

# **THE EDGE OF AWARENESS**

## **Gendlin's Contribution to Explorations of the Implicit**

**By Lynn Preston**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the last several years there has been an upsurge of ideas about the implicit dimension of experience, that which is in some sense known, but not yet available to reflective thought or verbalization. Terms such as: "implicit relational knowing," "unformulated experience," "pre-reflective unconscious," "horizon of experience," "subsymbolic process," "embodied knowing," and "the unthought known" are emerging from virtually every school of thought in the fields of psychoanalysis, cognitive science and infant research. Each of these concepts contributes its own unique perspective to our increasing understanding of this vital domain of experience. In this paper I wish to highlight a conceptualization of the implicit as "the edge of awareness"- experience that is just beneath the surface of consciousness. I will focus on Eugene Gendlin's concept of "felt sense" as it adds to and informs this timely investigation.

Why is the study of the implicit currently so prominent? Why are so many of our Self Psychology presentations and publications speaking to aspects of the implicit (see Beebe, et al. 2005; Lyons-Ruth, 1999; Burtman, 2005; Fosshage, 2005; Knoblauch, 2005; Stern (2004). What do all these terms that refer to it have in common? How is an explication of this implicit terrain useful in our moment-to-moment interaction with our patients?

The endeavor to make the unconscious, conscious has always been the *sine qua non* of psychoanalysis, but recently our understandings of and attitudes toward the unconscious have been radically revised. We no longer envision that which is out of awareness, as formed entities lurking in a dark hidden container. As we are challenged by postmodern influences such as nonlinear dynamic systems theory and chaos theory, our concepts of unconsciousness have become increasingly less "thingified." We have become fascinated with the complexities

of consciousness - its continuity and discontinuity, its relational nature, its availability and unavailability. We are ever more aware that development in psychotherapy is less about the content of what we come to know and more about the joint venture of coming to know, feeling known and knowable - being able to be available to the process of knowing on all its multiple levels. Perhaps an investigation of that which is just out of awareness is a way of exploring the nature of consciousness itself. Perhaps understanding the “edge of awareness” is exactly what is most relevant to our daily work with patients. As descendants of Kohut, with his exquisite sensitivity to the importance of empathic attunement, we seek to attune ourselves to the new experience that can be just in this moment coming over the horizon line of awareness (Stolorow, et al 200?). We want to extend our consciousness to look for the edge of taken for granted, implicit knowing. We want to be like fish becoming aware of the sea.

Understanding of the role of the implicit sheds new light on the nature of empathic responsiveness, which is at the heart of a self psychological therapy. I want to show how the “sensing into” of empathic attunement can be a royal road to the implicit. Gendlin’s “felt sense” demonstrates that it is through our body sense that we access the edge of awareness. I believe that recent attention to the implicit domain of experience can provide new grounding for empathy in a postmodern world devoid of “immaculate perception” (Orange, 1995), where the use of empathy as an objective data-gathering tool is gravely doubtful. This promising new direction is particularly intriguing to me because I have found that what is most helpful to me as a clinician, is my understandings of the micro movements of development in therapy. These moments pivot on accessing the link between implicit and explicit or as Bucci (2005) puts it, subsymbolic and symbolic experiencing. Leeward defines health as the aliveness of such a link. (Mitchell 2000 p.9)

My psychoanalytic investigations have been spurred on by mounting interest in new paradigm thinking - what I think of as “the great upheaval” in psychoanalysis. I have enjoyed thinking and writing about how postmodernism informs our work (see Preston & Shumsky, (2000, 2002, and 2004). It seems to me that every self psychological concept must be revised in

the light of our contemporary understandings of mutual influence and systems thinking. I have been interested in the question of how we ground our work in this new constructivist milieu. What is the epistemological basis for empathic attunement, the centerpiece of a self psychological treatment? I believe that new understandings of the implicit offer not only an expanded grounding for empathy, but a new way of thinking about what empathy is - one that transcends both the Cartesian splits between mind and body, self and other, objective and subjective, and also overcomes the inherent pitfalls of postmodern relativism.

Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit adds a striking illumination to these ideas - one that brings both a philosophical and clinical clarity to the discourse. I met Gene Gendlin when I was a young therapist over thirty years ago before I became a psychoanalyst. I was captivated by his fresh, thoughtful and profoundly helpful approach to psychotherapy. His "philosophy of the implicit" has provided me with ever unfolding new understandings, inspiration and grounding through the years. I found Self Psychology a few years after I immersed myself in Gendlin's approach, and it too became an ongoing fulcrum for my work. I have spent many years teaching and writing about both of these approaches, and now finally it has become a compelling task for me to articulate how the philosophy of the implicit and self psychology fit together.

## THE IMPLICIT "There" and "not there"

I recently asked my 87-year-old mother what implicit means to her. "It's something that is "there and not there. It's clearly there in the situation, but it hasn't been said or even exactly thought," she said. Its not that it is simply omitted I thought, but it is the *more than can be put into words* peeking out from between the lines.

The implicit is "already" and "not yet". We feel it and are impacted by it and yet its nature and message is ambiguous. It is like the wind. We "feel" it but we don't "see it." We are in it, it is not simply a content, it is palpable feeling sense of ourselves and the intersubjective field of which we are a part. It is large enough to house many contents, even

seemingly contradictory ones. It opens as it forms itself into words, images and thoughts. It calls attention to the emergent as in Stolorow's metaphor of horizons of experience - the lightening sky forecasts the coming of a new day.

The implicit is equated with the nonverbal, or "enactive verbal" - the "affective" dimension of relating, (Beebe 05 p7). The Boston Study of Change group uses the term "implicit relational knowing" to talk about the non-conscious world of relational expectancies, the interactive experience that is not symbolized in words or images. Donnel Stern speaks of the implicit as "unformulated experience"- "the uninterpreted form of those raw materials of consciousness, reflective experience that may eventually be assigned verbal interpretations and thereby brought into articulate form." (Stern 97 p 37).

An alternative to my mother's definition of implicit as "there and not there," might be, "a different kind of there." The implicit is *felt* rather than thought. At times its presence is unnoticed like the wallpaper in your childhood bedroom. At other times such as in Daniel Stern's "now moments," it requires a response. It may grip the stomach or tug on the heart or scramble the brain. At these times it is unavoidably palpably demandingly *there*.

The language of the implicit is the evocative. Metaphor, poetry, art and gesture, speak directly to our implicit knowing. We cherish artistic expression because it has the power to invoke that which has not been formed into words or images, and lift it out of the inchoate mass, to be worded, reflected upon and processed by us. Yet the implicit and its metaphors are always larger and can't be summed up in any explication.

## GENDLIN'S IMPLICIT

Eugene Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit is a vastly encompassing, complexly layered body of work. His philosophical journey began with his interest in investigating not only the ideas that great philosophers developed, but also the process through which they discovered/created their new terms and meanings. He wanted to find the "point of emergence" – the door through which creative thinking enters conscious awareness. He wanted to

understand how these thinkers were able to “dip into the larger realm at the edge of thinking.”

Although primarily a philosopher, Gendlin has also been a psychotherapist most of his life. One of the unique features of his philosophy is that he uses, as his starting point, his up close encounters with this point of emergence in psychotherapy. Through his clinical work it has become clear to him that “in psychotherapy...*more* than just thoughts and emotions are being worked with... The feel of this more is quite specific and can act as a guide for words and ideas.” This *more*, from the bigger realm at the edge of thinking, is what we are reaching for and referencing as we grope for the *right* words to express “what wants to be said.” Gendlin’s philosophy is an investigation of the relationship between the larger implicit knowing, and the process by which it is symbolized in words and images. The reciprocity between implicit body sense and explicit articulation – the “zigzag” as he calls it - is the hallmark of his work.

## “BEFINDLICHKEIT” FEELING STATE AND FEELING INTO

In his article, *Befindlichkeit: Heidegger and the Philosophy of Psychology*, Gendlin reinterprets Heidegger’s concept of *Befindlichkeit*, a common German expression referring to *a mood, feeling, or affect*, to articulate a concept that is uniquely suited to speak of the implicit dimension of living. Heidegger coins a clumsy noun like “how are you-ness” or perhaps “self finding,” to create a new conception that cannot be rendered in old ones. *Befindlichkeit* is both a feeling state and feeling into situations. Instead of a thing like concept, we have a new kind of relational concept -a “being that is it’s relating.” In other words feeling oneself into the implicit is inseparable from what one finds in the world. “There is no separation, Gendlin says, between us and what we find. Our situations don’t exist without us like our book do.”(Personal communication)

1. Heidegger’s concept denotes how we sense ourselves in situations. *Being* for him is always being in the world. Whereas feeling is usually thought of as something

inward, this concept refers to something both inward and outward, but before a split between inside and outside has been made. (Mack's warding off feeling was inseparable from the context of this complex situation)

2. Befindlichkeit always already has its own understanding. This understanding is active; it is not merely a perception or reception of what is happening to us. In psychoanalytic language, we are organizing our experience even on a sub cognitive level. (Mack's warding off feeling had within it its own understanding of the trauma of devastating loss and what was needed to bear that loss)

3. This understanding is implicit, not cognitive in the usual sense. It is sensed or felt rather than thought and it may not even be felt or sensed directly with attention. It is not made of separable cognitive units like words or images. It is not yet definable. "A feeling's understanding or meaning is implicit, first in the sense that it may not yet be known at all. Secondly, the meaning is implicit in a more inherent respect; implicit in that it is never quite equal to any cognitive units. There is always more to go. Thirdly, it is a holistic complexity... there is a complex texture..." (Saying that Mack's felt sense was about devastating loss only scratches the surface of layers of complexity that can be found there)

4. Heidegger says that speech is already always involved in any feeling or mood, indeed in any human experience. Speech is the articulation of understanding but this articulation doesn't first happen when we try to say what we feel. Just as befindlichkeit always already has its own understanding, it always already has its spoken articulation. (Mack's word forgive turned out not to exactly "fit " "release" was the word that was "recognized" by the befindlichkeit.)

In the same vein, Loewald pointed out that the very distinction between preverbal and verbal development epochs is misleading; there is no preverbal domain per se. Rather, language is an intrinsic dimension of human experience from birth onward. (Mitchell 2000)

Psychoanalytic theorists such as Stolorow, Atwood Orange, and Donnel Stern have picked up on Gendlin's use of Heidigger's term perhaps because it expands our ability to speak about the non-linear multi dimensional complexity of implicit experience. It is a term that overcomes our customary splits between inner and outer, self and other, mind and body, verbal and preverbal. The term, *Befindlichkeit*, points to the holistic yet intricately woven nature of this level. It encompasses the unity of finding and making. When the therapeutic moment is rich and alive, the analyst does not "assign" meaning to the event, the meaning emerges *from* it. It feels like the meaning has been "in there" all along yet this is a creative moment - a moment when discovering and creating are not two things.

#### FELT SENSE – THE EMERGENT HAS A FEEL

Gendlin's project of understanding this "dipping into the bigger realm at the edge of thinking" is at the center of his contribution to psychotherapy as well as philosophy. In keeping with psychoanalytic studies of the implicit, Gendlin's focus is on how we as therapists and patients can find a way to access and utilize this "bigger realm". One of his most immediately helpful observations is that the emergent has a feel. Many skilled therapists know and use this "feel" but its workings and theoretical implications are often not sufficiently articulated. When we are empathically attuned and we resonate with our patient's experience, we have learned to be aware not only of words and content or even of body language and non-verbal information, but also the feel, mood, bodily sense that is there in the intersubjective field. We are looking for the emergent feel - the felt connection between words and the implicit larger realm. We are responding to more strands of implicit information than could possibly be spelled out. These myriad strands of unarticulated knowing are simultaneously interacting and intersecting, crossing with each other in us and between us, impacting and being impacted by the situation.

Gendlin uses the term “felt sense” to talk about the visceral aura, the palpable mood of implicit knowing. We are all familiar with the special “feel” of a dream as we wake but don’t remember the contents. Or the experience of trying to remember someone’s name. There is a shadow of this name lodged in the body. The name has a feel that is present. It has a puzzle calling to be opened, nagging to be recalled. This feel guides us as we ask ourselves “Is it Sally?” and the feel somehow says “No”. “Is it Sue?” Somehow we know that this is closer. The felt sense responds to our inquiry. Gendlin says, “IT talks back.” The poet searches for the next line of her poem. There are many possible ways the poem can continue which would seem to say what she wants to convey. But only the one “clicks in.”

Donnel Stern (1997) writes:

”If we pay close attention, there is often a sensation of something coming before language. Whatever this is, it cannot be worded, though sometimes, after the fact, we feel that it was there. We often have the sense that the words we use “fit” the shape of what we wanted to say, or do not fit. There is always a vague meaning-shape, a protomeaning - that precedes what we say, and by which we gauge our success in expressing ourselves

This ability to check against the implicit “meaning shape” of our self expression is experiential evidence that there is something “there” at the edge of our awareness - something with a bodily quality that can guide us in finding the next right words. It is something quite specific and demanding. Only its own unique words will satisfy it. When our patients are visibly checking their words against this “feel,” we know they are speaking from direct access to this “larger realm at the edge of thinking.”

Mack was riddled with conflict about taking part in a ceremony honoring his father who had died when he was ten. It had taken him several months of building trust to tell me that his father had been a well-known political figure. Mack had passionately loved his father yet he said he had “felt nothing when he died”- and had refused to have anything to do with the crowds of mourning people and the public recognition of his father’s death. He became aware that he had always resented the public for taking his father’s attention away from him. As an adult he largely kept his identity as his father’s son a secret.

(M). I did take part in the award ceremony for my father. It was very compelling - very complicated. I don’t know what it meant but I couldn’t wait to tell you about it. (I sat forward



intensely listening. I felt a kind of electricity in the air). Actually, the people seemed nice. It seemed right to have this commemoration. (With a wry smile) “I don’t hate them anymore. I guess I forgive them. “

(L) What a surprise to find yourself forgiving them!

(M) But not exactly “forgiving” them, more like “releasing” them. (Notice that it was he who used the word forgive, but after checking, “release” had the sense of fit and the ability to further the process)

(L) Letting them go?

(M) Yes - Something about letting go. My friends tell me that I looked very happy at the ceremony, and I guess I was. I was really happy! (After a long pause) Afterward I was unbelievably sad. I never felt that kind of sad before.

(L) Is it here now?

(M) Yes (he is now close to tears). I feel a pain I never felt before. I finally participated in my father’s death. It seems so strange to me... all my life I’ve been refusing - I’ve been warding them off and warding off his death. This warding off feeling has always been there. It has shaped my whole life. I’ve always known it somehow, but never, ‘noticed’ it.

As Mack began to focus on the “feel” of the event, *I* also had the experience of the feel of emergence. His words were hesitant, but deliberate and careful. I hung expectantly on each new phrase. It was as if he and I were both in the grip of a birthing process - a new living of what until now could not be lived. When he said, “I have finally participated in my father’s death,” it was as if each word was being pulled out of that larger realm. I could almost touch the intricate interwoven strands of vast implicit knowing. The clouds had parted and a wide open yet richly textured space had appeared. I had the sense of being midwife even though I added little in the way of verbal content. Mack’s “warding off” feeling was powerful, shaping, palpable yet it was not previously recognized. It was implicit. Gendlin calls this “a new was.” Mack sees that he always was warding off his father’s death but this moment gave birth to some completely new knowing and a completely new self experience.

## WORKING WITH THE FELT SENSE - SENSING INTO THE IMPLICIT

### 1. Courting the Emergent - Inviting the Felt Sense

Gendlin uses the term "focusing" to talk about the dialogue between the thinking, explicit, symbolic level; and the feeling, implicit, subsymbolic level. "Focusing" is his word for the zigzag, back and forth movement needed to straddle the two realms. One goes to the edge of awareness and fishes for the very specific words and images that have the power to "hook" the unthought known, lifting it out of the vast open sea of the implicit.

Some therapeutic moments, like the ones with my patient Mack are already in contact with the felt sense level. At other times, this level is warded off, dissociated, or generally unavailable. Donnel Stern refers to a nonconscious "refusal to spell out" the unformulated. At these times the therapist has to *court* the felt sense. My supervisee, Mary, needed only a brief invitation to enter this level.

Mary, a new student in the self psychology program that I co-direct wore an unusually hesitant, downcast expression as we began our session. "I am having second thoughts about the program," she said. She explained that she was troubled by our emphasis on newer developments in self psychology when she had never studied the basics. "I don't have a self psychology foundation. I don't really know what a self is. I don't understand how it becomes derailed or what it needs to develop. I read references to what Kohut said, but I don't really know what they mean because I haven't read Kohut." I asked more about her experience, reassured her that the language would become more familiar, explained a bit about "new paradigm" thinking, offered her a recently published book about the basics of self psychology, and empathized with the limitations of a two year evening program. Although we were both trying very hard, the session seemed to go around in circles and there was still that troubled, hesitant look on her face. I was beginning to feel as if I was wasting her session and providing an inadequate educational experience. I admired her tenacity in insisting that she needed to "really" know Kohut before anything else could make sense. With only a few minutes left to the session, I wanted to shift gears and go to the deeper implicit level. I suggested in a slower, softer, tone: "Can we talk about the feel of all of this for you." She looked up with a sense of relief. "I am missing the foundation she said." And as if the word "foundation" had taken on a whole new meaning, she continued. "Yes, it is a "foundation" I am missing. As if there is no place for my roots to sink in. The program has an icy surface. I can't find my way beneath it. I can't get under its slippery skin." Now she was looking down, reading something inside herself. "I need something solid but not concrete. It has to be porous, like dirt." Now she was talking with her hands and her face was full of lively movements. A new image was emerging. Then with a big smile she said, "I need to grow a new therapist self. Yes, that's it. I am trying to regrow myself and I think that is what attracted me to Kohut." She breathed a big sigh. "Isn't that just what Kohut is talking about? Growing a new self? That's why I want to

"really" know Kohut. This is really interesting, isn't it?"

It is striking how markedly the quality of the discourse changes when the felt sense is being pursued and articulated. Although Mary's content was still the need for more grounding in Kohut's ideas, we went from circling the issue, drifting about the problem, to enjoying a rich path of experience. There was a quality of aliveness as images opened up to the articulation of new personal meanings. We still had the same practical problem of no room in the program for a course specifically on Kohut, but the feelings, therefore the situation had changed when we were able to enter this level. The issue had broadened to an exciting life challenge of "regrowing a self." This expanded meaning was accompanied by a palpable shift in mood that brought a new vitality into our session. Instead of only the frustration of something missing, it seemed like both of us were eager to see how Kohut might help in this venture. My invitation to talk from the feeling level, welcomed her to shift into metaphoric imagistic language, which enlivened the link between her words and the larger implicit meanings. This linking was an enactment of the growth of her new self.

As she was leaving, Mary said that she never would have thought of "talking that way" (going to the felt sense level) if I hadn't suggested it. It just wouldn't have occurred to her. Mary is someone who is easily able to connect with her present experience. It appeared as if it didn't take much from me, but that small invitation, which required me to shift gears, was pivotal.

When this level is inaccessible it takes a great deal more work to enliven this link. Mutative psychoanalytic interpretation is helpful, not because of the superior wisdom of the therapist, but because it "points" to this link. Often our interpretive remarks are useful precisely because their very wrongness can put the patient in touch with an exact meaning that does have the right fit which would not have otherwise been lifted from implicit knowing. Bucci and Freedman ask the question:

"Are interpretations the agent of change, or do they create a certain state of consciousness in

the patient which enables them to name? Naming, in the broadest sense of the word always implies surplus meaning. To name, to verbalize an experience from the preconscious implies the discovering of it and ‘just a little bit more’ in the evocative terms of Fenechel” (Freedman and Bucci, 1983 p363).

It seems to me that the state of consciousness being spoken of here is the open permeability that allows attention to flow back and forth between symbolic and subsymbolic levels, generating the “more” of ever evolving fresh meanings. Good interpretations function to evoke this state of consciousness.

Psychoanalysts have recently given more attention to non-interpretive ways of enlivening this link. Some examples that come to mind are the current emphasis on expressions of the analyst’s subjectivity that help to prime the pump of the patients experiencing process; parallels between successful improvisational theatre and vitalizing psychoanalytic interactions; the recent focus on varieties of enactment as central to the therapeutic process.

## 2. Looking for The Unclear Edge of Experience

The metaphor of an *edge* of experience provides a vivid image of the meeting place of two dimensions -a borderline between that which is known and that which is unknown It has been used by many psychoanalytic writers: Ogden - the “primitive edge;” Ehrenberg - “the intimate edge;” Knoblauch - “the musical edge;” and Tolpin - “the forward and trailing” edges. Gendlin’s unclear edge, speaks to the wider experience of the meeting place between implicit (subsymbolic, unformulated, non conscious) and explicit (symbolic, formulated, conscious) processing. This edge is characteristically unclear. We know we are finding it when we reach the tantalizing, fuzzy limit of our thinking. Donnel Stern (1997) writes:

“Unformulated experience *is* the moment- to-moment state of vagueness and possibility from which the next moment’s articulated experience emerges... *It is* part of the raw materials that may be tapped for the construction of the next moment’s experience.” He speaks of it as “a fresh state of not knowing, a kind of confusion - a confusion with appreciable new possibilities, and perhaps an intriguing confusion, but a confusion or a puzzle nevertheless” (p37).

The intriguing confusion or puzzle that is characteristic of “the unclear edge of experience” constitutes what Gendlin calls “the point of emergence.” It is the “feelings of tendency,” or as Stern (1997) puts it, “hazy protomeaning” (p.74) that must be sought, directly felt, opened, and spelled out to have new thinkable, rememberable experience. When we pay attention to this edge we notice the visceral quality of its presence. We can also recognize it from the fresh, non-linear language that signals its arrival (as in the example of Mary). Our recognition of the implicit level of experience prepares us to expect, look for, and make room for new tendrils of exploration. It signals us to encourage our patients to follow something that is there ready to emerge.

The lack of clarity that signals the edge of the implicit is not at all arbitrary, empty, or random. It has its own quite demanding precision - the right verbal or imagistic hook. The “sloppiness” that Daniel Stern tells us inevitably results from “the interaction of two minds working in a ‘hit-miss-repair-elaborate’ fashion”(Stern, 2004, p.156), in my view is guided by this precision. The therapeutic process is a spontaneous but disciplined form of play - at times coordinating gracefully, at other times stumbling about - but its success is gauged by the achievement of a specific palpable sense of “rightness,” or “fitted ness.” At those times when the patient is pursuing the unclear edge there is a relaxed, expectant quality to the session - a feeling of clear sailing - marked by a sense of curiosity and openness to surprise.

### 3. A different kind of listening - Listening for Harbingers of the Felt Sense

a) Active openness - Listening for the felt sense requires and fosters a softening of boundaries between implicit and explicit realms. The therapist relaxes into the open receptivity of her own and her patient’s unclear edge. The central importance of the analyst’s ability to listen to her own inner arisings has been written about by many with different emphases and different terms. (Bucci, 2001; Aron, 2000) Donnel Stern refers to a need for a “prepared mind” which entails “curiosity,” the state of an “active attitude of openness.” (P70). He says that this kind

of nonlinear listening:

“means that rather than employ a focused beam of attention, a searchlight to look for things in experience, which in one way or another usually seems to result in conventionalizing, one allows the possibilities implicit in experience to impress themselves on one’s consciousness.” (1997,Pg 78).

**b) Listening for images and metaphors** - The edge of awareness, is the transitional space between two worlds. As such it has characteristics of both. It uses symbols, but uses them in a different way than a purely declarative mode. Bucci (2001) points out that imagistic language has a special function in the process of emotional communication - the “referential process.” Imagery is the pivot of the referential process, symbolizing the subsymbolic content and enabling connections to words. “The analysts goal may now be stated specifically... to intervene in such a way as to activate the imagery that is missing for the patient, to enable the referential process to continue (p.51).

**C) Listening with the body** - The visceral quality of the felt sense is its primary characteristic. The implicit is a body knowing. When we are listening for the felt sense, our bodies are registering the complex layers of inchoate meanings brimming from the intersubjective field. Our bodies are the site of interaction between the verbal and imagistic. The body acts as radar picking up the implicit level. We can recognize the entrance of this level onto the psychoanalytic scene by the palpable nature of what is being said. We are “touched” by what is happening. Therapists know that their patients are “in touch” with the implicit when their words have this bodily, palpable feeling. In his 1992 paper, “The Primacy of the Body,” Gendlin speaks of the body as “environmental information.” “Let us try to think of a living body,” he says, “in such a way that it could be information and novelty.” We psychoanalysts have learned the uselessness of disembodied discourse whether it is in our therapy sessions or in our theorizing. There has been a great deal of recent attention to “body knowing” or the bodily nature of experience (Sucharov). Gendlin’s philosophy is an experience near examination of using this body information.

#### **4. “Lifting Out” and “Carrying Forward”**

The edge of awareness - the frontier of thinking - borders a huge reservoir of possibility. The therapist lifts out of this reservoir, relying on his own felt sense, the thoughts, feelings, images and metaphors that he feels might have the potential to carry the patient's experience further. In Gendlin's view, therapist responses “carry forward” when they “point” at just exactly the felt sense the patient is trying to communicate verbally and nonverbally. Gendlin (1996) says, “Every bit of human experience has a further possible movement implicit in it”(p13). The effort to respond in such a way as to direct therapeutic attention to this point of emergence, both carries forward the formulating process, and also enables the patient to feel deeply understood. It is our primary way of facilitating selfobject experience.

#### **5. Checking against the felt sense -“ it talks back”**

Gendlin's work started, as we have previously noted, with his remarkable observation that the “more” at the edge of experience can be checked against. Clinically it is the key to our ability to work with the felt sense. After I have made an interpretation, or added my own thoughts or feelings to the therapeutic interaction, I watch carefully for my patient's reaction on both the symbolic level and the subsymbolic level. I want to know, as exactly as I can, what my input did, not only on the explicit level, but on the implicit level as well. This checking not only keeps on track, opens the way for further articulation, but it is also an integral part of developing a new relatedness.

#### **6. Marking the moments of affective recognition or “Shift”**

When the felt sense has been opened, ushered in by images and fresh metaphoric language, new emergent experience usually unfolds in subtle little steps of forward movement at times leading up to a more pronounced “aha” or “hitting the nail on the head” experience. Each step has a sense of “give” or release in it. It is marked by a sigh, or a smile, or tears, or simply a sense of completion or rightness. Gendlin calls this palpable experience of clicking in,

a “felt shift.” Often these shifts are hard to come by, preceded by false starts and wrong turns. Sometimes they must be arduously coaxed and awaited for long periods of time. Like new births, these shifts need to be welcomed, recognized, named and nurtured. Bucci (2001) refers to these steps of growth as the completion of a “circle of emotional communication.”(P.63)

## **INTERACTION FIRST - THE “NEW US”**

Gendlin’s concept of “interaction first” in its larger philosophical meaning speaks to the nature of living as inherently interactive. Individuality is emergent - a process rather than an entity. This thinking is close to intersubjective field theory, affirming that life is always co-discovered. As Gendlin (1966) puts it: “Being in and being with (situations, the world) are not mere traits of humans. They are what it is to be human. They are human” being”(p. 15). More specifically, “Words, acts, other people’s reactions, all ‘carry forward’ the experiencing process, and that is what humans are: sentient, interactive organisms.” In psychoanalytic language, we are not isolated minds, but the river of human intersubjectivity. Psychotherapy is then a new “inter-being,” a new relatedness, a new living, a “new us.”

The ongoing question for theorists and clinicians is “how do we cultivate the kind of cohesive, generative and resilient “new us” that is transformative?” Daniel Stern (2004) talks about what he calls “the moving along process” to delineate aspects of the development of the “new us.” Moving along is driven forward by the need to be known and to make intersubjective contact (p.151). “Moments of meeting,” experience with another that is “personally undergone,” “actually lived through,” creates a “shared feeling voyage (p.172). As Lyons-Ruth (1999) puts it:

Moments of reorganization must involve a new kind of intersubjective meeting that occurs in a new opening in the interpersonal space allowing both participants to become agents toward one another in a new way.” (P611.)

Most writings about the implicit share in common an emphasis on the immediacy and directness of relating.



## IT IS THE *DOING* IN THE SAYING THAT IS MUTATIVE

In the current psychoanalytic literature about working with the implicit, there is much debate about the role of explication. Daniel Stern protests;

“Psychoanalysis is so focused on the verbally reconstructed aspect of experience that the phenomenal gets lost. Everything in treatment is after the fact. It is as if intellectual and linguistic functions operate on what might happen or what did happen, but never on what is happening. (Stern, 04 p140) He goes on to say; “we now see therapy, even psychoanalysis, as greatly based on action in the implicit domain, even when we are just speaking and listening (p146)

We would all agree that when therapy is *merely* on the level of *verbal constructions* not much of value is happening. Yet as Stern points out, talking is a primary way that humans *act* in relation to each other (and to ourselves, for that matter.) What is therapeutic is not primarily the content of what we are saying, but the action - the *doing* in our saying.

Therapy is not then a talking about, but a living out, or living further. It is the creation of new relational experience infused with new possibilities - new expectations of self and other. Gendlin uses the example of a client complaining; “Nobody understands me. Nobody listens to me!” If the therapist says, “But don’t I listen to you and understand you?” then the therapy experience becomes a reiteration of the client’s negative view, because the client has just said that “*nobody understands.*” If, on the other hand, the therapist responds with something like: “There’s no understanding or real listening, not even here with me,” then the actual interaction holds some new experience.

Jill came to see me after months of anguished rage and confusion. She told me that she had finally walked out on her therapist after years of ongoing battles resulting from her therapist’s insistent confrontations which inevitably degenerated into no win power struggles. Jill felt she was “fighting for her life.” She finally left when her therapist threatened to report her to the authorities if she didn’t immunize her baby. I listened to all the details of this tortured relationship, reflecting on the feeling level of her story. I felt her struggle to reach out again in the face of her despair, shame and rage. At the end of the session I said, “I am touched by your courage to take the risk to come here - to tell me, another *therapist* about all of this.” To my surprise she said with a downcast glance, “I’m sorry, I don’t think I can work with

you.” “How is that?” I asked, feeling a sort of complex mush. I had no clear thoughts, but a scramble of something like, “Would this valiant effort to trust again end here? Why?” She said with a tentative slightly challenging smile: “You are too nice - I can’t trust you.” I felt a sort of “clicking in.” Like the instant nonlinear processing talked about in the popular book “Blink.” I *felt* the knot she and we were in. I *felt* something about what she was implicitly asking for. I suddenly felt clear although I couldn’t have said exactly what I was clear about. “Maybe I am making it even worse,” I said with a smile, “but I must say, I am amazed that you can tell me this in our very first meeting.” Her face brightened and she laughed, “ You are a good foil. I guess you will give me a run for my money. I’ll see you next week.”

This interaction was an improvisation, which afforded no time for reflection. Our dialogue was action. What were we enacting? What was my saying doing? In retrospect the clarity I felt when she said I was too nice included my understanding of her need to push up against the other. Yet this was not what I was thinking. I *felt* that we were up against a dilemma that required a light touch, and that we were well matched. I sensed an invitation to play. My response communicated this recognition, and my welcoming the challenge. It could have been that my response might have exacerbated the situation since I was again doing what she said was unworkable for her - “being nice.” Then the doing would have been provoking greater alienation.

As it turned out, this brief exchange offered Jill and I the opportunity to initiate a new kind of relating - one in which the needed challenge could be also respectful of the new tendrils of life that were struggling to break ground. If I had responded to Jill’s “You are too nice” with an interpretation such as “it seems like you have trouble tolerating people being nice to you.” or “Perhaps you are pushing me into another battle ground?” The *saying* would have been insight oriented, but the *doing* would have fallen into the same power play as with her previous therapist.

## CONCLUSION

Psychoanalytic theory and practice is concerned, more than ever, with the question of how new experience is facilitated. How does therapeutic contact for one or two hours a week

have the power to transform life experience? What is the nature of the generativity and creativity harnessed by this unique kind of relatedness? The study of the implicit informs these questions on both the macro and micro levels.

Taking the large view we note that a century ago, Freud's concept of the unconscious opened the way to an entirely new understanding of what being human is, with its vast mysterious dimensions of subterranean motivations. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as we struggle with the challenges of postmodernism, the gathering explorations of the domain of implicit experiencing leads us into an entirely new way of thinking about humanness and the transforming power of clinical work. The implicit dimension with its "there and not there" or "differently there" qualities, transcends the bifurcation of inner and outer, self and other, subjective and objective. It gives us new, less reified metaphors - a different path of thinking. Gendlin's ideas about the implicit take on the complex philosophical problems and challenges of finding new kinds of concepts (ones that transcend these divisions) to explore the nature and workings of the process of emergence of new experience. With this approach, the psychoanalytic debate about the emphasis on interpretation and insight, versus the primacy of relationship, melts into new questions about how the implicit and explicit best work together. The concept of empathy understood as sensing into the implicit rather than putting oneself in the other's shoes, offers a non-linear, process oriented expansion of Kohut's central contribution.

On the close up clinical level our growing understandings of the link between the symbolic and the subsymbolic levels generate new questions, fresh approaches and expanded guidelines for therapeutic interaction. Gendlin's "felt sense" concept takes us into the specificity and minute detail of the therapeutic project of midwiving the emergent and of facilitating new experience. Gendlin's explication sheds new light on the micro moments of our project of articulating, unfolding and transforming experiential worlds.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aron, L. (2000). "Self Reflexivity and the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis." In *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. (2000). Vol. 17: pp.667 – 689.
- Beebe, B., Knoblauch, S., Rustin, J. and Sorter, D. (2005). *Forms of Intersubjectivity in Infant Research and Adult Treatment*. New York: Other Press.
- Beebe, B. and Lachman, F. (2002). *Infant Research and Adult Treatment: Co-Constructing Interactions*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Bucci, W. (2001). Pathways of Emotional Communication. In Lichtenberg, M.D (Ed.), *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, Vol 21 (1): 41-70. Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Burtman, R. (2005) *The Resurrection of Hope Through Implicit Knowing in an Analysis*.  
Presented for the Annual Conference for of International Association for the Psychology of the Self. Baltimore, Md.
- Gendlin, E.T. (1996). *Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Gendlin, E. T. (2004). *Beyond Postmodernism: From Concepts Through Experiencing*. Chapter 4, 100- 115.
- Gendlin, E.T. (1997). *Experiencing and the Creating of Meaning*, Preface to the Paper Edition.
- Gendlin, E.T. (1979). *Gefindlichkeit: [1] Heidegger and the Philosophy of Psychology*. In *Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry: Heidegger and Psychology*. Vol. XVI, Nos. 1,2 & 3, 1978-79.
- Gendlin, E.T. (1966). "Existentialism and Experiential Psychotherapy," In *Existential Child Therapy*. Moustakes, C. (Ed.), Basic Books.
- Gendlin, E.T.(1968). "The Experiential Response." In *Use of Interpretation in Treatment*. Grune & Stratton.
- Gotthold, J. J. (2006). Moments of Meeting: An Exploration of the Implicit Dimensions of Empathic Immersion in Adult and Child Treatment. In Coburn, William (Ed.), *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*. (2006). Vol. 1: 47-78.
- Knoblauch, S. H. (2005). "Body Rhythms and the Unconscious, In Altman, Neil and Davies, Jodi Messler (Eds.), *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: A Journal of Relational Perspectives*. (2005). Vol. 15 (6): 807-827. Hillsdale NH: The Analytic Press
- Lyons-Ruth, K. (1998). "Implicit Relational Knowing: Its Role in Development and Psychoanalytic Treatment." In *Infant Mental Health Journal*. (1998), Vol.

19(3): 282-289.

Lyons-Ruth, K.(1999). "The Two-Person Unconscious: Intersubjective Dialogue, Enactive Relational Representation, and the Emergence of New Forms of Relational Organization." In *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*. (1999). Vol. 19: 576-617. Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press.

Orange, D.M. (1995). *Emotional Understanding: Studies in Psychoanalyst Epistemology*. Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press.

Preston, L. & Shumsky, E. (2004). "Who tore the web? - Thoughts on psychoanalytic authority and responsiveness," in Coburn, W. (Ed.), *Progress in Self Psychology*, Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press, p.189 - 208.

Preston, L. and Shumsky, E. (2000). "From an empathic stance to an empathic dance: empathy as a bi-directional negotiation," in A. Goldberg (ed.), *Progress in Self Psychology*, Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press, pp. 47 - 61.

Preston, L. and Shumsky, E. (1998). "The development of the dyad: A bi-directional revisioning of some self psychological concepts," in A. Goldberg (ed.), *Progress in Self Psychology*, Hillsdale NJ, The Analytic Press. Pp. 67 - 84.

Preston, L. (1996). "Expressive relating: The intentional use of the analyst's subjectivity. In Goldberg, (ed.), *Progress in Self Psychology*, Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press, pp. 203 - 218.

Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self*, W.W.Norton & Co.

Stern, Daniel. (2004). *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Stern, Donnel. (1997). *Unformulated Experience- From Dissociation to Imagination in Psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press.

Stern, Donnel. (2004). APSP Presentation. New York City.

Stolorow, R., Atwood, G., Orange, D. (2003), *Worlds of Experience*.

Sucharov, M. S. (2002). "Representation and the Intrapsychic Cartesian Barriers to Empathic Contact. In *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*." Vol 22. (5): 686-707. Hillsdale: The Analytic Press.

Teicholz, J. G. (2006). "Qualities of Engagement and the Analyst's Theory." In Coburn, W. (Ed.), *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*. (2006). Vol. 1: 47-78.

Teicholz, J. G. (1999). *Kohut, Loewald, and the Postmoderns*. Hillsdale NJ: The Analytic Press.