

Giving Voice to the Experiential Value of Natural Environments

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People value natural environments in many different ways. In addition to the various tangible products and benefits that can be produced from a natural environment, people may also find value in their immediate experience of the environment while they are in it. This experiential value is an important aspect of quality of life for many people, but it is often not taken into account in making decisions about managing natural environments. In part, this is because the experiential value of the environment can be difficult for people to express in words. In this article, I explore how first-person methods from experiential and phenomenological psychology may help in giving voice to the inef-fable experiential value of natural environments. Drawing on the work of Charles Lewis, Eugene Gendlin, and Kenneth Shapiro, I illustrate how an initially inarticulate, bodily felt sense of the experiential value of a natural environment can be explicated in a way that both expresses and carries forward the implicit sense of value. Such practices might serve as a basis for an environmental decision-making process that incorporates the hard-to-express experiential values of nature.

Managing natural environments is a complex, and often controversial task. One reason for this is that the same environment can be valued by people in many different ways. Physical materials taken from a natural environment can be used to make products that people value, such as paper and lumber. Ecological processes taking place in the environment can lead to outcomes that positively affect people's lives, such as the buffering of coastal storm surges and improved air and water quality (Daily, 1997). Human interaction with natural settings may lead to beneficial physiological, psychological, and social outcomes, such as increased cardiovascular fitness, recovery from mental fatigue (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), and strengthened social bonds (Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, & Brunson, 1998). In addition to these benefits derived from natural environments, people may also find value in their immediate experience of the environment while they are in it. In this case, it is not some product or outcome produced by the environment that is valued, but the directly-experienced environment itself. It is this kind of value that I am concerned with in this article—the immediately-experienced value of being in a natural environment. I call this the *experiential value* of the environment.

Experience matters. Our quality of life is ultimately a matter of how we experience our lives, our selves, and the world we live in. Natural features of the environment are often an important aspect of this day-to-day experience. For example, in a study in which students kept diaries of aesthetic

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experiences in outdoor settings, Chenoweth and Gobster (1990) found that these experiences—many of which involved natural features of the landscape—often were evaluated as among the best that the students had had during the course of a week. A study of older park users (Tinsley, Tinsley, & Croskeys, 2002) reported that the most important perceived benefit from using city parks was “an immediate sense of pleasure or gratification” (p. 210). Eighty-two percent of participants rated this as a *very important* or *extremely important* benefit of their park use (Tinsley & Tinsley, 2001). Open-ended surveys about people’s special outdoor places (Schroeder, 2002, 2007) showed that aesthetic and other kinds of positive experiences in these places were much more than just a pleasant amenity. Such experiences served as significant sources of meaning and happiness in people’s lives, and led people to form strong emotional attachments to the places where they occurred.

The immediate, experiential value of natural environments, therefore, ought to be recognized and considered in environmental decision making, along with the tangible products, services, and outputs derived from these environments. Understanding and including the experiential value of natural environments in decision making poses some particular difficulties, however. The aspects of environmental experience that are the most valuable to people are sometimes the most difficult for them to describe and explain. The experiential value of an environment may be strongly present in a person’s awareness and may be an important facet of their quality of life, but they may have trouble finding words to convey that value.

In writings about the environment, it is not hard to find instances of people expressing the importance and, at the same time, the ineffability of their experience of nature. For example, this quote by Theodore Roosevelt is engraved on his monument in Washington DC: “There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm” (Roosevelt, 1910, p. xi).

Margaret Murie, an advocate for wilderness preservation, became frustrated on a trip to Alaska because she could not find adequate words to express her experience of the beauty of the environment: “The evenings have been really lovely. But the whole experience here has a flavor, an essence that will not be expressed in words. I get so tired of saying ‘lovely’—but where are the words?” (Murie, 2004, p. 331).

The orator Thomas Starr King found quite a few words to describe a sunset he witnessed in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, yet he seemed to feel that his detailed description fell short of the actual experience:

See the great hills assume a deeper blue or purple; see the burly Cannon Mountain stand, a dark abutment, at the gate of the Notch, unlighted except by its own pallor; and, as the sun goes down, watch his last beams of crimson or orange cover with devastating fire the pyramidal peaks of the three great Haystacks, and then decide whether language can recall or report the pomp of the spectacle. (King, 1860, pp. 95–96)

Experiences of this kind do not only happen in the wilderness and the mountains, but also in urban parks. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted believed that city park environments could affect people at a level deeper than language:

First, the chief end of a large park is an effect on the human organism by an action of what it presents to view, which action, like that of music, is of a kind that goes back of thought, and cannot be fully given the form of words. (Olmsted, 1886, p. 106)

George Godfrey, a Native American biologist working on prairie restoration in Illinois, used music and art as metaphors for the experience of natural ecosystems, which cannot be captured in scientific terms:

Research to save the environment is increasingly being channeled into systems ecology, flow charts, and data bases to detect critical trends. But where are the eyes and where are the ears to see and hear the environment's diminishing art and music? (Godfrey, 1993, p. 2)

Finally, in this well-known passage about sandhill cranes, Aldo Leopold suggested that, as with art, nature has values that transcend language:

Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words. (Leopold, 1970, p. 102)

Because experiential values are difficult to articulate and express, they are often neglected and disregarded in environmental decision making. Values and benefits that can be physically measured and scientifically documented take priority, yet important experiential aspects of the environment remain unspoken and unrecognized. How can decisions about natural environments take account of their immediate, experiential value, when this value is often ineffable and cannot be captured in language? In this article, I explore some perspectives and practices from the fields of experiential and phenomenological psychology that may help in understanding and articulating the experiential values of environments, including values and experiences that are difficult to convey in words.

Environmental researchers and managers are as likely as the general public to have such experiences, but scientific training and professional norms may discourage professionals from speaking openly about values and experiences that are subjective and emotional. First-person research methods from the human sciences may provide a way of entering into and reporting these experiences that is both personally genuine and scientifically defensible.

In what follows, I relate my own attempts to explicate the experiential value of natural environments using first-person practices based on the work of Charles Lewis, Eugene Gendlin, and Kenneth Shapiro. The common thread in these practices is that each involves attending to one's feelings in a particular way that brings new insights and understanding. The word *feelings* here refers to something more than simply emotions and moods. It points to a level of implicit, bodily-felt experiencing, which can be queried and progressively unfolded to bring new meanings to light. Beginning from a strong but inarticulate felt sense of environmental preference, these practices have led me to increasingly detailed conceptualizations of how and why I value natural places, culminating in a theory of process, form, and felt space that speaks directly from my implicit sense of the experiential value of nature.

Thus, this article has both a methodological and a substantive aspect. It is both a personal account of my exploration of my own felt relationship with nature, and a demonstration of how experiential methods may help to give voice to an important form of environmental value that has too often been overlooked.

THE FEELING OF A LANDSCAPE

My exploration of the experiential value of natural environments began when a friend of mine, the late Charles Lewis, told me about a discovery that he had made with respect to his experience of natural landscapes. Lewis, a horticulturist at the Morton Arboretum near Chicago, was very interested in how humans respond to plants and natural landscapes. His home was on the grounds of the arboretum, and he had requested that a tree be planted in front of the living room window to reduce the heat from the summer sun. He was, however, concerned that the tree would interfere with the view of a nearby lake through that window. As he described, the outcome was different from what he expected:

The tree was planted. We then had to look through its branches to see the water and were surprised to discover that, far from detracting from the view, the tree somehow enhanced it. This unexpected development aroused my curiosity, leading me to experiment as I walked through the arboretum. I chose a series of sites, first peering from behind a tree, then moving aside to see the unobstructed view . . . I soon noticed that the change of position brought with it a very subtle, almost visceral, shift within me. Somehow I could actually feel the difference in the views. I learned to become aware of the feeling associated with landscape settings and began to watch for it. Once recognized, I could discern that inner tug frequently; it happened almost all the time as I walked through the arboretum, but at so subjective a level that I was only aware of it if I really “listened” with the center of my body. This type of revelation is surely what is meant by the expression “gut feeling.” (Lewis, 1996, p. 44–45)

After experimenting on his own, Lewis developed a method for helping students in nature art classes at the arboretum to become aware of this subtle level of landscape experience. He would first tell the students to turn off the “thinker” within them and to give free reign to the “experienter” (p. 45). Then he would have them walk slowly from an enclosed space under a tree’s canopy out into an open field while paying attention to the feeling within themselves. After several attempts, most of the students were able to sense a felt shift inside their body while moving between the two kinds of space.

Some of the art students had been having trouble selecting specific subjects to paint. Once they stopped intellectualizing the choice process and learned to pay attention to how the feeling inside their body responded to the environment, they could use that awareness in choosing what to paint. As a result, the art teacher reported that students became able to more quickly and confidently select the scenes they wanted to paint, and that the finished works showed a deeper appreciation for the scene (Lewis, 1996).

On several occasions, I accompanied Lewis on walks at the arboretum while we shared our reactions to the landscapes we were viewing. I too could sense the subtle inner tug that he had discovered, and we often found that our inner feelings responded similarly to the environments we were in. It was as though my perception of the outside environment created an inward resonance, so that I could actually feel the setting inside my body, as well as see, hear, and smell it with my outward senses. I became fascinated with how my feelings seemed to resonate with certain environments, and especially with how the feeling inside me changed when I went from an artificial environment into a natural environment. I had always had a strong sense of appreciation and enjoyment of natural environments, but this new awareness made the value of such environments seem more immediate and palpable to me.

FOCUSING ON EXPERIENTIAL VALUE

Around the same time that Charles Lewis shared his discovery with me, I also became aware of the work of Eugene Gendlin in the field of experiential psychology. Gendlin (1996) had identified a particular type of inward awareness that seemed to characterize people with successful psychotherapy outcomes. He called this type of awareness a *felt sense*, and described it as “a bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time—encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 32). Gendlin found that when people attended to this inward sense of a situation or problem in a particular way, they would experience shifts in the felt sense that brought new insights and changed their whole way of relating to the situation. He developed an experiential practice, called focusing, as a means for teaching people how to develop this type of awareness and apply it to their lives.

A felt sense is usually vague and unclear when it first forms. It is not simply a mood or an emotion. It is a complex, bodily sense of an entire situation or concern. It is ineffable in that no words can capture the totality of meaning that it carries. But some words will seem to fit better than others, and when the fit between the words and the felt sense is close, the felt sense will seem to move, perhaps getting stronger, or perhaps changing to a different kind of feeling than it seemed to be at first. This shift in the felt sense, which Gendlin (1997) called “carrying forward” (p. 70), comes with a sense of relief, easing, or rightness. Through a series of such shifts, some of the implicit meaning in the felt sense unfolds, and words (or images or gestures) come that resonate with and express more and more precisely that meaning.

Gendlin’s (1981) focusing method involves a series of six steps that enable a person to locate their felt sense of an issue or situation and to find words or images that resonate with it and carry it forward. Gendlin presented these steps as an aid for learning, not as a rigid technique. The process is done with an attitude of openness and flexibility, going along with the felt sense as it unfolds, rather than trying to force it through a predefined program. A shift in the felt sense might not occur at all, or (more commonly) there might be several small shifts during a single focusing session.

After learning about focusing, it occurred to me that the visceral, inward feeling of the landscape that Lewis (1996) had discovered was, in fact, a felt sense, and that his method of landscape awareness could be seen as a first step toward an environmental version of Gendlin’s focusing practice. The inner tug that Lewis experienced as he moved from place to place was his felt sense of the landscape, an inward awareness of the holistic impact of the outward environment on him at any given moment. By sensing into this awareness, Lewis could get a clearer sense of his degree of liking or preference for the landscape he was viewing. He discovered that his felt preference was intricately correlated with the characteristics of the setting, and that changing his position by just a few feet could make a noticeable difference in his feeling of preference for the landscape.

As I became familiar with Gendlin’s focusing practice, however, I began to realize that there is more to the felt sense of an environment than just a feeling of preference or liking. Surrounding the bodily tug of preference that Lewis had found, I could sense a broader fringe of implicit, felt meaning, pertaining to how and why the environment has value for me. I began to wonder if I could use Gendlin’s method of focusing with this fringe of meaning.

In an earlier paper (Schroeder, 1990), I described my first experience with focusing on the felt sense of a natural environment during a visit to the Morton Arboretum. At one point, as I was walking on a trail in the woods, I heard the sound of frogs coming from a nearby wetland. Something about that sound seemed to attract and fascinate me, so I focused on the feeling I had there and experienced a shift in the felt sense, in which the words “This is where I belong” came to mind. I realized that in that environment I had a sense of fitting in perfectly, of it being just the right place for me to be in. As I continued focusing later during that same visit, I became aware that I could sense a kind of boundary that separates my self from the world around me. In the city where I live and work, this boundary usually feels tense and sharply defined. But in the natural environments of the arboretum, the boundary felt more relaxed and permeable, so that I had a feeling of greater openness to my surroundings. (See Sidebar 1 for a detailed description of this instance of environmental focusing.)

After this first experiment with focusing in nature, I continued to focus on my felt sense of different environments. I found that the sense of rightness and the feelings of relaxation and openness that I had experienced at the arboretum seem to happen almost anytime I am in a natural environment. In addition, I noticed that there is sometimes also a shift in my felt sense of time. In contrast to the externally imposed clock-time that normally structures my daily activities, my sense of time in natural settings unfolds through the movements and sounds of the environment, such as the rhythmic swaying of tree limbs in the wind, the breaking of waves against rocks on the lakeshore, or the steady progress of clouds across the sky. Instead of feeling hurried and pressured to keep up with a schedule of events tied to preset moments on an inexorably advancing clock, I feel myself carried effortlessly within an unhurried current of time intrinsic to the natural environment itself.

I had often had feelings like these in natural places, but had never before put these feelings into words. Focusing on the felt sense of the environment thus was a first step toward articulating the ineffable, experiential value that natural environments have for me.

SIDEBAR 1

Description of a Nature Experience at the Morton Arboretum (Schroeder, 1990, p. 194)

Walking past a wetland area, I was struck by the rhythmic sound of a chorus of frogs. I could feel some part of me responding strongly to that sound and to the whole setting of which it was a part. I took some time to be aware of the feeling without trying to interpret or analyze it. Then I tried to find a word or two that would capture the essence of this feeling. The felt sense was still unclear, but words like “fascination,” “delight,” and “gratitude” seemed to fit. I asked what it was about this place that gave me this feeling, and waited to see if an answer would come, not from my intellect but from the felt sense itself. Suddenly the felt sense shifted and its meaning became clear. The phrase “this is where I belong” came into my mind. I had a feeling of rightness, of fitting in this place, which contrasted with the feelings of stress and pressure that I often experience in the city

Over the next few hours at the arboretum, I felt an increasing sense of relaxation and relief. . . . I now felt immersed in my surroundings, as if I were drifting along in a slow quiet stream. I . . . focused on this felt sense, asking what it was about the forest that created these feelings of peace and relief. This time the answer involved a sense of equilibrium between me and my surroundings. I became aware of the psychological boundary that separates me from the world around. In the city this boundary is often tense, as the environment pushes on it and demands action. But in the forest this day there was no such pressure. The boundary had become relaxed and permeable. I could be open to my surroundings with no need for defense.

EXPLICATING THE STRUCTURE OF EXPERIENTIAL VALUE

Gendlin's focusing practice is akin to, although less systematic than, first-person methods of reflection that are used in phenomenological psychology research. Phenomenological psychology seeks to describe the essential characteristics and qualities of experienced phenomena through a process of reflection based upon openness to what arises in experience (Giorgi, 1970; Sokolowski, 2000). Phenomenological methods have been used to investigate various dimensions of the experience of environment and place (Seamon, 1982, 2000). A systematic review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I focus on a particular method of phenomenological reflection presented by Kenneth Shapiro that is (in some sense at least) an extension of Gendlin's focusing method.

Drawing in part upon Gendlin's work, Shapiro (1985) formulated a phenomenological method based on what he called "bodily reflective modes" (p. 13). Like Gendlin, Shapiro started from the implicit sense of events and situations that we have in our bodies. He noted that we continue to carry a felt sense of a situation even after we are no longer in the situation. The lingering, bodily sense of a phenomenon can be abstracted from the particular situations in which it arises, and can then be reflected upon to reveal characteristic features of the phenomenon.

The episode at the Morton Arboretum described in Sidebar 1 is one instance of a kind of experience that occurs so consistently when I am in natural settings that it has become for me a hallmark of the experiential value of nature. Following Shapiro's approach, I find that even when I am not in a natural setting, I can reflect back upon and return to a bodily sense of this characteristic felt shift in the quality of interaction between my self and my surroundings.

Shapiro (1985) presented two distinct modes in which such a bodily sense of a phenomenon can be abstracted and reflected upon. He called the first of these "the affected body" (p. 42). This mode relates to the overall feeling of how we are touched or impacted by an experience. The generalized, bodily feeling of the whole experience can be abstracted from the particular settings in which it occurs, and then can be attended to and reflected upon to yield a "broad-stroked description" of the overall atmosphere, ambience, or texture of the experience (Shapiro, 1985, p. 42). When I reflect on the lingering sense of my experience of natural environments by means of this mode, I find that the experience is characterized, first of all, by feelings of relief, relaxation, and a deep sense of restfulness. At the same time, there is also a sense of freshness and enlivenment, a feeling as though something inside me that is usually dormant comes to life again when I am in a natural environment.

The second of Shapiro's (1985) reflective modes (and the one to which he devoted most of his attention) is called "forming" (p. 117). Forming is a method for explicating the *structure* of a phenomenon; that is, how the constituent parts of the phenomenon are related to each other. In the mode of forming, an implicit, bodily sense of structure is abstracted from its original context and carried in the body as a felt sense of possible movement. This bodily sense can be virtually enacted, thereby articulating a space in which structure is posited as a set of potential moves. An implicit sense of structure embodied spatially in this way can then be described by means of schematic diagrams and linguistic metaphors (Shapiro, 1985).

When I employ Shapiro's (1985) reflective mode of forming, I discover that I carry an implicit sense of the structure of my experience of natural environments in the form of a potential movement—namely, a bodily sense of opening outward and expanding into the surrounding environment. Following Shapiro's method, I can diagram the abstract space realized by virtually

enacting this bodily sense of motion, resulting in a spatial representation of the structure of the experience (Figure 1).

I call the experience depicted in Figure 1 *opening*. Opening is a shift in my inward feeling of the interaction between my self and the environment that I am in. The left side of Figure 1 depicts an experience that is all too common in my daily life. Things seem to crowd in on me, making demands and requiring me to react and perform. In response, I adopt a vigilant and defensive posture. I feel tense and tight, my inward bodily sense constricting in reaction to the pressures of the situation. The boundary between myself and the world around me seems sharply defined, like a defensive perimeter. Opening takes place when a change in the situation or the environment leads to the experience on the right side of the figure. The world no longer presses in, and there is no sense of having to respond to demands. I relax and have a palpable, inward sense of expanding and opening out. The boundary separating me from my environment seems less distinct. Pressure and tension dissolve into a wide-open state of sensory involvement with, and appreciation of, my surroundings.

The experiential value of natural settings for me is significantly connected to this felt phenomenon of relaxation and opening. Shapiro's (1985) method of bodily reflective modes enables me to identify both a general texture and a structural form that characterizes this experience across different settings and occasions. This insight in turn allows me to more readily recognize and appreciate this aspect of experiential value when it occurs.

Metaphors for Experiential Value

After achieving a diagrammatic representation of the structure of an experienced phenomenon, Shapiro's (1985) method of forming involves the additional step of finding metaphors that describe the phenomenon and reveal further aspects of its structure. Metaphors highlight the ways in which different phenomena are similar to each other. According to Shapiro, this similarity often occurs because two phenomena have parallel structures. Shapiro emphasized that when a metaphor is first formed, the common structural features in the metaphor may be only implicitly grasped. That is, we may have a bodily sense of a structural similarity between two situations, even if we cannot yet specify exactly what that common structure is.

One metaphor for the experience of opening occurred to me as I reflected on my experience while walking on a forested trail. It seemed that something in me was like a bird that had been

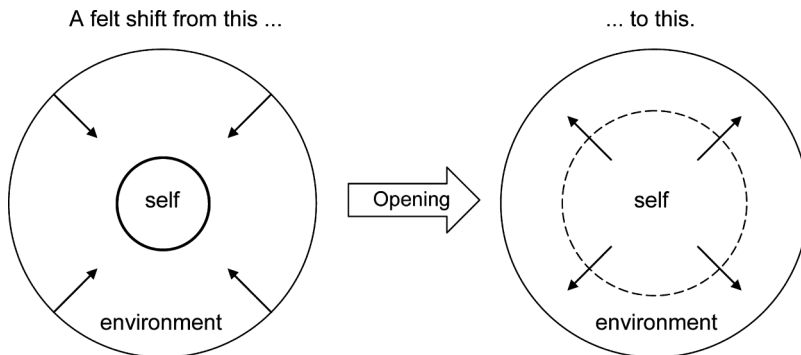


FIGURE 1 The structure of *opening*. Schematic diagram resulting from use of Shapiro's (1985) forming mode.

confined to a small cage. When I entered the forest, it was as if the cage fell away and the bird could fly free again. On another occasion, it seemed that the feeling I had as I walked through a natural area was like stepping out from a small, confined room into the middle of a vast, empty space, such as the inside of a cathedral or a large cavern. A third, more elaborate metaphor for the experience of opening comes from the basic knowledge of thermodynamics that I acquired in college physics courses. If the pressure on a given parcel of gas decreases in such a way that no heat enters or leaves the gas, the gas will expand and become cooler. This physical process, called an adiabatic expansion, is an apt metaphor for the experience diagrammed in Figure 1. When I am in a natural environment, the feeling of pressure on my mind eases, I have a felt sense of expanding outward, and emotionally I *chill out*, that is I become relaxed and calm. (Note that in the English language, temperature is a ubiquitous metaphor for a person's emotional state, with high temperature indicating a state of emotional arousal.) The common element in all of these metaphors is *space*. My inwardly felt experience of opening in natural environments can be metaphorically described as an expansion or opening up of physical space.

Explicating the experiential value of natural environments using Shapiro's (1985) reflective modes helped me to understand and articulate an important way in which natural environments matter to me. They induce or foster this distinctive, inward sense of relaxation and opening. Through Shapiro's phenomenological practices, I was now able to express the texture and structure of the felt shift that occurs when I enter a natural setting, to depict it in a diagram, and to describe it metaphorically as an expansion of space.

Opening in Other Contexts

Once I had done this, I began to recognize that the experience of opening occurs not only when I am in natural environments, but in certain other situations, as well. For example, the transition from being preoccupied with work to the experience of being on vacation involves a similar sense of opening or emptying (vacating) of experiential space, even when my vacation time is spent indoors at home instead of in a natural environment (Schroeder, 2008).

Other people have used comparable spatial metaphors to describe their experience of particular situations. For example, in a study of the intuitive experience, Petitmengin-Peugeot (1999) found that when participants entered an intuitive state of mind, they often reported a sensation of interior space expanding, with the limits between body and space fading away. Buddhist teachers often speak of space or spaciousness in the context of meditation practice. When one relaxes in meditation and lets go of conceptual labels and ego-based goals, the resulting experience is sometimes likened to expanding and resting in a vast, unobstructed space (see, for example, Sogyal Rinpoche, 1994, pp. 157–158). I have experienced this sense of spaciousness from time to time in my own practice of meditation, and it is recognizably similar to the opening I feel when in a natural environment.

Similarly, the first step of Gendlin's (1981) focusing practice, in which concerns and issues are identified and temporarily set aside, is called "clearing a space" (p. 71). Gendlin often used spatial metaphors to describe the inward feeling state that accompanies focusing:

And, of course you know that space changes. We begin with a sense located in the stomach or chest in the common space of the body sitting in the chair, but then a space opens that is much larger than

the body In this new space one's problems perhaps imaged as huge boulders can seem small in relation to a vast sky. (Gendlin, 1999, p. 3)

Particularly relevant is Gendlin's description of how his bodily sense of space changes depending on his relationship with the person listening to him during a focusing session:

I can feel that difference in my body the moment I first sit down with you. A difference there is, always. But with some people my body constricts. It wouldn't be too smart to focus with them Or when something is off in the relationship, that comes first So I couldn't [do] focusing right now, with you, because I still have this little worry I need to talk to you about, to make it all right, from last night. But when that's OK, then with you my body will feel like it expands there. (Gendlin, 1998, p. 21)

Thus, the bodily sense of opening that I experience in natural environments seems to be an instance of a more general kind of experience, which may occur in a variety of other contexts as well.

THEORIZING FROM EXPERIENTIAL VALUE

In the preceding sections, I described how Charles Lewis (1996) discovered a connection between the outwardly perceived environment and an inward bodily tug or attraction that embodies the immediate, experiential value of the environment. By attending to this bodily sense of value using practices from experiential and phenomenological psychology, I was able to describe the texture and structure implicit in my felt sense of natural environments—as a feeling of relaxation and an inward, bodily sense of opening and expansion. The question then arises of why this experience occurs so often for me in natural settings. What is it about natural environments that evokes the experience of relaxation and opening for me, when artificial or built environments generally do not?

Possible answers to this question are implicit within my felt sense of experiential value. At times, when focusing on my felt sense of natural places, I have experienced moments of insight into the connection between the character of the setting and my inward feelings. With a sense of “Aha!” I find myself newly able to express, not only *what* I experience, but also some aspect of *why* the experience occurs as it does in this kind of environment. For example, in my first focusing experience at the Morton Arboretum (Sidebar 1), insight came with the notion of a psychological boundary between me and my environment. This boundary, which is often contracted and tense in my daily life, relaxes and becomes more permeable in a natural environment because there are no demands pressing in on it. Sidebar 2 gives another example of insight, which occurred in my back yard early on a summer morning, and which I recorded in my journal shortly after it occurred. On this occasion, sensing into my feelings of relaxation and opening led to an impression of the natural environment as a unitary presence, perfect in itself, not requiring me to do anything beyond observing and appreciating it.

Such moments of insight bring a feeling of excitement and satisfaction. The felt sense of value opens into a nascent comprehension of how certain characteristics of the environment enable experiential value to arise, and this emergent understanding, in turn, carries forward

SIDE BAR 2

Entry from the Author's Personal Journal, Describing an Experience of Nature

Sitting on my deck, looking out over the back yard at sunrise. A gentle, intermittent breeze ruffling the leaves of the cottonwoods. Seagulls flying due west, away from the lake. I focus on the feelings I get from this early morning scene of neighborhood nature. At first, I get the now-familiar sense of opening, of relaxing and expanding into the quiet surroundings. I enjoy this for a few minutes, and then ask if there is anything more in this that wants to be known. Looking at the sky between the tree tops, I now get a sense of simplicity and absence of clutter. It's a feeling of clear, empty space – just the trees and the sky, without all the additional mental stuff that is usually there. . . .

Then out of this comes a sense of the setting as a whole, of it all fitting together and moving together as a single entity rather than as a collection of arbitrarily concatenated objects . . . The whole setting has (or is) a presence that I can feel. And it is perfect just as it is. It is all happening just as it should. There is nothing that needs to be changed. There is absolutely no need for me to do anything but observe and appreciate what is happening around me. This sense of “no need to do anything” is profoundly restful. My mind and body settle for a few moments into a peaceful, effortless state. I can simply sit and be and let everything else be, without having to work at making anything be different than the way it already is.

my sense of value with fresh interest and clarity. Moments like these can become a starting point for developing a first-person, experientially-based theory of the value of natural environments.

Generally speaking, a theory consists of a logically linked set of conceptual terms that describe and explain a domain of interest. There are many kinds of theories and many ways of creating them. The scientific method of theorizing is one approach that has assumed particular importance in modern culture, but other kinds of theories—from informal “folk theories” of everyday life to formalized systems of philosophical thought—also play important roles in human living.

Based on Gendlin's (1997) work on philosophical theory construction, he and his colleagues have extended the practice of focusing into a method for creating new theories from a person's implicit knowledge of some area of their experience (Hendricks, 2004). The method, called Thinking at the Edge (TAE), enables a person to develop conceptual terms and logical structures that speak from and carry forward their initially inarticulate felt sense of some topic of interest. The practice consists of a sequence of steps through which a person first locates their unclear, felt sense of something they know but cannot yet say, then observes how existing concepts and theories fail to adequately express this knowing. From there, the person can develop new, perhaps unconventional, terms that precisely express their felt knowing; identify logical linkages that inherently interconnect the terms; and explore the implications of the theoretical structure that emerges. As with focusing, these steps are not meant to be followed rigidly, but to provide guidance in what for most people is a new and unfamiliar way of working with concepts. Once the principles behind TAE are grasped, the process can be adapted and varied according to the needs and working style of the individual.

Applying the TAE practice to a domain of first-person experience, such as the felt value of nature, leads to a kind of theory that differs from conventional scientific theories in important ways. Where conventional theories in the field of environmental psychology speak *about* how people experience natural environments, a theory derived by a method like TAE can speak directly *from* that experience. The terms in the theory emerge from and maintain a direct connection with the first-person, felt sense of the experience that the theory is about. The theory not only explains the experience, but also evokes it and carries it forward, giving verbal expression and a logical structure to what was initially an ineffable felt sense of meaning. I call a theory with these characteristics an “experiential theory” (Schroeder, 2008, p. 247).

TOWARD AN EXPERIENTIAL THEORY OF THE VALUE OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

The TAE method of theory-construction (Hendricks, 2004) is complex and may take months or even years to carry through to a fully developed theory for a given topic. I can offer here only an initial sketch of an experiential theory, developed using TAE, that speaks from my experience of natural environments.

The two main terms in my experiential theory are *process* and *form*. By process, I mean the way in which things move (or change, develop, unfold) from within themselves, in ways that are inherently their own. Form refers to the manifest shapes or patterns with which things appear and through which they interact with each other. The theory deals with how process and form interact in my experience of the environment. Process and form are inseparable; one cannot exist without the other. I express the relationship between them by saying that process *engenders* (or gives rise to) form, and form *channels* (i.e., limits, directs, constrains, and enables) process.

I am directly aware of a kind of process that takes place within my body—an ongoing, *inwardly-sensed process*, which can be felt and which is intricately linked with perception, thought, emotion, and behavior. This immediately-sensed bodily process is what Charles Lewis felt as an inner tug toward certain landscapes at the Morton Arboretum, and it is the basis of the felt senses of Gendlin's focusing practice.

Normally, to meet the demands of living, I impose forms or patterns of thought and behavior on myself, which limit, direct, and constrain the ways in which my inwardly-sensed process can move and unfold. These forms and patterns arise through, and are sustained, by the uniquely human, socially-based processes of conceptual thinking and linguistic communication. I use the term *social-discursive form* to refer to these complex, humanly-created patterns. Social-discursive form is embodied in many ways—in social interactions, in spoken and written language, in discursive thinking, in behavioral routines, in humanmade artifacts, and in human alterations of the environment.

My daily life, more often than not, is a process of trying to impose and maintain social-discursive form on various aspects of the situations that I live in—including my own behavior, thoughts, and feelings; other people and my interactions with them; and the environments I live and work in. Imposing and maintaining social-discursive form requires effort, both mental and physical, leading to stress and fatigue. I feel tension at the interface where imposed form impinges on my inwardly-sensed process, because that process (like any process) resists being channeled into ways of moving that are not inherently its own.

The built and human-influenced environments in which I spend most of my time contribute to maintaining this state of tension. When I perceive social-discursive form that has been imposed on the environment, the social-discursive process of my own mind is engaged and activated, keeping me caught up in the work of imposing and maintaining such form.

To the extent that an environment is built or modified by humans, there is a disconnect between the environment's outward, perceptible form and its underlying, inherent process. The visible form of the environment does not arise from the environment itself but is imposed on it from outside. When I perceive this imposed form, the inherent process of the environment is concealed. My awareness stops at the surface and is reflected back into the socially-constructed, discursive realm of human concepts, purposes, and plans. Thus, my awareness is confined to a closed loop, in which it can engage only with the social-discursive form created

by myself and other humans. My inwardly-sensed process is channeled into the patterns that these forms embody, constraining the ways in which it can move and unfold.

By contrast, when I am in a natural environment (that is, an environment where social-discursive form is absent) my awareness engages with the emergent form of the environment. In contrast to imposed form, emergent form arises spontaneously from the inherent process of the environment itself. No effort is required on my part to create or maintain emergent environmental form. Being in a natural environment thus fosters a state of relaxation in which I can let go of the work of imposing form on the environment and on myself, and simply allow my awareness to move with the emergent form of the environment.

This unconstrained, emergent form reveals, rather than conceals, the inherent environmental process from which it arises. In natural environments, there is a continuity between the perceptible, outward form and the underlying process of the environment. As I perceive the emergent form of the environment, the closed, social-discursive loop of awareness is breached. The inwardly-sensed process of my body resonates effortlessly with the nonsocial and nondiscursive process revealed by emergent natural form. No longer constrained by imposed social-discursive form, my inwardly sensed process recovers its ability to move and unfold in ways not possible in a predominantly human-made environment.

I experience this increased freedom of movement of inwardly-sensed process as a feeling of expansion or an opening of space within myself. At first glance, this experience of space seems paradoxical. When I am in a natural setting, I feel a bodily sensation of expansion, but my body is obviously not literally expanding outward into the environment. This inwardly-felt sense of opening evokes a *space* that is not the literal, three-dimensional space of the physical environment. It is as though, in addition to the physical space of the environment, my body carries a palpable feeling of a different kind of space, which I call *felt-space*.

Reflecting on how this phenomenon of felt-space might arise, it occurs to me that there is an inherent connection between space and movement. Space implies the ability to move, and different types of movement imply different kinds of space. In general, a space may be defined as the totality of possibilities for movement of a particular kind in a given situation. The three-dimensional, physical space of the environment corresponds to the ability to move around from place to place, but other kinds of movement are possible, corresponding to other notions of space.

Felt-space, then, is my holistic feeling of the possible ways in which my body's inwardly sensed process is able to move and unfold, given the opportunities for thought, perception, and action in the present situation. Felt-space registers in my awareness as open and expansive when my inwardly-sensed process is able to unfold in a way that is free, unimpeded, and aligned with its own inherent tendencies. When my inwardly-sensed process is limited and constrained from moving and unfolding in its own way, felt space registers as constricted, crowded, or confined. The experience of opening is a shift from a confined to an expansive felt-space, which occurs when inwardly-sensed process goes from being constrained and limited to being able to unfold in its own, inherent way.

The essence of my experiential theory, then, is that when I am in a natural environment, something in me—some living process that I can feel inside myself—is freed to move in ways in which it cannot move when I am in an artificial or built environment. In perceiving emergent environmental form, I am drawn into a kind of resonance with the inherent, nondiscursive process of the environment, which frees my inwardly-sensed process from imposed social-discursive forms and enables it to move in a way that is more in line with how it inherently wants

to move. This increase in inward freedom of movement registers in my awareness as a sense of expansion—of opening into a felt-space that is larger, deeper, and more intricately open-ended than the one I inhabit when I am in the mostly artificial environments of my daily life. I feel this opening as a kind of homecoming, in which there is a sense of continuity and kinship between my inward self and the natural process revealed through the emergent form of the environment.

By contrast, when I am surrounded by humanly created artifacts, my awareness is reflected back into the domain of social-discursive form, which conceals the inherent process of the environment on which it has been imposed. Other writers on the phenomenology of nature have similarly noted how human experience is constrained by living in environments composed primarily of manufactured objects. Both Kohák (1984) and Abram (1996) have described the tendency of our modern consciousness to become encapsulated in a world of conceptual constructs that are reified in the human-created artifacts that surround us in our daily lives:

On a primordial, intuitive level, we preform our conceptions of nature not in an intimate interaction with God's living nature but amid a set of artifacts which conform to our construct of reality as matter, dead, meaningless, propelled by blind force It is a world in which humans encounter neither the order of nature nor that of the moral law, only the products of their own labor Actually, our world of artifacts may be no more than the thinnest of layers covering the rhythm of living nature, but it is that layer that we confront in our daily experience. (Kohák 1984, pp. 12–13)

In contact with the native forms of the earth, one's senses are slowly energized and awakened, combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns In contrast, the mass-produced artifacts of civilization . . . draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*. To the sensing body these artifacts are, like all phenomena, animate and even alive, but their life is profoundly constrained by the specific "functions" for which they were built. (Abram 1996, pp. 63–64)

In the experiential theory I have outlined, I have attempted to explicate this contrast in environmental experience at the level of bodily felt awareness. This theory is admittedly incomplete and misses much of the complexity and subtlety of environmental experiencing. To simplify the presentation, I have drawn a contrast between artificial environments, where emergent process is hidden by imposed form, and natural environments, where imposed form is absent. In reality, of course, there is a continuum rather than a dichotomy between these two extremes. Most of the environments I encounter in my daily life display a complex mixture of emergent and imposed form. Emergent form may still evoke the experience of opening for me in environments that are substantially designed and modified by humans. Furthermore, certain kinds of social-discursive form may evoke opening, and some kinds of emergent natural form may be stressful and threatening. In addition, the experience of opening is not solely determined by the environment; the state of mind that I bring to my engagement with the environment can facilitate or prevent the experience from occurring. The simple version of the theory I have outlined here does not take account of these and other complexities.

Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, this experiential theory does help me to understand, express, and explain why there is a generally consistent difference in how I experience natural versus artificial environments. The logical structure of the theory explicates, and at the same time carries forward, my implicit sense of the value of natural environments. There are many unfinished edges in this theory, where I can sense further meaning that has not yet found expression in

words. As I continue to explore these edges, the interplay between the developing conceptual structure and my felt sense of natural environments leads me to a progressively stronger and clearer sense of the experiential value that nature has for me.

CONCLUSION

In making decisions about managing natural environments, the values of the environment are often treated abstractly. Benefits provided by the environment are listed and categorized, their values are measured, and mathematical models are used to determine which alternative outcomes will have the greatest net value. Analysis of environmental values as mathematical abstractions can be quite useful in dealing with the mass of complex information that managers and policy makers are faced with. There is, however, the risk that abstract, quantified notions of value may become detached from people's immediate experiences of value. Decisions that appear rational may then leave out facets of experiential value that are important to people's lives.

For experiential values to be included in decision making, people need to be able to find the words to speak about them. I have illustrated here some first-person methods from experiential and phenomenological psychology that might help individuals, whether members of the general public or environmental professionals, to understand and express the experiential value that natural environments have for them. Through the practices I have described in this article, my grasp of the experiential value of natural environments has progressed from a mostly inarticulate feeling of attraction and appreciation, through various stages of descriptive explication, to the beginnings of an experiential theory about the interaction between form and process in the environment and in myself. Explicating experiential value using first-person phenomenological and experiential methods has enabled me to put into words some of what was previously ineffable in my experience of natural places. This is a demonstration of one possible approach to directly engaging, giving voice to, and carrying forward the experiential value of natural environments.

Of course, I am only one individual. Other people's experiences of value in various environments will differ from mine to a greater or lesser degree. For example, some people may experience a felt sense of inward expansion and freedom in architectural and social settings more than in natural places. Therefore, expressions of experiential value need to be shared in a way that respects differences between individuals, while seeking commonalities that can lead toward consensus in how such values should figure into decisions about designing and managing environments. Collaborative decision-making processes based on Gendlin's focusing practice, such as those developed by McGuire (2007), could provide an emotionally-safe venue in which this might be done. Practices similar to the one used by Lewis (1996) at the Morton Arboretum could be included in outdoor recreation, environmental interpretation, and education programs, as a way of encouraging members of the public to become aware of, express, and listen to others' accounts of the experiential value of natural environments. Through these kinds of practices, there is a potential not only for experiential value to be included in environmental decisions, but also for this value to be carried forward at the community level, to actually develop into new forms and to be expressed in new ways—perhaps helping to realize Aldo Leopold's (1970) vision of our appreciation of nature expanding “through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language” (p. 102).

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