

**Jeff Haller**

## **Adventures in True Gravity**

Recent Explorations in the Feldenkrais Method®

“True Gravity,” a term coined by Michael Murphy in his book „Golf in the Kingdom“ (published 1971) related to terms we use today, such as “flow states,” or being “in the zone”—terms we use to describe when a person enters into a state of organization unburdened by history, to play or express oneself in a way beyond one’s normal day-to-day capacities. True Gravity could be described as aligning human consciousness with universal principles so that one could come to a “mystical” expression of the divine. From a simple Feldenkrais Method perspective, True Gravity relates in a non-mystical way to a person engaged in life without superfluous effort, free from the burden of past issues, expressing their hidden potential in action. Here is how Dennis Leri describes this:

“In doing the Feldenkrais Method we must be careful not to bow to what’s culturally trendy and fashionable or pander to the cult of victimization. If we for an instant realize that our lives could be different and if we further realize the means to make it so, then we know it can be so for others also. Make no mistake about it, to achieve even a brief independence from our heritage is to realize the fruits of learning how to learn. Even a fleeting severance of ourselves from our conditioning can mark a stunning passage from ungrounded delusion or drowsy disillusionment to one of unadorned worldly engagement.” Last paragraph, <https://judoinfo.com/feldenkrais/>.

It is my understanding that the Feldenkrais Method is about helping a person come into a profound sense of wholeness, autonomy, and health. The work is complex, comprehensive, and supports a person to have the resources to live in such a way that they are untethered and non-identified with the past and who can utilize the past as a source of wisdom, awake to their own inner potential to learn and grow, and who has the resources to meet the uncertainty and chaos of life and thrive. In the very least, the Feldenkrais Method helps people with physical integrity and emotional dignity.

### **Recent Case Histories**

It is a fundamental principle of the Feldenkrais Method that we help a person generalize into their whole life that which they do perfectly in some lesser area of their life.

### **BF**

I met with BF at a golf course; he was standing on the edge of a putting green near Palm Beach, Florida. His presence in that moment was like any master I have ever been near. He played golf many years on the Professional Golf Association (PGA) tour and often was the number one player for strokes gained putting the golf ball. He now teaches putting to other professional golfers.

He came onto the green and rolled three putts to a regular-sized golf hole about 6 plus meters away, with each ball stopping a few centimeters from the hole. The fourth went in. He then turned his attention to a hole for training putting accuracy, about 4 meters away, a hole just larger than the diameter of a golf ball. He then, simply, rolled the next three putts into the hole, one on top of the other. Now this is a bit difficult to grasp, but metaphorically stated, there was not a putter in his hand to manipulate, or a material golf ball to hit to a hole, or a hole cut into the green. He was simply the complete image of the moment and that image expressed itself in “true gravity.” Pure simplicity. Watching him, the putter had no weight. He incorporated it so completely into his image of action that the wholeness of himself, with such a clear distribution of muscle tone, was not divided into segments of action. It was just whole and complete. He played this part of the golf game with inspiration and perfection. His putter was as much a part of himself as their stick is to a blind person. His skill had blossomed years before when a single seed of thought was given to him by another golf professional who was known for their great ability to putt a golf ball. That pro had simply told him that you don’t stand still when putting. That seed opened the gates into BF’s other worldly talent. It is a commonly held belief in golf that one stays still when putting, only moving the shoulders and arms to move the putter.

After our meeting on the putting green, we then went to the driving range to hit balls using the rest of the other 13 clubs in a golf bag. There he came into a ragged and for me an unexpected twist of self-expression. Here, we need to understand a bit of his personal history. He was raised in a way that he could not trust the messages he was given by his parents. He looked outwardly for attention and sought to prove his worth through the outcomes of his athletic prowess in golf and table tennis (he competed in national championship events). With a wild curiosity and shifting attention span he sought teachers and techniques to develop his golf swing, which came together at times but was inconsistent and did not hold up in the heat of competition. In the modern way of learning golf, with so much computer analysis of movement and theories of the golf swing, it is easy to get lost in trying to master elements of the swing, to try and put pieces of the swing together, to separate one’s attention from the whole into parts. This is exactly the opposite of how he lived on the putting green where there was no internal division, just whole expression.

It was on the practice range that he and I began to explore “true gravity” and entered into the realm and practice of Functional Integration®. How could I help him transfer the quality of what he did perfectly in putting, to him organizing a whole completely integrated golf swing, one that brought thinking, sensing, feeling and action into a seamless whole, a state where he could live and express his imagination like he did when putting?

We began by going back and forth between the green for putting and the practice tee. When we were on the putting green, I had BF tune into how he lifted the whole of himself through his skeleton so that he embraced his putter and putting. He did not grip it or hold the putter as an external object to manipulate, but joined with it to have it not be just a part of himself, but a living expression of himself. Clearly the club was weightless to him because he spread his attention and muscular tone so proportionately and evenly that the club was simply himself. I asked him to notice his connection, not with his feet to the ground, but

rather how from under his feet he found the support of the ground, and how he was alive in his interaction with the ground. I asked him to notice how his connection with the ground afforded him the source from which he could bring his putting to life.

Can we take a bit of a detour here for a moment to think about gravity and further our understanding about the principle of reversibility and how it applies here in this instance? In general, when we ask people about attending to their feet, they move their attention from caudal to cephalic or from tail to head. They think of their selves as being over their feet. When you ask most people about grounding, they think in terms of going down to the ground, to lower their center of gravity down toward the earth. This is in contrast to the thinking in the Tai Chi classics teaching where one learns to “borrow” from the earth when moving, to draw the earth’s energy up into us. In the 1950’s Moshe delivered two lectures at the Copenhagen Congress of Functional Movement and Relaxation. (Embodied Wisdom, Elizabeth Beringer) While these lectures are instrumental in understanding Moshe’s early thinking about Awareness Through Movement and Functional Integration, they are incomplete. The last page is missing which contains the mathematical derivatives for reversibility. For whatever reason, my colleague Roger Russell has the last page in German so we could find the meaning of the text. Most people in the Feldenkrais community consider a movement to be reversible when they can return through the path they came from while being able to start and reverse the movement at any point along the pathway. Moshe had a much more complete idea. In his derivatives, Moshe solved his equations to demonstrate that reversibility takes place when at any point of a movement the ground forces lift through the skeleton in such a way that at any point in the movement the ground forces equal the force of gravity. At any point a person stops moving, there is no work. There is no experience of effort. The organization of the whole is such that the forces are distributed proportionately and evenly, no place working harder than any other, and at any point of stopping one can reverse direction or move to another without hesitation or additional preparation. It is a significant challenge for us as practitioners to shift from thinking about how to be over our feet to discovering how we find our skeletal support from under our feet up and through us. Our muscular tone is always derived from the specificity of the support we find from the surface we are balanced on. That applies to all surfaces in how our interaction with the surface affords us the specificity, clarity, and efficiency in how we will organize our self to move from any orientation to any other orientation.

Back from that detour, all brilliant action is dependent of the specificity with which we find support from the surface with which we interact. With deep listening BF could sense the pure image of action that was represented in his connection with his feet, how the underside of his feet were supported by the earth. Hitting a putt that will roll from right to left is experienced with connection to the ground that is different from hitting a putt that rolls from left to right as the contour of a green indicates. Short putts are different from long, downhill different from uphill. With BF, all possibilities were experienced as a whole synergistic image.

On the practice range it was a different story. He wanted to set up a swing monitor to gain information about his swing speed, ball spin rate, how to initiate the action, swing plane, distance of his back swing, spinal turn, etc. shifting and shuffling through the vast data that he had attempted to assimilate in his years of training. He was going in and out of thoughts

so quickly that simple integration was improbable and the inconsistency with which he hit golf balls was apparent. Each thought created a muscular response with superfluous tension that did not meet the moment that was right then and there. He was disassociated mentally and not connected into a whole synergistic image that fit the moment. Moshe was known for saying, "Thinking that does not lead to a change of action, is simply cerebration." (Amherst, lecture, "Talking is not Thinking") He also stated that we want to develop a mind that works for us and not against us.

We could experience the contrast of what BF did perfectly when putting, with the frenetic pace of practice he entered into when hitting golf shots. I asked him what would it be like if he could simply embrace a golf club as he did a putter. What would it be for him to find his feet relating to the ground with a golf club as he did with a putter? Could he step into the whole image of striking a golf ball from the whole of sense of being and presence, as he did with his putter? As he stepped into shots, I asked him to notice the moment he went from being in the image of the shot into "hitting" the shot. I asked him to notice when he shifted from embracing the club into gripping the club with the intention to create an outcome.

Additionally, When BF attempted to escape into the safety of his mental machinations, I interrupted him asking if when he plays table tennis does he question how he holds the paddle, worry about his spine angle, how his feet are supporting him, etc? He answered, "no, of course not. I simply play." There is no time in a table tennis game to think about how you hold the paddle, what your spine angle is, how your feet connect with the ground, how you will shape yourself to hit the shots in a game. Of course, table tennis contrasts with golf. Table tennis is a game of responding to a moving ball. The dimensions of the table are set. Golf is played over a continuously changing sprawling landscape and the player organizes himself relative to the changing external conditions to a ball that is lying still on the ground. BF and I were, in the moment of contrasting the paradigm of doing for outcome, of performing, with the paradigm of being whole in one's self-image.

"We act in accordance with our self-image. This self-image—which in turn, governs our ever act—is conditioned in varying degree by three factors: heritage, education, and self-education." (*Awareness Through Movement* book, p3)

It was a good session; he welcomed the learning and had some pure moments of hitting the ball well. The next day we met at his house and my FI® table. Here, a much deeper exploration could take place. In his years of professional golf and activity he had a number of stress-related injuries and surgeries, a bunion operation, knee surgery, and back pain. His shifting attention led to patterns of tension that were parasitic, working against simplicity and efficiency. In our FI communion we discovered greater clarity in how he could find a much clearer internal representation of his skeleton so he could experience a simple tone that gave him a great sense of lightness, ease, increased sense of three-dimensionality, and enhanced sense of being connected with his surrounding environment. He was alive, awake, and whole in the moment. He was master of the realm, like when he walks on the putting green, and because he was so associated with the experience, we could go back to the driving range and he could enter into—not "practice" with the outcomes in mind but into the process of being in self-expression, in whole embodied imagination. It was glorious, a real breathtaking journey. For a brief moment we could experience "true gravity," where his

expression of whole was much greater than sum of his parts. I hope BF and I get to continue our dialogue and discovery into the mystery of "Golf in the Kingdom." I am pretty sure he will find a way to translate his experience into his teaching.

A brief note for Feldenkrais practitioners. The lessons with BF were not about making him more mobile. It was about him functioning in his life, environment, and within himself creating a new future for himself. In order to work with BF it helps that I understand the physics and principles of movement that will help him learn and move forward transcending the disturbances that interfere with his native ability. One does not need to know how to play golf to be an effective Feldenkrais teacher, but one needs to grasp the questions, "What is function and how does it relate to Functional Integration?" One has to understand that hitting golf balls off a perfectly flat cultivated surface is not like coming to the course from a family, playing in front of crowds, communicating with a caddy, playing for one's livelihood, etc. just like all of life where we fend for ourselves.

### **SM**

One of my colleagues is a man, AO, who is a National Hockey League (NHL) hall of fame hockey player, who has a business helping NHL hockey players and other age groups learn to refine their situational hockey skills and enhance their motor skills. I often work with him and the players he sends me, especially to help them recover from injury. Imagine playing a game on ice where the speed of play is such that a player moves 3 plus meters in less than a tenth of a second, skates all directions, holds a stick with a curved end manipulating a puck the size of a biscuit, in an arena where playing billiards with the puck off the walls is a part of how offense and defense are played. All this is complicated by the fact that guys can legally hit you to interrupt your progress. In the world of professional sport, it may well be the most difficult and comprehensive game that is played and I have found that most of the players I have met have an uncommon 3-dimensional intelligence.

AO called me and asked if I would work with one of his students. It turns out that SM, 23 years old, plays hockey for the American Hockey League (AHL), the league where players train to move up to the NHL. For those players in the AHL the clock is ticking. Hockey careers are often short and 23 years of age is nearing the end of time that a player will be called up into the "big leagues." SM has had a rough road on the way to reaching his dreams. At the age of 19, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer and spent a year recovering from surgery and chemo-therapy. Returning to play, he developed a sports related hernia on the opposite side as his testicular cancer. During the surgical repair for the hernia the surgeon discovered that the inguinal nerve was trapped in scar tissue. The surgeon removed the nerve. I leave it to you to look up what the inguinal nerve supplies but it effected his ability to find support in his upper thigh and groin area. Later an MRI which was misread showed a tear in the labrum for his right hip joint.

SM by all accounts is a stellar talent as a hockey player whose injuries have kept him from reaching his potential. When I was asked to see him, he was skating and playing with considerable pain in his hip and groin. I agreed to travel to where he was training and spend a week with him.

SM was understandably compromised in his movement and self-support. He had developed significant compensations, physically, mentally, and emotionally. He was up against the timeline of his age and chance to make his dreams of playing in the NHL. The clock was and is ticking. We began to investigate Functional Integration and Awareness Through Movement lessons. For three days he did not go to practice and we worked to help him discover skeletal support that was not diminished by pain so he could simply walk, lifted out of compensation into lightness. The following quote from Dr. Feldenkrais on tonic adjustment is my guide for how I begin to work with my clients:

“Phasic movements are normally not attempted until after considerable tonic apprenticeship. The corrections of the kinaesthetic sense and control should be well on the way before phasic movements are taught, so that properly integrated responses to gravitation are spontaneously elicited.” (Body and Mature Behavior, p 126)

In our lessons we worked to discover a clarity of support that was available to him that gave him a sense of skill, control, and pleasure.

On the fourth day SM went back to practice. He was able to skate and participate in practice without discomfort. He was elated when he returned home. Perhaps he was on the road to recovery and could move forward. The following day it all fell apart. Pain returned in his skating. He went from being emotionally high to being devastated, the lowest of lows and here is where our true work for the week began.

I came into the room where my table was and was confronted by a bitterly angry, frustrated and devastated young man. SM had been through so much for three years of trying to recover his abilities so he could move on with his stated dreams, but perhaps not his undiscovered un-avowed dreams. Trauma can be described as being faced with a situation that you don't have the means and resources to meet, and the experience changes your brain. (I have no idea where that quote came from.) For three years SM was attempting to meet his situation with the personal and emotional skills he had acquired as he grew up and became highly regarded for his hockey abilities. In his development he faced little adversity. His family was well off. He had access to the best equipment and training circumstances. He was physically gifted, lived in an area of Canada where hockey was the major sport. Then as we say, life happened. He had no preparation or emotional resources to meet the circumstances he found himself in.

For those of us who have matured somewhat we know that if we are quiet, composed, with a profound sense of our own autonomy we know that we can be with emotional disturbance and know it will dissolve, if we stay with it. With time we can emerge from the pain with resolve strengthened and made more complete in our connection with being. We can watch our mind seek answers. We can observe the way that emotional pain and underlying fear energize us into a mobius loop of self-protection and self-preservation. We can watch the way we seek to shelter ourselves from further harm and seek an outcome that will provide relief. If we are somewhat less mature, we seek ways we become overtly self-protective or internally sheltered, the commonly used term is “frozen”. We tend to justify our defense, project anger outward, or use some form of narcotizing ourselves to alleviate the pain we experience. We simply do not have the internal means to meet the pain we

experience and have to rely on past incomplete emotional responses to meet the new, much greater challenge. We are not prepared or resourceful enough for the moment and we are either fortunate to learn how to grow and temper ourselves or we live a profoundly restricted life.

SM was at a turning point. He was profoundly hurt, experiencing tragic loss and was going through every thought and emotion that passed through him. There was little I could say other than to help him bring his attention to being present to what he was experiencing. So damn hard to do, a skill I still struggle with, in certain areas of my life. I am not ashamed to admit. One has to face one's own imprisonment to ego and live with your own failings. I did my best to lay out a new context and paradigm for SM, one in which he could be with his thoughts and emotions. After a period of time and he had settled enough I suggested we have a FI lesson. He came to the table and I can tell you the work was profound. As the lesson emerged, me simply providing support and touch to increase his three-dimensional sense of himself, to move him from "being in his troubled mind" to finding new support from the surface of the table. His weight distribution spread out over the surface and his balance improved. We don't think of this so much as practitioners, but no matter where and how a person is supported their balance system is intact and determining a person's sense of support and safety. Normally we think that if a person is lying on a table, they are stable and supported but this is not so. People lie on the table in the way that affords them their historical sense of safety but not necessarily the organization from which true inner security and freedom arises, the means to move to the next position without hesitation. Very gradually for SM and me, the lesson emerged between us whereby he could roll with complete ease to the right and left as if to get up from the table. He found support in the areas that were vague to him so he could interact through his ribs with the table that his movement was more or less symmetrical. His balance changed and he could organize himself, his back, ribs, torso, legs, head, and arms as a co-ordinated whole, and he could quietly rest, his breath became more complete simply because the tension he had experienced was altered from a state of self-protection to one of possibility. When he came to the table he was in a state of stress and disequilibrium. His limbic system was fully engaged to give him a protected sense of safety, and then we entered into the world of functional thinking and self-discovery.

To me, a Feldenkrais lesson, is the process of asking questions in such a way that a person begins to internally find a potential that has been hidden to them. In general, the role of the limbic system is to give a person a sense of safety and helps preserve their known self-image—even if that self-image is ultimately destructive to them. The self-image will not change easily, even if new and more refined alternate behaviors are made known to them. When we invoke a person's attention in a Feldenkrais lesson, we help them engage their prefrontal cortex. The attributes of the prefrontal cortex are that it has the ability to make distinctions, note differences, seeks novelty, supports imagination and spontaneity, and when engaged serves to modulate the limbic system. (From notes of lectures on Feldenkrais and the Brain, given by Roger Russell in lectures given to my Feldenkrais Training Academy professional training.) It is our job as Feldenkrais teachers to support a person finding their own autonomy, integrity, and dignity.

As SM merged more and more into lesson we were having, his limbic system became modulated, moved into the background. He became more and more attentive to the details of the lesson that I directed his attention to so he could consciously find better support and utilization of the surface of the table to enact rolling, his breath became more his own, not the breath of self-protection. His features became calm and at the end of the lesson he was in a state of tranquility. He was flushed with a completely different innervation than the innervation driven by loss, tragedy, and self-preservation.

Here is the important part. When he sat up, he experienced himself with a significant contrast to the angry emotional space he had emerged from. Right there he was faced with the paradigm of his former self-image with his historical story and ego structure, with an opening into possible futures that offered a whole new world of possibility. We did not go through a therapeutic process to help him cope with the tragedy he was experiencing, in fact, we introduced a whole new neurological set of possibilities and neurological variations that were spread through his nervous system and that in turn provided him with a complete new image that served him in that moment. His own attention had given him another way of being in the moment. When he sat up, he was calm, present, whole, and able to glimpse a way through to whatever possible future awaits him, "true gravity". (It is worth rereading "Body and Mature Behavior" to grasp how Moshe responded to Freud's processes of curing people of anxiety through psychotherapy with his own way of lifting people into simplicity."

Since then, SM had the MRI I originally mentioned re-read by a competent physician who found that he had a significant tear of his labrum. He went through a cortico-steroid treatment of his hip that gave him two months of relief before the pain once again returned. He has recently had a surgery to repair his tear. He now knows all this is a part of his path, the future unknown. Since I left Chicago, SM has done an ATM a day from my online library. He has read Awareness Through Movement and is now reading the Potent Self. I am sending him a copy of Moshe Feldenkrais, My Life in Movement, and he is asking about how to train as a practitioner so that even if he does make it to the NHL he will be involved with his personal life work of self-discovery.

## **KW**

KW is now in her 70's. She has been a dancer since she was a child. She came to me a couple of years ago to help herself with being functional as she aged and continued dancing.

It is worth noting, that a great part of our lessons is to help her put together her image of herself so she could consciously support herself with clarity. In our most recent session, we were examining her ability to find support as she shifted weight from side to and to how she could lift onto her toes. As we were researching the principles of organizing ourselves to utilize ground forces through our skeleton to cancel gravity, a theme we keep exploring, she mentioned that she had a ballet teacher that had also tried to help her develop a similar physical composure. KW mentioned that she had never understood what her ballet teacher was talking about so she had simply used effort and force to achieve the outcome the class was offering. This general way of doing is well known to all of us.

As KW was lifting onto her toes, she was using her historic force and effort to lift. She was attempting to lift herself up and over her toes and using a lot of muscular effort to achieve



lifting. Moshe calls the effort superfluous in the Awareness Through Movement book in the chapter on Good Posture.

I suggested that she experiment with a different image of action. I showed her with a skeletal leg and foot that a different possibility existed for how she engaged the floor while lifting. If she could image that the ball of her foot, like a tire gaining traction and interacting with the floor, rolling the ball of her foot under the bones in her feet, up and through her, from the ground up, she would have a new way of lifting. And then she just did it. It was like she fell upward. She moved from the floor up and through herself, not trying to move over her feet.

The look of surprise on her face was priceless. 60 plus years of dance with effort dissolved in the moment and she realized what her ballet teacher had tried to explain to her all those years ago. In that moment her age dropped away and she was pristine in the simplicity of her experience, "true gravity". She was, in the moment, young, beautiful, and realized.

It is remarkable to be with a person when they realize the physical integrity that is available to them and how that shifts their internal sense of what is possible.