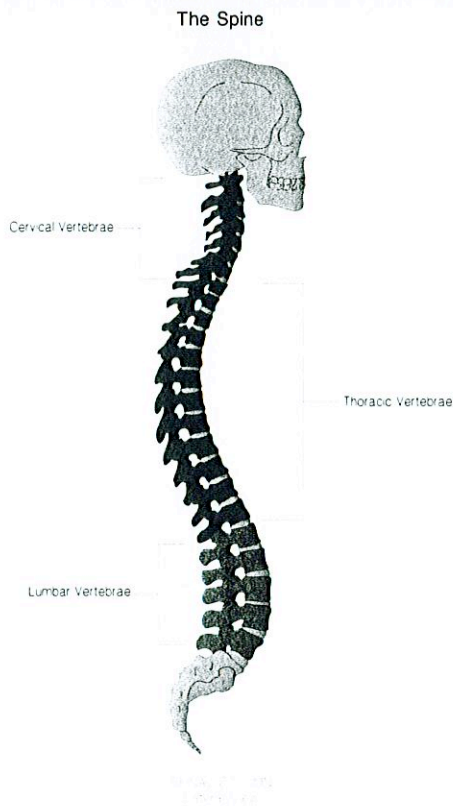


The Feldenkrais Method®: From Pain to Pleasure



By Glenn L. Gordon

Do I ever remember the day when I first started getting pains! I was playing the last few bars of a Tchaikovsky suite for orchestra, and I wanted to play out as much as I could. While I was playing, I felt a sharp pain in my right shoulder, between the neck and the shoulder joint. At the time, I didn't think much, except "Wow, I never felt pain here before." I had been playing the bass for 16 years, but never before had I experienced discomfort related to the bass. I had figured that my training had spared me some of the problems that my colleagues complain about. But this belief was dead wrong. In the time ahead, I was to learn the hard way how to make myself better.

The pains got worse steadily over the next few months. At times, it felt as if I had a large bruise, since my whole shoulder area was tender after playing for long rehearsals and concerts. As a result, I created my own vicious circle: playing without warming up, getting serious pains and then

taking substantial time off from the bass without preparing for the next time I had to play. I finally sought the help of a doctor, who referred me to a physical therapist. The physical therapist (at this time there were no clinics in Oslo specializing in the treatment of musicians) found no evidence of tendonitis or bursitis, but did find that my whole upper back was extremely tense, and that two vertebrae were locked together, possibly creating the symptoms in my arm and neck. I was treated with electro-therapy and massage, in addition to laser and acupuncture. This gave immediate results, but only temporary ones, relieving the acute tension. Only a month or two later, the same symptoms recurred. At the time, it was also recommended that I begin weight training to strengthen my upper back. I began to swim often, and enrolled in a T'ai Chi class. This was fun, and certainly helped to alleviate stress and tension. But the physical training just made the muscles that I had been having trouble with larger. I still had pain. I was very discouraged and began to ask myself how I was going to survive a whole career of working in an orchestra. I realized that I was looking for a fast cure instead of more realistically questioning the playing habits that led to the symptoms.

Eventually, I heard about the Feldenkrais Method® through a psychologist friend. She thought that it might help me with some of my problems, and I figured "OK, I'm not very optimistic, but I'll try this, too." That was two years ago, and since then, my shoulder problems have steadily gotten better. Additionally, Feldenkrais is an excellent means of getting in touch with oneself. This method has been so helpful to me that I have since decided to become certified as a Feldenkrais practitioner.

Moshé Feldenkrais (1904-1984), a Russian immigrant who moved to Israel when he was young, was a physicist, engineer, educator and researcher, in addition to being the first European to achieve a black belt in Judo. After irritating an old knee injury, doctors told him that with an operation, there would only be a fifty percent chance of regaining normal use. These were odds he didn't like, and so he began to

search for other ways to regain full use of his knee. His knowledge of mechanical science and psychology gave him insights that led his friends and colleagues to start coming to him with their problems. The process he developed is now widely accepted as a system of healing through self-awareness.

The Feldenkrais Method® uses sensory-motor learning as a means of improving aspects of everyday functioning, primarily movement and self-awareness. It is not a therapy, but rather a teaching method. Feldenkrais believed that it was more important to learn than to escape from pain, and said, "You cannot do what you want if you do not know what you do." Feldenkrais observed that all bodies malfunction in some way or another, both physically and mentally, because of faulty learning. As human beings, we learn by experience, and very little of what we know is instinctual. It took me years of study and practice, watching and listening to other bassists and other musicians in order to build up my ideals of musicianship. In that process, I included not only good habits, but also bad habits. Feldenkrais determined that when the brain receives or processes an image or action that is distorted by pain, fear or stress, the function and emotion are indelibly linked to each other, and perceived as a unit. Thus, our muscles associate certain patterns (physical) with certain feelings (emotions), and vice versa. In very physical ways, we open ourselves up when we are happy, and close ourselves down when threatened. The human body endures incredible amounts of stress in reaction to both real and imaginary threats, and creates habitual physical responses to them.

A musical example of this phenomenon might be the following. Every time there is an intonation problem, members of the bass section may look around, questioning and blaming each other, knowing that something is wrong with the music, but not necessarily in a position to fix it. The stress of this situation causes players to tense up. Even if players try to ignore the intonation problem, the stress and muscle tension are present since the players' brains have learned to hear and react this way to the situation. These physical responses, then, are really a learned "misuse" of the body. In my own case, I believe that I had unconsciously been making small changes like this in my playing over a long period of time. Each time I misused my body, it was so small that I wasn't even aware of it. I had never realized it

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was so hard to play in a symphony orchestra! And I had never experienced pain while playing before, so how was I even to know that something was wrong? Eventually these small misuses of my body were enough, and the pain started. For me, it was the last straw.

The Feldenkrais Method® functions by working directly with the part of the brain, called the “motor cortex,” that causes us to tighten our muscles or flinch (for example, whenever you see a Strauss excerpt). When our muscles tighten, the brain sends a message to the muscles. In effect, it is really a brain problem, and not a muscular one. The first phase of the method is called “Awareness Through Movement®,” and involves lessons that are performed with a Feldenkrais practitioner who verbally directs the student through a series of movements that can be performed sitting, standing or lying down. The lessons, done at the student’s own pace, help to explore one’s range of movement. There are no right or wrong movements, and one learns one’s own boundaries, and to respect them. In a lesson, a Feldenkrais practitioner may ask you to pay attention to a certain part of your body, while moving another. For example, while lying on your back on a table, with both legs hanging off the end, you might be asked to swing your legs back and forth, side to side. Do you feel the effects on your breathing? Does your head want to stay still, or follow the knees? The movements are done very consciously and slowly. This way, the nervous system has a chance of catching up and incorporating the movement patterns so that they may be incorporated into our normal lives. Through these types of exercises, students discover new movement skills and the relationship of different body parts to one another.

The second phase of the method is called “Functional Integration®,” and involves one-on-one sessions with a Feldenkrais practitioner. These sessions are very helpful for giving someone a quick start in the Feldenkrais Method®. In this, the practitioner “speaks” directly to the body through gentle touch and movement in sessions that usually last 45-60 minutes. The practitioner uses movements that may make a student aware of how he is using the body improperly, or to illustrate to the student more options of movements, that they might use later. The sessions are usually done without speaking, which allows the brain to remember the actions better. Many people have never considered the option of variation in their movements, instead locking themselves into bad habits from an early age. But the brain is quite amazing – if, after many times of doing something the wrong way, you

show the body how to do it the right way, the brain will immediately recognize the right way because it feels good. The brain can then use these correct movements to replace the improper ones.

From personal experience, I know that after Awareness Through Movement® and Functional Integration® lessons, I always feel much lighter and more refreshed than I did when I walked into the lesson, as if I had had a nap. I love it! Although I didn’t notice changes immediately, there is much more grace to my movement now. After a few months of going to class once a week, I began to realize that my back pains were bothering me less and less. Now when I play tough concerts of Bruckner and Strauss, I notice that it is much easier to pull a big sound without pressing — something that I had been wondering about for years. I also no longer have to take the weekend off from playing because of the pain in my shoulders. I have regained my confidence and really enjoy playing in an orchestra. When some of my old habit movements start creeping back, my body tells me almost immediately that I am doing something that isn’t efficient before it is expressed as pain and suffering.

Just recently, I have begun to use the method to help me with musical and specific problems. I am much more aware of my breathing now, and this is helping me with questions of phrasing. I have found new ways of using the bow, and even new fingerings. In a way, I feel like my own teacher for the first time in my life! Ultimately, I have learned that pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. This has been one of the greatest things that I have experienced, both as a bassist and as a person. So, for anyone who experiences pain while playing, or if you just want to become more aware of what you are doing so you can grow as a human being, I highly recommend the Feldenkrais Method®.

(Feldenkrais®, Feldenkrais Method®, Awareness Through Movement® and Functional Integration® are registered service marks of The Feldenkrais Guild®.)

Glenn Gordon attended the Curtis Institute of Music and studied with Roger Scott. Since 1995, he has been living in Norway, playing double bass in the Oslo Philharmonic. He is studying the Feldenkrais Method in Basel, Switzerland. For more information, you can check out The Feldenkrais Method® at www.feldenkrais.com. Also, look for Moshé Feldenkrais’ books: “The Elusive Obvious,” “Awareness Through Movement,” “The Potent Self,” and “Body and Mature Behavior.”