

I've always been fascinated by falling. Long before discovering the Feldenkrais Method, I had dreams that I was falling. You've probably had them too. The ones where you suddenly wake up with a jolt, just before landing. Only now and then my dreams took a different course. Occasionally I would fall and land in my dreams. Sometimes gracefully floating downward, other times landing with a good thump, but always uninjured. In fact, not only was I okay, I also experienced a huge perceptual shift as well. The room I was in was the same room, only it now looked completely different. The side of the mountain I fell off of, now offered an alternative route to the top that I hadn't seen before.

Dr. Feldenkrais was also captivated by the idea of falling. In his first book Body and Mature Behavior, he writes of the " ... instinctive reaction to falling," and relates it to " ... the body pattern of anxiety." Feldenkrais was also one of the first Europeans to get a black belt in Judo and founded the Judo Club of France. In Judo, as well as other martial arts, falling is the subject of great interest and practice and is something to be developed.

Whether in our dreams, our feelings or in our actions, falling is representative of so much of who we are and what we do. Falling in love - falling down - falling out of favor - falling asleep - fear of falling - falling all over yourself. Falling can describe so many states that are central to our experience of ourselves, that without it, we couldn't be who we are.

As children we fall so often that it is impossible to keep count. Our early falling is the means to our learning to function upright, to be recognized as "human." Yet at some point, we give up the joy and learning that falling affords us. Falling becomes more associated with failure than discovery. Over time, our "ability to fall" atrophies and worse still, becomes something we fear and avoid.

In the myth of Icarus, Icarus flies from the tower where he is imprisoned, on wings made of wax and feathers. Forewarned by his father not to fly too high so the sun won't melt the wings, Icarus continues to soar higher and higher until his wings melt and he falls to his death. The moral? Don't fly too high. Be moderate in your strivings. Listen to what your father tells you. I don't think so. It is really quite simple when you look at it from a Feldenkrais® perspective (at least mine). Icarus didn't know how to fall.

The Feldenkrais Method, both directly and indirectly, offers us the chance to explore the relationship between ourselves, the space around us, and the ground beneath us. We can develop our relationship with gravity through new references and create new possibilities for action. Familiarizing ourselves with falling can enhance our self confidence, creativity, sense of safety and risk, and provide us with more means to live with greater freedom.

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(Graphic courtesy of Angel Di Benedetto.)
No, we are not talking about balancing checkbooks, though yes, I do have that problem occasionally. We are talking about that special vertical relationship we have with the ubiquitous force of gravity: yes, the one that is responsible for the collection of bumps on our otherwise perfectly-shaped domes, whenever that relationship becomes dysfunctional and we go down with a crash.

Now, controlling balance involves many systems in our body all working in concert, one with another. In broad outline, these are: the visual, the vestibular, the internal milieu, and the somatosensory systems. We’ll first touch upon one common mechanism affecting balance. Maintaining an upright posture requires movement. In fact, it is impossible to remain upright without some amount of movement. Whenever movement is restricted, we add to our collection of bumps.

Witness the famous guard at Buckingham Palace. Whenever he tries to stand immobile for an extended period, internal fluid flowing downward reduces pressure in that by-now-infamous dome, he gets dizzy, nauseous, faint, and down he crashes, hopefully with his helmet still on.

Upright standing over a stable surface is not stable. Measurements using force plates have demonstrated conclusively that we sway, albeit imperceptibly, in a figure eight configuration over our base of support formed by the area enclosed by our feet. The sway is caused by a continuous synergistic flow of contraction/relaxation of the leg, ankle, and feet musculature, which by timed contractions, assisted by the array of valves in the veins, helps pump blood back up to the heart and head. If insufficient blood (oxygen and glucose) reaches the brain, the sway increases until the center of gravity of that poor guard tilts beyond the boundary of his base of support, and oops, I just heard another thud.

Now, if that hapless guard had done some Feldenkrais work, he would have been aware that he was holding his upper torso in rigid, military style, and the slightest sway beyond his narrow base of support would put him in the unenviable position of the Tower of Pisa. If a Feldenkrais teacher happened to stroll by and notice his predicament, he/she might offer our guard the following quick Awareness Through Movement® lesson, which could help him and all his guardhouse pals.

The mission of the Feldenkrais Educational Foundation of North America is to foster education, research, and public awareness of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education.

Feldenkrais Educational Foundation of North America (FEFNA) has established a Planned Gift Program called “Leave a Legacy.” For more information on ways to support FEFNA, or how a planned gift can benefit you, your taxes, and our programs, call the office at 800.775.2118.
Moving While Standing Still: An Awareness Through Movement® lesson to try

**Find** a short stool, a thick phone book, or use a stairway step about 6 inches high and stand in front of it. Place your right foot on the stool/book/step and place your hands lightly on a credenza, or some other supporting surface, such as the back of a sturdy chair, for balance. Imagine that you have a small hula hoop surrounding your left knee, close to it but not touching it. Now start moving your knee in a circular fashion as if to touch the inner circumference of the little hoop. Round and round, slowly and gently, and gradually more accurately as a circle. Keep going, and notice if you selected a circle counterclockwise or clockwise.

**After** a minute or two, or less if you have any discomfort, stop briefly for a short 20-30 second rest and reverse the direction of the circles you had been doing. Do this for about another minute while paying attention to the motion of your pelvis, then of the length of your spine, including your head. Ask yourself if you are breathing continuously. When you stop, take your foot off the stool and walk around the room for a minute paying attention to whatever you may be sensing/feeling that is in any way different from what you are accustomed to feeling when you walk.

**Return** to the same starting position. Now focus on the sole of your left foot and see if you can visualize the circumference of the sole of your foot, its outline so to speak. Now think that the bottom rim of the sole of your foot has chalk on it, and you want to imprint that outline on the floor without smudging. Start pressing the bottom pads of your toes, one after the other, onto the floor (lightly) and continue the imprinting round the rest of the rim of the foot, round and round, without lifting any part of your foot off the floor. All you are doing is changing the pressure gradient. As you do this, continue visualizing your foot, sensing the relation of the foot movement to your ankle movement, and to your knee and hip, and pelvis. Sense each toe separately. Can you sense the roundness of your heel, the outside lateral aspect of your foot at the bottom?

Did you choose to make clockwise or counterclockwise circles? Please stop, remove your foot from the stool and walk about for a minute, here again comparing what you sense now to what you sensed earlier. Is anything different? If so, what is different?

**Now** return to the same position and repeat the foot imprinting, but in the reverse direction from the earlier one. Pay attention to all the earlier mentioned details. Are you holding your breath at any phase of the circling?

**When** you are done, step off, walk around, and sense what is different in your walk. Is there a difference between your left and right sides? How is your sense of balance? How grounded do you feel? Do you feel shorter/taller/lighter/heavier? Finally, go back to the same position and make the same circles with your knee as you did originally, just a few circles in one direction, then reverse. What's different?

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Waking Up James

When I first met seven-year-old James, he showed definite signs of autistic behavior: no eye contact, random speech, inability to answer “yes” or “no” appropriately. He did not use pronouns, including “I.” He would aggressively thrust his fingers at people, and pull toys apart with those same intense finger movements.

After careful observation and reflection, I found ways to engage this behavior at a meaningful level. Peeling an orange, for example, turned his intense finger movements into an acceptable human function. At the end of the Functional Integration lesson we would peel an orange together. Slowly and meticulously James peeled the orange, allowing me to start the initial peeling, then he completed it. Step by step, we established non-verbal communication. James still could not skip. He could not hop alternately on (Cont. on page 4)
each foot. When he wanted to move fast, he would go off in an undifferentiated gallop. Now, James loved to jump on my mini trampoline. He used to refer to our sessions as “Jump, Jump, Jump.” First he jumped hard and high on both feet. As the lessons continued, he was able to jump on one foot. Then the other. And finally to switch feet — to alternately hop on one foot and then the other. This easily translated into skipping.

As James mastered skipping, I decided to use his new skill to wake up his social awareness. I joined him in the skipping. His excitement grew: someone was playing with him! I taught him a skipping nursery rhyme, letting him fill in the words until he learned it. With the introduction of rhythmic language, his speech and voice became stronger.

I upped the ante. I took him into the outside hallways of my office. The long corridors of the old building echoed our sounds. We skipped from one end to the other. His joyful sounds attracted the attention of other occupants as they peeked out the door to see what the commotion was about. Later, they looked just to see this child joyfully playing. (Or was it just to see me skipping?)

Once James skipped far ahead of me and disappeared around the corner. My heart skipped a beat — what if he found the fire escape or some other disaster? When I got there he was hiding, playing hide-and-go-seek with me. He looked me directly in the eyes and laughed and laughed. James had moved from self-absorption to the world of human communication.

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**In Print:**
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**Online Only:**
Oh, My Aching Back: final report, online with the Ivanhoe Broadcast News.
Go to: www.ivanhoe.com/docs/thisweekonly/alternativetherapies.html