Felt Sense
Writing with the Body

Sondra Perl

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Contents

Foreword: Felt Sense and the Wrong Word

Peter Elbow

When I tried to write my papers during my first go at graduate school, everything I wrote seemed wrong. I spent all my time crossing out and ripping up and often not ending up with a paper. It was this experience that eventually got me thinking hard about writing, and it explains what you might call a negative framework for this foreword. Yet I'd wager that most people's most recurrent experience in writing is also negative—even when their writing goes tolerably well: again and again coming up with a word and realizing that it's the wrong word. Whether the word arrived easily or by dint of struggle—whether it's still in mind or already written—we know it's wrong. Surely this is one of the main reasons why writing brings so much discouragement.

But when we understand how felt sense works and learn to attend to it and use it in writing—and I don't know any better guide than what Sondra Perl gives us here in these pages and on the enclosed CD—we can move productively past that discouraging experience. *Not* by impatiently pushing the wrong word away and frantically searching for the right word—as I did in graduate school—but by *honoring* the wrong word and *dwelling in the experience* that tells us that it's wrong. The wrong word may be wrong, but it usually provides a string to the feeling of what we *are* trying to say—our *felt sense* of meaning.

Gendlin and Perl give us guidance in learning to attend to that felt nonverbal sense triggered by a word. It may feel like a discouraging experience—a negative buzzer going off yet again saying "No, that's not the word I want." But it's

not the discouragement we need to dwell in, it's the vein of rich meaning that the discouragement often tries to hide: "*What I'm trying to say is . . .*" It is *here*, in this *nonverbal space*, that we can dwell with a positive and hopeful sense of expectation. And this *here* turns out to be rooted in the body. In short, the experience of "Uh oh, wrong word" is good news—if we know what to do with it. It means that now the leverage is available for finding words for exactly what we do mean. If I had known then what Gendlin and Perl have taught me, I wouldn't have had to quit in failure. (I don't mean to give the impression that the only doorway into felt sense is through the wrong word. There are various doorways but it's the one that strikes me most, and I love it that wrongness can usher us to rightness.)

Of course it's controversial to claim that we all possess these rich veins of meaning in our nonverbal bodies. Few people will believe that claim unless they actually learn to use felt sense—and notice what they are doing. (For of course people often do use felt sense without noticing or understanding the process.) Nevertheless, Gendlin gives a disarmingly simple argument for the claim. He asks a simple question: How do we *know* that the word we just produced is not what we mean? On what basis do we sometimes say, "No, that's not quite it." Against what standard do we make that judgment? Do we compare the words to other words inside our heads that are a correct rendering of "what I really mean"? Even if we were to do this unusual thing, then how do we decide that *those* words were a correct rendering? In short, if we can tell that the words that came from our mouth are "not what we mean"—we must be comparing those words, ultimately, to something nonverbal. That something has got to be the body or rooted in the body. Of course I'm not excluding the head from the body—I'm just excluding words in the head.

But writing—in contrast to speaking—poses special problems for felt sense. When we speak, our goal is usually just

to say what we mean. In writing, however, our goal is likely to be different: not so much to say what we mean as to *adjust* or *change* what we mean till our words are true or well argued or valid or interesting—and clear and well organized. Writing usually heightens our concern about standards of good writing and readers' responses. When we've spoken, we can often say, "Yes, those words might be wrong and awkward, but I don't care because they say what I meant to say." After writing, we're less likely to say that.

Is writing the culprit in drowning out felt sense? It seems so. After all, the very fact of having to find the letters for spelling every word we write adds an external standard for judging written words wrong. But in fact it's not the medium of writing itself that does the most to drown out felt sense. It's the *situation* in which people so often do their writing: writing for teachers, writing for scholarly publication, writing for tenure. So often, writing is done for someone with authority over us who will judge whether our words are acceptable or not—which tends to mean whether *we* are acceptable or not. It's easier to learn to attend to felt sense during writing if we make a crucial decision about writing situations: we need to do *some* writing where we don't have to worry whether readers like it or disagree with us. For example, if we write in a diary or if we write important personal letters, we are much more likely to be able to say "I don't care whether it's good writing, all I care about is whether it really says what I'm trying to say." This is fertile ground for noticing felt sense. Conversely, there are *speech* situations where it's harder to hear felt sense because we are worrying so much about listener reactions—for example on job interviews and first dates.

Of course we can't ignore readers and external standards of good writing, but if our awareness of readers and standards *drowns out* all awareness of felt sense as we write, this is a reason for working *harder* at felt sense when we write. For when people get tricked into turning off their felt

sense of internal meaning, their writing tends to degenerate. Sondra Perl's original research showed students falling apart when they attended mostly to their sense of external standards of good writing. (The research is summarized in "Understanding Composing," which is cited in the book.) When students have been told over and over by others that their words are bad writing, they are especially likely to turn off the internal buzzers that signal the presence of felt sense. Without a source in felt sense, people are stuck trying to spin out strings of words they hope readers will like—or at least accept. Even when writers are skilled enough to get this kind of writing to make sense, it tends to have an unsettling, ungrounded or floating quality. The writer has given up on finding words for what he or she really means or wants to say.

It's the experience of managing to say what you really mean that I'd call the most lasting and reliable reward that writing can offer us. The buzzer finally goes off with a *positive* sound: these words give us a palpable bodily feeling of "Yes! I've written exactly what I wanted to say—but it's something I've never been able to say before." The words may not be what the reader wants to hear, but they say what I want to say. Once I get to this point, *then* I can decide whether I'm willing to make adjustments in order to satisfy external standards or readers. I have learned—and I think I've seen this over and over in students—that there is little hope in pleasing readers unless we can at least find words for the meanings inside us.

One last important point. It turns out that these meanings we build out of felt sense are *intricate* and *precise*. Gendlin often uses those two words. The words are startling and important because they contradict how most people think about nonverbal knowledge. They usually think of "hunches" and "intuition" as vague and fuzzy and only capable of pointing in a vague general direction—never spelling out anything with intricate precision. Work

with felt sense shows otherwise. Think about it: when we hear the "offness" in a word we've used, we hear it even if it's just *slightly* off. If you continue with this book, you'll discover that your work with felt sense can lead to the working out of intricate and precise structures of articulated meaning. In other words, felt sense provides us with a kind of blueprint for a precise intricate meaning—but it's a blueprint written nonverbally in our bodies.*

*For access to many writings by Gendlin and colleagues who work with him, see *www.focusing.org*. I've written more about felt sense in the following three works:

Introduction to the new edition of *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, Oxford University Press, 1998 (original edition 1981).

"The War Between Reading and Writing—and How to End It," *Rhetoric Review* 12.1 (Fall 1993): 5–24. Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

"Three Mysteries at the Heart of Writing," *in Composition Studies in the New Millennium: Rereading the Past, Rewriting the Future*, Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald A. Daiker, Edward M. White, eds. pp. 10–27, Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

Acknowledgments

This book reflects years of collaborative work and my debt to many friends and colleagues.

I think back to the late 1970s when I was first introduced to Gene Gendlin's focusing process and a group of us created "New Changes" in New York City, a self-help network for Vietnam veterans, modeled on the Changes network Gene had begun in Chicago. Arthur Egendorf, Joan Lavender, and Robert Whitney taught me focusing and listening and I, in turn, practiced focusing and listening with veterans in free weekly sessions held at Baruch College in Manhattan.

At the same time, I wondered what would happen if I applied Gene's focusing process to writing. In the New York City Writing Project at Lehman College of the City University of New York (CUNY), I found colleagues who helped me think through the steps that would turn Gendlin's focusing questions into the Guidelines for Composing. Those who worked with me in the early years, trying out versions and creating their own, include Elaine Avidon, Lillian Rossi Maida, Ed Osterman, Meta Plotnik, and Nancy Wilson. In Shoreham-Wading River, Diane Burkhardt showed me that the Guidelines worked as well with eighth graders as they did with college students and adults.

By the time I was ready to write this book and create the CD, the Writing Project brought me another group of teachers who were willing to listen, experiment, and give me feedback: Thomasina LaGuardia, Susan Sermoneta, Alan Stein, and Halima Toure; in addition, the Writing Across the Curriculum Initiative at CUNY brought me others: Peter Gray, Linda Hirsch, and Jessica Yood.

I also invited my doctoral students to help fine-tune the CD. Many took me up on this offer, listening to the CD while writing at computers in the basement of the CUNY Graduate Center, playing early versions of it in their freshman composition classrooms, and giving me feedback from their students. They include Maureen Fadem, Cathy Fagan, Frank Gaughan, David Hyman, Peter Khost, Bob Lazaroff, Irwin Leopando, Emily Schnee, and Ann Tabachnikov. Several years earlier, Mark McBeth, Tim McCormack, and Leo Parascondola worked with the Guidelines and sent me encouraging feedback and useful leads.

I am also indebted to my professional colleagues who have, from early on, been as intrigued by felt sense as I have. The founders of the Assembly on Expanded Perspective in Learning of the National Council of Teachers of English, Alice Brand and Richard Graves, and more recent leaders, Regina Foehr, Bruce Novak, and Libby Falk Jones, made an important place for felt sense in their conferences and program presentations. Over the years, my thinking has also been enriched by my friendship with Peter Elbow, who has furthered this work in his own unique way, and with M. Elizabeth (Betsy) Sargent who has been using the Guidelines for years, has field-tested the CD, and has provided me with insightful comments. And my work on this book was enriched by a week-long writing retreat in a farmhouse in southern Vermont where Nancy Gerson, Nancy Sommers, Mimi Schwartz, and I mixed writing with running, swimming, and cooking.

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I do not send my writing anywhere without first asking my dear friend, Nancy Wilson, to read it. It is Nancy's eye and ear I trust probably more than my own.

I have also received encouragement and support from the Focusing Network. Kye Nelson was particularly helpful in untangling a few theoretical notions. Finally, I come to Gene Gendlin without whose work mine would not exist. For twenty-five years, Gene has been a generous friend and colleague, always available to talk and more important, to listen.

I thank all of you for accompanying me on this journey, on a life committed to teaching, writing, and understanding the sources of creativity, for the hours of conversation about classrooms and what it takes to awaken the writer in each of us.

Introduction: Why This? Why Now?

For twenty years, at professional conferences in Denver or Detroit, Louisville or Los Angeles, colleagues have buttonholed me in hallways or stopped me in elevators to ask about felt sense. "I've read your article, 'Understanding Composing'" they say, "but I just can't figure out how to use felt sense in my classroom." Or, others admit, "I really like the idea, but talking about felt sense makes me uncomfortable. It just seems so touchy-feely."

I understand these reservations. Felt sense is one of those elusive notions that can make academics uncomfortable. This discomfort arises, I suggest, because felt sense refers explicitly to the body, and in particular, to the way body and mind are connected. According to Eugene Gendlin, the philosopher and psychologist who created the term, felt sense often comes first as an unclear, barely noticeable bodily sensation. Frequently, it is slightly disturbing because it calls attention to what is just on the edge of our thinking but not yet articulated in words. Gendlin refers to this aspect of felt sense as "a body-sense of meaning" (1981, 10). And to work with this body-sense, we need to attend to our bodies and discover just what these inchoate pushes and pulls, these barely formed preverbal yearnings or leanings, are beginning to suggest to us.

Now, whether the idea of a felt sense makes us uneasy, it is not farfetched to say that we all live, think, and feel in bodies, and that the physical is an essential aspect of human experience. This body-mind relationship is implied in Michel Polanyi's concept of "tacit knowledge," a kind of knowing, he asserts in *The Tacit Dimension* (1967), in which we "know more than we can tell" (4), in which we have "tacit foreknowledge of yet undiscovered things" (23), a

kind of knowing, I suggest, that is *tacit* because it is embedded in the body and nowhere else.

Interestingly, once felt sense has been explained, people often nod knowingly or experience a flash of recognition, realizing that they have called on felt sense in their own lives, regardless of their line of work. It turns out that once they understand it, people often become excited, recalling a time when they had a creative flash or were thrilled about a new idea they had just come up with. Often, they can describe, quite precisely, not only the idea but how they felt, physically, at the moment of discovery. But such moments, most conclude, are rare; they come only a few times in a lifetime and are more serendipitous than a sure bet. In fact, for centuries, the generative and creative aspects of people's lives and work seemed mysterious and off-limits, not something one could count on with any certainty. But the promise of felt sense is that there is a place we can turn to—and turn to reliably—as the source of new thinking. Felt sense does not guarantee that our ideas or our insights will be revolutionary or even accurate, but understanding felt sense and knowing how to access it provides us with a starting point for engaging in a process that is both creative and meaningful.

The implications of felt sense are particularly relevant for teachers of writing. Showing students how to work with felt sense can help them unleash their own creativity, providing them access to language and ideas that may have otherwise remained inaccessible. Learning to work with felt sense can lead students into an open and exciting way of thinking through which they can, with guidance and training, learn to say and think what is genuinely new and fresh for them.

I say this with conviction because for the past twenty-five years I have introduced felt sense to hundreds of writers, students, and teachers. The teachers, primarily my colleagues in the New York City Writing Project, first

explored and discovered the usefulness of felt sense in their own lives. Then, they brought this work into their classrooms—in middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities. Having guided their own students in the use of felt sense, these same teachers then often introduce this approach to other teachers in the dozens of inservice courses organized by the New York City Writing Project. And over the years, when I meet with Writing Project colleagues or other teachers, I hear, repeatedly, the same sort of response: "I was scared to do the felt sense exercise, but once we got started, I was amazed. Everyone wrote for at least half an hour, and this one resistant student [or teacher or administrator] just couldn't stop. I wish every class could be so easy."

So, what is the felt sense exercise? It is a guided process, a composing activity that I call the Guidelines for Composing. The Guidelines are recorded on the CD that accompanies this book. They are designed for writers to use on their own or for writing teachers to use with students in classroom settings or computer labs. In either case, the Guidelines are designed to set up what I think of as a "protected space" for writing: to help writers locate topics or research questions that are of interest to them or to help them contact their own unique stance on topics or research questions that have been assigned to them. More specifically, they guide writers through their composing processes from the first scary moments of facing the blank page to selecting and developing a topic, from waiting for a felt sense to form to seeing just what it suggests, from jotting down notes and images and ideas to eventually finding a shape and a point of view for a first draft.

The Guidelines for Composing are exploratory in nature; one can never predict ahead of time just what will emerge. Consequently, students often find Guideline questions to be both comforting and challenging, scary and revealing, fruitful and, at times, surprisingly profound. I

often think of them as providing company for writers of any age, at any level, professional or novice, as each faces his or her own urge to say and write something that actually matters.

Of course, in the field of composition studies, we have, over the past thirty years, developed a range of techniques to help students discover what's on their minds and give shape to their ideas. Freewriting, clustering, mapping, looping, all come to mind—and all are useful. Seen from this angle, the Guidelines are another tool, another composing activity, to get writers writing. But when they are connected to felt sense, they offer us a way to examine larger issues of composing. They give us an experiential base from which to examine how our bodies and our minds are connected, how meaning emerges not only from cognition but also from intuition, and how the body itself is implicated in knowing and in the construction of knowledge.

One does not have to accept the body-mind connection for the Guidelines to work effectively or to serve a useful purpose in writing classrooms; but for those interested in these connections, I lay out, in Chapter 3, a philosophy of bodily knowing. Here, contrary to many postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers, I suggest that language is not a prison that traps us but an open field in which we are free to play; that we are not only constructed by language and culture but also creators of new language and new cultures; and that this language-ing ability to say something fresh and new, to think new thoughts, can be derived, in essence, from our increasingly sophisticated ability to understand, acknowledge, and become adept at accessing felt sense.

So, this book does three things. Chapter 1 is historical in nature; it explicates the concept of felt sense and explains its connection to the field of composition studies. Chapter 2 is experiential; it is keyed to the CD and includes an annotated transcript of the Guidelines so that teachers know what to

expect when playing the CD in their classrooms or can revise the questions if they choose to lead students through the Guidelines on their own. Chapter 3 is theoretical; it addresses the idea that language and meaning are connected to inchoate, bodily intuitions and explores what this means in a philosophy of embodied knowing.

Depending on your inclinations, you can begin at any point. But, no matter where you start, there is, ultimately, one place you want to end up: playing the CD and writing along with the composing guidelines. Teachers may prefer to listen to the CD and work with it on their own before introducing it to students. Students, on the other hand, will find the CD self-explanatory, designed so that no prior knowledge is necessary. If students find the Guidelines useful, they can then acquire copies of the CD and use them on their own whenever they have a paper to write or a project to design or even just the urge to sit down and compose. (Track 52 of the CD provides additional information about Gendlin's work, *www.focusing.org*, and about purchasing copies of this book or the CD, *www.heinemann.com* or *www.boyntoncook.com*.)

This book and the CD are an attempt to explain what I was unable to articulate fully in those crowded conference corridors and cramped hotel elevators—namely that:

- Using felt sense in the classroom has made me a better teacher of writing.
- Most students who use the Guidelines for Composing become more effective and more confident writers.
- Felt sense is an aspect of our being that, when used wisely, can guide us not only when we write but also when we teach.
- The more conscious and comfortable we become accessing felt sense, the closer we come to grasping the endlessly rich and intricately creative aspects of composing not only our writing, but also our lives.