

LEARNING THROUGH MOVEMENT: THE *FELDENKRAIS METHOD*®

By Louise Runyon

You bend over to pick up a pencil, and experience back pain for months afterwards. You have a car wreck, and years later are still dealing with the repercussions. You've been through extensive psychotherapy, but have not resolved key issues. Why is this, and is there anything you can do?

We all have patterns of movement, arising out of our experience. We break an arm and stop moving parts of our shoulder and chest and breath. We orient ourselves to the right in response to a parent who grabbed us by the left hand. Parts of our spine or a hip freeze from the trauma of surgery. The events subside, but the movement patterns remain. The *Feldenkrais Method* offers embodied, experiential learning, through the exploration of movement possibilities other than the habitual.

Whether working one-on-one with a trained practitioner or in group classes, *Feldenkrais*® students explore small, gentle movement options. The brain recognizes order and efficiency and, when given choices, can release the muscles from years of held tension in a single moment. People frequently discover that their ribs can move, for example, and suddenly movement is able to flow through their whole body: this missing piece enables many things to fall into place. Someone may become acquainted with their collarbones, and how the muscles around these bones have been pulling this person down and forward for a lifetime: when they feel their collarbones rotate and lift, the person has a whole new perspective. Someone else may learn that they have been “holding on with their eyes” – focusing so exclusively in a certain direction that their head is prevented from being part of their movement. These kinds of discoveries mean that people learn, in an embodied way, that they have choices.

Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) was a physicist and engineer who lived most of his life in Israel. He developed his method in the course of attempting to heal his own injured knees, discovering for himself the amazing self-organizing ability of the human nervous system. He found that when presented with different movement possibilities, the nervous system has a way of choosing the most optimal, efficient path, which over time becomes part of a person's new repertoire of movement. Feldenkrais became engaged in the process of helping others re-learn how to learn, drawing on the brain's unique ability for self-healing and self-realization.

In the *Feldenkrais Method*, students work slowly and gently, with small movements. Unlike physical therapy or conventional exercise, quality is emphasized over quantity. This approach enables people to come to a heightened awareness of what they are doing and how they are doing it, which allows them to make different choices, both consciously and unconsciously. Because the unmoving parts of ourselves are generally the parts of which we are unaware, by filling in these “uncharted areas” of our map we soon begin to move differently.

The method is practiced in two ways: *Functional Integration*[®] is an individual hands-on session, widely recognized for addressing both minor and serious muscular-skeletal and neurological problems, chronic tension and pain, and the motor development problems of children. *Awareness Through Movement*[®] lessons are verbally-guided group classes. Both offer new movement possibilities to the brain in an organized way, resulting in improvements in coordination, posture, breath, self-image, and sense of well-being.

In *Functional Integration*, an individual is guided through small directed movements by the gentle touch of the practitioner, while lying or sitting on a low padded table. Custom-tailored to each person, this process provides the most direct and personal feedback. In *Awareness Through Movement* lessons, students begin by noticing how they contact the floor as they lie on their backs. Invariably, by the end of the lesson this has changed: they lie more comfortably, more of themselves is in contact with the floor, their breathing is fuller, and pain and dysfunction are frequently gone.

Professional musicians, athletes and dancers have sought out the *Feldenkrais Method* to hone and improve their abilities, and to deal with potentially career-ending injuries and conditions. People with strokes, spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy have utilized the method extensively to improve their functioning. Individuals with pain and dysfunction through overuse, misuse and neglect have benefited, as well as people who simply want to move more easily, or age more gracefully. Others seek out the method because they feel alienated from their bodies, or because they recognize movement as an important part of their process of personal growth. The method has been applied in many other areas, including reversal of incontinence, bone strengthening and improving sleep.

Although Feldenkrais developed his work in an attempt to heal his own knees, he discovered that learning through movement offered even more than the gift of being able to walk again. He became, more than anything else, interested in the question of human potential. Like Feldenkrais, most people come to the method because of physical pain or disability. Very often, they come away with more than just physical relief. They find that if they are not always compelled to orient themselves to the left, or to stand mostly on one foot, they can also act in non-habitual ways in the world. Some find that issues with which they have dealt in therapy for years become resolved when they are no longer carrying them in their movement patterns.

We are designed, through the evolution of the human brain, to function exquisitely throughout our lives. Very often we feel helpless when we do not function, when debilitating injuries result from something as minor as bending over to pick up a pencil. Learning through movement, the basic premise of the method, helps us access that which is possible in our lives, to get more in touch with “how we were meant to be.”

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