This article was inspired by a symposium held this past November 2009 in Paris, France. The symposium looked at aspects of neuroscience, the Feldenkrais Method® and longevity and was attended by Feldenkrais® practitioners and scientists.

I learned about human aging in my senior year at university. Aging was dissected as if a disease. Professors were frenzied with the imminent growth spurt of the baby boomers. Whoever unveiled the most potent potion, the best exercise, diet, the one who could find “the cure” won. Aging was, and still remains, big business.

My favorite university professor was passionate for this topic of aging, or gerontology, to be more academically correct. She taught us all you needed to know about aging, and then some! As I come to the end of this introduction, one sentence still rings so loud from one of her lectures on what contributes to good bone health:

“...osteoporosis is a pediatric disease that manifests in old age....”

When do we become wise?

Wisdom, from a Feldenkrais Method point of view, starts from the very beginning. Our body is wiser and far more intelligent than we often give it credit for. If you have ever heard Feldenkrais practitioners use the term “organic learning,” they are referring to the innate wisdom that exists within our body, nervous system and brain.

Basically, built in wisdom.

This wisdom first comes naturally when an infant with a healthy nervous system* develops in relationship to her environment. A baby has all the tricks of the trade miraculously embedded in her mainframe for life. This is especially true for movement and more importantly, seeking it. How beautifully organized is a child? Her movement is light, curious, flexible and as she develops, it becomes...
more complex and coordinated. Where does this innate wisdom go when we age? I will let you in on a secret – it’s still there!

Depending on your age and/or life experiences, this innate wisdom may be hiding under a few layers of habit (or injury, trauma, routine, etc.), or it may be hidden under a landslide. The great thing about the human system is that even if you don’t cultivate this innate bodily wisdom regularly or have never been one to seek modes of becoming more in tune with yourself, your nervous system and brain are always there, waiting to be stimulated. Our natural capacity to learn remains. So how do you find it again?

Enter, Feldenkrais.

Moshe Feldenkrais, the founder of the Feldenkrais Method, had a very simple way of bringing our built-in wisdom back to us in a format that is similar to how an infant does it naturally. He named it Awareness Through Movement® and Functional Integration® and within these modes of practice, a person is exposed to the wisdom of the human being.

Much of what grown-ups do in activity (life) is devoid of sensation – we ‘just do it,’ and while just doing it, we are rarely guided to pause --- even for a second --- to actually sense if what we are doing is of ease, pleasure, or if it’s uncomfortable and awkward. A Feldenkrais lesson guides and helps you do just this. The human system is incredibly wise and if given a chance to go back to this concept of sensing, (what our younger counterparts do from day one) some incredible stuff can start to happen. It really can.

Quite often learning that is complex stops after a certain time point. I generalize here. Often it stops after university, for others it may be high school. Then there are those that do virtually no higher form of academic education, yet their learning matrices are richer than all the Nobel Laureates put together. Why is this? These people learn new and novel things all the time. They kick the inner fear voice that says, “You are too old!” These folks take up a new pastime, a new career, learn a new sport or musical instrument, make new friends no matter what their age. All of us, I am sure, knows an old granny or uncle who joins a new social club, goes on a cruise solo, hikes new trails every summer, or heaven forbid, re-marries in their senior years! They keep a childlike sense of learning and challenge close to their hearts.

Such resiliency is key for us.

This resiliency, or more appropriately, the invitation to practice resiliency can be found in a Feldenkrais lesson. The exploration of new and novel movement patterns brings part of your brain and nervous system into a situation where you must sense, think, organize and essentially solve a movement riddle. An interesting thing to note is that normal aging is no longer associated with a decline in brain cells, but as a result of a lack of change and diversity occurring within the cells themselves.

When is a good time to start taking Feldenkrais lessons, you may ask?

Did you know that once we sense we are thirsty, we are already dehydrated? This is why endurance athletes are taught to drink fluids like clockwork during marathons. “Thirsty? Not really. Well, maybe consider having a drink anyway.” Many of us tend to take action only when it has to be done. If we take this back to wisdom and simply keep our mojo going – why do we need to feel tired and ragged to consider taking better care of ourselves? Why do most people seek out mind-body modalities and various therapeutic healing arts when injury is at full bay and they can’t walk anymore?

Why not learn how to use yourself efficiently and effectively before that dreaded fall happens, or before that pulled muscle limits your daily walks, or before that future bad back inevitably descends over you in your old age?

Moshe Feldenkrais use to often say, before he would start speaking, “It’s a funny thing (insert his words)....”

Well, it’s a funny thing how we make excuses for not doing various activities as a result of getting older, when it is not doing these activities that makes us age. We have all the tools within ourselves to avoid succumbing to...
the classic aging process, all that is needed is a form of practice that taps back into the embedded wisdom that exists deep within us.

To finish up, I recently had a friend tell me that spending three years volunteering in a third world country, being quiet with herself and learning various Buddhist traditions didn’t give her the magnitude of self-discovery and self-growth that studying the Feldenkrais Method for one year has done. I was astonished by this story. So often we think we need to travel far and wide, have a guru and believe in something magical to find the path to self-discovery. I wonder if self-discovery can begin in the comfort of our own area code and with a little effort that slowly, or maybe even quickly, brings us much needed wisdom in and around this stuff we call aging.

When is a good time to start, you may ask? No time like the present!

* I say healthy as infants that are born with motor and brain disorders that limit their ability to move and sense to their fullest potential often don’t exhibit normal infant development patterns. One area in which Feldenkrais work can facilitate improvement from such disorders is to help bring these normal developmental patterns to the child through various forms of touch and movement.

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The Beginning Is a Very Good Place to Start

A Conversation about the Feldenkrais Method® with Master Teacher Maxine Davis

—Jill Anna Ponasik

I climbed the brownstone’s steps and rang the buzzer for apartment 4. Feldenkrais® teacher Maxine Davis welcomed me into her cozy apartment with a gentle smile and a smidgen of anxiety about our task for the day: to come up with a plan for a series of four articles on the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education. She settled into the sofa cushions, legs tucked beneath her frame. I found a spot at her worktable.

We decided to start at the beginning.

“What happens if we redefine what it means to prepare?”

Do we need to? As singers, aren’t we experts at the art of preparation? Isn’t that what those endless hours of coaching and practicing are for—so that we can be ready?

“Many times, people are so eager to leap into the act of singing that it’s like holding back wild horses just to ask them to notice, ‘Am I ready to approach this note?’ ‘Is the pitch clearly in my ear?’ ‘Do I have that easy sense of breath?’ When we sing, we sometimes worry that we have to perform, rather than just being engaged in a process.”

I thought about some of my own lessons, of conversations with friends. I thought about the idea that, as singers, on some level we understand that we must be prepared to move. We want the sounds coming from our bodies to float, pierce, spin, and ring. We want our muscles to be easy and free, and yet, what many of us do, over and over again, is hold on for dear life.

I asked Davis how we’re supposed to take notice of all those things without freezing them in place or holding on with excessive tension.

“Look, right now, you’re sitting in that chair and what do you notice?”

I easily and quickly noticed some construction sounds, the music on the radio, and the feeling of air from a fan blowing on me.

“So, are you frozen in place?”

“No.” Aha. I see the point.

“I’m talking about the same awareness. You hold the intention that you’re about to sing, but it doesn’t have to be any different than feeling the chair that you’re sitting on, or feeling the pen in your hand. Preparation can be as simple as taking a little time to define what elements need to be present to execute your intention.”

I’m new to the Feldenkrais Method, but I could tell immediately that this was making intuitive sense to me, and also, that it was significantly different than other educational models I’d encountered.

Moshe Feldenkrais was born in Slavuta, Ukraine at the beginning of the 20th century. The chapters of his life are eclectic. He worked as a laborer, cartographer, nuclear physicist, and engineer. He was a dedicated athlete in gymnastics, soccer, and the martial arts, especially judo. After injuring his knee in a soccer game, he declined surgery and instead, used his own body as a laboratory to study kinesiology, anatomy, and physiology. Over time, he retaught himself to walk, and in the process, developed the Feldenkrais Method, which he described as “a system for accessing the power of the central nervous system to improve human functioning.”

As a teacher, Davis has often observed a significant difference between what students think they are doing and what they are actually doing. Much of her job is helping them acquire an improved awareness of what they are actually doing, so that they can do more of what they want. In other words, she helps students alter habitual ways of moving and thinking that may be limiting their success.

“I might have somebody sing, and then I watch and listen. I may see that the way they take their breath sets up a whole series of problems—and they think these are their problems. At that point, I might give them four different ways to breathe.”

Davis often helps students by taking them through a series of variations on a specific movement, in this case, the act of inhalation. “Engaging in the series of variations makes it more likely that they will happen upon the right desired coordination,” she explains. She may present one

(continued on page 5)
exercise and then another one, always focusing on the breath but never repeating the same exercise more than three or four times in a row, to avoid neurological fatigue. It provides for a spiraling, organic, playful way to learn that somewhat resembles the learning styles of young children. When we observe a small child, it may seem to us as if they’re engaging in random acts such as rolling, clapping, and crawling, but one day, those pieces assemble and they learn to walk. They play around until they learn what is necessary to progress.

“Try a variety of things until you find the optimal way to do what you’re doing. You’ll get all kinds of outcomes, but often what you’ll get is something a lot freer because you get out of your own way for a second,” says Davis. “Feldenkrais is a big one for saying that there are as many ways to breathe as there are positions you might find yourself in or tasks you might find yourself doing. Running is different than sitting or jumping. There is no fixed dogma. What we’re looking for is the readiness of the system to respond in a spontaneous way.”

My conversation with Davis continued to bounce about. We discussed brain plasticity and an article about innovation that had caught her attention in the New York Times. Her mind is curious, and her attitude, playful. Davis asks as many questions as she answers, and as she speaks her thoughts wind in and around the topics at hand. At some point, it occurred to me that such curiosity might be a hallmark of the Feldenkrais Method.

Interest in the workings of his own body helped Moshe Feldenkrais regain the use of his injured knee. Rather than simply accept expert advice and undergo surgery, which carried a risk of debilitation, he applied knowledge and curiosity to the problem. He spent time carefully developing his sensitivity and awareness until he could actively observe exactly what his body was doing. Once he accomplished that, he found the way to improvement wide open.

Davis began her career as a singer. She recalled for me one of her own voice lessons, before she began her study of the Feldenkrais Method.

“My teacher was trying to get me to go, ‘nea, nea, nea,’ in order to lift the soft palate. I simply couldn’t do it. Nothing she did, nothing she said made any difference. I could hear perfectly what she was talking about, and I would try and try, but my palate was going the opposite way. Now, I can lift the palate in all [kinds of] different ways, because I can feel how I do what I do. My newest discovery is that there is a whole relationship between being able to open the inner nostril and lifting the soft palate.”

There’s that curiosity at work again.

Davis has said that her first Feldenkrais lesson gave her a sense of being in a new world, one full of possibility and hope. Students say that they feel taller, lighter, and can breathe more freely after lessons. In the following months we’ll continue our conversations about the Feldenkrais Method and will dive into issues such as maintaining a sense of play during practice, differentiating between the learning process and the performing process, and developing the ability to observe yourself from a point of neutrality. I feel a bright trace of delight at the thought of the discussions to come.

Maxine Davis has degrees in music education and performance. She is the recipient of a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship and is a 1991 graduate of the NY Feldenkrais Professional Training Program. She has introduced the Feldenkrais Method to people at New York University, the New School, the 92nd St. Y, and the Chautauqua Institution. She teaches private Feldenkrais lessons and classes, as well as voice lessons informed by the Feldenkrais approach to learning, from her studio in New York City. Visit her online at www.maxinedavis.net.

Jill Anna Ponasik works as a singer-actor and sometimes, a writer. She is in the process of leaving her apartment on New York’s Upper East Side to inhabit an old farmhouse in Wauwatosa, WI. You can reach her online at www.jillannaponasik.com.
“All descriptions of reality are limited expressions of the world of emptiness. Yet we attach to the descriptions and think they are reality. That is a mistake.”

Shunryu Suzuki

During my training, we were informed that there would be some confusion when people asked us to define the Feldenkrais Method®. One trainer told a humorous story to help prepare us for such moments. He was walking in Berkeley when he saw an interesting sign. It looked more like art than a sign. It was beautiful to look at, but hard to understand. He asked about the sign and was told it was for a Chinese restaurant. The trainer advised us that as future practitioners we needed to be able to explain the Feldenkrais Method with the same type of simplicity and clarity.

My first attempt to explain went something like: “Feldenkrais® is a method that uses movement to teach self-improvement,” which created an image of Richard Simmons crossed with Dr. Phil. While it was somewhat entertaining to think about, it was more than a little confusing.

Perhaps the best definition of the Feldenkrais Method is one that is empty. We tend to think of empty as nothing, because it is undefined. But emptiness can also mean free from one’s preconceived ideas and concepts. Think of the Feldenkrais Method as an empty cup. If we fill the cup with orange juice, we think Feldenkrais is orange juice. If the cup remains empty, it has numberless possibilities (juice, tea, milk, water, etc.). By not defining the Feldenkrais Method, one’s experience is more open. This way, it is not just another form of movement therapy or bodywork.

It is interesting to listen to people’s experience with the Feldenkrais Method. I often hear ideas and comments that are new to me. While Feldenkrais themes (improving self-image, reducing unnecessary effort or organizing an action more efficiently) are common in many lessons, we all respond in unique and individual ways. After the same class, one person may notice less back pain, another a new way to function and yet another, better vision.

Now when people ask me to define the Feldenkrais Method, I ask them what they enjoy doing. Then I tell them how Feldenkrais lessons will teach them to do it better. Hopefully, I am able to intrigue them enough to visit an Awareness Through Movement® class or make an appointment for a Functional Integration® lesson. As an old Chinese saying goes:

“I hear and forget
I see and remember
I do and understand.”

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