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# Right in Their Hands: How gestures imply the body's next steps in Focusing-oriented therapy

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**Abstract.** One of the cornerstones of the theory and practice of Focusing-oriented therapy is Gendlin's notion (1996) of the *life-forward process*. In this paper, the importance of recognizing beginning signs of movement in a life-forward direction will be explored with emphasis on the role of gestures as implying next steps and solutions. The phenomenon of *gestural leads* will be delineated, as a recurrent process marker that emerges in initial sessions of psychotherapy. Using vignettes, the author will demonstrate how Focusing at these gestural "markers" can be a powerful avenue for explicating their felt meaning and for formulating new, intricate possibilities for moving forward. Stages of the Focusing-process event in facilitating change-steps along with a brief theoretical exploration will be presented.

**Key words:** gestures, Focusing-oriented therapy, change-step, life-forward process event

## **Auf der Hand: Wie Gesten die nächsten Schritte des Körpers in der Focusing-orientierten Therapie andeuten**

Einer der Grundpfeiler von Theorie und Praxis Focusing-orientierter Therapie ist Gendlins Gedanke (1996) des *vorwärtsgerichteten Lebensprozesses*. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Wichtigkeit, die Anzeichen einer vorwärtsgerichteten Bewegung zu erkennen. Er betont die Rolle der Gesten, die nächste Schritte und Lösungen andeuten. Das Phänomen eines *Leitfadens durch Gesten* wird umrissen. Dieser stellt einen wiederkehrenden Prozessmarker dar, der bereits in den ersten psychotherapeutischen Sitzungen auftaucht. Anhand von Fallvignetten zeigt der Autor, wie Focusing mit diesen „Markern“ aus Gesten ein machtvoller Zugang (Avenue) sein kann, um ihre gefühlte Bedeutung zu erklären und um neue, damit verwobene Möglichkeiten für die Vorwärtsbewegung zu formulieren. Dargestellt werden die Phasen eines Focusing-Prozesses mit den fördernden Veränderungsschritten (facilitating change-steps), zusammen mit einer kurzen theoretischen Untersuchung.

## **Justo en sus manos: Cómo los gestos implican los pasos siguientes del cuerpo en la terapia orientada al focusing**

Uno de las piedras angulares de la teoría y práctica de la terapia orientada al Focusing es la noción de Gendlin (1996) del *proceso promotor de vida*. En este escrito se explorará la importancia de reconocer las primeras señales de movimiento en una dirección promotora de vida con énfasis en el rol de los gestos

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## Right in Their Hands

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para indicar los próximos pasos y soluciones. El fenómeno de *pistas gestuales* será delineado como marcador recurrente del proceso que emerge en las sesiones iniciales de psicoterapia. Usando ejemplos, el autor demostrará cómo el Focusing en estos “marcadores” gestuales puede ser una vía potente para explicar su significado y para formular las nuevas e intrincadas posibilidades de avance. Se presentarán las etapas del acontecimiento del proceso de Focusing para facilitar los pasos de cambio, junto con una breve exploración teórica.

### **Dans leurs Mains: La manière dont les gestes impliquent les prochaines étapes de la thérapie orientée sur le Focusing**

Une des clefs de voûte de la théorie et de la pratique de la thérapie orientée sur le Focusing est la notion du processus “vers la vie” de Gendlin (1996). Dans cet article, les premiers signes de mouvement dans une direction vers la vie ainsi que leur importance sont explorés tout en soulignant le rôle de la gestuelle pour donner une indication des prochaines étapes. Le phénomène d’*indices gestuels* est décrit comme un marqueur récurrent des processus qui émergent dans les sessions initiales de la psychothérapie. Au travers de vignettes, l’auteur démontre, quand ces “marqueurs” gestuels apparaissent, la manière dont le fait d’orienter vers le Focusing peut ouvrir un canal puissant pour expliciter leur sens corporels et pour formuler des possibilités nouvelles et complexes pour avancer. Les étapes, en tant qu’événement du processus de Focusing dans la facilitation pas à pas du changement sont présentées ainsi qu’une brève exploration théorique.

### **Nas suas mãos: De como os gestos precedem os passos seguintes do corpo em terapia orientada pelo Focusing**

O conceito de processo motivador de vida (Gendlin, 1996) é um dos conceitos fundamentais da teoria e da prática da terapia orientada pelo *Focusing*. Neste artigo, será explorada a importância de reconhecer sinais iniciais de movimento numa direcção motivadora de vida, colocando-se a ênfase no papel dos gestos como implicando os passos e as soluções seguintes. Será delineado o fenómeno de pistas gestuais, como sinalizador recorrente do processo que emerge nas sessões iniciais de psicoterapia. Recorrendo a curtos casos clínicos, o autor demonstrará como o *Focusing* estes “sinalizadores” podem ser um poderoso aporte para explicar o sentido vivenciado e para formular novas e intrincadas possibilidades de prosseguir. Serão apresentados os estádios do processo de *Focusing* facilitadores de passos de mudança, bem como uma breve exploração teórica.

すべてはその手の中に：フォーカシング指向心理療法において、いかにジェスチャーが身体の次のステップを暗示しているか

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## I. INTRODUCTION: GESTURING AS FACILITATING CHANGE IN FOCUSING-ORIENTED THERAPY

The living body always implies its right next steps. (Gendlin, 1993, p. 31)

A client comes to therapy to overcome social anxiety, with respect to public speaking and women. In an initial session, he describes certain situations likely to evoke anxious reactions. In the midst of describing his fears, he states, “I don’t know what to do to overcome these anxious feelings . . . It’s not clear . . .” While stating this, I observed that his hands are making a distinct movement: **both hands are facing each other, fingers curled, making a sphere-like shape, with hands rotating back and forth in opposite directions around this sphere.** I pointed out the hand movement, inviting him to observe the gesturing motion, to sense how it feels, and what it might be conveying to him. He first observed the gesturing motion, then closed his eyes. He stated, “It feels like something in me that’s crawling into a shell, closing off from the world . . . It feels safe in there, like I’m protected and sheltered.” He sensed how the rotation of his hands conveyed a spherical shape, and how this felt comforting to a scared, insecure part of him by holding it safely inside this shell. He mentioned how his whole body felt calmer. “Yeah [sigh], if I could protect that part of me in this shell, it would feel more comfortable. [Sighs] The anxiety has gone down. I feel much more relaxed.”

This brief excerpt is a clear example of a gesture as an incipient form of bodily implying of a life-forward direction, a tacit indicator of right next steps. Thus, while the client states that he does not know what to do, his hands are showing that they *do know* a way toward resolution. I have termed this phenomenon *gestural lead*, to indicate how hand movements can function as an embodied way of implying right next steps toward carrying forward clients’ living and experiencing process. In this paper, I will describe gestural leads as a recurrent marker in therapy and as a Focusing-oriented change event in initial sessions of psychotherapy.

## II. THEORIES AND FUNCTIONS OF GESTURES

### a. Gestures: Embodied knowledge

The term *gesture* comes from Latin: *gestura*, bearing, deportment, carrying, and is defined as “(1) a movement made with a part of the body in order to express meaning or emotion or to communicate an instruction; (2) an action intended to communicate feelings or intentions” (Msn.encarta dictionary). In practical terms, we say something is a gesture when the hand movements appear to be a part of the speaker’s expression, aimed at conveying information, emphasis or meaning (see Kendon, 2000). David M. Levin (1985) notes that etymologically to gesture means, “to bear,” “to bring forth,” “to give birth,” “to make appear,” thus inferring two functions: (1) *bearing (being)* — carrying habitual patterns; and (2) *possibility (becoming)* — formulating or bringing something new into existence.

Gestures are bodily actions pregnant with implicit meaning, a manifestation of “embodied knowledge, the lived experience that hands bring to their symbolic task” (LeBaron & Streeck,

2000, p. 120). As Goldin-Meadow (2003, p. 57) states, “Speakers can express knowledge in gesture that they do not express in speech.” Gestures function as symbolic, virtual “versioning” (Gendlin, 1997) of an action, helping transition from what is known to something emerging but not yet known (Goldin-Meadow, 2003).

**b. Role of gestures in the process of thinking**

A recent book by Kendon (2004b) offers a very well-researched history of gesture studies. According to Kendon, until the last decade, gestures were mainly considered to function as social communication or nonverbal expression. Infants’ gestures, such as pointing with their fingers to express desire, reach out to the world and influence social interactions.

Over the past decade or so, the study of gestures has expanded to include their role in the process of thinking (Kendon, 2000). Gestures help formulate, conceptualize and express new ideas without disrupting existing communication (Kita, 2000; Goldin-Meadow, 2003). When gestures co-occur with speech, they have a “*self-oriented*” function (Kita, 2000; McNeill, 2000, 2005) providing an alternative pathway for “packaging information” (Kita, 2000) not available to and beyond that of conceptual, linguistic thinking. What is becoming clearer is that gestures are an integral part of language and thought itself, making a unique contribution to the full meaning of expression as it occurs, more complete than the verbal content alone (McNeil, 2000).

**c. Gesture mismatches: Emergent sense of solutions to problems**

Gestures are often consonant with speech, often serving to amplify what is being verbalized. There are also times when gestures appear to be expressing something different from the verbal content of speech, what Goldin-Meadow (2003) calls gesture-speech *mismatches*. Gesture *mismatch* or *non-redundant* gesture (Kita, 2000) is described as “any instance in which gesture and speech convey *different* information” (Kendon, 2004a, p. 95).

In a series of experiments with children, Goldin-Meadow (2003) observed that some children, while giving incorrect explanations to problems, indicated via gestures that they had a sense of the solution. The children who displayed these mismatches were in transition toward arriving at a new or correct understanding of the problem. Gesture mismatches occurred more frequently during this transitional phase, displaying a “second idea” not found in verbal speech. This idea expressed in the gesture “is part of the solution process itself” (Goldin-Meadow, 2003, p. 172) and when followed, would often result in new ideas and answers. This lends strength to the notion that gestures do not just reflect thought but are expressing an embodied knowledge that people have about a problem, but which has not yet been formulated in words or ideas. “There are many situations ... where the information conveyed in gesture *predicts the speaker’s next step* [italics added] — it’s a harbinger of things to come” (ibid.). Gestural leads in therapy serve a similar function.

### III. BRIEF REVIEW OF GESTURES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

#### a. Understanding of gesture in psychoanalysis and experiential therapy

Attention to nonverbal activity has always been an important aspect of psychotherapy. Gestures along with other forms of nonverbal behavior have mainly been viewed as unwitting expressions of inner thoughts and underlying emotions. Freud is quoted as stating, “If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore. And thus the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the mind is one which is quite possible to accomplish” (cited in Krueger, 1989, p. 147). In addition to psychoanalysis, many schools of therapy view gesture and other bodily expressions as indicators of unconscious or emotional material being leaked or “betrayed” (Leijssen, 2006). Gestures are seen as disclosing something of which clients are unaware, or are trying to conceal. In addition, nonverbal material is rich with history and meaning, often conveying unformulated experience (Stern, 1997). As Krueger (1989) states, “Gesture and movement predate speech and reveal basic and powerful affect” (p. 147); “[they] ... embody unarticulated and unsymbolized experience” (p. 148).

Many experiential-process therapies as well as body-oriented/somatic therapies work directly with nonverbal expression and movement (Leijssen, 2006). For many years, Gestalt therapists have incorporated client gestures into their work to bring forward aspects of client experiencing that have not yet been symbolized in awareness, often via what are called *experiments*. Experiments are in-session processes designed to increase awareness of what clients are feeling and doing moment-to-moment as well to invite clients to try out new ways of behaving. One type of experiment focuses on the “explication” of “pregnant paralinguage” (Daniels, 2001), i.e., giving voice to nonverbal expressions, such as gesturing. By giving the gesture a voice, what the movement might be saying emerges more directly and powerfully in the session, while also enabling the emotional meaning of the gesture to unfold (Yontef, 1993).

#### b. Gestures as a therapeutic avenue in Focusing-oriented therapy

Focusing-oriented therapy (FOT) (Gendlin, 1996) is an emerging orientation that emphasizes *the experiencing body* (Leijssen, 2006), i.e., the body as sensed or felt from inside. The key concept is *felt sense*, defined as a *body sense of a whole* situation. The therapeutic change process involves a back and forth between any explicit expression and its connection to its body (felt) sense, so that, with accurate symbolization, there is a physical release, enabling the whole body to reformulate and live further.

In a succinct summation of his philosophy (see 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1997), Gendlin (1996, p. 215) states that “Every living body organizes, implies and — if it can — enacts the next step of its own living process. If it cannot enact the next step, the implying of it continues.” This is a core tenant of the theory and practice of FOT, i.e., that when blocked, the body always discloses “... an implicit implying of what is to come next” (Purton, 2004, p. 181), what Gendlin (1986) calls “*bodily sensed leads...*” (p. 52B). I will demonstrate how gestures, as one type of bodily lead, can imply right next steps.

Although there has been mention of using gesture in FOT (Leijssen, 2006; Wiltschko, 1994), to my knowledge (other than my own earlier explorations of a similar phenomenon,

see Fleisch, 1997, 2000) there has been no specific study of gestures as an entrée to a Focusing-oriented change event in therapy. H. Jay Shaffer pioneered the importance of gestures in the Focusing process. As he states, “Gesture not only may co-occur with speech but can supplement speech with its own insights into the felt sense and may even at times *convey a message that contrasts with the message of speech* [italics added]” (Shaffer, 1998). Because gestures involve motion, they convey a process aspect that often enacts an implicit knowing of a new way forward in a right direction.

#### IV. GESTURAL LEADS: A SPECIFIC TASK-MARKER IN FOCUSING-ORIENTED THERAPY

In the examples presented in this paper, motioning of the hands and arms served a particular function — **as leads to a solution or new possibility of being**. Gestural leads can be viewed as specific markers similar to other examples presented by (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993) in experiential/process-oriented therapy. These researchers discovered recurrent types of processing difficulties clients face in therapy. What they term *markers* are indicators of the onset of these in-therapy events, including clients’ readiness for a particular type of therapeutic exploration (Greenberg et al., 1993, pp. 9, 13). The authors suggest that if clients are engaged in the task of trying to solve a problem, they may be more receptive at those moments to an invitation designed to help facilitate its solution.

This article focuses on gestural leads as a distinct process marker that can arise at any point in the therapy process. Here I will only focus on gestures that arise in initial sessions. The Focusing change event is initiated by a specific gesturing marker — *a movement or positioning of the hands/arms that occurs in juxtaposition to clients’ expressed narratives of being stuck in some area of living, which conveys something that differs from the content of their speech*.

The specific aspects that characterize a gestural-lead Focusing change event are as follows:

1. *Strong negative affect/bodily stress/blockage* Clients are verbally expressing physical and emotional distress in relation to a specific problem or central issue, in which they report being stuck, confused, unable to move forward, change, etc.
2. *Spontaneous gesture occurs* During the process of speaking and reflecting back the verbal content, an unprompted, distinct movement of the hands/arms happens, that appears to be expressing something different from or in addition to verbal utterances.
3. *Attending to and Focusing on the gesture* Focusing on the bodily sense and felt meaning of the gesture brings new information and steps toward a sense of solution and forward movement in the situation that had previously felt blocked or stopped.

## V. VIGNETTES: EXAMPLES OF GESTURAL LEADS IN INITIAL THERAPY SESSIONS

The transcripts presented here have all come from the initial session of psychotherapy. These examples will illustrate how gesture serves the function of a process “marker” that initiates the Focusing change event, such that inviting attention to what clients’ hands are doing allows for what they are implying, e.g., a direction of change or solution, to open up and formulate. The first two vignettes demonstrate how gestures can function as a pathway toward resolution in a specific interpersonal situation. The second pair of vignettes shows how gestures activate a general direction of growth and personal development. Details in each vignette have been altered or mixed together to protect the confidentiality of the clients. However, the modifications do not change the meanings of what happened and the gestures are presented exactly as observed. The specific gestures utilized are highlighted in bold (marked by an \*) along with other therapist input that is part of the process event. Experiential meanings of the gestural leads are placed in roman type within the italicized vignettes. For brevity, I have eliminated most of the listening reflections that follow clients’ sharing. The reader can assume these occurred following each verbal utterance.

### Vignette 1

A married woman in her mid-30s (“Marlene”) came to therapy with severe physical and emotional distress, including extreme tension, headaches, fatigue, anxiety, frustration, depression, pain, hopelessness, frequent crying, low self-esteem, etc. These symptoms were presented as a result of an ongoing struggle with her husband’s continued drug abuse. After describing her symptoms and the situation, she exclaimed,

*Client: The situation is not getting better — there’s nothing more I can do. I’ve put so much energy to help him, I feel drained, have nothing left. I don’t know what to do anymore. [Strongly] I’m giving up!!*

While stating this, I observed that Marlene began **\*making a motion with her hands and arms moving vertically from her chest area outwards, looking as if holding something and leaving her arms outstretched toward the other side of the couch.**

*Therapist: I noticed while you were speaking that your hands were making this motion [I briefly demonstrate the gesture]. I wonder if it would feel OK to pay attention to the gesturing, sense how it feels in the center of your body.*

*C: [Pauses, sighs . . .] Yeah, it’s kind of like what I do. I try putting the ball in my husband’s court, but I always take it back. I don’t know what it is except I’m always taking responsibility and blame for his drug problems.*

*T: You want to put the ball over there, and something in you takes it back again. You might stay with that gesturing motion — sense what it might be suggesting . . .*

*C: [She repeats the movement, then pauses] Now that feels good. [deeper sigh] Yes, it's saying that I need to put the ball in his court, over there, and keep it there. If I could do that more often, it would be such a relief! It would take a big load off me. [breath]*

*T: Doing that movement — feels good, relieving. See if it feels OK to try this — close your eyes and notice how it feels if you could imagine keeping that ball with him, over there.*

*C: [closes eyes, silent for several seconds, body seems to relax further, slight smile] I don't feel that heavy burden. It's such a great sense of relief. Even my body is not as shaky — much calmer, more settled feeling. Feels much better.*

*T: Stay with that whole sense of calm that came. Now you might check inside — sense what message or meaning comes from this calm, settled place.*

*C: [quietly attends] It says, "You're OK, you're all right!" [big smile] I feel freer, comfortable. I feel good inside. I do feel a little scared, but it seems to be fading away. Mostly a lot of sense of relief.*

*C: [after pause] Freedom! [big sigh] It's a sense of letting go. He's not my responsibility. I really want to be able to separate, to get to that point of inner peace, to discover who I am ... And when I say "He's not my responsibility," [repeats gesture] that helps. It's a space nobody can touch. Just the freedom it gives me.*

### **Vignette 2**

A woman ("Kate") came to a first session complaining of feeling very depressed and anxious, as well as drinking more heavily during the past month. According to Kate, the main reason for these symptoms is a situation with her adult daughter (late 20s) who has been having difficulty getting her life together. Her daughter is not employed, not making much effort, seems lost, and in need of money. In the first session, Kate describes this internal struggle in the situation with her daughter.

*C: I feel so guilty, so responsible, and keep trying to make it better for her. With all I'm doing, nothing seems to work and when she doesn't change, I end up feeling worse, angry, resentful. I know it is her problem, but I wish I could do something to help.*

While saying this, I observe that **\*she makes a very pronounced movement of touching her fingertips to her chest, then from there, unfolding her hands in front of her, until her arms are outstretched and palms are facing upwards.**

*T: While you were talking, I noticed this motion with your arms and hands [I briefly enact the movement]. There may be something important in that gesture. I wonder if it would be OK to notice how it feels to continue that gesturing ...*

*C: [repeats the movement] It feels very good. [smiles] I can feel myself relaxing, calming down. [Her hands, which had been trembling, stopped shaking]*



*T: Now that your body is more relaxed, maybe sense what the gesture might be saying.*

*C: [takes a moment] I sense it is saying that I need to give back these problems to my daughter. They are her problems and I have been carrying them for too long.*

*T: You might notice how it feels to give back these problems to your daughter, in just the way that your movement is suggesting — how your hands begin by touching your chest.*

*C: [Closes her eyes, pauses, repeats the gestural motion] It feels like a very gentle movement, no anger, hurt, or blame, just calm and caring. I can even sense a feeling of love, like this would be helping her by me giving back what is hers. [Tears, soft crying]*

### Vignette 3

A man came to therapy at the behest of his wife, following the death of his mother. The purpose of the sessions was to help “Jim” be able to grieve his mother’s death and learn to handle stress and emotional flare-ups better. In the first session, Jim acknowledged that he experiences great difficulty expressing feelings.

*C: I tend to change the subject, to go “sideways” to avoid emotions. I really have a hard time saying what I feel ...*

While talking, I noticed that Jim **\*kept moving his right hand, touching a spot in the central part of his chest area.** I mentioned the movement and asked if Jim was aware of what his hand was doing.

*C: No, I haven’t been aware of my hand, but now that you mention it, it feels like there’s something in there. [touching the same spot on the chest area] It feels like something holding me back, being afraid I could make a mistake. I don’t know if I would say the wrong thing, something “stupid.”*

*T: I wonder if you can sense what is in that space inside your body, in the chest area ...*

*C: It feels like tension, and something painful. I know I keep a lot of feelings inside, afraid to express how I feel, fear of getting hurt ... something scared inside. Right now, I feel a knot, a weight on my chest. [makes same motion of touching spot on chest]*

*T: Check if it would be OK to leave your hand there, maybe staying with what it feels like.*

*C: [Keeps hand on chest] I feel pain, a lot of sadness, worry, some anger. [Strong] It’s like, “One more thing! What else could go wrong? When will I get a break?” [Sigh]*

*T: Sensing a lot of feelings in there. Giving voice to them brings a sigh, some easing.*

*C: Yeah, it felt good to let something out, like I can breathe a little easier.*

While saying this, **\*\*he put both hands on the spot on his chest, and moved them outwards toward me, opening them apart as they moved forward.**

*T: Feels relieving ... and as you said that, I saw your hands moving forward and opening outwards. [I demonstrate the motion] Maybe sense what comes from that movement ...*

*C: [Continues the movement] As a kid, I didn't get love or compliments, and think I learned to keep all the feelings about that inside. If I can open up like this [looks at his hands] it feels like I can get everything off my chest. It feels like I can let out some feelings. I know inside is a caring guy, but never learned how to show it. I always wanted to be hugged and cuddled as a child and maybe, if I continue to open up, I can hug. I need help which you are giving me to break through these walls and the pattern of going "sideways," changing the subject. When I let stuff out in the open, it feels much better.*

#### **Vignette 4**

A man ("Charles") came to therapy after he lost his temper and cursed at his boss at work. He realized that there had been a build-up of anger and depressed moods related to work and personal issues, to the point of not being able to concentrate or follow through with work or home tasks. He was feeling unhappily "stuck, unsure how to change," stating that he wanted "to move forward in a positive direction."

*C: I feel like I am struggling between "two people" inside me, one that has always been "responsible," and the other that says "why be responsible?"*

*T: Two people in there — maybe sense both, notice which feels stronger right now.*

*C: The one saying, "You don't have to take this all on any more. You've been doing that your whole life. What has it ever gotten you? Find out who you are, what you like. Time to let stuff out — let loose." That voice says, "Live in the present."*

While saying this, I observed that Charles **\*made a pronounced movement with his two hands, moving forward in parallel lines, very close together, with palms facing each other.**

*T: While expressing this voice, your energy seemed stronger, more alive. I also observed this gesture. [I demonstrate the gesture] Maybe stay with that, sensing how it feels, what it conveys.*

*C: Yeah, it feels good — like I'm loosening up a bit. That movement [which he repeats] it feels like it's protecting that space that wants to explore. It's like shutting everything else out, just keeping me focused on the present. [Pause] I can feel some fulfillment and enjoyment in this space, and nowhere else in my life. It also feels like some stability, kind of withdrawing into my own space, a structure which I haven't had in a long time.*

*T: This gesturing [I do the gesture] is like ... helping to stay focused in the moment.*

*C: Definitely. I've lived most of my life either dwelling on the past, especially my failures, or worrying about the future, about what could go wrong. I've never liked changes — always kept the status quo. So that place where I can truly enjoy and live in the moment is very narrow. [Long pause] It's like, [strongly] "This is my stand!"*

While saying this, **\*\*his hands move outwards to the side from their close, parallel position.**

*T: So notice how your hands are moving wider apart — maybe keep attention there ...*

*C: That's it! I need to move out more into my life. I need to widen this narrow space, to find ways to expand this space so I can loosen up and have more stability in the world.*

*T: Perhaps this gesture is indicating a pathway to move forward. Is that right?*

*C: Yes. It's good that you picked up this gesture. I never realized how I've lived in this narrow frame, sort of finding stability and peace in my own little space. Now I realize I need to learn to open these walls up more, transition this space more into my life.*

## VI. DISCUSSION OF FOCUSING CHANGE EVENT: HOW GESTURES IMPLY RIGHT NEXT STEPS

Gestures often serve as body leads to the organism's implicit sense of rightness especially (although not exclusively) in the context of initial sessions of therapy. The vignettes presented above demonstrate how gesturing movements are enacting a sequence of the body's sense of its right next step and life-forward direction. When brought to Focusing attention, the gestures enabled clients to gain new information and open new possibilities for change both in specific situations and in more general patterns of living, past places where they had felt blocked or stuck.

Gestures arise as markers indicating a potential readiness for a change to release a state of blockage. In the examples presented, the gestures occur in juxtaposition to clients' narratives of blockage and distress, indicating something more or different is being expressed with the hands, something not yet in awareness nor formulated in words or actions. The process task then involves formulating (symbolizing) what the hands are conveying. As shown, the movements of hands are expressing an incipient implying of something new, an intricate sense of how to resolve a central problem and release a major area of blockage in their living. Gestural leads are nonverbal markers for this inwardly arising life-forward energy (Gendlin, 1996), demonstrating a pre-reflective understanding or embodied, felt knowing of the body's sense of a right direction or solution.

The process task marked by gestural leads has to do with releasing blocks and resolving situations by bringing attention to some physical manifestation of the body's implying of the right next steps. By going beyond the old routine or pattern that had not been working, gesture tacitly reveals a different pathway not yet formulated in words or action. The process task shows clients that it is their own inner-directed movements and self-generated energy that leads to solutions and changes.

In the first two vignettes, the gestures activate a sense of solution in a specific situation, i.e., how the body movement shows a new possibility for moving forward. The gestures disclosed an implicit sense of something more than the clients had been able to formulate or

enact in the actual situations. In Vignette 1, the client's hands reach across to the other side of the couch opening a new possibility of both putting the ball in the husband's court and leaving the ball over there, "*I need to put the ball in his court, over there, and keep it there.*" In Vignette 2, the client's hands touch near her heart and come outward, conveying both needing to give problems back to daughter, "*I need to give back these problems to my daughter*" and doing so in a calm, gentle, loving manner, "*It feels like a very gentle movement, no anger, hurt, or blame, just calm and caring.*"

The second two vignettes show how gestures can activate change-steps in a more general area of living. In these examples, two movements happened, the second motion carrying forward what was implied in the first. Thus, in Vignette 3, the pattern of holding in feelings was first expressed followed by the hand showing what would be a right direction for positive change ("*if I can open up . . . , let out some feelings*"). In Vignette 4, the space between the hands widened, enacting a sequence of the client's felt sense of wanting to live in a larger, more open space. Notice that in these examples, the second hand motion opened up related aspects of clients' life story. The gesture not only carries forward implied next steps in specific situations, but also brings forward old embodied patterns that have impeded fuller living and experiencing.

The notion of an inherent life-forward process (Gendlin, 1986, 1996) allows therapists to be attentive to any initial stirring of positive movement. "Therapists need to recognize and respond to *life-forward movement* [italics added] when it happens" (Gendlin, 1996, p. 259). Gestures (as implicit body lead) are one form of this inwardly arising life-energy, as expressed through the hands. As a therapeutic avenue, Focusing on the gestures serves both as trial versions of actions not yet taken (or ready to be enacted) and provides a powerful bodily felt release.

## VII. GESTURAL LEADS IN INITIAL THERAPY SESSIONS: PROCESS STAGES OF CHANGE EVENT

Based on the vignettes presented (along with many similar examples), I have delineated six stages or steps in the process of the gestural-lead Focusing change event. These stages are not to be taken as a "formula" to follow. Rather, they explicate a sequence that seems to recur, within which we can utilize any specific step or stage as needed.

### **Step 1. Noticing the marker: Observing hand movement as possible gestural lead**

While expressing distress or concern about a difficult situation, clients' hands/arms move in a distinct way. The key to the marker as a gestural lead is that the gesturing motion arises in the moment of speaking and seems meaningful in its own right. Often, while observing the gesture, therapists may experience a sense that the movement is "saying something" that feels important and somehow related to the central issue being discussed.

### **Step 2. Bringing the gesture to awareness: Invitation for reflection**

Once the gesture is observed, and seems to be a possible body lead, the gesture is brought to

awareness, by gently repeating the actual movement itself (without merely copying or mimicking) as part of an empathic reflection of the whole utterance. Clients are then invited to pay attention to the gesture, suggesting that they take some time to sense its feeling and energy and what “it” might be expressing.

**Step 3. Focusing: Pausing/inviting a felt sense of the gesture**

While in focal awareness, there is a distinct “pause” when clients’ attention focuses on the gestural sequence. This is the invitation for Focusing to happen, by making the gesture the specific object of attention, including repeating the movement while inwardly sensing how it feels. At times, reiterating the gesture itself brings a bodily felt shift (relief, easing, loosening, etc.) even before its implicit meaning comes to awareness.

**Step 4. Holding the gestural space: Unfolding its felt meaning**

As the gesture remains as focal object of attention (“direct referent”), continuing to hold this gestural space then allows for its “story” and implicit meaningfulness to open up and unfold. This step corresponds to what Gendlin (1997) calls “letting come,” in that we deliberately hold steady the gesture, while letting its felt meanings and emergent story to come forward on its own and be symbolized via words and implied actions. To explicate (symbolize) the felt sense of the gesture is itself a process of carrying forward by allowing the whole body to formulate and experience new possibilities of acting and living. As in Vignettes 3 and 4, sometimes a second gesture arises that allows deeper significance (including embedded aspects of clients’ life history) to continue to unfold.

**Step 5. Sensing the felt shift: Making room for new bodily energy**

In the process of attending to and Focusing on gestural leads, sensing the bodily energy is crucial (Gendlin, 1996). While accessing the body’s gestural implying, there occurs a noticeable physically felt shift. The body calms, there is a distinct sense of something releasing, easing, at times, a sense of feeling more energized, empowered. The person’s sense of themselves often feels freer, more expansive, stronger, as they have a new relationship both with themselves and with their situation. It is important to encourage clients to pause, receive and more fully experience the body shift and new, freeing energy.

**Step 6. Reiterating next steps that emerged from gestural leads**

The final step involves an invitation to recall the specific new step and/or change that has emerged. Clients can be encouraged to repeat the main significance and/or new awareness that emerged and to sense the new bodily energy they’re experiencing. This helps clients anchor and maintain a felt connection with what has come. Therapists can remind clients of any steps that have come and ask if there may be ways to carry forward the step in their life.

## VIII. CONCLUSION: GESTURES AS MOVEMENT IN A LIFE-FORWARD DIRECTION

I have delineated a particular process event, i.e., gestural leads in initial sessions of therapy. The function of gesturing as leads to next steps in a life-forward direction indicate the importance for any Focusing, experiential or person-centered therapist to become increasingly sensitive to nonverbal expressions as beginning stirrings of forward-moving energy that are implying change. Further study of nonverbal markers as therapeutic avenues seems important using qualitative methods along with instruments such as the Experiencing Scale. Such studies could provide additional empirical verification and explication of the Process Model (Gendlin, 1991, 1997).

When our life-forward process is blocked, the body generates an “object” needed to carry further its living (Gendlin 1981, 1984). With gestures, the actual movements of the hands shift the body more in alignment with what has been implied all along in order to change the situation. Clients are now more able to live in the space of the positive shift or solution.

Usually not until *the body first solves the problem so that the body is as the solution requires* can we live that solution out in external steps, steps of thought, or calculation. It is therefore a fact that *the body will move itself* [italics added], and shift itself into how it is as problem solved, if we let it. (Gendlin, 1978, p. 340)

This is how gestures function as an important form of bodily implying. When actual behavior to move forward has not happened or cannot occur, gestures can symbolically express the missing actions, moving the body more in alignment with what is needed (Gendlin, 1997; Purton, 2004, p. 185). In therapy, therefore, attention to even slight physical (hand) movements may indicate an incipient stirring of the life-forward process, the body (literally) moving in a right direction.

When the hands move, they seem to display a sense of their own, physically showing something that is unfolding ahead of conscious deliberation. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) calls these *initiating gestures* — an embodied form of *authentic speech*, something “which formulates for the first time.” As he states (1945/1962),

Speech puts up a new sense, if it is authentic *speech*, ... *if it is an initiating gesture* ... We must therefore recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of giving significance ... by which man transcends himself *towards a new form of behavior; or towards other people, or toward his own thought* [italics added], through his body and his speech. (p. 194)

We can see how Merleau-Ponty (along with Gendlin) is leading us to a radical new understanding of gesture, one that not only reflects a speaker’s thoughts, intentions and emotional states, but also opens new, authentic possibilities, activating the life-forward process.

In a wonderful book, *The Body's Recollection of Being*, David M. Levin (1985) notes that he draws from Merleau-Ponty, and Gendlin, in explicating the importance of initiating gestures. They are part of the process of *becoming* oneself, being *true* to oneself. As Levin (1985) poetically states,

Focusing on the bodily felt sense — the bodily felt character — of our gestures ... becomes an event of disclosing a moment when the field of the gesture's encounter gives birth to, or makes appear, a "new thing," .... (p. 126)

Gestural meanings unfold through attunement to the deepest level of our body's intentionality, an intentionality rooted in "knowledge in our hands." "We have been right all along in focusing our attention on the body of feeling, or more specifically, on our *felt sense* of gesture and motility (Levin, 1985, p. 148).

It is quite often that our hands are "telling a story" that is enacting a way forward not yet taken. Gesturing is thus one important way that our body discloses how "living organisms imply exact next steps" (Hendricks, 2001) and therefore helps in "carrying forward an organism's *own* inwardly arising process" (Gendlin, 1997, p. 277). As one form of bodily implying, clients learn that ways forward are often *right in their hands*.

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