

## **“Whatever happens, I surely will not unobserve it . . .”**

**Paul Rubin**

In this issue of *The Feldenkrais Journal*, Lisa Burrell writes of the emergence and growth of a generalized dystonia during the years she was in our Houston Feldenkrais Teacher Training program. She chronicles well the onset and development of this debilitating disorder as well as her intellectual and emotional attempts to understand it and to cope with it.

As her Educational Director from the beginning, I found the growing complexity of her symptoms and the deepening of her fear to be perplexing and daunting. At first, I did not understand the severity of her situation. As it became more apparent, I was reminded of something Dr. Feldenkrais said in a lecture he gave in his Amherst training.

Given on June 15, 1981, this commentary is commonly known as “To Correct is Incorrect.” In it, Feldenkrais famously recounts the process of a perplexing Functional Integration session and his thinking and feeling states during the lesson. Much more importantly, he details his self-examination in the days and months that followed as he patiently made sense of what had transpired. To my mind, one statement stands out from all the others as revealing an absolutely essential condition for growth as a teacher or as a teacher of teachers of our Method. By following an additional and oft overlooked principle articulated in this story, Feldenkrais says that his unflinching self-examination

“ . . . made, to me, a major change in my life, and a major understanding of psychotherapy, and an improvement in Functional Integration beyond anything I could do before.”

The principle?

“That was the surprise of my life . . . ***That whether I am hurt or not—whatever happens—I surely will not unobserve it.***”

This is the simple reason that I have tried my best to accompany Lisa as her teacher, consultant, and as a source of support over the past several years. This is the reason why, though there are not as of yet any clear or easily stated results of her inquiries, I believe that she and I and other sincere students of the Method simply must pay attention to her story and others like it.

In her article, Lisa recounts many instances of Feldenkrais teachers and trainers offering solution after solution after solution. Some of what was proffered was distressingly simplistic. Some people dismissed her story, and her, as being a manifestation of resistance or of psychopathology. Some seem to have felt that because the answers to some of her questions could not be known immediately, that they were not worth investigating. Others expressed concern that examining the issues raised would result in fearful practitioners—

more on this later. And finally, some seem to feel significantly threatened by her questions and experience. This latter group seems to want to know only stories of our successes and to leave perplexing questions “unobserved.”

But what goes “unobserved” cannot be learned from. My experience with Lisa has pushed me ever deeper into an examination of the Method and how I teach it to emerging teacher-practitioners. It has deeply affected how I examine my own processes of learning. Lisa and I have had many hours of conversation, exchanged many hundreds of emails. We have pushed each other to think new thoughts about her experience, about her questions, and more broadly, about what the Feldenkrais Method is and how it can be practiced and taught.

Recently, I encountered a wonderful book—*Do No Harm* (2015) by Henry Marsh.<sup>1</sup> The author is a well-respected senior neurosurgeon. His book is a straightforward but profound account of his decades of performing some of the most risky surgical procedures and, in the process, witnessing some heartbreaking results. Some were on account of mistakes, many others were simply the result of the complexity of the system in which he was intervening. Stimulated by Marsh’s retrospective thinking about his development as a practitioner, and by my discussions with Lisa, a couple of stories from my own work with clients came to mind. One is from nearly 40 years ago; one is from just a few months ago.

In 1977, fresh out of my training, I got a call from a local man whose passion was running. This fellow ran and ran and ran. He had developed what he called “shin splints.” He had heard of some successful work I had done with people whom he knew, and he came with a positive attitude. At first, the hardest thing for him was to decide whether to accept my suggestion that he not run for a while. What he could articulate about his reluctance was a fear of losing his conditioning. I could see that his reluctance ran deep. But he decided to give it a go. He improved. Then he began his old regimen of running extremely strenuous, rough terrain, up a local mountain of about 3,000 feet and down again. He ran upwards of 10 miles nearly every day.

As he struggled with repeated cycles of improvement with Functional Integration and re-injury upon returning to a clearly punishing regimen, I began to talk to him about how he might change his practice for good and over the long term. He struggled with the idea of doing less but did not disengage from our process. Finally, he established a program of slower paced long-distance running, over significantly less brutal terrain, as a daily practice. He found a way to run that allowed him to continue. He developed a deep loyalty to the Method and was a client for many years, even doing the first year and a half of a training program for his own personal development.

A few years after that was over, I heard he had begun to have serious psychological problems requiring hospitalization. I have wondered ever since whether his running was a necessary, unavowed self-regulation, a compensation that worked to help keep some underlying issues at bay. Did I, by focusing too narrowly on his physical difficulties and working with him to change some strong and important daily habits, inadvertently

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Marsh, *Do No Harm* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015).

contribute to his psychological vulnerability? I can never know the answer to this question. I do not even believe that it is important to know the answer. It is simply a worthwhile question to keep in mind when working with others: when does our assistance to make changes in important habits and behaviors run the risk of negatively disturbing a balanced system? How can we know?

The second story concerns those who have expressed worry that examining Lisa's story, and other similar stories, will scare practitioners away from doing their work. I will say that many of Lisa's classmates went through a period of being frightened of touching others. It was something I tried my best to address in the training, I hope with success.

But to my second story: recently, I was privileged to work with a very fine cellist. We had the opportunity for only one lesson, because it was far from home. At the beginning of the session, I was struck by the strength of her habitual way of bringing her arms and hands directly to the positions of holding the bow and to the fingerboard. I had a flash of fear. What if I was about to disturb a highly compensated dystonia and thereby unleash it? What if this lovely person's beautiful talent was to be disturbed by my work, no matter how gentle, respectful, and well-intended? These thoughts arose in me unbidden and were answered in the space of just a few seconds.

My answer to myself was simply that I could not know that, that I will never be able to know the answer to such a question, and that I could either give up or . . . well, what? I realized, without all the words, that I could and would have to trust that the tens of thousands of lessons I have given in 40 years of practice have resulted overwhelmingly in benefit for the recipients. I realized I could only do my best, as shaped by the sum total of what I have learned about giving FI, and continue to be respectful, gentle, receptive, and kind. I could only continue to trust that the majority of people do have the capability of self-regulation, that most do not have nervous systems on the verge of serious instability.

I continued with the lesson. I worked with some fear, some trust, with full respect. The next day and also over the next weeks I heard that the lesson was helpful—that it provided a continuing source of improvement in playing, in breathing, and in everyday function. I was pleased. When we touch someone, we are engaged with an enormous series of complex relationships. As Feldenkrais pointed out so many times: cause and effect is extremely elusive in complex systems. By extension, so is control of all variables. If you improve one set or several sets of relationships in a complex system, the whole system will most likely improve. But not certainly. This is why we need to proceed with respect and care and without ambition or guarantees in our everyday work.

Insofar as Lisa's article is concerned, I hope that more people who have had confounding experiences as a teacher, a student, or as a teacher of teachers will come forward. Our successes make our reputation in the world. Mining our disappointments and those things that we do not understand will promote our maturation as a profession. These kinds of discussions must be open-ended, in my opinion. We need to avoid the expectation of quick solutions and premature conclusions. We need also to avoid abandoning or avoiding topics that might take a long time to reveal their potential for informing us. It is important to remember that honestly conducted inquiries can be counted on to take unexpected turns

and to inspire new branches of investigation leading to new information or insight. In his commitment to let neither the source nor the implications of his discomfort remain “unobserved”, Feldenkrais ended up in a fruitful place, one where he said he was pleased to find “the surprise of my life.”