

## **Learning to Learn – Teaching Learning II**

### **Getting in Touch with Oneself: “Small”, “Slow”, “Soft” :**

by Ilana Nevill

#### **Learning or Not Learning – That is the Question**

Undue hurry prevents real learning. That was the essence of decisive awareness ‘lessons’ with Myriam Pfeffer - who holds that human contact is only possible when one is in touch with oneself - and with Mia Segal who talks about “returning people to themselves” and gets you to understand to what extent touch and spoken word are interchangeable in terms of their impact on the learner. Three of those lessons were particularly ‘uncomfortable’ and exhilarating at the same time. They revealed in a flash the complexity of a learner’s profoundly interrelated inner and outer realities.

The three lessons briefly described below are intended as examples of “the kind of learning which helps us to know ourselves” (Moshe Feldenkrais), i.e. gain clarity about what we do and how: whether our way of going about this matches our intention as well as the demands of the situation; whether the amount of effort we use is appropriate, etc. This kind of learning happens in playful movement exploration “where the accent is put...on how you direct yourself doing it”, with plenty of opportunity to discover “new and different ways of doing things I already know how to do” (The Elusive Obvious, p. 36 and p.35).

The ultimate goal of Feldenkrais lessons far exceeds those of conventional schooling and training. In Amherst Feldenkrais talked about “growth” as the gradual unfolding of the learners’ largely unacknowledged possibilities. “Self-mastery”, “the essence of human maturity”, is described in ‘The Potent Self’ as “that sort of unstable equilibrium that is abandoned in each action and recovered for the next. To achieve that mastery within the limits of ourselves, we must sort out the motivations that originate from the physiological tensions of our bodies and those that are grafted onto them by habits formed under the duress of dependence. Once we can recognize what we enact, we begin to feel in control of the situation and can preserve our peace of mind in spite of adversity.” ( The Potent Self, p.216) Paradoxically the ‘potent self’ is utterly spontaneous just because it is in control – and vice versa.

We were beginning to explore spiraling from sitting cross-legged to standing during the London Training in 1986 when Myriam Pfeffer stopped in front of me and asked “Will you turn to the left or to the right?” “To the right!”. As soon as I followed Myriam’s invitation to go ahead, I found that the right leg (habitually in front of the left) would get in the way. Recognition of the obstacle coincided with a somewhat unsettling inner debate: ‘What does she expect of me? ... Do I really want to get stuck and look stupid?... Should I please her by doing what I said I would... or rather find a way out of the obvious impasse?’ This triggered the swift withdrawal of my left leg from underneath the right. Continuing in the chosen direction meant opting out of the challenge of demonstrating to my follow-students how habit can lead you into a cul-de-sac. Myriam turned away to somebody else with the

comment “Well, that’s possible too...” The brief moment of registering disappointment in my teacher’s voice taught me a lot. By rapidly executing a ‘face-saving’ solution I had actively prevented my own and everybody else’s learning.

Looking back to many equally unsettling but wonderfully revelatory learning experiences in Mia Segal’s courses, two stand out in particular.

One day Mia invited me to lift her head while she was stretched out on the floor. Positively petrified, I ‘tried’ to overcome the uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty by ‘doing my best’ - and wasn’t in the least bit surprised when I heard Mia ask mockingly: “Why are you in such a hurry?” My completely unpremeditated answer: “To get it over with as quickly as possible” was more disconcerting. It forced me to face the undeniable, utterly confusing fact that although I had always considered ‘learning’ to be my ‘greatest passion’, here I was actively preventing myself from making the most of a once-in-a-lifetime chance of learning through feedback from an acknowledged master

On another occasion Mia gave me an opportunity of discovering how to cope with my fear of touching people’s heads and necks (a fear which probably goes back to head injury during a traffic accident when I was six) and also of understanding that it is possible to ‘endure’ the unfamiliar combination of ‘non-doing’, inner poise, and all-round mindfulness. She had me put my fingertips lightly on each side of a partner’s cervical spine. I waited in vain for further instruction to do something. After an eternity Mia asked: “What do you feel under your left index?. ..Are you afraid?” “No!” After another eternity: “What do you feel under the right?... Are you afraid?” This questioning continued until I finally got it: ‘As long as I am in touch with what I sense, there is absolutely no uncertainty, no fear.’ At precisely that moment of revelation there was a gentle little ‘pop’ as a vertebra somewhere in my partner’s dorsal spine realigned itself all on its own - a surprise to both of us and utterly miraculous to me...

### **What Kind of a Model Do I Offer My Students**

As a ‘teacher’ Feldenkrais never tired of setting an example of how in striving for “self-mastery” one gradually achieves inner authority and an integrity that also convinces others. For his students and successors he thus became a guarantor of the feasibility of realising the potential for ‘growth’ slumbering within themselves. “It is the object of our learning to remove authority completely from your inner life ... Inwardly the only authority is you”. Without that we would be forced to fall back time and again on the familiar methods conventional ‘authority figures’ depend on: “Using power, strength, violence, nothing else: pain” (Amherst, 10.6.1981).

Even today (after 20 years of experience in and with the Method) it occasionally occurs to me that what I am saying in a lesson, and how I say it, doesn’t really fit in with the ideal image of a person constantly open to new learning, always ready to encounter self and world with alert interest.

Sometimes my behaviour seems controlled from out of some hidden corner where all kinds of habits, insecurities, self-criticisms, strivings for recognition, etc, got established early on in my life. I now know that all this restricts contact with one’s inner resources and also interferes with creative dialogue

and honest partnership between learners – especially where they encounter each other as “student/pupil” and “teacher”.

However such uncomfortable moments of truth make it possible to catch glimpses of personal “cross motivations” (see ‘The Potent Self’, p.218 ff). The resulting, often highly revealing insights into the “chaotic entanglements of conflicting motivations” within help me develop empathy with others who are also looking for the end of the one thread which is really important to them at a specific moment. In that respect I will never stop learning with and from others. Anybody who comes to my practice is a potential teacher for me – especially young children for whom the knot of contradictory urges has not yet become as large and tight as for most adults, and who don’t yet make a distinction between playing and learning.

If I am inwardly thrown, I think of the honesty and humility with which Moshe once remarked: “In the early days, when I had the notion that I was trying to ‘cure’ my client, I did rather poor work. But later, when I realized the two of us were, in fact, working together to achieve an understanding of the situation, then my work changed. Only then did it become more certain” (Thomas Hanna, *The Body of Life*, p. 189).

Over the years Feldenkrais play/work has become for me a deeply absorbing and extraordinarily enjoyable shared exploration leading to surprising discoveries – especially about bridging gulfs between inner and outer, intention and action, thinking and doing, ideal self and undermining conditioning in the form of a negative self-image. At best this will lead eventually, but unfailingly, to the emergence of a more realistic and positive picture. My job as a ‘teacher’ is to present learners with ways and means for gaining, or returning to, a state of inner balance (“neutral state”). The skill with which I direct students’ interest and attention in the course of that complex process depends on the breadth and depth of my own experience. This informs both ‘objective’ observation of what they are actually doing and imaginative participation in what they may ‘subjectively’ sense when playfully investigating familiar and unfamiliar movement patterns.

In “The Potent Self” the “neutral state” is described as the essence of human maturity. Whatever stage we may ultimately attain with regard to that goal, the path Moshe Feldenkrais has charted for us involves being fully present in the moment and allowing ourselves to actually experience the main characteristics of “being in neutral”: erect posture, calm breathing, relaxation of the jaw, neck, and mouth muscles, natural fullness of the belly, a decline in paralyzing self-criticism, increasing spontaneity etc. Moments of deep absorption in the process of self-discovery and self-direction give the learners’ nervous systems a real chance of coming up with unsuspected new ways of making the impossible possible, the possible manageable, and the manageable easy and elegant - without consciously volitional intervention and effort.

### **“Human Contact is Only Possible if We are in Touch with Ourselves”**

What Myriam Pfeffer told me in a conversation about successful Feldenkrais teaching (Paris, October 2005) became the starting-point for planning a workshop organised by the English Guild in London at the beginning of 2006. *The Three Ss in Feldenkrais: Small, Slow, Soft* focused on the question: How to establish more friendly relations primarily with and within oneself, but also with a hard chair or floor - and beyond that with the wider environment (space, others, etc). This question was pursued by way of systematic investigation of possibilities allowing the three guiding principles in self-directed Feldenkrais learning to take on concrete, practical significance for the learner.

Since it cannot be taken for granted that exhortations such as “Do less ... half as much ... a tenth of what you’re doing... more slowly, lightly, gently, softly – without all that effort ...” mean the same thing for everyone, we had to ask in more tangible terms: How can learners get a taste, develop the skill of “finding the right measure” (Myriam), i.e. of detecting and then learning to reduce unnecessary effort?

Staying within the framework of familiar movement-sequences, we explored different ways of sensing even tiny changes in complex relationships – within the body, with the floor, the area sat on, space etc; sometimes relying on closely focused, at other times on more global, attention.

Interesting opportunities for practising “small, soft, and slow”, and occasionally getting a taste of the elusively obvious “neutral state” were offered by:

- Slightly exaggerating one’s body organisation in standing, sitting, and walking.
- Exploring a kind of self-FI, leading for instance to the discovery that carefully making the skin slide on one’s forehead provides information about personal preferences with regard to posture and overall movement.
- Playful differentiation of tongue and eye movements
- Occasional use of an “air-hand”.

### **Learning through Subtly Exaggerating and Subsequently Changing what is Habitual with Occasional Support from an “Air-Hand”**

In slightly exaggerating weight-distribution in standing and sitting it soon became possible to feel subtle but increasingly clear changes in the relationship between sacrum, back of the head, and sternum. The relationship of these three areas - to gravity and to each other - became a kind of concrete guideline and reference-point as we investigated questions like: Are the sacrum and back of the head vertically aligned, or slightly inclined forwards or backwards? And how does the breastbone react when I adopt the attitude of a slumped youngster or a stiffly erect soldier? Where between those extremes am I “at home”? What happens if I displace my weight very slightly from what I feel to be a “neutral” position into a less familiar direction? Similar investigations were carried out in walking and in struggling against an imaginary storm from the front, back, or side. This was further developed sitting on chairs in a large circle. The modest intention of displacing the weight onto the less secure sit-

bone seemed to trigger ‘anxiety barriers’ in some participants - simply because they could not do this with ease. In some cases such insecurities were accompanied by a sense of being a potential ‘failure’. Three strategies could be clearly distinguished during playful exploration of weight-shifting in sitting:

- The spine remains stiff; the sacrum, back of the head, and sternum remain in the same configuration; the head moves considerably from side to side.
- The pelvis remains largely uninvolved while head and upper body move as if the ribs were pushed to the right or left along a shelf. Here too the feeling of possessing a reliable, i.e. strong and flexible, axis gets lost.
- The pelvis becomes mobile; the sacrum ‘invites’ more and more higher vertebrae to participate, leading to extension of the weight-bearing side and slight lateral bending of the spine.

As soon as a relatively hard learning-aid (such as a thin board or book placed under the less ‘aware’, less ‘willing’, sit-bone) is replaced by a softly yielding “Air-Hand” (a minimally inflated ‘overball’, the size of a child’s head), the third strategy became easy even for those who had previously thought it inconceivable. The “Air-Hand” also served to support and pleasantly ‘bring to life’ all the parts of the body which normally have no only limited or no contact with the floor (lumbar vertebra area and back of the neck; the waist when lying on the side; sternum when lying on the stomach). Such a gentle ‘prop’ seems to have the irresistible power of suggesting adherence to “the 3 Ss”, resulting in *letting go* of habitual holding patterns and spontaneous functional adaptation to prevailing conditions - as something not only feasible but indeed profoundly natural for the human nervous system. As learning thus becomes more “organic”, no longer requires wilful effort, and does not get hampered by fear of failure, a person’s individual “toolkit of learning” (Guy Claxton) can keep expanding throughout life.

To acquire a reliable, well-stocked toolkit as a somatic educator, takes considerable time: to discover ways of making real (rather than imagined) contact with the self, gaining experience in applying what one has learnt, *and* finding out how nurturing continuous exchange with colleagues can be. Mutual support in continuous learning is an absolute necessity in our profession since we are all doing pioneering work. In a talk he gave at the First European Feldenkrais Congress (Heidelberg, 1995), the late neuro-biologist Francisco Varela emphasized that Feldenkrais professionals are already working *practically* and successfully with complex relationships with which the sciences are still trying to come to grips.

As a group of professionals seeking social recognition we seem to be nearly as much ahead of our time as Moshe Feldenkrais was in “single combat”. We are usually reminded of that fact when insecurities and secret doubts assail us: ‘Am I really any good? Do I really know enough?...As much as others?’ Instead of hiding such misgivings from one another, we could intentionally make them an issue at meetings or in articles, as I have tried to do here. In other words we could actively help one another to turn our imagined or real ‘deficits’ into launching-pads for mutually-assisted playful learning, as we envisaged in the Guild workshop in London. On that occasion it may have dawned on some that mutual

trust (including readiness to share all sorts of worries about ‘problems’ and ‘deficiencies’) grows alongside trust in oneself.

*Surprises* - as registered at the end of that workshop (for instance the clarity of feeling how spine and pelvis began to ‘participate’ when gently sliding the skin around the bone of a single finger) - constitute the living heart of our Method. They provide continually renewed demonstration that genuine learning tends to occur in moments of perplexity when we don’t get any further by sticking to familiar routines. If we help one another cherish and cope creatively with such moments, then with time we should succeed in developing a LEARNING-TEACHING CULTURE that truly accords with our Method.