

New Texas

A Journal of Positive Lifestyles July/August 1981 Transforming Our Intricate Body/Mind

Last month, over three hundred people filled the room for Moshe Feldenkrais' first Texas workshop, held in Dallas. Many were health care professionals, including M.D.s, psychologists, chiropractors and movement therapists. Several were pushed into the room in wheelchairs in order to participate in the movement process through active imagining. Word spreads quickly about a man with a reputation for "miracle cures." Dr. Goldman is in training with Dr. Feldenkrais and discusses her experience of his work and its importance.

By Kathryn L. Goldman

Are we indeed moving towards a society beyond anything we can imagine today: a society of persons who have transformed the very processes of thought and perception, so as to live with objectivity and compassion, with awareness, love, and intelligence? Sometimes I feel like sociologist Amitai Etzioni. When asked whether he really believed that society would change in significant ways, he smiled and responded "On Mondays." It was, of course, a Monday at the time.

What cheers me when the world appears most bleak are my own experiences with growth. When I knew no methods for changing my perceptions and ways of thinking, I could see no hope for the planet. When asked to write about my heroes, I had none. Society seemed rife with almost explosive discord. When I looked at myself, at my own feelings and relationships, I felt as though my mind went 'round in grooves like a phonograph record. I really wanted much more to change the way I thought than to change my external circumstances, for I had a gnawing sense that the key lay inside of me.

Since then, I have experienced much change within myself – and concomitantly, the world seems to have grown full of creative, capable people who are deeply committed to furthering the evolution of both individuals and society as a whole. People do not spring up overnight, like mushrooms after rain. It is obvious to me to perceive the transformational possibilities of the human race. Most students of social change still do not notice them.

How then can you change yourself? "Slowly," is my first thought. "By changing your awareness of how you move and letting this new perception of yourself gradually influence all your actions," is my second.

My thoughts about self awareness have been strongly influenced by the work of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, the Israeli physicist who healed himself of a crippling knee injury – and in the process developed a profound understanding of the interaction between our mind and bodies.



Author Kathryn L. Goldman and Moshe Feldenkrais

BODYWORK OR MINDWORK?

Often, we separate our thoughts about the development of society from our day-to-day experiences of what living actually feels like. We label the former "philosophy" or "social theory" and stick it in college courses which we don't expect to comprehend, enjoy, or find useful. We deal with the "stuff" of daily experience and the often uncomfortable sensations of living in a human body by going into therapy, having another drink, or undergoing "bodywork." Moshe Feldenkrais makes fun of the term "bodywork": he says it's for cars, not people. People, he contends, need *mindwork* that can teach us how better to use ourselves harmoniously, with all our capacities functioning as a unified whole.

Feldenkrais work consists of simple, unaccustomed movements that clarify your self-image. By changing habitual movement patterns, new pathways are created in the mind, and you begin to feel differently about yourself. While the body grows flexible and lets go of old tensions, you grow more attentive to what you can learn from your own feelings, rather than to what you can learn from others' words. In the process, as Moshe often repeats, "You make the impossible possible, the possible easy, and the easy graceful and even elegant!" By learning to use the body in smoothly-coordinated movement patterns, you begin to assume that there is usually an easy, relatively graceful way to handle events in life. When you operate from this assumption, many life problems become easier to resolve.

Imagery and physical movement are part of one continuum in this work. Each of us has an image of ourself in the mind, based on motor and sensory input to the brain through the nervous system. At birth, this self-image exists only in potential. It develops through our use of ourselves, through exploratory movement and play and corresponding improvements in coordinated intentional acts. In other words, our self-image is intimately connected with our movements in learning about the world. Movement leaves material traces in the brain – and thought of movements affects the muscles that are being thought about.

For an example, make a fist with your left hand, slowly, attending closely to the sensations as you do so. Now, vividly *imagine* making a fist with the right hand. You should notice some barely perceptible, but real, contractions in the right arm muscles. It is virtually impossible to avoid participating in this sensory-motor feedback loop between action and brain whether you move or vividly re-enact the same movement in your imagination.

WHAT IS “NORMAL”?

According to Moshe, “We settle for so little! As long as we can get by, we let it go at that. We can have terrible posture and movement patterns and habits which are distorting and damaging to our bodies *and* brains – and still be classified as ‘normal.’ Most of us use perhaps five percent of body-brain potential!”

In my own early experiences with Feldenkrais group lessons in Awareness Through Movement, I recall making lots of seemingly purposeless little movements and then standing up – and feeling as though I had somehow been given a new body. I felt lighter, strung together differently, with all parts of myself in balance. Walking felt far more graceful, and my head seemed to grow out of my spine and neck like a flower. I couldn’t understand the relationship between what often seemed like boring little movements and this sense of newfound ease and comfort. After a few lessons, the sensation intensified, and I began to enjoy the movements themselves. “I feel as if all the cells in my body are making love with each other,” I said to the teacher, in an attempt to verbalize the delicious sensations.

FROM PHYSICS TO AWARENESS

Moshe himself is one of those rare human beings who has created something truly new and useful by putting together a range of experience and learning that few of us attain. Born in Russia in 1904, he left during the revolutionary period and traveled on his own through war-torn Europe to Palestine. He worked in construction for years and went to Paris in 1928 to earn a doctorate in applied physics at the Sorbonne, along with an engineering degree. A master of the martial arts, he founded the Judo Club of Paris..

His work with the human body combines the perspectives of physics and the martial arts to focus on the interaction of movement and all other aspects of human behavior. His first book on the subject, *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation, and Learning*, was published in 1949. Ever since, he has been polishing and fine-tuning his methods for simultaneously improving the functioning of body and mind through altering established movement habits. In addition to the “Awareness through Movement” exercises (described in his book of the same name), he developed a subtle and gentle method for manipulating the body, known as Functional Integration. The practitioner’s hands guide the student to greater awareness and an improved self-image. Functional Integration has been successful with many people suffering from serious problems such as multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and strokes.

Dr. Feldenkrais’ students and admirers include violinist Yehudi Menuhin, statesman David Ben-Gurion, anthropologist Margaret Mead, theater director Peter Brook, brain researcher Karl Pribram, and Jean Houston and Robert Masters, co-directors of the Foundation for Mind Research. Practitioners of the Feldenkrais methods are not numerous, for the training process takes over three years and requires both patience and

dedication to learn. Presently, there are 60 certified practitioners (including Delton Justice in Lubbock as sole Texas practitioner) and approximately 200 trainees in their second year of training.

As Dr. Masters has said, “Feldenkrais is the man who has gone farther than anyone else, past or present in re-education the mind-body continuum. The practical applications have scarcely begun to be recognized.”

Your first lesson will probably be different from anything you’ve already experienced and from what you expect. It certainly was for me. It is difficult at first to see any relation between making funny little movements and experiencing profound changes in the way you think or relate to people. However, as I persist the connections become more apparent. I find both Moshe and the work alternately fascinating, exhilarating, boring, frustrating, and miraculous. But I keep on, and the more I learn, the more I appreciate its capacity to transform human behavior without ideology or beliefs. “The healthy person is the one who can live his unavowed dreams fully,” says Moshe. Want to try?