

The Feldenkrais Method: art or craft?

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Is practicing the Feldenkrais Method an art or a craft? It's an interesting question that speaks to the systems nature of the method. An ideal system is self-sufficient, in that as long as the correct process is followed, it should give the desired result. This system should be tolerant to greater or lesser qualities of input, meaning that the process associated with the system must be clear and concise enough that an average person could follow the process and use the system and expect similar or equal results to a person with an innate talent for the work being performed.

The question of talent is central to art, in that art inherently requires creativity, and creativity, like talent, is difficult to quantify or control. Skill can be developed by almost anyone, but the ease or naturalness with which that skill grows will always vary from one individual to another. So how is the Feldenkrais Method built? Is it a finite craft that combines discrete skills in a way that is more like a system, or is it more like art that relies upon the talent of the participants?

The emphasis of art is the creative expression of the artist, while the focus of craft is the skill of the craftsperson. The division between the two is somewhat arbitrary, in that great art of necessity requires technical skill, while the execution of a craft at a very high level relies upon the unique talents and experiences of the craftsperson to interact with the subtleties of the material being worked. When discerning the role of the Feldenkrais Method as an art or a craft, what we are really talking about is emphasis. Is the role of Practitioner better fulfilled by emphasizing the technical aspects of the Method, or are vibrant, successful Practitioners most effective when they are encouraged to express their own, unique contribution to the process?

For me, the answer lies within the nature of the Method itself. One could argue that the "what" of the method is learning how to learn, or put differently, the Method is a somatic approach to heuristic learning. Moshe said that he could have taught his method using physics or martial arts, but it would have limited the audience. Movement is something that is available for everyone to work with as, as Moshe said, "movement is life; without movement life is unthinkable." While movement is central to the method as we know it, movement is not necessarily the purpose of the method.

Dennis Leri told a story of a student asking Moshe what he was looking for in FI. Moshe's answer was the ability (of the student) to express a clear intent. This echoes another one of Moshe's oft quoted ideas that "health is the ability to realize our avowed and unavowed dreams." This then speaks to the "why" of the method. The concepts of choice, maturity, independence, and dignity which appear throughout Moshe's writings all resonate with this concept. Why do we learn how to learn? So that we can "move closer to actually being creatures of free choice, to genuinely reflect individual creativity and emotion" (Moshe again).

The "how", of course, is ATM and FI. Any Practitioner has heard or participated in numerous discussions of how the "how" is supposed to be implemented-- ease, lack of effort, giving oneself permission to be comfortable and not try to do things "right", and so forth. Those principles, however, need to be viewed in context, so that we may differentiate the tools of the method from the outcome.

Structurally, the Feldenkrais Method is pretty simple. Each lesson follows a familiar pattern: a hypothesis is created, experiments are performed which test the hypothesis, and a new hypothesis is synthesized based on the results.

This process is typically initiated by following an injunction, given verbally or through touch. Frequently, this injunction is to move, but it could also be to sense or to imagine or simply to notice and to be. The hypothesis takes form in our primary image of ourselves, and is tested as we perform variations, derivatives, or contrasts which test the limits of our initial hypothesis. When we return to the original injunction, something has changed, and thus a new hypothesis is formed. While brilliant, Moshe Feldenkrais did not invent this process-- it is at base the Scientific Method formalized by Sir Francis Bacon in 1620, and highly reflective of Moshe's background as an engineer and physicist. Moshe found a way to apply it to himself in movement, and with himself as both subject and observer of the experiment.

This creative application of arguably the most effective method of organized learning in human history sets the Feldenkrais Method apart from most other forms of education. It is unique in that the experience of learning is the sole goal of the process, rather than holding a specific objective for what is to be learned, or how that learning is to be demonstrated. The method is also fairly unique in that it does not rely upon the knowledge or expertise of the provider to educate the consumer; it is the mere participation in the process that does the heavy lifting. Or, as Moshe said, "I am going to be your last teacher. Not because I'll be the greatest teacher you may ever encounter, but because from me you will learn how to learn. When you learn how to learn, you will realize that there are no teachers, that there are only people learning and people learning how to facilitate learning."

So the outcome of adhering to the process is that we learn how to learn. I will again use Moshe's words to tie the "how" back to the "why": "I believe that the person who never avowed his unavowed dreams somewhere in his unconscious, in his dreams, feels he has wasted his life, and when he is old he will realize it. So self-fulfillment is a real, vital necessity."

Having highlighted certain aspects regarding the purpose and structure of the Method, I find there is still one thing that requires clarity: What is meant by ones "dreams", avowed or otherwise? It seems to be a common assumption across most forms of personal development that people already know what their dreams are, or that upon reaching a certain level of self-development dreams will reveal themselves as whole and complete, ready to be made manifest. This may be true for some people, but not all. Realizing dreams may be as much about discovering what the world has to offer as the actual pursuit of the dream itself. An Inuit (Eskimo) may love nothing more than riding the waves on a surfboard, but unless they migrate south and have some free time and an adventurous spirit, that person will never know such a thing is possible. The whole question of dreams is defined by the fact that no one else can determine your dreams for you; they must be discovered through work, experience, or chance.

I recently read an article about a young man working his first job out of high school as a Wilderness Ranger in the Rocky Mountains of southwest Colorado.¹ Deer, Elk and Moose hunting are tremendously popular sports in that area, with the seasons starting in late fall. In this instance, the area was swarmed with hunters camping out ahead of the first day of the hunting season. Overnight on the night before the season opened, a storm blew in over the mountains and accumulated six inches (15cm) of snow by morning, with still more falling. The Rangers and others with backcountry experience packed their camps and left. Many others with less experience did not. By the next morning, nearly six feet (1.8m) of snow had accumulated, essentially closing off the area for winter. Of

¹ Hill, Scott *The Year the Snow Came* <http://hillpeoplegear.com/Experience/Tales/The-Year-The-Snow-Came>

those who waited too long, all got out eventually, but there were 18 head of horses and mules left at various camps to die in the snow.

The different types of Forest workers in the area had a meeting to decide what to do, but as is often the case, there were a variety of opinions and nothing was decided. The meeting broke up, and the animals were still up the mountain, in the cold and snow. It was at this point that a small group of Rangers decided to take action on their own initiative to save the livestock, putting their careers and lives at risk to do what they felt was right.

What to do? The boys from Creede [a small town surrounded by wilderness in the mountains of Colorado] knew and jumped out of the helicopter into chest deep snow at first light not long after the meeting. They were now on their own, but they were going to get the horses out or die trying. What followed was a race against exhaustion and death. They took turns breaking trail through snow that ranged between thigh and waist deep. A mind numbing effort that is soon reduced to the simplest of goals: placing one foot in front of the next. Quickly there is nothing left but trance like movement and exhaustion that must go on, because to stop is to quit, and to quit in those circumstances would have been to die. They must have pushed through their stamina and energy and into pure will. All through that day, long into the night they kept going. It was almost dawn 24 hours later when those boys came trudging out of the mountains with all 18 head of stock alive and well.

Ultimately, it is a story of independence, courage, and conviction set in the wildest of environments. There is something deeply profound about persistence and immense struggle in the service of an idea that is greater than the individual. This, to me, starts to illuminate the role and the power of a Dream in life. For the folks in this story, an unavowed dream determined a system of values and beliefs that directed them inexorably to a certain course of action. What is the role of the Feldenkrais Method in helping people who have not yet found such a Dream to discover it? Jumping out of a helicopter into a snowdrift might sound fun, but the rest of this particular dream is rather specific to circumstance and is not something likely to come up in conversation at the front of an FI lesson.

How do we as practitioners, then, get people to realize these avowed or unavowed dreams? The simplest answer is, "we don't." They're not our dreams to realize or, in fact, even to imagine. Very often I hear Practitioners being disdainful of dreams which do not resonate with the softer aspects of the Method that are required for learning, such as ease and attentiveness, speaking instead of things like strength and effort as crude and damaging. This is why we must differentiate the tools of the method from the outcome. There is nothing effortless about leading horses down a boulder-strewn canyon in chest deep snow for 24 hours straight, but it was a dream worth living that holds enduring value (especially to the animals whose lives were saved). So it is not our job to decide what dreams people should have, but rather to create conditions in which individuals are able to make their own discoveries and learn to observe and understand their own experiences.

For those experiences to be truly valuable, we must allow our students to experience them on their own terms, without undue influence from the outside. Or, as Dennis Leri often said in our trainings, "don't lessen the lesson, let the lesson lessen you." This is equally as valid for practitioners as it is for students.

And with that, we come back to art and craft.

Given the need for creative expression that separates art from craft, we as practitioners should strive to expert craftsmanship rather than artistry, as whatever creative expression arises should be inherent to the student, and not imposed by the practitioner based upon their own unique experiences, biases, and dreams, however well intended. It is only by releasing our attachment to outcomes that we can truly be of service to our students, and allow their unique true best learning to appear to them as their own discoveries.

Brian Hassler became a Feldenkrais Practitioner in 2009 (*Movement-Educators*, Dennis Leri, Educational Director). Brian's background includes theater, martial arts, carpentry, and a variety of forms of fitness and movement education. After teaching Pilates, Feldenkrais, and Taiji for several years in his home town of Denver, CO, USA, Brian decided that the business of movement education was detracting from the joy of movement education, and transitioned his practice from a vocation to an avocation. In addition to his ongoing movement work with friends and colleagues, he also enjoys reading, remodeling his house, and walking his dog.