Confusion & the Creative Process

Tiffany Sankary, GCFP

“You can’t be creative if you refuse to be confused.”
-Margaret Wheatley

What happens when you don’t understand something? What is your reaction to confusion? Often my reactions are determined by how interested I am in learning and how curious I am in the moment. I can either shut down or open myself to the discomfort of not knowing. The desire to understand and be with the confusing aspects of my life experience drives my creative process and led me to create a book about the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education.
I found the Feldenkrais Method during a confusing search for how to have a more loving relationship with my body after growing up in a family and society that taught me to hate it. The invitations the Method offered were liberating: feel without judgement, move without comparing myself to others, and sense internally instead of looking to others to validate if what I was doing was correct. Through permission and encouragement to imperfectly cultivate my own inner sense of knowing, I found grace in a clunky unembodied body. I found presence where I had been absent for so long. This coming home to myself was a creative, dynamic process.

There are many aspects to learning that are confusing. How do you sense your sternum when you don’t know you have a sternum? How do you lift your head off the ground gently and easily when it feels like a heavy bowling ball? How do you find support from the ground if you are used to holding and contracting around your pelvis and abdomen? The “projects” in any given Feldenkrais® lesson are a scaffolding for paying attention to yourself. You begin to shine a light in the dark areas of yourself (the areas that you don’t know how to feel) and over time the light gets brighter; your self-image becomes more clear. Both Awareness Through Movement® (verbally guided movement lessons often done in groups) and Functional Integration® (hands-on lessons) offer experiences of expanding space and time to be with the sensory-motor learning process. This expanded time allows for and even encourages making mistakes. The more we try to do something perfectly, the more unnecessary effort we bring to our action. Tracking this effort, really slowing down to notice it, can be uncomfortable. We would rather skip past and avoid confusion. How can we change ourselves if the desire to change evokes our habitual ways of acting? In Feldenkrais lessons, if we have the patience to face our blind spots, the presence of our awareness melts habitual tension. New possibilities emerge that couldn’t exist when the tension was held. More opportunities for learning arise as you can do more, feel more, and become more curious.

My curiosity led me to a Feldenkrais Method professional training program in 2002. I have since become a teacher and practitioner of the Method. During the beginning of my training, I used drawing to deepen my understanding of Moshe Feldenkrais’ writings and philosophy. I would take a sentence and see what came out of my pen as I explored hand-writing his words and drawing simple figures moving through space. I didn’t intend to literally draw what he described, but to get at a feeling or some aspect of his ideas. It was a different way for me to be with his words. On a first read I didn’t always understand his writing. It was complex, multi-dimensional, dense.

“Only when in possession of the full range of functioning on each level or plane of action can we eliminate compulsion to the degree that our action becomes the expression of our spontaneous selves. All creative men and women know spells when they can act in this manner.” (Moshe Feldenkrais, The Potent Self, p 199)

When I broke a quote up into smaller parts, I could digest it more easily. This is a strategy in Feldenkrais lessons—breaking down complex movement. The process of simplifying and then gradually adding more complexity helps us learn to bring more of the whole of ourselves into an action. There were times when what I drew didn’t quite get at the feeling I was looking for, so I redrew the
quote several times, trying to get closer to my intention. In the Feldenkrais Method, we often repeat a movement to explore a variety of qualities and slight shifts in trajectory, attending to different parts of ourselves that are involved in an action. As repetition with variation makes our experience more multi-dimensional, drawing Feldenkrais’ words and going back to look at the drawings added other dimensions to my understanding.

The common response I got when showing colleagues, teachers, and friends these drawings was, “This should be a book!” This planted a seed in me that grew over time. I sought permission from the publishers to use Feldenkrais’ quotes and was pleased that they were supportive of my project. I spent several years continuing to draw as I read his books, accumulating more images. The drawings became a way for me to meditate on his ideas, observing where the themes in his books showed up in my Feldenkrais practice and life. What early experiences led me to my habitual ways of acting? What interferes with and contributes to my learning? How can I best support others in their learning process? How am I compulsive? What does it feel like when I am spontaneous? When do I add parasitic effort? Where can I do less?

There came a point where I tried to organize the hundreds of drawings I’d been working on into chapters, but because the quotes were taken randomly from different sources they did not read as a cohesive whole. I became overwhelmed with confusion. I felt stuck and did not know how to continue. As maddening as it sometimes felt, this stuckness was a valuable part of my process. How would I take a dream and shape it into a reality? What was missing? I eventually had an idea about how to continue. I resisted it at first, as it would require shifting to a different kind of process. So far I had been spontaneous, playful, whimsical, inspired. This was the way I liked to work.
But the spirit of the book and the principles of the Method called on me to grow up, to expand beyond my comfort zone and my image of what a creative process looks like.

In the next phase of the project I put drawing on hold and prioritized getting clear about the text. I combed through all of Feldenkrais’ books and articles, cover to cover, to find all the possible quotes I might want to illustrate. From there, I organized the quotes by theme and crafted the flow of the book. There were many confusing moments in the editing process where I felt like my brain was turning inside out, so I sought support from a few colleagues, especially my husband Matty Wilkinson. We spent many nights reading Feldenkrais’ words aloud and playing with multiple ways of arranging the quotes so that they would read cohesively, even though they were taken from different sources. The end result was 25 chapters representing key themes in Feldenkrais’ philosophy, exploring what inhibits and supports our potential to become mature, creative human beings.

Then I got pregnant. I became aware of how precious my time was. I saw that I would no longer have the luxury of drawing whenever I felt like it once my child was born. I needed to learn how to call on the muse even when I wasn’t feeling inspired. And I did. I spent every morning of my pregnancy drawing, inspired by Feldenkrais’ ideas about maturity and creativity:

“It is commonly believed that one must wait for the muse or some other inspiration to bring about such happy moments. But mature, creative people have learned to know themselves sufficiently well so that they can bring themselves to the reversible state of acture. Thus, they can advertise months in advance the hour when the muse is going to function.” (The Potent Self, 199-200)

I had to keep moving regardless of how I felt (and thanks to the Feldenkrais Method I had a very active, comfortable pregnancy). In this push to finish the book, I didn’t let moments of doubt or confusion stop me. I saw that the fumbling and scribbling were a necessary part of the process. Early drafts of a drawing were needed to get to the final version. I needed to be willing to let go of what didn’t work in order to get to what did. By the time my son was born, I had completed the drawings, but there was still much work to be done. This work was mostly done during naps, late nights, and early mornings. (I am writing this as my son is napping). My son is now fifteen months and I am putting the final touches on the book.

After eleven years of playing, experimenting, being confused, frustrated, excited, inspired, reading, drawing, moving, editing, learning, my book has become a reality: Feldenkrais Illustrated: The Art of Learning. As I flip through it now, I am delighted and filled with hope that there is something magical on the other side of the unknown. Confusion keeps me searching for what’s next and what’s needed. I look for what to get rid of, what’s extraneous. I listen for the poetry and the moments of grace. It is not always clear and then there are moments when it is.

Image list / References

Bibliography

Tiffany Sankary is a visual artist, Feldenkrais® Practitioner and teacher of Authentic Movement. Her teaching is rooted in her own personal transformation and a deep respect for the innate intelligence and wisdom of the body. She guides students to deepen their inner world through sensory rich movement experiments, inviting curiosity, exploration and creativity. Tiffany empowers a wide range of individuals in their own learning process as they move from compulsion and pain to greater flexibility and freedom.

In addition to the Feldenkrais practitioner training and extensive advanced training in the Feldenkrais Method, Tiffany completed four years of Contemplative Dance/ Authentic Movement training. Tiffany offers group classes and workshops as well as individual hands-on Functional Integration sessions. She currently lives and practices in Somerville, MA and visits New York City and Berkeley, CA to teach and see clients a few times a year. She just published her first book Feldenkrais Illustrated: The Art of Learning, a visual guide to the writings of Moshe Feldenkrais, Movement and Creativity Press, 2014. For more info see: www.tiffany sankary.com and www.movementandcreativity.com
Performing Arts

A First Lesson in the Feldenkrais Method®

Jill Anna Ponasik

When I accepted the assignment to interview Maxine Davis and write a series of articles on the Feldenkrais Method, I knew next to nothing about [the] Feldenkrais [Method]. It occurred to me that one way to introduce the Method to Classical Singer readers might be to take a lesson myself and describe it step by step, so I signed myself right up.

I arrived for my private lesson a few minutes early and opened the door to find several people lying prone on the floor. I tiptoed around them and took a seat in the adjacent room. Phrases such as, “It feels to me like you lost the clarity of what you’re doing,” and, “Notice, does the contact with the floor send its force up to the top of your head?” floated through the space between rooms.

When it was my turn, Davis began by asking if there was anything in my performing life that had consistently proven to be an issue.

I confessed that I have a seemingly incurable fear of high notes, especially in my operatic repertoire, and that I miss the freedom and comfort I once felt when I was very proud of my voice and loved singing above the staff.

Davis asked me about the activities of my daily life. I told her I usually exercise by taking dance classes and walking a lot.

“So walk for me a bit, just your normal walk,” she said. “What I’m looking for is just something that catches my
attention, not so much a problem as [it is] a place to start.”

I walked about the room.

“The place that catches my attention now also relates to
the fear that you sense when singing up high,” said Davis.
“It has to do with what goes on from, say, your waist to
your chin. How much ballet did you take?”

“I took weekly classes for about nine years and was en
pointe for the last five.”

“One thing that I’ve observed in people with a lot of ballet
in their background is a kind of separation of chest and
pelvis,” Davis explained. “On a mechanical level they’re
not separate at all. The spine goes from the pelvis up
through the ribs all the way to your head.”

Davis asked me to lie on my back on the worktable. She
seated herself on a stool near my head. “I often start by
checking out the readiness of the head to roll,” she said,
and began rocking my head back and forth slowly and
gently.

“There’s a little resistance in your readiness to move,” she
continued. “If you cut off the connection between your
head and your tail, you have to do something active.”

I thought about this.

“Already, as you get used to that idea, something is
starting to change,” Davis continued. “In a way, the fact
that everything is connected is a pain, because if you’re
holding in your ankles, you can hear it in your voice. But
the good thing about everything being connected is that
you can access the topic from many ‘handles.’”

Davis moved to my feet and began to flip-flop my legs.
“What do you feel? What’s happening to your head?” she
asked.

“It’s moving. I can feel it all the way through me, in a
line.”

“What you feel is your skeleton,” Davis explained. “Now,
as you stand, think of the lift and separation that you
sustain. Try it and feel what goes on in your lower belly
and in your ability to breathe.”

“It tightens,” I said.

For a short while Davis had me practice moving back and
forth between my “lifted posture” and the relaxed, easy
position she had helped me find. Then she moved back to
my head and rolled it gently, as before.

“How’s that, compared to the beginning?” she asked.

“It rolls easily now,” I said.

“I’m not using any more force than before,” said Davis.
“What’s interesting to me is that, as a whole person, you
have all of these talents and interests, but your belief
about the organization of this part of your body is for a
single state of being. We’re born with a nervous system
that is designed to reinvent itself all the time, yet most
of us subvert it at some level because we want things to
stay the same—but we’re not designed for stability, we’re
designed to move.

“Now, try rolling to your side, bringing your arm with you,
tilting your leg, rolling your head and—stop! There’s your
ballet. Can you feel it? Your chest was in a separate world.
So come back, and let’s put it together. Now the chest is
part of the picture.”

I rose to a sitting position.

“For a moment, can you be where you are without pulling
yourself up into that dance posture?” Davis asked. “It can
be a scary experience, because there is a sense of self
associated with that other posture. Is there anything that
feels lazy about this one?”

“I feel an easing in my shoulders and my neck that I don’t
usually feel,” I said.

“Can you breathe down into your lower belly?”

“Yes!”

“Try it your old way. Can you breathe into your belly?”

“Yes...with effort.”

“What are you constantly told to do in singing?”

“Breathe into the belly.”

“You’ve created a posture whereby it’s hard to do what
you want to do. So you try harder. You put more effort in there.”

We moved over to the piano—Davis also teaches voice from a Feldenkrais perspective. We started with a very simple exercise.

“How does that feel?” she asked.

“OK.”

“Now, go over to the table. Put one foot up on the table. Place an elbow on your knee, and lean your cheek on your fist. Just kind of get interested in your sensations and notice whether the weight of your head disappears at any point.”

I followed her instructions, sang the exercise again, and noticed immediately that the sound was richer, fuller, and more connected.

“How does it feel to sing in that cockamamie position?” Davis asked.

“I love it!”

“What must you do to be in that position and let your hand hold your head? What must you give up?”

“I have to give up any rigidity in my ribcage.”

“Now look for a way to change legs and put your right elbow on your left knee. This is more demanding.”

I gave it a try, struggling a bit, but every time I remembered to drop the weight of my head into my hand, my singing improved.

“Now you’re releasing the sound rather than containing and controlling it. When I put you into these positions I’m making it impossible, or at least really noticeable, to go back to your old habits.”

I came closer to the piano and we continued with a few more exercises.

“Stand however you like. Protrude your tongue and bite on it, keeping it relaxed. See if you can do an ‘ng’ in the back [of your mouth].”

I tried.

“I see a little fight going on,” said Davis. “Reduce the effort. Give up any ideas you have about what may be right and just do the ‘ng.’ While you’re doing that, imagine an ‘ah’ in that space.

“The ‘ngs’ work with the palate. It’s like you’re saying, ‘Look palate—you can do something a little different.’ The position of your usual posture means that the palate gets less flexible, less ready to lift the way that it needs to for high notes.

“What you’re looking for is the same thing that I talked about with the chest, which is responsiveness. You don’t want the palate to be high all the time because different notes require different kinds of lift. When the palate is ready to respond, all of the vowels just slide into their spaces.”

Davis asked me to return to putting a foot up on the table. We repeated the exercises several more times. As we tinkered with this and that, my sound became more resonant, more present, and took less air to produce. I was beginning to understand what it means to apply too much effort to a problem.

“Obviously, to sing professionally, we need our voices to be reliable,” said Davis. “We can either try to be reliable by holding things in place or by developing the ability to feel when our bodies are doing what’s necessary. Your body is so responsive because of all the movement you’ve done.”

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I wonder what will happen if I “try less hard.” I’m about to go find out.


Maxine Davis segued remarkably smoothly from her life and profession as a singer and voice teacher to her life as a Feldenkrais practitioner and a voice teacher.

She works with a fluid mixture of people dealing with movement issues, professional and aspiring singers and people who want to “find their voice” at the physical and emotional level.

She teaches privately and at the 92nd St Y in New York City and at Chautauqua Institution with both students in the Voice Department of Marlena Malas and the general population, through ATM classes. Read more about Feldenkrais teacher Maxine Davis at maxinedavis.net.

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One of my long-time fascinations is the variety of expression possible when paint on brush is brought to paper by different hands. Years ago when I took a Chinese Brush Painting class, we studied pine branches and plum blossoms; I found the differences between each student’s application of paint to be startling and refreshing. In the class I teach, “Movement for Painters and Painting for Movers” (MPPM), I use the starkness of black paint on paper to indicate and track the influence of movement in image making.

If you paint, make art, dance, or act, you walk through the world observing people/animals/plants/buildings/machinery and how they relate in dimensional space. The experience of Feldenkrais® Awareness Through Movement® (ATM®) lessons lead into exploring paint, brush, and paper in MPPM. It’s a way to encourage creative activities to flow easily and spontaneously. In class we do not focus on producing artwork, but rather on exploring this process: how your relationship to yourself through movement lessons extends to painting on paper.

For someone with no art experience, the subtle alterations of oneself from ATM lessons, when applied to painting can open a vast world of expression quickly. Self-knowledge developed during the lessons gives confidence that is applicable beyond one’s movements. It is encouraged by the premise of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, that you are not learning the right way to move, but more possibilities in how to move/sense/think/feel. In our practice, each movement provides an opportunity for new discoveries, which helps relieve students of uncertainties in the next act – of putting marks on paper. Artists of every medium, including music, dance, and theater, can use this Method to stimulate their imagination and creative practice. Whether an artist is in a very productive period or is feeling stuck, this synthesis can free the process of creating to inspire new ways of working and new imagery to arise. For me, it’s like coming home - pure fun!

Curious? Try the ATM lesson on the following page.

Margot’s pastels are currently on exhibit at Sonoma Holistic Center in Sonoma where she gives Functional Integration® lessons. “Movement for Painters and Painting for Movers: Embodying the Creative Process” is sponsored by Santa Rosa Rec Dept, Santa Rosa, CA. The next session will be Jan 7-Feb 11, 6 Wednesdays, from 3:00-5:00pm.
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Sample lesson for Movement and Painting

5 minute drawing – draw the space around an object – an iron, a shoe, a basket, a bowl, any object

15-20 minute ATM
Throughout the lesson, go slowly to discover something new with each movement. Repeat each movement a few times to learn more about it, and do it more easily.

Lying on your back on the floor, sense your contact with the floor.

Stand your feet and lift them, bringing your knees toward your chest, observing how your shape changes.

Stand your feet, interlace your hands behind your head to fully support the head and neck, and lift your head, exploring how the shape of your back changes as you bring your right elbow and right knee toward one another, not trying to touch them, but sensing the folding of your front, and accordion movements of your ribs. Is it easier to inhale or exhale as you lift your head? Let each movement be easier.

Bring your left elbow and right knee toward one another. How does the shape of your back change? The shape of your front?

Rest and observe differences in how you are lying.

Try this movement in the direction of your left knee.

Lie on your side and bring the top elbow and knee toward one another and away, sensing the changes through your back and front, allowing your head to roll and upper body to soften into the movement.

Rest on your back.

Lie on your other side; bring the top elbow and knee toward one another and away, sensing the folding and unfolding on this side.

Rest on your back and notice your contact with the floor now, what has changed?

With this same quality of listening to yourself, slowly rise, sense yourself standing-sense your shape, your height, width. What do you notice about your back, your front? Do a tiny movement of folding and unfolding. Notice if all of you is part of this movement.

Continue to sense yourself as you draw the object again. What happens?

Please write me with the results! Margot@MargotSchaal.com

Micromoves.com
Creativity demands access to a state of anarchy where ‘not knowing’ is no problem. Without the willingness to be in that state of uncertainty it’s nigh impossible to tap into the muse. What do Awareness through Movement® (ATM®) lessons have to do with the ability to be creative? An ATM lesson, by definition, is an experiment, a process of systematically trying first a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, then, sitting back to appreciate the result. Does what you were left with seem to meld? Is there a sense of harmony or does the end result lacks congruence? You could be painting, or drawing, or writing, and the same values would apply. Reread the paragraph and substitute art for ATM lesson.

Children, unlike adults, are expected to have time and free rein to tap into unstructured hours where play is considered a form of learning that improves cognition and dexterity. Sadly, for adults this is not so. We have a social moratorium on play for adults, unless, of course, it’s somehow goal oriented. If it’s about competition, or exercise, that makes it okay. There’s nothing wrong with winning or with a healthy workout, it’s just that it’s not the same as having down time that taps into the parts of the self that crave expression. These parts of the self show up much less willingly when the rules are important, when deadlines loom, or when perfection is valued over all else.

Ironically, the same conditions necessary for optimal learning are also requisite for creativity: an environment of comfort, plenty of time, and a willingness to allow yourself to have some kind of free form relationship with the unknown. To hold lightly. By optimal learning, what’s meant is learning that is sticky, as opposed to cramming for a test and then forgetting it all after a few months.

Some people refer to accessing the muse as ‘being in the zone.’ Sometimes the access happens organically: you’re skiing and all you hear is the whoosh of skis on snow, no sense of anything other than making those turns at just the right moment. Have you ever been in such a state of entranced attention, doing something that makes you forget the time, unconcerned with things happening.
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outside the realm of your experience in that moment? Check out this clinical description of the state of flow and notice if it seems to somehow resonate with what happens when the muse is present, and/or with the experience of doing an ATM lesson:

“Flow theory states that while the zone can be experienced at varying levels, a phenomenological structure of eight dimensions describes the experience for individuals across occupations, demographic groups and cultures. These dimensions are listed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as: (a) clear goals and feedback; (b) balance between challenges and skills; (c) action and awareness merged; (d) concentration on task; (e) sense of potential control; (f) loss of self-consciousness; (g) altered sense of time; and, (h) self-rewarding experience.”

The article this is drawn from is out of a sports psychology journal, but it could just as easily be referring to any of the creative or performance arts, or to an ATM lesson. The ‘clear goals and feedback’ are even similarly vague: in sports, performance demonstrates success, but most people train for improvement, not perfection. In art, the goal is aesthetic, but nevertheless clear. It's subjective, but it either moves you or it doesn’t. In ATM lessons, the goal is to improve learning via the medium of movement, yet, this additional aspect of improving our ability to access a state where learning is easy is just as freeing because it can be applied to other areas of life and because it can be used to improve quality of life.

What is the connection between quality of life and creativity? Strangely enough, this brings us right back to where we started: thinking about how children are able to perceive the world in ways which adults seem to have abdicated, for the most part, in favor of a reality which has little tolerance for not knowing, play or learning, let alone creativity. Children spend idle hours looking at clouds and seeing the most amazing things. Children are still in touch with awe, empowered to see wonder, enlightened by fun without always needing to be serious. They see the beauty the rest of us miss because it’s omnipresent...unless, of course, you can put yourself in the zone of being present to what’s so obvious most people miss it. This is the function of ATM lessons.

There is a very unusual international organization called the Cloud Appreciation Society, started by Gavin Pretor-Pinney, from the U.K. Apparently, thousands of people on several continents believe there is value not just in seeing clouds, but in actually looking at them. He calls them diverse, evocative, a natural phenomenon with immense beauty that most people overlook. Gavin puts it this way, “I think, if you live with your head in the clouds every now and then, it helps you keep your feet on the ground.” Conversely, if you have your feet solidly on the ground, it helps you tap into the creativity that allows you to see the incredible beauty of the world around you, be inspired by it, and get loose enough to release the inner creativity that, unbeknownst to yourself, you may be longing for. The next time you get up off the floor after doing an ATM lesson, pick up pen and paper and see what happens. Consider it a part of the process. I can guarantee you may not get what you expected, but you will not be disappointed.

1 Athletic Insight, The Online Journal of Sport Psychology, “The Zone: Evidence of a Universal Phenomenon for Athletes Across Sports.” Janet A Young and Michelle D Pain, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Gabrielle Pullen is a Feldenkrais Practitioner who’s focus is the Feldenkrais Method as an embodied practice which helps diminish the aftershock of emotional trauma, grief and abuse in ways which promote boundaries, identity and creativity. She is currently working on a project for those motivated to pursue self-directed distance learning which incorporates ATM, guided meditation and writing as a means for reclaiming lost parts of the self and the adaptive capacity for lifelong resilience.
In 1976, Moshe Feldenkrais, DSc, presented a workshop at the Novato Institute in California. A young, independent scholar, dancer and philosopher named Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, PhD attended. At the time, Maxine was dissatisfied with the dominant perspective of kinesiology and movement science—it had a limited interpretation of how humans move through their world. She believed that there was something missing—respect for and curiosity about the felt experience of moving, the qualitative aspects of moving and being in the world.

At that workshop, I imagine Maxine was pleasantly surprised by Moshe's perspective on how to improve the so-called “range of motion.” Instead of isolating joints and parts of the body, Moshe's approach invited collaboration within oneself that resulted in seemingly magical gains in the quantity of movement through space and the accompanying quality of movement.

Inspired by her experience, Maxine subsequently presented a paper entitled “The Work of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais: A Radical Questioning of Dance Technique and a New Applied Kinesiology” at the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Recreation national conference in 1977 and published it two years later in Contact Quarterly. Maxine wrote, “Magic aside, Feldenkrais work is a living testimonial that the body always moves as a whole and that all parts are involved in any localization. If no one part moves in true isolation from any other part, then each part must either hinder or enhance the freedom of movement in all other parts” (1979, p. 24).

With her direct experience of one workshop added to her collective life experiences, Maxine was able to capture and integrate much of the depth of the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education. She wrote:

…[W]ith the Feldenkrais technique, one does not learn...
movements but learns how to move himself or herself. In any Feldenkrais class, one is not learning about the body, one is learning the body directly; one is in touch with the source itself, learning the ways of the body from the master teacher. What needs to be emphasized is that this learning is not done from the standpoint of the third person observer; one is not watching oneself, attending to the proceedings at a distance; what one is experiencing immediately and directly is oneself. One has the experience and it is only on the basis of having that experience that one is able to discriminate and notice change (p.28).

Twenty-five years after the publication of her Contact Quarterly article, Maxine and developmental psychologist and Feldenkrais Teacher Esther Thelen were admirers of one another’s research and scholarship. Certified Feldenkrais Trainer Roger Russell was a fan of both of them. He established relationships with them that helped with the organization of the 2004 research symposium entitled Movement and the Sense of Self that preceded the Feldenkrais Method Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington. Maxine was a presenter at that symposium. Esther and Maxine never met, though. Esther, a lead organizer and scheduled presenter, was unable to attend due to declining health, and died at the end of the year.

Nearly ten years later, Roger remains a fan of Maxine, and Maxine remains a fan of Moshe Feldenkrais. Now in her 80s, Maxine continues to teach, offer workshops, and write for scholarly and general audiences. Roger and his partner Ulla Schlaefke, also a Certified Feldenkrais Trainer, dreamed up an opportunity to spend a weekend with Maxine in her hometown of Yachats, Oregon. With the help of another Certified Feldenkrais Trainer, Jeff Haller, they organized a workshop with Maxine and a small group of mostly Feldenkrais teachers that took place last January.

Saturday morning began with three direct experiences of improvisational movement guided by Maxine. Sunday morning opened with the direct experience of an Awareness Through Movement lesson led by Jeff. Throughout the weekend, we listened, talked, and learned from one another as we considered what phenomenology and its qualitative examination of movement could offer to our understanding of the Feldenkrais Method. In turn, Maxine pondered how the perspectives of Feldenkrais teachers, scholars and researchers with diverse backgrounds could inform her thinking as a dancer and philosopher.

As we wrapped up our weekend together, Maxine reflected on how that 1976 workshop with Moshe influenced her style of teaching dance:

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That was just a marvelous eye opener to me. I should also mention that actually when I did resume teaching, and I remember doing this especially when I resumed teaching in the university, I started out my classes with variations on Feldenkrais movement lessons. Students were somewhat surprised at this, but also they really prospered from it in a lot of ways, particularly in terms of the way in which the usual dance classes were carried out. ...I ran into a student the following semester in the hallway who had been in my class the previous semester.... [He was] taking another dance class. ...He said, “Your class was really different.... You made us think.” ...I thought that was one of the nicest compliments I ever got from teaching.

With that anecdote, we circle back to the distinctive perspectives on the meaning of movement that Moshe and Maxine first shared and experienced together in 1976. What Moshe and Maxine offer the world is extraordinary. In 2014, desire for and curiosity about the extraordinary brought Maxine and sixteen others together to share space and experiences of sensing, feeling, thinking and moving. While we each had our unique direct experiences, we found common ground in our respect for the qualitative (e.g., qualia) as well as the quantitative (e.g., position, velocity) elements of human movement, and our dissatisfaction with long prominent reductionist views that assign special privilege to a favored body part (e.g., brain, muscle) or a component (e.g., flexibility, strength) of behavior. We found common ground in honoring the elegance, joy, and complexity that emerges from living as whole (e.g., gestalt), aware, moving humans.

Pat Buchanan, PhD, ATC, PT, GCFT helps female athletes create powerful performance. Her unique, holistic approach is based on expertise developed through over thirty years in movement science, education, and healthcare. Pat loves guiding girls and women to master their movement, get rid of pain, and play at the top of their game.

Help Share This Extraordinary Workshop With Others

The Esther Thelen Research and Education Fund, under the auspices of the Feldenkrais Education Foundation of North America, recorded this event. Materials will be available in book, video and audio formats in 2015. All profits from the sales of these products will go to the Esther Thelen Research and Education Fund.

You can support this project in several ways:

- Take a brief survey by January 26, 2014 and share your preferences about the formats in which you would like these materials to be made available (e.g., physical products, downloadable formats, audio, print, video, etc). The quick survey is available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/FVQGBNT
- Share this information with your friends and colleagues.
- Buy the workshop materials when they become available next year.
- Make a contribution to the Esther Thelen Fund and designate your donation for “Events & Activities” or “General.” Contribute online at: http://www.feldenkrais.com/content.asp?admin=Y&contentid=325

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Performing Arts

Music to my Ears

Marsha Novak, GCFP

I really enjoy working with performing artists. Back when I lived and worked in a good size city, I did so quite often. Since moving my practice and myself to an island, however, this happens more rarely.

Earlier this year, I was thrilled to be simultaneously working with two string players. One plays viola and some violin. The other plays cello. One had repetitive strain injury in her right arm; a car hit the other while she was walking and injured her left arm.

At first glance, these may seem like different situations. That said, my Feldenkrais® training and teaching has taught me that no matter the story of our difficulty, when movement of our arms is supported by our trunks, meaning that our ribs and chest are mobile, the strain in the arms and hands is greatly reduced. In the case of musicians, there is a greater physical connection with the instrument and their sound is typically richer.

When we started our lessons both of these women played as if their arms and hands alone were responsible for playing the instrument. There was a limited connection between the instrument and themselves. In both cases I did hands on work, Functional Integration® lessons, to help them sense the possibility that they could initiate the movement of their arms from their backs. I also helped them discover increased ease of movement in the chest and ribs.

Additionally, I recommended a little bit of homework; you might enjoy trying the ATM® lesson on the following page.

I also worked with these women directly with their instruments. Before having them play, I asked them to draw an imaginary “infinity” symbol with their instrument using their whole self. This task was performed on the ceiling for the cellist and on the opposite wall for the violist to promote the appropriate movement in the trunk to support playing. Sitting on an inflated cushion made this easier. Only after this did we begin to work directly with playing music, starting with easy “open strings” and progressing to more difficult passages, always stressing that “mistakes” are just variations that enhance learning.

Here is what these two women had to say:

The cellist …

“After a car accident making it difficult to play my beloved cello, finding Marsha has changed everything. Within the
Performing Arts

first session I was amazed at how she could pinpoint exactly where my issues were and create a depth of sound and control I had been missing."

The violist …

“I had to let you know that after just two hours or so of practice time to implement the flexible ribs thing, I played a Brahms piece for my professor yesterday and she could not believe what a difference it made in my sound. That was the missing piece!”

Thank you ladies.

Yes they were coming to see me about some pain- but my work is so much more than just getting out of pain- it is about moving in more comfortable and effective ways that help you to do the things that make your life more wonderful.

-In gratitude to Feldenkrais trainer Mary Spire for her advanced trainings in working with musicians.

Marsha Novak, GCFP lives and practices on Bainbridge Island, WA. She is so grateful to have found work that she finds so personally interesting and creative that also improves the lives of others. Marsha particularly enjoys working with performing artists and other “high performers” as well as children with special needs. You can learn more about her and her practice at www.movingwellbainbridge.com.

Sample ATM® lesson

- Lie on your back. Get an overall sense of your contact with the surface you are lying on.

Raise both arms so that they point toward the ceiling (or about ninety degree angle from the surface you are lying on). Your elbows are straight, but not locked. Slowly and gently reach one arm a small amount toward the ceiling noticing how your shoulder blade begins to leave the surface. Also notice any movement in your chest, spine or ribs. Repeat several times. Pause and rest.

Are your arms resting differently now? Do the same with your other arm. Again rest and compare.

- Roll onto one side. You may lay your head on your arm or place some folded towels underneath it so you are comfortable.

The arm on top should be long (elbow straight) at about a 90-degree angle from your trunk with your palm resting on the surface you are lying on. Gently slide your arm forward and return- again noticing movement in the shoulder blade, chest, spine and ribs.

Lie on your back and rest noticing differences between your two arms. Roll over and repeat on the other side.

Roll onto your back, rest and sense yourself lying with particular attention to your arms before you get up.

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Editor: Carla Feinstein, MFA

Executive Director: Bruce Day

Find practitioners at: www.feldenkrais.com

Contact us at:
FEFNA
401 Edgewater Place, Ste. 600
Wakefield, MA 01880 USA
781.876-8935
news@feldenkraisguild.com

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