

THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD AND THE DANCER

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Like many who enjoy and benefit from the Feldenkrais Method, I came to discover it through my love of dance. Each person who enjoys some form or another of dance probably has difficulty in explaining the attraction. As dance is a non-verbal activity, the words to describe it can represent only a partial aspect of the overall experience. The words which are often used — freeing, flowing, fluid, rhythmic and expressive — touch on the major qualities of the experience. Little girls in their first ballet classes and retired couples on the ballroom dance floor, all share this love of the art of movement. Through it, one feels alive, enriched, able to be "in the moment" and at one with some deep, primal, ancient human need. A range of experiences from a good aerobic workout to being "one with the universe" draws countless people to this form of human expression.

My love of dance began with the typical ballet classes for children. As a young teenager, my interest changed and I participated in classes in acrobatics and modern jazz dance at an excellent local Dance Arts Studio. As I was then living not far from New York City, the quality and style of teaching was influenced by the great teachers of dance in New York in the 1960s. I was later invited to be an assistant teacher in the acrobatic classes offered for children and continued my jazz dance classes throughout my high school years.

Looking back at these experiences today, I can greatly appreciate the tools which were developed — of good co-ordination, a sense of rhythm, flexibility and an ability to learn and be challenged by new possibilities. During my teenage years, dance helped me to develop a good self-image and helped to give form to expression of the many emerging and conflicting sexual feelings of adolescence.

In the schools of academic excellence in which I spent my high school years, the idea to make dance a career was not taken seriously. We were all steered to excel in the more academically-acceptable fields, especially the sciences. I was encouraged to apply to universities to study Biology, a subject which had come easily to me.

I rebelled against the pressure to study in the sciences and pursued instead a degree in Fine Arts, majoring in Art History. During my years of undergraduate studies, I did some courses entitled "Choreography" which were offered in the school's "Experimental College." It was a time of great experimentation on America's university campuses and courses which did not "fit" under existing Departments or were too "radical" for the times found a home in these alternative programs. The "Choreography" class attracted students from the Engineering School to the Philosophy Department with a balanced mix of men and women. Without much exposure to existing modern dance techniques, we created and performed dances in an atmosphere of inventiveness and innocence. Some had never danced before and without any pre-set ideas, were often the most creative.

Amidst the political turmoil of the Viet Nam war, the themes of our self-expression ranged from the global to the very personal. Dance offered a respite from the "heady" academic emphasis of a leading liberal arts school in the Boston, MA area. Our dance teacher was radically different from other teachers on the campus, encouraging us to experiment and find our own paths of self-expression. We were bold, enthusiastic and confident of our ability to give form to our inner worlds. Our dedication to dance activities, which was in addition to fulfilling the required academic activities, forced the university to form a Dance Department and two years after my graduation, the first Dance major was handed his diploma.

The lure of a possible professional career in dance began to conflict with the careers our university education had prepared us for. I personally felt the conflict very strongly and chose to take up the fellowship I had been awarded for a year of graduate studies in Art History at the University of Munich. Once there, I found myself more interested in what was going on in the dance academy and studios of Munich than in the university's lecture halls. The year abroad gave me an opportunity to decide to "follow my heart" and finally seriously pursue a career in dance. I extended my stay in order to attend a summer dance academy, an annual event in Cologne. There I met an inspiring New York-based teacher of the Graham technique who gave me the extra bit of encouragement I needed.

I moved to New York City in the autumn of 1973. Many of those with whom I had danced during my undergraduate years moved to New York as well. I started taking regular classes at the Martha Graham studio (often with Martha

herself), and found a part-time job, but it was at that point that I had an unfortunate accident. While preparing the floor in the loft I had rented to use as a live-in studio, a heavy wooden beam slipped and fell on top of me. I didn't quite realise how serious the damage to my neck and upper spine was at first but after a few days I began to understand that my planned career as a dancer would have to be postponed — or seriously re-considered. I was immediately helped by the chiropractor I had already been seeing. I wasn't sure what else I could do to recover.

I made an important decision then to continue somehow with my pursuit of dance and enrolled in a Master Degree program in the Graduate School of Education at New York University. At first, while I was unable to participate in any of the dance technique courses, I could complete the academic courses in Dance History, Dance Criticism and in Kinesiology.

I was fortunate that the Kinesiology course was experiential and was taught by a very gifted teacher, Andre Bernard. He had studied in the tradition of Mabel Todd. Mabel Todd had made a unique contribution to the dance world's understanding of efficient mechanics of movement with the publication of her book in 1937 "*The Thinking Body*". The method of teaching was mostly exploratory and we spent many pleasurable hours imaging and sensing internal structural and functional connections which had never been considered in dance technique classes. We learned anatomy by attempting to "feel" our own bones, joints and muscles.

In modern dance technique classes, as also in ballet classes, the student learns through imitating the teacher. The teacher will demonstrate a certain sequence; the students then perform it. Depending on the size of the class and the teaching style, the teacher may also go around and "correct" individual students. The learning takes the form of following an example, rather than of having an internal understanding. In this type of set-up, there is bound to be failure. I am sure that many people have had the frustrating experience of trying to learn a dance step and ending up feeling hopelessly awkward. I can recall having had teachers who were much shorter and of smaller frame than me and their particular rhythm and tempo made carrying out certain steps impossible for someone taller. And very few teachers know how to remedy the situation, except by slowing down and breaking down a sequence into smaller parts and repeating it. They can show you how it looks, but only the really gifted teachers can convey how something can feel. These are real problems in

the teaching of dance, but are also encountered in other fields where it is necessary to learn particular patterns of action — in athletics, sports, singing, playing musical instruments and marital arts, for example.

After my injury, I could no longer risk learning in this "trial by error" manner. I had to build a more complete image of myself, beginning with a clearer internal sense of my structure. In order to be able to possibly dance again, I needed to discover ways to balance and move which demanded less stress on the areas of injury. In other words, I had to find the mechanically most efficient use of the human structure, not just of my own. Up until then in my life, I had not had any injury serious enough to warrant this depth of attention to, and understanding of, exactly what I was doing. When one becomes interested in this process or is forced to do so by circumstances, new doors begin to open. I became drawn into an area of study which can easily be a lifetime pursuit.

I was grateful that I was able to find a few good teachers who helped me during these difficult years. In addition to the on-going classes with Andre Bernard, I had weekly lessons in the Alexander Technique with a woman who also had a background in dance. The Alexander Technique is taught by means of individual hands-on lessons. One of the goals of the Technique is to learn to direct movements from a sense of lengthening the entire spine, thereby inhibiting the unconscious ways in which we tend to shorten and contract. For me, it helped to diminish the chronic pain I was experiencing and gave me hope that I might be able, one day, to dance again.

But whenever I would attempt to return to dance technique classes, it was another story. I found that both the techniques and the teachers seemed to ignore all that I was learning about the internal understanding of efficient moving. Many of the dance techniques began to seem like abstract ideas for the dancer to try to conform to, rather than movements which developed from some "organic" source. One technique with which I felt somewhat comfortable was that of Jose Limon. He had been a student of Doris Humphrey who based her dance technique on the cycle of human breathing. The movement sequences had moments of breathing in, usually along with an upward, extending, reaching movement and of breathing out with a downward, contracting, falling movement. This made much more sense to me, but there was still something missing.

The Alexander Technique and the Mabel Todd work put me in contact with the profound intelligence of the human being in action. I began to be convinced that self-observation and the observation of others in movement provided a window for seeing and understanding the entire range of human behaviour at a very profound level. It became more and more clear to me that patterns of movement and action intimately reflect emotional states. The link between an intellectual pursuit and the study of human movement became visible. The academic/scientific emphasis of my earlier education and my love of dance/movement were beginning to come together.

While completing my MA degree in Dance in Education, I decided I would like to teach in a dance department of a university. I wanted to provide the kind of opportunity I had had as an undergraduate and to inspire others to explore their passion for dance. Once I had received my degree, I moved to San Francisco and began to apply for the rare teaching positions available in the few dance departments in American universities at that time. I had been drawn to California since spending the summer there at the age of 15. In the midst of my MA studies, I did a summer workshop with Anna Halprin at her San Francisco Dancers Workshop. Her work integrated yoga and dance in the "movement ritual" she had created and her ideas about performance in the environment were very appealing to me. I had planned on working further in that direction. However, the important experiences during my last year in New York city overtook all of my previous plans and I decided to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique.

There was a one-year wait to enter the next training program and I wanted to spend the time preparing. While searching for a course of related study I was introduced to a Feldenkrais Method teacher. I had read Feldenkrais' book "Awareness through Movement" during my dance years in New York City, but there were no teachers in New York at that time. After my first few individual lessons with this teacher in San Francisco, I was sure that I wanted to learn what it was that he knew. The contact he made with me through his touch related to some deep and profound place in me beyond the neck pain I was still then subject to. The level of awareness which these lessons provoked enable me to recognise that there was more to learn about how to take care of myself. I decided to study The Feldenkrais Method instead of the Alexander Technique.

I was fortunate to have had my first lessons from the teacher who became the organising director of the next training programme which Moshe Feldenkrais was to give, starting in the summer of 1980. Although I still didn't know too much about the Method, the opportunity to study "live" with the originator of such an effective method, was one I could not pass up. As Feldenkrais was then already 79 years old, I also was aware that this might be his last training. It took a lot of courage to re-arrange my life, my location, and my finances to take the "big leap" and land on the floor of the large gymnasium of a college in the small but academically vibrant town of Amherst, Massachusetts, where I spent nine weeks of each of the next three summers.

Learning from Moshe was very different from any other experience I had had up until then. After all of my dance training, it was a relief to be in a class where there was no "right" or "wrong" way to do anything. Moshe never demonstrated; he relied on each of us to find our own way with his verbal instructions. He tolerated everything, even silly questions. The instructions in the Awareness through Movement lessons were interlaced with stories, always with the point of illustrating the profound principles behind what he was teaching. "When you know what you are doing," he would often say, "you can do what you want." He managed to turn around the teacher-student relationship, encouraging us not just to accept him as an authority but to find our own inner authority. He knew that real learning takes place when one is not straining or efforting in order to achieve, but when the focus could be placed on the process. He believed that once one learned how to learn, this could be applied to all future endeavours.

I was in great awe of Moshe's intelligence and genius but he never made me personally feel inadequate. I felt totally accepted for the first time in my adult life. I came to realise, however, that I was carrying the results of several decades of feelings of inadequacy that were a product of my up-bringing, my academic and my dance technique training. I began to discover what it was that had been missing in my dance training. Although I was athletic, well-coordinated and graceful, I had often felt clumsy in dance classes because I didn't know what I was doing and I hadn't been given the time, support and attention to learn. So I had developed a self-image of inability and the idea of developing any sort of inner authority had hardly been mentioned.

This way of learning can become quite extreme in dance technique where there is a heavy pressure to conform to a particular style. The focus in dance

technique classes is very much on achievement and so little on the process of how to achieve, that very few succeed to become professional dancers. The successful ones are those who start out while very young, who are very slender (often bordering on what we now know as anorexia) and who have a will of iron. I found myself to be much happier amongst the variety of tall, short, large, slender, young and old students who came to study with Moshe Feldenkrais.

I was continually challenged, however, by my dance background which had formed a significant part of my self-image. I learned from Moshe that the self-image is so deeply ingrained in our brains and nervous systems that we are always acting unconsciously according to this image. For example, in modern dance training or in ballet, one learns to inhibit movements which are considered extraneous to the art for reasons of aesthetics or style. If I lift my leg to the side in a direction above my head, I have to inhibit with my entire torso and standing leg the forces which would otherwise bring me to fall in the opposite direction. Moshe had an extensive background in judo and, along with his doctoral studies in physics and mechanical engineering, he understood the mechanical forces at work in movement. When he would lead us through a lesson in Awareness through Movement, and ask us to move our arm in a certain manner, he would often have to say, "no one is stopping you from also moving your chest." I knew he was talking to me, as the ideas ingrained from my previous training were what was stopping me. As I had become so accustomed to the isolating of movements in dance, it was difficult for me to let go of that pattern.

When I was finally able to understand, my back and my chest became much more fluid and flexible and paradoxically much stronger. I learned a new definition of strength and power. Previous to meeting Moshe, I had believed that power and strength come from muscular development which could only be the result of hard work and discipline. Then I began to understand that good organisation, intelligent and skilful use of oneself was the most effective source of strength and power. From my previous experiences, skills were learned through repetition and discipline, not through a thorough understanding and awareness of "how" to do. I could more clearly grasp what had been lacking in most of my dance training. I finally felt as though I was finding the key to successful learning.



In the Amherst training, at the beginning of July in 1981, a principal dancer from the New York City Ballet came to have some individual lessons with Moshe Feldenkrais. Moshe related some of her "story" to us: she had suffered from pain in one hip for many years. Upon visiting various orthopaedic surgeons, no cause could be found for her pain. Finally, they decided to operate in order to sever the nerve which had been transmitting the pain signals. Since the operation, she developed more and more problems. As Moshe explained, now she no longer had the original pain but was lacking any sensory feedback. She was unable to feel when she was straining in a way that would lead to pain, so she developed new pains around the affected hip joint. She was ready to give up her career when, in desperation, she came to have a series of Functional Integration lessons.

An injury or re-occurring pain is a real problem for a professional dancer. As I was just beginning my professional career when I was injured, I was fortunate to be able to still pursue an avenue in which my love of dance and movement could be integrated. For a performer highly trained in one technique, injuries can be the end of a career. The only way to truly overcome an injury is through a process similar to the one I went through — a thorough re-examination of one's own organisation. Many dancers cannot or will not undergo this process and surgery becomes their only hope. Surgery is often marvellous and can repair injuries on a more or less permanent basis. However, there are great risks involved, ranging from ineffectiveness, to the risk of infection, to a worsening of the situation. It was clear to Moshe that this dancer had had an idiotic operation as she was worse afterwards than before. The surgery had created further damage — the loss of sensory information, so important to a dancer.

Moshe used this occasion to teach several Awareness through Movement lessons to the training group through which he demonstrated the misunderstandings surrounding the action of straightening a leg. A major belief is that those who have difficulty straightening their legs have "short hamstrings," the muscles in the back of the thigh. In many exercise classes, the inability to sit with the legs fully extended out in front or to bring the torso down towards the legs is often attributed to this one set of muscles. Moshe pointed out that the organisation of the entire back and chest is crucial to be able to extend the legs properly. He lead us through a lesson by the finish of which everyone was able to hold their foot and completely extend their leg above their head, demonstrating that it was possible to learn this in a short

amount of time with proper understanding and organisation. "Some people," Moshe said "spend their life at the (ballet) bar to kill their hamstrings and ruin their hip joints ... for the rest of their lives."

It began to dawn on me that in order to stay "in shape," classical and some modern dancers had to work daily to stretch muscles, ligaments and tendons which would naturally be much shorter. And given the opportunity — a two-week holiday or a prolonged recovery from an injury — these will shorten again. What this unfortunately means is that a serious dancer must work continually to retain abilities which are not natural to the structure and organisation of the human being. This forced me to question some of the basis of dance training itself.

In the training, I met other dancers who were re-considering their dance training, as was I. I came to know an older and much more experienced dancer, John Graham, who was in the training. We had actually met shortly before the Amherst training started and discovered that we had experiences in common of working with Anna Halprin, Andre Bernard and the Mabel Todd work and the Alexander Technique. We decided to offer courses together to bridge the gap between the sensory-awareness-oriented focus of the Feldenkrais Method and the more clearly-defined teacher/student roles in the dance/performance tradition. We called it "Gentle Dance," and structured our courses to meet for five-day segments at least five times over a year to a year-and-a-half period of time. We lead two groups through this process at the Coloman Centre in Germany and one group in London.

The courses attracted both trained and experienced dancers as well as those with no experience but a secret wish to be able to dance. As teachers we believed that anyone could dance, given a supportive and encouraging atmosphere. And dancers they all became, in the true sense of the word — fully self-expressive through the art of movement. Daily lessons in Awareness through Movement and the individual Functional Integration lessons provided each participant with an expanded range of choices and options as well as a greater field of awareness. The Feldenkrais lessons were also a springboard for further explorations in anatomy and kinesiology — the structure and mechanics of the human being in movement. This foundation lead to greater confidence as the participants gained a sense of control, timing and organisation of effort. They began to realise as well that their self-image is enriched by this process and that a fuller sense of self allows for greater ease

in self-expression. They grasped how this learning was applicable to life as well as to dance. Some of their comments like "you gave me back my bones," "I trust myself more," "I reached a joy in movement I haven't known since childhood" attest to this. John Graham and I learned through these courses that the Feldenkrais Method was an important sensorial, aesthetic and creative resource for the dancer and the dancer-to-be.

After the Feldenkrais training finished in 1983, I set up a practice in London. I often have dancers as students in my classes in Awareness through Movement and coming to me for individual lessons. I can understand their particular needs and areas of difficulty. In 1986 a dancer from a major New York modern dance company came to me for a lesson while on tour and in London. He was experiencing some pain in his upper spine and had had a lesson from a colleague of mine in Paris who recommended that he see me while in London. He demonstrated the movement of extending his head back to look towards the ceiling which was troublesome for him. I noticed that he relied almost entirely on the neck, or cervical part of his spine, while keeping the upper chest and back rather fixed. This would put a lot of stress on the vertebrae of the neck, probably causing the pain.

As is often the strategy in Functional Integration, I did not "diagnose" him or even share what I had observed. I guided him through several movements in various positions using my touch to illustrate to him non-verbally that his upper spine could bend and be included in any extension movements of his head. It is like a deep conversation with the nervous system of the student, a conversation which Moshe often described as "dancing with one another." When this man stood up at the finish of the lesson, I asked him to do the movement again which he had demonstrated at the beginning. He bent his entire upper spine to allow his head to extend, forming an even curve which distributed the effort more evenly over a larger area of his spine. He remarked, "That feels so easy. I'm using my upper back and chest now when I extend my head back." The discovery and learning became his, not something I had taught him or imposed on him.

This manner of teaching is one of the most important elements of the Feldenkrais Method, and Moshe, as my teacher, was the model. He often said "I am not really a teacher — I just provide the circumstances under which you can learn." It is a very self-empowering strategy. The tension between the "one who knows," the expert, and the "one who doesn't know," the beginner,

dissolves as both co-ordinate their intentions on the process of learning. Moshe often said and all of his experienced teachers agree, "I learn as much from my students as they do from me." This is a distinctly different attitude from most educational experiences.

When I first began teaching in London, I was invited to give classes in Awareness through Movement by a performing arts organisation The International Workshop Festival. Once a year, they offer an exciting series of courses in techniques and approaches which may not be easily available to performing artists in Britain. Many teachers are brought to London from all over the globe to join in these two weeks of an action-packed program. From the start, they included the Feldenkrais Method as an important resource for the performing artist. This association blossomed and since 1988 I have been leading courses at the annual Festival. As the link between the Feldenkrais Method and the performing arts became more clearly established through the help of the International Workshop Festival, more performers began to join the four-year professional training program in the Feldenkrais Method which I established in England. Now several Feldenkrais Method teachers with their own extensive backgrounds in theatre and dance also offer courses at the International Theatre Workshop.

Several highly-trained dancers have come to the courses I offered at the International Theatre Workshop year after year and I asked some of them to write about how it is that the Feldenkrais Method has had an impact on their dancing. I would like to quote from one of them who was able to write quite lucidly about her experience. She wrote:

*"Participating in a one-week workshop in the Feldenkrais Method changed my whole approach to movement dramatically. I began to find a natural alignment, eliminating bad habits which created unnecessary strain and loss of energy. Through a gradual process of thought and minimal movement, I became more balanced and graceful. Before the workshop, I believed that it took years of training to be able to move in such a fluid, controlled and centered manner. What was so clearly demonstrated was that with a week or re-learning, I achieved a sense of honesty, clarity and wholeness in my dancing. I felt strong, ready for anything. I liked and appreciated myself a lot more."*

Her experience, from the specifics of learning an easier and more effective way to move to the general feeling of grace and appreciation, illustrate what is possible for a dancer who is open to these new realms of possibility.

Another performing artist wrote:

*"I have discovered an easier and more effortless approach that years of technical study could probably never have revealed. The content of the workshop seems profound, resonating far beyond movement to a general awareness as how we, as performers and as people, learn, relate and perceive ourselves and others. It seems to me that this work helps to direct performers towards the infinity of our own potential and reminds us that our art forms can engage with issues which lie at the heart of human experience. Generally, this workshop helped me towards a sense of self that is spontaneous, joyful, emotional receptive and unconfined by fear — very much the way I would chose to live."*

Artists and dancers have the sensitivity which allows for a capacity of feeling and depth which they can, in turn, reflect back to their audiences. We can rely on artists of various kinds to enrich our lives with the "stuff" of life itself, recycled through their unique creative process.

The Feldenkrais Method offers the dancer — be they amateur or professional — experiences which can be both beneficial and enriching. The dancer can learn that there are many options available to them when thinking about and performing movements, and this concept liberates the dancer from the constant pressure of finding the "right" way. Through a process of guided self-discovery, the dancer can find more comfortable and energetically efficient ways in which to move — in their art as well as in daily life. The dancer can learn that it is wasteful and injury-causing to try hard to achieve by using unnecessary efforts and strain. Learning to listen to internal feedback signals enables the dancer to stop before the onset of pain and/or injury. By placing attention on the process of how to do an action, the dancer can find that the achievement is more easily obtainable. Real learning takes place in a supportive atmosphere where the dancer has time to explore and experiment and is not under pressure to be perfect. The knowledge and understanding which can result from these experiences gives the dancer a greater sense of

confidence and self-trust. The Method encourages the dancer to expand their realm of possibilities and their field of awareness, allowing them to be more creative and self-expressive.

It is many years now since I first set out on my personal path through the discovery of dance and movement. I explored many varied techniques and concepts along the way until I finally reached The Feldenkrais Method. Here I discovered that much of my earlier learning was drawn together. For me, it is inspiring to be able to share this innovative approach with those who find their life's expression through dance. Through my work as a Feldenkrais teacher I can continue to make a contribution to those working in this field, offering an opportunity for discovery of a heightened sense of awareness of both life and art.