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Pelko

Dealing with fear in the work of a Feldenkrais Practitioner

I am Raisa Vennamo, dancer-choreographer and Feldenkrais practitioner. I live and work in Finland, mainly in the Helsinki metropolitan area and in the North Karelia region in Eastern Finland. Movement and movement experientialism have been my way of perceiving the world and expressing myself since childhood. Words have crept in as an expression of existence over the years. My relationship with language has been enriched as my perception of movement has become more accurate, and ATM teaching has also developed my language, deepening my relationship with words. It is therefore a welcome challenge in my writing to try to verbalize the embodied experience of fear and how to deal with fear. My perspective is based on my own experience and the fears I have encountered in my work as a Feldenkrais practitioner. The fears that I deal with are the fear of losing control, of falling apart and the fear of encountering another person in social situations.

Emotions and embodied recognition, this is a terrain that I have an important learning experience from 24 years ago. During my Feldenkrais training in Strasbourg, we had a small group work theme of living different emotional states and observing the associated bodily changes and reactions. I was very inspired by the exercise, I was immediately hooked on the work. I remember as if it were yesterday a powerful insight about the corners of my mouth, as soon as I am insecure and fearful the corners of my mouth curve into a smile. I realised then that a certain shade of smile is organically linked to fear in me. It may appear to others as a smile but now I recognise it internally as a certain kind of grimace. Another self-revealing and important discovery at the time was the relationship of fear to my hips. The experience of the materiality of the pelvis disappeared as I became immersed in the feeling of fear, becoming weightless and ethereal in my pelvis, an absent presence. I withdrew from what constitutes the core of my experience of selfhood, the connection to my physical ecosystem, my internal organs, the knowledge of my gut ecosystem.

This exercise and my observations revealed to me something essential about the nature of fear, fear changes my actions and my relationship to my experience of self. It also revealed to me something essential about being human, about the material dimension of emotion as part of the self.

My father taught me that you have to try to face fear. He told me a memory from his youth. It was a summer night, he woke up and saw a white ghost on a chair in the room. It was terrifying, frightening and downright paralyzed him. Finally, my father gathered his courage and got up with the intention of confronting the ghost. It turned out to be a white collared shirt he had thrown on the chair that evening. For my father, this was an important learning experience. The story made such a strong impression on me, I was so moved by it that, almost 60 years later, I can still see my visualisation of the situation vividly in my mind's eye. However, I have come to realise that it is difficult to be aware of one's deepest fears, they are easily buried out of sight. But they can be accessed by observing your own bodily reactions and changes. Through my Feldenkrais work, my deepened bodily articulation has helped me to recognise my fears. I still notice when the corners of my mouth twist into an involuntary smile and my sense of materiality diminishes. However, nowadays it is easier to

choose a movement and step towards the fear. And the fact that I've learned to move more and more effortlessly from stillness to movement helps me to engage and face situations.

For me, encounter is at the heart of my Feldenkrais work. That I am able to meet my clients as openly, directly and with as few obstacles as possible. That I am able to open myself to the situation. This has been a challenge for me because meeting another person has been scary for me. Social situations have been tiring, and still are at times. The fear of failure in my work is also a familiar friend.

When I meet a new FI client we usually classically sit face to face at first. In this case, I have to be vigilant about the corners of my mouth. When I relax my mouth it's amazing how my ability to be present and confront deepens. Similarly, I take care of the grounding in my hips, trying to sense my touch on the seat. And to keep moving so that my client's being and state can stimulate my own movement to receive and respond. I have learned to use physical means to create a state of trust in myself so that in the encounter I have no worries. The important thing has been to understand that everything is in motion all the time and that I am always in motion.

It has been a long and interesting journey. Essential to this process have been the countless hours and years of working on my ATM, do less, don't try, stop evaluating. Feldenkrais work has changed me a lot. I have found more gentleness, tolerance, grace, and have learned to be more aware of myself, able to choose. This all helps in dealing with fear. The physical experience mirrors the thinking and the thinking in turn mirrors the physical experience. When working with the new and the unknown, I try to identify whether the fear I may be experiencing is primarily fear of losing control and falling apart, or fear of failure. In the fear of not knowing, the sense of bodily presence is lost and the fear of failure in turn freezes me. Both interfere with movement and free flow. I experience this strongly in performance situations on stage. If fear takes over, the sense of physical presence and material self disappears and movement loses its meaning. Movement has no relation to anything, neither to oneself nor to the environment. Creativity and spontaneity, on the other hand, are directly linked to sensory sensitivity and a sense of material self. The sense of the bones supports the experience of presence and from it, meanings emerge, connections are made. In order to overcome fear, it is necessary to grasp the sensation that leads to a path of encounter and relationship between self and environment.

The desire to succeed and to do better stimulates effort and endeavour. All too familiar to my trained dancing self. The first reason I got excited about working with Feldenkrais was that there was no need to try, no need to be better all the time. These classes were taught by Scott Clark in 1994 in Helsinki at the Theatre Academy's continuing education course. The class didn't make me feel good or euphoric, I was just so relieved to get a break from the idea that I should be better. The opportunity to be in motion with a permissive attitude felt like a heavenly gift. It took me a while to learn how to work in a way that made me feel good physically. The journey has been transformative. And I can still marvel at how much more sensitive my hands feel when I try less.

ATM teaching was easier for me in the early days of my work than private coaching. Group teaching was a familiar working situation from my dance years. The structure of the ATM class provided security, and the fact that the participants were working with their eyes closed gave me space and security, not having to face the whole time. I felt I was on top of the situation, so to speak, I could control the class. I found flow, spontaneity and freedom in

my teaching from the early years of my work and enjoyed the feeling of being able to touch others with my words. And the interaction just keeps growing every year, a wonderful feeling! Diligence has also been important, I taught up to ten ATM hours a week intermittently after I graduated. It took a lot of work to absorb all the lessons. I personally feel that repetition is important, familiar mechanisms and pathways emerge. It brings security and dispels fear.

FI work has slowly unfolded for me through years of doing it. Looking back now I see that I was afraid of FI guidance for many years. Precisely that I would lose control of the situation, and also that I would not make enough changes in my client. This was despite the fact that countless times in my training I had been instructed to do less, trust the process, sense and wait. FI? When I give classes, feeling my pelvis is important to me, that at times I return myself to my pelvis and wait for my breath, that I don't rush my breath. At the same time, I also give space and time to my client. If I start to get stuck I immediately remind myself to do less, drop and give up. These are all tools I have created for myself while doing ATM classes.

But for me, perhaps the most important thing is to remember that everything is always changing, everything is in motion, and that this motion itself is life in concrete terms. So the need to control and be controlled has given way to trust in change and movement. Constant change is an adventure, and sensation in this change is a refuge and a home. In my own embodiment, understanding how the foot and hand function as part of the same whole has dispelled the fear of disintegration, I am able to perceive in myself the spatial relationships between hand and foot and the internal connections within the body. I am fundamentally a whole, I don't need to try to be a whole. There is room for spontaneity. I think spontaneity requires that thinking, remembering, sensing, perceiving and emotion work smoothly in overlapping and interleaved ways so that all layers of the self are actively involved in processing the situation. The best FI hours occur when you dare to jump into the void in free interaction, staying in motion and responding to the moment with your whole self.

One more reminder about fear and how to manage it through body awareness. I practice budo, a martial art called Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu. We travelled to Tokyo to the Hombu dojo and at my teacher's suggestion my goal there was to do a godan test. This is a test where the candidate sits with his back to the sword and dodges a sword strike from behind. On my very first night at the dojo I signed up to be a tester. I got a few chances, but I was nowhere near surviving. I felt fear take over me, fear of many kinds. My body consciousness disappeared, I was anticipatory and reactive, not present in the moment, I was in a panic that was felt as restlessness, fluttering, confusion in my chest area, there was no grounding and I was trying hard to sense the blow from behind my back. I felt that it was completely impossible for me to feel. I was in Tokyo for a week and the very next night I decided that I could try again on the last night, and if I passed ok, if not, it would be for the future. This week then became an intense process and learning experience. I attended practice at the dojo every day and kept, while practicing, the test out of my mind. But in the evening alone the issue always came up in front of me. And I processed my reactions, made a break in my thoughts and learned. I learned that my terror had prevented me from moving to the side, the feeling of the sword's power was within my grasp but in my mind I was only sinking under its force, not moving. But I trusted my teacher's assessment that I was ready for the test. So I sought help from my bodily insight, strengthened my ability to reset my hips and clear my mind of any attempt. I realised that I could not move sideways if I was not free in my chest and therefore alert.

On the last night, I signed up again to be an examiner. I sat down and dropped into the feeling of my hips, clearing my mind. I dodged, and I was told I did it with elegance and without any hurry or worry. In fact, I don't consciously know what happened, only the moment when I was turning to the right is registered in my conscious mind. Never before or since have I experienced in my life such smoothness committed to the blink of an eye, this memory of movement is perhaps a fraction of a second. Moshe Feldenkrais was a budo master and I experience great similarities between budo (martial arts) and the Feldenkrais method.

In the weeks since I have been writing this article, I have had a new client come to me for private lessons. A young man, at the suggestion of his therapist. According to his own account, he suffers from a fear of being physically present, not daring to recognise his own physicality and avoiding his sensations. However, our conversation has been open, as he is used to expressing his thoughts. When I touch him, I can clearly sense when he is reserved, absent, not responding to my touch, and when he is giving himself up to recognition and confrontation. It is essential to our encounter that I, as a counsellor, am able to come to terms with my own fears, to resolve them within myself and to face them openly because I believe that a great deal of non-verbal information is transmitted in the contact between two people. By feeling safe myself, I can support my client towards the same process. In our last meeting we had a hard time settling into physical communication, it took me a while to get his non-verbal permission to touch, I had to really face myself, many times reminding myself to try less and trust the presence. I wasn't afraid, but the situation carried the danger of overdoing it. The lesson before this one had been a stunningly open and vivid, unhindered dive into encounter and happening. At this last meeting, we both must have had hopes and memories of the previous fruitful lesson. The processes of the two lessons were so different, the first a direct dive into the event, the second a trust slowly building over time. Great and fruitful both processes!

In order to manage my fears I have learned that it is also important to be able to set clear boundaries for myself if the client situation becomes too hard for me. In some situations, too much empathy is bad. When I can protect myself by recognizing my own boundaries I am able to be a safer reflection surface for others. If I notice my sense of presence in a situation changing in an undesirable direction, for example, I lose interest in what I am doing, I become a little tired, I feel a flicker of diligency, I find myself trying or wanting too much, I immediately make a new choice. I switch to another body part, change the rhythm, the intensity of the touch, some obvious change. I am no longer afraid that something will break, I understand that the work situation is truly an encounter between two people, where the needs of both must be respected, including myself. I have found a lot of joy and lightness in my work, a shared joy with my client.

As a fruit of years of Feldenkrais work, I have learned to thirst for an encounter, something I was quite afraid of at the beginning of my work!