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Saying Yes: An Experience of Working with Disabled Youngsters

Scott Clark, interviewing Jonathan Thrift
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Interviewer's Note

For quite a while, when I was first studying Feldenkrais, I was in a dilemma about the role of conscious understanding in the processes of learning or teaching the Method. This dilemma came to a head in a telling experience. I was asked to advise two dancers, Caroline Scott and Mieke Chill, who conducted movement workshops for young people with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities. I knew them both from my own dance teaching days, plus Caroline was then a student on the first Amsterdam Feldenkrais training (she is now an experienced practitioner in Yorkshire). I also invited my partner Jonathan Thrift to come along; he had been teaching choreography to students with cerebral palsy for several years, and I was sure that his experience would give him an interesting point of view. He later took Caroline's place for a few sessions while she was in Amsterdam, attending the training.

During the sessions, each student was attended by a care worker, and the group as a whole was led through a series of movement explorations by Mieke or Caroline. A musician improvised an accompaniment to the entire process, freely ranging between response and inspiration. The youngsters would arrive in wheelchairs or on trolleys, in most cases elaborately strapped in. When I first looked at these kids, I longed to touch them. Most didn't speak at all, some gave little evidence of any awareness. Several were allowed out of their horrifically restrictive corsets for this one hour a week, and their twisted and spastic bodies were eloquent. So as soon as I was able, I began to work with some of them (though, in the absence of any request from them, I was being a bit presumptuous!); in particular with a young girl whom I will call Angela. Angela seemed very drowsy most of the time, and certainly never spoke. Indeed, it didn't seem likely to me that she could understand speech. I also wasn't sure whether she could see. I approached her with some of my usual Feldenkrais ways of thinking: How could this person, who was so strongly bent sideways, bend a little more, in order to have a range of movement instead of a locked position? How could her ribs, just freed from tightly-moulded plastic, start to use their freedom? How could I push gently along her bent and twisted spine, give her some sense of the possible integrity of its bony structure? Gradually she began to breathe more fully, her overall tonus lessened. She seemed more alert and more present, and her fitful, restless movements got quieter and quieter. I worked throughout without speaking.

Meanwhile, Jonathan was having a spirited conversation, both verbal and physical, with a young girl whose legs were tightly held together, spastically straight, with the feet pointing

away from each other and strongly everted. He touched her heels together, so that they almost nested, the easiest way that each leg could move. "Is that nice? It is? Shall I do it fast or slow? Fast? OK! Again? You tell me when ... No, make me wait a little, then surprise me There you go!" He had seen, in this unspeaking girl, the way that her enthusiasm and happiness would transform her face and be her means of expression to the world. What anyone else might call her smile was more, it was her response, her consciousness, her way of saying yes. By the careful use of questions that required just a yes or a no (even when *no* is just the absence of a *yes*), and by skillful timing, he was elaborating this single signal into a means of communication; and so, a means of being human.

The differences in what we were doing were striking, but so were the similarities. The movements Jonathan was doing were very simple, no elaborate programme of differentiation and integration, but still, he followed many of the same ideas as a Feldenkrais practitioner might, by using her easiest directions, staying in the range of her comfort. But the concept at the heart of it all was simply noticing how someone can say yes. This is a common device in working with people with communication difficulties; at some (enlightened) schools, the first thing in the student's notes will be a description of what movements constitute their yes. At first this may seem to have no obvious parallel to what we do in Feldenkrais. But I later heard Larry Goldfarb describe FI as a series of simple physical questions, each one of the form "This way? Or that way?" And then the penny dropped. The heart of our work is exactly that, the act of noticing that all-important yes. It seems transparently obvious now, and yet I couldn't recall hearing it spoken of explicitly.

A couple of weeks after I first met Angela, Jonathan worked with her. I wasn't able to be there, and as soon as Jonathan and I met, I wanted to know how things had gone. As he started speaking, I realised that this was a key to something absolutely essential, at least for me, so I recorded the conversation. I have transcribed an extract in the hope that others may also find it useful. Sentences in italics are my interjections. I am very grateful to Caroline and Mieke for involving me in their project.

The Interview

I found it quite a horrifying thing when I was first trying to get into this whole cerebral palsy thing, I thought that the whole notion of a 'good yes' was a bit abhorrent. It seemed so reductionist to give binary questions to anybody; the whole balance of power is tipped in favour of the person who's asking the questions, because the response is only ever as good as the question. And that's quite onerous, it's a big responsibility. Now I'm surprised when people don't understand the concept of a good yes, it makes me realise just how important it is. It's really the basis of communication. It's no good calling something modern dance or dance therapy or creative dance or anything unless there's that kind of engagement. It's no good aiming for educational purposes unless that intellectual consent is possible.

'Intellectual' isn't entirely the right word; it's the consent of the conscious person.

Well, I call that intellectual consent. Plants don't have it: it's a function of the brain.

A lot of people would misunderstand you.

I think they would. I think that's because a lot of people don't realise that any intellect is

present; it surprises me how many people who work in this area don't realise the presence of intellect, or the possibility of it. If you don't provide the optimum environment, if you don't try to remove limiting factors, you're going to stunt things. So why not presume that there's going to be a positive outcome. Why not provide the optimum conditions for development. And that often means challenging, but it also means engaging, and it certainly needs that possibility of consent and communication. I think there is something that can be done in purely physical terms that is educative, something about giving someone a movement experience or collaborating with them that might confer intellectual possibilities. But if you can involve the conscious mind then you're working at a different level.

The thing that took the longest today was getting Angela's confidence that I would have the patience to wait for her to make a decision. Her decision making ability is fairly slow anyway. I might argue that that's partly because she doesn't have it challenged very often.

It hasn't been exercised, nobody takes it for a walk.

When we were taking the leg irons off, and the ankle straps, and the back brace, I was asking her "How do I do this?" And she was looking at me bemused, because people don't ask her, they do things *at* her and *to* her. I said "You're the expert at this!" That got a smile straight away. Comprehension — I got a smile. I said "Ugghh, we're going to get to the seat belt soon. Do I take this off and then is that it?" And she didn't say yes, but I thought that was because she wasn't communicating, or wasn't capable of it, or I wasn't clued in yet or whatever. But it wasn't, it was because she meant no; there was another strap left, a very thin velcro strap that was underneath her shawl that I couldn't see. And then I twigged, and she was waiting for me to twig, to realise that there was another strap there. I was saying, "Is it sensible to take the straps off your feet now?" No response. "Well, you are going to come out of the wheelchair, aren't you?" Response. "So which foot first then?" But touching the feet so that it was physical: this foot, or that foot first? I said "I'm not very good at this; do I undo your laces first or undo the foot straps first?" And she's looking heavenward, as if is he stupid or what? But that's a really good game to play; earlier I had said "Do I take the tray off and put it outside, throw it away?" Because I wanted to try and get a reaction, see if she comprehended that sort of thing. And then I said "Do you like going outside?" And she not only smiled, but looked outside as well. Then I knew that she understood! I said "Do you like being in school?" Nothing. "Do you *sometimes* like being in school?" Smile.

A lot of it was very subtle, fleeting; and sometimes when I sought a reinforcement it wouldn't happen, but that's also because her attention span isn't massive, it's not that her comprehension isn't there. And she does get exhausted. I think she's probably on diazepam or something like that, and you have to break into that, and sometimes just go with it. I was holding her hand, just to say hello, and I noticed that her hands were cold. And somebody said "You might want to put her jumper on." But rather than that, I asked, "Do you want your jumper on?" I think she was just surprised to be asked. I said "Oh, can you feel my hands? Are my hands warmer than yours?" And I could see her eyes roving in that sensation-based way; so it wasn't as though there was no response, there was a definite sense that she could feel the warmth. Personally, I love that feeling of somebody holding my hands when they're cold. So I said "Cold hands, warm heart." And she smiled again. That led very naturally into touching. If you're not secure about the efficacy of language, then touch becomes the prime vehicle. Especially when you can't rely on vision — she's got a divergent strabismus, and I'd be thinking "Which eye do I try to catch, or which eye

do I try to notice movement in?" And she really does have profound, multiple disabilities; I purposely leave 'learning' out of that.

Why?

I'm working on the assumption that there's some cognition there. The main thing is that she can't move. There's very little way that any volition that is there might be manifested in movement. And that's how volition is normally manifested. Normally we read it very very quickly, in bodily stuff, in movement of the tongue and the mouth. In this kind of context you've got to be sensitive to the little things that emerge above the other weather that's going on.

Anyhow, I was just extending the touching of my hand to her hand into a kind of "Where's this arm going to go? Where's this hand going to go?" And her one wrist was flexed completely, and the other was partially flexed. I said "Which hand shall we move then, this one or this one?" Because she's got that curve over the right side of the torso, it's easier for her to make the right hand dominant, because that's the one where her focus naturally goes, her head's to the right slightly, her focus goes down and to the right, she sees the right hand, the left is out of the picture. So I touched both, and said "This or this," and she didn't get anything the first time, as though nobody has ever given her these choices. But I wouldn't have gotten anywhere if I just asked; it was that combination of feeling her hands, and asking, saying "This hand or this hand," wait ... wait ... wait ... wait ... wait ... "This hand or this hand? Shall I ask you again?" And then I was likely to get a response. It was as though action and sensation set up a correlation between that and a possibility of volition on her part. Give it enough time, repeat the sensation, and then even if it was accidental, even if she just ended up looking down and to the right because that's the way her torso inclines, I'd say "Oh, you mean the right hand, this hand?" And then she'd respond, because she'd got me to do something. So then we got into this thing of her touching her other wrist. I said "Can you touch your other elbow?" and I touched her elbow with my own hand. And I could see her looking upwards, again in this unfocussed sort of thinking way, as I read it, and her hand was terribly compliant about going along her other arm towards her elbow. She so clearly enjoyed getting to the other elbow. And then by relaxing my hold on her, she was able to reverse the touch, down her whole arm back to her wrist, and then her hand would flop away, to her side again. When she did it I said "Oh, that's so gentle isn't it?": the way she touched her arm as the hand came away from the elbow. And I'm not sure that there's any voluntary control involved in that movement. But there was an understanding that she'd touched herself, and there was an enjoyment of that sensation. And also she could agree with my reading that it was gentle. But when she got to the end, she'd got her fingers together, and I said "Oh, fingertips to fingertips." And I joined in with it, and I tapped one of her nails against another, and I said "You've got nail varnish on, can you feel it?" And she really laughed, she really thought it was funny. She also liked that rhythmic tic-tic-tic-tic of nails against each other. She'd got her ring finger extended on her right hand, and that's what she was using to touch against the other. I said "Do you want to try to touch this finger, and I felt it, to this one?" And she said yes yes yes! So we were going tic-tic-tic-tic, and she loved it. And I said "Shall we go from elbow to fingertips again?" Yes, definitely yes. And I made that happen, I helped that. But I also gave her time so that her hand could relax on her elbow, so it wasn't in its contracted state. I said "Take your time; it's nice isn't it? Can you use your elbow to warm your hand? Or is your hand warming your elbow?" I don't know, maybe she relaxed because I was saying something, or because she was thinking. But then when she moved away there was a

definite attempt for fingertips to touch fingertips, and a real delight in it when it happened. I said "Have you ever scraped your own nail varnish off? Would you like to scrape your nail varnish off?" She was smiling, and looking up, and I said "You'd need to be much harder than that to scrape it off, wouldn't you? You don't ever do the washing up, do you?" And she smiled again, really smiled at that!

This level of comprehension is just incredible to me.

It was glimmers; when I say she smiled it was often a glimmer. Sometimes she did this rasping breathing; her respiration is so bad anyway, but it was like the start of a laugh. Later we played with using touch to explore breathing. I asked her where she wanted to touch herself. I noticed that it was her left side of her lower abdomen that was moving the most, that was least contracted as she breathed, and that was where her left hand was lying, just against her belly. But I was almost certain that she wouldn't have been able to sense or know that it was moving. So I put my fingers against hers there, and kept my hand extremely stiff and still, so that as her fingers moved they brushed against mine. As her faint breath moved in and out there was that little friction. I said "Can you feel it moving ... you're going up and you're going down." And that kind of fascinated her for a moment, but I think it was more about her hands than her breathing. And so then we went back to the flat hands touching the body surface, and I said, "Would you like to actually feel your tummy, or do you want to feel your chest moving, or there are more possibilities yet; do you want this hand or this hand ..." I could see she was, like, Oooh, there are so many possibilities here. And there was that element of guiding.

You can't be totally passive, completely neutral.

It's ok if people have categories already, and can choose. But in this situation, where people have been strapped in, and trussed up, and velcroed in, and not dealt with as if they were capable of making choices, they haven't had the experience upon which they might base those choices. I think that's really important, there's got to be a connection between sensation and memory, and between sensation and possibility. But I think it's a real balancing act between taking over and doing something *at* somebody — which is terribly politically incorrect — and on the other hand, enabling somebody to have an experience upon which they can base future decisions. Or at least have categories of possibility there.

I think there's a real art in setting up those binary possibilities. For me, one of the best ways into it is to introduce the concept in a broad sense, to say "Shall we do something like this?" You set up some parameters, and then you move from the general to the specific. "Would it be good to feel your breath with your hand on your belly, or with your arm here or with your hand there ..." Almost overload the possibilities. "OK, shall we have a moment to decide?" Wait, wait, wait, wait. "What about hand on the chest? No? Hand on the belly? Yes? Which hand, this one ... or this one ..." And then you get a strong response by that point, because you've limited it down. If somebody said to me, when I was learning terribly cerebral things at school, "Here's the problem, what's the answer?" I'd have sat there and gone ugghh. But if you said "Here's the problem; might it be this answer or that answer?" You then engage in a creative way, you begin to think, "I've got the possibility of getting this right, I've got the possibility of communicating something that might not be ridiculous."

There was a significant moment when I was sitting behind Angela and she had a ball in

front of her. I said “Would you like to move the ball around on your chest?” and I was moving her hands with the ball, me keeping very still, keeping her torso very still. “Or, we could keep it stuck to you, and you move around with the ball?” And then neither was right; classic thing, I asked it three times but got no response. I actually, sat there and said “Are you having another kip, are you chilling out again? This is supposed to be hard work! ... Am I asking the wrong question?” Slight glimmer. “Is it something I haven’t asked?” Slight glimmer. And then “Is it something like you want move yourself and the ball and me, all together?” And finally I got a big yes there. That was the communication highlight. That was the point where she really laughed, because I’d got it wrong for so long. And she persisted in her *no* — well, her nothing, nothing, nothing — despite my supposedly clever binary constructions. But when I gave her that possibility of everything moving around, and said “Oh is this more what you mean?” And then yes! Maybe she’d drifted for a bit, but the fact that she said yes, and then we did that ...

But as she was getting strapped back in to her chair she started crying. And it was really deep, sobbing crying. All that care when we were first getting her out, all that business of “You can have these choices about which strap I’ll undo first,” even though she hadn’t been participating yet at that point — it was all as if it were in reverse. She was really, really crying, big tears. I said “Do you want to wipe your tears away?” And she took a breath and looked at me, out of one eye. And so I helped one hand up to her eye. That was when she started to take a sobbing breath, and stopped crying. I was saying to her, when she was getting clamped back in, “Oh, I’ll work with you again next week, and the week after,” and I could see this glimmer of expectancy, disbelief, goodness knows what: I’m being wildly interpretive now. But there was an immediacy about that crying, she couldn’t breathe in and out consciously, she couldn’t deepen her breath earlier when we were working with that, but she could sob so deeply, and with that passionate force that isn’t difficult to read.