

Exercising a Dream

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"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."

-Moshe Feldenkrais

Dreams, with a capital 'D', can inspire us, console us, and help lift us up to realize our highest potential. Most Dreams of note require work to attain, and frequently that work comes in the form of a repeated practice of skills. While practice is often repetitive, repetitive does not mean mindless.

An amateur musician once witnessed legendary banjo player Bela Fleck sitting in an airport practicing a short sequence of just a few notes on his banjo. The amateur had a long layover, and left the airport to meet with some colleagues for a meal and conversation. He felt good that even a great musician like Bela Fleck would spend time playing around on his instrument trying to get things just right, much the same as the amateur did. He returned a few hours later to find Mr. Fleck still working on the same few notes, still seeking that perfect match between the sounds from his banjo and the potential he heard in his own mind. That was when the amateur realized that perhaps in some very important ways he and Bela Fleck were not quite alike after all.

Good practice, like an ATM, is iterative in nature. No physical act is ever perfectly identical to the one before. Some relationships, like a musician rehearsing, occur in a relatively closed system between artist and instrument, and in such cases consistency is highly desirable. Other relationships, like those between martial artists in sparring or competition, are highly dynamic, in which case the ability to accommodate variation is important. In both instances, maintaining presence throughout each repetition of a skill is critical so that nuances of performance can be sensed and understood.

No one practices perfectly the first time-- if they could, they wouldn't need to practice. There is a trope within the martial arts that if someone practices something without proper instruction they will do it wrong, and will therefore ingrain bad habits which are difficult, if not impossible, to remove. This is silly. Since no one does it perfectly the first time, it's going to start out wrong regardless of if a student learns from a qualified teacher or not. The student with the teacher will simply learn a more functional version of "wrong" than the student without the teacher. The real issue is the attentiveness of the student during practice. Habit forms in the gaps between awareness. If an action is done with continuous awareness and intention every time, a change in intention will change the performance of the action, no matter how many times it has been done previously.

The Feldenkrais Method is an interesting case in practice, in that the individual movements in ATM or FI are not really useful in and of themselves. If an ATM involves lying on one's back and reaching their arm towards the ceiling, no one gains any special benefit from having their arm reach an inch or two further by the end of the lesson. Real benefit comes from the increased sense self, and all that entails. For this reason, I often say that the Feldenkrais method is a meta practice that doesn't actually teach us to *do* anything, but makes us better at everything.

Improving "everything" is an appealing concept for those of us who are already engaged in the method and love the work for its own sake, but is perhaps not so compelling for the uninitiated. Very few people would be willing to invest the time, money, and energy necessary for a serious Feldenkrais practice based on the promise that they might perhaps be able to wash a plate more gracefully, or brush their teeth with a bit more elegance. What typically draws students to the method is either the hope of achieving a goal or the promise of escaping pain or discomfort.

For those with clear goals or Dreams, the benefits of the Feldenkrais method can be made fairly clear, but what about those with less clarity about what they want in their lives? What about those whose dreams are truly unavowed? An unavowed dream may be a secret dream; a hope or desire held to be impossible to achieve or too precious to be subject to the scrutiny of others. On the other hand, an

unavowed dream may be a dream that is unclear to the dreamer themselves, either due to lack of exposure to the things that would allow them to see it clearly, or because their true dream may be in conflict with lesser dreams imposed on the dreamer by outside influences.

In this case, how might we help people to the "real, vital necessity" of self-fulfillment, as championed by Feldenkrais? This search for fulfillment must go beyond a moment of *satori* (or enlightenment) in which the student suddenly finds the truth of their lives. For one, moments of *satori* are exceedingly rare. This is true for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that sudden enlightenment can be exceedingly painful.

What happens when a person's life has been built around lesser dreams and their true Dream is revealed to be incompatible with existing circumstance and responsibilities? A middle-aged student who suddenly realizes they want to live a life at sea may have children and elderly parents to care for, live in a landlocked region, and not have any of the necessary skills to operate a seagoing vessel or make a living without a computer and internet access.

This is a difficult situation, but perhaps more hopeless is if that same person only realizes they have been pursuing false dreams for years or decades, but has no idea what their true Dreams might be. Such a person might only know that they are dissatisfied and unfulfilled, but have no idea in which direction happiness might lie.

A big part of this apparent dilemma lies in the student's self image. Within the context of the Feldenkrais Method, we tend to deal with the physical self image, but that is only because out of thinking, feeling, sensing, and moving, only movement is directly observable and therefore suitable for hypothesis and testing.¹ All four elements are present in any human action, and are therefore tied closely to an individual's self image. If a person changes their physical self image, they necessarily change their thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Within each person's self image are contained ideas of certain capacities and limitations. Those capacities and limitations combine to suggest possibilities for that individual's future. By perturbing a student's sense of either their capacities or their limitations, new options may become available within that student's perception of future possibilities. I think of this relationship in terms of Image and Avatar.

Image, with a capital "I", refers to an individual's entire sense of self *at that moment*. In general use, an avatar is an embodiment or incarnation of an entity.² In the context of the Feldenkrais Method, when we imagine different possibilities and include aspects of thinking, feeling, sensing, and moving, we create an image of ourselves that is as real as we can make it, but in some sense does not currently exist. This is implicit in ATM, such as when we do a series of movements on one side, and imagine doing them on the other side without actually moving but including as much detail as we are able to in our minds. Similarly, when we pause during a lesson and compare our current scan to a scan at the start of the lesson, we are invoking an image of a past self that does not fully match what has changed in our current selves. More simply put, an Image represents what is, while an Avatar (with a capital "A") represents what was, will, or might be.

Creating an Avatar is different from memory or fantasy in that an Avatar requires a sense of one's whole self be embodied in the sensation. Think of an ATM where a student lies on their back and scans themselves, then reaches their right arm towards the ceiling and performs several variations. The student would then do a scan and compare themselves to the beginning of the lesson, paying special attention to their right arm and shoulder as compared to their left, and as compared to the beginning of the lesson. The student would then imagine the series of movements on their left side, then scan, then do the movements briefly and scan again. As always, amazement and applause would naturally ensue.

¹For more on this, see Feldenkrais Zeit, Heft 18 - Handwerk "Der Schüler ist der Künstler"
(<http://www.feldenkraiszeit.org/>)

²<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/avatar>

When scanning after doing the right side, a Feldenkrais neophyte might think back to the beginning of the lesson and consider those things which are notably different or which are called to their attention by the practitioner giving the lesson. A more experienced student would likely notice more details and more subtle changes, as well as things not specifically mentioned by the practitioner during either the initial or current scan. A student using an Avatar might attempt to recreate their entire sense of self at the time of the initial scan and impose it as a distinct entity on top of their current Image, and hold the sensation of both entities simultaneously. This is a challenging exercise in awareness and imagination, and when done well might allow the student to notice changes in places they hadn't been explicitly aware of at all during the initial scan.

Much like an Avatar can recreate sensations from the past, it can also project into the future. In the case of our hypothetical ATM, the student might project the Avatar to do the movements on the left side with great awareness of their whole future self while simultaneously remaining aware of their current self. Again, this is not a radical departure from simply imaging the movements on the left side, but differs only in the level of detail and the sense that there are two complete images held within the student's sense of self at the same time.

This concept has many additional uses and is a lot of fun in ATM, but how does it help our imaginary student above, who has touched on a Dream that now seems impossible, or only knows that what they are doing now isn't working?

In my last article, I told a story of some U.S. Forest Rangers who rescued a group stranded horses from a remote mountain valley after a sudden blizzard.³ In that case, an unavowed dream determined a system of values and beliefs that directed the dreamers inexorably to a certain course of action. It's a great story, and a powerful Dream, but the realization of any such Dream requires certain skills and attributes. It is not enough only to dream, one must also act. In order to know how to act, one must have a sense of one's own capabilities and limitations, and well as what is necessary for the Dream to come true.

In this sense, an Avatar might be the vehicle by which the dreamer puts their self into the Dream. The Rangers in the story needed strength, stamina, and courage, as well as knowledge of the environment, how to travel and survive, how to perform first aid, how to handle animals and humans, and likely other skills as well. Building a robust Avatar helps to shape the direction of one's growth.

In this case the Dream defined the Avatar, but much like thinking, feeling, sensing, and moving are inextricably linked, so too are Dreams and Avatars. Someone whose Dreams are fully unavowed, even to themselves, can use an Avatar to discover different possibilities. A well developed Avatar can reveal that which is fulfilling and that which is not. Those things which are rewarding in embodied imagination can lead to an understanding of what one truly enjoys. A clearer sense of one's preferences can in turn lead to a clearer sense of one's values. Once someone understands what is important (or, perhaps more significantly, what is *not* important), they can start to fill their lives with more meaningful things. Much like ATM might show that change is possible, a small change in thinking might show that fulfillment is possible-- both plant seeds for previously unimagined growth.

Even without explicitly creating an Avatar for oneself, the necessary elements of awareness, imagination, and recollection are contained in the Method and naturally build the capacity to perceive new possibilities based on subtle changes. I'm reminded of some old sayings: "a change of a few degrees at the start can change the destination by 100 miles," and "a journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step." Perhaps Feldenkrais practitioners can imagine how the journey of 1000 miles might change if the quality of the first step is somehow more possible, more easy, or more elegant.

³Feldenkrais Zeit, Heft 18 - Handwerk "Der Schüler ist der Künstler" (<http://www.feldenkraiszeit.org/>)