A Sense of Separation

Surviving health difficulties while living as an expatriate for many years saps the system. This story touches on how a sense of separation from home roots, culture, self, and almost from life itself in Near Death Experiences, has been overcome by one Australian woman. Zoe’s “lifeline” and source of survival from multiple collapses has been the Feldenkrais Method®, along with her own indomitable life force.

Zoe was referred to me by her distant colleague, also a Feldenkrais® practitioner. On twice yearly visits to her family’s city, Zoe found my Feldenkrais “hands-on” sessions assisted greatly in finding delicate balance in her structurally challenged spine. X-rays showed a compromised cervical spine, with thoracic involvement, imbalance and neuro-muscular tensions. We both knew the gentleness required. Zoe and I developed strong ties as she applied herself to understanding Feldenkrais during these brief urgent stays in Australia. Back in her Asian home, she used Feldenkrais tapes, books, as well as swimming to expand awareness, reduce pain, and help maintain stability. Night time especially, some vital power over her pain was gained by her practice of Awareness Through Movement® lessons.

Outside of her professional training as a singer and musician, Zoe held important positions in culture and music while supporting her husband in his international work. Because of her practiced smile and stoic calm (despite core pain and fatigue), attempts to explain her health needs weren’t well understood. Healthwise, this situation was explosive, as each collapse attenuated Zoe’s strength. Our email contact became important in maintaining her “home roots.”

Zoe and family arrived in Australia for a joyous Christmas. On January 4th, after surfing, the first Near Death Experience occurred; later that day, a total collapse. Zoe entered four hospitals in two days. Exhaustive tests implicated her neck (simulating a hemiplegia), with respiratory, sensory and motor involvement – drastic for a musician/singer. An urgent one-month-away date was set for a specialist’s neck-stabilizing operation (titanium plating and arthrodesis of three intervertebral joints).

It’s now history. Seven months post-operation, Zoe was catapulted into her slow, slow, non-swallowing, hardly-speaking, unbalanced, pot-holey, but upwardly swinging physical plane, was added a psychological bonus. The life-saving operation protected Zoe’s vital nerve supplies, even as it removed most of her singing voice. Breathing, arm function, sensory impairment, ordinary speech, swallowing, bodily pain and drain are all being steadily upgraded.

The touchstone of recovery came in mid-August, when I was a guest with Zoe’s family in Asia. Zoe had a Feldenkrais session most days, often twice daily, and the resistant spinal pain was on the run. Despite those plated cervical joints, overall movement was coming more freely. To this triumphant “pain breakthrough” on the physical plane, was added a psychological bonus.

I was invited to address an expatriate group on “Wellbeing with Feldenkrais.” Zoe gathered herself psychologically, spoke of her experience of Feldenkrais as a “source of optimism,” and introduced me. Thus she laid claim to her “whole” self again. For some, survival (pro tem) means coping by ignoring their own needs. In critical phases of separation from self, mere survival skills are not enough. Zoe fortunately had in place her Feldenkrais learning, the basis of awareness that allowed her to travel back from Near Death Experiences and massive collapses, to put together her fragmented self. What an experience it was for us all!

- Bettina Morphett-Savage, a GCFP in Brisbane, Australia, is also involved in physiotherapy, music, writing, and motherhood. Contact her at: b_m_s@powerup.com.au
Taking Steps to Recovery

“I was leading a very active lifestyle when I developed a neuroma (a mass growing from a nerve) on my right foot,” said Jeri Ann Smith. “When I couldn’t walk 15 minutes to the grocery store, I knew I needed to do something about it.” Fearing that surgery would limit her future options, and finding physical therapy only partly helpful, Jeri Ann began Feldenkrais lessons. “Feldenkrais certainly took longer than surgery would have,” she says, “but I’m still noticing continual improvement in my use of my feet and how they connect through my pelvis and spine – even influence my head position. I’m not afraid of reinjury because I’m very aware of my foot and all the different ways to use it.” Jeri Ann has fully returned to her active lifestyle – in fact, she has learned to surf in addition to resuming her skiing and bicycling. She has also completed walking her first half-marathon.

Peter Broadwell suffered foot pain when walking, which had intensified over a five month period. His pain was exacerbated by standing all day on the hard cement floors of convention centers, difficult in the best of circumstances. Not considering surgery an acceptable alternative, Peter sought me out. “I felt immensely better after the first lesson,” Peter said. After a few Feldenkrais lessons integrating the feet in standing and working with balance he said, “I learned some things I could do to maintain my recovery.” Peter reports he has minimal trouble walking, and manning the convention booths.

I am no stranger to foot injuries, myself, says Bruce. After eight years of folk dancing concurrent with martial arts (both barefoot), I developed bunion pain and a collapsed arch that left me unable to walk barefoot for almost two years. After a full week of Awareness Through Movement lessons and one Functional Integration lesson during the beginning of my Feldenkrais training, I was pain free for three months and even began to run during that time. Over the years since, occasional FIs and lots of self-experimentation, Feldenkrais style, have minimized any continuing pain.

Not everyone has come to me to avoid surgery. Having spent his fourth birthday in the hospital with polio, David Bunker has had eight surgeries in his ankles and feet. Now 56 years old with two fused ankles and severe hammertoes he began taking Feldenkrais lessons two years ago to deal with low back pain. “I’m a long-term project,” he says, noting that his back pain has substantially decreased on an ongoing basis. David has been learning to sense the ground with his feet and organize himself around balancing so well that he now only uses his cane while traveling and has “successfully negotiated the cobblestones in Brussels.” His pelvis, and spine are becoming more mobile, to the point that “I went in to pick up my custom fit shoes and the owner of the store was amazed that they were for me,” David laughs. “She said that never during her 30 years in business has she seen anyone with bilateral foot orthoses (supports for joints or muscles) walking as well as I do.”

– Bruce Richmond, GCFP, ATC, founded Personal Best Performance Clinic, in Los Altos, California. He uses the principles of the Feldenkrais Method in his public classes about running and golf and in his business management. Contact him at: bruce@pbest.com or 1.650.941.1379.

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Reclaiming Mobility

Three and a half years ago, Rona Stanton had the shock of her life. What doctors diagnosed as brain stem bleeding caused her automatic functioning to shut down, making her incapable of doing anything. For 2 1/2 weeks she was in intensive care with seven different tubes keeping her alive. Doctors advised her husband to send Rona to a nursing home, explaining that recovery from brain stem hemorrhage was unlikely.

Rona however, insisted on rehab and struggled her way back to walking. Two years after the stroke, she went back to physical therapy, feeling that her progress was too slow. I recently interviewed Rona and two of her Feldenkrais practitioners about her recovery.

“When I went to the physical therapist,” Rona explained, “he said, ‘You need Feldenkrais. You’ve re-learned a lot, but you have big gaps in your neurological process. Too bad there’s no practitioners around here.’ It was true, I could walk, but things you take for granted — jumping over a line, riding a bike — my memory didn’t serve.”

Rona then learned that Janeen Braun had recently become a local practitioner. “Janeen was able to break everything down into movement patterns I could get, no matter how small,” Rona laughed. “and she said I didn’t have to do it a million times, just go home and rest and let it integrate. It was the opposite of the rehab model.”

Janeen found her work with Rona to be a huge learning process. “The rehab model Rona adopted and her personal style — was to push. It made me reflect on my practice with her and seek to do ‘less.’ We studied how focus can be gained as much in resting as it can with action.”

Gaining Control

Eating disorders — anorexia and bulimia — are addictions by which one has gratification through control by denial. This denial is of one’s own hunger, one’s own body. Recovery, then, has unique challenge. Recovery means letting go of starvation and self-denial, a path which involves eating and caring for your body again. This path is not a matter of leaving a substance behind, such as recovering from alcoholism, it is a matter of returning to healthful eating and care for your body. But the very substance you ingest — food — is also the source of your addiction. It is a highly complicated and difficult journey. I taught a weekly Body Awareness class for a hospital eating disorder clinic a few years ago, as part of a comprehensive program. The class used primarily Feldenkrais movements, for the purpose of teaching a new way to thinking about own’s self, of hopefully gaining out a new respect for own’s body. Learning to tolerate paying attention to sensation, breath, movement was often a main accomplishment for many of those who participated.

When Rona moved to Eugene, Oregon, she found two ways to continue her learning. Deborah Vukson is a Feldenkrais teacher and also her yoga teacher. And for private lessons, she works with Karen Dooley, a Feldenkrais teacher who is also a physical therapist. “Karen helped me build right side awareness, teaching me how to find balance with my right foot and toe. Once we spent a whole hour on my toe!”

Although Karen insists it wasn’t really a full hour on the toe, she does feel that playing with the toes gave Rona more awareness. Karen explored many avenues of movement to pull Rona’s awareness to her toes’ relationship to standing. “We worked with shoes on, shoes off, socks on, socks off. We worked with the pelvis, its movement forward/back, up/down. And most importantly, how to take this learning into life.”

Karen echoes Janeen’s gratitude for the learning Rona provided. “I consider myself an optimistic soul who can find goodness in the world, yet Rona lives this every day of her life and continues to demonstrate that to me, with a vibrancy that uplifts me anytime I work with her. I am always amazed at her strength and perseverance. She teaches me the grace to live in this crazy world. I feel I am the lucky one.”

Although, since her trauma, Rona has always worked to re-establish a “normal life,” her work with the Feldenkrais Method has helped her regain the ease and quality of movement that is so essential for a comfortable life. Rona’s improvement continues, along with her learning as she integrates new possibilities into her daily activities. It’s no longer about reclaiming the “old” Rona, but a journey towards a new approach to everyday living. “The Feldenkrais Method gives you a range of options” concluded Rona. “It teaches ‘this isn’t the only way you can do it.’ Then once you’re in the groove, when it makes sense, you remember it.”

-Lavinia Plonka, GCFP, in Morris Plains, New Jersey. She can be reached at: LaviniaP@att.net or call 973.586.1046.
This she did, and gradually over the weeks could bring herself more fully into this simply upright position. She expressed amazement that she could do this, and said it was the single most helpful change for her. She felt better about herself, and could interact with people with less fear when she was no longer so drawn-in.

Another young woman also learned to use this kind of posturing. One week she came to class, and said that she had had a conference with her family and social worker. In that conference, she deliberately assumed an upright posture, and made full eye contact with her mother to talk to her.

She told us in the class that “It was the first time in my life that my mother heard me.”

Both of these women seemed to learn a new action that was no longer about gaining control through self-denial, but rather was about gaining control through a healthy use of self. It is in this kind of way that the Feldenkrais Method can be a part of recovery for this complicated condition.

- Donna Maebori, a GCFT in Portland, Oregon, is also a physical therapist who heads a Chronic Pain Team at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center’s Rehabilitation Department. Contact her at 503-216-8112 or at: dobimel@teleport.com

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