

IMPROVISATION PROVIDES A WINDOW INTO IMPLICIT PROCESSES: THOUGHTS ON PHILIP RINGSTROM'S WORK - IN DIALOGUE WITH EUGENE GENDLIN

This presentation includes my take on Philip Ringstrom's ideas about improvisation, and a loosely constructed dialogue with philosopher Eugene Gendlin about his unpublished paper "Improvisation Provides" (excerpts from Gendlin's paper will be given out to participants attending the workshop and are included here as an appendix.) This paper seeks to embody something of the freshness of the live conversation between Gendlin and myself and between philosophy and clinical practice.

Introduction

In recent years the psychoanalytic conversation has been brimming with new meanings, models, and metaphors. It is as if our new paradigm sensibility, which challenges us to speak and write with a less reified and more multidimensional consciousness has spawned a growing body of images, ideas and models. Along with multiple perspectives on implicit experience, and references to chaos and complexity theory, an interest in improvisation is part of this contemporary movement. The influx of these innovations is, I believe, a creative effort to conceptualize human interaction with non-linear, non-dualistic and non-reified constructs.

The improvisational arts - theatre, music, dance and writing – offer new, grounding, experience-near images which can help us wrap our minds around the complexities of non-linear systems thinking. We see in our mind's eye actors playing off of each other in impromptu scenes. We can recall the sounds of a group of jazz musicians jamming. We know how at special moments we ourselves have spontaneously said something better than we could have if we had crafted it with years of effort. We think of the moments in a session when, without conscious consideration, we say or do something surprising that just fits, although it would not ordinarily have occurred to us. How do we understand these occurrences? What enables this unplanned, unthought out - rightness? What can we learn about the workings of "emergence" from these ordinary yet extra-ordinary events?

When I discovered Philip Ringstrom's work on improvisation, I was not only excited by its vitality, vibrancy and clinical usefulness, I was also attracted to its theoretical possibilities. It adds yet another dimension to explorations of implicit experience in which I have been immersed for several years.

(See my paper, “The Edge of Awareness; Gendlin’s contribution to Explorations of the Implicit” in press.) I have been fascinated with the accumulating cross fertilization of approaches to explorations of the implicit as they broaden our conceptions of consciousness and of the psychoanalytic project. I have been particularly interested in how Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit informs and elaborates these explorations. The experience of improvisation highlights moments when self reflection is not overtly guiding our self expression; it puts us directly in contact with the vast resources of implicit knowing. As Ringstrom puts it:

“While the *dramatis personae* of analyst and analysand initially often assume the stage through an *explicit* investigation, that is an inquiry initiated in the verbal, symbolic realm, both soon discover within their characters the whole realm of the implicit, that is, the unsymbolized, pre-reflective, non-verbally encoded aspects of their characters as they manifest in the co-transferences (Orange, 1995). In fact, in scene work, there is no dichotomy between exploratory/interpretive work and implicit relational experience, since the two are tightly interwoven. It is implicit that we explore, and make explicit either through words or actions *who* we are, *what* we’re doing, *where* and *when* we are doing it and *why*. In short, the domain of exploration quickly becomes the field of enactment. (Ringstrom 2007 p.12)

1. It is a cold afternoon in New York City. I am off to see Eugene Gendlin. He is looking well after his recent illness, I am eager to continue our dialogue about philosophy and psychotherapy and pursue my project of bringing his “philosophy of the implicit” into the psychoanalytic conversation. I begin by chatting with him about my current interest in improvisation as it adds to our thinking about implicit experience. I talk excitedly about Philip Ringstrom’s take on improvisation and tell him that from my point of view, Ringstrom is one of the new needed voices emerging out of the cross fertilization of this time. (He has the perspective of a second generation intersubjectivist who can artfully integrate the sensibilities of relational self psychologists with the Mitchell, capital R Relational groups.) This integration allows for a new theoretical improvisation. I can tell that Gendlin is savoring the possibilities for dialogue here.

I am surprised and delighted when he hands me his unpublished paper “Improvisation Provides.” I have taught Gendlin’s work for many years, and pride myself on thinking I *know about* all his theory. But he is full of surprises and here is another one. He has written about just the topic I chose to warm up this cold afternoon.

2. My talk with Gendlin begins with a spirited summary of Ringstrom’s ideas.

I tell Gendlin that for Ringstrom, the guidelines of improvisational theater provide a new relational ethic for psychoanalysis. The primary rule of thumb in such an ethic is the cultivation of a “yes and” response that carries the interaction forward rather than a “yes but” sort of response that closes down the engagement. “An improvisational scene,” he tells us, “results from one party setting something in motion while the other takes what is given and moves it one step further. It “plays off of and with patterns emergent in both parties. In so doing, it teases out and plays with patterns that are linear and non-linear, verbal and non-verbal, actively allowing contexts of experiencing to influence their development” (2005 p.8) He argues that this kind of ethic cultivates the sense of safety that is crucial to play, and is able to create “a warm bath of curiosity” (2005 p.4) so central to an alive analysis. . He describes his own psychoanalytic experience with John Lindon as; “living in the realm of the improvisational instead of the realm of the scripted” (2006 p.85) a freedom culminating in “a kind of symmetry of engagement while still grasping an asymmetry of purpose.” (2006 p.84)

I tell Gene Gendlin that beside the theoretical framework it provides, what sparks my interest in the model of improvisation is its ability to foster in us the sense of freedom and trust in implicit processes that it describes. It offers guidelines to help us to rely on our *inner* listening, and deep connectedness rather than on *being careful*. All our skill and theory is there - in the “implicit relational knowing” we bring to the improvisational interaction.

Gendlin leans forward. “For me the important thing about improvisation is that it shows us how the implicit is always bigger. What we say from that place can be better, more precise. When we speak or act from there, we feel more truly ourselves. It shows that we are always living in that implicit, already interacting way.” I begin to grasp that Gendlin isn’t interested in improvisation for its own sake or even for its clinical applications, but for what it demonstrates about implicit processes and how these processes relate to the experience of “true self.”

I show Gendlin Ringstrom’s description of what he calls “essential self moments” or “moments of truth.” He is writing about his own analysis with John Lindon.

“They are more like implicit ‘moments of truth’ that remain unknown until I experience them with you.” “For this to happen,” I say, “I am learning that I have to ‘lean into the experience’ as opposed to ‘leaning away’ from it.” For instance, in leaning away, one tries to avoid, or, even worse, attempts to control, emergent experiences. In so doing, one is vulnerable to devolving into a state of anxiety. If one “leans into one’s experience,” no matter how frightening, the specter of dread rapidly resolves. This, I underscore, is what consistently happens when I lean into our analysis... “There is a deep sense of

relaxation and relief that I experience following leaning into the anxiety of the unknown.” “Indeed... “If I experience you leaning away, I will be all alone.” (2006 p. 88)

Gendlin embraces the evocative new term “leaning into.” We talk about this “leaning into” the unknown as a willingness to go to what Gendlin calls “the edge of awareness” and allow one’s deeper “implicit self” to emerge unchecked by preconceptions. Ringstrom talks about the feeling of anxiety he must endure before he leans into the “essential self moment.” Gendlin notes that we are often uncomfortable in these moments because “More of you is showing than you can see and this can bring a sense of exposure.” We are in these moments coming from this “more” – more than concepts or culture or language etc. Ringstrom describes “a deep sense of relaxation and relief that he senses following leaning into the anxiety of the unknown. He says that these moments capture something about “knowing when you’ve gotten it right; that is, when what you are saying corresponds to a deep sense of connection to yourself and perhaps to another...” I recognize this experience of “Knowing that you have gotten it right.”! There is a *ring of truth* in these moments - a special kind of knowing that entails a permeability between implicit and explicit. It emerges out of a fresh state of a kind of intriguing *confusion*, as if one can sense the quality of an iceberg, or perhaps a large living sea creature, just beneath the surface of what one is trying to say. It often comes with fresh language, images and metaphors. It is marked by a sense of opening, give, and movement.

This kind of knowing runs through Gendlin’s work. He comments, “We know its rightness when it *carries forward* and when something carries forward one can always recognize that it does. People often ask me how I know the difference between the thoughts that carry forward and those that don’t. A bodily shift distinguishes these moments. When this carrying forward experience visibly happens to these people (who are asking), I say ‘there – there it is! I comment that when the therapist is sensitized to this shift of consciousness she is able to pick up on some of its telltale signs – and help to bring it over the horizon line of consciousness.

The relief that Ringstrom describes feeling following leaning into the anxiety of the unknown is akin to the sense of “give” or “release” that Gendlin talks about as an indication that the implicit intricacy of one’s experience has been recognized and received. Ringstrom says that he needs John, his analyst, to also lean into his experience, and if he doesn’t then he will be all alone.

3. Gendlin comments that our sense of the other informs the experience from before the session ever begins. A basic principle of his philosophy is what he calls “interaction first,” by which he means that

our experience comes out of interaction on every level of existence starting from the cellular level. Somewhat like intersubjective systems theory, Gendlin holds that there is no "inner" experience separate from the context in which it arises. For Gendlin, "The implicit living is always already interactional, and only within it can one distinguish one's own experience from that of the other person's." "Being is always 'interbeing'" I remark. Gendlin says, "In this view the implicit does not consist of discreet factors. It is a texture in which all factors have already affected all the others. From out of this we form discreet entities." I bring in the example of the popular book *Blink*, in which Malcolm Gladwell explores the amazing efficacy of instant 'intuitive' decisions and assessments such as the policeman instantly assessing the danger of a situation or the art dealer, contrary to evidence 'sniffing' out a fraud.

Within these "hunches", many factors are instantly considered together. These factors are already co-mingling and affecting each other on a sub-symbolic level. This is what Gendlin calls *interaffecting*. On this implicit level, however, these multiple considerations are one alive texture. We live from this texture and the strands of this implicit knowing are only separated into entities as we explicate them. "Improvisation is our living directly from this implicit texture," Gendlin remarks. "This explains the 'intuitions' of the people Gladwell studied."

4. Although Ringstrom tells us that John Lindon's responses were often, on the surface, within a somewhat conventional frame. (It seems that Phil was lying on the couch unfolding his experience in a reflective manner while his analyst listened attentively.) Yet Ringstrom calls his analytic experience with John, "living in the realm of the improvisation, not the realm of the scripted." How is this Improvisational? "It was improvisational in its manner, not necessarily in its form. It was improvisational in its *leaning into* the next moment of emergence," Gendlin remarks.

In his paper, Gendlin introduces the term "coming freshly from underneath." He leads us into this concept by first describing the kind of experience that we associate with improvisation.

"...art involves a fresh formation of new sounds, images rhythms, movements and actions, exciting new sensations – we are surprised- we say 'ah'..."

Then he takes us a step further.

"But what about performing a script or a score? That too is art, surely. Yet the sounds and visions are not new -- or are they? Certainly they are! We see that plays and scores are opportunities for -- fresh improvisation. When a score is provided, it is still the new improvisation that counts.

We don't go to see Hamlet just to have the play we have already heard and seen repeated. Rather, we hope that the play will livingly emerge. That will be quite new. Crease calls a successful performance "a phenomenon that appears." In acting a written script or in playing a score, it is the fresh formation which counts performance just runs on without bringing a unique new life to the score. . Will this production of Hamlet be a phenomenon?

He comes to his conclusion:

"So we see still another level of improvisation. The live coming from underneath is a separate variable, whether or not it creates a novel product just then. To be sure, new products and new ways of performing them do come from underneath. But then they can become repeatable and decided ways of performing. Then there is again the question: "Tonight, will it come from underneath?"

5. Gendlin proceeds to his next point. Improvisation is bodily, he asserts. "We cannot deliberately construct or will it. It belongs to the family of bodily comings like: sleep, appetite, orgasm, tears, love, anger, dreams, imagery, laughter, funny remarks, as well as the words for what we want to say, and the coming of new phrases and new steps in creating a work of art." He says that emergence is always bodily despite the fact that only some of those on the list would usually be considered bodily. In saying this, the word "body" expands its usual meaning. "It is not only the one sitting in the chair, but also how one senses this body from inside, its sentient, wanting, demanding, prefiguring what I want to say and-after a moment-giving rise to the phrases to say it. It is the body which lets the next step of speech, action, or art formation come."

Furthermore this bodily sense of leaning into what *wants to come* is a forward *movement*. Good art and good psychotherapy is going somewhere – it is a development, an unfolding. We can feel the momentum in good psychotherapy sessions. The articulation of each emergent thought that comes from implicit knowing is a step of development.

6. Gendlin asks me for a recent example. First I think of my seminar that morning in which we are reading Ringstrom's papers. One of the therapists in my group asks if the interaction she just had with her patient was an improvisational moment. Her patient is very anxious about driving to a new place in

N.J. She is ashamed of being such a “baby” about it. The therapist, also a nervous driver, wants to shift the static self critical, repetitive tone of the session. The patient says: “Everybody does these things with equanimity, except for me.” The therapist spontaneously puts her arms out with a big smile indicating all the people and says, “Yes, but where are all these people?” The patient brightening points to her chair saying, “Well they don’t sit in places like this.” The therapist laughs and points to her chair retorting, “Well, they aren’t sitting here.” The session proceeds in a lighter more flowing way.

Gendlin comments that we have known for years that people need to know they are not the only ones that have some human reaction. “What is improvisational here?” he asks. (Gendlin doesn’t seem to notice that this is an instance of *his* coming from underneath) I reply that I think that what makes it improvisational is not the content, but the sense of freedom and spontaneity that the therapist introduces and invites. It is the *coming from underneath* and the *leaning into* that makes the playful quality with which she says “Yes” and with a big smile and hand movement “But where are all these people?” This slightly unexpected quip changes the tone of the session and allows the patient to be more creative and playful when she points to her chair and says “Well they don’t sit in places like this either.” Then the therapist continues the game in saying, “Well, they aren’t sitting here either.” Now Gendlin and I agree that rather than the content, it is a new living that the therapist introduces when she says: “Yes but, where are all these people?” We notice here that when the interaction is stuck it is often necessary for the therapist to “go first” in setting a tone of improvisation which brings the qualities of freedom and surprise that are characteristic of these moments. Improvisation requires a softening of the membrane between implicit and explicit modes. It produces a shifting of gears into what Donnel Stern calls *courting surprise*.

7. I introduce a vignette from a consultation I did the night before.

Ann had been referred to me by someone who thinks highly of my work. In our phone conversation, she seemed eager to see me. She was right on time for our consultation. She came in the door with an intense heavy expression and sat down on the couch with a thud. She stared at me fiercely and said, “My life is an utter failure. All my life I have been searching for some guidance for my soul and I’ve never gotten this simple thing. ” Her voice rose to a shrill peak as she pointed her finger at me and pronounced, “The people in your profession have never given me what I needed. I’ve gone to psychics and healers, intuitives and astrologers as well as regular psychotherapists like you!

L: What kind of guidance has your soul needed? Tell me about your soul. (I inquire tentatively)

A: I can tell by the way that you say the word “soul” that you are not comfortable with it. What kinds of metaphysical schemas have you studied anyway? Do you even know the work of Carl Jung? I can tell I’m wasting my time here with you. You are like all the rest.

L: I’m quite comfortable with “soul.” (I protest uncomfortably.) I’m always looking for the soul of the matter and I can’t stand “soulless” psychotherapy.

A: (She continues right on.) For years I’ve been pouring myself out and POURING MYSELF OUT AND POURING MYSELF OUT and I’ve gotten nothing back. I’m dry. I don’t know why I came here.

We stare tensely at each other for a while. We’re at a stalemate. I am thinking “What have I gotten myself into here? How many minutes do I have left of this consultation? Well, I might as well dive into this icy water.” Vaguely remembering Ringstrom’s paper, which I had read the night before, I let go of my preconceptions of the interview and say:

L: Ann, we don’t seem to know where to go from here. Would you be willing to try something with me? How about giving me ten minutes – pouring me one ten minute cup of soul and seeing what happens here and now.

A: (She looks up surprised and taken aback). Ten minutes, she blurts out angrily. Where would I possibly start? There is so much. I’ve had many lifetimes of misery and struggle and you want me to tell you something in ten minutes?

L: YES, I DO! It’s like a many volume odyssey (as I make a hand motion indicating all of the volumes lined up before us.) This soul has been struggling through all of these lives and I want you to let me see what it is up against right now in this volume, this chapter, this paragraph. What are the themes at this moment for the soul?

A: The themes have been struggle, frustration, alienation, isolation and loss.

L: And just now?

A: (She looks down, as if sensing something inside herself, pauses, her voice getting quieter.) I don’t know...well now... maybe something is ready for change but it can’t happen. I feel some life force wanting to come through somehow, but of course, it is too late. I’ve lived in a world of abundance that I could never take part in, and now maybe something *could* change and the world is closing down. There is nothing left for me.

L: The world is closing down? (I say with incredulity)

A: (Shrill again.) Don't you read the newspapers? Don't you know what is happening out there? (She begins to recite all the portending calamities.) This is objective reality!

L: (I interrupt). Yes, yes I see. Just as the soul is ready to take flight, the world is closing down and it will never get a chance? Instead of being welcomed and ushered in, it's being closed out.

A: (She looks at me directly.) Yes, she says decisively, I never could take part in what the world had to offer and now it's too late.

L: The ten minutes are over and I have a very powerful picture of what your soul is facing right now in your journey. Are you willing to pour me another ten minutes? This time I would like to know what should happen. How *should* it be able to progress? What does it want?

A: Oh, she says flippantly, with a gesture of dismissal. I want a house in the country. I want to be an artist. I want friends. (She stops abruptly as I nod with recognition.) But maybe that isn't even the soul. Maybe that's the personality level. Sometimes I get them confused. (She becomes quieter.)

L: Could it be that the soul and the personality both want these things?

A: You don't understand, she says angrily. Like, take Martin Luther King, for example. On the personality level, he wanted to live a long life with his family, but his soul was committed to dying for a cause.

L: I see. So maybe the soul has different intentions than the personality?

A: I have always "known" that I'm not allowed to have goals on a personality level. As long as I can remember, I've had the deep conviction that these worldly things are not for me. Maybe I don't know what the soul needs. (She is now thoughtful and reflective.)

L: (After a few minutes, I venture.) I wonder if the intention of that "whole big thing," that "life force" you talked about is somehow blocked by your deep conviction. I can almost see an image of life energy getting stuck there somehow in the "not allowed."

A: (There is a long pause which seems pregnant rather than tense. She seems to be taking in what I said.) You know, there was one therapist that did help me many years ago. She used to say things like that.

L: What kinds of things?

A: I'm not sure, but they had the same feeling. (Looking at me shyly) Her name was also Lynn

Discussion

“The model of improvisation helped me here,” I tell Gendlin after describing this recent session. Ringstrom’s “relational ethic” encouraged me to step out of my usual more receptive, traditionally empathic mode of being which I would usually use in a first consultation. I had to let go of some preconceptions to do that. Ringstrom’s guidelines of improvisation having been freshly encoded in my implicit orientation, facilitated my sensing into the possibilities of the difficult moments when I felt battered by Ann; They helped me to experience these moments as “now moments,” (Daniel Stern) rather than tortured moments. I was able to *lean into* my improvisational self and began to rely on my spontaneous inventive way of being in order to engage her. Her powerful aria; “I have been pouring myself out and pouring myself out and POURING MYSELF OUT evoked my responding refrain Will you pour me out just a small ten minute cup of soul?”

Gendlin comments; “You seem to have so much nerve asking her for the very thing she says she doesn’t want to give. I want to have a feeling for the implicit sense that your request (to pour you a cup of soul) came out of.”

This is an intriguing challenge, to put the *felt sense* from which I was improvising into words. It is still fresh like a flavor I can still taste on my mind’s tongue. After dipping into it for a moment I tell him that looking back on it I recognize that before I could be improvisational I had to experience a state shift myself. At first I was feeling accused, constrained and constricted (I am sure she picked that up when she said I was uncomfortable with “soul ”) The shift came when I let go of my preconceptions, used my inner Ringstrom as a selfobject, and jumped into the icy water. I went from a cringy feeling to a “take charge” feeling. After this shift I could sense that *she* had come with some hope that I would receive her soul and give her something back, which was drowned in the dread that her meeting with me would be a repetition of experiences of not being seen and received. I *felt* something of her hope and dread and I sensed her wanting to be sought for underneath her protests. I *felt* her wanting me to disconfirm her fear that I was not comfortable with *soul* and with her *soul*.

Gendlin says thoughtfully, “You changed the interaction from one in which she is the one who is asking and wishing for something - someone who doesn’t get a chance. You became the one who was asking and you created exactly her chance. You converted it into one in which her inner being was carried forward by someone who wanted to hear from her soul. You were introducing and initiating a new living in that very moment, allowing some new life to come through.”

My thoughts about the interchange with Ann

A) Ann's pronouncements were threatening to imminently stop the show. My playful "Yes and" response – "would you pour me a ten minute cup of soul?" - was a way to keep something going. I - that is, my considered self - could not figure out how to carry the interaction forward so I let my *implicit self*, or *improvisational self* take over.

B) This improvisation was not impulsive, or merely "reactive." It was an attentive responding. My "playing off of" her was a kind of implicit relational coordination which when it works is an attuned response – a kind of bodily sensing into the other and the situation. Improvisation is letting go into the more that we know - more about the other and the situation than we could have time, space, or ability to think about. Like empathy, we can only know that it was true improvisation with hind sight. When it fails we don't refer to it as improvisation.

C) Although my participation was spontaneous and non-reflective, it was not "untheoretical." My theory and personal organization of experience is embedded in my spontaneity. What came from me were self psychological intentions such as the facilitation of selfobject relatedness and working with the interplay of her hopes and dread.

D) Improvisation and good psychotherapy is about touching and being touched. As therapists we need to be touched by our patients, and our patients need to touch their own implicit emergent experience and to feel touched by it (and by our being touched.) Ann was frozen solid in protest, grief and despair. She began to touch and be touched by her own experience when she was surprised by my invitation to play and reluctantly began to play a bit with me. She started to slow down and listen to herself. There was a palpable shift when she looked down as if to sense something inside herself, and told me that a "life force wanted to come through." In Gendlin's language, she was then in contact with the "felt sense" of her experience. The entrance of this level of experiencing into the dialogue changes the tenor and tone of the conversation. This shift is a palpable experience for the therapist as well as the patient – it is the touchstone that we are looking for. What emerges in these moments is always surprising and much more intricate than any of our theoretical concepts could predict or capture.

E) In order to enter a therapeutic play space with Ann I wanted my participation to be evocative, and inviting – I wanted to catch hold of the "sub symbolic" (Bucci), "unformulated" (Donnell Stern), "unthought known" (Bollas). Metaphors and imagery act as a kind of doorway into this realm. Donna Orange calls this the dialogue of metaphor which has the power to speak the unspeakable (APSP conference "Beyond Words 2007) My first metaphor a *cup of soul* was carrying her idea of *pouring herself out*, one step further. This image had mixed results perhaps because it was my way of lightening

the situation (making her accusatory lament into a kind of tea party perhaps.) Her protest about my cup of soul then suggested a many volume odyssey, an image which was more in keeping with what she was trying to communicate. She offered “the world is closing down which I questioned. Her protests led to my image of the bird prevented from taking flight.

When Ann talked about a life force wanting to come through, I had a vivid image of obstructed energy, which perhaps was communicated to me by her on a sub-symbolic level. Bucci talks about the sub symbolic communication of the patient to the analyst that is translated into an image by the therapist and which can be used by the patient as a vehicle for explicating the implicit. (Bucci, “Emotional Communication”)

A few additional thoughts

Although therapeutic moments that are like a scripted play, and those that are like an impromptu theater performance can both “come from underneath” - and therefore can be improvisational in Gendlin’s terms - these modes have different flavors and different rhythms. In moments that are like a scripted play I am carefully tracking the therapy process and sprinkling in my own thoughts and feelings like salt and pepper to bring out the flavor of the patient’s main course that we are cooking together. We might call these interactions *improvisational* with a small (i). There is usually a slower, more leisurely pace in these moments with time to reflect and consider my responses and time to consciously check them against my patient’s verbal and non verbal reactions. There is a back and forth movement between sensing into the implicit and formulating and crafting explications of it.

In moments more like impromptu theater, I am working with the immediacy of spontaneous engagement with little time for conscious reflecting. The checking of my responses against my patient’s reactions (and his against mine) is then simultaneous, and often out of my awareness – bottom up, without top down processing. My empathic attunement is expressed in the immediacy of unmediated responsiveness and not thought about until afterward. These moments we could call *Improvisational* with a capital (I). Both types of relational movement require skilled attentiveness and an alive link between implicit and explicit processing.

With “yes and” empathic attunement at its heart, Improvisation with a capital (I) offers relational self psychologists a lively, contactful, spontaneously expressive alternative to more confrontational models of intimate engagement. In the difficult moments in which we find ourselves “caught in the grip of

the field,” Improvisation suggests images and guidelines to free us from defensive reacting or becoming rote - trapped in an “empathic straight jacket.”

Summary of Gendlin’s Points.

- Improvisation as a bodily attunement to oneself and the other – a sensing into the situation and acting from one’s implicit knowing, gives us a window into the nature of implicit processes that make up our human living. These processes are always operative even when we don’t tap into them as we do in improvisation.
- The “coming from underneath,” of improvisation, shows us a deeper more naked level of ourselves that has the qualities of freshness, aliveness, and feelingfulness – We see that this expression comes from something beneath the formation of thoughts.
- When we are being improvisational, leaning into the emergent, we discover that we are a flow of living forward movement.
- Improvisation reveals that the implicit level is a source of highly ordered, highly skilled coordination. It is far from –“wild analysis” or “flying by the seat of one’s pants”
- The essence of improvisation, its “playing off of” quality, is its very structure. It demonstrates that the implicit intricacy always includes a living in relation to, and toward, - coordinated with, the other on an organismic level.

Conclusion

The art of improvisation offers glowing possibilities for psychotherapy on both the clinical and theoretical levels. It not only inspires us, but gives us a structure to engage wholeheartedly, genuinely and creatively with our patients. It encourages us to enter the realm of image, metaphor and play where implicit and explicit meet, and to learn to relate from our deep sense of the patient, ourselves and the situation. It helps us to develop the skills of coordinating our spontaneous self expressions with the sense of what is emergent in our patients and in the field we co-inhabit and co-create. Using the rules of improvisation, Ringstrom offers us a relational ethic - what he refers to as “yes and” rather than “yes but” responding. This ethic expands our concepts of empathic resonance. When we are caught in repetitious or volatile interactions it can help us to catch the spark of possibilities inherent in playful, imaginative therapeutic interplay, and invoke the ever present potential to break out of constrained patterns of relating and live them one step further.

Gendlin uses improvisation not for its clinical possibilities, but for its ability to demonstrate the nature of the implicit intricacy that we are always living from even when we are not attending to it as we do in improvisation. His philosophical framework provides us with a way of thinking about the nature of implicit experience. He deals with questions such as “Where does improvisation come from? How do we recognize that place, level, process? How do we receive it and carry it forward?” For Gendlin implicit processing is what human living *is*. What is expressed explicitly is only a small part of that. He looks at the process of emergence itself, through concepts such as “interaction first,” “coming from underneath” and “carrying forward.”

Rather than using improvisation to inform clinical practice, Gendlin looks into the experience of improvisational skilled spontaneity, finding in it instances of the “underneath” implicit living, that is always operating, even when we are not noticing it. He uses improvisation to say something like “look at this amazing, skilled complexity that we are! Look at what our actions and words come out of! Look at the movements that are inherent to human living.”

I am hoping that this paper, representing a conversation between Gendlin, myself and Ringstrom’s ideas, will generate an improvisational dialogue between the language of philosophy and that of clinical practice.