**Choice & Freedom:**

an interview with Elinor Silverstein

–by Gabrielle Pullen, GCFP

Vivacious, and unfailingly upbeat, even in the face of her work with some of the most neurologically challenged, Elinor Silverstein talks candidly about how her experience growing up in two households where Feldenkrais® thinking prevailed formed a major influence to her entire approach to living...Both of her parents studied with Moshe in the 1950’s, and at one point her mother was raised by his parents. She finished the Amherst Training in 1983 and has had an on-going practice ever since.

**ES:** I’m very inspired to work with people who have been seriously injured, and those who have neurological injuries. But, to me, Feldenkrais is more a way of thinking, a philosophy, even more than a method.

**SA:** Would you say it’s a way of living?

**ES:** A way of living, yes, and it’s the way I raised both of my sons, and my husband!

**SA:** Can you give me an example of how you raised your sons in that way?

**ES:** Yes. We spoke about the definition of choice, as Moshe saw it. Starting at the age of thirteen I talked to each of my sons about choice at the start of their Bar Mitzvah, the ceremony that marks their coming of age as young men in the eyes of Judaism. Moshe used to say if you only have two options, you are forced to do this, or to do that. But once you add in another option, now you have choice because you don’t have to compulsively go back and forth, and back and forth again, between only one and the other.

**SA:** I’ve heard that before but I don’t think I ever got the significance of it. Having three options rather than just two lifts you out of the realm of dualism, of right and wrong. That third choice takes you into the realm of nuance, it generates shades of grey along a much richer continuum of embodied experience.

**ES:** Yes, and we also talked about what maturity means; the definition of maturity is to have choice, and the ability to respond to something in our environment rather than to...
react. To react comes from the back of the brain. A response comes because we thought about it from a more full use of our brain, even more from the front. Therein lies maturity and the ability to choose our actions.

SA: You mean that part of the brain that differentiates humans from other mammals with smaller brains? Having a frontal cortex allows for premeditated thought rather than action that occurs purely out of an instinct for self-preservation, a process which originates from the lower brain stem, a more ancient part of the brain from the point of view of evolution.

ES: Exactly, so I would always say to my boys, ‘Is your action coming from the back of your brain or the front of your brain?’ Not that I’m saying one is better than the other, I’m just saying that you have choice.

SA: Technology in the realm of brain scans has made huge strides in recent years and many studies bear out what you are saying. Brain scans of felons in high security prisons, for example, demonstrate that the place where the most neurons should fire when making decisions regarding right and wrong is in the frontal cortex, and that there’s not much activity going on there for people with a history of violent crime. They are operating from an inability to think cognitively, to use that frontal lobe where an awareness of how our behavior affects others seems to reside.

ES: And breathing. Think about that, about what it’s like to go into a fear response, how it makes you gasp for breath, and what that does to the way we hold ourselves and how it might stop us from even being able to relate to the possibility of having mobility and accessibility of our whole body.

SA: So, if this happens over and over again over time, the child develops a habit of holding in their aliveness, of trying to be invisible to avoid being a target, of making themselves small. The child will also develop a dysfunctional relationship with breathing in general, and with movement, since you can’t breathe without it. And because it’s at the level of habit, it has a long-term effect that is often left untreated because somatic consequences are much more broad than any one

calm environment. One needs a four-wheel drive to go along the road less traveled.

ES: That’s absolutely right. And in addition to that there’s this issue of cell permeability that, so far, I hardly hear anyone talking about. Shallow breathing means oxygen and nutrients can’t get in and cell waste cannot get out. What happens if a person has undergone shock and has developed this way of holding their ribcage, and they are constantly holding their breath?

Moshe would say, ‘There is no one way of breathing, I can’t believe anyone would write a book on how to breathe as if there were only one way of doing it! If you get pulled over by the police, you’re going to have a different way of breathing than if someone beautiful is walking by, or when walking in a field of flowers...’ Moshe believed that breathing happens naturally when we move in an unencumbered way.

SA: How does this relate to the issue of how we create a sense of safety from within ourselves? Moshe grew up in the Ukraine during the time of the Pogroms, which were basically random violent mob attacks against Jews and their businesses or property. Surely this affected his relationship with the issue of safety?

ES: Absolutely. When you look at Jews who lived through those times, their individual and collective experiences were deeply embedded in their psyches. Moshe was always interested in how you create safety within yourself wherever you are. You can’t necessarily stop the universe from the horror that may come, but you can control how you deal with it, how you are moving through it, how you are using your awareness to know something’s off base. To collect

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yourself during fear, and more so, to respond.

Moshe would observe people and wonder how people survived trauma. And he was not just about survival, he was about living to the fullest. How is it that people live through all that? Including the people he met while in Palestine, participating in the formation of Israel; how do people with such difficult backgrounds find the maturity to have all those negative experiences without becoming negative themselves, but to decide that they’re going to learn from it and find a way to raise their children and be happy? Their maturity was born of choice. It’s crucial.

SA: How did Moshe relate to the issue of safety? Did you talk to him about these things?

ES: Yes, which is why his first book was about the art of one-to-one unarmed combat. When he first came to Palestine, Jews were not allowed to arm themselves, hence his teaching of martial arts with the use of yourself and whatever you might have around you. It was, in part, his answer to the question, ‘How can you learn to gain control of yourself so that no matter what is going on around you, they can’t get the better of YOU?’ He was always teaching to be aware of one’s surroundings.

SA: How do you mean?

ES: Wherever you are, you should always be aware and know what’s going on around you. If you’re not, you might not live to see another day. Again the idea of choice: he would always accentuate that when you enter a building, you need to casually notice at least three ways out in case of emergency.

When our country was attacked and our twin towers were on fire, I remember being aghast at the thought of how many people who worked in those buildings might not know of any other way down but the elevators that they relied on every day. Moshe would say that choice means at least three options. To him it was simple martial arts and survival. To us, it might not be in our thinking. We simply go up the elevator.

SA: What do you think is the relationship between how we create a sense of safety and our individual identity? For example, a strong, athletic young man is going to relate to the world differently when he first lives on his own than a fairly inactive young woman who has a history of asthma.

ES: You know, we are what we think. We are what we believe. Moshe wrote about this in his books. The ability to be a potent human being comes down to how you are thinking about yourself, how you enable yourself to act within your environment. In his writings he talks about the state of anxiety versus self confidence. It’s so important. It’s huge. And we find so much of our confidence in our body and psyche in Awareness Through Movement®.

We find it in the lessons because they help us to be able to move in all five cardinal directions (forward, backward, side to side, both diagonals, and up and down). When you get that in your physical experience, it affects your soma, your whole sense of self.

Look, I always put it this way, when you see a silhouette of someone walking far away, most people can tell their relative age. The walk of a young person is distinct from that of an elderly person. Can you imagine what it’s like to walk if your already rounding forward so that you’re weight is in front of you? Then you become afraid to go backward, or to move sideways. Can you imagine the anxiety that propels?

Moshe said, ‘Every living being deserves to move freely. Even if someone has to come in and move them.’

SA: You work with people in ICU. How is their sense of safety affected by your work with them?

ES: I love it! You see, I don’t only work with someone in ICU in the bed. I might also bring in the family and the nurses and teach them how to sense, touch and move their own self and the person in the bed. Then, the whole energy between everyone in that room shifts, because the nursing staff is thinking differently, the family members are thinking differently. It empowers them to do things differently. It empowers them to think in new ways and act accordingly.

SA: To have choice.

ES: Yes! To have choice. Choice. It’s a beautiful thing!

Watch Elinor at work: www.youtube.com/user/ElinorSilverstein

Choice.
It’s a beautiful thing!
I often say that in the course of my training, I fell apart and came back together again.

Like many people, I came to the Feldenkrais Method® through injury. Since 2003, I was irritated by spasms in my upper back. I tried everything: physical therapy, Rolfing, massage, holistic chiropractors and not so holistic chiropractors. Finally after four years of hit-and-miss treatments, a dance teacher suggested I try the Feldenkrais Method.

I began by attending Awareness Through Movement® classes with Carol Kress and Donna Bervinchak. I quickly discovered something that was revolutionary to me: that by lying on my back and lifting my left arm ever so slightly off the ground, I could basically produce the same results as a chiropractic adjustment. I actually felt my nerves fire and a vertebrae move into a more comfortable place than where it had been before.

This event was revolutionary to me because I’d lived my life with a “no pain, no gain” attitude. I felt I had to beat my muscles into submission in order to make them relax; that I had to force my bones into a particular alignment. This way of thinking was connected to deeper patterns of believing that I had to work myself into the ground in order to earn the right to exist.

So, the Feldenkrais Method changed my life.

Probably a lot of people say this. Probably all the people who read this newsletter know about this potentiality already or you would not be reading this; you would not be engaged with the Method. But I keep saying this because I cannot get over it: the possibility of healing oneself; of training one’s awareness to be so fine that one could maintain one’s own state of health and well-being; this power to heal oneself is incredibly empowering.

When I entered the training program, I was coming from a place where I had given up a lot of my power. I was fresh out of a doctoral program, exhausted, beaten down, insecure, and questioning whether I would be of any use in the “real world.” During my first two years of training, I fell asleep a lot. I did not take notes. I often felt totally disoriented. Occasionally, I was triggered emotionally.

At the same time as I was going through my training, I had to look for work. I found it in Southern California. I sublet my apartment in Oakland, moved to Los Angeles, and returned to Berkeley for trainings. Eventually, I landed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship in theater and dance that paid for me to move myself completely down to LA.

Towards the end my gig, I was faced again with being jobless. I thought I would have to put the training on hold. When I told my classmates goodbye, I started bawling. This surprised me and also showed me how important the work and the space had become to me. At the last moment, I was offered a contract for one more year. Over the course of that year, I was offered a permanent tenure-track appointment.

People always talk about how hard it is to land a tenure track position in academia, but for me it was relatively EASY. While I can’t quantify or show scientific proof, I do believe that the changes in my body and being that occurred from the training made me a stronger candidate for my job.

I started my Feldenkrais training as a work-study student. I finished it no longer having to do work-study; my job paid

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This isn’t to say that everything became easy. I missed a lot of sessions and had to do a lot of make-up. Sometimes I had to leave LA at 4 AM to arrive at my training in Berkeley by 11:30 AM. But the fact of the matter is that it was still possible for me to continue. I had the time, I had the money. I had the car. I had the energy. I made it happen. And I am so grateful for this.

Still, by working so hard to hold myself together in Los Angeles, oftentimes I arrived at the training on time only to fall asleep during class. I was lazy coming back from breaks. My sense of disorientation returned. In retrospect, I needed this space to be “imperfect” in order to function in LA.

At the university, I noticed that the Feldenkrais® pedagogy had begun to influence my own teaching. The classes I taught became places where it was safe for students to “fall apart:” to be late, to take long breaks, to fall asleep, to fail, and through trial and error, eventually find their own way of moving. When I allowed the students to learn this way, the learning was more permanent, more lasting, and more profound. One student told me he used to feel like he did not belong at this school. Through the work in our class, he came became more confident and started to realize that it was his school, also. One day, I saw him standing in the quad, handing out information flyers about being vegan. This was something he would not have done at the beginning of the semester.

During my last year, I often boasted that I’d managed to eradicate the spasms in my upper back. I bit my tongue when I had a relapse a few months before graduating. The injury was related to an old issue I had of caring for others at the expense of myself. The flare up arrived at the end of a two-week period during which I’d taken care of three, and at times six, teenage boys. By the end, I felt like my left arm was going to fall off. But though the source issue was the same, my condition was less severe than it had been in the past. I was also able to deal with it more efficiently because I now knew how to deal with it.

I had a Functional Integration® lesson with Carol. I noticed that despite the tension of my tissue, I could sense my skeleton, supple and free, underneath the pain. This gave me a sense of ease and hope while the muscles calmed down.

This new sense I have of my skeleton has also helped me tremendously in dancing. People observing me have commented on the movement of my spine; that they can see force “ripple” through my vertebrae. A teacher who used to tell me that part of my middle-back seemed to be dead or missing, doesn’t say this anymore. I dance more fully. The experience is richer and more satisfying. I’ve been offered more and more opportunities to perform in more and more prestigious venues. Still, it’s not really the prestigious venues that are most valuable to me, but the feeling of freedom of movement that I have now.

I want to express my gratitude to all my teachers, classmates, and of course, to Moshe. I look forward to the next stages of my relationship with this work.

Last week, someone considering enrolling in a training asked for my advice. I said that I thought everyone interested should train if they could. The decision, as I see it, is more a matter of timing. If and when you are ready, participating in a Feldenkrais training can only offer improvement.

Find a training near you:
www.feldenkrais.com/classes/become_a_practitioner/
Embodying Neuroscience:

A Long Time Coming, Well Worth the Wait

-by Pat Buchanan, PhD, ATC, PT, GCFT, Chair, Esther Thelen Research Committee

Forty years ago, Moshe Feldenkrais thought that the organization of the brain’s neurons, including the movements related to those neural patterns, would change in response to activity. In *Awareness Through Movement*, he wrote that “the area for the third finger would be larger in a person who has learned to play a musical instrument than in one who has not.” Thinking that the brain was changeable and plastic across the life span was rare at that time. It took more than thirty years for neuroscience to confirm Dr. Feldenkrais’ hypothesis; brain imaging technology allowed researchers to demonstrate the proposed effect in musicians.

Feldenkrais’ perspective that behavior emerges from and is influenced by the interactions among sensing, moving, feeling and thinking was also revolutionary. Late in the 20th century and into the 21st century, a distinctive group of movement scientists, psychologists, neuroscientists, biologists, philosophers and health care providers found common ground in challenging long held beliefs about the innate primacy of the nervous system in directing human behavior. Instead, a more integrative, interactive understanding of behavior gradually took hold and continues to develop.

From this perspective, the nervous system is situated within a body within an environment that share responsibility for the development and emergence of human behavior, whether a human is acquiring those behaviors for the first time, recovering from illness or injury, or adapting to the changes that come with life. This common ground is not yet the predominantly held ground, but it resonates with those who find the reductionist, dualistic perspective of much of western science unsatisfying.

This Labor Day, the 2012 Esther Thelen Research Symposium and Feldenkrais Method® Annual Conference offer a landmark opportunity to learn from and (continued on page 7)
dialogue with some of the ground breaking scientists and scholars who have fostered this change in viewpoint. Several of them were colleagues of Esther Thelen, developmental psychologist and Feldenkrais® Practitioner. Esther had a major impact on bringing embodied, interrelated, and integrated dynamic systems theory to bear on our understanding human development.

Under the auspices of the Feldenkrais Educational Foundation of North America and the Esther Thelen Research Committee, The Esther Thelen Research and Education Fund is proud to sponsor the Esther Thelen Research Symposium and collaborate with the Feldenkrais Guild® of North America in creating a very special Annual Conference with the unifying theme Embodying Neuroscience: the Feldenkrais Method in Human Development, Performance and Health. These events reflect Esther Thelen’s commitment to principled scientific inquiry, professional and personal development, and translational actions that foster societal change.

Both the Symposium and the Conference are open to Feldenkrais Practitioners, professionals in related disciplines, and the general public. We truly have a world-class line up of informative and thought provoking presenters for the Research Symposium.

- Michael Turvey, professor emeritus at the University of Connecticut, was one of a group of highly influential scientists at UConn that introduced Esther Thelen and countless others to the work of Nicholai Bernstein, J. J. Gibson, and the principles of dynamic systems theory and ecological psychology. No longer does understanding and examining behavior depend on the maturation of the nervous system and its innate programs to inadequately explain the amazing and evolving range of the human repertoire. Instead, physical properties that explain the emergence of weather patterns can also describe the self-organization of human behavior and that of other living organisms.

- Georg Striedter, professor at the University of California-Irvine, will ground us in an evolutionary perspective on the human brain that clarifies the development of the distinctive learning capabilities of humans.

- Jane Clark, professor at the University of Maryland-College Park, and Jill Whitall, professor at the University of Maryland-Baltimore, collaborated on many of the early developmental studies of human movement that used principles of the new movement science theories. Dr. Clark will share insights from her work with typically developing children and those with developmental coordination disorder.

- Dr. Whitall will offer lessons from her research on the recovery of arm function in people who have had strokes.

Both will address issues of variability, individuality, and processes of change in a way that should be informative and satisfying to non-reductionists/science skeptics and offer practical insights to practitioners.

- Catherine Kerr, assistant professor at Brown University, will talk about her research on brain changes in response to various mindfulness/awareness practices, including meditation and Tai Chi, which are reflected in neuroimaging studies.

- Wolf Mehling, physician and associate professor at the University of California-San Francisco, will discuss his research of body awareness. In particular, he will consider the challenges of doing rigorous

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studies that use methods appropriate for the integrated, non-reductionist perspectives of practices such as the Feldenkrais Method®.

• Alva Noë, professor at the University of California-Berkeley, will bring us full circle with the philosopher’s point of view on embodiment and argue that “you are not your brain.” Instead, consciousness arises at the intersection of brain, body and world®.

Symposium attendees will have numerous opportunities for discussion with presenters and one another throughout the two days. In addition, researchers will share their recent projects through posters that will be on display throughout the Symposium and into the Conference. Nine very talented Feldenkrais Practitioners will close the circle with the Symposium by offering workshops in the Conference that extend the presenters’ themes onto the floor and table. They join many more colleagues in constructing a rich week long opportunity for learning and networking.

To bridge the Symposium and the Conference, we are thrilled to have the eminent neuroscientist Michael Merzenich, professor emeritus at the University of California-San Francisco and Co-Founder and Chief Scientific Officer of Posit Science, deliver the keynote address. Dr. Merzenich has made numerous contributions to neuroscience, including advances in the use of microelectrodes that dramatically improved our understanding that the sensorimotor maps depicting the organization of the brain change in response to experience, and applications of neuroplasticity to improve cognitive abilities across the life span.

Readers may know Dr. Merzenich from the chapter about him in The Brain That Changes Itself, or from his prominent role in the PBS show, “Brain Fitness.” Dr. Merzenich will talk about: his connection with Esther Thelen, the implications of animal and human research for clinical settings from a neurological perspective, and the translation of researchers’ work to the work of Feldenkrais Practitioners as well as other educators and health care providers®.

Registration opens late April.
www.feldenkrais.com/events/conference/2012/
I truly believe this year’s Research Symposium and Annual Conference will be pivotal events for the Feldenkrais Method, its practitioners, students, and beyond. Have you ever thought that the Feldenkrais Method is the best thing since sliced bread and wondered what the ingredients are that make it so special? Have you wished that researchers, practitioners, and students could talk to one another and learn from each other? Have you speculated how the neurosciences and integrative applications such as the Feldenkrais Method could inform each other and benefit your life? This week’s proceedings will clarify many of the organic processes underlying the Feldenkrais Method and provide opportunities to seek answers to these and many more questions.

What more can I say, but to invite you to join us this summer in the San Francisco Bay Area for these very special events in the history of the Feldenkrais Method.

Endnotes
1www.feldenkrais.com/resources/esther_thelen_phd_gcfp_research_and_education_fund/
2www.feldenkrais.com/events/conference/2012_public/
3http://ione.psy.uconn.edu/mtsurvey/
4www.faculty.uci.edu/profile.cfm?faculty_id=3006
5www.sph.umd.edu/KNES/faculty/jclark/
6http://medschool.umaryland.edu/facultyresearchprofile/viewprofile.aspx?id=3055
7http://research.brown.edu/research/profile.php?id=1314807477
8www.ucsfhealth.org/cgi-bin/expertDetail.cgi?doctorid=27211
9http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~noe/
10www.ted.com/talks/michael_merzenich_on_the_elastic_brain.html
& www.positscience.com/science/global-science-team/merzenich