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EUGENE GENDLIN, GROUND-BREAKING PSYCHOLOGIST AND PHILOSOPHER, HAS DIED AT AGE 90.
Spring Valley, New York, May 1, 2017
December 25, 1926 - May 1, 2017

Eugene T. Gendlin, the American philosopher and psychologist who developed the mind-body connection practice called "Focusing," died on May 1 at the age of 90 in Spring Valley, New York. His death was announced by the International Focusing Institute (www.focusing.org), which was founded in 1985 by Dr. Gendlin to promote the practice of Focusing and the philosophy behind it, which he called the "Philosophy of the Implicit." Focusing is an experiential, body-oriented method for generating insights and emotional healing. Gendlin's philosophy falls under the branch of philosophy called phenomenology. Significant influences on his philosophical work included Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A nearly exhaustive library of his work is maintained by the Institute in the [Gendlin Online Library](#).

GENDLIN'S WORK BRIDGED PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY, ACADEMIA AND POPULAR SELF-HELP

Eugene Gendlin's work was notable for how he bridged the fields of philosophy and psychology, as well as bridging serious academic work with popular self-help. He studied and taught philosophy at the University of Chicago, one of the world's top academic institutions. While engaged in the study of

philosophy, he became a student and colleague of one of the great minds in psychology, Dr. Carl Rogers, who was revolutionizing the study of psychotherapy at the University of Chicago.

Gendlin's extraordinary intellectual gifts were matched by his extraordinary compassion for people. When he saw that the research he was conducting at the university could have profound meaning for the ordinary person, he wrote [Focusing](#) as a popular self-help book so that his discovery would not languish in academic circles. Perhaps his experience as a Jew escaping the Nazi occupation of Austria explains some piece of this great compassion. He recounted his family's escape from the Nazis in an interview with Lore Korbei decades years after his escape. That interview is found at https://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2181.html.

ACADEMIC HONORS

[Gendlin](#) has been honored by the [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) four times. , and was the first recipient of the APA's Distinguished Professional Psychologist of the Year award. He was awarded the [Viktor Frankl prize](#) by the Viktor Frankl Family Foundation in 2008. In 2016 he was honored with a lifetime achievement award from the [World Association for Person Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling](#) and a lifetime achievement award from the [United States Association for Body Psychotherapy](#).

Gendlin was a founder and longtime editor of the journal *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* as well as the in-house journal of the Focusing Institute called the [Folio](#), and is the author of a number of books, including [Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method](#). The mass-market edition of his popular classic [Focusing](#) has been translated into 17 languages and sold more than a half million copies.

EARLY STUDIES IN PSYCHOLOGY

He studied under [Carl Rogers](#), the founder of client-centered therapy, during the 1950s, receiving a PhD in philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1958. Gendlin's theories impacted Rogers' own beliefs and played a role in Rogers' view of psychotherapy. (See <http://www.focusing.org/multimedia/carl-rogers.asp>) Under Rogers' guidance at the University of Chicago, Gendlin developed one of the first [outcomes studies](#) on psychotherapy.

In 1958, two psychologists at the University of Chicago Counseling Center (Kirtner and Cartwright) described how various clients presented their problems in the first therapy session. Based on these descriptions, they divided the clients into five types. They found that their typology predicted both the length of therapy, and whether therapy would be successful (Kirtner & Cartwright, 1958). For example, in a sample of 24 clients, they found that therapy was successful for every client in the first two of their five categories, and therapy was unsuccessful for every client in the last two of their five categories. They found, in other words, that specific client behaviors at the beginning of therapy predict outcome at the end of therapy.

This study raised many important questions; for example, whether failure-prone clients should continue therapy after the first session, or whether they needed some special intervention to help them succeed in therapy. The importance of client behavior in therapy, and the questions it raised, were largely ignored until Gendlin and colleagues rediscovered them through a separate line of research.

EARLY STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

In the mid-1950s, Gendlin was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Chicago studying the relationship between concepts and implicit understanding (which he then called preconceptual feelings).

The philosophy that Gendlin was already formulating suggested that consciousness is a continuous process of conceptualizing implicit understanding. The word “dog,” for example, implicitly refers to (includes, carries with it) many experiences with a certain kind of animal; otherwise the word wouldn't mean anything. In a sentence like, “the dog chased the ball,” each word implicitly includes or refers to unsymbolized experience, so that we know implicitly what each word means, and thus what the sentence means.

We can think explicitly about any word in the sentence, but only if we stop thinking about the meaning of the sentence and start thinking about the meaning of the particular word; and in that case, our explicit definition of the word still depends on implicit understanding. In the sentence above, we can explicitly define the word “dog” (“a dog is a mammal often kept as a house pet”), but the words in our definition refer to other unsymbolized experience. Any one meaning can be made explicit, but only by reference to other implicit experience.

In the same way, when we think about a problem, we start with an explicit formulation that refers implicitly to a great deal of unsymbolized experience. We experience what is unsymbolized as a “feel” about the problem or situation; and guided by this “feel” we symbolize (make explicit or explicate) this unsymbolized context, until we have a solution.

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Unlike some philosophers, Gendlin wasn't content just to think about this relationship; he wanted to observe people in the actual process of conceptualizing their experience, and he thought that psychotherapy would be a good place to look. Thus it happened that a graduate student in philosophy began training as a psychotherapist at the University of Chicago Counseling Center.

Gendlin expected to find therapy clients stating some problem conceptually, but then finding that their statement of the problem depended on some implicit understanding that they hadn't conceptualized. Upon stating that implicit understanding, they would find that it depended on another implicit understanding that they hadn't conceptualized, and so on. In this way, the client's statements would refer continuously to the client's implicit experiencing, and in so doing, would continuously lead toward a deeper understanding, and a resolution, of the initial problem.

Gendlin's research articulated that psychological change is best understood as a process of finding and following one's inner felt experience. He demonstrated that the client's ability to realize lasting positive change in psychotherapy depended on their ability to access a non-verbal, bodily feel of the issues that brought them into therapy. Gendlin called this intuitive body-feel the "felt sense." He studied how those successful clients accessed and articulated this felt sense, and developed [Focusing](#) in order to teach others how to do so. In 1978, Gendlin published his best-selling book *Focusing*, which presented a six step method for discovering one's felt sense and drawing on it for personal development.

Gendlin founded [The Focusing Institute](#) in 1985 to facilitate training and education in Focusing for academic and professional communities and to share the practice with the public. In 2016, its name was changed to the International Focusing Institute.

GENDLIN'S RELEVANCE TO PSYCHOLOGY AND SELF-HELP

[Dr. Ann Weiser Cornell](#), one of the world's foremost teachers of Focusing, says:

Because of Gene Gendlin and his Focusing process, hundreds of thousands of people around the world are able to give themselves and others the kind of support for emotional healing that otherwise had been found mainly in psychotherapy. Gene developed Focusing as a way that anyone can learn to listen inwardly to the life direction that is found in the body, and he believed in empowering people to do their own emotional healing – themselves, in partnerships, and in communities. So from the very beginning he taught Focusing to anyone who wanted to learn it, and encouraged people to pass it along. From these roots has grown a worldwide grassroots movement of mutual support for positive change based on acceptance and inclusion, and a hopeful vision of what is possible for all living beings.

Dr. [Kevin Krycka](#), Professor of Psychology at Seattle University and member of the [Board of Trustees](#) of

The International Focusing Institute, says:

Influenced by his work with Carl Rogers, Gene Gendlin promoted psychotherapy as a revolutionary place where human beings do not only delve into their individual experience, but also see their intimate connection to others and the world around them.

Focusing counters our tendency to rush to conclude or judge. It counters any tendency to see others as tools to our own personal ends, because we are fundamentally interaction with others. Experience is always interaction, and therefore suffering is never just an individual phenomenon. It is always implicitly shared. Focusing-Oriented

Therapists know that the healing that happens in psychotherapy is to return the person from the experience of isolation to the awareness of connection.

Gendlin was a pioneer of “embodiment” in philosophy and psychology. Gendlin wrote in his book, [*Focusing*](#):

When I use the word 'body' I mean more than the physical machine. Not only do you physically live the circumstances around you but also those you only think of in your mind. Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people. In fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body and it is felt from inside.

GENDLIN’S RELEVANCE TO PHILOSOPHY

Gendlin regarded himself first and foremost as a philosopher and he brought a rigorous philosophical perspective to psychology. His approach was presented in his early book [*Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*](#) and later developed into a comprehensive theory of the deep nature of life processes. His thought is most fully articulated in his masterwork *A Process Model*, soon to be published by [*Northwestern University Press*](#).

Gendlin brought philosophy into societal matters by creating a way of thinking that can be applied to all of our most challenging societal issues, including the environment and issues of multi-culturalism. He sought to overcome the dualistic thinking found in much of the philosophy of the early to mid-twentieth century, by demonstrating what it means to think with body and mind. Students of his philosophy have

found that when one engages experiential, embodied background and logic, surprising new thinking is available to them.

[Dr. Donata Schoeller](#) is a professor of philosophy and translated Gendlin's master work, *A Process Model*, into German (with Christiane Geiser). She is a member of the [International Leadership Council](#) of the [International Focusing Institute](#). Schoeller says of Gendlin:

Gene Gendlin was a pioneer of what today is considered the "turn to embodiment."

He brought philosophy to societal matters at a time when others were content to be in the ivory tower of academia. He didn't simply criticize the prevailing dualism of body and mind, but demonstrated what it means to think with body and mind.

*Philosophers talk now about philosophical practice, but Gene actually delivered one, through his great work, *A Process Model*, and through the development of the practice of *Thinking at the Edge*.*

As a younger philosopher, it was an amazing experience for me to see the existential seriousness with which he did philosophy. He didn't compromise with any easier agenda; he took 30 years to write his main work. He was willing to give up being hailed by academia in order to be true to his work. I am deeply grateful to him for his work and for his example.

THINKING AT THE EDGE

From 1968 to 1995, Gendlin taught philosophy and psychology at the University of Chicago. There he taught a course on theory-building that later gave rise to a practice he called ["Thinking at the Edge"](#)

(TAE). TAE is a fourteen-step method for drawing on one's non-conceptual, experiential knowing about any topic to create novel theory and concepts.

PERSONAL LIFE

Gendlin was a Jew, born in Vienna, Austria, on December 25, 1926. He lived with his parents in the 9th district of Vienna, a very Jewish district at that time. His father was a doctor of chemistry, and had a business as a dry cleaner. The family left Austria because of the rise of the Nazism. They first escaped to Holland and later emigrated to the United States with his parents on the [SS Paris](#) on its last voyage to New York, arriving January 11, 1939. He went on to serve in the United States Navy and to become a U.S. citizen.

After leaving the University of Chicago, Gendlin and his wife, [Mary Hendricks-Gendlin](#), moved to New York state in 1996. Mary worked closely with Gendlin and served for many years as the Director of The Focusing Institute. She died in March 2015.

Gendlin is survived by three children, Elissa Gendlin (from his marriage to Mary Hendricks-Gendlin), Gerry Gendlin and Judith Jones (both from his marriage to Frances Gendlin).

AWARDS

1970: "Distinguished Professional Award in Psychology and Psychotherapy," from Division 29 of the American Psychological Association (Division of Psychotherapy)

2000: "Charlotte and Karl Bühler Award" (given jointly to Gendlin and The Focusing Institute), from Division 32 of the American Psychological Association (the Society for Humanistic Psychology)

2007: "Viktor Frankl Award of the City of Vienna for outstanding achievements in the field of meaning-oriented humanistic psychotherapy," from the Viktor Frankl Foundation

2011: "Distinguished Theoretical and Philosophical Contributions to Psychology," from Division 24 of the American Psychological Association (The Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology)

2016: "Lifetime Achievement," from the World Association for Person Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling

2016: "Lifetime Achievement," from the US Association for Body Psychotherapy

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