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Who Me? Afraid?

The clown sits on the stage, broom in hand, debris everywhere, underwear on her head, the broken stool teetering under her as she adjusts her smashed hat. Everything that could go wrong has...to the audience's delight. Because a clown is only successful when she has failed miserably.

Yet many people live in fear of failure, or worse, looking like a fool. Whether it is the result of education, conditioning, or trauma, we valiantly protect our self-image by tightening up, literally "holding ourselves together", or as one of my clients recently expressed, "waiting for the other shoe to drop." (This is an 19th century American expression that comes from the experience of people living in apartments on top of each other. At night, you could hear the upstairs neighbor take off a shoe and drop it on the floor, and then the next. The shoes must have been rather heavy to create such a sense of anticipatory anxiety that it crept into our slang!) I picture the clown desperately trying to put the shoe on....her nose.

Because that's what we do, right? I want to write a novel, but instead I clean the refrigerator. I want to quit my job, but I am afraid to admit I'm afraid, so I develop other habits – drinking, TV binging, anything to not do the thing I say I wish to do. Fear: of failure, abandonment, the unknown, turns the body/mind/emotions into a frozen wasteland of tension, protective habits and emotional and physical pain.

In the first year of my Feldenkrais training, I approached one of my trainers, the late Mark Reese, now known in the Feldenkrais community as the author of the exhaustive biography of Moshe Feldenkrais. "I want to be a writer," I said. "Do you have any suggestions on how I should begin?" He shrugged and said, "Write. Just write," and he walked away, leaving me

awkwardly standing there. I had hoped for...what? Exercises? Reassurance? Maybe a compliment? The truth was, I was afraid to start.

And now, after writing for thirty years, I think I am becoming a writer, realizing my “avowed and unavowed dreams.” The practice of Awareness Through Movement has supported me throughout this process. Learning to let go of physical tensions, and as Feldenkrais called them, “parasitic habits” can help anyone let go of anxiety, fear, and in order to live an elegant, dignified life. Feldenkrais wrote extensively about what he called anxiety patterns and the inappropriate distribution of tonus that keeps us trapped in self-defeating behavior.

It seems that neuroscience and psychology is only now connecting the ability to sense one’s physical state to better understand and relieve emotional anxiety. Surely anxiety patterns in the body are connected to the emotional experience we call anxiety! In a recent podcast¹, Jud Brewer, author of the book, *Unwinding Anxiety*, spoke of “replacing somatic reward,” in other words, examining the physical habits associated with an emotion and finding another sensation that feels better. “So if I’m feeling anxious, I can just feel into my body and ask myself, OK, where do I feel this anxiety more strongly? For a lot of folks, they feel it in their chest. Sometimes I’ll feel it in my — if I’m stressed, I’ll feel it my shoulders, or my jaw, or even in my eyes tensing. And then I can get curious and say, OK, where do I feel it more, on the left side or the right side of my body?

And then my brain goes, well, I don’t know. Let’s explore. Is it more on the right side or the left side? The answer doesn’t matter, but that little hmm is that indication that we’re starting to get curious as we explore our body sensations. That’s what I mean by injecting a little bit of curiosity.”

Sounds a bit like a Feldenkrais scan!

Compare this to what Feldenkrais said in *The Potent Self*²:

“In compulsive behavior, we are aware of inner tension and resistance; we feel strain when acting the way we do. This strain is always expressed through muscular tension of the muscles of the face, the neck, the abdomen, the fingers, or the toes that can easily be detected if looked for.”

Of course, he goes into much more detail, but his clear understanding of the physical relationship to the experience of inner tension is perhaps 80 years ahead of its time.

The Feldenkrais Method has many applications, from supporting special needs children to helping people recover from injury or trauma. And as Dr. Freud said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Pain is real, and is often the result of physical situations and challenges.

But often students come because of unexplainable physical pain. In the US, the Feldenkrais Method is often a last resort. It is expensive, not covered by insurance and the name is difficult and sometimes intimidating to pronounce. People sometimes inadvertently add a “t” to the end, making it sound like Felden-Christ, and fear they will be indoctrinated into a religious cult. Or they are afraid that it is some strange, foreign pseudo-medicine, even though we all call it somatic EDUCATION. They come because nothing else worked. Or because they have seen how a friend of theirs has blossomed. They want to feel good.

They soon realize that many of their postural challenges, or chronic back problems, or TMJD are connected to anxiety patterns related to worry, rumination, catastrophizing and more. Often, just experiencing the sensation of support for the tense muscles, or learning how to do a scan, starts a person on a path to freedom from habitual physical and emotional discomfort. This is often accompanied by laughter, tears, gratitude, hope, surprise and even rage!

There is a formula in comedy. The protagonists find themselves in a plot nightmare. The door is locked. The fiancé is with her best friend. The car is filled with pasta sauce. The worse it gets,

the more we laugh. Just like the clown's dilemma. Yet, when it comes to our own lives, it doesn't feel funny. We live in fear, worrying about the job, the children, the strange pain in the groin, the arrival of our parents, the deadline. Sometimes, when the other shoe drops, it's a relief. You get fired, receive the diagnosis, the parent dies. The worst has happened. But the habit of anxiety is so powerful, you quickly find another situation to worry about. It would be funny if it didn't feel so bad.

We are not psychotherapists. We are teachers and listeners. Is it possible to really listen to what a student is saying with both words and movement, without judgment, without jumping to conclusions? Can we trust our observations and at the same time, be open to what the client is presenting? Can we recognize the manifestations of the anxiety patterns and help our students discover their own obstacles and possibilities?

The Feldenkrais Method can help people begin to recognize habitual anxiety patterns, and develop awareness of what triggers the pain loop. Feldenkrais lessons also offer a way to interrupt habitual behavior without needing analysis or explanations. Using Feldenkrais learning principles: following curiosity, not going beyond perceived limitations, sensing breath and contact, exploring the use of constraint, etc, can allow anyone to live life with joy instead of fear.

One of the most powerful learning principles of our work can often be perceived as a paradox: investing in failure. Unlike the clown, who never learns, we allow ourselves to fail in order to learn new and better strategies. Fear of failure is right up there with fear of falling – two apparently irreversible situations. By learning to fall well, and to fail well, we develop resilience, or as Feldenkrais put it, “the ability to recover from shock.” In our safe learning environment, we explore options without being attached to success, or being afraid of “doing it wrong”. We practice letting go of our holding patterns so that when we find ourselves in an anxiety provoking situation, we can change the potential “nightmare” by letting go, because we know how to recover.

Neuroscience is also catching up with Moshe's suggestion to "do it badly." In a recent podcast³, Neuroscientist Andrew Huberman of Stanford University in California said, "Errors, and making errors out of sync with what we'd like to do is how our nervous system is cued, through a very distinct biological mechanism, that something isn't going right, and therefore, certain neurochemicals are deployed that signal the neural circuits that they have to change.....Making errors over, and over and over again is the route to shaping your nervous system so that it performs better, and better and better."

What I wish for our profession is for my colleagues to apply these same principles to their practice. I often see fellow practitioners hold themselves back from speaking about the work, because they are afraid of being inarticulate, afraid to try something new with a client in case it doesn't work, afraid to look foolish at an advanced training because they don't want to be judged by the trainer, afraid to try a new lesson with a group because they don't feel experienced enough. Yet, we are the model for our students. We are the face of the Feldenkrais Method. We can help others with their fear and anxiety patterns. Let's also be willing to risk learning about our own. We teach what we need to learn. And you can't learn anything if you are afraid to try!

¹ Anxious? Me, Too. This Conversation Could Help.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/podcasts/ezra-klein-podcast-judson-brewer-transcript.html>

² Feldenkrais, Moshe, The Potent Self, pg. 12

³ **Huberman, Andrew**, Using Failures, Movement & Balance to Learn Faster | Huberman Lab Podcast #7 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hx3U64IXFOY&t=1s>