

Some Reflections on the Practice of Teaching

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Shakespeare, in *Twelfth Night*, made the following observation about leaders:

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” (Act II, Scene v)

We might think the same about ourselves as teachers graduating from a Feldenkrais Training. Some are natural teachers from the start: some will learn to be good teachers and some find the teaching thrust upon them. What do we need to practice, first to become good teachers and then perhaps great ones?

The research on what is a good teacher points to some simple and necessary abilities. Moshe Feldenkrais, the best teacher that I have had in my life, offers succinct examples of each of the qualities of a good teacher, and also some insight into the path to become a great teacher.

A GOOD TEACHER KNOWS THE MATERIAL

You cannot teach what you do not know. As Moshe said to us:

“I couldn't teach you something I don't know. That's right. I couldn't teach you Chinese. I don't know it. I can teach you only thing I know and that I can use myself well. Other things you know probably better than I. I can learn from you. But you cannot learn from me the thing I don't know.” (Amherst 1980 July 23rd)

The use of self which Moshe knows, the ability to go on improving our own organization, is a fundamental part of what we come to learn and that which becomes for us a lifelong practice.

“And you will find that if you handle yourself and hold your breath like that, then the person whom you hold, holds his breath, too and therefore, if you are not organized, he is disorganized.” (Amherst 1980 July 23rd)

Our tasks are many in knowing the material and understanding how lessons are constructed. Often in doing the Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons of Alexander Yanai, the clue to make a lesson possible and easy is found once a small detail, often in the very small print, is understood and utilized.

Another important part of knowing the material is achieved by study and reflection after teaching. After each lesson is taught, ATM or Functional Integration (FI), think for a moment about what happened in the lesson. Seek always to improve, to refine and to notice smaller and smaller details.

Moshe told us of an FI lesson with a man who, after several lessons given by Moshe, had not been helped and Moshe did not know what to do. In this last lesson he planned to finish, tell the man he could not help him, and give him his money back for the lesson. While working Moshe became so bored that he found himself nodding off, falling asleep with his hand on the man's forehead, then waking and nodding off again with his hand there on the forehead.

When he finished the lesson Moshe said he had the surprise of his life:

“The man looked at me with bright eyes, quiet easy and told me ‘you know, that’s the best lesson I ever had from you’. This was the first lesson where I did not think and was bored and did something just by feeling.”

“That was probably the reason why I have learned so many things; that whether I am hurt or not--whatever happens-- I will surely not unobserve it.” (Amherst 1981 June 15th)

Whatever happens in a lesson, a good teacher will take the time to observe it and reflect.

A GOOD TEACHER HAS THE EXPECTATION THAT THE STUDENT WILL LEARN.

In the literature on teaching there is something known as the Pygmalion effect, named after the Greek myth of a sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had carved. In teaching it relates to the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby a student comes to believe what others say, especially what the teacher says and expects of him or her. The literature describes the positive expectations of the teacher, the Pygmalion effect, and also the Golem effect of negative expectations of the student and how it affects self-image and performance.

In his teaching Moshe gave special importance to his expectation that all of us could and would learn:

“Slowly, go on. Now, once you do it more or less well to that side, do it now or keep on another few minutes until some of you.... There's so many of them doing it so nicely, pleasure to see. But, you know, I am insatiable. It should be one hundred percent because there is nobody here idiotic enough not to be able to learn as quickly as the others, another minute or a minute less, that's all. (Amherst 1980, July 2nd)

“If you can't do it, don't do it. Go do what you can and in a few minutes you'll be able to do it as usual. You know, that's why we go at the pace of everybody, so that everybody without exception can learn. And usually we achieve that extraordinary thing that the whole audience does it and the impossible, elegantly and satisfied. And I believe we have repeated that thing at least a hundred times since we are here.” (Amherst 1980 July 9th)

“I hope that... to be able to show you that within one or two lessons there will be an improvement that he didn't get with all the operations and with the twenty years of being a professor's son. We will see. I say that because I have a previous experience and it worked. It worked because what we do cannot not work because it works on all of you, why shouldn't it work on anybody else? It's not on one person. It's a hundred percent, without exception. (Amherst 1980 June 17th)

A GOOD TEACHER SETS CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

From the very first day and throughout all of his teaching Moshe emphasized that his lessons set the conditions for learning.

“So, the one thing, you will write as little as possible and my job will be to make you learn. And that's what I say, not teach. I am not a teacher. I am here only to produce conditions in which your brains, our brains, can learn the best way. And you will see that that's quite a lot better than what we have achieved up to now, not only here, but the world over. That's talking high and high promises. You will

see. We won't betray you." (Amherst 1980, June 9th)

"In other words, the responsibility for doing is yours, not mine. I can only provide the conditions in which you can learn and you can do the learning." (Amherst 81, June 9th)

In his lecture "To Correct is Incorrect" Moshe spoke of the futility of teachers who tell students the 'right way' and correct students.

"You go by gradual approximation from the point where you are. You can move a little bit, and then look around, and then another little bit, and then another little bit, but there must be, in the background, the thing that you know—that gradual steps will lead you to something where there is a great freedom of action, where you will do it your own way, with your own handwriting. And you will be able to—more important than anything else—find what does the person need at this moment, most, without you actually being able to think it out, or find it out, but you will feel it. And especially, by touching him you will find the things that can assist him to find his own way quicker than anything else in the world can do." (Amherst 1981 June 15th)

It is by setting conditions for learning that we can help people to learn and find their own way.

A GOOD TEACHER HAS MULTIPLE WAYS OF GIVING FEEDBACK

A good teacher can give feedback in many ways, verbal and non-verbal. What is important that the student feel that he or she is seen and recognized. Moshe had many ways of doing this and one special way that can be used by all teachers. Moshe knew that each person, no matter how well or badly organized, has a moment when they do something beautifully. He would observe and watch until a student did something with ease and grace. At that moment he would stop the group and recognize the particular student so everyone could watch what he or she did. A moment that Moshe, referencing Krishnamurti, thought of as the person 'blossoming.'

Moshe was a great teacher, and the qualities that made him so were his

creativity, intelligence and curiosity, his humor, his great vitality and his compassion for the human predicament. Behind all of Moshe's teaching is the desire to restore each person's dignity, a respect for self and the capacity to learn and grow.

In summary, thoughts from Moshe Feldenkrais, the best teacher that I have had in my life, provide succinct examples of each of the qualities of a good teacher, and also some insight into the path to become a great teacher.

A good teacher:

- 1) Knows the material
- 2) Has the expectation that the student will learn.
- 3) Sets conditions for learning
- 4) Has multiple ways of giving feedback

While I think of these abilities as guideposts, when I teach I have an additional perspective. While creating a learning environment, I feel a great field of attention spread over the room, created by my teaching and the way the students attend, interact and discover. I am sensitive to subtle variations in this field of attention, some intentional and others spontaneous. I am aware of disturbances in the field, of anger, of impatience, of frustration and I will adjust my teaching with humor or a story or silence, whatever is needed, to remove obstacles and bring the field of attention back to learning and discovering.