

# Impotential

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## On the Move

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This is longest I've gone between blog posts, though I did manage to crank out two blogchains entries. I have a good excuse: we were suddenly told to leave the apartment where we planned to rent for many more months and had to scramble to find a new home. August in New York is a mad game of musical chairs as hundreds of thousands move in and out of each other apartments. The streets fill up with U-Hauls and moving trucks, the sidewalks with young people carrying couches and mattresses, and when the music stops on midnight of 9/1 those without a room are forced to move to Jersey City and prowl the far side of the Hudson like hungry ghosts.

My wife and I sprung into action using all the accumulated wisdom of Putanumonit. We compiled a decision matrix with 25 attributes and more than 60 apartments. While others dithered, we saw a house that scored enough standard deviations above the mean to trigger the exponential secretary threshold and applied right away.

It then turned out that the main qualification for renting a house is being able to come up with arbitrary amounts of money in certified checks at a day's notice. Between the broker's fee, first month's rent, security deposit, moving deposit, keys deposit, etc we were required to accumulate many times the monthly rent in our checking account at once. I get why landlords want to test a tenant's cash-flow resiliency, but a lot of people who could easily afford to pay the rent at our new place could not afford the one-time expenditure of moving in. Thanks to the fast turnaround of Wealthfront's cash account we just managed to write all the checks in time.

So, I belatedly unboxed my keyboard and am writing this from our new apartment in Brooklyn. We finally have room for guests — given how many Effective Altruists pass through looking for a place to crash I count having a spare bed in NYC as Effective Altruism in itself. This is not not an invitation.

## In Focus

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In the middle of stressing about the immediate problem of finding a place to live, I took a day with three friends to contemplate and talk about the more abiding issues in our life.

We did a session of Focusing, a psychotherapeutic process developed by Eugene Gendlin that involves communicating with felt senses in your body to achieve insight into previously hidden parts of your mind. The second-weirdest thing about focusing is

that a technique developed by a rigorous analytic philosopher sounds like so much New Agey mumbo jumbo. Here are (very briefly) the steps of focusing, although to learn how to actually do it you'll have to read the (short and very comprehensible) book.

1. **Clearing space.** Described by Gendlin as “establishing an environment of friendly feeling within yourself, preparing to give yourself a fair hearing”. Involves putting all your problems at a manageable distance, such as on the floor beside you.
2. **Felt sense.** Picking one problem to focus on, and observing how the whole of it feels in your *body*.
3. **Handle.** Being with the felt sense until you find a description of it that resonates, such as a word, a phrase, or an image.
4. **Resonating.** To check for resonance, you say the handle out loud a few times. When a handle fits it should cause a perceptible shift in the felt sense.
5. **Asking** the felt sense questions like “What is the worst of this issue?” or “How does it want you to be with it?” Being with the felt sense until a response comes.
6. **Receiving** the response with welcome and acceptance, showing your body empathy and gratitude for its wisdom.

The weirdest thing about Focusing is that it totally works. I don't have a good model of how and why although I am inspired to learn more about neuroscientist Anil Seth's theory of bodily allostasis as the foundation of consciousness. I am less inspired to learn more about chakras and auras, despite the urging of some of my Focusing-friendly friends. In any case, focusing works.

## Potential?

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I sat on the floor across from my friend who was ready to hold space, take notes, and remind me of the six steps. I closed my eyes and noticed my mood, my thoughts, and my sensations without identifying with them, similar to how one would start mindfulness meditation. I asked: *what stands between me and being fine?*

Two things came in response. My thoughts turned to the **dilemma of unstriving** which has occupied my mind for the last month. Should I give up on the drive to keep changing my life in the expectation of achieving some ill-defined future greatness? A sensation also appeared in my body: a tightness running from my right jaw down my left arm. The tightness was shaped like a spiral spring, loose around my face and tightening to a tense coil around my heart.

I tried a few handles for the sense. *Ego*. An image of myself as a balding middle-aged man who didn't amount to much drinking beer on the couch. *Fear of mortality*. Nothing happened. And then, a new thought entered my head:

| What if people are only into me because of my **potential**?

The felt sense immediately shifted, leaping from my body and coalescing into a small heavy ball that floated a few inches in front of my chest. My breath caught in surprise, but then I relaxed and began a dialogue with the new, shifted sense.

What is the worst of it? That if I give up on my potential for greatness the people I value will leave me in disappointment: my wife, my parents, my friends, my blog readers. Where does this fear come from? I realized that throughout most of my early life, my main achievements were not actual achievements but proof of my potential: the math Olympiads, the standardized exams, the exclusive programs I was admitted to. I joke that the greatest obstacle to my success is that everyone believed in me as a kid but it's true, everyone did.

I kept thinking and realized that it's quite unlikely that anyone likes me today because of who I *may become one day*. My wife and my friends for sure care a lot more about what I can offer them *right now*. Same for my parents — I have two younger siblings who are still somewhat looking to find their footing in life, and my family is quite happy with where I am even if I'm not going anywhere. Even my employer would be quite pleased if I just kept on performing my current job at my current level forever, I am not being groomed for any high office.

And then I realized that this was probably as true when I was 15 as it is in my thirties. How many people would even have the patience to invest in someone for years just for some potential future? I bet that everyone who hung out and did nice things for me when I was a teenager did so because they liked me in the moment.

At having this realization, the felt sense shifted again. The heavy ball broke up into particles that diffused into my arms and torso spreading their weight evenly and comfortably. I relaxed, smiled and took a few breaths. But then I noticed that a small core of the heavy ball remained, perched on my sternum. I questioned. It took a few seconds, and then replied:

| OK, other people are not into me because of my potential. But I still am.

I thanked it and opened my eyes.