

**THEATER OF THE LIVING BODY I:
Expressive improvisation in focusing-oriented therapy**

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New experience must come first, only then can later experience be explained by being the same as it. Since it had to come first in the past, it can still come first, now too... Improvisation is obviously first. "Improvisation comes first." (Gendlin, 1993)

Introduction

One can make an analogy between the living body and theater, as both are "sites" of dramatic events and experiences. In fact, the original meaning of theater is "A place for viewing or seeing; a place that is the setting for dramatic events, where significant actions or events take place." Based on Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit (implicit understanding/ bodily knowing), the process of Focusing in general, and Wholebody Focusing in particular involves the coming alive and spontaneous unfolding of bodily lived events. They are forms of *improvisation* in the sense that what comes is not pre-scripted or predicted, but emerges in its own way and time, from the wellspring of the living body's attunement to the right feel and next steps of its development. Over the past few years, I have noticed how a wholebody focusing process, as an individual session or over a course of therapy, has the flavor of a journey and can be thought of as enacting a story or drama from the living body. This can be in the form of a gesture, movement or posture that carries a bodily knowing or implying of something that needs attention, next step of living (I have elsewhere called these *implicit leads*, Fleisch, 2008). The dramatic aspect can be played out between two distinct gestures or movements that can interact with each other. This can also be explored via a bodily sensation, energy or connection between some part of the client and myself as we both Co-Presence the felt sense of what is emerging. When allowed to move outward into expression, movement, interaction, enactment etc., the *bodily coming* that arises has a more full-bodied way of being experienced, expressed and carried forward. I will show how this process functions both in my therapy practice and in another paper, in retreat/workshop settings, where the whole group serves as a container for the process of each person "on stage."

In this article, I will present some ways that I have observed and developed this process I have termed the *theater of the living body*. The main purpose here is descriptive of instances and examples, as these form the foundation of then stepping back and attempting to explicate what makes this type of process "work." Thus, the theoretical implications are still in process and will be presented in a future paper.

What is most important to me here is to describe how the process happens- and begin to explore some of the aspects of the TLB that seem have a very powerful transformational effect on all participants.

Improvisation

Improvisation comes from Latin *improvisus*, literally, unforeseen, from *in-* + *provisus*, past participle of *providēre* to see ahead. To improvise is "To make something up or invent it as one goes on, without a pre-plan or forethought." **Improvisation** is the practice of acting, singing, talking and reacting, of making and creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings. This can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to act (taken from Wikipedia). As Ringstrom (2001) has shown in much of his work, "Improvisational theater can be a useful metaphor for grasping key elements in the moment-to-moment unfolding of any analytic process ."

Three important concepts from improvisation that will be explored are: the *scene*, the *offer* and *space work/objects*. Briefly, 1) the *scene* is the imaginary world, environment or situation evoked through the coming forward of the improvisation. In Focusing, and certainly in therapy, this is not just "made up" yet is also not "already formed," but is an explication and organic unfolding of the implicit realm of the living body and felt sense of something emerging.

2) The *offer* is what the "performer" makes toward his/her companion or fellow actor, a gesture, move, request, etc., something that calls for response. In improv, the principle is called "Yes and," in which the second actor (in Gendlin's terms) crosses with and carries forward the offering, so that what develops is truly a *co-creation*. This is an illustration of *interaction-first* in which all parties in the field are already *inter-affected* by not only the specific offering, but the felt sense of the whole scene unfolding. This awareness also includes an implicit understanding of the motivations and felt intention of the character or part(s) of the self-system being enacted.

3) The final term *space work (space object)* involves the physicality of what is being evoked and created in the absence of props, scenery and other adornments. Similar to mime, in improv, the range of non-verbal expression movement, postures, gesture, facial expression, as well as verbalizations bring us into the space of the character and help us become a part of the experiential process being enacted. A gestural move for example can evoke an image (and felt sense) of a missing or needed object.

Co-Presencing as the foundation of improvisation/ starting place of the living theater

My journey as a psychotherapist has expanded my experience of Presence to that of Co-Presence, an interactive-relational space of shared experiencing. In the space of Co-Presence, I become more attuned to the whole field of experiencing between myself and my client, one that includes attention to energy, movement, gesture, posture, images, sensory-affective information etc. Essentially, whatever crosses our shared field of consciousness is part of the Co-Presencing process. In addition, I have become more open to the practice of entering the field from a space of Not-Knowing, and Not-Trying, without a pre-set notion of how this session will unfold. This feels similar to what Bion (the brilliant psychoanalyst) has stated as entering each analytic session "without memory or desire." His evocative stance feels very similar to Gendlin's notion that "experiencing (improvisation/ interaction) is first." This allows for something fresh, alive and genuine to come forward in each moment of the therapy space- and opens our aware body to register, resonate and metabolize every nuance of experience in the shared field. The therapy space thus becomes a process of co-creation, in which our shared experiencing crosses in the field of inter-action, and inter-affecting, allowing something new and fresh to awaken and unfold.

In this space of Co-Presencing, we become informed by the natural emergence of "something" that arises from the support of grounded presence. The presence of the Companion becomes organically attuned to the presence and embodiment of the client, who is supported to invite and await for whatever emerges into awareness. This is often a good place to start, letting the body settle, being as comfortable and open as possible with the sense of not knowing how to be with each other. We don't have to know what is coming, or what to do, but trust in the body-wisdom to do the listening and inform us of what might be unfolding here. This forms the foundation of the creative improvisational nature of the theater- to allow something fresh and genuine to come of its own accord in the shared relational space between us and among the whole group. I become informed by everything that comes into conscious awareness. Thus, I am not only reflecting back an empathic felt understanding of what my client might be experiencing , but also an implicit awareness of something that might be needed here, something arising in the field that needs my own experiencing crossing with that of my client to be a creative product of both. I want to offer some examples that highlight the dramatic, improvisational theater sense of WBF in therapy.

Improvisational moments in Focusing-oriented therapy: three examples

I hope to illustrate these principles and the centrality of Focusing-oriented improvisation in the following examples drawn from my therapy practice. My other intention is to demonstrate how my own implicit felt sense and openness to Whole body experiencing and engaged interacting had a powerful impact on both myself and the clients. It is in this space of Co-Presence where the dramatic theater of transformation can be a genuine lived process that unfolds without pre-scripting, without knowing if or how it would work out. These examples are with clients in long-term, depth therapy, all of whom suffered some form of childhood abuse and early life traumas, and who manifested some form of addiction throughout adult life.

Example #1: One client named Sam was in his mid- 50's when he first came to see me. He had recently become sober after years of alcohol abuse and later in our therapy, also confronted and stopped a pattern of sexual addiction. Sam was able to drop into a space of deep feeling and expressing, was open to working in a whole body way (including standing) so that our work proceeded well for quite a while. Then we seemed to hit a bit of an impasse especially when he began to explore the sexual addict part of himself. It felt in me that something was missing and needed for the carrying forward of what he termed a very, very deeply wounded place that had been abandoned and abused as a young child. I began to get an implicit understanding of what was needed, an authentic deeply felt connection with this young part. I also realized that something in me that had been blocking the offering this part was implying due to fears and difficulties with this type of depth of intimacy. Yet I felt I owed it to Sam (and to myself) to allow some process to unfold, even if uncomfortable to some place in me.

So as we were standing, I felt his (the very young boy's) eyes looking toward me. I could sense something in me that wanted to turn away, to look down and avoid the longing and desiring of presence those eyes were expressing. I then took the step of stating, "I can really feel those eyes wanting contact with mine." "Yes, said Sam, "I think this is the deep wound, not just the physical/sexual abuse, but the sense of absence, no one there." (This is what this part of me was doing as well). At that point, I accepted the offering. He said, "If you could stay connected with my eyes, that would mean so much..." which we did (during several sessions), often for 10-15 minutes. This was at first extremely challenging for a part of me that doesn't like to be seen so closely, yet after a while, felt more and more ok.

As we stayed in that space, I felt that a scene was unfolding of a boy (maybe age 2 or 3) being looked at lovingly by his father, and in me, a sense that I could be that father to that boy and the boy in me who also experienced a deep wound of father abandonment. During one poignant session, tears came to both of us as we allowed this process of close eye contact to unfold. Sam said, "Thank you so much, for staying present with me. This is what it needed." And as he said that, I felt and shared, "I think Sam that this is what we both need." I noticed that his hands were gently touching and moving up and down his torso. It felt like something important was being evoked and experienced there/ When I pointed this out, he affirmed, "Yes, this eye contact feels very healing inside. It feels like there is a laying down of new tracks inside me here, going on right now."

Example #2: I have been working with the client named Bill for about four years. It became clear that he'd suffered multiple traumas in early life, but had operated with such dissociation and substance abuse that there was little awareness or experiencing of suffering. We have identified at least two or three main characters that inhabit his inner world and that play themselves out in our therapy space together: the acting-out addict (like a teen on the loose); a pseudo-parent who permits the acting-out; a very insecure, anxious, lonely young child who feels very badly about himself and is always seeking approval and trying to please. All these characters have come out in various stages in our therapy. At the time of this scenario, Bill had decided to stop using drugs and alcohol, which triggered an upsurge of anxiety, terror and despair. In a recent session, he described this young place in him as feeling "being out in the cold" without the drugs, a sense that it is lost in a cold, cruel, uncaring world/

What came out was "Why is it necessary to suffer? Wasn't it enough as a child?" I felt this in my body as a crying out from that very young child who felt left out in the cold (not connected with a mother's love and warmth)- something that I had also experienced. "Where's the mother? How do you evoke the love of the mother?" Now I had an experience (coming from my work in facilitating the *theater of the living body*- a whole group focusing process that I will describe in another article) of Bill (and myself at the moment) being surrounded by a group of women, offering nurturing, love, warmth, etc.

Without expressing this directly, I did invite, "Maybe you can sense what this place might need or want now?" " It wants you to tell me that you have confidence in me- that you believe I can stop using- that you support me and my healing and be there for my recovery...." I said, "Yes, of course, and what is

coming for me is to see if it feels ok to hold your hands, and also to take some time to connect with my/our body so that what comes from me is a genuine expression from inside." "Sure." So we took a couple of minutes of silence, then I just allowed the words to come from the living body of our felt connection. As I reflected back my sense of confidence, support, caring, and his courage for being willing to open to this deep healing, our bodies naturally began to sway side to side. I felt like we were rocking a baby, like both our wounded babies were being soothed by the movement and energy from the Mother.

As I shared the words, it felt like an energy was being transmitted through our hands and grounded co-presence. His whole energy-body transformed and suddenly he began to sing a prayer in a beautiful soulful way. Then he said the prayer in English, something like, "God, please grant me the strength and desire to gain salvation, to heal and grow in mind and spirit. I need your help to reach my salvation." We then stood hands in hands in silence for another minute, with bodies still swaying. In me, I felt my heart open and a wave of love swept through as never before. We then sat and talked a bit before ending the session. I could feel that his whole being had gone through a deep transformation, that the little boy in him had felt the 'mother's' love maybe for the first time. He was able to sense the whole of him as embodying an entirely different energy.

Example #3: In the final instance, I have been working with Jane for many years. As a victim of severe verbal, sexual and physical abuse as a young girl, her system had developed a very ingrained pattern of withdrawing into states of sleep, disconnection, passivity and inactivity that at times could mimic a catatonic state of frozenness. While we have made progress in many areas of her living, this pattern has always remained. It had been relatively inactive, until recent episodes when her husband would act up with aggression and anger. As we explored this pattern, Jane said, "It just wants to lay in bed, not get up and not have to do anything." This time as she described this, I felt something different. I got a strong sense of the withdrawing part asserting itself, like it was saying "NO!!! You can't make me go out there into that abusive world." I have had a part of me that also has tended to withdraw into states of passive avoidance and isolation, and felt there was a "meeting" of these parts in the field.

I invited Jane to see if this resonated, and to see if she would like to allow this place to express itself more outwardly here. She took some time and said, "Yes, I can feel it saying "No" to other people, to the world, to violence... It has a strength that I never realized before." I reflected this back and invited us to stay present with that place, maybe letting her whole body inhabit that part. I could sense that some

part of her was having difficulty staying with that "No" place so I offered to model it for/with her. She agreed- and I took a moment to let my body connect with that place in me (which I was sensing as a co-creation also drawing energy from that part of her). As I did, I just invited my body to be that young part and to do, say whatever came. It enacted a sequence of anger, a sense that it was carrying a burden that it shouldn't have had to carry (since her parents didn't respond to early cries for help and protection), and realized that as I took a more active stance with her, that I was also becoming a protective adult as who was saying "No" and intervening with the abuser.

As we shared the process, Jane said that she felt uplifted, that she could feel more of the "No I won't," "You can't make me," "You won't hurt me anymore," infuse her whole body. This has been a seminal experience still being processed, and also resonated with a growing edge in me that can be passive and abdicate a more active responsible role (as my father did) in stepping up to confront situations. Thus, as in the other examples, the drama felt transformative for both myself and the client.

Conclusion: Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit and improvisation in the theater of the living body

I hope that these examples give a flavor of the multiple avenues of carrying forward that can organically arise and be allowed expression and further living in the therapeutic space. All these are instances of experiential, whole body focusing-oriented improvisation, co-created dramas that we creatively enact in therapy. They are the whole body implying forward, without knowing or trying, staying organically attuned to the life energy that wants expression. Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit offers us a new vision of the living body as an ongoing process of body-environment interaction. Thus, each moment implicitly contains information about body-environment-situation, which via Focusing, can be brought to awareness as felt senses. And his sense of "improvisation first" offers a powerful principle for our work as Focusing-oriented therapists. It helps me stay alive in my body to whatever is transpiring between us moment to moment and be open to engaging in creative ways with clients that follow the felt sense of and bodily implying forward. To use Gendlin's term, it is a "coming from underneath" of something beneath and more than already formed ideas. I might say it is a *coming from the field of Being*, an invitation and felt sense of the whole space in which we are playing off of and engaging with each other. As Preston has stated, " It demonstrates that the implicit intricacy always includes a living in relation to, and toward, - coordinated with the other on an organismic level." Preston concludes, and I agree that, "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."

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A shorter version of this paper entitled "Co-Presencing in Wholebody Focusing-oriented therapy: carrying forward blocked process and structure-bound states through interactive engagement," was published in *The Focusing Connection*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Jan, 2011.

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