

How Indigenous Elders Think With the Heart

Shamanic Counseling Theory

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In my own examination of indigenous medicine people and the elders of a number of North and South American tribes, I have noticed an implicit heart psychology and have noticed that you can identify several major characteristics of this process of thinking from the heart.

From the considerable time I have spent sitting with and listening to a variety of indigenous elders and medicine people, I can tell you that there is a discernable pattern to their way of talking and thinking. When speaking from the heart, from their own experiencing, the word formation is often slowed and relaxed, as if the words were forming from a deeper, more inward place.

Their eyes seem to move between looking at you, then periodically defocusing, as if they are going inside themselves somewhere for more information. There is a back and forth movement with their eyes. Often such people frequently look slightly downward when checking in with this deeper place, which seems to be the touchstone of their forming words which they are continually checking them against some source of inner authority.

These people burrow into the topic or issue or situation under consideration and don't speak until they have really made contact with a precise spot within that is felt as *pregnant* with meaning and a sense of authenticity.

They are not hasty to reach conclusion, but seem to circle around or circumambulate the topic, closing in on it progressively, and at a more relaxed pace than the everyday verbal flow. Gradually the *subject matter*, whatever it is that they are *centering their attention on*, seems to open up more, and their words slowly and progressively lay out different sides, facets, and details of it.

Even though a variety of detail may emerge when the pregnant spot opens and yields her brood, there is a felt quality of unity to their reflections and expressions that holds it all together. This is why if you are in the presence of such a person and are taking in what they say, you can feel within yourself a natural truth quality which has an integrity to it.

The authenticity is unmistakable because of the *place* it is coming from. In time, the emerging viewpoint (and/or attitude towards...) of the elder or medicine man or woman follows organically from the details that have been laid out, as if it were a natural disclosure of truth, of the way of the Universe. In all probability, Ochiway Bianco talked like this as he thought from and with the heart. [\[i\]](#)

In the course of this book the process we just described here will be increasingly developed through the chapters on how to focus on the *pregnant spot*, which is essentially referred to as a 'felt sense'. A *felt-sense*, a term coined by the American philosopher and psychologist E.T. Gendlin is a fairly new name for an ancient capacity, and is essentially a gift of the heart. It is an intrinsic power of the heart. You will be shown how to find it and use it to do what these wise people know how to do. We will be teaching you some important Focusing and post-focusing steps.

Focusing is a stepwise process for teaching how to form, focus on, and *use* a felt sense, and to use it to think and act *with* and *from* this deeper place of the heart. *Focusing on a felt sense* is a practice which, for our modern cultural context, re-integrates the gifts of mind and heart, and is a bridge practice for bringing them back into more intimate and creative relationship.

It might help our understanding at this point to informally list these characteristics of the pattern described.

- * Slowing Down

- * Quieting the Mind

- * Going Inside

- * Burrowing In: Centering on the issue, problem, or subject matter that concerns you.

- * Getting the Feel of the Whole of it.

- * Inviting it to open, to speak in its own natural kind of way

- * Silent listening or Inward Sensing [without thoughts or words]

- * Gut-knowing: Use of the visceral-instinctual feeling tones [felt sense]

- * Circumambulating or staying with the Pregnant Spot, as a Touchstone for continual attention and checking against.

- * When the Pregnant Spot opens, a variety of detail or aspects that were previously implicit but not clearly perceived, come into view explicitly.

- * Understanding is increased as the details, or the important pieces of it, are now *seen*.

*Expression as concrete words come to capture the gist of it can be checked against the visceral or bodily feel of it, for exactness of fit.

* The words are modified for accuracy if needed.

*The words that come are characteristically fresh and concrete, often poetic in nature.

There are several other noteworthy aspects of how the wise elder goes inside to consult his or her own inwardly arising experiential process. First, the pace of speech is generally slower and has a *feel* as if coming from some inward source or ground, and yet has a *feel* of authority that comes with being experience-based and not intellect centered. Secondly, there seems to be knowledge of how to let something like a hunch or intuition form anytime it is wanted or needed.

It is important to say that all of this requires suspending the usual, everyday mental flow of words and lets them arise directly from the inwardly sensed pregnant spot [felt sense of...] in the center of chest and abdominal area.

The Gifts of the Heart

We usually think of the gifts of the mind as associated with the intellect, its capacity for conceptual and logical thinking, analysis, scientific investigation, practical thinking and so on. Similarly, there are many kinds of gifts associated with the heart: your center of being or core of aliveness, the intricacies of feeling, of love, compassion, a moral sense, a sense of the numinous [sacred], the flow of your ongoing experiencing, imagination, vision of the whole, of aiming towards sense of purpose, intuition, use of instincts and bodily felt perceptions.

The capacity to tap and *focus on a felt sense* that makes possible a healing of the split in ourselves and in our world between heart and mind as well as unconscious and conscious processes.

The gifts of the heart include the capacities or tools to use them in concert with the gifts of the mind. In the course of this book and doing the heart-centered practices, we shall help the mind realize its proper relationship to the heart is to be its servant.

Never do we put down the mind in a negative manner. We all need a good head on the shoulders and nothing much can come of our heart based purposes, goals and intentions, without the mind's gifts in making assessments, brining us important information from the world, and using its logical powers to identify obstacles, plan strategies for realizing and help for bringing "on line" the vision for our lives that arises in the heart.

When we say the mind is *servant*, we mean that our values and orientation in life should come from the heart, and the mind should help make that happen. The mind on its own has an incapacity to bring fulfillment and depth of satisfaction into our living. It is not the *source* of the vision, but the *companion* and helper.

We all Have a Capacity to Live Like This

We all have a capacity to think and act from the heart and in fact we sometimes use a felt sense, although not usually in a deliberate and skilled way. It is a gift of the heart and so is an archetypal capacity that is available to all.

We already know so much about the mind and have given it plenty of space in our modern lives. We need to understand the gifts of the heart better, so we will focus our attention on one of the primary gifts, the capacity to form or notice a *felt-sense* of something. [\[ii\]](#)

Here are some kinds of examples to illustrate ways you may have used a felt sense, in which you are actually interacting with an odd body sense that we might call the *visceral feel* or an *intuition*, and is in fact part of your own *internal guidance system* [IGS] by which you move towards what you are drawn to, and away from what you are repelled by.

A Spot in the Park: You are taking a walk in the park. You notice a spot by the banks of the pond where it feels attractive and you are drawn to pause, sit there awhile, and watch the graceful gliding of the swans. You did not think “*I shall go to the park and watch the swans*”. On this occasion, you just felt the *urge to move in that direction*.

Once in the park and walking along, your attention is captured by this spot, and it *draws you towards* resting and refreshing yourself there. The gift of the felt sense is used in this way to notice what you are *drawn toward*.

Your Spot in the Auditorium: You enter an auditorium to attend a class or view a film. You use the felt sense to find your spot, your seat. You don’t usually think it out in such a situation and say to yourself “6th row, 3rd seat.” Rather you move with the body towards that spot where it feels comfortable. [\[iii\]](#)

A More Attractive Path: You are driving to work. Normally you are in a bit of a rush to get there. Today you come to a fork in the road and find yourself drawn towards taking the longer but more scenic route through the countryside. Let yourself notice what happened here. You did not think: “*Hmm I’ve got more time today so lets make the drive interesting and take the long route around the corn fields*”. In fact you didn’t really think about it at all. You were simply driving and suddenly found yourself *drawn towards* taking the left fork, and you do so. Something in you seems to want to connect with the natural beauty of corn fields and woodlands.

In all these examples you chose some action which is not determined by thinking, [at least not primarily] and not only by emotion, but by the subtle inward bodily *feel of* being drawn towards some *spot* or *course of action* [route or path]. The heart’s integral relation with a felt sense is such that it has this internal and instinctual guidance system built into it.

Later we shall describe this *internal guidance system*, or *IGS* for short, in more detail when we offer you some practices for developing skill in using it [*D.I.G.S., What am I hungry for? What am I drawn Toward*, etc.]. But here we are simply drawing attention to the fact that a felt sense is how you tap it, and use it. Now you can let a felt sense form about anything, any problem, or issue, or challenge or situation, and it can, with a few more steps, help guide you naturally like that.

[i] I have seen and heard his grand- daughter Mirabel talk like this herself in a video in which she was describing the characteristics of her grandfather. I have witnessed the pattern numerous times amongst other indigenous elders and healers, as well as wise people from other traditions, including HH The Dalai Lama of Tibet, and Helen Luke, the Jungian analyst, writer and wise woman, John S. Dunne the mystic, story telling theologian, and numerous other people from various wisdom traditions, including Taoism, Advaita Vedanta, and Zen.

[ii] Technically a felt sense can be viewed as body and mind before they are split apart by culture. The felt sense knows your language and knows your thoughts as implicit in its holistic sense of things. But when you are using the felt sense, you are paying attention to feeling and temporarily setting aside the thinking processes of the mind while you sense inwardly or get the feel of.

[iii] I am indebted for this kind of example, Joan Klagsburn, Ph.D, who offers a few others in her book manual, *HOW TO TEACH A WORKSHOP IN FOCUSING*. It is available through the on line bookstore at www.Focusing.org

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