

The Feldenkrais way

Richard W Bruner investigates the body movement theory



MOSHE Feldenkrais was born in 1904 in Poland. When he was 14, he went alone to Palestine before it became Israel.

István Heimer attended Eötvös Loránd University in 1972-77, where he obtained a master's degree in English language and literature. He taught high-school English in Hungary for 15 years.

In the 1970s, with a friend, he opened one of the country's then rare private schools. He left the school and became an educational-travel organizer, putting together excursions to places like the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

Feldenkrais left Israel in his 20s to study engineering in Paris, where he earned a doctorate in physics. He worked as a research assistant with Frederick Curie-Joliot. During World War II, he escaped to England and worked in the anti-submarine branch of the British Admiralty. During a soccer match he suffered a crippling knee injury. Later, rather than undergoing surgery, he developed a system of self-

rehabilitation.

He expanded the system into what is today the Feldenkrais Method. After the war, he went back to Israel and became the first director of the electronic department of defense.

Heimer discovered the Feldenkrais Method by accident. "Even while teaching English, I was always interested in alternative body movement therapy," he said.

"Even in the '70s, I was doing yoga and reading about the Alexander method. I was lucky finding the Feldenkrais, because I think it's better; it's different. Actually, I found it on the Internet."

An American woman practitioner of the Feldenkrais method, Pamela Cordell lives and works in Austria.

When he heard she was coming to Hungary to treat a stroke patient, he arranged to take lessons in the method from her.

He found the experience exhilarating. "After a few lessons, I was walking in the

street and I thought I was walking on air; everything was so easy, so right. I had never had the experience before.

"This woman encouraged me to go into training. Why? I simply want to learn the method for myself. She said, 'You can teach it until you are 90.' It wasn't difficult for her to persuade me, because I enjoyed the lessons."

Feldenkrais personally trained a small number of practitioners. Today there are more than 5,000 certified Feldenkrais practitioners in the world.

It contributes to the development of the new field of somatic (of, relating to, or affecting the body) education and influences medicine, gerontology, education and psychology.

The method is geared to help those experiencing chronic or acute pain of the back, neck, shoulders, hips, legs or knees caused by stress, misuse, accident or illness. Professional athletes who have used Feldenkrais include basketball star

Julius Erving and PGA golfers Rick Acton and Duffy Waldorf. Celebrities who have used the method include Norman Cousins, Margaret Mead, Helen Hayes and Whoopi Goldberg.

Heimer went first to Santa Fe, New Mexico for his introductory training. After that, he continued training in Maui, Hawaii and in Munich. The entire course took four years, at the rate of two months per year. "Maui was very interesting," he said. "I got there in January. I couldn't believe my eyes."

His training improved his own physical well-being. "My father was a medical doctor and he said back problems were the result of humans having to walk on two legs, rather than four.

"But it's not true, because, if you are well-balanced and well-aligned, you have no back problems. I had problems with my feet and my teacher told me, 'Oh, it will be all right.' I didn't take it seriously. Then, in the third year, I looked down and saw that my toes were nicely aligned; the problems had disappeared."

What exactly is the Feldenkrais Method? An exercise? A therapy?

Without categorizing it, Heimer describes its consequences. "It helps you live with less effort in your daily life," he said. "Feldenkrais preferred to call them lessons, rather than exercises. These are not 'physical exercises' such as calisthenics; they are somatopsychic explorations which foster improvements. Gradually, students become aware of how their musculature, skeleton – indeed their entire selves – are involved as an inextricable whole in every action.

"From small, slow beginnings, larger movements emerge entailing greater complexity, power and speed. The result is learning to move with greater efficien-

cy and satisfaction, and improved well-being.

"The Feldenkrais method is a unique approach to improving body motion which, in turn, alleviates pain, enhances self image, minimizes work-related stress, enhances personal growth and a sense of well-being."

Heimer insists that the Feldenkrais method is definitely not a fad. "Feldenkrais was a scientist; that's what distinguishes the Feldenkrais method from the others. He was an engineer, a physicist; he was working with the Curies in Paris. His wife was a pediatrician. His scientific background made his method more credible.

"The wonderful thing about it is it's easy to do, although there are some demanding [exercises]... and there are great changes. You are getting more flexible and it's achieved without effort.

"You experiment with different movements and it gives you more possibilities. To make an effort you always find your limit. But if you make a little movement, then you find more possibilities. And possibilities in your movement, possibilities in your life. You can realize what you dreamed about when you were a child."

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