

The Feldenkrais Method



Shelagh O'Neill

I was lucky to discover The Feldenkrais Method, which has become both a personal and professional practice. I have run a full-time practice since qualifying in 1990 (London). I live in Penzance and work mainly in Cornwall and in Bristol.

I always wanted to be a teacher and trained as a schoolteacher when I left school. For years I taught in primary, secondary and adult education, eventually moving sideways to do a PhD researching young children's understanding about communication.

My early teacher training (in the now infamous late '60s) was illuminated by the ideals of self-motivated, self-driven education. In retrospect my first weekend in the Feldenkrais Method made all that progressive theory live for me. I experienced that finding for yourself how to do something is a very different thing from being told how to do it; discovering a change is very different from being told what is different.

At first The Feldenkrais Method® seemed completely incomprehensible - I had no intellectual understanding of what we'd been doing. But after the workshop, back at work, I realized that my response to the

stress I was under at the time had changed completely - I was managing it much more efficiently. The whole experience resonated so strongly that I enrolled on the first training in England. At first, I did the training for my personal development. But soon I was compelled to practice and teach the work – it was completely involving and fascinating.

Since qualifying I have worked full-time as a Feldenkrais practitioner and teacher. The daily interest of working with whoever comes is enriched by opportunities to work with specialist groups such as violinists from the Welsh National Opera, students at Circo-Media circus school, a programme with Helen Poynor (Walk of Life) and work with Fiona Wright, performance artist. I am qualified as an Assistant Trainer and currently work on the Professional Feldenkrais Training in London, teaching aspiring Feldenkrais Practitioners.

I offer the full range of Functional Integration and Awareness through Movement in Penzance and Bristol and occasionally elsewhere, both public (open) groups and closed, specialist work.

My work is underpinned by my Qigong practice. I have worked with Master Zhixing Wang since 1990.

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The Feldenkrais Method focuses on movement, and yet is about much more than that. It is about the development of flexibility, of mind and body, of the person as a whole. Understanding the connection between living a full life and optimum movement, Moshe Feldenkrais was looking for flexible minds rather than flexible bodies.

Learning with awareness

A first experience of Feldenkrais is often of relaxation, the starting point for learning. From this starting point we use awareness as a tool and a process. Through awareness we widen our sense and knowledge of the self, and, amazingly, find that actions change as a result.

My actions – like yours - are started and up-dated by constant feedback to my nervous system. The Feldenkrais Method actively uses this process to reconnect me with the possibility of intensive learning I had as an infant, when every day was a step towards more knowledge, more mobility and more useful intelligence.

Updating and adapting

This constant process can be limited by age, and can be sidetracked by shock, illness or injury. Through touch, or the following of specific verbal instructions, anyone working with the Method can increase awareness, and the ability to adapt according to the demands of the moment.

We begin to solve problems better. We become more efficient – more elegant – more human. The impact of aging, shock, illness and/or injury lessens and changes. Life becomes more worth living.

Organising to deal with pain or injury

People working with difficult movement, with pain, or injury, often find this a more effective approach than more mechanical methods. Feldenkrais realized it is not enough to work just with the injury or problem: it happened within the movement organization of the person. The whole organization needs to be taken into account to not only help to heal, but to prevent repetition of damage.

It also helps people with problems with the nervous system, such as cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis, with aging, or with that unspecified

sense that life could be better. Performers use the Method to hone their skills.

Group lessons and individual sessions

Carefully structured movement patterns are used in both the group lessons of Awareness Through Movement, and in the individual Functional Integration sessions. Through movement, you remember how to know, from internal feedback, where you are, and what you are doing. You learn to use the feedback from your movement to improve what you do. This comes from developing your awareness of what you are actually doing, rather than from paying attention to what you want to do.

Coming home

Many people feel a “coming home” when they remember how to pay attention like this. Lessons can lead to real shifts in understanding the self in relation to the world, often feeling like an inexplicable pleasure. The experience of knowing oneself in this way seems to open up understanding of wider life issues, while overtly focusing on the practicalities of moving better.

And, like being more human, it is an on-going process. One which doesn't always have to happen within a Feldenkrais lesson or session, but which is enhanced by the awareness gained there.