Living forward. The challenge of carrying forward Gendlin's legacy.

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Introduction

Gendlin used the concept 'living forward' or 'life-forward energy' only a few times in his writings. However it is implied in everything he has written and we can sense that 'living forward' has been of huge importance to his way of thinking, practicing and living. This comes across very clearly in the following quotes:

"*If one's attitude is welcoming, even long-fixated memories come as part of fresh* ***living forward****, rather than as constriction and stoppage."* Gendlin (1999)[2]

"*It took me a long time to affirm that the ongoing bodily experiencing has its own inherent* ***life-forwarding*** *implying. The little steps that arise at the edge are creative, imaginative, and always in some positive direction*." Gendlin (2003)[3]

"*In bodily terms 'help' means anything that brings* ***life-forward energy***." Gendlin (2012)[4]

I read in these words that life-forward energy is about the potential to move forward in a positive direction. And that the purpose of therapy or counselling is to touch that experiential layer, awakening the vital energy that will direct healthy and creative development.

Why have I chosen to zoom in on a theme about which Gendlin did not say much explicitly?

I have been practising focusing for over 40 years, and during this time I have more and more found myself getting in touch with important experiences for which I don't have sufficient words. Something resonates inside of me while reading certain passages of Gendlin's work. Even when it is still unclear which words can best be used as handles, just the search in itself for the right symbols in connection with the felt experience is already a carrying forward.

In this article I will deepen these questions:

1. How can we understand 'living forward'?

2. How can we come into contact with this living forward?

3. How can we facilitate the helping process of working with life-forward energy?

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[2] Gendlin, E.T. (1999). A new model. Journal of Consciousness Studies, 6(2-3), 232-237. http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2142.html Page 234.

[3] Gendlin, E.T. (2003). Beyond postmodernism: From concepts through experiencing. In Roger Frie (Ed.), Understanding Experience: Psychotherapy and Postmodernism, pp.100-115, Routledge. http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2164.html Page 115.

[4] Gendlin (2012) Body dreamwork. In McNamara, Patrick & Deirdre (Eds.), Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreams, Praeger Press. https://www.focusing.org/gendlin/pdf/gendlin_body_dreamwork.pdf

4. How can bodily felt contact with living forward open new perspectives on human development, healing and wellbeing?

Of course answers to these questions will overlap with each other.

In addition to these answers I will make it clear how Gendlin's approach implies five different changes in mind-set or **paradigm shifts** in the traditional Western way of thinking, acting and living.

Finally I will address how this opens the way for a multicultural **existential wellbeing** model in which the physical, social, personal and spiritual aspects of human existence are intrinsically interwoven and living forward is cultivated in the full range of experience.

The personal meaning for me in offering this article is in wishing to carry forward Gendlin's legacy.

1. How can we understand 'living forward'?

In human beings, living forward can be understood as the vital energy that arises from a stream of barely noticeable experiences. This preconceptual experience is inherent to life and is therefore almost impossible to express through words. It permeates the human body, much like it permeates every living organism. Living forward can result in new forms and creative expressions of the ongoing life force.

The way in which living forward shapes the human organism has its **own natural development.** This process simply **happens**, without us even noticing it or being aware of it. "*Living bodies imply their own next steps*" (Gendlin, 1992)[5].

> Note: My colleague and dear friend Patricia de Martelaere (1957-2009), Professor in Philosophy and expert in Taoism[6] refers to the Chinese concept **'Qi',** which could be a perfect translation of living forward. She chooses not to translate the word because possible translations such as 'energy' or 'life force' can be vague and misleading. They do not grasp the specificity of 'Qi' as the very basis of the life of everything and everyone. The descriptions of Qi however are exceptionally interesting in the context of living forward.
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> Qi is felt to be a life force given by nature. Qi is always moving. Qi refers to everything that can be actualized. Sometimes the material side of Qi is more prominent, sometimes the energetic side. These aspects are qualitatively different: matter is Qi in a more solid form; consciousness is a more ethereal form. Remarkably, Qi is also translated as 'process' because it describes reality in terms of processes and sees reality as fundamentally in motion, constantly changing and developing.
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> Other non-Western cultures have concepts similar to the Chinese Qi or our living forward concept. Exploring these similarities would be a very interesting journey in itself, which we cannot dwell on here and now.

Living forward is an essential property of the whole organism which always manifests itself in different ways, depending on the *situation*. And we notice these manifestations depending on how a specific *socio-cultural context* reveals different aspects of living forward.

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[5] Gendlin, E.T. (1992).*The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception: How the body knows the situation and philosophy.* Excerpt from: *Man and World* 25 (3-4) 341-353.

[6] de Martelaere, P. (2006). *Taoïsme. De weg om niet te volgen*. Ambo.

In the context of ***psychotherapy*** **Gendlin approaches a problem** as a *bodily felt process* in which life-forward energy has been kept from moving in its natural flow. The person can't move to a next step because there is a stoppage in living forward; life-forward energy is locked up or misdirected in some aspects of his or her life.

Living forward can be restored by welcoming the bodily felt sensations as a place to start, as an opportunity to reflect on 'something' that is pre-verbally expressed in this subtle experience. When you start to notice this vague experience and make an effort to capture something of it, you will find a handle that enables you to open the door to a deeper felt layer of experience. And then all you need to do is follow the life-forward energy. Anyone who is familiar with focusing is also familiar with the sense of wonder that comes from discovering a sense of direction and meaning in a movement that was at first only a vague sensation.

Experiencing a felt sense of how a situation affects you, and the further unfolding of the felt meaning, are often associated with a process that Gendlin called 'moving forward', at times described as tangible/visible **shifts** in how the body expresses this process of change. These are also moments in which living forward can be felt increasingly clearly.

And while the unfolding of a felt sense and making contact with living forward are often regarded as intrinsically interwoven, I feel it is particularly important to **see them as different processes, each with its own dynamic**. The awareness of life-forward energy can be used as a helping process, distinguished from a felt sense process.

By considering the process of contact with living forward as different from the unfolding of a felt sense, new roads are opened to psychotherapy - and to life in general.

Before I explain a different approach, starting from the experience of living forward, I want to highlight that Gendlin was a real ***game changer*** in the field of Psychotherapy and Philosophy. Without understanding that Gendlin altered a number of rules of the game, the experiential approach may provoke frustration and resistance; people tend to run into something of an obstacle, which they may find difficult to pinpoint. The experiential approach implies several new steps, which I call paradigm shifts.

> The **first paradigm shift** I want to highlight is that Gendlin starts by breaking through the constrictive *psychological* framework in which the *mind* has the upper hand. He paves the way to the *body*.

This '*change in mind-set'* is similar to the revolution in traditional Physics when Relativity and Quantum Physics demonstrated that the usual principles of causality and the associated dualistic vision are simply untenable. Energy (which is sometimes called "Spirit" in the humanities) permeates everything. Contemporary natural science proved that mass and energy exist on the same continuum.[7]

Many people have not yet made this shift in their perception of reality and in their self-experiencing. As a result, they are 'stuck' in a mental rut, finding it difficult to establish contact with their more subtle bodily felt energy. This will be more fully explained in response to the next question.

[7] Anselm & Michael Grün (2016). *God en kwantumfysica.* Averbode.

2. **How can we come into contact with this living forward? What are possible openings to experiencing this life-forward energy?**

The first is **contact with your body.** This involves ***experiencing your body from the inside***. For young children this is completely natural. *They are their bodies*; various sensations moving from the inside outward, direct their actions. Like animals, plants and any number of micro-organisms, their bodily felt senses are still very much in tune with their immediate environment.

Contact with the body begins to change when the body is seen and judged from the outside. *Thinking about and judging the body* may then overshadow *feeling and experiencing the body* from the inside. Contact with life-forward energy that can be felt from the inside, becomes gradually attenuated and may even disappear entirely off their radar over time. The '*body's antennae'* no longer 'function', they no longer communicate anything. A person no longer *inhabits* his or her body: the person has 'withdrawn from his or her own body' and limited him or herself to the mind.

When this contact with the felt body, where life-forward energy is naturally expressed, no longer exists, one method of re-establishing this contact may be to **purposefully direct one's attention to bodily sensations** and bodily felt processes. This, among others, is what we try to do with the **invitation to focus**.

> Note: Remarkably, in many diverse non Western cultures, more importance is attached as a matter of course to *bodily processes* (e.g. movement, or position of the body, or breathing exercises) as *part of personality development* and to assist an *expansion of consciousness*. Patricia de Martelaere[8] describes how, based on her inner physical sensations when practising Tai Chi – the slow martial art – she became interested in what took place in her and how her thoughts and feelings appeared to be linked to her physical movements. She points out that the underlying Chinese Taoist philosophy is difficult to understand if you do not practise Tai Chi from within: finding the 'mysterious gateway', emptying your heart and consciousness, breathing from your heels.

We now know that this is not just about 'directing one's attention'; it is largely the **quality of the attention** that makes the difference. This is because it involves the **type of energy that determines the type of movements in the organism**. The organism may shrink, freeze, block out things when exposed to judgmental attention. However, the organism can relax, open up, restore itself when confronted with friendly welcoming attention. Rational people tend to scornfully dismiss the energetic impact of attention as a '*placebo*', thus ignoring the powerful energy that shapes the organism. In Gendlin's words: *"The body structure is not only made but also maintained by ongoing processes. … The body is process concretized … it's a record, an action track."* [9]

There is **scientific evidence**, for example, that the *healing of wounds* is promoted by a positive environment[10]. The person's attitude, the attitude of others, even the presence of animals or plants can all influence the human organism's healing process. This also makes it possible for us to

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[8] de Martelaere, P. (2006). *Taoïsme. De weg om niet te volgen*. Ambo.

[9] Gendlin, Process Model, unpublished manuscript.

[10] Kiecolt-Glaser, J.K., Loving, T.J., Stowell, J.R., Malarkey, W.B., Lemeshow, S., Dickinson, S.L., & Glaser, R. (2005). Hostile Marital Interactions, Proinflammatory Cytokine Production, and Wound Healing. Archives of General Psychiatry, 62, 1377-1384.

understand how a *therapeutic relationship* or a *positive interpersonal a*tmosphere can be one of the most important resources influencing the client's healing process.

That said, none of this can take away from the fact that people are sometimes *'stuck in their heads'*, *stuck in the mental realm* unable to seek out and identify the healing experience of living forward in their body. In order to help even these people to *learn* something from this process, there are already a number of valuable steps that have been developed by several focusing teachers. However, all experienced focusing teachers are aware - in the same way that experienced therapists are - that people may have put quite a number of *obstacles* in place over the course of their lives, dooming every attempt to make contact with bodily felt experiencing to failure. People also tend to systematically *ignore* every situation that could disturb them, or they *channel* their perceptions so that they always end up at the same dead end, or they *take refuge* in numbing substances so they no longer have to feel what the body is carrying. Some people have come to *identify themselves with the mind* to such an extent that they have 'compartmentalised' their bodies and no longer 'feel' more subtle sensations. The organism is seen more as a *machine* that can be controlled through rational thought. The mind has taken the upper hand, sidestepping the body. 'Talking' therapy often only provides more fodder for their thought processing.

> An experiential approach supposes a **second paradigm shift**. Gendlin actually chose to radically *reverse the direction* of our working process. Traditionally, the client and the therapist strive to *get a grip on* an aspect of the client or of the situation. The living forward principle focuses on *establishing a connection with a felt aspect in the organism, using this as inspiration.*

It is at this point that a person needs to be put back in touch with the **ability to feel 'life'** again and re-connect with how it carries forward. But they will never succeed in this endeavour if we are constantly knocking on doors that are closed to their bodily felt experience. This will become clear as I develop the next question.

3. How can we facilitate the helping process of working with life-forward energy?

One of the facilitative approaches I want to discuss here involves a situation where attention is not actually focused on the body directly. We look for a situation that invites the client to make a *detour*. A detour that can also act as a *short-cut*, which surprises the client with a *new perspective*. Let me illustrate this with a case example.

> **EXAMPLE**: One of my clients is a highly developed intellectual who only believes in the rational. His 'brain' is all that matters in his self-experience; the rest of his body 'does not exist' in a manner of speaking. If I were to allow him to take control of the conversation, our conversation would be limited to discussing and reasoning and he would only analyse his experiences.
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> The fact that many years of psychoanalysis and various behavioural therapy sessions did not help, encouraged me to believe that we needed to take a different approach. However, the client never responded to my invitation to notice something in his body. Instead he dismissed this as 'nonsense', as new-age psychobabble which he didn't wish to engage in.

After yet another failed attempt to make some contact on an experiential level during our discussions, I once asked him whether he ever notices **nature around him**. He was caught off guard by the unexpectedness of my intervention. But for the first time ever, he fell silent, and then he gave me an answer that was quite different from his usual flood of words.

He said he found it very strange when a new friend visited him in his home - where he had been living for over 20 years - and she was pleasantly surprised by the lovely tree near his front door. He had never noticed the tree.

So I put these words to him: *"Your body is also there, like the tree, a living organism that has been growing all this time without you having paid attention to it."*

This reflection touched him and literally inspired movement in his body. He '*felt*' something move in his throat, chest and abdomen.

This marked a real turning point in his therapy, as he was able to notice that ***bodily felt movement, the living forward in that situation.***

I'm going to cut this long story short and limit myself to telling you that - much to my surprise - his new relationship with his body later resulted in another, rather striking change. After the 'tree session', he stopped suffering from impotence for the first time in many years when making love to his girlfriend.

This client's narrow perception of the world, which only included the mental part of him, suddenly opened up because his attention was directed to *another situation in which living forward suddenly revealed itself*.

The session demonstrates how establishing a real felt connection with the *wider realm in which natural life-forward energy* can be vividly perceived, is a good option where the living forward experiencing in an individual has stopped. This is an example of what Gendlin describes in his Process Model as: *"Crossing with a new environmental plane brings novelty."* By directing the attention to something else than 'the problem', something new comes to life.

Since our body is a part of nature, it can be very helpful to notice different forms of 'life' in nature. Animals are included here (as is shown by the remedial effects of therapy with horses or the proximity of a pet). Nature demonstrates perfectly so many different life processes which are also present in the human organism. It opens up the opportunity of **'crossing'** examples of living forward from nature to what is possible to experience as an human being.

We can expand the realm in which personal experiencing unfolds by exploring new situations, new opportunities where life-forward energy manifests itself.

Here we have a **third paradigm shift** which is comparable to the breakthrough of *positive psychology*. The individual is no longer reduced to his or her problem. By focusing on living forward, we directly tap into a *healthy energy*.

The suffering experienced by the person is acknowledged as something that is part of life. Failures no longer need to be 'confessed' and the same content explained over and over again. Stumbling blocks or problems act like signposts to the organism, which 'knows' what a 'good life' should be like. They point in the direction of a stopped process which can be made to move forward again by establishing a connection with life-forward energy. This approach, which strives for 'well-being', is rather unusual in therapy, which tends to mainly focus on 'the problem'. Gendlin expressed his vision as illustrated

by this quote: "*Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness.*" [11]

This principle of looking for the positive tendency or the life-forward energy behind problematic behaviour or painful feelings, is quite common among Person-centred therapists. However psychotherapists often invest much of their time in exploring problems. In a living forward approach we try instead to make a shortcut, to bypass the stumbling blocks and look for new energy by going straight in the direction of living forward. We pay more attention to what brings the client alive and we inquire about positive experiences.

It is striking how participants of **focusing workshops** are often surprised by how a direct connection to life energy helps them to swiftly relate to themselves in a pleasant way as separate from their problems. They often say that this approach has delivered better results in a short period of time than they have ever experienced in psychotherapy. We can understand this by acknowledging that on an experiential level the living forward is there and reaches much further than the 'problem' or particular emotions. At that level the person can experience a directly felt contact with how life wants to move forward. Maybe part of the power of focusing workshops is that they are less problem oriented. Instead their focus is to make contact at the experiential level with the body's inherent potential of living forward. This brings me to the following theme that I want to explain.

4. **How can bodily felt contact with living forward open new perspectives on human development, healing and wellbeing? Are there more opportunities for establishing contact with life-forward energy than we are currently using? What else could we do to open up to our full creative and healing potential?**

In this context, it is worth remembering that Gendlin *'discovered'* the focusing process in psychotherapy as a way of being with oneself that was already *natura*l to some clients. He then studied how this process is activated in therapy. As a philosopher, he also delved deeper into *the underlying dynamic of this life-forwarding process*. So he gradually developed his process theory, which instead of just relating to therapy concerns *'living'* as a whole.

An individual's relational* impact *on the other is obviously crucial to the process of experiential change in the **therapeutic relationship.** In experiential therapy, besides the interpersonal relationship, the **inner relationship** also becomes clear and plays a crucial role in the healing process.

This brings us to the **next paradigm shift** Gendlin brought into the therapeutic landscape. In an experiential approach clients are encouraged to refer to their *inner felt compass* rather than to the knowledge of the therapist or other authorities. Clients can then discover and learn how to make best use of their bodily felt knowledge (- where necessary with temporary assistance from their therapist). It is vital that the client understands and can directly experience the fact that he or she himself/herself has the tools to care for his or her own development.

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[11] Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing* (Rev. ed.). New York: Bantam Books.

And with the living forward principle we recognise ***all interactions that involve living*.** We take seriously **multiple ways** that we can be inspired by living forward. The case example already demonstrated that *establishing a connection with life-forward energy* is sometimes better facilitated by the experience of contact and crossing with life in **nature**.

Gendlin described several other living forward processes in which another person does not play a central role. In '**Thinking at the Edge'** he explained how a special creative process arises out of the interaction with bodily felt experience and some "*ideas"* or a theory; thus bringing new life into ideas instead of them simply being dead words. (In this respect as well Gendlin's publications may bear new fruits over time).

Gendlin also offers equally inspiring opportunities in his approach to **dreams:** "*Letting the life-forward energy actually come in the body is the chief purpose of body dream interpretation*."[12]

He stresses on multiple occasions that dreams can have therapeutic/life-forward value, even without the intervention of a therapist or another person. Here again the process of crossing and the element of surprise plays a role: unusual images and movements can break through familiar perspectives and create new openings in narrowed visions.

> In 2012 I was a participant in Gendlin's phone workshops "*Dreams and the Life-Forward Direction*", organized with the assistance of Ann Weiser-Cornell[13]. In his introduction of the workshop Gendlin pointed to the unconscious as a source of implicit knowing that is much bigger than the knowledge we usually address. He demonstrated how to process the living forward energy even in one picture of a dream: "*Stay with that sparkle. … This excitement knows something. … Where is a new beginning possible? … Go directly to where the help is.*" All his interactions felt as enthusiastic personal support: "*I want to be maximum company. That's different from imposing yourself*".
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> Sometimes Gendlin's comments were quite unusual: "*We could ask the Bigger System*" or "*I'm thanking the Bigger System*". Asked for clarification, Gendlin answered: "*Dreams come from the other side. I don't care what that is, or how you call it. From the other side something comes. Dreams do not make your decision. Let your decision develop from the interaction. Do something very small. That opens up the interactional space. Something new will come*."

5. The Bigger System

To some extent it is surprising that Gendlin refers to the Bigger System, but also not surprising. In his *Focusing* book he wrote: "*Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people - in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside.*" [14] Building on - or carrying

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[12] Gendlin, E.T. (2012). *Body Dreamwork.* In McNamara, Patrick & Deirdre (Eds.), Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreams, Praeger Press.

[13] Gendlin-Cornell Phone Course September 20 to October 18, 2012. "*Dreams and the Life-Forward Direction*".

[14] Gendlin, E T. (1981). Focusing (Rev. ed.). New York: Bantam Books. (p.77)

forward - Gendlin's idea's implies that we could tap into a *gigantic potential*, that 'psycho'-therapists generally approach with a lot of caution and hesitate to put into words.

> Again this suggests a **paradigm shift**, whereby we incorporate this kind of expanded consciousness in our experiential approach, thereby *acknowledging that transpersonal sources - the Bigger System - contribute to human development and wellbeing.* I have often noticed that many of our colleagues consider this shift 'a bridge too far'.

It has always puzzled me that 'humanities scholars' have more difficulty accepting this transition than their counterparts in the 'exact sciences'. For Gendlin, this extension was a natural step. About *'The Human Being in the Universe'* he wrote*: "Religious, spiritual, or cosmic sensitivity is the next logical extension of the movement branching out from the individual to groups, the family, and society. There is a dimension even greater than society—the universe or cosmos. In the current trends this is not a matter of belief. Rather, it is the bodily experience of sensing oneself in a vast cosmic context. It is an experience of breathing more deeply, of having a sense of vastness."*[15]

Gendlin once said about focusing: "*it stretches the mind*". By paying attention to living forward one could say: "*It stretches awareness*" – it could lead to experiencing of being aware of what is much broader than was ever realized before. 'Awareness' goes deeper than 'mindfulness' - because it does not limit itself to what the 'mind' notices; rather it acknowledges what the body's antennae can register in connection with a larger field of experiences. It opens our consciousness of a vast unity.

Choosing to engage with a much larger experience of living forward can make a world of difference. This implies a choice, but at the same time it is also a gradual process of slowly deepening awareness. It allows living forward working through us, from our connection to the depth of the earth to the wider universal space that transcends the human body. This also implies an opening up and an acknowledgment that there is more to life than you know or can understand.

> An **example** of a personal experience I had during my walking of the Camino to Santiago de Compostella. In the week before my departure one of my toes got seriously wounded. I could barely stand on my feet. Nevertheless I decided to start on the Camino, which involves 25 kilometres every day. I trusted that 'Mother Earth' would support me. With every step on the ground I consciously made connection with the vital and healing energy of the earth. I could experience the living forward of the earth flowing into my physical body. To my surprise, my wounded feet didn't give me any problem during the walking.

Trusting through direct experience that our body is part of the larger realm of living forward, unity, creation... we can literally be touched by transpersonal life-forward energy. We also can experience that we can connect to *life-forward energy that moves out of the physical body*. We can receive things that come together in an unusual way as signs of a greater connection than we might have been aware of. We can become aware that the spirit is working when we begin to notice signs of

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[15] Gendlin, E.T. (1975). *The newer therapies.* In S. Arieti (Ed.), American handbook of psychiatry: Volume V. Treatment (2nd ed., pp. 269-289). New York: Basic Books. P. 287 http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2140.html

synchronicity and become aware that something important is about to happen. In these moments, we experience a *qualitative jump in living forward.* In an endnote I'll give an illustration of this

Even if the felt energy in connection with the Bigger System gradually becomes more difficult to pinpoint in material forms that we can observe with our senses, the human being has the bodily felt ability to notice and use this subtler energy. Sometimes it requires 'training' to achieve this shift and expand the scope of our consciousness. Learning to focus and deepening the reach of our bodily felt experiences also requires training. In the same way as I learned to trust the living forward that develops from a felt sense, I learned to trust the living forward that develops from making connection to the bigger system. But more than training, this requires a *change in mind-set*. This means moving away from the biased assumption that only those things that can be counted, measured and observed with our senses really exist. We must be open to and expand our attention to forms of energy that extend beyond the realm of our current knowledge and things we can explain. Once you have experienced this first-hand, arguments no longer matter. Our felt experience strengthens the idea that connecting with the living forward which permeates our universe will get us much further than we can understand and influence from our limited 'I'. Finding the right words to express this *mystery* will always be difficult and our words will never quite be enough. Einstein regarded '*God*' as a name for all things unknown in Nature. Others use the word '*Spirit*' to refer to the energy that permeates everything and yet is so difficult to measure. Some prefer to call it the '*Unnameable*'. In existential philosophy it is referred to as '*The Unknown*'.

Conclusion

Personally, I prefer to understand living forward as *'pure' life energy*, which can manifest itself in various forms. I consider the human body to be one of the many forms in which life expresses itself. The body is an environment in which living forward is manifested. The **experiential body** integrates the physical body, interpersonal relationships, the inner relationship, and the spiritual realms. This simply happens, without the person having to be aware of the living forward of his or her whole organism. Pure energy can be experienced in human beings in *pure qualities* such as love, compassion, wisdom, peace, wonder, surrender... Gendlin incorporated many of these pure qualities, including humour. These all happen to be spiritual qualities where we expand our limited 'I', ways of being that allow us to establish a connection with everything that is. Therapists cultivate pure qualities in their authentic compassionate non-judgmental presence and so they offer a healing relationship. Clients are invited to open up to the living forward energy by practicing the focusing attitude of welcoming, noticing, relating to oneself from 'self-in-presence'.

In an **existential wellbeing** approach[16] the client is encouraged to pay attention to different aspects of living forward that reveal themselves and take turns in coming to the fore. In an interwoven process, the physical, the interpersonal or social, the inner or personal, and the transpersonal or spiritual aspects of experiencing come together. They can be experienced as a variety of perspectives on the same phenomena. The existential wellbeing model transcends culture, embracing Eastern and Western traditions and welcoming all beliefs from our planet. Due to their particular socio-cultural

[16] See our international free of charge Massive Open Online Course (MOOC): *Existential Well-being Counseling: A Person-centered Experiential Approach*. https://www.edx.org/course/existential-well-being-counseling-person-kuleuvenx-ewbcx
Some articles and video's also are available on: http://www.existentieelwelzijn.be

learning process, individuals may have developed different sensitivities and be better trained in specific forms of expression that articulate the process of living forward. The other side of this is that our socio-cultural context can, in giving more emphasis to some of these realms of experience, sometimes overrate them, while undervaluing, losing sight of or repressing other experiential realms. In an existential wellbeing approach people learn to notice all living forward interactions. By expanding their awareness to the physical, interpersonal, inner and transpersonal forms of expression, they can develop their *full potential as human beings.*

Let me end with an invitation to continue the living forward process, in interaction with Gendlin's amazing legacy, our own experiences and our many changing life contexts.

Endnote[17]: Illustration Connecting to the Bigger system

The words that I use to describe my self-transcending experiences are **embedded in the culture** in which I was raised. However, I increasingly feel that there are natural laws of which we are barely aware behind all of this. For example, I can explain from my past how the Catholic veneration of the culture of Mother Mary in my family of origin has been decisive in my life journey. But my past cannot explain the way in which this 'Mother Goddess' repeatedly manifested herself later in my life. I can only recognise that it simply happened despite me. It is a reality that I have learned to embrace because I could not ignore it.

Life continues to amaze me. Sometimes with things that still appear positively wondrous today. However, I suspect that one day we will be able to understand what we now sometimes still experience as 'supernatural'. Our perspective of reality is shifting with increasing awareness and scientific discoveries. But before we have the confirmation of empirically founded knowledge, we have to make do with experiential knowledge. The development of experiential knowledge goes hand in hand with increasing awareness and as we let each other know what life teaches us and share the resources we can use in the process. In this spirit, I will share this remarkable story.

> In 2008, our granddaughter Annelien was born; she is our son's second child. At first her parents were delighted that this baby was so calm, completely different to their first child. They found it easy that, for example, she didn't wake up when they emptied the dishwasher or received a visit from some noisy friends. It was a great luxury to have a child who slept calmly through everything, wherever she was. This was a relief after a first child who reacted hyper-sensitively to everything. However, this positive story suddenly deteriorated into a drama. During tests carried out by the Child and Family Agency, it became apparent that the baby was deaf. She was around two months old at the time. The joy that came from having an 'easy child' turned into concern for a 'deaf child'. The medical system was immediately set in motion. Annelien was subjected to extensive tests, and the best medical specialists were called on to identify the problem. An electrode had to be implanted in her brain as soon as possible as this would increase the chances of her picking up sounds at an early stage.

[17] This illustration was not included in the Lecture in Greece.

One forenoon I was at work and received a phone call from my daughter-in-law asking if I could accompany her to an appointment for the electrode implant. Her husband couldn't accompany her as he had been held up at work. I knew that she was afraid to go to the hospital alone with the baby. I had a meeting that particular afternoon. However at half past eleven, I received a phone call to say that the meeting had been cancelled.

The synchronicity is often quite remarkable at such moments. I have learned to receive things that come together in an unusual way as signs of a greater connection than we first realize. Due to an unmistakable synchronization of events, I became aware that something important was about to happen. And a high sensitive spiritual friend advised me to trust the meaningfulness of these events. So I was happy to join my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter to the hospital.

While we were sitting in the waiting room of the hospital, two members of staff approached us unexpectedly. They were supposed to perform a test on another baby, but the parents had cancelled because they were stuck in traffic. The specialized test equipment was all ready for use, so they suggested performing the test now, with Annelien. It was a test, just like the various other tests that had all confirmed her deafness. To me this unexpected examination was once more a sign of synchronicity. So we followed the medical staff.

Annelien, however, protested fiercely. She didn't want the electrodes, which were necessary for the test, to be attached to her little head. I asked the medical examiner whether I could hold the electrodes on Annelien's little head instead of having them stuck on. When I placed my finger on her tiny forehead to hold the electrodes in place, suddenly I had the idea that Annelien had invoked her deafness as protection. With my finger on her forehead, I communicated with my three-month-old granddaughter in my thoughts: "*Annelien, if you want, you can let Mother Mary be the one who protects you*." In critical situations I always call on this same spiritual source.

After having communicated through the soul with Annelien, she instantly quietened down. She allowed the test to be performed without any more fuss. Afterwards we went back to the waiting room. The results would be discussed with the doctor a little later. Annelien gave me a big smile. First the doctor discussed the case history with the mother. Suddenly the doctor fell silent. "*I don't understand it at all*", she said. "*This last test revealed that Annelien can hear perfectly normally*." At that moment the doctor's telephone rang. Annelien almost jumped out of her skin.

To me this is an example of a series of events that are incomprehensible unless you accept that energy was exchanged on a level that we know nothing about. I can only say that: "*This is something we cannot explain with contemporary scientific knowledge*." When a three-month-old child is involved there is no question of suggestion or a hysterical reaction. I have started to find these kinds of events less extraordinary, because I am increasingly faced with these kinds of examples. In the past, I did not talk about such things, because I know that many people would regard such matters with scepticism. Standing on sacred ground means that I am no longer hurt by what other people think about it. I regard it it as experiential knowledge that is asking to be shared so that others can be nourished in their own emerging trust and can take courage from it to deepen their spiritual path.