

Gene Quotes for Politically Responsible Focusing

Gene Quotes

For

Politically Responsible Focusing

Assembled by Dave Young & Gisela Uhl

This is the first of at least three handouts. A second handout will deal with a kind of Focusing that engages the body differently than pausing for a felt-sense to emerge. Instead, it checks for body-tensions & dissociations which sometimes indicate an out-of-awareness indoctrination that goes against our values. The Focusing steps in this second handout are organized like the questions in Gene's *Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams* book that prompt a rightness or a nothingness response. We hope to have this second handout ready in a few weeks. The third handout will deal with Focusing, Politics & Ideology, and it will likely take longer to complete.

Dave: The point of these Gene quotes is not to teach philosophy. (Though I believe, and I hope this will show, that there's nothing more useful than a penetratingly thoughtful philosophy.)

The goal, here, is to meet the urgent needs we face in our world right now. As you'll see, Gene believes this demands that we change our Focusing as well as our ways of teaching Focusing. Specifically, he urges us to make them consciously political in addition to being psychological & spiritual. And he shows how this can be done by challenging what he calls our society's "structural oppressive political context". (underlining Gene's)

Gene also shows there's no such thing as "apolitical Focusing". We can Focus unconscious of politics, thereby largely living our indoctrinations, our society's oppressive political contexts. Or we can Focus aware of

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our society's “structural oppressive political context”. Then we can create & choose, instead, a conscious, political context aligned with our values & our world's urgent needs.

Gisela: Focusing always involves the Whole, all of our living; and our social-economic-political world is part of this Whole....

Dave: “Whole” had a special meaning for Gene. For him, the quality of a “whole” was modelled on the experience of a felt sense. This meaning of “wholeness” was well-captured in contrast to “totality” by a student & colleague of Gene's, David Michael Levin:

“The wholeness of... a ‘whole’ is essentially different from a ‘totality’. A totality can be mastered, dominated, controlled; it can be grasped with certainty; it is absolutely complete....”

“A whole has its own completeness, but this completeness remains open. [It is] open to further enrichment & development, to different completions....”

“We... need a familiarity with the feeling of wholeness; we need to consult our deepest sense of wholeness.” The Opening of Vision, David Michael Levin, 1988, p. 79.

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Unless otherwise noted, all quote sources can be found in the Gendlin Online Library at www.focusing.org.

The need to integrate politics, personal growth/Focusing, and Spirituality

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"The realms of politics, personal growth/[Focusing] and spiritual awareness are usually thought about separately, as three different realms. But they must come together. Nor can any of them be reduced to the other two, however overarching each may be. Although different, [they are] in need of each other." "Politics in Relation to Psychological and Spiritual Awareness", Gendlin 1978, p. 1. [Currently unpublished, but hopefully in the Gendlin Online Library soon.]

Dave: Gene is saying that without explicitly involving spirituality & politics in our felt-sensing & our Focusing we will lack something vital, something we deeply need to more fully & creatively carry forward us & our situations. -- However:

"A spiritual value can make one feel so good... that one can easily make the mistake of ignoring what is left of the problem." "Spiritual terminology can be a form of oppression". *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*, Gendlin 1984, p. 274 and 275. [Not in the Gendlin Online Library.]

Gisela: As we live in a human society, in a social-political context, we need to develop an awareness of this context, which is penetrating deeply into our living and therefore needs to be allowed to consciously come into our focusing processes.

"Political, spiritual, and psychological vocabularies seem to cover different topics, but if taken experientially they are all one implicitly. Each is opposed to oppression, but different vocabularies give different leverage with it." *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*, Gendlin 1996, p. 273. [Not in the Gendlin Online Library.]

Gisela: It is worth reading the whole section, pages 271-275: ORGANISMIC RIGHTNESS WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT IS RIGHT, and also think it further.....

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Dave: “Taken experientially” & “all one implicitly”, of course, means felt-sensing each of these three together as one felt-sense. Here Gene shows us how all three “realms” together, in their differences, can more thoroughly liberate our Focusing in addressing issues of oppression & indoctrination.

Focusing Needs a Structural Political Context

“Our practice of Focusing (and every inward practice) needs a conscious political context around it.” “Focusing needs a structural political consciousness.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 154.

Dave: My experience is that many, perhaps most Focusers, to some extent, integrate some kind of spirituality into their Focusing. The interaction of Focusing & spirituality has been deeply explored by Ed McMahon & Pete Campbell in their Bio-Spirituality, as well as by Elfie Hinterkopf in her book, Integrating Spirituality in Counseling. However, explicitly integrating politics into our Focusing seems rare.

Gisela: This lack may be because the political is experientially less accessible. Much of it is hidden from us and therefore out-of-awareness. Our felt sensing of what feels right needs more than being felt. It needs an understanding of our situation, it needs an educated, informed, politically and socially critical thinking. This can then consciously enter into our felt-sensing.

Gene defines “Political”, Ways Political Awareness Can Help

“For the purpose of our discussion I define *political* as opposition to oppression of any sort. If a person is conversant with opposing political oppression, some of these attitudes can be transferred to combating psychological oppression.”

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“If a client happens to be certain that political or social oppression is wrong, this certainty can help us if it is applied, for example, to the way the superego [critical inner voice, “the critic”] oppresses a person. Without this analogy, clients might believe that the superego is right. But once recognizing the inner oppression, they are convinced it is wrong.”

“This *political* attitude can also generate a truthful self-respect. For example, instead of being ashamed of bad grammar, a poorly educated person can say: “See, they didn’t even teach me to talk right.” We want to oppose oppression; we would be joining it if we were to look down on the wounds and the marks it has left, instead of having respect for them.” *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*, Gendlin 1996, p. 272.

Dave: Gene points to one important way we need the political realm in our Focusing: “a structural political consciousness AROUND our Focusing”. In my experience, “around it” is similar to how Focusers spiritually ground their Focusing through “fields”, e.g., a field of loving.

We give Gene quotes, below, on some steps for how we can create “a structural political consciousness”, an awareness of our social-economic-political world in which we are living.

“We need not differentiate ‘our own organism’ and ‘social forms’. Humans, complex animals are always also elaborated by social forms. But as we live these forms, we can reject and further elaborate them. We need to distinguish the kind of step which organismically elaborates the social forms further, as against only re-instances them.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 154.

Dave: Here Gene notes that politics -- specifically “social forms” (including indoctrinated oppressions such as racism, sexism, classism,

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homophobia) -- are always already there in our living, even when they're out-of-awareness.

Just as Gene says that Focusing is "intrinsically" a valuing process, when he says here, "We need not differentiate 'our own organism' and 'social forms'," he is, in effect, saying that our living is intrinsically political. Therefore, there is no such thing as apolitical Focusing. (See "Five Philosophical Talking Points to Communicate with Colleagues Who Don't Yet Know Focusing." Point #4, "Focusing is Intrinsically a Valuing", Gendlin 2004.)

Obviously, our indoctrinated social forms can involve both internalized oppression as well as external oppression.

This is one reason why Gene states, in an earlier quote, that we need "a conscious political context around our Focusing, a structural political context."

If we live our indoctrinated social forms consciously, if we explicitly have a "conscious political context" aligned with our values, Gene gives us, here, one way we can determine whether our living these social forms is truly liberating: noticing, physically, the "kind of step" we are taking, i.e., is this step a Focusing step, an opening, a freeing, a carrying-forward?

"We can observably distinguish such steps (as in Focusing) from the closed manner of self-imposed steps. The distinction between the two kinds of steps lets us know when we organismically elaborate the social forms further, as against when we only re-instance them."

"But even that will not solve the whole question." (underlining Gene's "The Political Critique of Awareness", Gendlin 1984, p. 154.

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“...do focusing steps necessarily free us from oppressive social forms? They do; but we can not say that they always do in every respect, that every oppressive form will change. **This is no minor limitation!**” (underlining & exclamation point Gene’s, letters in bold by us) “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 154.

Dave: Gene is clear, “Focusing steps” aren’t always enough for politically liberating us from our oppressive social forms.

I highly recommend Gene’s article about “elaborating” vs “only re-instancing” social forms, this in the context of our values: “Process Ethics and the Political Question” (1986). This article challenges common assumptions from political science as well as from Freud & several philosophers. The article summary:

“Two questions will be discussed in this paper. (1) Can ethics be founded on a certain manner of process, the kind of decision-making, rather than the content or conclusions?; and (2) Does our decision-making process merely reflect social and political control? Or can more arise from the individual than what society has built into the body?” “Process Ethics and the Political Question”, Gendlin 1986, p. 1.

“We live in a structural political context and it can help to sense ourselves within it.” (underlining Gene’s) “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 154.

Gisela: The following quote, which appears again later in this handout, (after subheading “Gene Shows Our Need for Political Strength in Joining with Others”) is also relevant 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.” “The Political

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Critique of the Awareness Movement”, Gendlin 1984, p.144, (underline by Gisela)

Dave: Here Gene gives us one way we can make our Focusing more liberating. We can explicitly, consciously KNOW & FEEL living our oppressive structural political context.

Gisela: The structural political context is more than “social forms”. It is the social-political-economic structure which participates in making the forms. It is their underlying decisive force.

Gisela & Dave: Consciously, explicitly KNOWING & FEELING our indoctrinating political context lets us “HAVE” it. Before we “HAVE” it, we are, literally, lived by it. But in “HAVING” it, in being aware of it, we can choose our relationship with this indoctrinating political context -- we can decide what to do with our KNOWING & FEELING it,

We can also see & feel the ways our living is shaped by it and, hopefully, what we can do about it. We can experience more clearly how this oppressive political context twists our thinking, our felt-sensing and our beliefs. Perhaps we can begin to develop steps toward a new structural political context, one better aligned with our values and our world’s needs.

We also can take our first steps toward seeing how it was created, how it maintains itself, and who benefits in this political context. These issues will be covered in more depth in our forthcoming handout on Focusing, Politics & Ideology.

Gisela: It is easy to liberate ourselves from “form”; but to develop the political context we would need a broad movement, a “WE” in solidarity. For us to change only social forms won’t change anything regarding our oppressive socio-economic-political condition!

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Dave: This is one important way we can move past what Gene calls Focusing's serious limitations:

“...we cannot say that any particular steps are freeing in all respects. Indeed, there is no such finite multiplicity as ‘all respects’. When such a step frees us in some respects, perhaps it re-instances old oppression in some other respects. Whether something new is freeing or more control is never a simple question. For example, when are women’s rights freeing, and when do they create pressure on women to work and leave their children? One cannot decide it from the content alone.... The difference between freeing and forcing depends also on the kind of process the individual goes through. Distinguishing between kinds of process offers new possibilities for thinking about what is freeing.”
 “Psychotherapy Research: Toward a Bodily Human Nature”, Gendlin 1989, p. 209.

Dave: This is an example of how Focusing needs a conscious political context around us. And as you’ll see below, more than an individual political consciousness is also needed.

“Let me try to show experientially how a political context enables private freeing steps beyond the usual limits.”

“My purpose is to develop a structural political context from rejecting the ‘internal’/’external’ split leading to detailed structural analysis.”
 “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 154.

“Let me try to show experientially how a political context enables private freeing steps beyond the usual limits.”

Gisela: Gene does not provide this detailed structural analysis, neither can focusing provide it. But it can help us find the right sources for the information we need, so that we can have an analysis which eventually frees us from indoctrination & ideology.

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“I must first show what I mean by having a ‘political context’ around individual process. I will take my first examples from the movements of blacks, women and gay people who already have such a context. Then I will talk about the rest of us.”

“Humans are social. Therefore it is difficult for one person alone to have a complete conviction that the society’s message is wrong. You need other people. Your training may say, “Shame on you for needing the judgment of others.” But you live in relation to others. Of course, you may know a social pattern to be wrong – a small child often knows what would be right instead. But this knowing may not make a body sureness, alone.”

“You may know you don’t even want to fit prescribed routines. But a lone person may not be strong against self-attacks, insecurity and inferiority feelings.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, pp. 154-155.

Gene example of nature, society & the political “what should be”:

“Is the sense of organismic rightness based on nature? For example, that ‘every child should be protected’ seems true of animal infants in nature. But my next pair of examples shows that the bodily sense of rightness is not *simply* based on the facts of nature. Consider the following example: A client seemed to remember himself vividly as a newborn. His two older brothers looked down on him and shook their heads. ‘No good,’ they said, ‘No good at all.’”

“Client: I felt such contempt. I was just no good, not worth anything. And I couldn’t defend myself against them. I didn’t have language. I couldn’t talk back!”

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“Therapist: They dumped contempt on you and you had no language to defend yourself. That wasn’t fair. *It shouldn’t have been like that. You should have had some way to defend yourself.*”

“It was a turning point. He visibly expanded, his shoulders straightened, as if he was throwing a weight off. He breathed better.”

“Client: Yes. I should have had a way to talk back. I’ve lived under that contempt all my life, and I don’t have to anymore.”

“Nature gives us no way to talk back when we first arrive here. So my assertions do not come just from the way things are in nature. I value the example because it shows this so clearly.”

“My counterexample comes from a recent Russian émigré who said to me about his good life here:”

“Client: How we live here is not reality. Only a few people live this way. The human reality in the world is how my mother and my brothers and I lived in one room and spent all our time just surviving. I need to find a way to tell my children that this is not the human reality.”

“My value statements about what should be, what would be more right than nature and society provide for, can seem to obscure just that knowledge which this man values and needs his children to have. The fact that we can appreciate both shows that there is something universal about both (and about any experiential differentiation).” *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*, Gendlin 1986, p. 169.

Gisela: “*What nature and society provide*” — *this needs to be differentiated. Society provides in a totally different way. And it also withholds! Nature does not withhold; it only lacks at times.*

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But my main point is this: This man's value, in the Russian immigrant example, is certainly not opposed to what Gene would state "how things should be". The Russian immigrant's value is on a different level: he wants to acknowledge the different material reality in his homeland. He does not want to ignore that.

Here, further thinking is required! He could have realized the injustice of society. And this would be crucial. But he could harm his children by telling them only, "This is not reality." He should say, "Everyone has the right to a life that is more than mere survival, and oppression makes this impossible for some people."

There is the value of "how things should be", and the value to acknowledge the reality which is different in another country, or different for different people in one's own country.

That does not mean that things should not be "as they should be"!

I can imagine that client's children going in a very destructive opposition to him, instead of becoming politically aware. The example cries out for the political!

Gene Shows Our Need for Political Strength in Joining with Others.

“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.”

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

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“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. A group of heart patients are somewhat helped by talking to each other, but not in this way. The strengthening comes from the political aspect – let us see how that word works, here.”

“The person’s self-belittling 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!’” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 155.

Dave: Sustainable liberating from social forms & ideologies – the lies that keep us in our place through many social forces of oppression – this needs more than individual processing. In the US & elsewhere, even peaceful and legally-protected social forms of protest can be met with violent, sometimes deadly oppression. This we clearly see in the widespread protests about racism in Spring & Summer 2020 (and beyond?). It is easy to see that liberating as an individual process is much less sustainable.

Even internalized ideologies & oppressive social patterns – hard to see, harder to reliably change – are deeply violent in their severe, rigid & punitive shaping of our understandings & living.

“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.’” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 144.

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Dave: In other words, we are all oppressed by social structures and forms and their corresponding ideologies. We need liberating both as members of an oppressed class and also as individuals. And sustained liberating, as members of a group and as individuals, needs mutual supporting of others similarly oppressed.

***Please Note**: I am not, in any way, suggesting that we privilege, for example, white oppressions over the clearly more comprehensive, serious & deadly racist oppressions, heterosexual oppressions over LGBTQ oppressions, male oppressions over female oppressions, wealthy oppressions over the poor oppressions, etc.*

I strongly, insistently believe & experience that we of privilege have an urgent responsibility to recognize the forms & contents of our privileges. My privileges are always also maintaining others' oppressions. No privileging is without maintaining oppressions. I must then turn my privilege on its head, so to speak, using it to actively recognize & support dismantling the oppressions that my privilege maintains.

I also strongly, insistently believe & experience that as I support people becoming liberated from the oppression my privilege maintains, I become liberated. I experience this in the felt-quality of my living. Oppressing pollutes, diminishes, hardens, disheartens, makes paranoid, the oppressor.

As a white, cis-gendered, middle-class male, I must also recognize & address my own socialized oppressions as well as the systemic sources of those oppressions. These socialized oppressions drain me & bring a misplaced resentment. My liberation also means recognizing not only the content, but even more, the functions of my oppressions, how they & the divisions they maintain serve those in power.

The Need for Change

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Dave: In the next several quotes, Gene sets out the conflict between rigid social patterns and “the more intricate texture of ‘inwardness’” From this, Gene derives “...political principles — political because they define the external source of our inward oppression” (underlining ours) “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 145.

“It is society which defines simplistic patterns as reality, and thereby defines our experience as unreal and merely internal....”

“The more intricate texture of ‘inwardness’ does not fit. And what it fails to fit is the ‘external reality’ made of seemingly smoother patterns that make no room for the complexity. This is the origin of the very notion that experience is ‘merely inward’.... Reality omits us and seems external. (underlining Gene’s) “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 144.

“This derivation of the internal/external split leads me to posit what I call political principles. I call them political because they define the external source of inward oppression. Political theory holds that what we experience as our own inward oppressive experience has an external source in the social and economic structure. ...one external source is the very notion of ‘external’ reality itself, the fact that the social patterns leave no room for our more complex apprehensions. The ordinary routines leave nothing open for us to fill in. We are assumed to fit without internal complexity. The job is structured before we take it on. The classroom pattern is there, we are only asked to fit it... The patterns are complete without us. We are trained in the deep-felt belief that we ought to fit. What does not fit the simple forms is ‘merely internal’, unreal, therefore crazy. But this oppression of the ‘external’ needs to be fought.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 145.

“We have not been liberating ourselves ‘only inwardly.’ That would have meant giving up on living, loving and working with others. On the

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contrary, we try to create new forms of social interaction. Of course these forms are ‘unstable’ since they are newly made in each interaction.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 145

Dave & Gisela: The next two quotes discuss the daunting challenges of making new, liberating individual & systemic, even global individual & systemic structures. As Gene says, “the structural political & economic detail must be seen” for liberation & equality.

“Form-making also requires a ‘structural’ understanding of social organization. The forms are part of social and international economic structures. For example, finding work that connects with our experience runs counter to how work and pay are organized in our society. The structural political and economic detail must be seen, else form-making will be superficial.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, pp. 146-147.

Gisela & Dave: Here Gene points to the structural/systemic level, the challenges of socio-political-economic form-making/restructuring needed as, we hope, classes, countries & ecosystems become liberated from exploitation and achieve equal rights, including their right to shape socio-political-economic interactions to meet their needs, values & situations.

Dave & Gisela: “Equality” must also involve form-making/restructuring that addresses each class’s history of oppressions & inequalities. For many, however, even after current systemic inequality measures cease, their history of inequality still leaves them, as individuals & as a class, far behind economically, educationally and in many other ways. Thus their inequalities are set up to continue indefinitely.

Form-making/restructuring is, indeed, a desperately-needed & complex skill.

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“The opposition [to the Awareness Movement] from the political side misses the inherent political character of current form-improvising. What could be more social than living rejection of traditional patterns of love and work? But it’s often presented apolitically (and is in that sense unconsciously reactionary, as if social change is not needed). Just as often the Awareness Movement calls for social change, but without a structural analysis. Then its proposals and efforts are superficial. But structural political-economic analysis has long been associated with the assumption that social change must be imposed on people.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, (underlining Gisela’s & Dave’s) Gendlin 1984, p. 148.

“These critics do not believe social change can come from inside people outward. They believe it must come from social engineering, from the outside in.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 148.

Gisela & Dave: We think radical social change can come about only through a movement, from a “WE” which calls for forming.

“Subjective complexity can paralyze action. Action is simpler. But there is a new kind of simplicity. A step in Focusing can lead to a simple action that feels whole.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 146.

“...form-making also needs listening to the other persons [other classes, countries & ecosystems] so their intricacy can participate. That makes devising new forms doubly hard.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 146.

“It’s tempting to foresee a social system in which form-making itself becomes routine. Form-making would become an expected part of most situations. There would again be shared patterns, but they would be

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patterns of mutual pattern-making. But it is too early even for a sketch.”
 “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 147.

Gisela & Dave: Gene wrote this in 1984 -- literally a different world from what we face 35+ years later. We must not only sketch it, we must desperately engage in form-making, changing our social-economic-political structures now, facing urgent needs in equality-making as a country & as a world, with issues such as global warming & pandemics which are questioning our basic survival.

“Individual experience is inherently social, had by many people with each other. It is therefore true that individuals embody the present social system and cannot come up with a new one. Neither can a new system be derived from theoretical engineering and imposed on people from the outside in. It is in living that we change the old forms; we differentiate and newly augment them.” “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 149.

“The assumption is false that individuals are mere copies of such forms. If that were so we would not feel their narrowness. Rather, the organism is highly organized -- animals are already quite complex. Recent research shows that newborns arrive with much more organization than had been assumed. Social patterns organize the individual, but organisms are also a source of order that elaborates social patterns.”
 “The Political Critique of Awareness”, Gendlin 1984, p. 150.

Altered Marshall Rosenberg Quote:

Dave: Marshall Rosenberg is the developer of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I find that Focusing & NVC need each other. I cannot recall where I read this quote. Here I have altered Marshall, substituting “Focusing” where he had “NVC”.

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"If I use Focusing to liberate people to be less depressed, to get along better with their family, but do not teach them, at the same time, to use their energy to rapidly transform systems in the world, then I am part of the problem. I am essentially calming people down, making them happier to live in the systems as they are, so I am using Focusing as a narcotic."

Dave: I never discussed Marshall's quote with Gene. As I've altered it from NVC to Focusing, I know he would have drawn many further distinctions & elaborations. But I don't think Gene would have disregarded Focusing's potential "narcotic" use. I do know he would have applauded any urgent insistence that Focusing be applied to social change now, in our current situation.

During & right after the 2016 election, Gene & I both knew of Jews who had swastikas painted onto their houses. I remember him asking me whether I thought the country was veering into increasing hate attacks. As we now know, his concerns have been horrifically well-founded.

Comments or questions can be sent to Gisela Uhl ulumagila@yahoo.com & Dave Young dkarljung1950@yahoo.com. Be sure to put "Focusing" or "Gene" in the files name. Otherwise I will probably delete it w/o opening, as I don't open email files unless I know the sender.