

Focusing as a Liberatory Process

How might Focusing be understood as a liberatory process that enables a sense of carrying forward even within oppressive contexts?

Can a Focusing orientation facilitate an empowered sense of self-direction that supports individuals and social change movements in organizing for our collective carrying forward?

Eugene Gendlin on Focusing

From the introduction of “Focusing” (2003 Edition):

“You have a bodily orienting sense...you can learn how to let a deeper bodily felt sense come in relation to any specific situation. Your body ‘knows’ the whole of each of your situations, vastly more aspects of it than you can think. Here you find an intricate bodily knowledge and new steps that want to come and will come, if you can wait here.”

Eugene Gendlin on Focusing

From the introduction of “Focusing” (2003 Edition):

“After you find this deeper level, it takes practice to stay here. In a difficult moment, most people cannot hold on to the body-sense of the situation long enough for steps to come. We can train you how to do this. Most people don’t know how to let the unclear felt sense ‘open’ into a whole field of intricate detail from which new steps of thought and action emerge.”

Eugene Gendlin on Focusing

From the introduction of “Focusing” (2003 Edition):

“...your body is not a machine, rather a wonderfully intricate interaction with everything around you, which is why it ‘knows’ so much just in being.”

Tentative Ideas

The body is a multi-dimensional and relational living system:

- both contained and open
- embedded within larger systems
- comprised of smaller systems

“System” as a particular domain of interaction – of inter-relationship – where this a relational process unfolding.

- “Process” as in a series of progressive actions or activities that produce something

Interaction

Inter-Are

Vicarious

Tentative Ideas

“Here you find an intricate bodily knowledge and new steps that **want** to come, and will come, if you can wait here.”

Life-forward movement
“carrying forward”

“Your body always tends in the direction of feeling better. Your body is a complex, life-maintaining system. Often, we feel so much wrong that we come to accept those bad feelings as the basic state of things. But it is not. The bad feeling is the body knowing and pushing toward what good would be. Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness...”

Tentative Ideas

“Liberatory” as in:

- helping to free from oppressive control or conditions that constrain one’s ability to be or do
- helping to free from limitations to one’s choice, ability or power

Liberatory life-forward movement as that which is characterized by a “self-directional” quality in which one is able to express some degree of a “self-directional” impulse?

- The expansiveness of “self” here could be fluid
- Related to self-empowerment - “I/we have some choice, ability or power here.”

Barbara K. Love:
“Developing a Liberatory Consciousness” (2000)

“Through the socialization process, every member of society learns the attitudes, language, behaviors, and skills that are necessary to function effectively in the existing society...No single human can be charged with the creation of the oppressive systems in operation today. All humans now living have internalized the attitudes, understandings and patterns of thought that allow them to function in and collaborate with these systems of oppression, whether they benefit from them or are placed at a disadvantage by them.”

Barbara K. Love:
“Developing a Liberatory Consciousness” (2000)

“To be effective as a liberation worker –that is, one who is committed to changing systems and institutions characterized by oppression to create greater equity and social justice—a crucial step is the development of liberatory consciousness. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected...A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live ‘outside’ the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems.”

Barbara K. Love:
“Developing a Liberatory Consciousness” (2000)

“Four elements in developing a liberatory consciousness are described here. They include awareness, analysis, acting, and accountability/ally-ship. The labeling of these four components in the development of liberatory consciousness is neither mysterious or difficult, static nor fixed, or something that some people have and others do not. It is to be continuously practiced event by event, each time we are faced with a situation in which oppression or internalized oppression is evident. These labels remind us that every human can acquire the skills to become a liberation worker.”

Barbara K. Love:
“Developing a Liberatory Consciousness” (2000)

“Awareness, the first part of the tasks, includes practicing awareness or noticing what is happening. The second part includes analyzing what is happening from a stance of awareness along with the possibilities for action. The third part of the task includes deciding on the basis of that analysis what needs to be done, and seeing to it that the action is accomplished. The fourth part may be the most troublesome part for it requires that individuals accept accountability to self and community for the consequences of the action that has been taken or not taken.”

Individuals &
Social Change Movements

Gene: “The Political Critique of Awareness” (1984)

“We live in a structural political context and it can help to sense ourselves within it...a political context enables private freeing steps beyond the usual limits.”

“People in so-called minority groups gain a lot of strength from discovering that such subjective difficulties are not their individual traits, but are systematically generated by the experiences the social structure assigns them. Recognizing this, an individual becomes stronger.

This well known strengthening comes from knowing oneself to belong to a politically oppressed group. This effect does not occur if one knows merely that others suffer similar difficulties...The strengthening comes from the political aspect—let us see how that word works, here.

‘Political’ oppression has its common origin in structural arrangements of social living, definitions of situations, conditions of work, patterns of love, roles of social and economic structure. It is not just individual fate accidentally shared. Therefore it gives one an energy.”

Gene: “The Political Critique of Awareness” (1984)

“The person's self-denigrating turns into positive energy. The person feels as one of millions who had criticized themselves individually. The shortcomings are recognized as results of political deprivation. Suddenly a shy person who has always been interrupted and has no experience in arguing can speak up. The inability to speak well is no obstacle now. The person points to it, saying, ‘See, I don't speak well, that's because of how I was trained only to listen, that's my point!’

We need to extend this political strengthening to everyone. Blacks, women, and gay people also need this strengthening as human individuals, not only as members of a ‘minority’...

Just as the women's movement opposes not men, but certain structural patterns, so I am not opposing people but structural arrangements. Everyone is trapped in those...Nor am I speaking negatively about the present society. Our greater individual capacity and intricacy developed in its relatively great openness, its literacy, wealth, production, communication, and other sophistications, as well as its history of constant evolution. The idea is not to turn against it, to stop loving it, but to sense where it is killing the life in us.

This political awareness is needed for social action, but also for private experiential process.

Gene: “The Political Critique of Awareness” (1984)

“You might find how you oppress yourself by identifying and joining old forms, for example those that say: produce, perform, don't upset those in charge, don't ask too much, make no waves, look good, be deserving...

People differ in what they have developed, and in what is now a freeing step for them...

Without a political translation there may not be enough energy to free us from hurt, anger, shame, etc. Their stuckness keeps us in the forms we consciously oppose. We see through these forms, but our bodily capacity is not enough to walk freely through them.

New forms don't just pop up, they are augmentations of old forms. They come from freely sensing the old forms and how they don't fit. Avoiding them from pain is almost like respecting them. Then we don't get past them.

...The political translation helps to bring energy, resilience, some of that new ego-strength I spoke of.”

Harriet Tubman (U.S. Abolitionist, 1820 – 1913)

“I grew up like a neglected weed—ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it. Then I was not happy or contented: every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away. I had two sisters carried away in a chain-gang, — one of them left two children. We were always uneasy. **Now I've been free, I know what a dreadful condition slavery is.**”

"With her owner's death, Araminta faced a series of perplexing questions. What would become of her mother and siblings once they all became the inheritance of the Brodess children? Would her family be sold and scattered to the four corners of the South? Where would Araminta end up? Sold away from her family? Sold away from her husband? Tubman, in her early twenties, confronted the possibility of abandoning her parents, her husband, and the Eastern Shore—the only place she had ever called home. Araminta's sisters had disappeared with a slave coffle and **she felt an intensifying need to leave before she too was swallowed up by the void.**

Years later Tubman likened her decision to an epiphany: 'I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.'"

- From "Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom" (2005) by Catherine Clinton

Viktor Frankl (Psychiatrist & Holocaust Survivor)

From “Man’s Search for Meaning” (1946):

“...my mind clung to my wife’s image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honourable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfilment.”

Viktor Frankl (Psychiatrist & Holocaust Survivor)

From “Man’s Search for Meaning” (1946):

“Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

“In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.”

Organizations

Self-Directed Learning

From "Unschooling: Raising, Curious Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom" by Kerry McDonald

“Most of the young people who attend were formally in school and it can take a long time for them to deschool and adapt to the freedom and autonomy that unschooling offers. ‘In our experience, ‘says David,’ some of our kids go through a period of time where they appear to do nothing. Sometimes they know what they want to do but are unsure how to get started. A few have really needed a lot of time and space to really decompress from school. Some need time to work through the whole idea of being free from school. Others are so focused on what they want to do and frustrated by school’s attempt to prevent them from doing it that, as soon as they have the chance to spend as much time on it as they want, they jump right in and go...as kids become more comfortable with self-directed learning, I see things change. They begin to see the value in experimentation.”

Self-Directed Learning

From "Unschooling: Raising, Curious Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom" by Kerry McDonald

“Education is an internal process within the individual. I can’t give you an education, it’s not a product. I can’t make you think. I can’t motivate you. All of those things are the result of internal connections and decisions. Knowing yourself and what you want are largely neglected in conventional structured schooling. Natural Creativity focuses on facilitating the process of learning with the product left up to each individual.”

- More and more families of color are also homeschooling and unschooling to protect their children from race-related harm and from white-washed learning experiences

The Liberatory Power of the Focusing Process

- Creates space “in-between”
- Allows for accessing a capacity for self-direction and empowerment
- Allows for fluid experiencing of an expansive sense of self
- Allows for accessing the wisdom, strength, and resilience of ancestral and collective “knowing” and experiencing
- Serves as a generative pathway for identifying possible “freeing steps”
- Allows one to access a capacity for continuous self-definition
- Supports meaning-making
- Is a capacity that can be taught, practiced, and strengthened
- Is there more?

Worker Self-Directed Organizations

From “Reinventing Organizations” (2014) by Frederic Laloux:

“The founders of Teal Organizations use a different metaphor for the workplaces they aspire to create. With surprising frequency, they talk about their organization as a living organism or living system. Life, in all its evolutionary wisdom, manages ecosystems of unfashionable beauty, every evolving toward more wholeness, complexity, and consciousness. change in nature happens everywhere, all the time, in a self-organizing urge that comes from every cell and every organism, with no need for central command and control to give orders or pull the levers.

The metaphor opens up new horizons. Imagine what organizations would be like if we stopped designing them like soulless, clunky machines. What could organizations achieve, and what would work feel like, if we treated them like living beings, if we let them be fueled by the evolutionary power of life itself?”

Worker Self-Directed Organizations

From “Holocracy” (2015) by Brian J. Robertson:

“Every organization has some potential or creative capacity it is best suited to sustainably express in the world given everything available to it...its purpose or raison d’etre, reason for being. This isn’t necessarily that purpose that we founders or leaders want for the organization, although it’s typically seeded by the founders.

In a company’s formative years, everything available to it may be little more than the founders’ passions and those will shape the purpose, at least for a while. When parents let go of their own personal dreams for their children, they create space to find out what those children were really born to do, what creative impulse is waiting to express itself through each child. In the same way, when we let go of the idea that ‘I want my company to do X’, we can find the organization’s own creative impulse, the deepest potential or creative capacity it can sustainably express in the world, given everything available to it. Said another way, what does this organization want to be in the world and what does the world need this organization to be?”

- Relies on the ability of employees to “sense tensions” from their unique vantage points that provide insight into the organization’s creative potential or evolutionary purpose