

# Working With What's Missing

I have been a *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Instructor* for twenty years. It might seem obvious that I would have an active practice. In fact, I have never had one.

When I graduated from the training at 31 years old, I couldn't grow my practice fast enough to make a living. Once I realized that I would not be able to sustain myself and my family through *The Feldenkrais Method*, I resigned myself to doing occasional FI's in workshops and through referrals, publishing information about the Method for the general public, and bringing what I knew into the professional realms in which I worked, including music instruction.

Recently I was having a conversation with a journalist and musician who was unfamiliar with the Method, and he asked me how I use *Feldenkrais* with my piano students. This might seem obvious as well. And yet I found myself at a loss for how to explain exactly how I apply the Method to my music instruction.

My *Feldenkrais* mindset impacts the work I do with my students, both in my life as a music teacher in schools and as a private music instructor. My approach to the learning process, to self-improvement and to internal conflict is qualitatively different from that of most of my colleagues and has informed the way I teach. However, I could not have readily pointed to specific things I was doing with my students to address their self-image.

And yet that very week after my conversation with the journalist I found myself in a situation that was ideal for illustrating the connection between my teaching and my background as a Feldenkrais practitioner. I was working with one of my piano students on the Chopin *Scherzo No. 1, Op. 20*, a difficult piece which, like many Chopin works, tends to highlight our shortcomings as pianists, a characteristic which can both humiliate and enlighten us. My student found that she had to look down at her hands at certain places in the music, which interrupted her flow and caused her to miss notes.

I suggested to her that she make a list of all the places where she felt the need to look down. I said that these spots might share certain characteristics in common. I hypothesized that there might be places where we have to bring our hands which might make her uneasy in ways that were not directly related to the music.

We use several means of perception in order to play, adjust, and self-correct: we see our hands and the music notation, we hear the sounds of our playing, and we sense where our limbs are without having to look. Because this last, proprioceptive way of sensing is the most elusive, we sometimes take it for granted. And when our proprioceptive information is incomplete, resulting in an incomplete internal self-image, instead of us understanding that our picture is incomplete we tend to think what's missing was never there, and is not a part of us at all.

The virtuoso showman Liberace, for all his silliness, had an awe-inspiring sense of his body. If you watch his performances, especially the ones in which he sings to the camera, you can see him bring his left hand to a place on a piano well out of his range of vision. He had such a powerful sense of his body that he knew exactly where he was in relation to the piano at all times.

In contrast, the places where my student suddenly has to look down at her hands may in fact involve that section of the piano in which her body image is incomplete, where her

proprioception fails her, places where, to all intents and purposes, her hands have vanished from her perception. Faced with the sudden inability to sense where she is, she must use her eyes to compensate. She will need to overcome this deficit, possibly through somatic work, so that she can recognize the obvious, that she has a hole in her perception.

Yes, it was delightful to finally have a concrete, obvious example of how I use the Method to help my students. But what was even more astounding was also equally obvious, and equally elusive. The reason I was able to point this out to my student is because I was in the same situation.

My whole life I have been blessed with a clever left hand and an insecure right hand. In jazz, I could play a bass line almost from the beginning of my studies, but I have only begun soloing with my right hand to my satisfaction thirty years later. I am able to solo now because I have been able to begin to see the things about the situation that eluded me.

It would seem to be obvious that my left hand plays so well because I am more present on my left side than my right. That was always my assumption. The truth was more elusive.

Recently I played an audition with my daughter in which I played Schubert's *Standchen*, in which the left hand has to make unprepared leaps. A few of these leaps were problematic for me, and for no apparent reason. They were not terribly difficult, and yet I frequently missed them.

Keeping my student's dilemma in mind, it occurred to me that perhaps the place where I was asked to leap, the place I kept missing, was a kind of a dead spot in my awareness, a place I couldn't feel my hand. What is especially interesting is that I have bone loss in my lower gums along the same vertical line as those spots at the piano. Were there other tell-tale signs?

Investigating my vision, I find the world on my left side appears dead. I can "see" out of my left eye, but the images don't reach me the same way. I don't accept the images on my left side as real, and I don't feel like I live in the world I see on the left.

Once I began putting the pieces together, I started rethinking my left-hand / right-hand dilemma. It occurred to me that my left hand has always been smarter because it's been operating in the dark, a blind man, and has had to compensate with a more highly developed sense of touch or sound. Meanwhile my right hand has been overwhelmed with sensation, and my vision on the right, where the terrifying audience always sits, has been all too real, hampering my ability. It is probably no coincidence that I have suffered from stage fright *far more on the piano* than as a singer or public speaker!

You'd think this would all be obvious. Clearly if "what's on the left isn't real," I'd spend my whole life not trusting it. But because I hadn't questioned my experience, the obvious remained hidden, and instead of thinking of the left side as a threat, what was on the left didn't exist at all.

Now I can see that the answer to all of these questions was visible, in plain sight, but not recognized. We perceive the world through a combination of sensory, intellectual and proprioceptive means. Because our perception *in toto* trumps any one aspect of perception, especially the all important vision, it's easy for the obvious to slip past us.

It is essential for Feldenkrais practitioners to understand that among our first priorities is to deal with this Elusive Obvious. More than a diagnosis, which identifies a problem in the self-

image that we can't explain, we seek out things that are not currently in the self-image. They may be present, but not recognized.

In his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, neurosurgeon Oliver Sacks relates the story of a man who awoke one day to find a leg in his bed. When he pushed the leg out of his bed, he fell out of the bed as well. He could not understand what had happened.

The leg was his own, clearly visible to him, clearly attached, obviously his. Because it was not part of his self-image, the obvious remained elusive to him. However humorous this story may appear to us, we all resemble this man to a lesser degree, and we all have parts that belong to us which we cannot identify and may not even perceive, but which nonetheless are attached to us and impact our lives.

The Method creates a systematic way to identify what's missing in the self-image: engagement of curiosity through an investigation of some kind of functional-behavior puzzle, either initiated by the practitioner's touch or the practitioner's words. The process of engaging in the solutions to these puzzles activates the nervous system and can force us to acknowledge and use the elusive and obvious parts of ourselves to solve them. A well-designed lesson will prevent us from solving the puzzle with what we already have available to us in our self-perception, so that we *must* recognize the elusive parts of ourselves in order to discover what becomes the obvious solution.

In our desire to legitimize the perception of our work through research and promotion, we will always be tempted to define ourselves in a way that is easy for everyone to understand. I suggest that we find a way to make our true aims visible in plain sight: we are discoverers of the elusive obvious. Our goals for the clients are often elusive to them, and sometimes to us as well.