

THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD and its relevance to dance ^{1,2}

by Yvan Joly ³

"If we do not know what we are doing, we cannot do what we want"
(Moshe Feldenkrais)

For close to 50 years, Moshe Feldenkrais has been developing a learning system to enhance our awareness of movement, to improve its quality, and to expand its repertoire. His method conveys practical strategies and attitudes simultaneously with a philosophy for learning. Through this practice, it is the quality of the whole of our lives that can blossom: knowing what we are doing, we can do more of what we want.

Group or individual lessons

Group lessons of the Feldenkrais Method are called "Awareness Through Movement". Using verbal instructions, the teacher leads the group through movement sequences that create an opportunity for exploring habits and discovering new possibilities. The movements are done slowly, most of the time on the floor. They present challenges in coordination; differentiations or isolations of body parts; simple locomotion; twisting, rolling, etc. Often, the movements are non-habitual, unexpected. The pupils are invited to bring to what they do, an "attention without tension". One learns to determine from an inner sense, what is comfortable and appropriate for oneself. One learns that it is in bypassing the limitations that one can surpass them. Individual lessons of the Feldenkrais Method are called "Functional Integration". In these private lessons, the Feldenkrais practitioner uses touch more than words to guide a pupil's movement.

Some of the roots of the method

Moshe Feldenkrais, who is now 78, is a physicist and engineer, recognized in these fields for his inventions and research. That background has undoubtedly rooted his conception of the human body as a "physical reality": weights and masses organized in space, as well as an interaction of forces, resulting in standing, moving and acting. Felden-

krais was also one of the first judo black belts of Europe and he is the author of several books on that subject. Thus his movement work includes this "oriental vision" of harmonious and efficient movement, utilizing minimal energy.

An avid student of neurophysiology and psychology, Feldenkrais has made important contributions in these areas ⁴. On one hand, he proposes that our sensations, thoughts, and emotions are the result of our movement. On the other hand, he suggests that movement is the only aspect of ourselves which we have the power to reorganize. Thus, movement is of primary importance in his approach. Probably the most important contribution which Feldenkrais has brought to our era is this understanding and concretizing of some of the essential elements of the learning process of the nervous system: that is, how do we learn. In the human infant, most movement is not instinctive. It has to be learned, more or less in its totality. We thus learn our own ways of crawling, standing up, walking, talking and of doing things. Since these ways of moving are relatively efficient and satisfying, we stop looking for others. After that, we repeat the use of these learned patterns that have become habitual. We use habits without any longer knowing how in fact we do it. We may even believe that "this is how we are made". But, and this is one of the very important notions in present neurophysiology, our nervous system is eminently plastic, malleable. What we "simply" need to do is to create the conditions to put it back on the path of learning: starting from where we left off, continuing on the road of the development of our potential, creating new circuits. Through a playful kind of learning, the kind children do, spontaneously, we can find alternatives for the difficulties we encounter and also "aerate" our creativity.

Guidelines for the development of the nervous system

The Feldenkrais Method creates the concrete conditions that best allow our nervous systems to learn. Thus emphasis is on the inner experience rather than on the performance itself. One learns to guide one's movement according to the inner sensation of it rather than by its appearance.

It is only by recognizing the internal quality, the flavor, of what I do that I can integrate feedback from the "outside". Otherwise, I am limited to relying on the "outside" to know if what I do is good and appropriate.

During the lessons, the directions "Go slowly. Do not force!" are repeated over and over. If we want to perceive new avenues and explore new roads, and if we want to experience the pleasure of discovery along the movement way, we must allow ourselves time to be sensitive. For learning, we need trial and error space. Isn't learning a production of many trials and errors, with a progressive choice of the one organization of ourselves that suits best our intention? Once the learning is established that is once the "parasitic movements" are eliminated, one may choose to accelerate the pace, progressively, according to intention. A new movement, one that feels good, can thus be integrated into the repertoire of "movements that I can do". A new road joins the inventory of roads once taken.⁵ It can then be used to attain a given goal. More and more one trusts one's resources to do what one wants. When the learning is done, the performing can come.

The Feldenkrais Method also suggests moving and exploring movement within the limits of our comfort. If I have pain or fear, I am less available for learning since I must defend against that pain or fear. Also, in the Feldenkrais perspective, the pain or fear is the result of what I do to, or with myself, though most of the time, it is "without me knowing" how I am creating it for myself. Feldenkrais' approach is to do things for the pleasure that they bring, avoiding the creation of pain and fear. The result, the product, comes as a fringe benefit of a pleasurable process. This strategy first renders the learning pleasant in itself. And, is it not more likely that I will adopt a new movement or a new behavior if it has been learned in a context of pleasure, where laughter or a discreet inner smile has been present.

Nonetheless, the Feldenkrais Method presents a challenge to our "bodily intelligence". Unexpected, sometimes apparently impossible movements

are presented. This creates a stimulating experience. Giving the nervous system problems to solve provokes invention. The art of learning becomes the art of navigating along the border of ease and unknown at the same time. At this border, "what appears to be impossible becomes possible, then easy and comfortable, and finally, esthetically satisfying for the one who moves".

A specific relevance to dance

In the course of this process, many specific needs of dancers can be met. Obviously, one develops the basis of movement. Coordination, alignment, orientation, support, balance, releasing, strength, optimal use of energy, breathing, all are drawn to attention and developed by learning. The repertoire of movements in itself is broadened. Suppleness is "figured in". Addressing the nervous system, rather than the muscles, the method calls for the aware body to release rather than the mechanical body to be stretched. One learns to let go of muscles rather than pulling on them, against oneself. After all, if our muscles are short and tense, is it not because we ourselves are contracting them?... Suppleness is also acquired in as much as we become aware that the person is a whole. A rigid area is often perceived as such because it is trying to compensate for other rigidities, situated elsewhere in the organism.

Many people come to the Feldenkrais Method to find alternatives for their pains and problems with backs, knees, necks, ankles, etc. Once again, these "bodily events" are perceived as the symptomatic result of an inappropriate use of the organism, seen globally. In this context, the Feldenkrais Method is not directed toward healing the symptoms but rather with learning. It teaches us how to find alternatives. It conveys new information to the nervous system, giving it choices. Finally, from the preventive perspective, this method is a basic teaching of the art of self-maintenance in movement: acknowledging our limits and surpassing them intelligently.

As well, the learning of new and/or difficult movements becomes more accessible. Knowing concretely how to create the learning conditions

already mentioned, one becomes able to teach oneself what one wants to do or what one is required to do.

Through this process of the Feldenkrais Method, our imagination and creativity also develop. We identify our personal styles. We learn to familiarize ourselves with novelty, to appreciate our spontaneity, to trust our intuition, our nervous system, our organism, ourselves. More and more we find the strength and wisdom to become what we really are. Obviously, this is beneficial to dance in composition and improvisation, as well as in rehearsing and performing. The awareness through movement is also an important basis for stage presence: isn't inhabited movement the support "par excellence" for the projection of oneself?

Finally, other than these contributions to "the dance that we do". and to "the dance that we show", the Feldenkrais Method has a definite application to "the dance that we teach": knowing better how to do it ourselves, we can obviously convey it to others more effectively.

From the dancing body to the dancing self

"How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (W.B. Yeats, in "Among School Children")

It is a widespread conception that in dance, the body is the tool, the instrument. What Moshe Feldenkrais' approach points out is that movement is the specific nature and expression of living organisms, of life itself. Muscles and bones, organs, and brain and nervous system, form the whole body-mind complex that some of us now refer to, in the holistic fashion, as the "soma". In that perspective, dance is movement of the whole self. Developing our movement possibilities is thus developing our whole sensing, feeling, thinking and dancing self.

Notes

1 The major part of this article was originally published in French, in the Québec dance magazine "Réflex", vol. 2, no. 2, 1982, under the title "La méthode Feldenkrais et la danse".

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4 Books by Moshe Feldenkrais:

- Body and Mature Behaviour. New-York: International Universities Press, 1948.
- Awareness Through Movement! New-York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- The Case of Nora. New-York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- The Elusive Obvious. Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications, 1981.

5 Robert Frost wrote a poem entitled, "The Road Not Taken". The end of the last verse reads:

Two roads diverged in a wood and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference !