

FITTING IN, POURING OUT, AND RELATING

By Eugene Gendlin (unpublished manuscript)

“Gene listens to me so sensitively. But when he isn’t listening, when we are working together he suddenly dumps some complaint or bad feeling all over me, without even looking first to see what I’m doing, what state I’m in. I feel like I don’t count! It seems that he doesn’t care what I’m feeling, or that I’m tired, or that I’ve got my own side of whatever the trouble is. It makes me wonder if he’s real when he is listening to me.”

Why can sensitive, inwardly open people be so blind to the other person at times? Sure, if we set ourselves to listen, we’re wonderful, but at other times...? Then we are in our own feelings and don’t watch for the other person.

To live from ourselves, must we dump on other people without looking to see what they are up against, whether they are in a place to listen, and whether we are expressing ourselves in a way they can receive?

Shouldn’t being in touch with our feelings make us more sensitive to the feelings of others? Why do the most inwardly open people sometimes seem the most “narcissistic”? I have heard people wonder about this puzzle for years.

Elsewhere I have examined this word “narcissistic”¹. It comes from certain critics who condemn the whole trend toward awareness of feelings. They would have liked our society to remain in its old mold, without much attention to inner experience. They think that aside from the socially trained ego there is nothing in people but “chaotic drives.” If being in touch with feelings makes one ignore others, that does not surprise those critics. They assume that people are inherently autistic and selfish. Anything more than that comes from an externally imposed social code. Once in touch with their own needs, people will ride over others. Our viewpoint is different. We observe a deeper moral concern arising from inside, as people enter into their more intricate experience.

To us the problem seems to be a contradiction: Why do just the most sensitive people, those who otherwise feel the deepest concern for others, forget all about the other person when expressing themselves? And why do we dump poisonous stuff just in those places where we are most welcomed, and where we most want to do our real living?

One reason we refuse to be more careful about the other person is that being careful feels like going back to the old thing. I call the old thing “fitting in.”

We all know how to fit in. Most of the world still consists of settings where we put ourselves away and do the expected. There we are not “selfish.” We are always considerate in those places. We might express feelings but only in a manner

¹ “A Philosophical Critique of the Concept of Narcissism: The Significance of the Awareness Movement,” in D.M. Levin (Ed.), *Pathologies of the modern self. Postmodern studies on narcissism, schizophrenia, and depression*, pp. 251-304. New York: New York University Press. From http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2158.html

that fits the setting, only when it fits, and only the feelings that fit. In those settings – really almost everywhere – we put ourselves away and go by what the setting requires. We ponder our words in advance; we think first. In most places the people are friendly, but they are really strangers with each other.

Of course we know how to be considerate, how to check the other person out first, postpone ourselves – and all that, but that feels like what we do everywhere else. In close relationships we fight, rather than accepting it here too.

Here is a new message: Those are not the only alternatives! We do not need to pour ourselves out raw and blind, or go back to fitting in. There is a third alternative, a different way forward, a further stage.

The false assumption, only two alternatives

Let me first describe more exactly when it is, that we seem to face this bad choice. Either we pour our feelings out or – if we have to think first, if we have to watch, listen, couch what we say carefully – it seems like the old thing. A choice between those two comes about as follows:

In an intimate relationship (also in an organization like the Focusing Network), our actual feelings are invited. Our close person may even complain that we don't express our feelings. But when we do, they are received as bad news. Our spontaneity is felt as inconsiderate, or as criticism, an attack. We get defensiveness back. When we consistently encounter this, we feel bad. Now we have those new bad feelings to express. And now they really are criticisms. But since we feel them, we struggle more than ever to say them, to accept the invitation to be present as we really are.

Of course we could hold our feelings back until there is a right time, but is there ever? We could "psych out" the other person, decide what that person can stand, pick among our feelings just what can be welcomed. We could say just a little, and first ponder how to say it. Then we could stop, and help the other person take it in. We could listen and receive all the reactions and misunderstandings, until the person was able to hear what we actually meant. If the person didn't come that far, we could let it go for now, and begin again another day. But we don't even want to try any of that. Or perhaps we do it, but with despair and ill will. It does not seem like a hopeful and fascinating project. It seems like going back to the old thing.

All that work to reach the other person, does it seem like manipulating, like dealing with a stranger? We don't want to turn a close person into a stranger. That seems unfair and dishonest in a close relationship. It feels like giving up on being genuine, and going back to the old thing.

I argue that we need not choose either pouring out or shutting down. Relating is more complex, it is not either of those two. But to go forward we have to work with the sense of this seeming choice. I want to address the exact spot which seems to pose this choice. It is a private inner place, there where we have our hope that we could live in relation, really from ourselves and really with the other person. You might find the implicit assumption there, that anything but pouring out is the old thing.

It is difficult to avoid this assumption because our bodies assume it. Your body – the instant reaction you physically sense – probably assumes that if you must stop pouring out, you are giving up and fitting in. Many of us have had to struggle to get past "fitting in," to overcome our fears, our tendencies to put ourselves away. It can still seem hard to counter those tendencies, to maintain the new project of living from ourselves. Therefore anything that resembles "fitting in" feels discouraging, deadly to the life in us, that is trying to be. Or so it seems.

I see many people who have already become quite strong. Not only are they outwardly overbearing; they are also strong inside. Yet they still think of themselves as very shaky, as if they must fend off the slightest discouragement to their coming out, as if that could collapse them and shut them down inside. That feeling of collapse might still be your first reaction, but stay with it a moment and check: You might now be strong enough to go further.

Relating

If pouring out is examined even a little, we see that there is a further stage, a more relational way. For example: Suppose you say some of what you feel. Now: Don't you want to know what you said? You think you know, but you know only what you meant to say. That isn't what you said. What you said is what the other person got from it.

Twice I was in Japan, speaking through a translator to individuals and audiences. Sometimes my audience would sit unmoved, or look disturbed after I said something. I knew what I wanted to have said to them. But what I actually said to my audience was what the translator said, and – I didn't even know what that was. How I wished I knew what he told them!

With individuals it is easier. When we see the other person reacting oddly, we can ask: "What did you hear me say?" Then we can keep working until we have actually said what we wanted to say.

When we say something important, do we want only to speak it out, regardless of the very different thing it becomes on the way there? Would we be willing to send letters, if the U. S. Mail changed them to say Usually we then discover that we did not fully know what we were trying to express. The misunderstanding is not all due to a change in the message on the way over. We did not know all of what we sent, and especially

some of our motivation in sending it. We can get used to finding out more, and welcoming it. That helps us to say what we really want to say.

Soon, instead of working primarily on the other person, and only now and then grudgingly seeing our own part of the trouble, we can become primarily interested in our own part of it, our own business, our own development. Thereby a whole new mode of living opens, and a lot of desperation falls away.

Going into what the other person heard, and further into our own feelings, those are only two strands of a more complex problem. We need to wonder and find out what the other person can and cannot stand – and when. We need to learn which of our own ways feel like expressions to the other person, and which feel like attacks (and sometimes are attacks).

Before we even begin to speak, we can wonder what the others are feeling and doing, whether they are in a place to listen to us. We check what now preoccupies them. We learn the signs of when they have the will to work things out, and when not.

All that work! Of course it could feel like the old thing, like the old command: “Always think of the others; understand them; postpone yourself for a later time” (which may never come). But although relating is complex, it is not the old thing. It is quite a new thing!

Of course it is harder to keep track of the other person before, during, and after we express ourselves, than just pouring out, but the effort is to enable both people to be present. It is not going back to the old pattern in which neither was really present.

Seeing both sides at once

Part of the complexity is that there are two sides to the “pouring out” problem. One side is the person who shares feelings and is not well received. The other side is the person on whom the feelings are poured, often without a chance to get ready, and without help in absorbing, understanding, and digesting what is being expressed.

We are all at times on each side, but most people never see that these are two sides of one interaction! From either side they cannot see the other side. One can be puzzled why one’s attempts at sharing are never welcomed (not recognizing that one’s sharing can feel like an attack), and also puzzled why the other person is constantly attacking (not recognizing the other’s attacks as efforts to share).

There is an important bit of knowledge that can clear this up: We come to know that it feels good to express anger, and bad to receive it. It feels good to cry, and bad to see someone crying. When bad feelings roll out, it feels good, but having them roll on us feels bad. Much of the trouble is accounted for by this mismatch between how expression feels from the inside and from the outside. What feels precious and life-forward from inside may be quite negative when felt from outside.

It requires training and practice to know how to back up a little inside, to make internal room for one’s own reaction to being attacked, to give people room to cry, shout, or to dump poison. We come to know that from inside it is life-forward, a real sharing, so that we can be glad they can do it.

Conversely, we come to know that what feels life-forward and really sharing inside us, can land as an attack on the other person, and that if we look into it, we might well find that it was partly that.

We need training for relationships

In therapy we are trained to manage feeling-expressions. Why would we expect them to succeed in just any old way in intimate settings? Those are more complex.

Or compare focusing partnerships to marriage. In marriage, listening can help a lot – but only if we know that all sorts of feelings about living with the person will pile up as we listen. We can hold those for a few minutes, but where are they to go eventually?

Focusing partnerships work well because we have few other needs with each other. In my half of the time I can pour out my feelings. They don’t involve my partner’s life. In her turn what she expresses is from her life. It is not a reaction to me.

Relating is more than reciprocal therapy, more than taking turns listening. There is a vital place for listening in close relationships. Without it I doubt if we can get far. In *Changes*, one crucial factor was Kristin Glaser’s idea of training every member in listening (and focusing, and any other skill anyone was willing to teach.) Without

these skills the group would soon have burst apart. Listening and taking turns are conditions that make focusing partnerships possible, but they are a lot simpler than simultaneous mutual relating.

Surely each person needs care and time. Why should we be careless in intimate relationships where we live together and have life-needs with each other? Isn't that where we want the most care, and also the most training?

A society is coming that will include something like our partnership structure as a regular feature, such as friendship is now recognized as something everyone can have. It will be a society that makes room for our uniquely individual ways. Time and space will be structured in, in many settings, to let us find the uniqueness in ourselves and in each other. A great many interpersonal skills are now being taught in various settings. Those will soon be taught to everyone in public school. Focusing and listening are only two of them.

Deeper reasons why careful skills seem inimical to closeness

Let me return to the vulnerable, far-in part of us. We often find it as an "inner child" part. It is very important to realize that what we feel in that part of ourselves is also right. In it we feel an inherently right longing to be received as we are – and also an inherently right longing to love someone who will never ever pour poison into our loving place.

The critics would call these needs (in both directions) "infantile." They don't think it right to meet those needs even in infants. They think adults surely should have given up on those needs long ago. The needs seem only infantile to them, because they think of adults in an old way. In previous generations adults no longer felt those needs. Why not? Because they are so regularly defeated in traditional society. Naturally they seem childish to those who look at the new developments from the old point of view.

These critics are not yet at the stage of getting in touch with feelings and part-selves, and certainly they don't know the vast experiential intricacy which focusing opens beyond the familiar feelings. They think human nature contains nothing but an infant plus a "social ego" formed from the patterns society gives us from outside. The traditional adult was a closed, jelled, unitary self; the deeper levels with which we are now familiar, were closed off. Only poets and odd people even knew of them. The official view (as recently as Freud's view) was that the deeper levels are just "infancy."

To be sure, these relational needs are often experienced as an "inner child" part of us. But to think of them as childish misses both that they are inherently right needs in a child, and more importantly, that they remain inherently right needs in adult life. But how to meet those needs as adults requires many differentiations and trained steps.

To sense one's "inner child" (and other parts of oneself as well) seems to the critics simply a failure to develop the old adult ego that had closed all that off.

We see this inward contact as a further development of the human person. But notice: It is not true that we must lose the adult functions that the ego used to perform for the closed-off type of adult. We are now developing new ways to be a different kind of adult. We are becoming more able to moderate between our various part-selves. The one who does the mediating is a deeper and more genuine "self" than the old social role-ego that was closed off from all that.

For example, what would we do if we saw an actual child rushing out innocently to express precious feelings in an unguarded way? We would protect the child. For example, say little Eve has just run up to some man and told him what she got for Christmas, but the man didn't hear her and he just coughed and looked away. Don't we tell the child: "That man didn't hear you. Let's go up to him and tell him you want to say something." Then we would ask the man if Eve could tell him something. Or, if we don't expect a good reaction, we would say, "That's a mean man. Let's tell it to someone else."

Of course these are adult functions, but with those you don't push the child part of you back down. You can protect your child and run interference for it, so that it does not get discouraged in its desire to be present. In focusing when there is a felt sense, we also sense ourselves as a new kind of "I." The felt sense is "over there" and I am "over here" in a new kind of inner space. I have the felt sense; I am not the felt sense. The self that experiences this is really no content at all.

We might like to jump into that content-free self and skip all the rest, but we cannot. It leaves too much of us behind. We would skip much of what we are actually living, and so we would stay blind in it. Skipping would also close off the whole new territory of experiential intricacy through which we develop as persons.

As the self that can mediate gets strong, we find that we can endorse anything that is inherently right in each different experience. For example, in dealing with an angry feeling, we can respect and endorse how inherently right it is to be so angry – given how we construed what happened, and yet we can also know all the while that this is not the only way the even can be interpreted. On the one hand we need not push the anger back down into our tissues; we can respect its internal rightness. On the other hand we can know that the other person might be living the same event in a different way, perhaps even very positively.

Such differentiations are difficult, but they used to be impossible. It used to be either/or; we can't both be right. Either I am wrong, and must push my anger back down, or I am right and you are wrong, then you must put up with having my anger dumped on you. Now we can endorse what is right in both reactions – but it isn't easy yet.

It is just becoming understood that two people are two different snowflakes. Very different pictures appear when the same interaction is plotted on two different snowflakes as graph paper. This is especially so when each wants to react genuinely to the other.

Such mediation can let us endorse both sides of the need for a totally right relationship. We can ensure that the need does not get defeated inside. It should be sustained, not argued down, or put away. It isn't true that growing up means no longer having it. On the one side, we become able to endorse the need to be received just as we are, without having to work at it. Nevertheless we endorse it, but with a knowing smile to ourselves, because we also know we have to work at it. We need to build the skills to make it possible, and that will take some time.

On the other side, we can endorse our inner sense that nobody should ever dump bad stuff onto our readiness to love them, but again: with a smile, because of course we also know that it will happen. But we are becoming more able to protect that receptivity, although we cannot always, if we wish to hear from someone – really. There is an inner longing that others should fit us exactly and still be really themselves. We can endorse the longing, but again with a smile. Of course we want both fit and realness, but we get both only in spots. Each being is an exciting venture of its own. No actual other being exists just to fit us. It could only be a false merger, the other person silent and shut away, just pretending. We wouldn't want it. Better the unique and uniquely troublesome other person.

But then, are we never really related? Are we coursing through the universe alone? Is it like Fritz Perls said, "I am me and you are you and if we meet for a little while, that's a lucky accident"? He affirmed the wonderful separateness of each being. But sour old Fritz only got that half of it.

Freud and Jung also write sometimes as if there are no real relations, only "projections." But we are not only separate selves; it is also true that we are interactions.

We are the interaction, and that is more real than how we variously interpret it. Our picture is never quite right, but if the work out our "projections," we can sense ourselves in the fresh air of actually living with and bumping into that real other person.

Skills for relating are not artificial

I have a long history with the problem that learned specifics can seem artificial to people. Early on, the very idea of instructions for focusing seems grossly to violate the spontaneous therapy process, and the "indefinable art of the therapist." Instructions for skillful little moves can seem the opposite of spontaneity. Yet we use them to open ourselves precisely there, where deep spontaneity comes.

In our time many social routines have broken down – and we are glad! Behind them opens an intricacy of experience, and along with it a more basic self.

Today many people have intricate experiences for which the language has no phrases. We devise new phrasing for such experiences. It is something that only poets used to do. For most people to be able to do it, is an exciting development of the human individual. It is a new stage. Of course it isn't so easy to deal with, but in one area of life after another it is becoming known that it is worth the trouble.

For example, people (especially men) used to assume that spontaneous sexual behavior should simply elicit the expected good response. To want that response is still inherently right, but now we understand that each person must find out in a refined, precise way what the other intricately needs, so that we can both be really present. Now that no longer seems "artificial."

Even in corporations more and more people are now expected to contribute their creativity and their unique perceptions. That may be a more thorough exploitation, or it may enable people to live more really while they work.

In every human area the intricacy of human experiencing is being discovered. Behind every broken social routine is a new field of experiential intricacy. We are learning how to get around in these new territories, not by imposing a new set of routines, but by entering into, and speaking from, experiential intricacy.

Take listening. It isn't just "Say back what the person said." We need to sense the crux of what they say, take it in, feel it, respond after having felt it. We don't repeat it all; we distinguish and repeat the touchy part. Also, we try not to round it off so that its edge disappears. More can come at that edge, so we refer to the edge as such. There are many other specifics. Listening training takes a while, and can seem very artificial at the start. But soon it makes us more present and more closely related to clients and partners, than to our so-called close people.

Now that listening and focusing are part of us, those don't seem artificial at home, or in our organization. But we need quite a number of other skills to relate in our living spaces.

Here is another example of a small but vital skill: We become able to stop expressing ourselves, the moment the other person needs us to stop. When we stop, the other person has room to absorb what we have expressed so far. Of course we want that. Yet, once launched, we find it very hard to stop!

Why don't I want to stop, if I can be sure of a bad reception as I go on? A bad reception is better than nothing? To keep the person close, rather than disengaging? To make the person feel my anger? Not to let them get away with something? Note these motivations! If I am not directly in touch with those, if I let myself believe that all I am trying to do is make the relationship better just now, what are the chances of a good outcome?

I deny the assumption so widely maintained, that if I have trouble with a person, especially in a group, that person ought to be willing to listen to me, and to "work it out" with me. I don't agree that the other person ought to sit still for that. There are too many conditions that would need to be met, before it could work. I just mentioned one of them: Let me ask, "Am I actually trying to work it out?" Perhaps I only want to pour out my anger. Perhaps, if I can say that, it could be heard. If it stays covered, there will be an endless murky process that leaves the other person in pain, and me still unheard.

In organizations one expresses feelings in a supposedly civilized, partly covert way, couched in (sometimes accurate) perceptions of external events. It takes training to know how to receive this sort of thing, to receive the feelings as feelings, and more importantly, to look for the person's deeper life-forward movement that is implicit even in ugly, poisonous stuff. As therapists and listeners we learn to look for this, and to let it come into its own. We learn to have the necessary poise and energy – for an hour! It takes much more poise and energy to learn to do this in continuous close relationships.

Hard feelings are hard to work out, even if there is a third person who will take real time to listen to both of us in turn (as we do in Changes), and to let us each focus step by step. Without all those skills and conditions, why expect anything good from pouring out?

Conclusion

What I call "pouring out" (without keeping track of the other person) is not yet relating. We do not go back to fitting in, if we slow down, protect our inner need to relate, express ourselves bit by bit, and stand back inwardly to make room for the other person's pouring out, until this skill comes into general use.

My point is that there is a third stage – relating – which we all really want. That further stage is now in the process of developing. It is not as simple as it seemed. It is part of the further development of the human being, that comes with the discovery of experiential intricacy.

In traditional society people stayed within routines, roles, and rules. At least that kept the peace. We can respect the old way for what it was. One only had to manage the routines, and one could live. Today that is no longer enough. Every day some of our situations are more intricate than we can handle with routines. People who cling to the routines are now considered rigid, uncreative, and not yet developed. The critics who think of the new developments as "narcissism" are wrong.

It is true that there are difficulties at the present stage. But the millions of people who have found their feelings would not go back if they could.

A further stage is developing. Beyond the usual feelings, beyond two static pictures of each other, focusing lets us enter into experiential intricacy with a process of little steps. With a stronger self we are becoming able to let our relating happen from experiential intricacy, and again by little steps.

In traditional culture people felt real and genuine in their roles. When we look back today we cannot imagine that people could have felt real in those. The self we now feel as ourselves was muted, not brought forward.

Perhaps that seemed natural and was not painful. But today people find the deeper level quickly.

So our problem is really quite new. Relating from how we genuinely are inside, is new. No wonder we don't yet know all about how to do it together.

I deny the premise so often asserted, that if only we share our feelings, express ourselves as honestly as we can, a real relationship will form. We need not be disappointed and confused when it doesn't.

We need not feel defeated by the bad reception we get for pouring out, nor by bad stuff dumped into our open receptivity. Nothing is wrong. We would not expect a real relationship to come about, just by pouring out.

To be able to pour out – as one person being here, really – that was a step. Most of us have attained that stage. I am interested in learning more about the further stage: How can both of us be present and live from ourselves, rather than neither, or only one or the other? That is a stage our society has not yet reached. It's new territory.

We are the ones who are working it out. Instead of feeling defeated by all the pitfalls, we can feel like pioneers.