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In Praise of Homework

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This is intentionally provocative; some parts are a bit tongue-in-cheek, while others are absolutely sincere. I leave it to the reader to discern the difference!

At the time that I first discovered Feldenkrais, I was a dancer and a dance teacher — and a fraud. I was a fraud because, when I stood in front of a class of dance students pretending to teach them, I knew that I didn't know how to do it: I didn't know all the miscellaneous and arcane rules that dance teachers were supposed to know, I didn't know what made one movement *right* and another movement *wrong*. Without that, how could I be the traditional teacher, standing over my students dispensing knowledge like manna from heaven, knowledge that of course flowed from the wiser to the more ignorant? Feldenkrais saved me from this, in one of the most important liberations of my life. I began to use ATM for every dance class that I taught, and so found myself engaged in a conversation with peers, with equals, in which we jointly explored. We didn't need to know ahead of time what was right and wrong, we could use this most intimate science to build a physical intelligence that had its own authority. I felt such an enormous relief!

But it didn't work with FI, which was, as far as I could make out, both from my experiences on the receiving end as well as my attempts to dish it out, a completely occult procedure of the old style. FI, as far as I could make out, originated from an all-knowing practitioner and was aimed in un-interpreted silence at the ignorant client. Occasionally, cryptic observations would be thrown out by the practitioner: "Look, this elbow is closer to your ribs! Look how your head turns this way!" The inability of the uninitiated to feel these things themselves or to connect them to anything of any importance simply emphasised their ignorance. (If this seems too harsh a criticism of my teachers, please realise that it refers as much to my own attempts!)

Then in 1990, shortly after the first London training finished and I had graduated, I came into contact with a different model — a conscious contract: the practitioner makes an explicit agreement with the client including (a) the *problem* from the client's point of view; (b) a *translation* of this into a *pattern of movement* that both practitioner and client could observe; (c) the practitioner's intention to open some sort of window of choice that would enable *another pattern of movement*; (d) this choice would be not only be verifiable by the client (that is, they would know what had changed), but it would even be within the client's conscious control.

This was a wonderful prospect. The only catch was that I couldn't do it.

A lot of water flowed under the bridge. I kept working, and for some reason people continued to come to see me. (The Feldenkrais Method is so strong, that it could withstand even my ignorance as a practitioner.) Visiting trainings, eventually working on trainings, doing

different post-graduate courses — bit by bit, experience brought more of the pieces of the puzzle into place. The picture that emerged was one that was slightly different than any-one had ever tried to teach me, though it was clearly related to what many of my teachers had been saying. I offer it here, not as the only format for an FI, but as one possible way of proceeding. So here, then is my (current) unpatented step-by-step formula for doing an FI:

Step One: Conversation

What does the client want? How do they notice the lack of something, how might they notice having what they want?

Step Two: Homework

(I know some people have rather unfortunate associations with the word 'homework' — I would certainly be open to another word.) The practitioner translates the client's problem into a pattern of movement, and gives them homework — homework in the traditional sense, something for them to work on after the lesson, at home — designed to make that pattern of movement really clear.

Step Three: FI

The practitioner says "Now lie down on this table, and I'll do something that will make it easier for you to do the homework."

Step Four: Revisit the Homework

The practitioner asks the client to do the homework again. Can they remember it? Did the work on the table make it clearer? Then send them on their way to practise.

Now, I must immediately repeat that not all FI's can (or should) follow this format. It is, at the very least, often impossible to choose 'homework' without considerable exploration. And this formula represents 'application' of the Feldenkrais Method in the extreme; the purity of a lesson that is un-interpreted by the practitioner, that speaks directly to the nervous system of the recipient without the mediation of words, is one of the jewels of our work. But not the only jewel!

Step Two, the 'homework', is the key to everything else. What can homework be? I think of this as essentially a miniature ATM lesson, miniature in the sense that it has only one or maybe two distinctions. I only really began to appreciate what this meant when I began my present project of writing and recording brief ATM lessons for a CD. I wanted lessons that would only be three to nine minutes long. What can you do in that time? One or two instances of "You could move like this ... or like that," one or two examples of how the road divides into two, of how we have a choice of which way to go. Real lessons, the hour-long epics that we are accustomed to basking in on the floor, are built of many steps, with many distinctions, many choices. We who are already addicted to Feldenkrais love the richness of that world, and newcomers can sustain the attention such an epic demands when they are supported by a class of others who are similarly concentrated. But at home, on their own ... we can help them by simplifying and reducing these epics to smaller atoms of choice.

What is the function of this homework? It has quite different functions, for the practitioner, for the client during the lesson, for the client after the lesson. For the practitioner, the homework is the real master: everything in the actual hands-on part of the FI *must* serve the homework, must pertain directly to the client's ability to notice the sensory clues that will enable the homework-ATM to live and breathe. It must be at once rich and full, but without anything excess. For years, I gave FI's in which I got lost, as a direct result of not

really having a clear idea what I was exploring. When we have some idea of what the client's homework might be, even if we don't know it until later in the lesson, it gives direction to the rest of the FI.

The homework has the same role for the client during the lesson. It organises what otherwise might be a complete jungle of sensation, trackless and wild. It lets them in on the science of our Method, and they may well be able to know how the lesson is going even before the practitioner knows — after all, the client has a uniquely internal vantage point to the lesson, if we can only invite them in.

But the homework has an even more important role for the client after the lesson. First of all, it establishes an expectation: this is going to take work on their part. And as well, it sets their course for *how to work*. We forget, we who have been doing Feldenkrais for so many years, how new and different the way of thinking is. The people who come to see us have lived all their lives thinking that muscles have to be strengthened and that will must be exerted in order to attain good posture or action. Simply learning differences in action is so elusive an idea! The homework helps the client remember the feeling of the lesson, and helps them realise that the lesson is about learning, *their* learning, and in so doing, the homework brings the lesson into the client's own world of choice and self-regulation. And these are surely the essence of Moshe's aim: choice and self-regulation.

In order to live up to this idea of what a lesson could be, it really is necessary to have at one's fingertips either a wonderfully spontaneous creativity, or else a collection of these miniature ATM's that can be given quickly and concisely. When I first consciously began to work this way, I had only a few. I had to fight the impulse to give whole-hour ATM's, to drag the client into the full richness of the Feldenkrais world in one massive step. One very helpful model was Jack Heggie's *Running with the Whole Body*. In that book, he gives a few classic full-sized ATM's, but he also gives some examples of briefer lessons, with only one or two distinctions; often standing. In the text they seem like just part of his conversation, he doesn't give them a great deal of stress, but at the same time he makes it clear that they are keys to awareness. It's also interesting that they are standing — occupying a space midway between the normal world of action and the *other* world of lying-down ATM. Frank Wildman's *Busy Person's Guide* is a collection of miniature lessons, though their role is presented rather differently. But to make this work for me, I have had to, quite consciously, grow my own repertoire of these miniature ATM's. When creativity is spontaneous, I don't need them — the rest of the time, I have something to fall back on. You can find some of my own attempts in the form of recordings, *Short Lessons in Awareness Through Movement*, on my website.

The ideas that I am presenting here may not strike you as that new. In exchanges with colleagues who have been trained by Mia Segal, I often find that they are doing something very similar. It is also clearly related to the way that some practitioners use 'reference movements'. But I hope you will find that, by using a format as explicit as this, homework can be a useful tool for bringing clients into our world, our conversation, and into the heart of the lesson.