

# Focusing in Haruki Murakami's Novels - Akira Ikemi

Translated by **James Even Chen**, supervised by **Akira Ikemi** / July 13, 2023, revised August 16th, 2023.

**Translated from:** "The Psychology of Focusing as Observed in the Novels of Haruki Murakami" (2013, 2016)

**Author:** Akira Ikemi

It was Hiroyuki Uenishi who told me about the *felt sense* in Haruki Murakami's novels. In his doctoral thesis titled "Quantitative Studies on Focusing in Daily Life," which he submitted to Kansai University, he referred to the "clump of air" that the protagonist of the novel "Norwegian Wood" (Kodansha) feels within himself. I will leave this for a moment and give a brief introduction to *felt sense* and *Focusing*.

*Felt sense* is a meaningful sensation that is difficult to put into words but can be felt in the body in a vague and ambiguous way. When talking to someone and feeling something is not quite right, it's often unclear what exactly is bothering us, and it may not immediately translate into words. However, there can be a faint sense of discomfort or a sense that

something is out-of-place, felt in the chest or within the "body." That sensation is referred to as *felt sense*. The act of slowly touching upon this implicitly meaningful *felt sense* and gradually bringing forth its meaning is called *Focusing*. Focusing-oriented psychotherapy is centered around this process and was developed by Eugene Gendlin, a renowned philosopher and psychotherapist who was a professor at University of Chicago. Since the 1960s, Professor Gendlin has emphasized and substantiated the significance of *Focusing* as a crucial process in psychotherapy and the "creation of meaning."

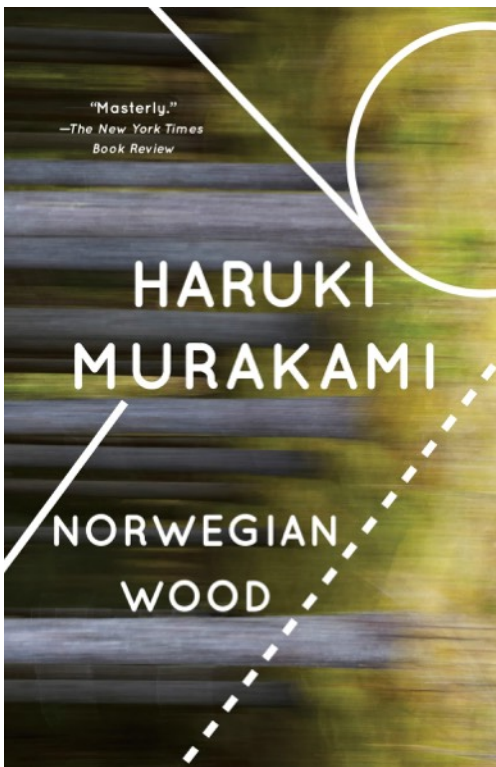
Let's return to the novel "Norwegian Wood."

I tried hard to forget, but there remained inside me a vague knot of air. And as time went by, the knot began to take on a clear and simple form, a form that I am **now** able to put into words **what it was**, like this:... (p.53, Volume 1 of 2)

...but at the time I felt it not as words but as that knot of

air inside me. (p.54, Volume 1 of 2)

*Translated from the Japanese by Jay Rubin (2000, Vintage), edited by Akira Ikemi (in bold)*



Since many features of the *felt sense* are displayed here, there is no doubt that this is an expression of the *felt sense*. First, it is a sensation that is felt within oneself ("inside me"), in the body, regarding a certain situation. Second, it is a sensation that is perceived vaguely, distinct from intense emotions or pain. Therefore, the protagonist expresses it as a "knot of air." Additionally, it exists prior to words, meaning that its meaning can be discovered later and put into words. Furthermore, as expressed by "what it **was**", the past is reexamined and understood in a new way, in the sense of "Ah, so that's what it **was**," as if what we had always felt was this, even though we discovered the meaning anew later. I have come to refer to this as "carried forward *was*" (Ikemi, Okamura & Tanaka, 2023). Thus, this brief excerpt accurately represents several characteristics of *felt sense*.

Embarrassingly enough, I haven't read many of Haruki Murakami's novels. However, after discovering this passage in "Norwegian Wood," I became interested in reading some of Murakami's works. As I read his novels, I noticed that this "knot of air" is frequently depicted.

In the novel "Dance Dance Dance" (Kodansha), Yuki expresses the following:

"It's not like specific images come to mind. I just feel something vague, an intangible, opaque clump of air." (p.225, Volume 2 of 2)

*Translated by James Even Chen*

Another characteristic of *felt sense* is revealed here. It is not a visual image. Rather, it is perceived as an atmosphere surrounding events or situations. And there, we explain in psychology and philosophy, lies an "implicit" meaning. In other words, there is some meaning that is sensed. This kind of experience is called *direct reference* in Gendlin's philosophy. It is also referred to as *felt sense* and *felt meaning*. It is sensed directly, before words can say what it is. Yuki speaks about *felt sense* in this scene:

"I don't know what's wrong. But *something's* wrong. Something wrong, something distorted. It feels suffocating in there. The air is so heavy..." (pp.225-226, Volume 2 of 2)

*Translated by James Even Chen*

As seen here, *felt sense* is not concrete, but it is a *sense of meaning*. In this particular scene, it implies "something's wrong, something wrong, something distorted." Let's revisit the passage later concerning the line "It feels suffocating in there."

Now, what does the novel "Dance Dance Dance" actually depict? Who or what is the "Dolphin Hotel" and the "Sheep Man"? Of course, there is no single correct answer to these questions. Therefore, I would like to offer a bold interpretation from the standpoint of *Focusing*. First, let's take a look at the beginning of the novel:



I had a dream about the Dolphin Hotel.

I was included in the dream. In other words, I was included as some kind of continuous situation.

(p.7) *Translated by James Even Chen*

People tend to think of themselves as independent entities separate from their circumstances. However, in reality, one is always contained in a situation, or the "world". And the situation exists not only as a definite chain of events, but also as a sense that covers and contains them all. It is always felt at the edge of awareness, not unconsciousness. If it were truly unconscious, the protagonist would not even be aware of the presence of the Dolphin Hotel or the Sheep Man. Therefore, these are not in the realm of the unconscious but rather in what we refer to as "the edge of awareness." This "edge of awareness" implies many things, and before one is clearly aware of it, they are constantly processing all information with the power that resides in the edge of awareness itself, searching for and projecting a sense of implicit meaning and direction in life.

Let's imagine a day and think about the things we must do, want to do, or should do—planning out our daily schedule. And then, let's say there is a vague *felt sense* that doesn't quite fit. For example, when considering the schedule, you feel a slight pressure in your stomach. This subtle pressure has an implied meaning. As you contemplate while feeling that pressure, thinking about whether there's an impracticality in the day's plan, something missing, something forgotten, or an inefficient order, suddenly, "Ah, that's it!"—you realize something. In this way, the *felt sense* is felt within oneself, to use the terminology from my earlier book "Listening to the Messages of the Heart" (Kodansha), is always sending out "messages of the heart" by crossing various situations.

In this example, I described the sensation I felt in my stomach as "pressure," but even though it is referred to as pressure, its meaning is not immediately clear. It is necessary to inquire about what is "pressuring" me in today's schedule. Even if we can put the *felt sense* into words, the message it conveys is often not clear. We call such words "handle expressions."

Now, let's go back to the novel "Dance Dance Dance" and take a look at the part where the Sheep Man talks about his role.

"My role here is to connect things. Like an electrical panel, connect various things. This place is a knot..." (p.179, Volume 1 of 2)

*Translated by James Even Chen*

The Sheep Man is in a dark place, and when I thought about the connections between various events happening to the protagonist, it strangely resonated with the idea of something implicit, as "implicit" is written as "existing in the dark" in Japanese. In other words, the Sheep Man is connecting or "crossing" events at the edge of awareness. It is a *Message from the Heart*, the title of my first paperback book about Focusing in Japanese.

"Dance," said the Sheep Man. "Keep dancing as long as the music plays. Do you understand what I'm saying? Dance. Keep dancing. Don't think about why you dance. Don't think about the meaning. {※ I personally interpreted the "meaning" in the previous and next sentences as "reason."} There is no inherent meaning... Just step properly and keep dancing." (pp.182-183, Volume 1 of 2)

**Keep dancing. As long as the music plays.** (p.183, Volume 1 of 2)

*Translated by James Even Chen*

"Dance"—this is what is called a "handle" expression in Focusing. The meaning of this message from the dark edge of awareness is not immediately decipherable. However, the protagonist decided to live by the heart's message expressed by the Sheep Man. And he kept on dancing.

In Haruki Murakami's recent work, "Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage" (Bungeishunju), which he wrote nine years after the novel "Dance Dance Dance," the concept of a condensed air is also depicted.

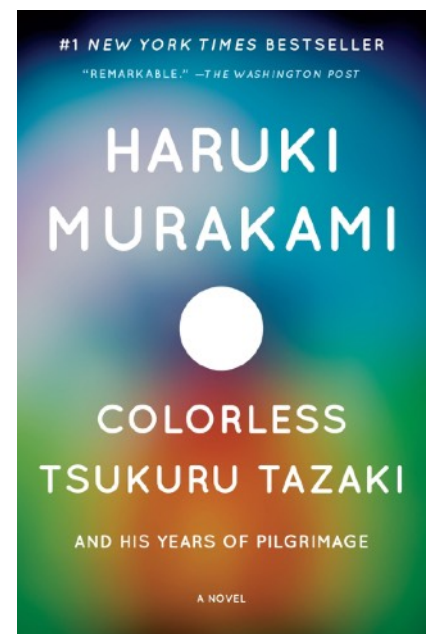
Yet his young friend's casual return made Tsukuru feel as if he were somehow able to spit out a hard lump of air that had been stuck in his chest. (p.125)

*Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2015, Vintage)*

The *felt sense* is related to the situation, in this case, felt specifically in the chest. Besides the discovery or expression of implicitly contained meanings, even if it happens by chance, *felt sense* changes or dissipates when a person's living situation changes. The change in the situation, coincidentally caused by the return of Tsukuru's younger friend, alters Tsukuru Tazaki's way of living, and along with that change, the *felt sense* is released and dissolved.

In the same novel, there are intriguing expressions of *felt sense*.

After he switched off the cell phone, Tsukuru felt **a faint sensation of something foreign**, as if something he'd eaten wasn't digesting well. He hadn't felt it before he'd spoken to Sara. That was for certain. But what it meant, or whether it meant anything at all, he couldn't tell. (p.209) - *Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2015, Vintage), edited by James Even Chen (in bold)*



He tried to replay the conversation with her, as accurately as he could remember it. What they'd said, her tone of voice, the way she'd paused. Nothing seemed any different from usual. (p.209) - *Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2015, Vintage)*

What the protagonist, Tsukuru Tazaki, is attempting here is *Focusing*. The sensation of something foreign lingering faintly in his chest is the *felt sense*. "Sensation of something foreign" is the handle expression for it. To explore the meaning of this sensation, a crossing between the situation and the *felt sense* is necessary. Tsukuru Tazaki engages in this crossing by trying to reproduce the conversation he had with Sara in his mind as accurately as possible, *focusing* on the content of their conversation, the impression of her voice, and the way she paused.

However, the attempt at *Focusing* does not progress smoothly. The continuation of the quote is as follows:

...the way she'd paused. Nothing seemed any different from usual. He put the cell phone in his pocket and went back to the cafeteria to finish his lunch. But he no longer had any appetite. (p.209)

*Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2015, Vintage)*

Tsukuru Tazaki's attention was solely directed towards Sara, and he seems to have lost sight of the *felt sense* he was re-experiencing himself. If I were to offer a single piece of advice, it would be to ask questions like, "What about my relationship with Sara feels like a foreign sensation?" or "What is this foreign sensation conveying to me?" and to try to reproduce the conversation with Sara in his mind, *focusing* on the faint sensation in his chest. That might have led to progress. Well, it's just a story in a novel, so advice doesn't really matter... In any case, here we have witnessed an attempt at *Focusing* in Haruki Murakami's novel.

Lastly, let's return to the scene where Yuki from "Dance Dance Dance" says,

"It feels suffocating in there. The air is so heavy..."

*Translated by James Even Chen*

When we concentrate solely on the *felt sense* like this, it can be tiring and exhausting. In such moments, instead of being "in there," it may be worthwhile to try observing it from a slightly distant perspective. Yuki also realizes this and says,

"When you close yourself off, you don't have to feel deeply. It's like closing your eyes. You shut off your senses. Then you don't have to see what's in front of you. But you know something is there..." (p.388, Volume 1 of 2)

*Translated by James Even Chen*

Since she knows something is there, it means she hasn't completely dissociated herself from it; she has only distanced herself a little from it. Similarly, the protagonist of "Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage" is engaging in the same psychological process:

Tsukuru decided not to pursue it further. He could think about it all he wanted and never find an answer. He placed this doubt inside a drawer in his mind labeled "Pending" and postponed any further consideration... (p.121)

*Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2015, Vintage)*

In *Focusing*, there is a psychological process called "Clearing a Space." It involves creating a "space" within the mind. The various cluttered worries can be stored, for example, in separate drawers or in a drawer labeled "Worries." Tsukuru Tazaki does this. Additionally, Yuki's heavy air can also be dealt with by imagining a place or container where it can be set aside, allowing for some distance. To avoid being overwhelmed by the *felt sense*, it's important to engage with it calmly and with lots of space.

The meaning of living does not exist from the beginning in clear and defined forms. It is perceived vaguely as a *felt sense* that encompasses oneself and various life situations. The *felt sense* felt within oneself, like the Sheep Man, implicitly connects various events and intentions for the future, throwing out messages for living uniquely and with individuality. Even if we obtain handle expressions such as "keep dancing" or "live simply" or "live a resilient life, like wild grass," it is not initially clear how to live them specifically. However,



relying on the *felt sense* and its metaphorical expressions felt within oneself, we can reflect on the situations we are already in and the situations we will encounter, align with them, contemplate them, and step forward like dancing, one step at a time. Then, life progresses. I saw this kind of *Focusing* psychology in the novels of Haruki Murakami.

"But I still don't know anything about life," I protest. "Look at the painting," he says. "And listen to the wind." I nod.  
"I know you can do it."

From the Last page of *Kafka on the Shore*. Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2005, Vintage)

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# Acknowledgments

※ Acknowledgment: This manuscript was written in Bangkok, Thailand. In Bangkok, where there are Japanese bookstores, I read Japanese books and wrote in Japanese. It seemed that my sensitivity towards Japanese had heightened in a non-Japanese language environment. In Bangkok, I stayed at the home of my friend Anmol Pathela for a total of nearly three months where I was able to write this essay. I am sincerely grateful to him and the Pathela family for our friendship. The original version of this manuscript was published in the newsletter "*The Focuser's Focus*," Vol. 16, No. 3 (November 2013), issued by the *Japan Focusing Association*.