

Are Aikido and the Feldenkrais Method doomed to similar fates?

After leaving a thriving practice in Basel, Switzerland and moving to a rural part of southern Sweden, I thought it would be fairly easy to build up another practice and keep working the way I had. However, the Feldenkrais Method isn't nearly as well known here as in Switzerland, and Yoga seems to be very popular. I found it quite difficult to explain what I do and how it could be useful for people. Part of this difficulty is because the FM is hard to explain (at least for me) and also because I think that, speaking very generally, the culture here is less interested in self inquiry than in Switzerland and other parts of Europe.

Additionally, in talking with colleagues from Sweden and different parts of the globe, I understand that many have a hard time building up a practice that can sustain them financially, a problem I didn't have until recently. However, I also heard that when Gaby Yaron gave workshops in Sweden, they were very well attended. And let's not forget that Dr. Feldenkrais gave workshops in the USA that had as many as 250 attendees! Dr. Feldenkrais' method was featured in an article in the prestigious journal, "The Smithsonian" and ATM lessons were broadcasted over Swiss public radio on Sunday evenings that many Swiss still remember. How can it be that the FM was once quite popular and now seems to be fading into obscurity? I and other colleagues have given this question much thought and I don't yet have a complete answer but there might be clues in looking to other fields of self inquiry and development. This account is not in any way intended to be a condemnation of any person, group or organization, it's simply my way of trying to understand things as they are.

This video, explaining how Aikido, a once famous martial art lost its popularity, led me to consider the historical and future development of the Feldenkrais Method in another light.

“Why Did Aikido Lose Popularity?” - Brief Martial Arts
<https://youtu.be/uMz20Z16HFU>

In the video, the narrator gives a brief history of how Aikido's founder, Morihei Ueshiba, developed Aikido and how it became very popular. The story elaborates on how the founder's students tried to preserve the techniques while often ignoring the spiritual or self development aspects.

Continuing, the narrative describes the rise of mixed martial arts and Brazilian Ju Jitsu (which was apparently heavily influenced by Judo) in particular, and how they were growing and adapting through competition. In order to win a mixed martial arts competition, competitors had to constantly adapt their styles and adopt techniques from other forms. Apparently, some Aikido teachers claimed that Aikido, in its “pure form,” could be just as effective in self defense and competition but were proven embarrassingly wrong. Others tried to adapt the art so that it would be more effective in fighting and practical self defense. According to the author, Aikido declined in popularity because it became separated from its founder’s intent, stagnated in development, and wasn’t effective in popular forms of competition.

In conclusion, the narrator argues for using Aikido in the way it was originally intended, as a path to developing oneself and changing the world for the better, rather than trying to change Aikido to fit into the competition setting or as a means for practical self defense.

The parallels that I see between the two arts, if you will, are that both founders chose forms that could be misinterpreted, as their means for improving the world through self discovery and growth. Dr. Feldenkrais chose movement and helped himself and many other people with severe conditions regain their abilities to move and live better lives, but his method was not about movement nor about healing people.

“I do not treat people, I do not cure people, and I do not teach people. I tell them stories because I believe that learning is the most important thing for a human being.” 1

Morihei Ueshiba, a formidable martial artist, developed a martial arts form to promote harmony among people but never encouraged fighting and competition. In this way, it is easy to understand how the FM and Aikido can be misunderstood.

“The purpose of the Art of Peace is to fashion sincere human beings; a sincere human being is one who has unified body and spirit, one who is free of hesitation or doubt, and one who understands the power of words.”
— John Stevens, The Art of Peace 2

While the FM has often demonstrated great efficacy in working with disabilities and pain, if we begin to think in terms of, “this lesson is good for knee pain” or “this movement helps shoulder problems”, we will have started down the slippery slope into the void that some Aikido teachers have already experienced. Claiming that the FM is a form of therapy or alternative medicine will (and already has) invite the scrutiny of, and subsequent ridicule from medical science. Medical science could be to the FM what mixed martial arts competition is to Aikido. In competition, there is a winner and a loser so it’s fairly clear as to what works for that specific setting.

Medical science uses clinical studies to demonstrate efficacy and those studies are based on a third person perspective. Self authority, dignity, and the potent self are subjective, first person experiences that can not be measured in the same way medical interventions can be.

(M)edical science, in contrast to somatics, historically has not integrated the subjective experience of the individual in its clinical research. Research studies within the medical field are built around the third person perspective of the body, with external impersonal observers using reductionist methods to gather quantifiable data able to be reproduced time and time again. In contrast, somatic methods are seen by some to be unquantifiable based on the fact that they are experiential and therefore subjective. In reductionist science objectivity and truth can only be found by third person studies of data; clinical research does not allow for the felt experience of the individual to have any meaning or bearing on the results of studies. 3

If we try to claim that the FM is good for treating pain, we will not be able to compete with other approaches that utilize multiple modalities, such as medication, treatment, occupational therapy, etc. and are verifiable through clinical studies. Similarly, if we reduce the FM to a method for better movement, we we will lose every running race and weightlifting competition unless we practice those specific sports and apply the FM in ways that its founder had not intended.

So what to do? I have come up with three very general approaches.

1. Dress up in becoming and colorful clothing, mix and match some novel or unique aspects of the FM such as, “mindful movements” and/or creative ATM lessons with other modalities like Pilates, Yoga, or Zumba and post core strengthening videos in exotic locations on social media. Or, offer the FM as a way of treating (yes, I know we don’t “treat” but that’s what the public will understand) back pain or for helping people who suffer from neurological difficulties. This would be the “Brazilian Ju Jitsu approach” and actually would mean picking what’s useful from anywhere to serve a specific purpose, such as getting fit or curing back pain for example. This might mean creating things like FM-based therapy or fitness. Adopters of this approach would need to tackle the daunting and expensive task of trying to find ways to quantify objective and reproducible results that fit into a reductionist model if they would like to compete in the medical or fitness realms. It would also mean possibly forfeiting the Method’s open ended nature of self inquiry for more goal or purpose driven outcomes.

2. Unapologetically acknowledge that the FM is a means of self inquiry and maturation, and teach it as just that. Understand that Awareness Through Movement and Functional Integration lessons are the means for learning and maturation, and not

movements or techniques to be mastered or done to another person. Of course the learning and growth from this practice may very well effect other areas of one's life, like moving better and having less pain but those are just serendipitous side effects, not the goals. This is my understanding of Dr. Feldenkrais's intentions.

3. And last but not least, as a methodological model for "leaning to learn" or "creating the conditions for learning." Using movement and awareness, Dr. Feldenkrais gave us a very different way of teaching than what was current in his time, and sadly, today as well. As I understand it, Dr. Feldenkrais didn't originally intend for his students to work the same way he did, but rather take his method into other forms of teaching. This third approach would require long, thorough, and continued study of the second approach in order to be genuine and serious. Teachers of other disciplines such as art, music, various academics and even sports would use the "Feldenkrais Methodology" in their own teaching. Much of mainstream teaching is based on instructing students what to do and then testing them. Dr. Feldenkrais offered a radically different approach in that he said, "You can't teach anyone anything, you can only create the conditions in which they can learn." Learning to "create the conditions for learning" in many other fields is what I personally consider could be the FM's greatest contribution to society. The more I investigate other schools of learning, such as in music and coaching, the more I see how they are starting to come to similar realizations that Dr. Feldenkrais had many years ago. This third approach would preserve the FM as a means of self inquiry and maturation, and, allow for cross fertilization with other fields of knowledge.

Of course, none of these approaches are complete entities in of themselves and we most likely practice the FM in ways that include some elements of each. It is my hope that the unique and potent aspects of the FM can contribute to, and foster a better and more humane world, to a greater extent than they already do.

Respectfully and with hope, John Tarr

1 <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1732043-the-art-of-peace>

2 Mullan, Kelly The Art and Science of Somatics: Theory, History and Scientific Foundations (Skidmore College, 2012, <
https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol/89/>) 16.

3 Feldenkrais, Dr. Moshe The Elusive Obvious (Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications, 1981), 118