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TITLE: Is the FM® an autonomous profession or not?

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At the annual conference in Washington DC last August, some 30 colleagues met for one day to debate this issue: **Is the FM an autonomous profession or not**. Practitioners, trainers, assistant-trainers and close-to-be graduates came from a variety of professions and different degrees of experience with the FM. Many of the political leaders of our community were present, but as individuals, not as representatives. Participants spent their day travelling through a process of group facilitation that included an introductory presentation by myself to situate the context, a written individual questionnaire to warm up the terrain, many short sequences of an ATM spread along the day to punctuate, aerate and inspire the process, small group discussions followed by a large group session to share the insights. In four smaller groups, we had a chance alternately to take “sides”: the side of Feldenkrais being an autonomous profession, the “side” of Feldenkrais being a method included in other professions, and the side to side discussion of what we want for our future. Though the process was clearly structured, I actually designed it as a non-linear one, setting ourselves up for unpredictable results along the poles of a few strange attractors. There were no outcomes to produce, no “butcher paper” to plaster the walls with, no need to agree, no recommendation or proposals to pass on, just a process serving the people present and the willingness to spend the day with other colleagues, their ideas, feelings, movements, words. My belief is that if some of us make a few steps in clarification and discussion, the whole community will benefit. Believe it or not, though it was a Feldenkrais meeting, there was no lying down on the floor. But we did do six 10 minute sequences of an ATM, in sitting and standing and walking. Despite the fact that most of the meeting was done in sitting and even if this event was scheduled at the end of a long stretch of workshops and meetings, the participants’ evaluations were in general enthusiastic, and I feel “mission accomplished”. Surely, since the day was an event and not a formal assembly, I will not impose on myself or on you readers, a formal report. You had to be there to experience and believe it. But surely, like some other colleagues, I can share some of my own insights and satisfaction.

“We were led gently and clearly through an extremely precise and complex process”.

“I became clearer about the issues”.

“The weaving of ATM throughout the day was dynamically relevant, somatically refreshing and metaphorically inspiring.”

“My own thinking was “poked” and I had to respond with a slightly new logic and fresh emotions”.

This topic of Feldenkrais as an autonomous profession or not was identified early on in the planning stage of the conference, between Donna Blank, program Coordinator, Andrea Wiener, conference coordinator and myself as foreseen facilitator. Together we thought that we could give the community a chance to approach hotter issues, disagreement, conflict perhaps, but with some form of process and a chance for inclusion of differences within commitment for respect.

As much as Moshe used to ramp and rave about not mixing Feldenkrais with other modalities, a large amount of the practice of Feldenkrais these days is tied to other modalities of intervention, whether in the domains of health for therapy and treatment, in sports for coaching and training, in the Arts for training and creating, or in education for learning virtually anything including academic topics. Actually some colleagues seem to think that the FM does and should not stand alone and needs to be set free to be included if not combined with some other profession. Surely some colleagues are convinced that if the FM stands alone as a profession, the training programs should be significantly different.

Meanwhile, a not insignificant amount of practitioners have embraced the FM as their unique professional identity and seem to earn quite a good living doing just and only and successfully that. Many believe that we are just getting started to be recognized. For some of our colleagues, the autonomy of the FM including the protection of the service marks is what makes it legally and politically possible to have a profession. For them, the autonomy and the specificity of the FM is challenged every time it is mixed, billed, complemented by another profession.

So the debate seemed to be set: we argued for one side and for the other and shared points of view.

A ROUNDABOUT MODEL OF THE FM AND OTHER DISCIPLINES **-Fig. 1-**

You will find in fig. 1 a visual model that I presented in the opening of the debate day. I have developed this visual model over the last years to represent the dynamic relation of professions and disciplinary fields with the FM of somatic education. This image appeared to me as I recalled my first experience of driving a standard shift car. The car was a 2CV (a Citroen deux-chevaux) and the setting was in Paris in my early twenties. I had landed a few hours before, and there I was, driving in Paris, trying to find this hotel in the center of town. First thing I knew, I was entering the famous roundabout of *Place de l'étoile*, with the *Arc de triomphe* in the middle. Getting in the “glorietta” was easy, so easy that I found myself very close to the Arc de triomphe, with 10 layers of cars around me. Due to this strict rule of priority to the right, everyone let me in, and in, and in! Getting out of the loop, in order to find the exact boulevard that I needed to aim for took me 7 or 8 loops of very aggressive driving with no priority. An intense experience punctuated by lots of jerks from the poor handling of the clutch and wrong shifting –end of the metaphor applied to my Feldenkrais process!.

When we arrive to the FM, we have a certain personal need, a certain background, a certain professional interest perhaps. This is represented in fig. 1, as I listed the “boulevards” of the roundabout leading to the FM, a sample of 8 domains surrounding the FM of somatic education. These domains can be at the origin of our passage at the roundabout. They can also be eventually the fields of application of our Feldenkrais teaching. Let us consider a few examples (in fig. 1, refer to A, B, C, D).

Practitioner A was originally a physical therapist, and after the FM training, she pursued this PT career. She came to the roundabout, and left to go back to her original domain. She likes to attend post-graduate workshops to refresh her understanding of the FM, but basically, she happily

returns to a busy successful PT practice in the medical milieu. Practitioner B was doing massage as a profession but as the training progressed he confirmed his interest in spirituality and ended up devoting his practice to help people in their meditation process with the FM. Practitioner C was a psychotherapist before the FM training, and now she is a sculptor, using Feldenkrais ideas for the sake of art. Practitioner D was a physical education teacher, and not unlike my personal story of driving in Paris, he stays in the roundabout place as he is now a practitioner, teaching at the roundabout place. Actually he is considering to become an assistant-trainer, which is another way of staying in the middle of it all! Voilà for the model. Obviously in all cases, the FM is triumphing!

FOR THE FM TO BE AN AUTONOMOUS PROFESSION OR NOT

Back to the day event at the annual meeting, when we met in large group meeting at the end of our day, we had considered many many sides of the question. The ATM weaved throughout the day was interesting on that respect. We have explored sitting to standing, standing on one and the other leg, looking around and behind and up, standing on crossed legs, and again looking around and behind and up, walking and looking around and behind with crossed legs or parallel legs, walking in pairs and finally looking forward. Obviously this process can be considered as metaphorical. I myself would rather submit that we experienced a somatic basis for the movement of the debate.

In the end some points did emerge that may be worth reporting here. Many aspects of our growth point to the fact that we ARE an autonomous profession. We have our own models and methods, our standards of practice, our service marks, our organizations. In the overall field of somatic education, though we share many of the objectives with other methods, we have our own identity mainly in the pedagogy. Meanwhile, the question does arise though of what it means for any practice to be called a profession. Is it enough to have income out of an activity to be a professional? Well if this is the case, many colleagues are not fully professionals, as their revenue does not come from their Feldenkrais practice –and they might wish it to be otherwise. Furthermore, if we have a profession, we need a definition not only of our overall method, but a precise definition of what ATM and FI are all about. Saying that an ATM is a lesson of the FM if it was invented by Moshe himself is just not enough to create a profession. Definitely, if we want a profession, we have to move towards more explicit descriptions. When Moshe was teaching, whatever HE did was stamped “Feldenkrais”. But we need to move on “post-mosheanism” to define our profession for ourselves. In that process we may find out that in our practices, some of what we do belongs to the Feldenkrais root, and some not! But who will say so?

On the other hand or on the other end, the FM is so often included, not to mention billed in other domains that we have to wonder about our autonomy. But is it not in all these other professions that the clientele is anyway? Moshe himself in Amherst was saying that he expected everyone to improve on what they were doing. Rolfers would do Rolfing but in another way, therapist would do therapy but in another way, computer programmers, philosophers, managers, everyone would improve, and only a portion of the graduates would do the FM itself. These would be people who stayed with the method and only the method, people who stayed around him and mostly him and some of his assistants. These days, one might consider actually that we should not offer professional training but training FOR professionals who include the FM in their other practices. Is it not ambitious anyway, not to say naive, to think that we can train someone to be an

autonomous professional of an autonomous profession in 160 days (counting the breaks!). Indeed training programs are at the core of this issue of our autonomous or not profession.

Obviously, our current situation reflects many options. We know that some options are mutually exclusive. We know also that some of our choices have consequences on the choices of other colleagues. What we don't know is the exact profile of practice, combination of practices, percentage of income etc. of our current membership. A collection of data could be included in the annual registration to the Guild, as well as a scientific survey in the membership. Then, we could stop worrying on the basis of impressions, and perhaps worry or not on the basis of facts!

What we don't have is a terrain for the "explicitation" and discussion of our own profession in our own terms. Most of our communications, whether in the Feldenkrais Journal, in Sensability, in Feldyforum, have to do with applications of the FM to this and that, importations of other domains, from this and that. This is turning into a malaise for me. We need to recognize the phenomenon and address it with determination. We need to put focus on our own work, on our own definitions, on our own methods, for example, what is it that makes an ATM an ATM lesson? It's not enough to say that it was a lesson developed and taught by Moshe Feldenkrais!

A DISTINCTION EMERGING FROM THE DEBATE:

Teaching the FM, or teaching with the FM

As the debate day unfolded, as I was witnessing the small group discussions and during the larger group sharing, an interesting distinction started to emerge: in our practices, are we teaching the FM, or are we not teaching something else with the FM. That simple distinction could perhaps help up to understand much of our professional quest not to speak of the marketing of our services and the autonomy of our profession. Actually that distinction started appearing to me on the day prior to the workshop day, as I attended a panel devoted to applications of the FM in sports. I listened to colleagues reporting on their own process of learning how to golf, how to run, how to ski, in order to teach the FM to these groups. I know for myself that for seven years *at L'Université du Québec à Montréal*, I have attempted to teach the FM to dancers, with varying degrees of success. I was not always clear myself on how they would use the lessons, and they themselves were not always clear about the use of the lessons for them, though most of the time the bridge happened. Yet I always stayed away from teaching dance as such. Partly because that was not my training or mandate, partly because I wanted to present the FM and not dance as such. I also happen to believe that the FM is a non-specific learning process. I have gone through similar experiences, presenting the FM to physical therapists, psychotherapists, physical educators, painters, actors, and more recently tango dancers and tango teachers. Do I intend to teach tango with a Feldenkrais twist or do I want to present the FM to tango dancers? That is the question.

I now think that it is crucial for all of us to ponder this distinction: am I teaching the FM to this clientele of people, in order for THEM to make use of it in their own domains of interest? Or am I teaching skills and competence of a specific domain using Feldenkrais ideas, Feldenkrais pedagogy, Feldenkrais techniques (if there is such a thing!). For example are you teaching a back

class using the FM or are you teaching a Feldenkrais class for people with back trouble. Are you teaching a Feldenkrais class to golfers, or are you teaching golf using the FM. Furthermore, I could seem even more facetious by asking: are you teaching the FM to this CP child or are you giving rehabilitation services to a child with limitations. Sounds like a bunch of....SSN (subtle semantic nuance)? For me it's a concrete distinction in action. I suggest that until that distinction is clear in our practice, we will have a hard time knowing what we are doing and when we don't know what we are doing, well you know what!