughts, feelings and sensations, while in experiential psychotherapy we are encouraged to express and explore them, but the focus of attention for both practices is on what is possible when we pause and let ourselves fully experience what is real in the moment.

The Mystery of Our Inner Lives

We are most accustomed to thinking of awe as a feeling that we get when we glance up at the night sky and are reminded of the limitless universe beyond the world that we know, or when we ponder the mystery of the tiniest particles and how there appears to be no end to how small life can be. In psychotherapy we are dealing with a somewhat different dimension of the mysterious, but one that is equally worthy of inspiring awe—and that is the mystery of our inner lives and the infinite possibilities that our inner worlds offer. This same infinite more that we see in the night sky and in the smallest particle can be said to apply to our inner worlds as well. We are part of that mystery. The realm of who we are beneath the surface is infinitely intricate and never reaches an end.

Part of what we are doing as therapists is setting up the conditions to experience the moment with the client in its fullness, to help uncover the “more” within the client and in the moment between client and

therapist, and finding that “more” helps the client move forward. It should not be surprising that the structure that we create and the attitudes we adopt in psychotherapy for bringing out the “more” within us are similar in some ways to spiritual practices for finding the “more,” the awe, in any given moment. And of course there is no end, no limit, to what we can find and explore. We will never have enough time to fully fathom ourselves and to capture all that exists in our conscious and unconscious minds.

But the infinite aspect of our inner lives is not the only thing that should inspire awe. After all, we are not just receiving an endless number of random feelings and sensations from within ourselves. There is real meaning there as well. We know when something becomes meaningful to us. When we hear beautiful music or go to a museum or read poetry, we know when our full being is responding. And if we are writing or speaking with someone, we know when our communications carry real meaning and reflect something of importance to us that truly resonates. So much of what is awe-inspiring about psychotherapy is that we are establishing ideal conditions for clients to make contact with their inner worlds and to witness first hand these moments of meaning.

THE MIRACLE OF FELT MEANING

Rather than remaining within the paucity and unreliability of a theory,
we employ all of them to open whole reaches of human experience.

Eugene Gendlin,

from *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*

What Makes Psychotherapy Work?

The experiential dimension of psychotherapy has been with us from the beginning, yet the process itself remains somewhat of a mystery. What exactly is this “more in the moment” that we are attempting to bring out in psychotherapy? Or, to ask a much more basic question, what makes psychotherapy work in the first place? And why do so many therapists today work in an experiential way, as opposed to emphasizing more structured or educational approaches?

Freud gave us one way to conceptualize the experiential process when he identified the realm of the unconscious and the possibility of “making the unconscious conscious.” Today we are still very aware of the unconscious and the opportunities for uncovering unconscious material in psychotherapy, but most of us now think of experiential psychotherapy in a much broader way. We tend to think of it as a process where the client is able to connect with feelings—or, more specifically, a process where clients can check in with how they are feeling or feel about something and find words or images to express this. Connecting with feelings is now such a central feature of most psychotherapy that therapists are often parodied for always coming back to a client and asking, “How do you feel about that?”

But how do we define “feelings”? I prefer to use the word “touched.” We might say that the goal of experiential psychotherapy is for the client to be touched in the process in a way that leads to growth and development. The advantage of the word “touched” is that it suggests something fresh and new, something that is felt in a palpable, bodily way and at the same time can encompass a wide range of experiences. It can mean emotionally touched (including the painful moments as well as the sweet or poignant ones); it can mean touched by the truth of a new insight; it can mean touched in the many ways that clients and therapists are touched in the psychotherapy relationship; and it can include a broader understanding of touching where a client can tap into an “underneath feeling level” below the surface of what is being said.

How We Are "Touched" in Psychotherapy

For further clarification, I turn to the work of Eugene Gendlin, an American philosopher and psychotherapist who has devoted much of his career to understanding what is happening in these moments when we feel touched in the psychotherapy process. Gendlin is also known as the founder of Focusing, a specific therapeutic approach that emerged from his collaboration with psychologist Carl Rogers. Gendlin has done psychotherapists a great service by giving us a very precise view of what the experiential dimension is all about. He would probably say that all of the forms of “touching” that I mentioned above are part of his vision of what promotes healing and growth in psychotherapy.

As a phenomenological philosopher, Gendlin is doing something quite different from most other psychologists or psychotherapists; rather than developing theoretical concepts about what is healing,

Gendlin begins with concepts that describe the therapy process itself in its full intricacy and continuous movement and unfolding--what he calls "alive concepts." The use of alive concepts is a way of bringing the language of psychotherapy forward to better reflect the cutting edge of today's science and philosophy, including the new physics, complexity theory and postmodernism. Just as complexity theory describes the world in terms of systems nested within systems going out to infinity, alive concepts capture what is mysterious about the dynamic process of human experiencing.

Gendlin is also different from most psychoanalytic writers in his focus on "felt meaning" and its importance in psychotherapy. He began his philosophical inquiry as an attempt to better understand what he refers to as an "ah-ha moment"--that experience that most of us can relate to when we *sense* that something is right or meaningful. Felt meaning involves the body as well as the mind, not just the left brain, rational experience.

Speaking From a Deeper Place

For Gendlin, the process of finding meaning is very much about our ability to connect with what he calls an "implicit" domain. Lynn Preston, Director of the Experiential Psychotherapy Project (EPP) in New York City, calls it a "flow of life process that is always present just beneath the content of what is being said." The implicit is similar to the unconscious in that we can be unaware of it when we are just functioning in a more superficial way. But unlike the unconscious, there is a fluidity in accessing the implicit realm; we have the ability to tap into it and speak from this infinitely intricate place within us. When we do, what comes out is totally unique, with its own kind of complexity—not something that could be entirely predicted in advance.

We as therapists depend upon this interplay between the implicit and the explicit for the therapy process to have momentum. After all, our clients are not just expressing what they already know but are allowing thoughts, feelings, images and reactions to emerge freshly out of their lived experience in the therapy process. Lynn Preston sums it up as follows: "A nutshell version of a focusing orientation is that it is a therapy centrally concerned with helping the client to speak from his feeling sense rather than about his feelings."

As Gendlin describes in his book *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*, a specific sequence of events occurs when we experience moments of felt meaning. It begins with what he calls a "felt sense," which connects us with our deeper implicit realm. A felt sense "forms at the border zone between conscious and unconscious" (at the edge of awareness), comes to us in a visceral way and represents a whole complexity. Although a felt sense can include emotion, it is not the same thing as emotion. It is more like a whole bodily mood. When we tap in to the felt sense, emotion sometimes accompanies the process, but the felt sense also includes the bigger experience, the "place where the tears come from."

Recognizing Moments of Meaning

When I was listened to for that mood--which has come to be called "a felt sense"--and invited to speak from it, I experienced a special kind of connection to myself and to a forward moving process. I found a direct line of access to the 'underneath feeling self'--the self that is sometimes hard to find, sometimes hard to bear and often hard to comprehend. I learned to touch into myself in this way and this self, amazingly came forward clearly speaking its own truths. New steps of awareness emerged organically, leading out to a hopeful, fresh, unexpected creativity.

Lynn Preston, from "Two Interwoven Miracles: The Relational Dimension of Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy"

As Lynn Preston describes, when someone finds just the right words to express their deeper felt sense, there is a feeling of connection, rightness and truth. Gendlin calls this the forward movement of a felt sense and believes that this is the basis of what works in psychotherapy. This is the moment of felt meaning. We know when we have found it because we can feel the shift, in the same way that we can feel the relief or release of an “ah-ha-moment.” There is a sense of “emergence” when what had been implicit is made explicit.

Moments of emergence in therapy can be quite dramatic in a beautiful way, which is ironic since what is emerging or newly expressed by a client sometimes comes from hidden parts of themselves that may be associated with shame, vulnerability or fear. Clients may connect with sadness or other aspects of themselves that they normally would ignore or fail to express. The client's words may be beautiful or hopeful (“Ah. . .so now I see what I have been missing all my life!”) or they may be dark (“I realize now that I would rather be dead than alive.”) But either way, if the client is speaking from a place of their emergent truth, it is safe to assume that the process will provide some type of forward movement. We want to encourage clients to say what has been “unsayable” in their lives, whether it is hopeful, dark or somewhere in between.

But emergence and forward movement are not just limited to dramatic moments. Much of the value of Gendlin's concepts is that they capture and explain a wide range of experiences, including those that are more subtle or that occur in small steps. In any given session, for example, there may be many times when a thought or a word or an image comes to a client in a way that feels meaningful, or when we feel touched in some way in the psychotherapy relationship. We might think of psychotherapy as the sum of these kinds of moments, both large and small, that feel right to us and offer us a sense of direction as to how to proceed—both in the psychotherapy process as well as in our lives in general.

The Therapist's Goal: Facilitating Emergence

To a large extent, the role of the therapist has shifted from one who holds the answers or the truth to one who facilitates a dialogue that leads to forward movement. As a therapist, I like to think of my goal as “facilitating emergence.” One way to do this is to encourage clients to slow down and check in with what they are experiencing in the present moment rather than staying caught at the more superficial, conversational level. As with contemporary spirituality, we want to “honor the pause” and resist the temptation to rush in to fill up quiet times; we want to avoid sending the message that we are in a hurry or that we are more concerned with analyzing or educating than with experiencing.

This does not mean, however, that the therapist is passive or just sits back and waits for something to emerge. Felt meaning does not take place in a vacuum; what emerges for a client is very much influenced by their relationship to and interactions with the therapist. So, in addition to leaving room for the client to make contact with their inner experience, facilitating emergence is also very much about the way that the therapist listens and responds to what is being said.

As Lynn Preston is fond of saying, therapists need to be “evocateurs.” We want to listen with an appreciation for what might emerge, which involves our own felt sensing, our ability to sense the “more” of what the client is wanting to express. We want to interact with our clients in a way to help evoke the felt sense level, lift it out, welcome it, explore it, cultivate it, mark it and celebrate it

(although these steps are not necessarily done with words). This is a far cry from the old psychoanalytic stance of neutrality, where the emphasis was placed on interpretation (of transference, etc.) rather than on forward movement through the emergence of felt meaning.

The Dance Between Therapist and Client

It follows that facilitating emergence is not something that the therapist undertakes as a removed, objective observer. At any given moment both the therapist and the client are impacting each other in infinitely complex ways. As two human beings engaged in a process of discovery, the therapist and the client are both intricately involved in their own felt sensing. It is difficult to help our clients tap into deeper levels if we are not also doing this ourselves. As evocateurs we use our felt sensing along with our rational, left brain thinking to help us guide the therapy process.

This happens in a variety of ways. Even when we are just listening we use our own felt sense to get a feeling for the often elusive “more in the moment” that the client is wanting to express. But so much of what we do goes beyond listening skills. Emergence also occurs through spontaneous conversation or improvisation, where the therapist assumes a more active role. According to Preston, “The therapeutic process is often an interplay of the slowing down and sensing into of focusing, and the spontaneous back and forth of conversation.” As therapists, we want to be skilled at the creative use of ourselves, which involves a kind of “coming from underneath,” an ability to access and act upon our own felt sense in a more spontaneous way. As Preston puts it:

The therapist is like a dance partner in the twists and turns of implicit emergence. It's something that the two people are doing together, not only that one person is helping the other to do. Although the roles are different, both partners are equally struggling to be present, coordinated with each other, to find their way together toward a future that is centered in the present moment.

The Therapist's Paradox

Of course our role as therapists is not limited to being evocateurs. Clients also need us to offer feedback and suggestions, educate them and provide a certain amount of structure. Yet having a sense of purpose in this way requires concentration and limits (to some degree) our ability to be open and receptive. I call this “the therapist's paradox.” Learning to juggle the proactive, willful, more conceptual aspect of our jobs with what might be called a more “spiritual,” open approach can be a wonderful although challenging journey.

When I was first introduced to Gendlin's concepts, I assumed that his approach would be strictly “client-centered” in the tradition of Carl Rogers, with an emphasis on a receptive stance that encourages a client to find their own way and leaves plenty of room for the emergence of felt meaning. As such, I imagined that his focusing-oriented style would be incompatible with other types of therapy that demand a more pro-active stance, such as cognitive therapy, guided imagery, EMDR, stress reduction work, behavioral therapy, etc. I had the impression that therapists needed to choose between these seemingly incompatible styles.

When I studied Gendlin's philosophy I was surprised and much relieved to find that he did not

disapprove of more proactive types of therapy and, in fact, he advocated using a wide range of psychotherapy approaches. He described how a focusing orientation could be used in conjunction with other theories, concepts and approaches to provide the right balance. This is true because theories and concepts are more like “things” while focusing is more about how we make use of the potential for aliveness and forward movement in each moment, in the “now.”

We can always ask ourselves if our interventions are helping the client to tap in to a deeper implicit level and if they are contributing to forward movement. Our theories, concepts and agendas can be seen merely as hypotheses to be discarded if they do not contribute to the emergence of felt meaning. No matter how strongly we are attached to any particular concept or approach, we need this discipline if we are to make room for “awe” and that unpredictable “more” in the moment.

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF FELT MEANING

“Meaning must be constantly received, like the light to which we must open our eyes here and now, if we want to see.”

Brother David Steindl-Rast, from
"Word, Silence, and Understanding"

Two Perspectives on Felt Meaning

Although they come from very different backgrounds, I have noticed some striking similarities between Eugene Gendlin's philosophy and the writings of Brother David Steindl-Rast. Gendlin is not considered a spiritual writer, and Brother David is a Benedictine monk and is not a psychotherapist. But what they are focusing on and the way they think lead them to come to similar conclusions, although they use different language. In a sense, both are phenomenological philosophers in that both are closely documenting a person's inner process of experiencing. And both could be called spiritual in that they are asking the big questions, such as what creates aliveness and how it is that we find meaning in our lives.

The parallels between the two are probably possible because of Brother David's basic orientation. In addition to being a Benedictine monk, he has also studied Zen Buddhism and has received the Martin Buber Award for his achievements in building bridges between the East and the West. He is a unique spiritual leader, someone who has been described as a contemplative or a mystic but who also is highly credible in the academic world (and held a prestigious lectureship at Cornell University following the likes of Paul Tillich).

Like Gendlin, Brother David never loses sight of the infinite and the mysterious. In fact, Brother David's definition of spirituality is based on the notion of mystery; he believes that Mystery (he uses a capital “M”) is not a problem to be resolved but rather is something to be embraced. This is the territory of the infinite and what he calls the "More." In his article "Views of the Cosmos," he claims that "the encounter with Mystery is our basic religious experience." This is the way we confront "a power beyond our comprehension," and to do so means that we must have an open view of the world that acknowledges and incorporates Mystery.

Finding Meaning as an Ongoing Process

One reason that Brother David's writings are particularly relevant to psychotherapy is that he is interested in the human quest for meaning, but not just in the narrow sense of looking for an explanation of where we came from or for the answers to the mysteries of the universe. Rather, he is focused on how we find meaning on an ongoing basis in our lives. He explains that finding meaning is a process, not something that, once found, one can hold onto and claim to possess; we cannot expect to keep meaning once we find it. Instead, “Meaning must be constantly received, like the light to which we must open our eyes here and now, if we want to see.”

Because experiential psychotherapy is all about creating moments of felt meaning and forward movement, it may not be surprising that Brother David's writings about finding meaning are similar in many ways to Gendlin's. As in Gendlin's philosophy, we always come back to the “now” and the fresh

possibilities for felt meaning inherent in each moment. And like Gendlin, Brother David emphasizes that the experience of finding meaning is not something that we can will to happen. Unlike purpose, finding meaning is not subject to our control. This kind of meaning is more about letting go or allowing than it is about willing. As Gendlin might say, felt meaning emerges; it has a life of its own.

The Quest for Meaning as “The Adventure Par Excellence”

When a client experiences felt meaning and forward movement in psychotherapy, should we consider this a spiritual process? Most of us would probably not think of this as spiritual, yet Brother David's language adds a spiritual dimension in that he highlights the uplifting elements of the human quest for meaning—something that we might be tempted to take for granted. For Brother David, there is no doubt that meaning is connected to spirituality. He tells us in "Word, Silence, and Understanding" that “happiness and meaningful life are inseparable” and that spirituality is “no more and no less than meaningful living, religion realized in daily life.”

As long as I am in control, not much can happen to me.
As soon as I allow reality to "touch me," I am in for adventure.
The quest for meaning is the adventure par excellence,
and happiness lies in the thrill of this adventure.
Brother David Steindl-Rast,
from "Word, Silence, and Understanding"

Brother David reminds us how exciting the quest for meaning is, that it can be thrilling to take the risk of really allowing reality to touch us. And of course psychotherapy is an ideal structure for clients to learn to take that risk and to participate in the experience of felt meaning. We encourage clients to relinquish some of their normal control and undertake this adventure. This aspect of psychotherapy is the source of much of its power and a primary reason that clients are willing to come back week after week. And at the same time, the need to let go of some of their control is also the reason why many people who might benefit from and enjoy psychotherapy manage to avoid ever embarking on the adventure.

Hearing the client's story in psychotherapy is not just about the content that is revealed or what we learn as a result, although this is vitally important. It is also about participating in the process of finding meaning, and the happiness and satisfaction that comes from that process. When we invite clients to open up and tell their story, we tend to think of the benefits in a traditional way—that the client will get to know themselves better and that doing this in the presence of an accepting therapist will help them overcome any negative self-concept. And also that, with the help of the therapist, clients will become aware of and learn to correct counterproductive patterns that have been holding them back. But to this list we should add that the process of finding meaning on an ongoing basis in psychotherapy is healing and fulfilling in and of itself and can establish a precedent for the kind of adventure that Brother David is referring to.

The Components of Felt Meaning

My first question when I read Brother David's thoughts on meaning was whether he was really referring to the same type of felt meaning that clients experience in psychotherapy. Is meaning by Brother David's definition the same as what Gendlin describes, where the client taps into an

“underneath feeling self,” finds the right words or image, and experiences a shift or a sense of forward movement? To my surprise, I discovered that the way Brother David breaks down the components of felt meaning is remarkably similar to Gendlin's description.

Brother David believes that what makes life meaningful differs from person to person, but when something becomes meaningful it always includes three aspects: silence ("the mysterious matrix from which word emerges"), word (where word can be defined broadly to include "whatever carries meaning"), and understanding. He explains that if we can allow ourselves to sink deeply into the silence, it can express itself in words, and then we have understanding. This sounds remarkably like Gendlin, where silence represents the implicit realm, “word” represents the words or images that express the felt sense, and understanding represents the felt shift and forward movement.

Felt Meaning and the Heart

I find some of Brother David's language particularly beautiful and, as a result, it is easy for me to relate to as I go about my work as a therapist. For Brother David, meaning is something that nourishes us. In "The God Problem," he describes meaning as "some encounter or activity in which your heart finds rest--for a while at least." I love that he brings in the concept of the heart when he talks about meaning. When our bodies respond in those “ah-ha” moments, it makes sense that our hearts are also involved; they go from a place of restlessness to finding rest. This is Brother David's way of describing that sense of release or relief characteristic of meaningful moments.

I also appreciate that both Gendlin and Brother David are fascinated with this mysterious place of silence that we all have within us and the fact that it contains more than can ever be expressed. Gendlin calls it the “implicit” realm and uses the term “implicit intricacy” to convey this infinitely complex quality. These words bring to mind the infinite fullness at the depths of our being and our longing to bring this into the world. The fact that the silent place includes the heart makes sense, since so much of the fullness feels like love.

Ultimately love and finding meaning belong together. This is an important concept for therapists. Being reminded of the fullness of our place of silence and the possibilities for the "more" within each of us can help us during those difficult or not so meaningful times in therapy. Therapists can remember that this mysterious place of silence is always there in its potential fullness, and if we remain patient we may be surprised by what emerges.

Meaningful Dialogue

Another feature of Brother David's exploration of felt meaning is that he does not focus solely on the individual; he also addresses the issue of how people find meaning together when they are in conversation. Of course not every conversation in our lives needs to feel meaningful. Nothing is wrong with a certain amount of “chatter,” even in psychotherapy. It would be exhausting and annoying to feel that we must always be accessing and speaking from our deeper places of silence. Yet clearly the challenge in psychotherapy is to leave enough room amidst the chatter to find the more meaningful moments.

Brother David offers a definition of “real dialogue” that is particularly useful for psychotherapists. For Brother David, “real dialogue” is not just an exchange of words but rather “an exchange of silence with silence by means of words.” He explains that when we are in real dialogue (in any type of interaction), we go “deep down into the silent part of the other.” So even though we think of therapy as focusing on

meaning from the standpoint of the client, real dialogue by this definition requires that both people be in contact with their own and each-others place of silence. Unless therapist and client can go “deep down into the silent part of the other,” how can the client and therapist really be attuned?

If we believe that psychotherapy should meet Brother David's definition of real dialogue (at least some of the time), we as therapists must be in contact with our own deep place of silence; we can't just help the client to connect to their place of silence while we remain detached. And we must also be willing to have the client witness our process to some degree. We might choose to speak directly to them from our place of silence, or, as often happens, the client simply experiences a connection with our place of silence without our needing to use words. I am not suggesting here that we as therapists should give up our boundaries and become overly self-disclosing or reckless, but rather that we must maintain our disciplined roles while at the same time skillfully accessing our own felt sensing, whether we are listening, responding or being more creative or spontaneous.

Examples of Felt Meaning in Psychotherapy

What follows are two simple examples from psychotherapy that illustrate this process of finding meaning. First, I will cite a case where the words of my client served to connect us to the silent place of each other. This was my first session with a young male client who was coming to therapy for the first time and acknowledging how much pain he had been in for much of his life. He conveyed a combination of sadness, anger, frustration and fear. Toward the end of the session he grew quiet for a moment and then said with some emotion, “I am an ugly person.” It was clear to me in that moment that there was something of great value in his making this statement. I felt touched, and in the pause that followed I experienced a feeling of connection--and I knew he could tell that I was moved.

It is still not totally clear to me all that was conveyed by his sentence, but I felt that he did not need me to reassure him that he was not an ugly person. (I later found out that his parents had been reassuring him all his life about what a sweet, attractive and good person he is.) In that moment he needed to say this unsayable thing to me and have me receive it at a deep level as the gift that it was. Without my putting it into words, in that moment we were both able to connect with the deep, silent part of the other.

The second example illustrates an instance where I spoke from my own place of silence to help facilitate a meaningful dialogue. A client is speaking of an unpleasant dream about a former friend with whom she is now estranged, and as I look at her face I sense that something is troubling her as she speaks. I use my felt sense and without giving it much thought, I share with her that I have had recurring dreams as well about a friend who I am estranged from. (The reason I chose to go in this direction was that I sensed that her concern was coming from a negative judgment about herself, that being estranged from this friend suggested some defect in herself.) I then told my client, “Yes, dreams like that can have a haunting quality.” I emphasized the word “haunting,” which to me captured so much of the rawness and complexity of what was troubling about my own experience with a failed friendship. To my delight, she brightened up and responded, “Yes, it does have a haunting feeling!”

This is an example where just one word served to connect the two of us in our deep places of silence and provided a special kind of forward movement. I believe that my client was reassured that she was not alone or abnormal, and the word “haunting” convinced her that I indeed had experienced something very similar to what she was going through--this word conveyed in a fresh, new way some of the disturbing quality of both of our experiences. In the course of our exchange we each felt deeply understood and appreciated.

FELT MEANING AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

As a field that once aspired to be a science, it has been difficult for our profession to openly acknowledge and celebrate the wondrous aspects of what we do. I believe that the language of felt meaning gives us one way to do this; it describes processes that are so central to what actually happens in psychotherapy and yet have not previously been made explicit. This language can inspire us and remind us of the “miracle” that occurs when we experience felt meaning and a sense of forward movement in psychotherapy or in any other facet of our lives.

Hearing these words strengthens our own felt sensing ability in the same way that regular exercise strengthens our muscles or going to church or to spiritual retreats can open us up to awe and the possibilities that each moment holds. In our role as “evocateurs” we need the exposure to the evocative language to help us embody the kind of “aliveness” that might be called spiritual.

Help With Orientation

The language of felt meaning also offers a valuable perspective from which to view our work as therapists, an occupation in which it is easy to sometimes feel lost, even after many years of study and experience. For me, what sticks in my mind most are certain phrases that help to ground me and remind me of my priorities. I like to remember that my primary role is to “facilitate emergence” and that I can navigate using my own felt sense to help uncover the “more” of what wants to be said and to lift out and celebrate “moments of meaning.”

To appreciate that the heart responds when something becomes meaningful—that is a radical concept, though somewhat obvious when you think about it. The heart is not just reserved for the strictly interpersonal dimension of the psychotherapy relationship. We also very much use our hearts to sense where the “more” lies and to find meaning for the client and ourselves in the process. The right words can touch us in our place of deep silence and bring us to understanding, which we can recognize as a felt shift or a place where our hearts find rest.

The Therapist's Paradox

The presence of paradox may be one way to recognize when we are in the realm of the spiritual, the awe-inspiring, when we are experiencing life in its full complexity. As therapists, we come face to face with paradox in many different forms. Just the basic premise that we are helping people to grow and change by accepting and embracing where they are right now is paradoxical.

One aspect of our role that is not often discussed is the paradoxical position that we are placed in of needing to be purposeful and receptive at the same time. If we as therapists are to remain open to the emergence of felt meaning, we must hold the tension between these two seemingly contradictory states. I was heartened to discover that both Gendlin and Brother David consider this tension to be legitimate. Just like a monk who learns to remain fully present while doing everyday chores such as washing dishes, we as therapists can practice staying fully present with our clients even as we are purposefully guiding the psychotherapy process.

Therapists need not feel wrong or guilty about using cognitive therapy or other more proactive

approaches in their practices. Quite the opposite: the willingness to rise to the challenge and commit to both purpose and openness to meaning is a source of strength and something that can benefit our clients. We can proudly embrace both the purposeful and the receptive aspects of our work.

Returning to Awe

As noted earlier, because mystery pervades all of life, awe becomes a rational response to any aspect of life that we choose to examine, depending upon our ability to be open to it. Yet we may be more likely to feel awe when we observe a colorful sunset, a hummingbird or a rose than when we contemplate “the Mystery at the center of our own heart.” Maybe because the mystery within us is not something that we can see, we are less likely to experience it as awesome or beautiful.

We discover Mystery at the center of our own heart
and sense the staggering possibility that our own little life
may become ultimately meaningful as a celebration of that Mystery
in which it is rooted.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, from "Views of the Cosmos"

Brother David's words help us to recognize this beauty—“the staggering possibility that our own little life may become ultimately meaningful as a celebration of that Mystery in which it is rooted.” What a delightful way to celebrate who we are, not in an ego centric way, but as a part of that larger mystery in which we are rooted. As Heschel says, “Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme.” Certainly our “own little life” deserves to be included too, as standing, however remotely, for something supreme.

Is Psychotherapy a Spiritual Practice?

I have often felt that therapists are engaging in a kind of spiritual practice. Part of it, I believe, is that we are assuming the same attitudes that Jon Kabat-Zinn and Pema Chodron outline as the essential features of a mindfulness approach: together with our clients we are examining the present moment with precision in a spirit of kindness and openness to all that is possible. And in doing so we create a sacred space for our clients that is not so much a reflection of our individual personalities but more a reflection of the special role that we have taken on.

But much of what feels spiritual about psychotherapy *is* about our individual personalities and who we are as people. We are in an occupation that allows us to regularly witness and experience the miracle of felt meaning and the feelings of connection to our clients (and to ourselves) that come with sharing these moments. We learn over time that the experience of felt meaning is not just passive. We have the opportunity to open our hearts to all that is happening at the experiential level, both for ourselves and for our clients. As therapists we make this gesture when we actively recognize, evoke and celebrate moments of meaning.

Brother David describes “the quest for meaning” as “the adventure par excellence”—that willingness to give up control enough to allow reality to touch us. Other than extreme sports, where we take risks and give up some of our control in a physical way, it is difficult to imagine any endeavor in life that is more actively committed to this type of adventure than psychotherapy. The whole purpose of experiential

psychotherapy is for the client to feel touched in a way that leads to healing and development. Ideally the quest for meaning that we undertake in psychotherapy provides a precedent for a lifetime of adventure, long after the actual psychotherapy is over and the client and therapist have parted ways.