

Joanna Rotté

## Feldenkrais Revisited: Tension, Talent, and the Legacy of Childhood

Moshe Feldenkrais developed his influential philosophy and physiology of movement from a background in engineering, and a concern to remedy a knee injury sustained in a game of soccer. Though he scorned psychoanalytical approaches to the remedying of poor or painful postures, he had great faith in the capacity of the body, through the brain, for self-correction and self-healing. Joanna Rotté met Feldenkrais shortly before his death in 1985, in his eightieth year, and talked to him during a nine-week course he was leading in his own methodology. Joanna Rotté now teaches Script Analysis and Voice and Movement at Villanova University, outside Philadelphia. Her travel memoir *Scene Change*, a theatre diary from Prague, Moscow, and Leningrad, was published by Limelight in 1994, and her performance piece, *Death of the Father*, was produced in the spring of 1998 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

*A FEW YEARS before he died in 1985, in his eightieth year, I interviewed Moshe Feldenkrais on the campus of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he was conducting a nine-week teacher-training programme in Feldenkrais methodology. The path that led an engineer to arrive at the role of an internationally respected specialist in movement is useful to review. It began during his teenage years in Tel Aviv where he practised jujitsu and played soccer, and continued in Paris where he studied both electrical and mechanical engineering as well as taking a doctorate in physics at the Sorbonne.*

*An old soccer injury flared up, chronic knee pain began to set in, and it was to this problem that Feldenkrais applied his technical and scientific knowledge combined with studies in neurophysiology. During the Second World War he escaped to London, working as a scientist and conducting classes in judo. As his teaching developed, he included yoga-like postures and exercises to explore the functioning of antagonistic muscle groups in relation to gravity. His research convinced him that all the injuries in a person's life – physical, psychological, emotional – are captured in the physical body; and that this history gets written into the muscles and the patterns of their use.*

*From the Feldenkrais perspective, it is unnecessary, in the interest of self-healing, to retrace*

*one's past through psychoanalysis. A person can be released from their past, including past injuries, by changing their pattern of movement. This entails releasing habitual patterns of distorted muscular use (since injury causes muscular distortion) and then finding comfortable movement through awareness.*

*During the years of his work as a renowned practitioner, Feldenkrais assisted two kinds of pupils – as he preferred to call them, since his stated approach was not medicinal but educational. There were the extraordinary pupils suffering from multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy, on whom he practised a method of manipulation called functional integration; and there were the ordinary pupils to whom he taught awareness exercises for increasing brain use, based on his claim that the average person uses only five to ten per cent of brain capacity. 'What I'm after', he said, 'isn't flexible bodies but flexible brains.' It is these awareness exercises to which the theatre and performing arts communities have been drawn.*

*When I met Feldenkrais, his posture and carriage appeared comfortable. His shoulders looked relaxed. His gait was like a broom, kept close to the floor. He wore black cotton trousers in martial arts style and a blousey white, Indian-influenced shirt on a not tall but sturdy frame. On his feet were black Chinese-like cloth shoes. His own*

being modelled his intention: 'To restore each person to their human dignity.'

I asked him to speak to his practice of getting at the mind through the body: why this emphasis on using movement to teach the body to re-programme the brain?

Every actor knows the essentiality of movement. The important thing about movement is: can he walk? Can he stand by himself? Can she go to the toilet by herself? Can she see to the right and the left? Can she hear? In other words, as far as movement goes, how can you imagine life without it? Obviously, it's the most general thing and the most important capacity for any person. A person who doesn't move at all – if he doesn't breathe and has no heartbeat, no regurgitating, and no defecation – surely he is dead.

Your teaching is addressed to the average person, to increase or heighten his or her awareness through movement. But the average person can already walk and stand and turn. . . .

Oh, that's what he thinks!

Perhaps not well. . . .

It's not a question of 'well'. I'm not interested in anybody walking well. I'm interested in him. A person comes to me and says, 'My posture is bad', or he comes and says, 'My breathing is bad.' People come. I never ask them. I have never told anyone, 'You have a bad posture and your eyes are cockeyed and your head is tilted.' It's not my business.

So, the average person can believe that his posture is all right but can get to work, can improve their feeling about their posture. Your *feeling*, that's all. Your posture must change in such a way that it becomes to you a good feeling. Do you feel your breathing is as perfect as you want? Is your eyesight good?

*My eyesight is not so good, but my breathing is all right.*

Well, there you are. If you ask people, they'll say, 'My voice is not so good.' People complain. The average person complains. If the average person were feeling well, he wouldn't be doing any jogging. There are

millions of people jogging in America. Why do they jog?

*To feel better.*

Because they feel bad. They feel they're clumsy. And, by the way, their jogging is not that good either. There are few people who jog and improve. So there is a question about jogging. Is your swimming perfect? Can you swim as well as Mark Spitz?

No.

Why not? You're an average person.

*Insufficient training.*

Training only? There are plenty of people who train to swim and none swims like Mark Spitz.

*Insufficient desire.*

The average person gives it up! So you see, the average person is actually the most interesting person, because none or very few of the 4.5 billion average people are satisfied with their own being. But average men and women are too silly to understand all their problems. They have their trouble, and they either just keep it to themselves or they go into psychotherapy. Or they read books about holistic health and try to do something by themselves, or they go to practitioners of the dozens of different healing methods taught.

So the average person is actually aware that he is not doing justice to his own make-up, to his potential. He feels that he could be better. So, you see, it is not I who wants the average person to be well, to get his posture straight. I don't know what straight means for him. If I make your posture the way I like it, you will find it awful. I must make your posture the way that *feels to you* to be the posture you'd like to feel.

*Is that what you mean when you speak of a correct self-image for each person?*

Yes, each person has his own make-up.

*And the correct image cannot come from outside oneself?*

No, it cannot. Because if it could, a person would have it.

*Will there always be some conflict within a person between the society's image of what he should be and his own personally correct self-image?*

In our society, in our culture, it is unavoidable. But some anthropologists have found a very few, very small communities in the world where it isn't like this. They haven't got the big problems of big countries where the solutions are not simple.

*So your way for a person to reach his correct self-image is through action?*

Yes, because without action we can't know what we would like to feel.

*And you teach that one of the crucial factors contributing to a person's getting away from his correct self-image is the experience of pain.*

Yes, most of the problems people have come through pain, whether it is tooth pain, eye pain, neck pain, ear pain, stomach pain.

*Or social pain? Or pain from one's parents?*

Yes, emotional pain – deep insults to a child, let us say, who loses all confidence and does not consider himself worthy of standing on his own feet.

*But how do I know when I'm manifesting my correct self-image?*

Actually, to say the word correct is not correct. Can you see? Knowing this in itself actually helps you already to understand that you are not going to be given a series of rules: that you would have to hold your head like this, your hand like that, and your feet like this, and then you would be all right. That would be cuckoo, wouldn't it?

If I want to help you to feel comfortable in your mind, I must bring you to a state that you feel is correct for you. The state you are brought to must be one which makes you a more effective person with more direct performance of your intention. You must be helped to get to a state where you have a good nervous system but do not need to know that you have a nervous system.

For example, if you want to take a good look at me, you take it. At this point, you don't need to know that you have a nervous system. You only need to focus and press a sight button. But if another person wants to take a good look at me and he has a tremor in his neck, then he knows that he has a tremor and a nervous system, and he would go to a neurologist to find out what's wrong with his nervous system. In other words, a well-organized nervous system is one you don't know you have.

The nervous system that works healthily makes it so that whatever you intend to do – through your internal drive or as a reaction to something happening outside of you – is performed easily, comfortably, with elegance, and doesn't take five movements in order to perform one action. My objective is to educate the person so much about himself that he doesn't find any more fault with himself. But if a person sits like this (*slumping forward*), and if I talk to him for ten years telling him to sit straight, he can't do it. He wouldn't know what I mean.

So how does a person become aware? You can start just by stretching out your arms and looking at their length in front of you. Which arm is longer? So, you may say, 'That one's longer.' Now, would you want to make it shorter? Or can you make the shorter one longer? So, if I adjust your head: now, see, the shorter one's gotten longer. So, I may say, 'Look, if adjusting your head makes the shorter arm longer, maybe you actually hold your head to the other side all the time, and that's why the arm on that side is longer.'

Since that is so, you will find that you move your head only to one side and that the other side is stiff in the neck and doesn't move at all. Now, how come, if you're an average healthy person? Where did you learn to move your head to one side and not to the other?' And you may say, 'I always had one eye better than the other.' And I will say, 'Oh, yeah? Is it your eyes? All right, let's close the eyes and see.' And you'll find that if you move the eyes slowly to the stiff side, your stiff neck will move.

Now let's see what this man does if I tell him to get up from the chair. See, he gets up

using this side because he sits on this side. He can get up only on this leg, only on this side. So, I'll say, 'How would you get up on the other side? How would you do that?' Then he will find, in trying to get up on the other side, that he doesn't sit on the other hip at all. Because his head is tilted or twisted. He doesn't know that I can put this book in there under the side he doesn't sit on, but that I cannot slide the book under the hip he does sit on.

In other words, the average man in the street comes with a minor problem – like, he holds his shoulder up. When you look closer, you can see that it took a very extraordinary machine – a human brain – and circumstances of his childhood, and misunderstanding of his teachers and parents, to make that child into a being that found it was easier to be cockeyed. When he discovers that his posture is not good, he suddenly realizes the harm he has been doing to himself. His bad posture is because he has not been aware of how he has been standing, sitting, walking, holding himself. He has been cockeyed from longstanding habit.

*Let's say, for example, if one side of the pelvis is raised and so the opposite shoulder is also raised so as to achieve balance –*

Yes, it can't be otherwise.

*Well, does it matter to you where the imbalance started, if it started in the pelvis or in the shoulder?*

It never started in the pelvis or in the shoulder. It started in the brain, wherever or whatever it is.

*So you are not interested in correcting this part or that part of the body?*

I am not interested in correcting anybody or any part of anybody. I'll tell you something (*touching the tip of his thumb to the tip of his little finger*) – you'll find that this is a peculiarly human thing. No animal can do this. No ape can do this, because the ape's thumb is here on the side. Now, try to separate my fingers. If you cannot touch and hold these fingers together, you are certainly not using

your full human capacity, your ability of carrying out an intention to perform. If you go into a mental hospital and find people far gone with schizophrenia, you will find few of them who can hold these fingers together. The people who can are those who have got the ability to intend and to do, which means to act normally. If I want to get up, I get up. But if somebody wants to get up and takes a half-hour, that's a nervous system which is what?

*Weak.*

The average person uses about ten per cent of his ability.

*Do you think diet is a contributory factor in the development of a person's awareness?*

Certainly. If you take poison, it contributes.

*Is poison different for each person?*

There are some poisons that will kill anybody – a few drops of cyanide will do that. But the diet has an influence undoubtedly.

*Quantity? Quality?*

Both. Quantity, certainly. Quality, certainly. Try eating rotten tomatoes for a week and you will see that quality makes a difference.

*There's a saying in China that at the moment of birth it is already too late to begin childhood education.*

That is certainly true. Because when children come out into the world, they can already hear. In a few hours or a few days, they can already see. They can already sweat and cry. Where did they learn that? They learned it in the womb. Otherwise, how could a baby breathe coming out? He's in water. He comes out and then on the first contact with air he makes the primal cry and exhales and takes in air. Obviously he has already been having training to perform that.

In fact, we now know that children are actually taking into the lungs some amniotic liquid and regurgitating it. When they come out, the water is thrown out and the air is then taken in, and that starts respiration. The lungs have learned elasticity, everything has

been formed, there is already haemoglobin, and the blood is coming through absorbing oxygen and exuding carbon dioxide.

*What about artistic awareness or consciousness? How is that developed?*

You know, the eunuchs were known to have made a nice choir, with strong but feminine voices. Sopranos. And their musical compositions were Vatican property and were never published. So nobody knew the music. But we know that Liszt was in the Vatican and he listened, and he went home and wrote down the music. It's said that Mozart could do the same thing.

So some few people can listen to a long drawn-out hymn or service or composition and then go home and write it down in musical notation. But many people can't even remember a tune, or can only remember da-da-da-da of the whole Ninth Symphony. But there was that extraordinary musical awareness of a Beethoven who could write when he was deaf. Of course, consciousness and awareness and being awake are three different things.

*How does talent enter into this? Do you consider talent to be evidence of an inborn inclination or of a developed ability?*

If you can discover talent at the age of three days and tell me that *this* child is going to be a general and that *that* child is going to be a mathematician, then I will know what talent means. We talk about talent once it's there, not before. No one could have said fifty or even twenty years ago that I would be doing awareness through movement training or giving lectures. So, is this a talent? What do we mean by a talent? Somebody is a talented musician. At what point did he become a talented musician?

*I'm uncertain of the moment, but an attraction to music must have always been there. The talented musician must have originally been drawn to music as a form of expression. He must have liked music and felt comfortable with it and that he could develop a facility for it.*

When does someone discover that?

*When is the talent called a talent? It seems that would be an acknowledgement coming from the outside. Someone knowledgeable sees the talent and names it.*

Can you destroy it?

*Probably not entirely.*

Talent is a word that grown-up people have found to describe a quality once it's there and everyone knows that it's there. Therefore, talent is not an inborn thing.

*Are you saying that talent comes from what a child is exposed to in the environment?*

It's not an inborn thing. The only inborn thing is tissues and a brain that's capable of learning. The talent is inculcated. You cannot be a talented pianist without ten or twenty years of playing music at a piano. You can only say that to be talented at something you must be interested in it. Because if you are not interested in music, you won't have the patience or won't find the time to practice some ten hours every day as many talented pianists need to do.

*Is it conceivable that someone could grow up in some backward country without any musical instrument and at the age of sixteen go out and look for a piano? Or do you think for a person to become a musician there has to be already a piano in the home when he's growing up?*

If somebody hadn't learned Chinese before the age of sixteen, he wouldn't ever learn it unless he were living in China or needed to know the language. It's the same thing with the piano. If an Eskimo was born in an igloo and never heard of or saw a piano in his life, and then you brought him at the age of sixteen to the Juilliard, you would see that no teacher there would undertake to teach him. The teacher would think it's a waste of time. And why should the Eskimo play the piano?

*But if he were seven years old, would it be different?*

No. For an Eskimo to be brought to the Juilliard at the age of seven, it's too late. An

Eskimo child being brought to the Juilliard and seeing these people fiddling, and those others playing brass, and others drumming, he would just be driven crazy. He would find himself running away, saying, 'They're a band of mad people.'

Yet he could be very musical. He could detect the movement of a white bear on the ice that all of Juilliard would never detect. He wouldn't be called a talented musician, yet if he'd been born here he could have been a musician. And by the way, if you think about this a little bit, does a talented musician also not have to have somewhere in his guts a desire for the public to hear him? And why does a talented musician want a public? Why can't he learn to play the piano and go to the seashore and play for himself?

*He desires the performance. He wants that public contact.*

A talented pianist must have an audience that can understand that talented pianist. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to sustain the capacity to practise for ten years. For what? And who would build pianos if there were not a public interested in hearing the piano? When somebody can play so that the public is interested, he then has the potential to develop into a genius – and be given a lot of money, and so on. A pianist needs that.

*And he needs an audience.*

In an Eskimo child there is no sense of that need for an understanding public. He would not comprehend what you wanted for him with the piano, why he should torture himself ten hours a day – unless you introduce him to the public, and educate him, and make him into a western child. At seven years, it's too late. You will have to bring in a lot of psychiatrists, and they would not know what to do with the child.

*What do you think of the Hindu concept of karma, of a former life having some influence on what a person becomes in this life?*

I don't believe it. I don't deal with things I don't know. I don't go into things that are impossible to know, that I have no means of knowing. I know about as much as you do about things that are impossible to know. I also know as much as people who claim that they know, but they don't know either.

*What about the effects of heredity?*

Heredity can be quite well defined. Heredity means that if you were born in Japan to natives of that country, then your eyes are Japanese.

*You don't mean that heredity is just physiological?*

Not only physiological. The tissues of the brain are also involved. There is the quality of the brain: the way it can learn, how much it can learn, what sort of retention it has. That's all heredity.

*What role do parents play in who the child becomes?*

What can I say? If we didn't have parents, we would be all right. But if you think about it, most parents are actually much better than not. They have two or three cuckoo things that they do to their children, things they do wrongly. And generally they don't do them wrongly intentionally. They themselves are probably a bit cuckoo, having been wronged by somebody else before.

How many wrong things can a mother do to a child? Or tell a child? 'Be careful', or 'Don't do that, you silly', or something. She can have fifteen faults in her behaviour. But do you know what it takes to bring a person to the age of twenty? How many sleepless nights did she have with that baby having its thumb there, its teeth, diarrhoea, and childhood diseases? And she managed to get it to school and clothe it. Even if you get bad parents, the badness is one per cent of what they do good. But that one per cent can be just like putting a spoonful of sand in a Rolls Royce. The spoonful of sand can spoil the Rolls Royce. That's parents.