Talk

Angela 2 — Week 1, Day 3, Session 4 — 40 minutes

Summary: Russell gives the background for a practice he is about to lead. Experience, he says, is formed from sensing, feeling, and thinking, and wholeness comes by moving between differentiation and integration. He then introduces resource growing: using remembered moments of peace, love, or presence to strengthen life-giving patterns in the brain.

How experience forms

A process I want to do, but I want to give a little bit of background. And in order to give the background for the process I want to do, I need to give another —

So I'm going to speak a little bit. As is true of most of the subjects we work with, but they happen in spirals, in the sense that we'll go to one level of depth, and then we'll return to a subject at another level, and then we'll return to that subject. What I'm going to say will be very admittedly incomplete.

What I want to be pointing toward is, first, how we form our experiences. How a human being experiences their experience. How that forms.

This is a fundamental question for humanity, for philosophers, now for neurologists: how a human being has the experience of experiencing. Another way to say that is how we know we're alive. How we know we're alive. Very fundamental, deep question.

And I want to say a few things about it now. Again, it's going to be just touching on things for our group mind to begin working with, and return to it.

The first thing I want to comment on is this picture that the Gestaltists really understood. They were really the precursors to the phenomenologists, we can say. The Gestaltists really understood that we see things, we experience things as wholes, as a whole something, and then we divide it up into parts.

That's our thought process. We divide it into parts, and when it's done well, it can be a helpful thing. Often what happens is we divide up our experience — in our thinking, in our feeling, or in our attention to our body — in ways that we end up having narrow bands of experience that don't feel whole anymore, because they've gotten cut off from the whole.

So the first thing I want to point toward is that when we are hearing a concert, we are having this whole gestalt, this whole experience, even if we choose to focus on the lead violinist. We can do that, and we can do that in an effective way. We can add to the concert sometimes by taking a part of it.

But when we're doing that, if we're really musical, if we love music, it's not that we're pushing the other stuff away. It's not that we're doing this. It's that we're doing this. We're focusing in on something, but we have this also. We're not pushing that away in order —

And what I'd like to say is that most of the time, our experiences, when we're in harmony with a moment, when we're in harmony with another person, have this feeling of wholeness. Even when we're focusing on a particular something, this wholeness is there.

Now, the capacity to differentiate our experience. So let me give a picture of this a little bit.

The ingredients of a moment

In any moment of experience — now you'll experience how poorly I write, but hopefully you can read it. It's not one of my fortes.

In a moment of experience, we could say a moment is created. Moments are infinite in scope. No two moments are the same. Where — every moment is a novel creation, yet the ingredients of moments are finite.

Moments, from this point of view, are created out of — there is the capacity for sensing, right? Those are sensations. Sensations, of course, mean everything from seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and the body sense — temperature, weight, pressure, or kinesthesia.

There's what's often called feeling, which includes, but is not limited to, emotion. So why do I say includes, but is not limited to?

Classically, people will talk about emotions like mad, sad, glad, those kinds of categories. When I'm talking about a feeling sense, it's anything that, in our language, fits with I feel — I feel energized. We wouldn't say energized is a classical emotion, but it's a way we can feel, yeah?

Or, I feel excited about something. I feel — I'm not really — yeah, I'm feeling a little bit of — you get the idea. And anything that fits like that. So it's emotion plus how it feels to be you. How it feels to be you in a given moment.

And then, of course, there is thinking. Thinking is more than what we normally think of as thinking. It actually includes any symbolizing. It's the capacity of the human being to represent something that is not here — with an image, with a word, with a collection of words. It can also be musical symbols. It fits.

In other words, every way of symbolizing experience. Every way of holding something that isn't here, isn't present, and being able to have a word for it, an image of it, a representation of it.

And each moment of experience is an amalgam, a unique creation. It's like these are your finger paints, and then you make your picture. And it's a unique creation using these elements.

Whole and healing

And when we are in a holistic — and this is such a beautiful word. I much prefer the spelling with the W. Why? Because this implies something that is whole, rather than something that has a hole in it.

And the basic point of holistic is to get rid of the hole. Get rid of this hole, so you can have this whole. Do you get what I mean?

So the basic point of holistic is this word whole, which is the root — rooted in the word healing. To heal something is to become whole. To become whole around something — it heals.

To become whole around the fact we have cancer is not necessarily getting rid of the cancer. To become whole around the cancer is much bigger. One can get rid of cancer and not be healed. One could be very divided inside for the rest of their life. One can become very whole and carry that cancer and be killed by that.

And so we're talking about this sense of whole.

Differentiation and integration

Okay, so in this creation, you could say, of a moment, I would suggest that in moments where we're feeling in harmony — in those places in our life, it could be our hobby, it could be when we're making music, if we're musicians, it could be when we're walking in nature, if that's a place of connecting, it could be whatever it is that is our place of feeling whole — often in those places, there's what we can call an integration.

Integration is another fantastic word, because into — integration is another way of getting at this sense of what is whole.

So I have to give you a few of these things before I can get into the practice that we do.

In those moments where we are in harmony with our living, I would suggest that there is a fluidity between the bodily sense, how we feel, and our symbolizing — our ability to reflect on it, talk about it. That there's an integration of the human being in those moments.

Now, one more thing about this whole. Whole — just like when you hear people say, well, I want to experience the all, the all. Well, it's actually quite superficial if there isn't also the capacity for differentiating and making distinctions.

And so, to feel my whole body, but not to be able to have the specificity of how that shoulder moves. To have the whole is great, and it is enriched when there's the capacity for more differentiation.

This is Feldenkrais's great insight: that there's this movement from differentiation to integration, to further differentiation, to further integration, and that that's the process of development. That's the process of growth in an individual — to be able to differentiate aspects of our personhood and then have them come together as a whole being, and then to find that, well, there's more to know about this, and we feel we get a little bit disassembled, and then we reintegrate with more capacity.

And then we make some more distinctions, we get a little bit disassembled again. And if you get used to this process of growth, you start getting comfortable with the disassembling, or more comfortable with it. Because there's more coming. There's more potential energy being liberated for the organism to reintegrate at a higher level.

Marriages do that when they are evolving. Human beings do that when they're evolving. Countries and political systems do that. All systems go through this. If they stay at the same level of integration, they will die, because they will stay solid.

I need to keep going here for a minute. They will stay solid.

When something is alive, it implicitly has movement. And that movement — when it's a healthy, life-evolving movement — includes a differentiating followed by a reintegrating. And so more gets possible in the system. You get that picture?

So when we solidify ourselves — just take it physically — in our protective patterns, and we solidify ourselves, this is a system that's bound for decay and death. Solidification is the movement towards, you could say, premature death. It's only premature if they could have another possibility. But it's a solidification. Life becomes less differentiated.

And then, when we can bring some more capacity to differentiate the parts, it's not enough just to differentiate them and have everything moving, unless there are frequent reintegrations, so that the organism comes to a higher level of standing and mobility. Do you get how that works?

If you can see that physically, it's the exact same thing that's going on in our inner development.

When one channel dominates

As we differentiate our feeling life, it's not enough to say — you know, some of us are very feeling types, and we often feel overwhelmed by emotions. And when the feeling self is very alive, but is not in connection to the symbolizing and thinking, or the sensations, we tend to get overwhelmed by the feeling.

Remember yesterday, working with Barbara. Can I comment back to some of the work? Okay. So one of the subtexts, if you think back on it, was there was a lot of feeling. And one of the things that I kept encouraging, and Barbara kept doing: can we connect the feeling to sensation?

Not just have it be, I've got — this is different — if somebody has, I'm really scared, I'm just full of fear, I'm just full of fear. There's nothing you can do about it, and you say, yeah, here, you're full of fear. But what's needed in that moment is a more holistic experiencing of what's called fear.

How do we get it more holistic? Well, one place is how you're sensing that in your body. Okay, well, I'm really scared, and I feel my heart's really beating. Already it's growing. Already there's more. More wholeness beginning to — I feel this in my — and there's the ability, we can call this, in that symbolizing, the ability to actually say, well, I'm noticing this and I'm noticing this.

There's the beginning of standing next to the experience of the fear. One is not just, I'm so full of fear. One is, well, I feel this in the chest, it's still a whole lot of fear, and I also notice — and now you have a person who is having a much more whole experience of that moment.

And then thoughts come in, like, oh, this is bringing up the memory of that. And then, as Barbara said, she's really good at getting the thoughts and pictures and ideas. And when that started going on for a little while — we wanted that — but there were a couple of moments there where she could have really gotten carried away in the story. Then I said, and how is that in your body right now?

We switched channels to make it whole again. Do you get what I mean?

So we don't, usually — all of those channels of experiencing are essential for the whole. But if one begins to dominate, if one starts getting lost in thought, and there isn't embodiment, and there's no connection to how the thought is feeling, then we have that sense of, I got stuck in my head. I got stuck in my head.

Some of us have a strong habit. The thinking life is so dominant that we ignore the body sense and our feeling life. Some of us, the feeling life is so dominant that we can't stand next to it, and we can't sense it immediately. Some of us somaticize a lot, and we feel everything as, oh, that pain in my back, and we get fixated on certain sensations. But it's very difficult for us to connect to our feeling life, or any imagery connected to it, the thoughts about it.

So often, what's very helpful is to differentiate experience and to help them reintegrate, by bringing in that sense of what's missing from this being a whole human being having this experience. What channels are being ignored?

And when those come in, generally the experiencer has a fuller, wholer, and actually what feels like more workable experience, less overwhelming experience, usually.

What has stopped moving

Oh, it's just — Piaget talks about equilibrium and disequilibrium, which is a very similar concept, which I think — in order to grow, we have to go through this period of confusion, of disequilibrium, and get reorganized. And then when you reorganize, you've got equilibrium again, but you can't stay there. It's a continuous —

Right. If you're an evolving system. And what happens very often, in relationships or in individuals, because the fear of change is so strong, is okay, we're going to live in this. And it gets arthritic, both metaphorically and often physically. It gets stuck in its state, in its prior state.

Everything — again, Feldenkrais, great insight — life is movement. And Buddha said the same thing in another language. Heraclitus said the same thing in another language, right?

When we have left that stream of life, when it's no longer capable of moving forward, something has gotten solidified. The places that have gotten solidified in us are holding life energy. It's like an iceberg floating down the river. It can't — it's still made of river stuff, but it can't participate in river life. It's got stuck. It's like a narrow passage and the big iceberg, and how do we melt that? That's what we're working.

Okay, so I want just this kind of picture. Our experience is made of really precise elements. It's always new and fresh.

Fluidity between the channels

One of the things that we will be learning, as our time moves on, is the fluidity of movement in these channels. These channels — feeling, thinking, and sensing — are not separate. I'm separating them to talk about them, with the whole implicit. But to separate them helps them get enriched, so that there's more available for the whole.

And each of them. Sensation can be further differentiated, and just the sensation of the physical body can be further differentiated, so we can go to infinite degrees. Thinking can be differentiated, and then different types of thinking can be different. So within each of them, we can go further, further, further, further, further, and that can be helpful as long as one is not losing track of the reintegration. And they reconnect.

So with our thinking, we will learn what it means to be embodied in our thinking, so that those of us who have this tendency to get lost in our thoughts, and lose connection to the rest of the self, because we're living up here. Everybody seems to notice it except us, especially our spouses.

And this person often gets married to a dominant feeler. The conversations are very interesting. When a dominant thinker has a primary relationship with a dominant feeler, they're there to learn from each other, of course, but often there's just this different language going on. And boy, it's so helpful when we get fluid in our mood.

We can still be a dominant thinker, but we can learn to be embodied thinkers, our feeling life nourishing our thinking. Same for those who are dominant feelers. Our capacity to reflect, and be with the feeling and not in it, is liberation itself.

Okay, so that's introducing a little subject.

Resource growing

Now, this is all background for the process I want to do, and I want to write this, make it something for you.

This is a kind of practice that we'll do numerous times in embodied life work. It's a key practice for us, and it's, I believe, one of the great life-giving practices for people. It's what I call resource growing, which is just an abbreviation for growing our internal resource.

So just as — let me pause for a second and see how I want to start.

I have the perception and experience that we, as living, functioning human beings, have had moments — at least had moments — of experiencing all of the, we could call them soul qualities, or all of the qualities of the awake human being. Spirit qualities, except spirit doesn't really have qualities. Let's call it the deep qualities of humanity.

What do I mean by that? Everyone has experienced moments of deep peace. Even people who have had really traumatized backgrounds, there have been moments, often spare, but moments. Moments of what we could call love, a warm-heartedness toward, or being cared for, for at least a moment. Otherwise we wouldn't survive. At least a moment of being cared for.

And I've worked with this resource growing with people who have more horrific backgrounds than you can imagine, and we have found these moments, these bodily memory moments.

So we all have some experience of what it feels like to be flowing, to be in connection, even to experience gratitude. To experience something like forgiving. These qualities that we long for, often. A quality of really being present.

We've had moments. Some of us have gone, I really want to learn how to be present. I'm lost in my mind so much. Even this, which is many of us, have had many moments where we've been really present with something. Often it's at moments where we feel really safe, where we're doing something that we really enjoy. Those are the things we often choose for hobbies, or that really call us. Some of us are really drawn to nature because we have these moments like this.

For some of us, it's beauty. We see some beautiful colors, or the sunset, or the sunrise, or even in a museum, and it will move us so much. It touches that place. Yeah?

So what resource growing is about is using our own history to grow the neural pathways of positive experience. Okay, so I want you to get this image. We're using your experience.

Our experience means something. From a neurological point of view, it's something your brain has experienced. From a human point of view, it's something you have experienced. Using our experience to grow what I like to call neural networks. Neural networks just means brain patterns.

And what is really wonderful about being in this age, where there are PET scans, and where you can watch activity in the brain, and see what meditation does to the brain, and what meditation on compassion does to the brain, and how that's different than meditation that's focused, is that you can actually observe that we grow our own brains. We grow our own connectivity in our brains. This is really good news.

And the tragic error of a lot of therapy — and I love lots of therapies, and this is not a down-on-therapy talk — but the tragic error of a lot of therapies is that people are taught to focus on what doesn't work, where the problem is.

This again was a Feldenkrais insight, related to the physical body. You don't work on the problem first. You develop the health of the system so that the healthy parts can lift the injured part. Same thing. Family therapy comes from the same point of view. You don't begin with the identified patient. You grow — look at the system of interconnections, get the system healthier, and then that part of it can be lifted by the health of the organism, or the health of that system.

So it's unfortunate that we spend so much time focused on the feeling of being, say, disconnected, and so little time growing how it feels to be really connected, and growing the sense of connectedness. Or how often we deal with what it feels like to be anxious, but we don't deal with the known inner experience of deep peace, and how to grow the experience of deep peace so that your brain can find it easily. You get what I mean?

So this whole part of the embodied life work — and there are three main parts. I think most of you know this. I actually haven't spent any time talking about the embodied life work in terms of theory. It stands on the meditation aspect, the movement aspect, and what I call guided inquiry.

This is a part of guided inquiry. There are numerous parts. What's called focusing is a part of guided inquiry. Resource growing, which is kind of a cousin of focusing, is a part of guided inquiry. There are other practices we'll do. It's awareness practice that helps round out our study.

So resource growing grew out of an insight that began with Feldenkrais. Well, we can grow these motor patterns. We can grow new motor patterns. And then he said, well, we can use the imagination to work with movement patterns. And he began, a very little bit, using the imagination in other realms.

And then I began to get interested in, well, there's a whole lot of potential there. And then I started seeing other people who were studying neurology and looking at how human beings learn, saying, wow, this is not pie-in-the-sky stuff. Us — like I like to say — us very ordinary human beings can begin becoming responsible for our own brain patterns. And we can begin to grow life-giving neurological patterns that carry the states that we wish would happen spontaneously more often.

And what are they? They're states like, gee, I wish I could be more present, or more connected to my whole self, more connected to the people around me, more in presence. Different words we can

put on different aspects of these. But those qualities that are life-giving — there might be certain ones that you're more attracted to. It's kind of like a Chinese restaurant. You pick a few from here and a few from here, you know.

But we all probably want them. Those of you who listen to my recordings, I speak about this a little bit. Some of us are really love beings. I mean, everybody here probably has a positive feeling towards loving and being loved, but for some of us, that's our lifeblood.

Some of us are truth beings, where we feel most connected to ourselves when we are in — we might be philosophers, scientists — in connection with the authentic truth. And that, if we had to choose, might actually trump love, or be our doorway to feeling most ourselves. We like the love, but we're truth beings.

Yeah. So we all want all of them, but we are all predisposed towards certain ones a little bit more. Yeah.

So we will be doing a number of resource growing processes, and we're going to do our first one today, shortly.

How a memory grows

And I'm going to guide you through the process. I really want to tell you about it.

I'm going to guide you inward, bring you to a certain kind of state of consciousness, through a certain guidance, and I'm going to ask you to invite your inner life to have a memory of a certain something, and we'll see if something comes. There's no pressure here. There's never an I have to produce in any of these practices. It doesn't work if there is.

So it's an invitation to your inner life to have a memory, and I'll give you some time to do that. It can be very vague. It can be very subtle. It doesn't have to be a big thing. It can be a very small thing.

And I'm going to help you grow the memory. Now, memory, neurologically, is quite interesting. Memory is a construction. It's not, this is the way it was, like a fixed picture. Memory changes over time.

The neurology of memory is quite interesting. The cells that are transferring the information to the new cells, as these cells die off — it's more like a game of telephone. And depending on how you're feeling at a given time, the memory can change.

So as trite as it is, and as embarrassed as I am to say it, I can actually say the bumper sticker is true. You're never too old to have a happy child.

Memories can — I mean, in terms of the neurology of it, there can be a reconfiguring. Through one's understanding — oh, I still didn't like it, but that feels really different knowing that. And it actually lives in your body differently.

It's the old story of somebody on the river in the fog, in their fancy boat, fishing off the front end of their boat, and all of a sudden something smacks into their boat. And they can't believe someone just smacked into them, and they're so angry, and they go running, and they're about to be livid at this guy, until they realize it was a log floating by.

And what happened to the anger? They're now upset about their boat, but there's no anger. Right? So when you understand the circumstances of something, that can actually change how something lives in your body, even very old.

Okay, so when I ask you for a memory, some of you are going to have very clear, precise memories. Some of you, it's going to be very vague. Don't worry if it's vague. I'm going to encourage you to grow it. Your brain works best when it can have more information.

So, for example, if you're having a memory and you're not quite sure if the walls are red or blue, don't worry about it. And if you have a kind of sense that they were bright, let them be bright. But you don't have to worry if there's enough detail, or if it really happened exactly like that. That can interfere with your process.

Okay, so maybe a bathroom, but not a tea break. Okay, just enough time. Water in, water out.