

REVEALING OUR SELF ...TO OURSELF...TO OTHERS

TO MASK OR NOT TO MASK

By Alan Questel

Masks have been a part of human culture for thousands of years. The earliest reference I found was over 9000 year old Neolithic stone masks. Masks serve a purpose. They can be used to elicit a quality of another 'self' such as an animal or spirit or different human persona. Masks can also serve a social role, to hide behind so as not to be seen, to protect ourselves, to appear different to another and let's not forget our professional masks. Our social masks have likely been around for the whole existence of humankind as well. They are useful in many ways.

From a Feldenkrais point of view masks are functional. They can exist as part of our self-image. Whether a mask is used to be a different self or to hide an existing self the real questions might be, if I am wearing a mask, is it by choice? Is a mask something I know I am wearing? Is it something I want to put on or take off. If I want to unmask myself is that to everyone or am I unmasking myself to myself? Or maybe wearing a mask(s) is something to master?

If someone came up to you and asked 'Are you wearing a mask?' What would you say? There are many possible answers. If you just responded quickly you might say 'no' wondering why someone would ask you that or possibly denying it. Or maybe you would reflect on the question and say 'hmmmm...I don't think so'. You might possibly say 'sometimes' being aware of the face you put on in certain circumstances. You might even say yes, feeling a bit exposed, also knowing that it's necessary for you.

'Are you wearing a mask' brings up several questions. Do I know I am wearing a mask, even sometimes? How do I know if I am wearing one? Am I making a choice or is it something I acquired over time that has become compulsive? Is it something I can change? Is it something I want to change?

THE PERSONAL

The very first Feldenkrais lesson I received was because I had back pain. I was an actor and to make money I did interior contracting in New York City. I had been wallpapering my acting teacher's bathroom when I felt something in my back and had to stop working due to the pain. My acting teacher said 'Go see a Feldenkrais Practitioner' and I said, 'No way'. I had read Moshe's book, *Awareness Through Movement*, and while the thinking was interesting to me, the movements made no sense at all.

The pain continued and finally I went to a Feldenkrais Practitioner. I was extremely disappointed, even irritated as during the lesson the practitioner obviously had no idea what he was doing. He barely touched me and I thought this is really a waste of time and expensive as well. Then I stood up. I had no pain. I was really confused. I asked the practitioner 'What did you do'? He said, 'I was helping your body do what it was doing'. And I thought...ok...it's a secret. A few hours later I was driving my car on the FDR drive in New

York City. The FDR drive was (likely still is) like a pinball machine for cars. I soon realized, as cars were cutting me off, I wasn't getting angry. What happened to me?

All I could think of was the Feldenkrais lesson. This made no sense to me. Now my confusion turned into a lasting bewilderment. How did that event not only get rid of my back pain but also change how I was driving?

My pain never returned. Still, there was something that happened that I couldn't get out of my mind. Even though I didn't need another lesson, and could hardly afford it, I returned for another lesson. This time I was in a different position, yet he still touched with the same quality. At one point he was doing something around my shoulders, and suddenly, my knees let go and I commented about it out loud. He said, 'yeah, it's all connected'! Again, more confusion, what was he talking about?

The real discovery came at the end of the lesson when he said, 'When you are ready, roll to your side and get up'. I lay there and slowly rolled my head nodding no and I finally said, 'No'. He said 'No?' and I repeated it again, 'No'. He asked, 'Why not'. I said, 'Because I don't want to go where I have to go now'.

Where I had to go was to give an estimate for a carpentry job. In that moment a thought crystalized in me...'I really...REALLY...REALLY don't like doing this work! I was good at it and made decent money, but it was clearly not what I liked nor wanted to do, nor who I felt myself to be.

I can honestly say in that in a split second my 'mask' was revealed, taken off and I was left with this deep realization of who I sincerely felt myself to be. Or maybe who I didn't want to be. Either way I felt unmasked. It wasn't very comfortable, yet at the same time I had a tremendous sense of relief.

CAN THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD UNMASK US?

Now the question comes, how did this Feldenkrais lesson reveal something about myself to myself? Aspects of myself that in some way I may have known, but never said it out loud to myself, a blind spot(s).

Can the Feldenkrais Method really help us discover and realize our inner self?

I believe it can (it did with me) and it does. When I think of how people come to classes, private lessons and training programs, the most consistent thing I hear and see is that they were 'touched' in some deeply personal way. Often, they can't describe it but deep down they know it.

How does this happen? I don't think we can say for sure, but we can recognize some factors that might lead to this.

To understand this, we need to include Moshe's idea of self-image. Our self-image is comprised of our thinking, feeling, sensing and movement. A change in any one aspect has the potential to change the other aspects. As I described earlier, the change in my movement not only changed how I sensed myself, but it also influenced my feeling life and

my actions, leading me to a clarification of who I thought myself to be, a clearer sense of my self-image and what I wanted in my life.

The mechanism of this may be understood in when we become more skeletal in how we do things. With increased skeletal support and more efficient transmission of force, our muscles work less, more economically, less compulsively and less in opposition antagonistically. We are less habitually biased in our actions, and one could argue that our nervous system, when less muscularly occupied, becomes more efficiently engaged in an action, in our feelings, in our thoughts. The result is something is freed from the work that our nervous system is involved in. Maybe this is how the other aspects of who we are become more evident. We might even say that the 'mask' we were wearing was not only on our face but also it was a mask in our actions, a mask of our whole self.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BECOME UNMASKED AND HOW CAN I DO IT?

It is important to realize the becoming unmasked isn't a one-time event. It's a process that can hopefully continue throughout our whole lives. It can include realizing who we believe ourselves to be, over and over, in time. It can help us understand one of the most difficult questions, what do I want to do? Each un-layering can show us how we relate to others, clarify our intentions, allow us to understand the decisions we made as well as the ones we make now and ones we will make in the future.

The word that come to mind as we become unmasked is revealed. It can be described as feeling more authentic, our true self, honest, genuine, real. Of course, one might also feel caught or exposed or vulnerable; yet still relating to our authenticity. Then I need to consider, what do these things concretely look like, how are they actualized? It's not so easy here to make the abstract concrete.

Again, I think of the mechanisms of Feldenkrais lessons. How is it that I do a lesson that involves rotation and after I can more easily get in and out of a chair? How does a lesson for my back change my attitude when I drive? How does a lesson with my hands help me sleep better? How do these events change how I feel about myself?

The only answer (for now) that I come up with is how we work with a system. Not just working with a system but intelligently informing the system in ways that can produce these kinds of results. Results that lead us to feeling more authentic, honest, genuine, true and real.

The Feldenkrais Method also provides us with an active role we can take to unmask ourselves. Awareness. Discovering the things about ourselves that we didn't know, uncovering our blind spots. Of course, this is more easily said than done. How can we uncover our blind spots as we are blind to them. The things that we cannot see...yet.

Part of my job as a practitioner, when giving an FI, is to help reveal to someone, something they didn't know about themselves, their blind spots.

Yet to do this on our own is much more elusive. The first thing that is needed is the desire to find them. It requires a capacity for self-reflection. In ATM there is the chance for this, yet

we need to understand how to do it. If I scan myself or feel myself in an action, I will most likely pay attention to the things I already feel, already know how to pay attention to. If I feel my hip joint and my ankle but cannot sense my knee what allows me to find it. We afford people a few ways to do this.

For example, first, we can direct their (our) attention to movements in the ankle and the hip joint and slowly, while moving between those movements, coloring in the parts in-between we don't yet feel or know.

To do this we need to rely on another basic idea we utilize in our work. The Weber-Fechner law. The understanding that with a reduction in stimulus or effort we can increase our sensitivity to observe details that we normally don't have the opportunity or know how to pay attention to. Whether it's the idea of coloring in or going slower and smaller, both contribute to our ability to be more aware.

Another factor in finding this is time and patience. To not attempt to focus for something, that we usually already know about, and utilizing and improving our ability to listen and allow for something to emerge into our attention.

KEEPING OUR MASKS

While removing our masks appears to be a possible goal towards knowing ourselves better. The Feldenkrais Method is inclusive. We don't say never or shouldn't. We must always understand the context, how something is done and who is doing it, to decide whether or not to do it. We are interested in having the 'choice' to do or not do something or even acting in a third or fourth way. In the spirit of inclusivity, we need to appreciate the usefulness of having a mask. A mask can help us feel safe. A mask can literally stop the spreading of germs. A mask can help us act in a way that is more differentiated between our thoughts and feelings. A mask may be an approximation from being a charlatan to becoming an expert. A mask can help us hide ourselves or help us take on a different persona. Maybe we can keep our masks in the background so if one day, when it makes sense, we can put them on again. Like Moshe said, if you type with two fingers and learn to type with ten fingers you will still have access to typing with two fingers if the situation arises.

AND...

Maybe it's the un-layering of our habits that is the unmasking of ourselves. The discovering of what we do, how we do it, who we are and what we can do, how we can do it and who we can become.

In these ways the Feldenkrais Method is opportunity to comprehend Moshe's one sentence description of the method, Know Thyself. Unmasking ourselves, layer by layer, finding more satisfaction, more joy, more acceptance and liking ourselves more...even loving ourselves, while still being able to wear our masks if we so choose.

I think we all have a sense of who is behind our masks, now all we need are the ways to navigate getting there, to mask or not to mask. The Feldenkrais Method seems like a pretty good start!