

# Eugene Gendlin Memorial (8/12/2017)

## New York City

### Symposium on Carrying Forward Gendlin's Legacy in Philosophy

by

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Ann Weiser Cornell and Rob Parker have been a major part of my life for over a decade; yet, this weekend is the first time meeting them in person. I only know them through the wonders of technology, based on what Eugene Gendlin and Rob Parker have termed the “unit model.” But it was not the “unit model” that has given my life a new way of being-in-the-world. It was Gendlin’s project embodied in *A Process Model* (PM), as taught by Dr. Parker, and Gendlin’s Focusing enterprise as taught by Dr. Cornell. This may sound dramatic, but it is true. Let me explain. But first, I appreciate the opportunity given to me by Dr. Parker to briefly say a few words about philosophy, focusing, and the immensity of life processes. Yes, Gendlin brought us all together here today.

In *Truth and Method* (1990), Martin Heidegger’s student, Hans Georg Gadamer, retrieves an original meaning of theory, the ancient notion of *theoros*: “someone who takes part in a festival” (p. 124). The implication here is of active participation and of a kind of playing around. It is this notion of play – interplay – of keeping possibilities in play that are “kinds” of openings and spaces for new possibilities (Ironsides, 2005). Throughout the PM, Gendlin shows how we can “have” and “create” concepts from a bodily feel of the “gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people – in fact, the whole universe (1981, p. 77). It is this interplay of body-environment that has fascinated [resonating out of embodied immediacy, from my own understanding, thinking, feeling, explicating...] me, with Dr. Parker’s guidance, from the very beginning of the book (and after a several years we still have 30 pages to go!!). Witness what Gendlin wrote in *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*:

“One develops when the desire to live and do things stirs deep down, when one’s hope and desires stir, when one’s own perceptions and evaluations carry a new sureness, when the capacity to stand one’s ground increases, and when one can consider others and their needs....It is development when one is drawn to something that is directly interesting, and when one wants to play” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 21). Gendlin goes on to say, “It is development when something stirs inside that has long been immobile and silent, cramped and almost dumb, and when life’s energy flows in a new way” (p. 21-22).

When one wants to play... What can that mean? A way of imagining this kind of play is explicated by Gendlin in PM [and printed on some shirts you might see around here today]: “Direct referent formation enables poetic novelty – but the novel phrasing is only a result. The prior important sequence is the formation of the direct referent, the having and feeling of the whole situation as a directly felt unclear whole.” His words interplay so well with what Mark Strand once wrote about poetry (from the *Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*): “A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxical, a poem permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves.” In other words, we can feel something like the “More Than” (more than our given culture and more than given meanings of words) of what is implicit in our lives – if we can pause the “busy living,” even for brief periods of time, with just a little training of a

few steps. In our class, and as Dr. Parker has said many times over, in class and in his writings (Parker, 2014) we are more than fixed units; we are more than reified patterns or invented theoretical schemes that are imposed or superimposed over our lived experience.

This sense of keeping possibilities in play and the embodied implicit has become a new way of being in my work. I am a disability case manager, assisting people with work activity restrictions and worker role limitations return to suitable, gainful employment. Services I offer include medical case management and vocational renewal services. I would typically get involved with an injured worker after several months, that is, after much and costly medical treatment has led to minimal (if any) progress. Or perhaps the injured worker's pain and debilitation has only worsened. You can imagine what can happen in this situation amidst a culture that holds functional efficiency and material production in the highest levels of esteem. When our own self-esteem is merely an unconscious rendering of our most transcendent cultural norms, and one is now an injured worker who has not been able to return to work for some months, they are made out to be the problem, although the injury occurred through no fault of their own. Benefits get cut-off through arbitrary decisions, families are sometimes immediately plunged into poverty, and the worker's own physical pain and emotional despair cause major upheavals. Costly independent medical evaluations and court expenses ensue, but the injured worker may go on for months without any compensation. As the eminent sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (2001), has written: "A judge replied to the unlucky people's plea for mercy with 'you may say that it is your misfortune to be criminal; I answer that it is your crime to be unfortunate.'" It is easy to see how invented schemes that are imposed and hammered over reality become mistaken for reality. Injured workers with whom I work really do feel criminalized.

While learning and continuing to learn PM, Focusing, and TAE, my encountering and interacting with persons as persons (rather than as human resources to be manipulated whimsically) has drastically improved with being aware of my own pre-conceived notions of insurance and rehabilitation in attempts to create an "open spaces" for inter-human versions of and re-recognitions of that which can give life in such dire circumstances. New possibilities can and do emerge from such processes of allowing others to actually have and articulate their "ownmost" experiences.

My initial academic training was in philosophy and theology; in fact, the philosophy I learned was to prepare for theology. I remember one of the concepts I learned, which a particular theologian developed by reflecting on Augustine's writings. This writer asked a question that he asked the reader to ask often; it went something like this: "What do you really love when you say you love God." Perhaps one honest answer to that question is we love our concepts of God rather than our own experiences of love and life. Perhaps we love God as power, as mighty, as that all powerful divinity that blesses the blessed (the blessed meaning those who are powerful and mighty). The concepts become the reality. But this theologian conceived God not as powerful and mighty, but as the "possibility of the impossible" (Caputo, 2001). Many of the clients with whom I work feel as if their situations have become impossible – impossible to work again; impossible to enjoy life again; impossible to feel whole again. Can life's energy flow in a new way? Part of what I hope from appropriating PM and applying it in daily situations is to assist others to keep possibilities in play, even the possibility of the impossible. For example, I assist some of my clients (some of whom have not worked for 2 years) to return to school by way of formal retraining programs that may take up to 3 years to complete at local colleges and universities. This is one example of how something once conceptualized and felt as impossible is now a realized achievement.

To continue with my background in theology, in PM (p. 251), Gendlin writes, "An old way of saying something like this, is to want the will of God." Gendlin continues with an explication of the symbolizing of the concept of "God:" "One wants the best, and in the long run the most desirable, what one would want if one knew everything." Resonating with Gendlin, Harvard theologian, Gordon Kaufman, once attested: "Whatever may be the dangers of the image/concept 'God,' it remains...[one of]

our most profound and comprehensive symbols, particularly with respect to its powers to draw all that we humans know or experience or can imagine together into an all-inclusive yet open and thoroughly differentiated Whole...." Of course, neither Gendlin nor Kaufman are talking about some distant "onto-theo-logical" Being or Lord of beings perched in a celestial heaven; we can, in the terms of PM, re-recognize our most in-depth symbols through the formation of the direct referent called the embodied felt sense, when our bodies can version a new way of having and living such an all-encompassing symbol. In other words, a fullness of life is not only possible; it is the life forward direction in any situation, even in situations like my aforementioned clients. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Parker and to the other members of our PM group (from Japan, Italy, and Chicago) for journeying with and entrusting me as one of many who will carry forward Eugene Gendlin's legacy in philosophy.

Let me end with this beautiful imagery, for me a way of symbolizing one of the differences between the unit model and the PM, written by a founder of process theology (or natural theology), Pierre Teilhard De Chardin: "Someday, after mastering winds, waves, tides, and gravity, we shall harness the energy of love; and for the second time in the history of the world, mortals will have discovered fire."

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