The Feldenkrais Method® Plus Pilates

Learning a Second Movement Language

“You want me to what??!” The instructor repeats, “Scoop in the abs, slide your ribs down the front of you, shoulder blades down the back of you and BREATHE.” Little did I realize, that was only the preparation for the hour that followed. We moved from one exercise to the next at what felt like lightning speed. Some had fairly straightforward names like the Roll Up and Spine Stretch Forward, others like the Swan Dive, Saw, and Seal Puppy did not hint at what the position or purpose might be. Who were all these people around me with great bodies and how did they know what “going into the Hundreds” meant?

I was doing my best to keep up, however as a Feldenkrais® practitioner new to Pilates, it was a shock to my system. For ten years I had embraced the ideas of going slowly, doing less and resting often during a Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement® lesson. When I worked with a practitioner one-on-one during a Functional Integration® lesson, I was reminded through gentle touch and specific verbal cueing that letting my belly and inner thigh muscles unclench allowed for greater fluidity in everyday movements such as sitting, standing, turning and walking. To scoop in or let go, that is the question.

Like learning a second “movement language,” going through the Pilates training helped me to understand when to do what and why. I could feel that the movements were similar, but what was different was the intention. On the surface they appear as diverse as Spanish and French however, at the core of these methods is awareness and attention, strength and flexibility. Clearly they are rooted in similar thoughts and ideas, much like Latin provides the foundation for Romance languages. Words like “control,” “flow,” “concentration,” and “precision” are often used in association with Pilates while “slowly,” “gently,” “explore,” and “imagine,” more aptly apply to the Feldenkrais Method.

Pilates fulfills its promise that “…in 10 sessions you’ll feel different, 20 sessions you’ll look different, and in 30 sessions you’ll have a new body.” After six months of intensive training, followed by six months of observation, student teaching and regular workouts, I could keep up with my Pilates classmates and fit into clothes I hadn’t worn in years. The Feldenkrais Method never gave me the “bod,” but it allowed me to stick with Pilates in order to become proficient in, and still learning, the two languages.

Being able to use the Feldenkrais Method to teach a Pilates class gives my students more options on their Pelvic Curl or Chest Lift, less shock of physical multi-tasking, and the support to find their own language through movement. ●●

—by Darcia Dexter Negrin, GCFT since 1996, Pilates certified since 1999
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Throughout my whole life, it seems as if I have been on a mission to improve myself. I started dancing when I was five years old and continued professional training throughout high school and college. I worked hard at it—always in the studio—stretching, bending, and practicing. I was stumped, however, at how technique came so easily to those who seemed to never work hard.

In college, I discovered Pilates. It was 1989 in New York and my college had one of only a few Pilates studios in the New York City area at the time. Now, I’m sure, there are hundreds. I was attracted to the innovative machines and whole body philosophy. I thought this could be the answer to my quest for physical perfection. I was around the studio so much that I soon became an instructor and found myself teaching professional Broadway dancers, who were sometimes twice my age.

I was still far from satisfied with my own abilities, however. Various aches, pains, and stiffness led me to try any other technique or modality that promised relief. By this time I was in Seattle and was attending an Awareness Through Movement class. I was intrigued by how these often slow, small, and subtle movements not only offered relief from chronic tensions, but also gave me a feeling of integration and wholeness, that perhaps was what I was looking for.

I joined a four-year Feldenkrais training in 1998. We met three times per year for 2- to 3-week intensive segments. After one particular segment, I was trying out some familiar Pilates moves on the “High Barrel.” I was performing a “swan dive,” a significant back bending movement where the goal is to touch and possibly walk down the wall behind you with your fingers. Back bending had never been easy for me and usually I would experience a level of resistance that I would have to push past before touching the wall. This time I practically bruised my fingers slamming swiftly and effortlessly into the wall!

What had happened? I hadn’t practiced this move in months. Did I suddenly become Superwoman? Something was different. I felt more alive and integrated, yes, but after further reflection I realized that I could explain it another way. I was no longer working against myself. My intention to bend backwards did not have to fight against parts of me that had previously refused to bend. Other Pilates moves also felt more graceful and effortless— all without excessive work or practice!

My mission continues, but my experience with the Feldenkrais Method has changed my perspective. I have learned that more practice and hard work does not guarantee improvement. The Feldenkrais lessons offer me increased awareness and the opportunity to perceive myself moving with greater ease and elegance. This is something repetitive practice cannot provide. It may, in fact, be the essence of the perfection I seek.

—by Peggy Z. Protz, GCFT since 2001, practiced Pilates since 1989
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Bringing the Feldenkrais Method into My Personal Pilates Practice

For eight years I have been studying and practicing Pilates mat work, learning the movements and the form, enjoying the process of making shapes and keeping the pace with the counting. At the same time, I wondered how this work could fit into my Feldenkrais thinking. In class, I found I was focusing on obeying the teacher and getting it right. While practicing on my own, I allowed myself to be more playful and spent time feeling the movement from within.

I have chosen to stop taking Pilates classes but continue to explore its relationship to the Feldenkrais Method. I am moving “outside the box,” letting myself “smudge the lines” of the shapes I am creating, making it more of a discovery rather than strictly adhering to “correct form.” I don’t need to do preparatory actions. When I lift my head from the supine position, I notice the path my head wants to make rather than first imposing a line by lowering my chin to my chest. I follow the response in my skeleton and muscular system from the initial moment of the lift. I don’t need to do a set up before I begin the movement. I have changed the cues I use; I am not concerned about counting or breathing in a specific way.

Now that I know the rules it is time to break them. In the Pilates exercise called “the Hundreds,” I let go of the position of the arms I originally learned, I move them through space; likewise I move my legs and even my head and eyes. I vary the patterns my limbs make while maintaining a constraint of keeping my torso stable or vice versa. It becomes a dance. I find I am using my core without having to work hard. My focus is finding flow through the movements by differentiating my ribs and moving from my center.

I also incorporate movements from Awareness Through Movement lessons. This gives me greater variety. The sitting exercise “Spine Stretch” is more interesting when I play with different sitting movements from my Feldenkrais training, such as: “Sit and place the soles of the feet together. Interlace the fingers and put them behind the head. Lower the head and elbows towards the floor while bending the lower spine and then erect the head by arching in the lower back.” Doing the “pelvic clock” while seated in the “V-position” is especially challenging: “Sit and lift the legs in the air. Roll the pelvis on the floor, rolling across the sit bones.” However if I protrude my stomach and arch my back as I roll my pelvis forward and pull my stomach in and round my back as I roll backwards, as Moshe Feldenkrais suggested, it is much easier.

I integrate Feldenkrais movements when I do “the Swan,” thereby making it more dynamic as opposed to my tendency, when I do Pilates, to keep it static and rigid. For example: “Lie prone, bend the knees and bring the feet towards the ceiling. Lift the knees alternately from the floor. When one knee lifts, let the other knee press into the floor. Let the movement be very minimal while increasing the speed.”

I also play with the classic Feldenkrais Method idea of differentiating the eyes from the head: lift your head up as your eyes go down and vice versa. Rotations of the pelvis, spine, shoulders, and head are other interesting movements I add.

I feel I am truly practicing Pilates for myself. I am having more fun. By bringing the Feldenkrais Method into my Pilates practice, I find alternatives to holding my belly in a particular way. My trunk becomes less rigid, I breathe with more ease. It is less a physical endurance test and more an exploration in how I can think and move at the same time. Not only do I become stronger, I become better organized!

—by Anna Haltrecht, GCFT since 1986, practiced Pilates since 1996 <anna@catspaj.com>

“Thanks to the Feldenkrais lessons I have been doing, I am now able to begin expanding my Pilates routine. I was previously in so much pain that I was unable to lie on the Reformer. Now I’m able to get to that next step of conditioning and strengthening my body!”

—Brigid Curran, Artist
I am a fifty-five year old equestrian. When I decided to get back into riding several years ago, I quickly realized that abilities I took for granted in my twenties were no longer there. My balance, posture, and fitness level were not what they had been. I wasn’t nearly as flexible in my movements and had slipped into certain physical habits that interfered with my ability to perform well on horseback.

I began a Pilates fitness program because I needed a strong base of support that would allow me to stay balanced and follow my horse’s motion. During my Pilates workouts, attention to my upper back, lower back, abdominal or “core area,” and legs gave me the strength and flexibility to maintain a secure position in the saddle. Both my Pilates instructor and my riding coach noted the positive changes in my body and ability to perform. However, I continued to be plagued with unnecessary tension in some areas of my body causing unconscious and incorrect muscular effort. Some habitual patterns persisted, affecting my riding and my horse.

I began seeing Sandra Bradshaw, a Feldenkrais practitioner in my hometown of Kelowna, BC. Through a combination of Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement and Functional Integration lessons, much of the habitual and unnecessary tension in my body was reduced, which greatly assisted in maintaining the integrity of my body alignment on the horse. Unconscious habits became conscious and as my nervous system began to reorganize my body into an integrated whole, I became more balanced and relaxed. Intention and action began to fuse as my mental directives responded with new and more effective movement patterns. Through the activation of neuro-pathways, I began to “turn on the electricity” and I became aware of every part of my body, on a cellular level.

As a rider, I have come to appreciate what Pilates and the Feldenkrais Method have to offer. By improving my physical and mental fitness I can utilize more of my athletic potential to further develop my riding skills. My horse reflects the positive changes in my body/mind and is more willing and cooperative in our work together.

—by Marsha Ivany, Kelowna, BC, Canada

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