

Memorial for Eugene T. Gendlin

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I agree that all patterns and distinctions can break down, but what exceeds them can be found performing many roles that go far beyond the breakdown of concepts and distinctions. (Gendlin, 1997, p. 3)

As you already might know, philosopher Gene Gendlin passed away on May 1, 2017. The impact of his far-reaching philosophy, called the philosophy of the implicit, and psychology will be measured by others. For my part, I want to convey something of the person Gene was with people; the lasting impression he left on those of us who studied with him, and the probable (and improbable) ways his life's works will carry forward.

A common practice today is to provide *context* to the works of great thinkers. We want to know them, at least a little, beyond their words found in speeches, books, and articles. At some level, we know intuitively that what such thinkers produce are just the culmination of a long, long journey and represent, at best, a refinement of influences, creativity, and intellectual traditions. You already know the end of his life story. He died with a close friend near his side at the age of 90 in Spring Hill, New York, USA. Knowing something of his beginnings is also important.

Gene, an only child, was born on December 25, 1926 in Vienna, Austria. Born to Jewish parents, Gene's early life was typical in many ways. According to Gene, his father was attentive to the needs of his family and particularly attuned to the trustworthiness of others. Gene related a particularly meaningful encounter he and his father had with another man. His father was behaving uncharacteristically toward this man; typically engaging and conversant, he seemed cautious and was careful in what he said. Later, Gene asked his father why he was so different with this fellow. His father responded by pausing, and gesturing to his stomach area, saying he didn't feel right in here about this person. Gene trusted his father, and no more was said (K. Krycka, personal communication, May, 1989).

A few years later, his father arranged for the family's transport out of Austria. It was in September, 1938, when the family left for Holland. Kristallnacht began on November 9 of that year. The family immigrated to the United States in January, 1939. Gene attended The Catholic University of America, and he completed his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1958.

Gene's father was not prescient of the coming dramatic changes to Austria and the world, and Gene would never claim foreknowledge of situations or events in his own long life. Rather, he would let others decide for themselves what led his father to leave just when he did and by implication, ask us to question what moves us to do what we do when we do. For Gene, this

territory of the interaction between our implicit understanding and the creation of meaning (personal, societal, economic, or otherwise), would occupy his entire life.

Most people who knew Gene personally would likely recall how freely giving of his time he was. I know personally how much time he would spend with a young graduate student who questioned his use of the word ‘feeling.’ Others might wince at his lack of interest in practicalities and his smoking habit. But across the spectrum, Gene was recognized foremost for his compassionate, unique way of taking any given statement that sounded solid and quickly showing how much more was in it than even it’s creators could see. He felt the same way about his own theories and philosophy. Others were always invited to say more than he did. I genuinely believe Gene intended his works to be improved upon, or to put it another way, to be exceeded one day.

Even though Gene did not earn a degree in psychology, his influence in this field might be better known and recognized than that of philosophy. He has a long list of accomplishments in psychology, psychotherapy, and psychological research. For convenience, I have summarized these below. Gene was also dedicated to having as many people as possible gain access to his insights and practices. He advocated for making focusing available at no or low cost to any one interested. He wanted to make sure anyone could get basic training in learning how to listen to one’s embodied wisdom or felt sense. To this end, in a rare agreement with publishers of his works, the International Focusing Institute houses a free, complete, electronically accessible library of Gene’s articles, including some unpublished materials (<http://www.focusing.org/gendlin>).

Gene also advocated for research to be done to test his many theories. In psychology, there are many accepted research methodologies, and Gene promoted them all. He was particularly interested in the outcomes of those who participated in focusing-oriented psychotherapy. Mary Hendricks (2001), Gene’s wife and intellectual partner, published a summary of all the research done on focusing and focusing-oriented psychotherapy. In 2016, this work was updated in the 2nd edition of the American Psychological Association’s *Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of Research and Practice* (Krycka & Ikimi, 2016).

We found that in the focusing community there is passion for research and there is plenty of writing, but there is a slowing down of scientific research. This is one development that Gene anticipated and worried over. In some areas within psychotherapy research, for instance, the traditional studies utilizing the so-called gold standard procedure (i.e., double-blind, randomized control studies) were not being done with the noted exception of researchers in Japan.

We discovered an interesting development outside of traditional research; his influence leap frogged into other domains of study. We found that while someone may not be studying Gene’s passages in the way that someone might study Husserl, Kant, or Carl Rogers, what they were doing, what they continued to do with great enthusiasm, was write where they were about topics that were generated from Gendlin’s thought. While it is important that primary research be done, I think Gene would be happy to hear his works are very much alive and generating many new ideas and forms of research.

Gene was of course, a philosopher, and like many phenomenologists, he created a new lexicon of terms that helped to describe embodied human experiencing. You are probably quite familiar with what I mean. All you have to do is read the original works of just about any philosopher – even translated ones – and you find unique terms that point to some subtle meanings, without which, the reader would be a little lost. Gene was not immune to this tendency. Even though his native language was Austrian, and he studied the German philosophers in their native tongue, he chose to work primarily in English. His favorite linguistic mechanism was to add *-ing* to usual words, imparting a sense of fluidity and action, making a typical word into a verb. He

thought that the interconnected process of thinking, sensing, and creating might be captured by insisting our language function beyond their given patterns. Each new term, often derived in some fashion from his great mentors (i.e., Aristotle, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, James, Wittgenstein, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, McKeon, and Dewey), was orienting us to how all terms and concepts are verbs; all have more in them than appears at first. This insight has the power to not only change the way we use existing terms and concepts, but how we develop new ones.

Whether we have come to his works through his philosophy, psychotherapy, focusing, or the human sciences in general, his impact is widely known and felt. Many might not be aware, but in the latter part of his life, Gene became intensely interested in helping experts in other fields ‘translate’ his philosophical model, called a process model, for their own fields of study, such as cognition, memory, and somatics. He was, or rather, is a wayfarer across many domains.

Before Gene’s passing, when his health was declining, it became a topic conversation amongst the Board of the International Focusing Institute, of which I was a member, to find ways to structure and establish a way to carry forward his work in the Academy and beyond. While adjusting to the fact that Gene would no longer be here to pass on his own unique wisdom to those interested in his contributions, many who were familiar with his philosophical and psychological works, began to publically wonder about how, or even if, Gene’s deeply challenging legacy would survive his passing. In fact, Gene was concerned that his work was not being studied any more, and that it eventually would die out all together.

In order for his works to survive, it would at least require those of us who teach in universities, like myself, to raise-up the next level of academics and scholars who will carry forward his philosophy and it’s profound relationship to psychology and psychotherapy research and practice. Carrying Gene’s work forward will require the interest of many more beyond the Academy.

A concrete step was taken to create a research center in Gene’s name: The Eugene T. Gendlin Center for Research in Experiential Philosophy and Psychology. We call it the Gendlin Center for short. I, along with Akira Ikeme (psychology, Japan), Mary Jeanne Larabee (philosophy, USA), Rob Parker (practitioner, USA), and Donata Schoeller (philosophy, Switzerland) form a committee that will chart the mission and goals of the Gendlin Center. One of the first tasks of the committee has been to establish grants, one each to support research in philosophy and psychology. The Gendlin prize will support new scholars and also to encourage those of us already engaged in his work getting to keep it alive in the Academy.

Gene was a prolific author, leaving us with a publishing record of 238 articles and monographs in total; 85 of these are related to focusing, psychology, and psychotherapy, 82 relate to philosophy, and 71 on other topics. Gene also published seven books, including his seminal work, *The Process Model*, soon to be re-published by Northwestern University Press. Speeches or publications are not the totality of who this man was, nonetheless his words are there for others to explore. As the epigram at the beginning of this tribute indicates, Gene believed that concepts and ideas always hold something more than their originator would have imagined. While it remains to be seen precisely how Gene’s legacy will be expanded upon and refined, or as he says, ‘exceeded,’ there is ample reason to be looking forward to what the next generation of scholars, activists, and therapists will produce.

Below is a summary of Gendlin’s Awards and Recognitions:

The American Psychological Association awarded Gene the following:

- The “Distinguished Professional Award in Psychology and Psychotherapy” (1970).
- The “Charlotte and Karl Bühler Award” (2000, given jointly to Gendlin and The Focusing Institute), from Division 32 of APA (the Society for Humanistic Psychology);
- The “Viktor Frankl Award of the City of Vienna for outstanding achievements in the field of meaning-oriented humanistic psychotherapy,” (2007) from the Viktor Frankl Foundation;
- The “Distinguished Theoretical and Philosophical Contributions to Psychology,” (2011) from Division 24 of APA (The Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology);
- An award for “Lifetime Achievement,” (2016) from the World Association for Person Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling;
- And a “Lifetime Achievement Award,” (2016) from the US Association for Body Psychotherapy.

References

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