

First-Applying: An Experiential Approach to Reading Gendlin's A Process Model

By Neil Dunaetz

Because I work experientially with Gendlin's A Process Model, I often cannot clearly distinguish what is Gendlin's from what is mine.

Of course I could point to his text and say "that is his," and point to my own words and say "these are mine." But that would be a spectator's distinction (en#1) where "saying" is only what has been said, just the finished "thing" or "fact" of it, standing alone in an empty space, apart from the intricate living process which the saying is from. Because I do not approach A Process Model as en#1, it would be false for me to draw the line in that way, even if, from another perspective, it might be valid to do so.

Though inherently unfinished, Gendlin's text constitutes a unique whole in itself. As I work with A Process Model (aPM), what I have is something that in one way is like a hybrid (Gendlin's-and-mine), and in another way, it is mine. But how then do I speak from my experience with the text, and within that speaking also maintain the singular integrity of Gendlin's saying? I cannot. In my saying, Gendlin's saying functions, but not as it would itself, as its own whole. For that, one needs his text.

When you want Gendlin, go to his text. My intention here is to help you have more of Gendlin's meaning as you directly engage his words.

~ These things must be deeply felt and thought. We can be content to go slowly. ~

1. Reading A Process Model is its first-application. The reading interaction implies (needs) what the terms do. Without this reflexive action, the text can be noticeably unresponsive to our reading attempts.

This is a reversal of the way we usually think about learning something new, where first we work to understand something and then we can apply it. Here, because our reading needs the bits of living that the terms mean, we allow the terms to apply in the reading itself.

Gendlin's terms self-imply their action. That is, the terms do what they mean. What the terms do is new, so how do we get this if not as a bodily new formation, a new bit of bodily living? How do we allow the terms to function (do what they do) bodily, within the reading process itself?

When I read a particular part of the text that seems impenetrable, something in my body might change, maybe just slightly. As I read that part again it is as I now am, already with this slight change. Now reading the “same” text occurs into the changed body, perhaps making a slight further change in the body. Now maybe the text can begin a little to mean something, even if it is just vaguely felt. These slight, vague, bodily-felt differences are the emerging understanding, are the movement toward and into what the terms do (mean).

To say it more precisely, reading aPM requires entering bodily implying as it is changed by the reading interaction. Now we see why Gendlin wanted his students to read the same ten pages of Aristotle forty times. It is not repetition. Each reading brings a slight shift in bodily implying, the next reading occurs into the changed implying, making a further slight change, and so on. Allowing and noticing the subtle bodily change that reading brings is first-applying.

2. A Process Model begins itself with only itself. The process distinction “en#2” (environment reflexively identical with living process) is where and how the new model begins itself.

Gendlin, I believe, defines “en#1” (the observed environment) on page 1 in order to clarify what he is not starting with. (En#1 is derived much later, in Chapter VII, and is a human way of having, whereas en#2 applies to all living process, not just human.)

Gendlin starts by saying, “I will lay down some terms as if they came out of nowhere” [emphasis mine]. From this it should be clear that he is not simply redefining familiar terms, substituting new concepts for old, or proposing a new theory to replace an existing one. Rather, he is making something new in an as-yet-unformed place, “as if...out of nowhere.”

What we normally do in order to understand something, can, in reading aPM, become an obstacle to understanding. While we, of course, have the functional capacities of modern humans, Gendlin’s aPM begins itself in Chapter I without assuming any of that. And while we use our developed capacities and cultural knowing in order to read, it may confuse and limit if we project those into the newly developing model.

Instead, let us go with what the text gives, allowing the developing model to freshly make its own inherencies.

As we read, it helps tremendously to let Gendlin’s precise terms function (make meaning) in the environment they are struggling to newly make.

“The point is not to listen to a series of propositions, but rather to follow the movement of the showing,” Heidegger said beginning his famous lecture, “Time and Being.” This is how I work with aPM. I interact with it in its own terms. I am less interested in comparing it to other systems of thinking. Such comparisons can be meaningful as far as they go, but comparisons are not the new model, and can never be as powerful or go as far as aPM can go itself.

Experientially following (staying with) what Gendlin’s exact terms are doing is what Gendlin means. Our reading is into the implying. Again we see the difficulty: in order to make meaning we need to move ourselves forward using the very terms we are struggling to make meaning of!

3. So, yes, A Process Model is challenging to read. This seems to be true regardless of our intelligence, education, or facility with English language. Why is that?

Gendlin has said that “we have to change the inner assumptions of our basic concepts.” (Staying in Focus, January 2004). Let’s think about that. He could have said, “We have to change our basic concepts.” But he is pointing to something else, something beneath the concepts themselves, something that the concepts are of. Basic concepts such as “one,” “two,” “body,” “environment,” “inner,” “outer,” “individual,” “species,” “nature,” “the past” and “the world,” are rooted in a mesh of culturally-shared, deeply-held assumptions.

Normally we rely on this mesh of inner assumptions in order to understand each other and to locate ourselves in the world. One could even say that this mesh gives the world we know. But relying on this mesh does not work so well when we read aPM because aPM is not “of” this mesh.

With A Process Model, Gendlin manages to break free of the always-already assumptions—he makes a fresh start. The model is generating its own new basis for meaning, and that is both how and where we work with it, in the generating.

It is often the case in aPM that what Gendlin means is not like anything we already think. If we try to read aPM through (into) our culturally-shared assumptions, it is like lighting a fire underwater. We may have flashes of light (at best), but never real heat. Whatever we arrive at will lack the power of which Gendlin speaks.

4. In reading, we may see words we know, but we don’t know what they are doing here. Gendlin leverages language, making familiar words do unexpected duty. (Those who practice Thinking at the Edge will recognize the process involved here.) We experience these differences bodily, in the changes-in-implying made within the reading interaction.

You have probably noticed that Gendlin often puts words together in a funny way, making strange phrases and sentences. You may know what each of the words means separately, yet have no idea what they all mean together, the way he uses them here. In this situation, here is what I do:

As I read the first word in a strange phrase or sentence, I slow down to get a little felt sense of the meaning it comes with. I read the first word again, into or with the felt meaning that comes with it. I keep that there before me, as a whole.... Then I read the second word, and get a little felt sense of the meaning it brings. I read the second word again, into or with its felt.... When I have it, I read the first and second words and have their felt meanings in sequence, like I'm stringing popcorn. So now I have a string of two felt wholes that come with the first two words. If one or the other slips away as I hold them together, I go back and start again with the first word. When I can hold that felt string of two, then I go on to the third word and get a felt something of the meaning this word comes with, and add it to the string. Until I can hold the string of three. I continue on like that, reading the string of words and holding (having) the string of felt meanings, connected to each other, until I can hold the whole sequence.

It is important to go in the order the words are written. (Often I need to go back to some earlier place in the text to "recover" Gendlin's particular meaning of one or more of the words, and then bring that into the sequence of the phrase I'm working with.)

In my experience, this process allows us to go, with Gendlin, beyond the usual mesh of assumptions.

Rather than try to ignore the strangeness, wish it away, or translate it into something more familiar, we can use the strangeness to move with (to change with). This is still just another way of saying "first-applying."

5. While we might sometimes wish to understand and explain Gendlin in familiar terms, aPM, at its most powerful, does not become the more familiar kind of knowing or understanding, but constitutes a new whole of its own (and now our own!) making.

Much of the "understanding" I carry from one reading to the next is not factual knowing, but something bodily grasped. If you ask me, "What happens in Chapter V?" I am slow to answer. Each time I must live (make) those sequences anew in order to have their doing. Even if I have just read something and have deeply comprehended, on the following day it may not be there for me like that, in that immediate way. Again and again I need to go back to the text, back to earlier chapters, back into experiencing, to first-apply, again.

Gendlin's "concepts" are slippery like that, for me. It's like I'm standing in water, trying to catch fish with my hands. I can get the fish in my hands but when I bring it out of the water it's not there anymore, only the feeling of where it "was," and the knowing that I once had it. Each time I need to go into the water again and find it.

With each re-entering experience, I become a bit more "skilled." I know better where to look, and the feel of what I'm looking for. Specific terms and phrases in the text begin to function as handles for felt sequences I want to have again. Eventually, some of the fish stay. I become more amphibious.

The words and phrases of aPM are like reflexive handholds with which I move myself through the new sequences, in the new environment which my own movement is making. In this, you can see that for me the text is not en#1 (what the spectator sees), but each reading is an intimate engaging, an en#2 process that further develops a new en#3, for going on in. This is why, in an experiential reading, it is so difficult to separate what is Gendlin's and what is mine. As en#2, it is both.

It is only after I have a strong experiential grasp of Gendlin's terms that I am willing to refer to them as "concepts." Before that, they are for me only undulating terrain through which (with which) I move, and move again, and then again, until I recognize in my moving what the terms are saying.

(continue)

6. The basic model itself (Chapters I through IV) is like skeletal structure or scaffolding that needs our bringing something more into it in order for it to function (do what it does, make sense). This "something more" might be many things, but always living process.

For example, where Gendlin uses examples to explicate his meaning, I try to experientially be in that example. So, on page 1, where Gendlin says:

"And, 'body' is not just the lungs, but the lungs expanding. Air coming in and lungs expanding cannot be separate."

I take a moment and try to find that, experientially, in my own breathing, right now. I may alternate back and forth several times, reading the text, and feeling my breathing. But not as separate steps: when I read, it is into the implying, down and into the body that breathes. And when I am feeling my breathing, I feel for, in the feel of my breathing, what the text is saying.

Our "bringing to" or "bringing into" can be of many contents.

For example, my second reading of aPM was actually a co-reading with *The Beak of the Finch* by Jonathan Weiner (Vintage Books, 1995). *Beak* is the Pulitzer Prize-winning story of direct scientific observations of evolutionary process happening, ongoing-ly, here and now. I switched from book to book often, going back and forth.

In reading *Beak*, as I took in what the scientists had observed, it came in already an explication of aPM. And as I read aPM, I found myself going deeper and deeper into the living processes on Daphne Major, one of the Galapagos Islands.

By this process I was able to “find” in *Beak* more than what the author had written, and in aPM, both an expressive flowering of key concepts, and strong implications for going further, beyond what Gendlin has written.

Here the first-applying process has elaborated to bring more thickness of implying for the reading to occur into. In this case, the “more thickness” was also the beginning of a going further with the new model, into “species-body.”

7. The goal then, is not to understand what Gendlin is saying, as if it were the right answer for a school exam, or some truth or wisdom outside of us. Rather, let our reading generate in our own experiencing, what Gendlin is saying-from. This, I think, is what he means.

First-applying makes functional what Gendlin is saying-from.

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