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Living the Dream: The Evolution of Focusing-Oriented Dream Work

By Leslie Ellis, MA, RCC

A dream is alive.

Gendlin, 2012

Introduction: The evolution of focusing-oriented dream work

It has been 25 years since Gendlin (1986) published his book describing the method for using focusing-oriented therapy (FOT) techniques to work with dreams. Since then, he has refined the method, adding clarity, and offered a more systematic way to approach a therapy client's dream. This chapter will provide an overview of Gendlin's approach to the dream, with an emphasis on his current thinking. Parallels between Gendlin's approach and experiential Jungian-oriented dreamwork will be examined. An extended clinical example will show how one might apply Gendlin's methods, including finding 'help' in a dream and using 'bias control'. The example will illustrate how inviting the dreamer to attend to the bodily-felt sense of what the dream is bringing (versus more theoretical analysis) is key to accessing the dream's therapeutic value.

Dreams are not just a record of the images that flash through our minds as we sleep, but living pieces of unfinished process that bring new energy and a new way of living... but only if we attend to them in a very particular way. These are some of the current thoughts Gendlin (2012) expresses about working with dreams. Since publishing his book (1986) on how to use the body to interpret dreams, Gendlin has evolved his approach and clarified his methodology in several ways to make dream work safer and more accessible. This chapter describes Gendlin's current method and shows how focusing-oriented dream work is complementary to other dream theories, particularly modern Jungian experiential approaches. The ideas presented will be grounded in a

detailed clinical example that illustrates uses and nuances of focusing-oriented dream work methods.

Gendlin's current approach to the dream

Gendlin (1996) called the technique in his dream book “a new professional method” (p.4). Many aspects of his approach are from the original major 20th century dream theorists, Freud and Jung. What is new in Gendlin's approach is the use of the dreamer's own bodily felt sense as key to discovering the meaning of the dream. This approach moves the dream work process away from traditional analytic roots and ‘therapist-as-expert’ to a more collaborative, experiential approach. This movement is not unique to Gendlin: most current approaches to the dream suggest that only the dreamer can say for sure what the dream means.

However, the philosophy (1997) underlying Gendlin's current thinking about dreams differentiates his approach. Gendlin (2012) suggests that as human beings, we are ongoing interactions with the environment, living stories that end only when we stop living. “The body, when asleep, tells an unfinished story... When we sit with a dream we enable it to take its next steps, to finish its story.” Gendlin sees dreams as alive, as “code for the process that can happen” that inherently brings the dreamer new “life-forward” energy. In fact, when the dreamer finds new energy from the dream, the point of the dream work has been realized. He believes there is no need to go further into the meaning of the dream, although one can if the dreamer is curious. Interpretation, however, does not carry the dream process forward. Gendlin suggests that only the dreamer's felt sense of the dream can do that. Processing takes place on the boundary between ordinary and altered states. “You want to stay right on that line where you are all here, and you can also touch that unfinished process in your body. This is the only way I know that you can process a dream.”

A soft start

Gendlin (in press) states that, “Letting the life-forward energy actually come in the body is the chief purpose of body dream interpretation.” He offers specific steps suggesting one not explore the most sensitive part of the dream right away, as therapists tend to do. Instead, work your way in gently beginning with a detailed re-telling of the dream, followed by an exploration of

associations to the setting. Gendlin (in press) says starting with the place or setting provides safety and a sense of the context of the dream.

The next step is getting ‘help’ from the dream, and by this Gendlin (in press) means “anything that brings life-forward energy.” Animals, children, anything alive or novel can be help. Without it, the dreamer will process the old problems in the same way. With help, Gendlin (2012) says, “Everything we... look at in the dream is going to open up for us.” Sometimes helpful, positive elements are not apparent in the dream, but Gendlin (in press) says they are always there, even if we have to search. For example, if the dream is about a sick turtle, one might ask what a healthy one would be like.

Another unlikely place to look for help is in strange or novel elements of the dream. Or, one can use ‘bias control’ which gives the dreamer an experience of the opposite of what they would normally value. New energy often comes from there. Gendlin introduced the notion of ‘bias control’ in his dream book (1986) and has since simplified the process (1992) by suggesting that if the dream and dreamer disagree, one can find new energy by “expecting a step from the side opposite to one’s usual attitude” (p.26). One way to try out bias control is by using the dream technique, derived from Gestalt theory (Perls 1969/1992) of asking the dreamer to *be* the person in their dream that they least identify with. Another expanded concept from Gendlin (1992) is to ask how the dream *should* go if one were to dream it onward. This is similar to Jung’s ideas of active imagination, and dreaming the dream onward.

The questions

Once the basic goal of searching for a bodily-felt sense of the life-forward energy in a dream is understood, and the dream is entered into in a way that feels safe and good to the dreamer, Gendlin (1986) suggests selective use of the 16 questions from his dream book. The questions are meant for the dreamer to take inside themselves to see if they engender a felt sense that might unlock the dream’s meaning. “The interpretation comes *inside the dreamer* or not at all.... *Only the dreamer’s body can interpret the dream*” (p.25).

The questions (1986, p.17) can be summarized as associations (general, emotional, from the previous day), elements of a drama (place, story, characters), decoding methods (symbols, body analogies, counterfactual elements) and dimensions of development (childhood, personal growth, sexuality, spirituality). The questions are derived mainly from Freud and Jung, but Gendlin's method is not bound by the detailed (and now somewhat dated) theories underlying their methods.

Influences and complementary approaches

Contributions toward the knowledge of dreams by Jung, Freud, Perls (1969/1992), Bonime (1962), Berry (1974) and a few others were briefly acknowledged by Gendlin (1986). However, rather than focusing on the source of his ideas, he concentrated on explicating his method. In parallel, many dream theorists, particularly in the Jungian tradition, have been developing similar methods that complement, deepen and sometimes challenge focusing-oriented approaches to the dream.

Although there is nothing in the literature that critiques Gendlin's approach directly, Berry (1974) offers a thoughtful challenge to Gendlin's reliance on the 'felt shift' as key to the dream. She suggests the therapist rely not just on the sense of when things 'click' for the client. "We know from comparative studies... that virtually every therapy 'works'... and all fail to the same extent.... If there are better or worse theories about dream interpretation, they cannot be based on what 'clicks'" (p.60). Berry exhorts anyone who is working with dreams to be acutely aware of the theoretical assumptions that underlie their interpretations. She suggests it is very difficult for therapists to allow dreams to truly speak for themselves without falling into supposition or deriving implications. Focusing on the felt sense from a dream can help bring the dream work back to the client and the dream itself.

The bodily-felt sense to which Gendlin refers is not dependent on insights revealed. Focusing-oriented dream work is anti-theoretical: not aimed at convincing the dreamer of something, but rather on bringing one in closer contact with the authentic life-forward direction inherent in dreams. Yet of course even this is a theory, albeit one that values direct experience. Jung

(1934/1974) said the therapist “in every single case should be ready to construct a totally new theory of dreams” (p.95).

The Gestalt approach (Perls, 1969/1992) included in Gendlin’s method brings dreamers into the immediate felt experience of the dream. The work of Bosnak (1996) takes embodied dreamwork to even deeper experiential levels as he invites dreamers to hold and experience felt sense impressions from several places in the dream at one time. Hillman (1979) represents the tradition of depth or archetypal psychology that views dreams as alive and worthy of direct, experiential attention for their own sake. He wrote, “We cannot understand the dream until enter it” (p.80). There isn’t space to flesh out the many ways that these and other modern Jungian experiential dream work methods complement and deepen a focusing-oriented approach to dreams (and vice versa). But it is worth noting that the development of embodied experiential dream work is not unique to Gendlin and owes a debt to Jung.

Clinical example: Leah’s dream of the little dog driving

The following clinical example will serve to illustrate ways in which one can use focusing-oriented and complementary dream work techniques to bring about a deep shift in the dreamer. The dreamer, whose personal details have been altered, has graciously agreed to the use of this material. She is a professional in her early 30s who suffers from an eating disorder, anxiety and depression. At the time of the session referenced below, she had been in bi-weekly therapy for more than a year. Many of her symptoms were in remission, but she continued to struggle with anxiety, her relationship to food, her body and herself.

“Leah” dreamt that she was in a small town watching in horror as her friend Tracy’s small terrier Jones was driving around the town. Her concern was not that the dog was driving, but that he was driving without insurance. She was very angry with her friend and extremely upset when she woke up from the dream.

In her associations to the dream, Leah talked about the difficulty in her relationship with Tracy, a former roommate who suffered from drug addiction. Leah had chosen to distance herself from what became an enmeshed and abusive relationship. The dog had died in the past year, which

scared Leah because Tracy had always talked about killing herself once Jones died. In recent weeks, Leah had been dreaming about Jones a lot, sometimes as a healthy pup, sometimes as sick and dying. There was a strong link to her maternal feelings for the dog because she was now considering having a child of her own. Leah felt worried about her ability to properly care for a child, and also about how being pregnant would affect her fragile body image.

After this initial exploration of associations, we had a lot of fun with the main dream image of a little dog happily driving a car around a small town. There was lots of mutual laughter. This is an example of what Gendlin would call 'finding help' in a dream. From this good place, we could start to explore the dream's more difficult places, such as where Leah admonishes Tracy.

C: I felt like I went up to her and said listen, there's no insurance on that vehicle, you shouldn't be driving it, you need to stop him. Tracy said, no he's fine, he's a good driver. I didn't even want to be around her. I just wanted to say, 'Your car's not insured. What's going to happen if there's an accident and you've lost everything, you can't take care of him?' I had this whole scenario happening with all kinds of bad things, and Tracy's like, whatever, he's fine.

T: Was she like that about taking care of Jones?

C: Yeah she had some aversion about putting Jones on a leash and he would always run out into traffic. I thought for sure that Jones was going to get hit by a car and that's how he was going to die. I would be so stressed out when I was around her. When he was with me, he was always on a leash. You owe that to the little thing. He doesn't know better.

T: So I wonder if you can just feel into that a little.

C: Yeah, I can feel the worry in my stomach. It feels like this gross 'ick' (voice gets shaky).

T: Ok, maybe don't too feel too much of that, just a little bit.... Try to feel it but not all the way in.

C: It's uncomfortable even feeling it just a little bit.

T: Just try to be friendly with it and curious.

C: (Silence) It's in my stomach but it's almost like it flashes down into my legs and up into my chest... but it sits in my stomach.

T: It sort of lives there and it spreads...

C: Yeah depending on what the thought is. If it's a really scary thought it goes right down to my

toes.

Here in the session, we were not just working with the dream image, but the felt sense that it brought. It led to talk of Leah's anxiety about motherhood, and her worry about repeating her own experience of not being adequately nurtured. When she tried to see herself in the maternal role, she said there was a sense of unreality to it. She found help from the dream when I encouraged her to tap into her tangible maternal feelings for Jones. Through the imaginal experience of holding the dog in her arms, she realized she would be a protective, loving mother. She sighed and said she felt better.

This was a step, but not a completion as we had not yet fully explored all the main themes. Despite its amusing content, the dream was profoundly upsetting to the dreamer. The excerpt below illustrates the use of a combined Gestalt approach and bias control to find help in what feels like the most unlikely place in the dream. This intervention is also based on Jung's (1948/1974) idea that dreams are compensatory to a position the dreamer may be holding too strongly in waking life; dreams bring the psyche back into balance.

T: I'm wondering, and this might sound like a very odd thing, but sometimes in your dreams it's useful to try on the opposite, like a little bit of Tracy, a little bit of her nonchalance. She goes too far, but a little bit of that... So if you can go back into this dream, where Jones is driving and Tracy's unconcerned and you're very concerned... can you just try to be Tracy for a minute? Take your time...

C: It's actually easier than I thought to slip into. Her idea is that he's fine. I'm over-reacting, he can drive well and he's not going to get into an accident. She just has every confidence that Jones is fine and she just lets him do his thing.

T: What's that like in your body to have that confidence?

C: Um (silence) I'm not fully embracing it but... it feels lighter. I'm not having to worry about someone else's stuff completely. It's hard living for two.

T: So it feels lighter, and yet you're not fully there. But where you can be like Tracy it feels like you don't have to live for both you and the dog. He and you can be separate and you don't have to be so...

C: ...afraid.

T: Not so afraid. So how is it in there now?

C: It's not as bad. I feel like I've been fighting.... now I feel like I don't have to do that, 'What if?' so much. I do that a lot.

T: So you're going back and forth. See if you can really let yourself be her, just sink into that nonchalance.

C: Just whatever, he's driving, it's fine (voice changes to more of a drawl). It's making me appreciate just how good of a driver Jones is versus making me think that he's going to die.

T: Oh, you get to see how competent and skillful he is.

C: Yeah, he's a very good driver (lots of laughter).

T: You can enjoy it more... what an amazing little dog.

C: Yes. He's really having fun. He was oblivious to my concern anyway.

T: The concept of insurance was probably doesn't concern him much (mutual laughter).

C: I'm crying from laughing. It's true I do that... I mean really this dog is driving and I'm worried about insurance.

This moment of hilarity led to a deep insight for Tracy. She realized that she often looks past the real issue to find peripheral things to worry about. She related this to her body image and relationship to food.

C: I'll find other things to put it on and I'll get really upset about something else when I really know that I'm feeling really crappy about myself.

T: Displacing it because the real thing is too big or too uncomfortable maybe?

C: Yeah. Or I feel like I can't control it. I felt like there was nothing I could do. So I said, you need to get insurance. That was my way of trying to get control.

We explored this track for a few more minutes until it felt like the new insight had fully landed in the client's body. Then the question, 'What *should* happen?' followed naturally from the dialogue. It was a matter of simply articulating the suggestion to which the dreamer herself had alluded:

T: So what would happen if you just really focused on the core issue... for example if you walk into this dream and imagine what should happen. Just try that for a minute... to work with the main concern.

C: It's probably safety. As good as he is, Jones shouldn't be driving... I feel a little bad taking him out because he was really enjoying driving but I know that this is what's best... I put him on a leash and give him to Tracy.

T: And what happens for you?

C: I feel better. I don't have to worry about him driving around crashing into things, killing himself.

T: So... just take that into your body... I wonder what happens when you make some kind of commitment to yourself to really look at the main thing rather than...

C: ...worrying about all the things that aren't real.

T: What if you just say, I'm going to sit with what's really important?

C: (Big out-breath, long silence) It's funny because what I'm seeing right now is almost like two balls of energy. One is like my relationship to food, which feels negative and one is more like a bowl and this bowl is like my mind-body. I need to put the ball into the bowl... or maybe it's a cradle. I need them to come together... But I feel like if I put it in, it just hops back out.

T: It won't stay. So your body is showing you that they need to come together.... What needs to happen to that ball so it will stay?

C: The ball needs attention. I feel like the cradle is right. I feel like my relationship to food is this ball and then over here is a cradle sort of like my mind and body. They need to be one but they're not, they're separate.

T: Right, so you need to somehow work with the ball...

C: I feel like it runs blue and it needs to run red.

T: It's needs to be red and then it might stay.

C: It needs to be warm. That means it's at peace... I'm actually having a moment because it has... (tearful) because I hadn't seen it like that... and that's awesome....to be able to see it like that (more tears) is just, just awesome...

T: It IS awesome... and so, before we stop, maybe you can just check with this ball and see what's one small thing that might help it move a little towards the red.

C: I feel like I want to hold it (she gestures this).

T: Yeah, holding it, warming it up...

C: I know if I put it into the cradle, it will just pop back out but I'm going to put it in anyway. Even though it's not red yet, I just know it belongs there.

T: Like this is your home, try it out. You can't stay long, but it seems like the way you describe that cradle, it's actually made for that ball.

C: (Crying) I just had a huge breakthrough... (more tears). I feel it. That's crazy.

When the client came in two weeks later, she reported that the shift had stayed with her. Her anxiety, both in waking life and dreams, had lessened. She had surprised herself by baking and really enjoying it. This was significant because for over a decade, she had experienced a strained relationship with food. For her to actually enjoy baking was an amazing new development.

Conclusion

The above example is not a prescription. A classic analytical approach to this dream might suggest that the leashing of Jones was not necessarily a positive step. A Jungian interpretation might view this as the dream ego wanting instinct leashed and under control. However, this analysis is speculation, stepping too far away from the dreamer's bodily-felt experience. Bringing the dangerous Tracy-Jones dyad under control was what this dreamer needed in order to feel safe. This, in turn, led to a profound shift via the spontaneous ball-and-cradle image that emerged. If, as Gendlin says, a dream is unfinished process, this final image may be a form of completion, but an ending that is so unexpected, so far from what anyone except the dreamer herself would have arrived at. A focusing approach to dreams suggests that sensitively following the process as directed by the client's body is a better way to help the client receive a dream's 'gifts' than any analysis the therapist might be tempted to impose.

In terms of dream work technique, Freud began with free association and analysis of hidden wish fulfillment. Jung said, stay close to the dream images themselves. Gendlin added that it is fine to stray from strict adherence to the dream, but not by following a theory. The way forward is via the dreamer's body and their felt sense of the dream. This is Gendlin's contribution to the ongoing evolution of dream work.

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