

Removing the Mask: The Reggio Emilia Approach in Comparison with The Feldenkrais Method

I am well-acquainted with masks. My mother lived with and eventually died from a case of Multiple Sclerosis so severe it took away her short-term memory and mobility for the last ten years of her life. My mother was incapable of hiding her symptoms from anyone, and yet the damage to her brain kept her in a state where she was in constant denial. In other words, she was constantly wearing a mask.

The experience of growing up in a dysfunctional family with denial as its central tenet caused me to loathe masks and eschew false appearances. As my sister once related, I ruined my chances to become a magician because all I ever wanted to do after performing a trick was tell people how the trick was done!

This isn't to say I have never worn masks. I just didn't know I was wearing them.

My certification process to become a Feldenkrais Practitioner in 2000, and the years of continuing education that followed, have helped me to peel away the layers. My career choice of public school educator proved a fertile ground to further explore and practice this putting on and taking off of masks. As I worked my way from high school to middle school to elementary school and finally preschool, I have had a chance to revisit my own childhood development through witnessing the struggles of my students. Ending in preschool provided the most profound experiences, and the teaching philosophy of the school at which I serve proved particularly incisive.

For over a decade my wife and I owned the Willow School of Georgia, a preschool serving three-month-olds through five-year-olds, and I worked there starting in 2020, first as a music teacher and finally as a Pre-K Lead teacher. The Willow School is a Reggio-Inspired school, meaning it models its pedagogy from the Reggio Emilia Approach. The intersection of my Feldenkrais background with this Italian approach to childhood education has been a revelation, and for many years I envisioned writing an article examining the overlap between these two approaches to human development.

It was only with the request that I address the subject of masks that I saw how I might approach the question. The Feldenkrais Method serves ostensibly to help us remove our masks so that we can function in as pristine a state as possible. The Reggio Approach is designed to prevent children from putting on masks in the first place.

Each age of preschool is a fascinating journey of surprises. It's always a revelation to discover that babies are fully realized humans and not merely empty vessels. Toddlers are immensely powerful creatures who struggle to put into words what they want. Two- and three-year olds are endlessly curious.

I work with four-year olds who are turning five. This, to me, may be the most fascinating group of all. These children are just at the age where they move from parallel play to active interaction with one another. This heightened socialization brings both opportunity and peril. The opportunity lies in their ability to express their desires and act upon them in real time, to know who they are and what they want. The peril resides in the fact that they have not yet had time to form adequate defenses to physical and emotional challenges, and how they choose to create that system of responses will determine how they are in the world as adults.

A four year old can hit her friend and make them cry, then apologize and be completely forgiven by her friend, all in the space of one minute. Lacking the capacity to abstract, they are mostly in the moment, with a limited recollection of their past and specific anticipation of future events. Even more important, they are at the cusp of masking, just old enough to begin to suppress their own desires.

Trauma can make this process begin earlier, but the experience is natural to most four-year olds even without it. The question becomes: under what circumstances are they putting on a layer of protection from disappointment, from pain, from fear, from embarrassment, or even from joy and success if those experiences are intense enough?

The Reggio Emilia Approach offers children the opportunity to form themselves in an environment in which they are seen as capable and fully realized humans rather than incomplete humans-to-be. Educators in this approach base their lessons on the interests of the children, which are determined through careful observation, documentation and, most importantly, collaboration with the children. As such, there is no set curriculum, no preset materials, no benchmarks.

The Reggio Emilia Approach evolved after the Second World War through a cooperative effort between Italian pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi and the parents of the Reggio Emilia region of Italy. The philosophy is based upon principles including the ideas that children must have a say in their learning direction, that they be able to learn through many different modalities including touch, movement and listening, that they have a relationship with other children and the environment in which they are learning, and that they have endless ways ("a hundred languages") to express themselves.

The Reggio Emilia Approach and the Feldenkrais Method serve very different aims. Nevertheless, when seen through the lens of "masks," several aspects of the work

overlap, and this confluence reveals something important about each. Ultimately through this comparison it is easier to recognize the Feldenkrais Method as a learning modality rather than exercise or bodywork.

Neutrality is a tenet of the Feldenkrais Method. Neutral touch is an extension of our attitude towards the client, an openness reflecting our intent to observe what we sense, rather than diagnose what we think. Through this neutral touch, we leave open the possibility that the client will exhibit a reaction that neither of us could have predicted which the nervous system will pick up as a beneficial choice.

A teacher in a Reggio Classroom is also neutral, observing the child rather than directing them. A Reggio Teacher may create an “invitation” or “provocation” in which items are laid out ahead of time for a child to come across and freely explore. This is an *opportunity* to learn rather than an instructive corridor for them to traverse. The goal, and often the result, is that the child takes the learning somewhere the teacher neither could have predicted or led them to.

As an example, this week I lay four white boards on the floor, placing one bead on the first board, two on the second, three on the third and four on the fourth. I then asked the children to tell me a story about the beads. My expectation was that they might describe how the beads were increasing at a rate of one-per-board.

Instead, the children invented much richer storylines around the beads. One said for instance that the first one was a mermaid who was split into two by a divider, an interesting narrative which suggested additional story ideas to the other children. None of this was in my lesson plan!

As a result, the children were able to *embody mathematics ideas through active storytelling*, covering many learning domains at once. Had I created an activity where my learning goal was more obvious, such as pre-instruct them to say something about the beads which accurately reflected the rate of increase, the children might have masked their own desires, either to please me, or to hide from a sense of inadequacy, and the learning would have been poorer as a result.

A client on the table may react similarly to a more directed touch, a desire on the part of the practitioner for them to understand something rather than discover it. Through neutral interaction, the Feldenkrais Practitioner shows the client to themselves, helping them to know and perhaps even accept that which had been foreign, undesirable, or even invisible. Reggio Teachers do something similar by documenting what they notice in the classroom interactions and sharing that documentation with the children so that they come to see themselves through the educator’s eyes without a sense of shame or obligation.

Such observation is not always appreciated, at least initially. This Fall, I wrote down a revealing interaction with one of my students: *"L asked Mr. Adam why he was writing down everything they did and said. Mr. Adam replied, 'Because I'm interested in what you're saying and doing.' L thought for a minute, and then she laughed a little."*

I remain astounded and saddened by this interaction. Why should a four-year old find it amusing that an adult might be interested in what they are doing? To my mind, this suggested that the child's self-image, already forming at age four, was oriented around the idea that her play, her interests, and by extension her concept of self were uninteresting, unimportant, irrelevant. She could only have formed that opinion as a result of the attitudes of the society in which she lives.

The natural consequence of such a sense of self would be a dichotomy, an implicit understanding that there are two worlds: The one in which she lives as her authentic self, and the one she creates to please others, ostensibly to survive and thrive in an environment that expects her to conform.

Some of the clients that come to us seeking the Feldenkrais Method are the ones who were damaged in this way, long ago. They have ceased to regard their true selves as being of any consequence, or at least they see their true self as unsafe in some way. Their self-images are greatly distorted as a result of the effort they habitually make to mask, to please, to misdirect, and this distortion has physical, mental and emotional repercussions with which we must tangle when we work with them.

These two aspects of the Reggio Work, the open-ended learning opportunity and the documentation, are a unique way for the educator to join the child in the learning process rather than direct them. It calls to mind a Feldenkrais Practitioner's unique connection with the client in which two bodies appear to share a single nervous system, much like the synergy between two dancers. With such an intimate bond, masks, for the client or the practitioner, are counterproductive and perhaps even impossible.

It could be argued that we put on a kind of "neutral mask" in a session, suppressing our desire to see the client improve, hiding our impatience, our boredom, so that we provide a professional experience. I wonder, however, whether the neutral state is the mask, or whether the burning desire to see the client improve, the impatience, the boredom is in fact the mask of our own fear of failure in a session. These may be self-defense mechanisms that prevent us from being in the moment with the person on the table.

That we are able to succeed at all in restoring some of a person's self-image follows from the working process in the Method itself, its modalities, its insistence on neutrality of touch, abandonment of pre-conceived ideas and diagnoses. Like Reggio, it is a way of working that allows us to dance with another person in such a way that they can safely see themselves acting in non-habitual ways that nevertheless feel authentic.

Masks have value. They protect us, offer us emotional space in close quarters, and can even be amusing and fun, but only if they can be removed at will. When a mask is a compulsion rather than a choice, it can serve to take the place of parts of a person's identity, and can be a heavy burden indeed.

Reggio and Feldenkrais are each known by few, poorly understood, and easily misrepresented. It is my hope that these two approaches can be seen as complementary and that furthering the reputation of one might bring along the other. Ours will be a better world when masks are worn only in places where they are wanted and needed, and that the rest of the time we can live in our true selves and follow better paths.