

The Wisdom of Body-Mind Process

by Ann Weiser Cornell

I got an email that made me want to write about body and mind in Focusing. Here's what it said: "Before I practiced Focusing, my mind would have never thought such a thing would be possible (change in the body). When I was told my body contains wisdom within, my mind was still doubtful."

What struck me first was that this person was speaking as if her mind is other than her body. It made me want to ask: What do we mean by "the mind"? This is an ancient philosophical question that I am not qualified to address at that level. But I can speak as a practicing Focuser and longtime Focusing teacher.

I have not been able to discover any experience of "mind" that is separate from what I mean by "body."

Over and over again, when people tell me "I am in my head," or "My mind is saying this," or "I am having thoughts now," and I then respond "Something in you _____," it turns out that what was called "head" or "mind" or "thoughts" is actually something that also has feelings and can give a felt sense.

Take that email: "When I was told my body contains wisdom within, I was still doubtful." I might say, "Ah, you're remembering something in you was doubtful. You might check if that's still there right now."

If she said "Yes, I'm still doubtful," I could say, "You might take some time to sense how that quality of 'doubtful' is sitting in you right now."

Maybe she would say, "It's this little frown, right between my eyes. Like something in me has to watch and make sure it's all real."

And I might respond, "Maybe you



could acknowledge something in you there, that feels it has to watch and make sure it's all real."

"Yes," she says, and senses more... Clearly there is more! And isn't that body?

From thousands of experiences like this, I'm now convinced that what people call "thoughts" are not something separate from body, but an expression or instance within body.

Body Includes Mind

When I read Gendlin, it is clear to me that he doesn't intend the word "body" to be opposed to a concept of mind. Here's the most obvious quote I've found, from *A Process Model*, page 34.

"What I now do, feel, and think comes out of my body. This may sound odd, but where else does it come from? The mind? To separate mind and body deprives 'body' of certain vitally important characteristics of living tissue. I am not referring just to the famous mind/body problem on the abstract level. The problem involves a way of thinking, a type of concept, which removes implying (and as we will soon see also mean-

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ing and symbolic functions) from body. For us it is vital not to miss the fact that living bodies imply their next bits of life process."

Sure, that might be a bit hard to understand! The concepts are new, and are being used in a new way. But that doesn't mean you have to separate out an entity and say that your "mind" doesn't understand. No, it's plainly and simply you who may not understand - yet...

How Our Bodies are Wise

So what about the other side of the problem. How can "body" have a quality like being "wise," a quality that we usually assume requires a mind?

When Gendlin says, "Living bodies imply their next bits of life process," he's really saying the same thing as when he says, "Our bodies are wise."

Or: "Our bodies know our next life steps."

I've heard Janet Klein give the wonderful example of accidentally getting a cut on one's finger. Where inside us is the knowing of how that cut is going to heal? In the body, right? If I were a doctor I might know how to describe the process of a healing cut. But my finger wouldn't heal any faster or better, because I knew that, than a person who didn't have a clue! In either case, the physician and the - let's say the Focusing teacher - the finger heals. The body knows.

The body knows that digestion follows eating, and how to digest. The body knows that inhale follows exhale. When you spot a person across the street, and you can't consciously remember how you know them, your body is already orienting to the person as known. ("Funny, I didn't recognize her at first as the one I'd had all that trouble with on the committee, but I was already pulling back, turning away. My body knew before I did.")

So just as we are redefining the word "body" to refer to the whole interacting life process that we are - which includes thoughts, images, memories, etc. - we are also redefining the word "know" to mean something more than a series of mental connections.

Body is not separate from mind, mind is not separate from body.

Of course we may need those separate concepts of "body" and "mind" for some purposes. Distinctions can be useful. But we must never let our need for distinctions fool us into thinking that the distinctions are fundamental. Other distinctions could have been made. "Body" and "mind" are one process.

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How Focusing Taps Body Wisdom

What do Focusers mean when we say that with Focusing we tap into the wisdom of the body? Is that just about digesting food, breathing, the healing of cuts? Most people who come to me for Focusing sessions are interested in the kinds of things they don't trust their bodies to do, like untangling relationships, making decisions, getting past blocks, healing old emotional pain.

But the Focusing process can help with those things, and it helps because of the same body wisdom that heals cuts and digests food, but on a whole other level.

When relationships get tangled up and decisions get hard and actions are blocked, a complex process has already occurred that has resulted in the withdrawal of here-and-now awareness from our experiencing. We've labeled some aspect of our experiencing and are no longer in contact with it directly. It's "his stubbornness" or "my procrastination" instead of how it feels freshly right now.

Under those conditions, body wisdom can't operate very well - just as you

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can't see out the window if the blinds are closed. When we're trying to think about a situation using the simple building blocks of our pre-cut concepts, we get ourselves into dead ends. We get nowhere. There's no way out.

But the body process is ready and available to give us fresh ways forward. We can get there by coming into body awareness, here and now, and inviting the felt sense of the situation that feels stuck. That takes us below the concepts to the place where new possibilities live, because it takes us back to the "more."

"My Brother Will Never Be Different"

Janet started her Focusing session with this issue. Her brother would be visiting in a few weeks... and she had a despairing feeling from over 50 years of wishing he was a different person. At the end of her Focusing session, her feeling had shifted. She was in a new place. How things would go with her brother remained to be seen — but she was not holding the issue in the same way. Something new could happen.

She gave me permission to transcribe part of her session for this article.

A: "Inviting your body to form the fresh whole sense of that issue with your brother right now. The feel of it, as you remember and think of him."

J: "It's like there's two halves of me, like the lower half is separate from the upper half. In the lower half it feels like stomping. Like marshmallows stomping around.

A: "So this marshmallow stomping, that's what you're sensing, in the lower half."

J: "There's the part of me that's longing for him to be different. And that's in my chest. Tight, tense, pulled inward... like something that's got too much force applied to it. And it could break. The stomping in the lower half, that's angry at the longing part."

A: "So there in your chest there's that tight, tense... I'm not sure I got it... under pressure it could break."

J: "Yeah. And it's also like a collapsing. A tightness, and a tension, and a collapsing. ... Like you could long so much for something that you would collapse in on yourself."

A: "So we could say, that's how big the longing is. And you could maybe say that to it. That's how big the longing is, that it is even collapsing in on itself there."

J: "It's like when they talk about a galaxy collapsing in itself. That big. Because there's a whole lifetime here of wanting him to be something he's not."

A: "There's a whole lifetime here of wanting him to be something he's not. And you're letting it know you really sense how it is for it."

J: "It's letting me know it would please like to just be allowed to collapse, because — he isn't going to be different. And the wanting isn't going to be fulfilled by him."

A: "It's as if something has been in the way of it collapsing, and it would like to just collapse."

J: "It's been longing harder and harder because of the stomping part, the part that's angry at it. And that part subsided for a bit, and that let this part say, 'I'd just like to finish my collapsing please.' And in that, it eased. And went back to looking like stars. But it's not a collapsing black hole any more."

A: "Maybe just take some time to sense how it feels now."

J: "It's all calmer and easier."

Janet is an experienced Focuser. If you're not, you might find a lot to wonder at in her Focusing session! There are body sensations mixed in with images, metaphors like collapsing galaxies, parts that speak and appreciate being heard. But that seems to be how the body process communicates, through fresh metaphors and responsive sensations. And by easing, calming, and feeling better when its process is given attentive company.

Our remarkable bodies are always available for this process: pausing, and allowing a *whole felt sense* to form of whatever situation or issue is facing us. We simply need to be willing to take the courageous step of letting go, for a time, of the certainty of "knowing what it's all about." There is another kind of *knowing* waiting for us, one that has the ability to take us to a place where something truly new can happen.

Ann Weiser Cornell is the editor of this newsletter.