

Feldenkrais®: An Exploration in Possibility

Rosanna L. Mattingly, Portland, Oregon, rosannamattingly@gmail.com

Moshe Feldenkrais, the physicist and martial artist who developed the *Feldenkrais Method*® of Somatic Education, said, “If you know what you are doing, you can do what you want.” Is it possible for persons experiencing the late effects of polio to do more of what they want? Of course it is!

The “Method”

In my view, *Feldenkrais* is far more a process of exploration than a method. *Feldenkrais* is a means through which

we can discover what is possible, much as a child does in exploring his or her movement in the world. The child, as we know, learns to roll over, creep and crawl, stand, walk, skip and run. By participating in *Feldenkrais* lessons,

I increased my awareness of myself as an integrated whole. Amazingly, as I discovered more possibilities in movement, I found myself changing in other realms, for example, emotionally and intellectually.

The Lessons

Feldenkrais lessons take place with a *Feldenkrais* practitioner either on an individual basis (*Functional Integration*®) or in a group setting (*Awareness Through Movement*®). Participants are invited to remain open rather than have expectations, to be gentle with themselves, to do less than what may be possible at a given time, to adjust to their own capabilities, and to attend to the means rather than the outcome. I remember laughing at the not-having-expectations part during my own first lessons. *Of course*, I was there for a reason!

Along with the initial improvements that occurred in my balance in standing, I quickly learned that *Feldenkrais* is not about “fixing,” but rather about developing and maturing. I was not confined by my previous experience and ways of learning, but was engaged in a spirit of exploration, playfulness and being present to what happens. I became open to other possibilities, foreseen and unforeseen.

The Background

Moshe Feldenkrais considered our capacities for moving, sensing, feeling and thinking in developing his “method.” Although each of these capacities is present to various degrees in every action, he focused on movement as perhaps the easiest means for initiating change.

Change occurs in part as we begin to recognize and re-evaluate habits. Although many habits are useful, some are based on misperceptions and some, though necessary for survival early on, may no longer serve us. The pathways of our habits are so well worn that we often travel them without conscious awareness. As an example, most of us remember being rattled by all that needed our attention when first learning to drive, but now, years later, we drive 65 miles per hour down a freeway, and at some point realize that our attention was focused elsewhere.

Feldenkrais lessons focus on movement, yet awareness, the act of consciously



Rosanna Mattingly with her great nephew, Logan Arnold.

Rosanna Mattingly is a Guild Certified *Feldenkrais Practitioner*™ who teaches and writes in Portland, Oregon.

paying attention during the lessons, is fundamental to the process. The lessons provide opportunities to discover alternative pathways, consciously or not – pathways that are easier, more efficient, more to our liking. They help us recognize our choices.

The Relevance

There is no way to deny my limitations, but my experience as a *Feldenkrais* student and practitioner suggests that we tend to limit ourselves more by our thinking than by our actual physical limitations. What we believe, whether true or false, can have enormous power over what we are able to do. More than once I've been surprised to find myself moving in a way that differed from what I thought I was doing, and I was delighted to find that something I did not think possible actually was.

Those who participate in *Feldenkrais* lessons, myself included, generally experience improvement in balance, coordination, flexibility and quality of life. We learn to move in ways that are more appropriate for our situations and ourselves. We begin to recognize stress and strain, and find alternative movements for following through. We take time to spread the effort and thereby reduce the tendency toward overuse. We find ways to support ourselves more through our bones, experience less pain, and manage uncertainty. We recognize our first attempts for what they are: first approximations. As we expand our sense of self, we expand our options. We become more grounded, self-reliant, and able to remain open and in the moment.

What Happens in a *Feldenkrais* Session?

Feldenkrais is done in two formats.

In group classes, called *Awareness Through Movement*, the *Feldenkrais* teacher verbally leads you through a sequence of movements in basic positions: sitting or lying on the floor, standing or sitting in a chair.

Private *Feldenkrais* lessons, called *Functional Integration*, are tailored to each student's individual learning needs; the teacher guides your movements through touch.

People participating in *Feldenkrais* lessons are usually referred to as "students" rather than as clients or patients. This reinforces the view of the work as primarily an educational process.

Because there is limited research in the late effects of polio and few experts in the field, we are finding our own ways, learning more and more to trust ourselves. *Feldenkrais* can contribute to our lives as we continue to find what is possible. It begins with awareness of what we do, acceptance of what is, and openness to what might be.

This, in the end, is what *Feldenkrais* said that he wanted: "to restore each person to their human dignity." His approach enables us to both acknowledge and experience the self as ever-creative, whole and rich in possibility. ▲

For additional information, visit:
www.feldenkrais.com

Resources

- Alon, Ruthy. 1996. *Mindful Spontaneity: Lessons in the Feldenkrais Method*. North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, California.
- Feldenkrais, Moshe. 1977. *Awareness Through Movement*. HarperCollins Publishers. New York.
- Feldenkrais, Moshe. 1981. *The Elusive Obvious*. Meta Publications. Capitola, California.
- Feldenkrais, Moshe. 2002. *The Potent Self: A Study of Spontaneity and Compulsion*. Frog, Ltd. and Somatic Resources. Berkeley, California.
- Plonka, Lavinia. 2004. *What Are You Afraid Of? A Body/Mind Guide to Courageous Living*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin. New York.

Related Resources

- Claxton, Guy. 1999. *Wise Up: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning*. Bloomsbury Publishing. New York.
- Damasio, Antonio. 1999. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. A Harvest Book/Harcourt, Inc. New York.
- Langer, Ellen J. 1997. *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc. New York.
- LeDoux, Joseph. 2002. *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*. Penguin Books. New York.
- Schwartz, Jeffrey M. and Sharon Begley. 2002. *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force*. HarperCollins. New York.