

A VERY HUMAN PROCESS.

Interview with Carl Ginsburg

Carl Ginsburg, former professor of chemistry, writer at heart, now much in demand as a Feldenkrais Trainer, is not a dancer. The way, however, he touches people in Functional Integration and teaches future Feldenkrais practitioners establishes a sensitive and effective form of communication that has dance-like qualities. All of us who completed the First London Training in 1990 think with much affection and gratitude of Carl's calm presence, poise, and generous support.

At the beginning of an interview recorded during an advanced workshop, Carl talked about the early 70's and his search for a method to cure his long established back pain. Rolfing, Bioenergetics, Chiropractic, Osteopathic and other treatments were interesting but didn't really help. Even the gentlest form of exercise was no good:

I would end up hurting myself more. I had a sense that in a way my dissatisfaction with my life was related to having back trouble ... I wasn't doing what I really wanted to do with myself. I was teaching chemistry in a small college in upstate New York ...

I think, at that time, my real dream was to be a writer and I felt I didn't have enough capability to realise the dream in a way that I could also support a family. I did write poetry at the time and publish some, but I didn't feel that I had the freedom to really make a choice for myself.

Carl wasn't alone in being dissatisfied:

Actually we had formed a group of teachers at this little college looking for a way to "right livelihood", as we put it. We were looking to find work for ourselves that fitted our values because we felt that the institution as it was didn't fit our values ... We were looking to form a counter institution.

In 1974 Carl joined a Gestalt workshop at the New England Centre in Amherst, Massachusetts:

Through the contacts that we made, I got involved in this Gestalt

Workshop, which I had taken with the ostensible purpose of doing something that would increase my skills at group leadership. But of course, the Gestalt workshop really was much more about me than improving my skills ... In those days I was beginning to realise that I was a human being with feelings that I was not expressing, and I always tended to over-intellectualise everything and avoid feeling and making contact with people through that. It seemed that the things I was incapable of - to my mind, being in touch with movements and feeling, and also moving in a co-ordinated way - were simply beyond me ... In the end I began discovering alternatives to behaving in that way. What happened at the workshop was that someone who had studied with Moshe Feldenkrais at Berkeley offered a Feldenkrais workshop. So I did it. He would teach a little ATM in the morning and I found it fascinating right from the start. I would do these little processes and suddenly discover I had improved somehow. And then I did a weekend workshop with him and that was mind boggling, because now I suddenly saw that my intelligence with regard to movement was very stunted by my lack of development. There was a relationship between how I hurt my back and being underdeveloped in terms of my own sensibilities.

My fascination was that here was a process that could give me alternatives.

I CAME OUT OF THAT WORKSHOP WITH THE COMMITMENT TO FIND FELDENKRAIS

Anyway that process was the missing link... I saw that these movement sequences could do something that none of the other work could do, that I could gain an understanding and a learning that worked and was immediately practical. It was astounding to me that these simple movements could achieve that. And I said to myself 'Well, whoever developed such an idea has to be a genius!' Because nothing else ever approximated it. For example, the Krauss exercises I used to do had you do relaxation before you did the movement or the exercises. But It didn't prevent you from hurting yourself again because you could still move in the same idiotic way. The same happened in yoga. I didn't have a pathway leading to learning. But here I suddenly could move ten times more than before because the movement-sequences were so

ingeniously put together. Nothing I had tried before had achieved that.

I came out of that workshop with the commitment that I would find Feldenkrais and study with him. My family listened to all of this and thought I was crazy of course. But it was my mother who saw an advertisement announcing a Professional Training in the Feldenkrais Method, to be sponsored by the Humanistic Psychology Institute ... I think she was sorry afterwards... She didn't know what she had unleashed ... I mean a complete burning of all the bridges. I had started the process before, but by the time I had decided to go to San Francisco I was no longer a chemistry professor. I had arranged to get laid off from my position at Syracuse. So I was now an unemployed person. But you could get unemployment insurance in those days ... Of course I couldn't pay the training with that. But it turned out that when we bought a house we had an extra parcel of land and it sold two weeks before I needed to send my cheque. So the money just appeared... And with the unemployment insurance I had enough to keep the family going and to live in San Francisco.

My first reaction (to being in the training) was that everything Feldenkrais said made sense to me - and that at a number of different levels. It wasn't simply what he said about movement or anything like that. It was what he said in the overall context of the process. At the same time, I was convinced that I wouldn't be successful because I felt like I didn't have the skills or that I wouldn't be able to develop the skills ... for example, to touch people. I thought, 'I'm not even comfortable on the floor touching somebody. I can't even organise myself to be comfortable yet ... How am I going to develop the sensitivity in my hands that seems to be essential when I have never done anything with my hands?' My whole life had been spent in intellectual kinds of pursuits, being clumsy. Even as a chemist I was often clumsy and dropping things.

Did that feeling persist right through the Training?

No. Something changed. One thing in the first year of our training. Moshe was very clear about was that you didn't have to do anything in the sense of doing something in a direct sort of way. We did some exercises in the class where we just touched without having the intention of fixing something or making something

better or doing anything with that kind of intention. I had that idea in mind ...

WHATEVER THIS IS, IT'S SIMPLE ENOUGH THAT I CAN DO IT

In the fall after the first summer I went to visit some people at a Sufi Community. Two of the friends I had worked with at Syracuse lived there. They had a friend who had a shoulder problem, and of course Moshe had said over and over again "Don't touch anybody with a problem". They kept saying "Why don't you see what you can do for him". And I said "I'm not qualified" and so on. But of course, I got talked into it and then, since I knew that anything I did might hurt him, I did what Moshe had said, which was to not have any intention of fixing or making better. So I did it and he gets off the floor and says "Boy, that feels different!" It was a little shock to me but I said "Whatever this is, it's simple enough that I can do it".

I mean, if I understand what Moshe said and it had that effect with this person, then I did have the ability. And actually, from that point on, I always thought I could do it ...

I had every intention of setting up a practise. I don't know whether you could think of it as having a vocation in the true sense of the term. Remember, we had done this thing about "right livelihood". Well... this sounded like right livelihood to me. I was quite frightened to go out in the world without much support and present this new idea to people... but I was willing to do it.

The family didn't support that particular thinking: Well, here's Carl and he's a college professor type and he's a not very good salesman and hustler. So what's going to happen?

What did you do?

... Well I went to Albuquerque... My wife had cousins in Alberquerque. I stopped there and met a man who was a Gurdjieff teacher and a therapist. He was fascinated with Feldenkrais work and said "Why don't you come and teach some workshops in New Mexico". So I came back and taught two workshops, and people were very open and interested. I met a lot of people who said "Why don't you come to Alberquerque? We could use

somebody like you here". This man also had space in his little office complex. He said I could rent office space and he had a group room where I could teach classes... So it all fell into place. I went home and announced to the family that we were all going to Albuquerque, which the children resented... actually.

I set up the practice and the therapist referred a few people to me. So I had a few clients. It was very slow at the beginning... but the classes seemed to go pretty well. I taught ATM and had just a few clients for private work. Then, in the spring, there were a few more. I was on the radio, on talk shows. I did free demonstrations. I did some advertising in an alternative newspaper. But it wasn't that which seemed to generate other clients. It seemed to be the clients I worked with that generated other clients.

Within two years I had got to a place where the thing was working. But it worked in the sense that I had people who felt the work was valuable and who were willing to send other people.

THE IMPORTANT THING: HOW YOU CREATE THE LESSON

As an assistant in training programmes Carl discovered new dimensions

Teaching in a training group, I discovered the important thing was how you create the lesson. The lesson you would teach in an ordinary workshop or classroom situation has a lot of impact. But for the training group, you needed to refine and focus... to develop to another level... The lesson has to be taught in a more specific and more refined way. In a sense you have to think that the main basis for the students learning to teach lessons is their experience of your teaching. If your teaching isn't clear then your students aren't getting a good model from which to operate.

*What are the characteristics of your particular teaching style?...
What do you want your students to get from you?*

I have a sense that my particular way of teaching has certain characteristics that come across. One is that I seem to be very

comfortable in a situation where I can create a lot of safety for the students... That the students feel like they can make mistakes and ask questions and so on... That came naturally to me. Part of it is that I tend to feel I'm not so very special and that other people could easily have skills that I have... I suppose it was always hard for me to create an image of myself where it was something much more than I thought I was. But on one level I am aware that, over the years, I developed a lot of ability to be very skilful, particularly doing FIs. More so initially than in teaching ATMs. That came easily in the end although as I say, initially I felt I couldn't.

I found that since I had a very quiet style, students seemed to feel comfortable with that isn't flashy but at the same time students seem to like it.

A lot of the other trainers like to work with very large groups and feel quite comfortable with that. I don't so much.

I like between thirty and forty students actually. I could even work with a smaller group of course and be more comfortable. When I do advanced trainings for example, I keep the groups really small... Less than 16. That's my own personal choice...

ALWAYS STAYING IN TUNE WITH YOUR SENSES

What interests me the most is to do a couple of things. One is to give people the sense that the actual doing of the work, no matter whether you're teaching ATM or doing FI, is always staying in tune with your senses. That's a theme I feel very strongly about. Because, I suppose, that was a strategy that worked for me. One of the ways that felt comfortable when working was that I could find out what I needed to find out through my senses. I didn't have to develop a whole model of what I was doing in order to do it. Other people have other strategies. But for me that was the strategy and I see it seems to help people.

The other thing I am interested in a lot is just simply to see that there's a way of thinking in the Feldenkrais Method that is very distinctive. It relies on understanding that we're working with a person in a context - and the context is the person's life.

This thinking is in terms of seeing what the person needs in that

context and finding a way towards eliciting that for the person so that it becomes a process that's a very human process.

The process is about how human beings operate and how the nervous system is in a situation. I very much like this idea that we don't think in a cause and effect kind of way. That's a very different kind of thinking than the kind of academic thinking I was trained in.

As I say, from the very beginning, the things Moshe said would make sense to me. One of the things I was most attracted to was his way of expressing himself and taking and thinking about what he did. His way of doing was so opposed to the kind of academic training I had. It wasn't anti-intellectual or unintelligent. On the contrary it was unifying. It involved every aspect of being human. It was sensitive. It was sensory. It was also thinking in a direct kind of way. It was intelligent in the sense that it could be intellectualised after the fact. Which Moshe did do.

But Moshe wasn't sure that he was actually succeeding in teaching people to think differently.

He tried. I think that it was the toughest part of what he attempted to do... That it is the part of the work that we do poorest, as trainers... I've often asked myself how that can be improved and haven't come to a conclusion yet but at the same time I think that in the process of training, in asking questions and answering questions, a lot can be done. For example students often have quandaries and questions that result from their own language confusions. I know that some of the teachers attempt to deal with that by directing students into their experience again, which is a way of doing that kind of clarification. My guess is that I haven't evolved my own teaching in that direction as much as I'd like. But finding ways to direct the question into experience is a way of clarifying the thinking that I like. If you are tuned into the senses you see what the result is. You can see the results come about through the interaction and not through specific knowledge...

It's thinking from the senses into acting... It doesn't bypass the intellect so much as the symbolic level... the verbalisation. For people who haven't taken that step it's hard to imagine what it is. Early on I started doing that in the FI work and it would come about that I would act, that is touch, do something, feel, and then

realise that I hadn't any verbal model of how I got from the sensing to acting and back and forth, but I had done it nevertheless.

Could you put that into words later, with hindsight?

Of course. Moshe always called that the third approximation or the fourth approximation. By that he meant that after you knew what you did you could in fact describe your 'thinking' process... but that description came post experience. For me that is the beauty of the Method.