

Right in Their Hands: How Gestures Imply the Body's Next Steps

A man comes to see me to overcome social anxiety, especially with public speaking and with women. In the midst of describing his fears, he states, "I don't know what to do to eliminate these anxious feelings... It's not clear..." While he is stating this, I observe his hands making this 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 point out the movement and invite him to observe and sense the feel of the gesture, what it might be conveying to him. He first observes the gestural motion, then closes his eyes. "What it feels like is something in me crawling into a shell, closing off from the world... It feels safe in there, like I'm protected and sheltered." He says his whole body feels calmer, and that something about the gestural motion feels right to him. He describes how his hands are showing a spherical shape, something that could comfort a scared, insecure part of him by holding it safely inside this shell. "Yeah [sigh], if I could protect that part of me in this shell, it feels more comfortable, and my anxiety goes down. I feel much more relaxed." What a great illustration of something Eugene Gendlin writes: "More powerful than letting words come from a felt sense may be letting body movement come."

I call these phenomena gestural leads, as these gestures are a way that our organism discloses something unformulated that could carry forward our experiential process toward solutions and further living. Our hands seem to convey wisdom of their own, providing a bridge, a visual, moving space that helps us to transition from what is known to what is emerging, but not yet known.

H. Jay Shaffer pioneered the importance of gesture in the Focusing experience. "Gesture not only may co-occur with speech but 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." He adds that, "Gesture manifests the whole event for us in space before our eyes" and because gesturing also involves motion, conveys a process aspect much more than words. Gesticulating while talking or exploring a difficult problem is an especially important form of bodily implying. As we will see, our hands are often displaying a knowing of their own, different from and more than conscious thought. At times, a gesture will reveal something not yet known, thus serving to activate an implicit sense of a presently felt meaning. I have discovered another aspect of gestures—that they can serve to indicate an emergence of a next step of change, healing, new development.

The Body's Implying

A cornerstone of Gendlin's theory of Focusing is the idea that our body is a self-organizing and self-righting system that maintains its own sense of continuity. The listener/therapist can be attentive to emergent leads or edges that could open up the implicit 'more' of experiencing.

As Gendlin states, "There can always be 'leads,' 'edges,' a sense of more." (1986: 30) Without sensing for and responses pointing toward the experiential edges or leads, the implicit more often does not emerge, leaving us with 'dead end' discussions and a stopped process. Change-steps and process movement come from continual awareness of the 'more,' often felt as an unclear whole, an inward feeling or body sense.

With gestures, a complex meaning of the organism's living process is expressed and implied, enabling us to formulate and live in new ways. Our gestures (hands) are telling a story, often different from the verbal content and often disclosing a lived context of meaning and embodied knowing. Gestures are occurring right now, in the experiential field. Gestures are spatial, visual, imagistic, wholistic events that convey a process dynamic, as they enact an action/interaction sequence in real time. Our hand movements are pregnant with embodied, implicit meanings, creating a new space in which the body can symbolically generate possible action in "physically absent situations."

Vignettes

These examples have been drawn from initial sessions in psychotherapy. In these examples, the gestic expressions (bodily movements) actually demonstrate an implied direction of change or interactive step not yet formulated or taken. Identifying details in each example have been altered, but nothing else. The specific gestures utilized are highlighted in bold (marked by a *) along with additional interventions that attempt to amplify the felt meaning and direction that the movements imply.

Vignette #1: A married woman in her mid- 30's (Marlene) came to therapy with symptoms of severe physical stress, such as physical 'shaking', extreme tension, headaches, fatigue, as well as extreme emotional distress, including 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 spending a few minutes describing her symptoms and the situation, she exclaimed, "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!! I try putting the ball in his court, but always take it back."

While stating this, 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.

T: 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, what it might be expressing...?

C: Yeah, I don't know what it is except I'm always taking responsibility and blame for his drug problems. [She repeats the movement, then pauses] Now that feels good (sighs). 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 (body relaxes). 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. Oh yeah! I feel happy. I can sense a stronger, more meaningful person inside, a sense of self-worth I haven't felt for a long time. It's a space nobody can touch. Just the freedom it gives me.

Vignette #2: A man in his early 50's 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

better handle stress and emotional mood swings. Jim acknowledged in the first session that he experiences great difficulty connecting with or expressing feelings.

C: I keep everything inside. I don't think I know-how to connect or express feelings to others. I feel scared of what's going to happen. Right now, I feel a knot, a weight on my chest [makes motion of touching spot on chest].

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.

After demonstrating the gesture, I invite Jim to pause and sense more into the movement.

C: [Continues the movement of bring hands outward from that spot on chest and opening them outwards]. Yeah, it felt good to let something out, like I can breathe a little easier. 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 to gesturing], it feels like I can get everything off my chest. It feels like I can let out some feelings.

Vignette #3: A man ("Charles") in his late 50's came to therapy following an incident at his workplace in which he lost his temper and cursed at his boss. He realized that there had been a build-up of anger and hostility regarding his work situation as well as other significant life stressors, especially a long-term divorce dispute. He was feeling unhappily 'stuck' in life, yet unsure how to change, expressly stating that he wanted 'to move forward in a positive direction.' In the first session, Charles reported a sense of bouncing between two energies:

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?' It's 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, Charles *made a pronounced movement with his two hands, moving forward in parallel lines, very close together, with palms facing each other. I suggest we might stop and pay attention to the gestural motion...

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

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

C: That's it! I need to find ways to expand this space so I can loosen up and have more stability in the world. I'm ready to move on! 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.

Specific Process Stages

I have developed six stages or steps in the process of accessing gestures as implicit leads in psychotherapy sessions.

Step 1) Noticing the marker- observing the gesture/hand movement

In all the examples, as clients were discussing their initial or current concern, there was a moment when the gesturing took on a specific shape or form. It is important to distinguish these gestures as “markers” from the regularity of gesturing that is commonplace in everyday speech. Gestural leads are very pronounced movements that enact or display something unique (new/different/meaningful) of its own. The gesture then becomes the “it,” the object to which we become aware and inwardly attend.

Step 2) Bringing to awareness the gesture: invitation for reflection

Once the gesture is observed, we can allow our own body-sense to feel (receive/ sense the impact of) its energy. When I notice the movement, I open my body to take in and be affected by its quality and felt meaningfulness. As I experience a felt-sense of the gesture, it opens up to its quality and functioning as a possible implicit lead. At this point, I will bring the gesture to awareness, by empathically reflecting both the words and gently repeating the actual movement itself (without merely copying or mimicking). I then invite clients to pay attention to the gesture, suggesting that they take some time to sense its feeling and energy and what “it” might be expressing. If the client has already used some phrase that corresponds to the movement, then that would be incorporated into the empathic reflection.

Step 3) Focusing: creating/holding the gestural space

After bringing to awareness and recognizing the gesture, I have found it very important to help “hold the space” allowing time to bring attention into the body-look and behavioral movement. We are both getting the feel of the movement, trying not to impose any order or interpretation but rather giving room for it to reveal what it is about and what it is leading us toward. This is the invitation for Focusing to happen, by making the gesture the specific object of attention, including repeating the movement while inwardly Focusing on its felt sense and implicit meanings. At times, just reiterating the gestures themselves feels positive and engenders aliveness and life-forward energy, even before its actual meaning in interactions and situations becomes more clarified.

Step 4) Explication of the gestural story: symbolizing and unfolding felt meaning

Once the gesture has become a specific datum of attention (“direct referent”), already there is sense of something easing, loosening, emerging here. Continuing to pause and hold this gestural space, then allows for its “story” to unfold – the story being what “makes” it an implicit lead i.e., that there is something that is inherently meaningful that can be explicated and formulated (symbolized) that also is implying (inferring/revealing...) what is “missing” and needing to occur. This step is what Gendlin calls

“letting come,” that we allow the gestural space to unfold, we don’t impose order, we let the implicit experiential order reveal itself. Here, what the gesture is “saying” and implying comes more into focus, and is then symbolized via words and energy that fit with the movement. To explicate (symbolize) the meaning of the posture or movement is itself a process of carrying forward the whole of bodily experiencing interacting with its lived situation.

Step 5) Sensing the felt shift: making room for the new bodily energy

A hallmark of Focusing is the importance of the back and forth from the explicit object to its impact on the implicit whole, i.e., the bodily felt experiencing. The bodily shift is the change, as our body is what directly feels, knows, senses its situations. What makes something a change-step is not only or primarily an insight, or behavioral change, or new way of interacting, but that all of these result from or result in a shift in how our body has that situation as a whole. This is what is meant by “carrying forward,” that where our body-sense was stuck, blocked, tense, anxious, its meaning unclear, fuzzy, something happens that opens up and releases the felt blockage (however slightly that might be felt).

Thus, in the process of the gestural “dance” in which clients’ gestures have taken the lead and we follow, sensing the bodily energy is crucial. This is not actually a distinct sequential step, but occurs during the whole process. I try to open up my own body-space in order to more directly and intensely feel and experience the dance. I want my bodily being to join and sense the energy and impact of the gesture (or other implicit leads). This involves being extremely sensitive to and aware of moment-to-moment shifts in bodily movements, postures, energy and interactive dynamics as they unfold.

Step 6) Generating next-steps from gestural leads

The final step is to take what has come thus far and see if there is a specific step that would help carry forward the gesture into further meaning and living in the world. A change-step can be a specific action (or interaction), it could be an internal reminder (gesture/phrase/ word/image) or it could be staying with the bodily energy that has been felt during the process. Since a step is defined as that which carries forward our bodily felt experiencing, then anything that does so can serve this function. At times, the step has already happened, and we may just need to remind clients of this step. I may ask clients if everything that has occurred today implies to them a specific step they will take with them (or would feel right to enact) during the week. This helps the life-forward direction and new bodily energy to have a concrete focus, as a thread, as a way of holding the space, and as a way of carrying further some possibilities for solutions or growth in their life situations.

In the vignettes, the specific step grows organically out of the gestural space we created and allowed to unfold. Its story, meanings and implications have already opened up and what feels right, needed, required in the situation is given some room to emerge. The steps are concrete, specific ways to carry further what has been disclosed and symbolized by the gestural lead although not necessarily in the exact form disclosed by the movement.

Final note: Gestural leads are the body’s way of pointing toward the felt direction of change and healing. There are many other forms of implicit leads and they function to help us recognize and access what the

body already knows (and is disclosing) as needed to complete a process and release our body process to live more fully and more alive. The vignettes and the stages outlined about are not meant as a one time process nor to imply it is an instant fix of a situation. There are almost always other edges, conflicting pulls and energy, and very deeply guarded places of vulnerability that take many, many steps and much time and intimate relational work to help bring forth and more fully carry forward.

Following clients' hands can convey a deeper knowing that can guide us to enact authentic sequences toward life, solutions, growth, and deepened connection with ourselves and others. Gendlin has stated that "A living body implies its own next steps," and "The body is the implying of a next move... but...that move is as yet unformed." We can think of these gestures as the body literally moving in a right direction, implying "a little movement of the whole person toward life." The germ of these steps began, let's remember, right in their hands.