

As we work

Felt-sense-based Interacting with an Evolving Leading Edge

Kye Nelson (1999)

What I am going to attempt to describe in this article is a certain kind of "movement" in relation to unfolding processes of discovery. This movement is one I ongoingly make in relation to my own creative processes. It is one I have observed naturally occurring in individual and group problem-solving and innovation. Finally, it is the foundation of what I am doing as I interact in learning relationships with children—and it is the heart of what I teach them.

I want to write about how I work with children in such a way that, if you are of a mind to, you can "cash in" my description and **do** something of what I am describing. But also I want this description of a way of working to be more generally applicable^¾ and I want to convey some sense of where else it might **be** applicable.

To do this, I need to lay out the **context** within which I work and also create a shared vocabulary. Then I will be in a position to give some examples of what I do, and describe what this way of working **is in me**: my first-person process. (Gendlin, 1999).

To this end I have appropriated vocabulary from several bodies of work which describe optimal human processes. This vocabulary is already rich and precise though not widely used, and I want something of its richness to be available here so that I can then make these terms do what I need them to do (Nelson, 1998) in describing this movement and its context.

Research into attachment and interrelating between parents and infants has been a particularly rich source of descriptive vocabulary, because our first experiencing of unfolding processes of discovery takes place in infancy, within the context of parent-infant interacting. So I will begin at the beginning, with mother and baby.

An unborn baby is physically enfolded within the mother as s/he unfolds, but also is enfolded in a continuously unfolding relating. There is the mother, there is the baby, and there is something **between** them. At first this interrelating is primarily a biochemical conversation, but as pregnancy progresses mother and baby also respond more and more to one another's movements, energy states, and states of consciousness. Each begins to form a sense of who the other **is**, and how their interactions unfold. (Boukydis, 1985, 1990; Brazelton, 1990)

Birth brings about a shift in how the mother enfolds this unfolding life. Her enfolding opens-out so that there is room for a much more complex unfolding. This more spacious embrace of an ever-more-intricate process is echoed in how the two relate to one another. Ultimately they learn to "dance" with one another in synchronized, rhythmic exchanges with a give-and-take that engages each in a dialogue with its own implicit rules and momentum. The essential qualities of this kind of engagement are encapsulated in the term **entrainment**. (Condon & Sander, 1974)

This interrelating not only helps to strengthen the attachment between the pair. It also is how the infant first explores learning, creativity, and other discovery at the edge of the known, because an adult entrained with an infant is playing very precisely, with the infant's delighted cooperation, just past the edge of what the infant can do unsupported. In so doing, they are giving the infant an opportunity to unfold in this new direction. (Stern, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978) The relating experienced in the dance of entrainment thus becomes the exemplar (template, core, founding instance, ...) for these sorts of processes.

In this context the infant learns nuances of attention and discovers the pleasures of a state of **flow**—that is, total absorption in an intrinsically interesting problem at the edge of one's capacity. (Massimini & Carli, 1988) The natural context for this early experiencing of unfolding processes of discovery is the mother's **enfolding attentive warmth, which evokes and generously receives the evolving leading edge** of the infant's becoming.

Neither the effectiveness of—nor the thirst for—this kind of interaction ends with infancy. Throughout the life cycle, this kind of interaction and support allows an optimal unfolding into that edge just beyond what can be conceived or completed unsupported, known in educational theory as the **zone of proximal development**. (Vygotsky, 1978) When the process is unimpeded, the details of what is unfolding are constellated around that essential and ineradicable but also unfixed "I-am" in each person which is becoming manifest. An individual can ongoingly access this edge, but it also has durability even when its unfolding is interrupted. It is a persistent and abiding duration that won't take no for an answer - it can be interrupted because it will keep knocking. (Gendlin, 1997) How this ever-evolving self is manifesting itself shifts with developmental stages (Kegan, 1982) but the core qualities of the kind of interaction that can optimally support such unfolding do not.

Discovery at the edge of unaided capacity—and the state of flow that accompanies it—can proceed independently when the individual is able to provide the enfolding context for themselves as the responsiveness of the process itself provides the momentum. Based on my observations of children who are unable to work independently in this way prior to our work together, I believe that for an individual to fully develop the capacity for entrainment with a

process, they must first have had ample opportunity to experience it in the context of another's caring presence.

For this relating to be fluid and natural, a dynamic balance must exist. This balance is attained by giving full expression to—and maintaining just enough tension between—knowing and not-knowing, honoring what wants to persist and encouraging something new. It is as natural, and simple, as the act of taking a step—but just as with walking, it can be more or less graceful and elegant depending on the practitioner.

Ongoing attention to the felt sense of an entire process, even as one participates in its unfolding, can help achieve and sustain this dynamic balance. The felt sense of the **entirety or duration** of the process enfolds its unfolding **in this moment**. In working this way one is ongoingly attending to, and following the lead of, that which feels implicitly and inherently right.

This kind of ongoing real-time felt-sensing offers a profoundly simple and therefore infinitely flexible tool for engaging in and supporting a whole range of unfolding processes. It is the way of being that is at the heart of natural learning, and so has a natural place in all discovery.

But here I need to make the term "discovery" say something a little different than it usually does. In normal usage discovering means that **something** has been discovered which is a static, unchanging entity: "Columbus discovered America". But the act of discovering in the unfolding sense in which I am using it here **changes** that which it discovers. So I would like the word "discovery" here to include 'and already in being discovered it is different'. This is familiar territory to focusers because we experience it again and again in the discovery-and-now-it-moves process of Focusing.

Now I need to consider the most generous common denominator of the sorts of things than can be referred to by the term "Focusing". The term could be reserved to refer to a freestanding exploration of the unfolding self, centered in and guided by the felt sense. But felt-sensing often is the lodestone process that guides ongoing discovery and decision-making in other sorts of unfolding processes. Therefore, the term "Focusing" might point to **ongoing reference to, and guidance by, the felt sense of any unfolding process**: for instance, musical performance, storytelling, acting, troubleshooting, technological innovation, or a farmer's sense of the weather. In looking at these instances it becomes apparent that **this referring can be made either explicitly (with conscious attention) or implicitly, as long as it remains embodied**. This kind of definition gives an opening to **apply** this process more broadly. Felt-sensing becomes visible as a fundamental process of embodied consciousness which interpenetrates and informs many other real-time processes.

But when is the referral made implicitly, and when is it done with conscious attention?

A first step in distinguishing the two comes when I attend to what is going-on kinesthetically as I do what I do. Entrainment with what **is** (a continually changing "is") gives rise to an implicit knowing of its living-forward in me, and the simultaneous **matching** (Behnke, 1988) of that living-forward with its physical expression. (Sacks, 1984) In that tiny void between right-before and just-after, a bodily experiencing of implications guides the formation of that kinesthetic intention which itself informs the accompanying action. (Gendlin, 1997)

This happens just below the level of conscious awareness as long as the implications of what is intended engender a felt sense of rightness. But when the next step feels unclear or potentially in the wrong direction, then that kinesthetic sense of unclearness or not-rightness **requests** conscious attention for a time for a more generous exploration of implications: that request **is** the natural next step formed within this nexus.

The job of attention at this point is to step back, to move as far beyond the boundaries of this nexus as it takes to **see** (Sacks, 1995) the whole context for this feeling of unclearness. Attention articulates that which the body **knows** is meaningful or relevant but can only **feel**. When in this process attention continually **offers back** its insight to the body for confirmation, this fertile crossing of the seen and felt carries both forward.

With this general vocabulary and within this context I can begin to articulate something of how I currently use and teach (draw out, re-introduce, refine, ...) Focusing in interactions with children who are in the midst of making discoveries at, or just beyond, the edge of their capacity.

I have come, through daily observation, to greatly respect the strength of the human drive to go to the edge: to ask questions, to investigate, to experiment and see what will happen and then push it a little further, to synthesize, to collaborate with others—in short, the drive to become entrained again and again, to engage in a dialogue of discovery with many kinds of process, both within and without. Mapping patterns in childrens' open-ended discovery has taught me to trust and move with underlying patterns in the unfolding of core competencies.

I constantly innovate out of my own embodied sense of the hidden connections between realms of learning, creating a fertile, constantly changing context within which a particular child's drive to engage with (explore, respond to, be changed by,) process can be fully expressed and refined, in their own time and way. Learning is the sensitive response of an ever-evolving self in the dance of life. Therefore, when I am working with a child all of what is happening at this moment in our living can be welcomed as the fundamental context of our work.

For example, my 7-year-old and I have the flu today. He woke this morning feeling too miserable to do anything. Now he is bored. He has lately been on the edge of being able to imaginatively enter into the felt experience of others. His boredom offers a possible opportunity for him to make this shift

I tell him that I'm noticing he's closed up in himself with his own misery. Since he hasn't yet made this particular step he doesn't know what I mean, and says so. I ask him what is happening in the apartment. He notes his sleeping brother, then turns his attention to the sounds of birds outside, and notes different songs.

His brother wakes, and I ask 'what's changed?' He looks confused, and I say 'already it's different. Listen.' He does, hears the sounds of his brother's movements. Shortly his brother appears, asking for a throat lozenge, then disappears again. I ask, "Have you ever imagined how it would feel to be somebody else?" "No." 'You might feel in your body how it would be right now to **be B__**.' He closes his eyes, opens them in a bit and says 'My throat would be feeling sore and I would be feeling sick.'

His face is much more animated now. I say, 'What about the bird outside right now?' The bird flies, and his face registers delight as he feels in him something of how flying would be. 'That's strange, and fun.' He sees two squirrels playing in a tree outside and feels what it would be like to be able to play tag in a tree, and how it is to be a bird in the morning feeling hungry, looking for food. I simply listen and reflect.

Then I ask, 'what about me?' Again he closes his eyes for a bit, and when he opens them says 'you're very complicated'. He moves past the complicated, says 'you're tired', and I say, '...and I'm talking to **you** right now'. He experiences that, says 'it's odd, but nice'. Then he says, 'it's funny, but now I'm happy even though I still feel bad.' I say, 'if you look back on my saying you were closed up in yourself does it make sense now?' He reflects on it, and it does. He wants to play this new game some more, and applies it to an event in the past week, sensing each person involved. Then he notices he's hungry, so he stops.

The movement of evoking and generously receiving this responsive evolution can take several forms. Often what is needed to keep the process moving forward is simply to hear or witness it. Sometimes the process knows explicitly that it needs something it doesn't have, and what that something is. Without judgement or comment I provide exactly what it says it needs. Sometimes it knows implicitly that it needs **something**, but not exactly what that something is. Then I seek to help it discover that implicitly right thing that **it already knows** will make it possible for it to move forward again. (Gendlin 1991) Sometimes it asks for a delicate pull out of the zone of familiarity. All these variants of the basic movement-in-relation-to- can be verbal, or non-verbal participation, or non-verbal reflection and dialogue, or a blend of any of these. Often much of the interacting is non-verbal, as in this example:

S__ is discovering the nesting boxes. She opens each box, more and more delighted as she finds another box inside each. She explores their ordering for some time, involving me in the game. I keep up a running reflection of what is happening: 'now the orange one, now the blue one' as we pick up boxes. Eventually she wants to do something different and asks what I'd like to do.

I suggest a story card game as a tentative offering of another kind of ordering. At the end of the first round she places her cards more or less randomly, and her story is a brief description of what she sees on each card without any narrative bridge. I tell my story next, embroidering and being dramatic in standard storytelling fashion. She drinks this in and chooses that story set for the next round of the game. This time she spends some time deciding how she wants to order her cards. When she tells her story she uses some of my intonation and narrative thread; but her ordering of the cards is different and she also introduces humorous variations.

She returns to the nesting boxes and begins filling them with spiral shells and stones. At first what she puts in each box is random, but then she starts looking for a way to organize what she is doing. By bits and pieces, finally she arrives at the idea of sorting different sorts of shells and rocks into each box. Throughout this I am verbally reflecting what she is doing and following her lead in sharing the work itself. I change with her as she introduces variations and occasionally introduce variations myself.

Now she draws storytelling and boxes filled with treasures together and makes up a story which we enact as she creates it. I continue reflecting and following her lead, then offer to write her story down, an offer which pleases her very much. Afterwards we play with wood blocks, and here I offer the variation of building stairsteps. She is immediately absorbed in this new challenge.

By now there is a clear thread of exploring what-comes-next, so I begin to draw a number spiral. I draw it all the way to the edge of the paper, and we play with the idea of how big the spiral and the numbers could get if we had a piece of paper as big as the room... the building... the city... Her eyes get big with each new addition of bigness, and she laughs.

As I prepare for our next session I get out materials that could take this exploration of sequences in other directions: for instance putting sounds together to form words. What is out for a session changes depending on what happened in the last session, and if I have picked up the underlying threads well, what is new immediately draws the child deeply into its possibilities.

There are so many such substrates I am working with that no matter where a child leads I can follow and work together with them at an edge, in such a way that our interaction can relate to many unfoldings. I am constantly learning all the intricacy of the edge where this child is **now** and what wants to happen **there**.

Therefore, I find intrinsic value and pleasure in almost anything that happens in our interacting.

In order to continually recreate my own inner context as part of establishing a learning context for another, I must be ongoingly attentive to the exact contours of the edges around the not-yet-there where something wants to unfold, and the nesting of that unfolding in other unfoldings. I sense what that edge is asking of me right now in the course of **its own knowing of what it needs** and respond as precisely as I am able.

This ongoing attention, in the midst of work, to the felt sense of the **entire, unfolding process itself** is also the core of what I help children discover and refine in themselves. One way I teach a child how to do this is by simply helping them, as they work, to go to the felt sense for guidance whenever the need for guidance arises in them.

At first when I am working with a child I simply reflect the times I see them making felt-sense-based choices (i.e. I see a small pause with inner attention followed by a choice and reflect it: 'So that feels like the right thing to do next.'). Later I begin to guide them to notice their felt sense at times when they are looking to me to provide an external judgement, as in this example:

I say, 'Why don't you tell me the story of what is happening in this picture and I will write it down like I wrote down your story before.' She looks at details of the picture and I reflect them, then say 'I wonder where **he** might be going?' She is immediately involved with making up a story. I say each word aloud as she dictates it to me.

Me: [when she finishes] Would you like me to read it to you?

Her: Yes! [I read it.] It's a good story I guess. [Her tone leaves hooks for me to respond positively or negatively to the story, and she looks closely at my face. Underneath there is a little flatness or disappointment in her tone, and her facial expression says the same.]

Me: A part that doesn't quite feel right to you?... [said neutrally and tentatively—I have no agenda myself for her story]

Her: Read it again. [I read it.] No, I don't like that part.

Me: What would feel right for it to say? [There is a pause for inner attention, then she tells me what to change.]

Me: Shall I read it again?

Her: Yes. [I read it.] No, I don't like **that** part. [more revision] Now read it again. [and so on until she is satisfied].

There is a growing living web "in here" for the learner, and the growing and the web happen independently of me, but how I relate to that process/structure can amplify or diminish it. I want to respect what is happening on its own, and not interrupt it, but also I **do** want to intervene, and encourage it to shift and unfold into something new, a little broader or a little more subtle, or somehow carried forward. There is staying out of its way, and not merely staying out of its way—actively holding it safe. But there is also unbalancing it. It is being catalytic, but also being nurturing.

My 11-year-old son Benjamin came in to talk before I went to sleep the other night, and we started talking about the project of writing this article. I told him that I'm doing first person science (Gendlin, 1999) as I self-observe what I do with kids. I told him about needing to shift my perception of time and the present tense to be able to say what I do and told him my terms 'stretchy time and 'fractal time' and said 'like playing a piece of music'. After a few minutes of exploration in which—on the basis of only those three descriptors and his inner attention to what they brought in him—he independently reconstructed what I'd discovered myself, he asked me if I'd already known what he had discovered so far. I said yes, and he asked me to tell him a first person project he could work on 'where I hadn't figured it out yet'. Here are some highlights of the ensuing interaction:

Me: We know that there is a sort of 3-dimensional web that is the the structure of what's been learned, but it's constantly changing. What we don't know, as a first person science, is how you make this 3-dimensional web.

He was immediately galvanized, and went and got pencil and paper so I could take dictation—something I do when a child is writing at the edge because it frees them from the burden of capturing their own thoughts. I generally say each word aloud as I write it.

Him: Okay, like spelling. There are basic words I know that are on a solid part of the strand, but then other words that are new or not used much are shifted and lost. ... I make another strand to make it easier to find these extra words.

Me: So you might **go into** how you make that strand... [He is an experienced focuser, and "go into" is shorthand between he and I for explicit attention to the bodily sense of all that]

Him: [pause, inner attention] To make the strand, I must sort of make a mark in my consciousness that reminds me... That brings several more strings: how do I learn, why do I learn, and is it important to learn. God, there's many strands now... I need to build in a strand of the felt sense to realize how I keep on track, and stay with what I'm trying to learn... If I was writing a sentence on the felt

sense, and I put in 'this is all coming so fast', 'this is all coming so fast' would remind me later about **what** was all coming so fast, so that I would be able to pull more reasons out of it. Is this what you do?

Me: Yes, there are lots of strands and then I'm pulling them together. I'll have to get you a little notebook like the one I use to write them down. [I'm feeling in me how it is to be holding so many strands at once, and the relief of letting my writing them down hold them for me.]

Him: The way all the strands in a 3- dimensional spider web form, is when you start off on one idea and then you see another thing inside of it which forms another strand, which has more strands and ideas inside of **it**. This is part of the work my mother is doing.

And you keep going, trying to find everything inside all of the problems you have, sooner or later you will pull all of these together, and it will form a...web of ideas and thoughts. All of these ideas and thoughts are part of the way we learn. It is true you get information from books, movies, and tapes; but the most learning goes on inside when you start thinking weird and crazy thoughts and having strange ideas. The strands of what you know form a foundation. The strands of your probable ideas form around the things you know, and then creative ideas that might not even be true form around this, and you have a basic structure of learning.

Like, **that** [gesture towards the pages he's been dictating to me] stuff I **know** is true, but more layers will follow with what I think is likely and what I'm not even sure about...

Me: But you can always stay with the felt sense of it all to guide you...

Him: [pause, inner sensing, palpable feeling of excitement and bigness] I'm working really hard here on a problem that's new, and I've got so many felt senses I can't count them. I have got felt senses on how things get pulled into what you already know. I've got felt senses on how you begin knowing. I have felt senses on why you probably will never stop learning...

Again, I will start with the 1st one: how the ideas/knowledge get pulled in. It starts when you form your new ideas...After this happens, you will search around for a spot in the web of knowledge already existing...Now this is the place where you would ask me how I would find the place that I already know, so I will explain that. [What he did here is very interesting to me: he is holding the space internally for "my part" of an implicit dialogue.] To do this, you look around in what you already know...and find the same basic subject as the new knowledge/thoughts.

Problem 2: to begin your web - when I was little I knew basic knowledge as pain, hunger, pleasure, and sleepiness. Other things I would attach to these areas...When I climbed trees, [starting at about 18 months of age] I did not think that doing it could cause pain. It was fun, it fit in my pleasure category, I liked it. But when I scraped myself on snags of wood it hurt and those snags went in the pain category and so I didn't get caught on them and scrape myself...

Now I want to go another layer into the inner context of my responses. There is presence; there is a respectful trust; there is commitment; but what **are** these, precisely, in me?

Trust, in me, is the body-feel of the implicit coherence of an unfolding whole. It is a bodily knowing that this eye-blink of a moment **makes sense** within the context of the whole duration of many interpenetrating unfoldings. When it makes sense, there is a confident relaxing-into-it that can happen in my body, and I am able to be wide-open in relation to that unfolding, giving into it all of me. This is the source of ongoing presence.

Presence implies trust, and trust implies presence, and both imply commitment. Commitment is feeling **me** in the duration of the unfolding. It is the kinesthetic experience of not-leaving from an ongoing unfolding over its entire duration. And when I give all of me into an unfolding process I experience a state of flow. But my trust, my presence, and my commitment are not in relation to something seen explicitly, but to something felt implicitly.

There is a durability to commitment and also a durability to human unfolding. This durability has resilience; it's tough; it can survive interruptions for many years like a flower that springs up overnight in the desert after the rain. The final example I'll offer is about this durability in a little girl and me: the flowering in her that springs up overnight in the rain of my not-going.

She is five, but before I first meet her I am told that, because of an impoverished environment, she has been evaluated as functioning at a 2- or 3- year old level. She is described also as being very withdrawn and never happy.

She sits between her parents on the couch. She has her eyes closed and is leaning against her stepmother, who tries to get her to turn and engage with me. I want to reflect the closed eyes aloud, but not directly to the child because her body is telling me she isn't ready to be engaged directly. I want her to know that I am attending but not invading and that that I am her ally in this matter of not-engaging. But also I am feeling something wide-awake and maybe a little bit curious underneath the closed eyes—a very small not-passive something, maybe a little playful or impish, around her mouth and cheeks. So I both affirm the surface message, and also test the underneath one a bit, by saying to her stepmother 'She could take a nap the whole time if she wanted to. And one thing

about being here, she doesn't have to say one word to me.' She settles her body as if for a nap, a little tension releases, and there is a tiny shadow of a smile.

I am free to invite her **not** to interact with me because I am acting from the felt sense of the whole session, and feeling bodily that not-interacting-now has high potential to unfold into interacting later; further, that engaged interacting later **needs** not-interacting-now.

Ten minutes into the session she has begun to interact with her parents a little. There has not yet been any direct interaction between she and me, though she has stolen a few looks in my direction. At a pause I say, 'I wonder if S__ might like somebody to read this book? She nods, and her stepmother asks, 'would you like Kye to read it to you?' She nods again.

My choice of book was guided by the felt sense of what our whole relationship might be: it is the story of a little girl who is afraid of the dark and the hungry spirits that lurk in it, ready to devour her—and of the wise-woman who holds her as she herself discovers how to "carry her own light with her".

As I read she watches my face far more than the (gorgeous) pages of the book. I continue to respect her pace, which is saying, 'I want to check you out while you're busy with something and not watching me,' and which needs from me staying-involved-in-this-page so that her exploration of my face can continue to unfold.

But yet again I am acting out of the felt sense of the whole reading-the-book-with-her so that the story can unfold itself, and not only unfold, unfold in-response-to her hearing it. And smaller still, I am guided by the felt sense of the unfolding of this sentence so that it can come to life—and the unfolding of this word.

When I finish reading I feel something open enough in her to address directly and ask 'would you like to hear that again sometime?' She nods vigorously. I take this opening to play with the suspected imp a bit [also I am curious to know if she will be like a 2- or 3- year old in wanting to hear it again right away]. So I say 'like right now?' and she gets a bit of an 'adults are silly' look on her face, and I say, 'no, that would be silly, wouldn't it?' and she nods again, and the ghost smile is back. I say 'I think I see an imp there' warmly-playfully, and she gets a bit of glow about her. I ask if she knows what an imp is, and she shakes her head, so I give her a beguiling definition and tell her I'm one.

Then I say 'there are some things over there you might like to have a look at', gesturing in the direction of the area where various games and manipulatives live. Within minutes we are entrained in a mutual exploration of pattern blocks, and then in 'building tall', and soon this small person who had been described as never happy is deeply absorbed in challenging new problems, alternately silent and giggling. She is in flow.

Broken out like this, it might seem as though I have been deliberately holding all these layers in conscious awareness. But I don't need to do that. The light I carry with me is the ongoing embodied awareness of me-in-relation-to-all-of-that: usually implicit, but attended to explicitly when it asks. This is the light I hope to help this child discover in herself.

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