Practice

Angela 2 — Week 3, Day 4, Session 5 — 57 minutes

Summary: Russell invites a felt sensing of safe and unsafe, then of uncomfortable and unsafe, with people speaking from the body and reflecting one another's words. He teaches that a felt sense joins image, feeling, and sensation and moves forward, unlike circular feelings. Partners then explore life-enhancing and unhelpful vulnerability.

Safe and unsafe

[Russell:] So, I invite you to just pause for a moment and close your eyes.

And as we all know, there's such a great and important difference between the words that come from our thinking, when they're disconnected from our feeling and our body, and the felt sensing of something that's alive.

And a couple of important experiences that were spoken about in our first and second days here, I'd like to drop down and have some felt sensing into what these feel like.

And to speak out loud. Take your time. Someone will speak, let in what they say, then pause and sense, and we will learn together.

So first, before I tell you the subject matter, just drop down and feel. I'm sitting on this spot, and I'm here.

And if your body needs a stretch or a movement or anything, let yourself have it so that you — and let yourself feel the breath. Particularly on exhale. Include the space around you, that there are sounds you can hear.

And just for a moment, maybe place your hands on your chest, just to feel your heart space feeling, and a breath or two.

And then let your hands rest.

And just begin to invite your inner sense of the qualities of safe and unsafe. How those live as you take them down into your belly, to your chest. And you might do one at a time. You might go back and forth in your own way, inviting how that lives, and inviting whatever sensations, images, feelings come connected.

How you know safe. How you know, I'm safe?

[Silence 2 minutes]

[Russell:] Come on, feel ready, describe something out loud. It seems important to your inner life, about how unsafe feels, how safe feels in there.

[Participant:] Unsafe feels contracted and tense, and like war. And safe feels like an outward flowing vitality.

[Russell:] Outward flowing. Yeah.

And so we see this, and see what resonates for you, and then you can let that go through. And when someone's ready to offer their way, or something about their way, it can be similar, it can be different, but feel your language and your sensations as they are now.

[Participant:] Safe feels like a soft — just a soft smile. Not safe feels like closing the curtains.

[Participant:] Who's going to ask that again?

[Russell:] Yeah. It feels like a soft smile, and not safe feels like closing the curtains.

I'd like to add a little something. When someone just spoke, and before them another person spoke — when you hear the person who just spoke, when the person who has spoken before hears the words, say back a sentence like, so you're sensing a small smile, and you're sensing unsafe like curtains closing.

And then the next person that will speak, the one who just spoke will give them back a sentence, something like, so you're sensing, or so you're noticing, or you're receiving this like this, and you're noticing this like this.

[Participant:] You're sensing safe as a small soft smile, and unsafe like closing the curtain.

[Russell:] When you hear that, feel it. Feel if it feels just right, and if anything further wants to come with that, you can, or you can not say anything, and someone else will say something, and then you would repeat their words.

[Participant:] That feels like freedom, and real affection. And unsafe feels like danger.

[Russell:] And how does your body show you that danger is the right word? Is there a sensation there that speaks to you?

[Participant:] A little contraction, a desire to withdraw.

[Russell:] Okay.

[Participant:] So you're sensing that safe feels like freedom and relaxation, and sensing unsafe feels like danger and contraction.

[Participant:] Unsafe feels like avoidance, pushing away. Safe feels patient, slow, and nurturing.

[Participant:] Unsafe feels patient, and slow, and nurturing.

[Russell:] And I just want to comment that I know there's a balance. The tones that are being used are so exquisite and so just right for the responding, and I know for some people they'll be hard to hear.

See if you can, even if you miss the words, feel the energy of the reflecting back of the words. And if you're reflecting back the words and can raise the volume and keep the same feeling, do so.

[Participant:] I notice safe is expansive, especially in my diaphragm and solar plexus. Space around. Almost like being in a warm —

And unsafe. When I lose any sense of space, particularly in my lower body, diaphragm. Particularly a sense in my eyes, that are very much about looking out, almost like here to there, checking out the field, and kind of darting, tightly focused eyes.

[Russell:] Don't try to say it all. Just give the essence, what's most important.

[Participant:] So I hear that safe feels expansive and warm in your diaphragm, connecting to the ground.

[Participant:] Like a warm pool.

[Participant:] Unsafe feels like losing space, and narrowness within your sight, through your eyes.

[Participant:] Safe feels like raindrops on a pond. And unsafe feels like a fawn darting through the forest, here and there, frantically.

[Participant:] Raindrops, and unsafe, a fawn darting here and there through the forest.

[Russell:] And see if it feels okay when you take that image of the darting fawn. Feel how your body knows that that's right. What are some of the sensations, if there are some you're in touch with, that have the darting fawn?

[Participant:] My heart's beating fast, my palms are sweaty, my breath is constricted.

[Russell:] One more. One more person.

[Participant:] Unsafe is high pressure on my body. Safe is the warm presence all around you.

[Participant:] Unsafe is high pressure in your body, and safe is the warmth of people around you.

[Russell:] And what's the last — the warmth of?

[Participant:] Of people around you.

[Russell:] Say it once again, where the voice doesn't lift as a question, but as a state.

[Participant:] It feels like the warmth of people around you.

[Russell:] Let's feel how all that lives for all of us right now, for each of us.

Uncomfortable and unsafe

[Russell:] I want to go with a further distinction, as we're staying in touch.

Often in our lives — so stay inside as you listen — often in our lives, when we're learning, when we're growing, when we're doing challenging things, when we're really being intimate with ourselves or others, it's not uncommon for moments to get uncomfortable.

And begin to feel in your body for the difference between unsafe and uncomfortable.

And let your body speak to you about those, and see what comes as you speak out. It can be them individually, or how they're different. Let your inner life help you know the difference.

[Silence 2 minutes]

[Russell:] Of course, we're talking about a kind of uncomfortable that feels like it could potentially be helpful or life-giving. It's not all uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable like that. How that feels different than unsafe.

[Participant:] Uncomfortable feels more safe, because I'm familiar with the sound and the image. So I have some option. And when I move into situational danger — safety, and reacting — now there's much thought. The ante is too high. I feel like I have to decide.

[Russell:] And notice how your body lets you know whether it's uncomfortable or unsafe. See if you can get some distinction about the sensation, or all that's known in there.

[Participant:] I feel the ability to move, literally inside. My skin moves at different angles in the uncomfortable. But it's dangerous, like it's a straight line. I'm tightening up, looking for — narrowing, narrowing, tensing up.

[Participant:] So you sense uncomfortable as there's movement in there, even in the skin, angles and directions. And the unsafe feels like this straight line tightening.

[Participant:] Unsafe is usually, what I mean, fairly clear. Uncomfortable is usually a little more confusing. What's the spirit? What's going on, and why?

[Russell:] Listen, for the texture of unsafe when it's in your body. Drop in there and sense. What's the sum of its qualities? And then, when you get the qualities of the confusion called uncomfortable, how your body lets you know that.

[Participant:] Unsafe is a sense of coldness, hardness, containment. Focus, hardness, pain. Anger.

Uncomfortable is like an unease. Amorphous. It wasn't clear.

[Participant:] You're sensing unsafe as hardness — pain, anger. Uncomfortable, amorphous, unclear.

[Participant:] I've experienced uncomfortable as a blurring of my boundaries. It's my disorientation. And I experience unsafe as a pulling away from the ground, and leaving my body through my back.

[Participant:] Uncomfortable, the blurring of boundaries, vagueness. Unsafe is pulling back, literally, up and back, literally pulling you back.

[Participant:] A place, a location. A feeling. Leaving my body.

[Participant:] Leaving your body.

[Russell:] So I'm going to ask you to go just once again, just adding the clause. Rather than unsafe is, or uncomfortable is — you sense, or you're sensing uncomfortable as.

[Participant:] You're sensing uncomfortable as a blurring of boundaries, a sense of vagueness. Unsafe — sensing it as a movement through your body.

[Russell:] How do you feel? Do you have a sense of anything through your body? Right. Nice. Thank you.

And one more person.

[Participant:] Uncomfortable. There's a sense of needing to drop in, figure out, look after. I feel it mostly in my stomach.

Unsafe is more a bodily sense of watch guard. And I can feel it in my feet. I can feel it in my shoulders. Yeah, like that.

[Participant:] You sense uncomfortable as needing to drop in, to figure out. And you sense unsafe as a watch guard, for your feet.

[Russell:] And just take a moment to appreciate that when given a little time, your inner life, your inner sense, has a richness. A richness of language, sometimes imagery, sensation, all living together.

Just notice if there's a sense of appreciation that that's true, and that that's possible. It's so alive in there.

And then let your attention come back to just sitting here, feeling the ground under you, sounds around you. Your eyes open. Colors and shapes.

[Silence 32 seconds]

Felt sensing

[Russell:] Did anybody feel lost in the request I was making for your inquiry? Anybody feel like, I don't know quite what he means by that, or how to do that, or something like, huh?

[Participant:] At first.

[Russell:] It all came to you.

[Participant:] Right, right. So a specific example helped.

[Russell:] Yeah, good. Good to hear.

[Participant:] I found that.

I also worry that my body doesn't really distinguish. I think this maybe was part of the purpose of the exercise. I'm not sure. And what I've learned to do — I mean, I've had to use cognitive interventions on myself to tell myself the difference. This is not what you say to me, in order to get my body to respond correctly. So it's like —

[Russell:] Right, right.

But with some help, then a distinction can be made.

[Participant:] A little.

[Russell:] Right. So, and probably, you know, as they were closer — as it was a strong discomfort, it would be a stronger distinction. If it was a little bit of discomfort, you might see it sooner. If you were a little bit uncomfortable, 'cause you're waiting for a taxi and it's raining.

[Participant:] Right, right.

[Russell:] Yeah. So if we take a situation, I'm just thinking that if it's a strong discomfort, it's closer to unsafe, and mild discomfort, in a social interaction. Is that your — that's not your experience. You go straight to unsafe.

[Participant:] Kind of at the same level of intensity.

[Russell:] Yeah. Well, good to know that. Good to know that that's how you can get to making the distinction. Right. So that's helpful.

Those are not there yet. Sometimes some self-talk, and then listening — oh yeah, that's true. Oh, that feels different.

[Participant:] Wanting to bring me out in a way that I don't want to. But when I'm comfortable, I'm safe with the person that I'm able to be uncomfortable with. And then I can work with my discomfort. And there's a sense of potentiality.

[Russell:] Interesting.

[Participant:] Grasping for what uncomfortable means. I'm not sure.

[Russell:] Yeah. Yeah, interesting.

[Participant:] Not safe, but really clear.

[Russell:] Really clear. Okay.

So, what's most important to me right now in this practice is that we continue to clarify this felt sensing process. Because for me, that is maybe one of the most important aspects of how to be with our inner life.

There's a difference between being with just our feelings, or just our images, or just our sensations, and all of that working together. And it generally doesn't come off the top. It needs a pause, needs a little time, a sense of dropping down, a sense of listening to how that's alive in here.

And when we can learn that through practice — learn that kind of pausing and sensing into, and not simply getting located in the feeling word, and that which is a narrower band than the whole felt sense, or just our image, the symbol, the word for it, or just how it feels physically. It's not that they're all equal, but much of that is often there.

For example, there was a beautiful moment when someone came with the word avoidance, which is like a psychological word. It's a good word. It's a good word, has inner meaning. And then followed that with like a pushing away. Yet how the pushing away helped it to fill out.

If we just say, well, that's part of my resistance, I have this resistance to something — but when we can feel, why am I using the word resistance? Why am I using the word avoidance? Or why am I using the word anxiety? Let me unpack it a little bit. Oh, it actually has an energetic to it. It actually has a physical, energetic movement to it. And when we can get to the physical energetic movement that's layered within the word, the word comes alive.

We want the word. We want the symbology of it. We want how it feels in there. And a beautiful image of this fawn darting. And when the fawn darting includes the heart pumping, it takes on even more richness.

Not saying that all those will always be there, but we want to listen for the integrated experience of how it all comes together. And these are kind of like, you know, if you're doing a curry, you need the turmeric, and you need this, you need that. It's like they're all together.

And again, a couple of keys here for us, to listen in this way. And why it's important for me, because in my experience, many people who learn to go inside learn to listen to their feelings. And that's good. But what I notice is, very often feelings are circular. They keep coming back to the same place.

What I notice about an integrated experience of felt sensing is that it has movement forward, not just around.

And so I so much want to encourage us. And actually for me, as you can tell by the way I offer this stuff, for me even more important than the steps of Focusing is that we get conversant with felt senses, and that we can feel that what we're experiencing has got enough richness to it that it's either a felt sense, or it's becoming a felt sense. It's on its way to being a felt sense. It's moving forward.

Okay. So, what I notice is, when I have a feeling of that — okay, so, it used to be, and it still is to some extent, for my inner life to be touched begins with sadness. So it used to be, whenever I got touched, oh, there's sadness. Oh, I'm sad. And I would stop at the sad, and it would keep — so I didn't want to be touched a lot.

Then, as I began making more distinctions, oh, there's this kind of — how is this particular touched? And in the background, there's something. Sad isn't even the right word. It's more like shadows and light. It's got much more texture to it.

[Participant:] Like touched? Like being touched?

[Russell:] Yeah. No, no. Being touched emotionally. Yeah.

And so, as I would feel the rich texture of the experience, different words would come, different feeling would come, different images.

I notice a lot of people are very repetitive. This happens, and that's the feeling state that I experience in relation to that. You do that, I get angry. You do that, I — it feels circular. What I know.

And what I notice is that when I pause and I sense into the texture of this particular moment — what I call opening the box of the thing I called anger — I open it, and it's got all this texture, all these images. Maybe there's a lot of, I'm scared something's going to happen, that's part of my anger, and I'm all excited inside, and it's a kind of anger that's got me like this. And when all that is there, it tends to unfold. It moves, it shifts, when I can be with it.

So the felt sensing, for me, opens and moves what Gene called the felt shift. It helps things to move.

And that richness, that texture — that's why I find it so helpful not to say what things are, but what the sense is, what the feeling is like.

[Participant:] Okay, so what I — yeah. Yeah, I think to have some kind of label can help get in touch with something that's alive. But I think for me, hold the label lightly.

[Russell:] I think for Gene also, that the handle is a way in there, but now it's going to change. And yeah, he would say, let it change.

[Participant:] Things should look weird. Unsafe, and uncomfortable.

[Russell:] No, no. Well. And then, is it really right? Is this where it really fits? And then the handle is only fitting because you have to investigate the rightness of it.

[Participant:] Yes.

[Russell:] So the handle, yes, was the first doorway in. Unsafe — and somebody might listen for that and go a little deeper, and you go, no, it's uncomfortable.

And then, does that feel right? Is uncomfortable just right? And what is this uncomfortable? Oh, it's that uncomfortable where I just want to kind of go run and put covers over my head, kind of uncomfortable. Or is it, and I feel all squished. Or is it the uncomfortable where I — so each one has its own flavor. But the handle is the word, and it shifts as you're with it, as it unfolds.

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Let's wait on that for now.

[Participant:] The story also is, like, if you have a — there's so much. Like, you talk about people having repetitive patterns, and it's conditioning. So knowing, oh, is this happening now, or is this something that happened a long time ago? Is this feeling something that's related really to what's going on now, or is it something that's coming from something that happened to me?

So the investigation includes underlying stories. Like, as you go deeper, where is it arising from?

[Russell:] It can, yes. It certainly can, if one is — yes, it can.

In the work we're doing right now, especially as the companion, I'm not encouraging that one try to guide someone to look toward that, but in oneself.

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Okay, great.

Partner practice

[Russell:] Okay, so where I'd like to go next. Yeah, everybody kind of has a little bit of a feeling for what we're talking about here, I think. It seems like it.

One second. Okay, so.

So what I would like to have us do. I would like to have us explore another key subject that came up every day so far, and is a beautiful doorway into our inner life.

I would like to, with a partner, spend some time — I'm going to spend about twenty minutes each — learning from our inner life. So we're listening. It's speaking. So we might have to pause and be quiet and let it come, and then pause again and be quiet and let it come. That pausing is critical.

Going to listen for what is the difference, and how can I know life-enhancing vulnerability, and unhelpful vulnerability. How can we know these? How do we have these now?

And I'm not asking you to think about it or plan. I don't want you to try to plan it out. You could each sit down and write something about it. I know you could do that, and you could have a theory about this, and you could maybe say some really great and important things. But the practice here is letting it come from in the body, and finding language for it.

Okay? And so you're investigating. We don't know what form it's going to take. There's no right way to do it.

Some guidelines are frequent pausing, listening to your body. When you find yourself theorizing — well, I'm sure unhelpful are times in my life when I have made myself vulnerable — when you start feeling like that, let me pause for a moment.

And in fact, the partner can say a few things. The partner can reflect back some of your sensing or feeling words, like, so you're sensing, so you're noticing. Not all of them, but if there are strong ones, you can give them back. And when the partner says them back to you, take them in. Feel, does that feel right? Does that feel true?

Another thing your partner can do is, if you're kind of going on and on and on, your partner can say, maybe pause. Maybe sense what it would be like to pause. If the partner doesn't want to pause, you let them go. They have a right. They can keep talking. But one of your invitations as a partner will be, notice what it might be like to pause, or see if it feels right to pause.

Okay? So you can reflect back some of their sensing, feeling words. You can invite them to pause.

The last thing is, maybe sense that. Maybe sense how all that's in your body right now. And again, they can choose to go there or not.

And you may the whole time not say anything, or you may just reflect back some words. They may pause a lot. They may be in touch. But if they start going, you know, for a couple of minutes into something where it feels like maybe they're getting carried away by their stories about it, you might invite them. Maybe pause. And sense how all that is, or maybe feel that in your body. Sense how that's alive in there.

Does that feel possible to do?

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Now, each person's going to be doing this very, very differently, right? This is an opportunity for — hopefully you'll be surprised by some of what comes for you. It could be that it brings up things, stories in your life, or situations in your life. That's fine. It could be that that doesn't happen. That's fine.

It's really a practice for you to be guided by your felt sense around a very important subject. Okay?

And so you're listening for what I call — if you want to say it, call it — I call it life-enhancing. You could call it just positive vulnerability, or helpful vulnerability. And I think of it as unhelpful vulnerability.

Does that feel like enough information for you to work with?

[Participant:] Good.

[Russell:] Good. You got uncomfortable in the body. Good. Right, it's really in there.

Okay, so what you can do —

[Participant:] Excuse me. Life-enhancing vulnerability versus unhelpful is the word.

[Russell:] If you have another word you prefer that's in that direction, that's fine. You don't have to be wedded to my language.

So listen, this is what's going to happen. Stay with me. You need a partner. Since we are an odd number, I will have a partner.

This will be twenty minutes each. If you need a bathroom break, do it quickly. Find a partner first, then it will be twenty minutes.

And then after you finish, after the second person goes — please listen — after the second person goes, you can share a little bit, but we're going to go pretty directly into a next process. Okay, so there's not a lot of lead time, lag time, in that.

So you do twenty, brief pause, twenty. I want you to keep your own timing, and then come back. Some people can be in that room, some in this room, some outside.

The next process will start in this room.