The slow, gentle, and graceful movements that comprise the Feldenkrais Method® have much to offer the dance world. Moshe Feldenkrais’ ties to dance date back to the 1940s in Israel when modern dancer and movement notator Noah Eshkol took an interest in his work. Eshkol recorded Feldenkrais’ innovative Awareness Through Movement® (ATM) lessons using Eshkol Wachman notation. Israeli dance therapists Leah Bartal and Nira Ne’man, authors of “The Metaphoric Body and Movement, Awareness and Creativity,” credit Feldenkrais for opening their minds to the understanding of body/mind interrelatedness. They write, “We were fascinated by the way he treated every lesson as one unit, working on one theme, exploring its many facets with inventive variations. We came out of these lessons with a new consciousness and a new concept of thinking and sensing body and mind.”

Feldenkrais® Trainer, dancer and Certified Movement Analyst, Donna Blank, conducted the first-ever study on the effect of ATM on dancers. One of the dancers summarizes her ATM experience, “I have become aware of my inborn but lost instinctive behavior. Freedom in all areas results from this. I start to respond at an intuitive level-open for learning and creative expression” (Feldenkrais Journal #3). I had the privilege of being a participant in Blank’s landmark study and found my own work taking a radical departure from previous work. My qualitative range as a mover opened up ten-fold, expanding my palette of movement choices. Many of us felt we simply had more to work with. John Graham, one of the first dancers to study with Moshe Feldenkrais, speaks to this feeling of added dimension. He writes, “Dance was always there for me. Moshe made it more round, essential of itself.”

Today, dancers from varied backgrounds practice his work—including dancers from the worlds of ballet, ballroom, modern, contact improvisation, authentic movement and traditional dance forms. More and more academic dance programs are including the Feldenkrais Method in the curricula. Sylvie Fortin, a Professor of Dance at the University of Quebec at Montreal, finds the Method to be a key component in dance education. She writes, “The pedagogical strategies of the Feldenkrais Method (attending oneself slowly, gently, quietly and playfully) provided me with the non-mechanistic strategies I needed to repattern myself….Our heightened sensibility has the potential to change the way we see the world around us and to render us more capable to act intentionally and effectively.”

“"I am intrigued by the possible uses of the Feldenkrais Method for the dancer. In Feldenkrais® movement sequences, the student is allowed to fulfill a common movement goal in his or her own way. At certain places in a dance class, and at certain times in a dancer’s training this kind of learning is essential to technical and creative growth. We tend to see two separate aspects of dance training and acknowledge the creative, problemsolving aspect of technique only in performance. The problem-solving element of Feldenkrais’ work has served as a reminder and a resource for me in eliciting a creative response from students in dance classes.”

Martha Meyers in “Moshe Feldenkrais and Awareness Through Movement” DANCE Magazine 1983

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The Feldenkrais Method and the Dancing Hip

I was a professional dancer, choreographer and teacher for over twenty years when I began to experience stabbing pains in my right hip. X-rays indicated early arthritis, a condition that affected my mother when she was about the same age.

My doctor said the arthritis would probably not worsen (as in my mother’s case), but in any event, dancing wouldn’t affect it one way or the other. I could dance without fear of damaging my hip joint—if I could ignore the pain. For six months I kept working, but I was in pain, unhappy and very worried about the future.

It was at this point that Sally Nash, longtime friend and colleague (and, unbeknownst to me, a Feldenkrais Practitioner), noticed me limping in rehearsal. She asked what was wrong and, when I explained, offered to give me a Functional Integration® lesson.

As I lay on her table, she lightly pressed, lifted and rolled various parts of me. Afterward, I felt very relaxed, a little woozy in fact, but my hip was still painful. Sally watched me walk, then began asking questions about how I was protecting myself from the pain. She suggested some possible adjustments to my thinking and my movement exploration. As I continued to walk, concentrating on the new information, I suddenly noticed that the pain had completely gone.

What became clear was that my own thinking habits had completely wiped out a whole range of movement possibilities. I was unknowingly stifling my own natural creativity and curiosity. What a realization for an artist!

Ten years later, I am a Feldenkrais Practitioner and a solo dance improviser. I delight in the freedom, spontaneity and definition that the Method calls forth in my dancing and in my life. I can realistically look forward to growing for the rest of my life. ▬▬▬

–Cathy Paine, GCFP. Contact her at: cathypaine@mindspring.com

A Delicate Balance

The act of balancing is constant in life. Dancers further the challenge with beautiful, sometimes precarious poses. The camera can capture a single moment of balance, alive with movement. Moshe Feldenkrais referred to a way of carrying ourselves with a readiness for action. A different attitude from posture, this “acture” is essential to dance. In classical training learning correct body placement is a priority, sometimes placed ahead of learning how to move through space with grace and power. An ideal posture that many dancers and non-dancers strive for is the ability to stand upright with the back appearing to be straight—chest up, shoulders back and down, stomach in, with the head held high.

Like so many young dancers, I mastered a posture that appeared to be straight. Assisted by the barre I could take my legs high in the air and imitate the different poses I saw in the picture books. Away from the barre, I felt weak and off balance. A common recommendation is to create a sense of internal support through strengthening muscles of the abdomen and stabilizing the pelvis. Being that our two-legged structure is anything but stable, how do we develop internal support without interfering with coordinated action? In his book, “The Potent Self,” Moshe writes “In good action, the sensation of effort is absent no matter what the actual expenditure of energy is.” A concise description of what is so inspiring when you see a great dancer!

After four years of ankle and back pain I discovered the Feldenkrais Method in 1983. My recovery was amazingly quick and I continue to be inspired both in dance and daily life by improving my ability to balance effortlessly. My learning has inspired me to teach an annual six-day Intensive for Dance Teachers using the Method. In the middle of a workshop a young teacher exclaimed, “I always knew there was an easier way than the 20+ instructions for correct posture. My hamstrings finally released!” Rather than tightening muscles, the act of balancing revives our innate internal support and flexibility, and frees the breath to instantly improve stamina. Ultimately this allows the freedom to express oneself through movement and the art of dance. ▬▬▬

–Prisca Winslow Bradley, GCFP. Contact her at: priscawin@yahoo.com

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“Development stresses the harmonious coordination between structure, function, and achievement.”

–Moshe Feldenkrais
Dancing From the Inside Out

Opening night. The Joffrey Ballet is performing at the San Francisco Opera House, and I am to teach company class. However, my upper back has “gone out.” I am hunched over, breathing is difficult and I can barely turn my head. I anticipate an old familiar pattern: three days of painful, restricted movement, and another three or four days for the spasm to gradually ease. I am sitting gloomily in the green room backstage when I glance up at the bulletin board, and notice a flyer. “Chronic Back Pain?” it reads. There’s a phone number, so I call. Alice Brydges comes to watch me struggle through class, then we retire to my dressing room, where I lie down on the floor. Alice verbally guides me through various small, gentle movements for about an hour. When I stand, I am breathing more easily and can hold my head up again. The Feldenkrais Method in action!

I was intrigued. I had felt lacking in inspiration both personally and professionally—unable to hold my head up, so to speak. So when I returned home to New York I began taking Marcy Lindheimer’s ATM lessons regularly. Gradually, my awareness of having 24 individual ribs available for movement rather than one rib “cage” (a completely new sensation after years of holding ballet’s rigidly erect spine), released the holding pattern in my chest which had contributed to my recurring back spasms. Moreover, I realized that the lessons were changing not only my way of moving, but my way of being. Instead of striving to achieve a goal of perfection, I began enjoying the process of exploration towards that goal. Instead of judging myself, I became content observing what I was doing.

Surprisingly, awareness itself facilitated changes which in turn increased my sense of possibility, potential. When I realized I was also becoming less rigid in my interaction with other people, I knew this was the path I had been seeking. I applied to join the Professional Training about to begin. I had no idea if I would ever practice the Feldenkrais Method. Now, six years later, I teach at The Feldenkrais Learning Center in Manhattan. I also teach at Sarah Lawrence College, where I encourage my students to explore dancing from the inside out; to work towards the aesthetic form of classical ballet while developing an easier, more integrated way of moving; to improve their technique while exploring their creative potential for movement and for life. “Without movement, life is unthinkable.”

Moshe Feldenkrais. —Barbara Forbes, GCFP. Contact her at: barforb@hotmail.com

The Language of Permission

How do I not use the Feldenkrais Method in my work with dance? Some basic principles from the Feldenkrais Method work now infuse my teaching of dance to college dance majors; my choreography for students and professionals; and my development of intrinsic dance in guided movement practices for the general public. Recently one of my graduate students was asked by a student why she used so many passive verbs. She was not really speaking about passive verbs, we found out, but a teaching style unfamiliar to her. As my student and I discussed this later and tried to track the question to its source, it led me back to my Feldenkrais studies and what I want to call “the language of permission.” This language is not passive, rather it is allowing and non-directive, and can be mistaken for passivity, since teaching styles in dance often stem from imitation (do as I do, or replicate this form).

Teaching through description and observation rather than imperative and command is present in other movement forms that I have experienced, but not quite so explicitly or exclusively developed as in Awareness Through Movement classes. There I learned how to be nondirective, nonjudgmental, and exploratory. Certainly these were approaches that I had already experienced in dance improvisation, but here was a mode of non-directive learning that brought movement to the surface and allowed it to shine through a self-reflective mirror. No where in my experience had I worked through a model for learning that was so centered on the self perceptions of the student.

The Feldenkrais Method gave me the beginnings of a language of permission that I could develop in my work, one that eventually transformed my teaching and choreography, even my vision of “who” my students might be. As I dance, I still enjoy painting the air with my sixty-some body, but even more, I find great satisfaction in helping others to contact their intrinsic dance, whether they are professional dancers or people who have wanted to dance but for many reasons never dared. It seems that they need permission and a language that will liberally support their embodiment of movement.

I recently asked my “kinesiology for dance” class to help me construct a list of words and phrases of permission. This is just the beginning of what we came up with. The first word is a “biggie” that I heard throughout my Feldenkrais studies, so I begin with ALLOW, then move to FIND and aural comple-ments such as LISTEN (yes, we can listen to our bodies). The list goes further into DISCOVER and LET, to BEGIN and to FOLLOW. I especially like WAIT and TAKE A MOMENT. These are golden. I don’t want to forget ATTEND. Of course there are the quests such as WHAT IF, WHERE CAN and WHAT CAN; and I don’t want to forget the timing that flows individually in WHEN YOU ARE READY, how the breath rides freely on this permission. There are many others that I leave to the reader to FIGURE OUT, to bring forth, to finish and to FORM.

—Sondra Fraleigh, GCFP. Contact her at: sfraleig@brockport.edu
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