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no pain, big gain

Rozanna Weinberger

When I interviewed violist Karen Tuttle last year ("Body and Soul," December 1998), she spoke compellingly of the Feldenkrais Method and its effect on many of her students. Within days of the interview, I came across a violin-playing friend who was beside herself with enthusiasm about a Feldenkrais course she was about to take. That cinched it for me—I had to find out what it was all about.

My own interest in movement studies goes back to my high-school years, when I was grappling with mastering the viola and also recovering from a broken neck I'd suffered at age 15. As a result, three of my cervical vertebrae are fused together. At the time, I had no idea of the effects such an injury could have on the way my body moves, nor was I interested in dwelling on the possibility that such an accident could affect my dreams of being a violist. But as time passed and my playing progressed, I realized that I needed to eliminate the awkwardness the injury had caused in

Above, the author at a training class.

my playing, and no traditional teaching methods seemed able to help me do that.

Luckily, Tuttle suggested that I read *The Inner Game of Tennis*, by W. Timothy Gallwey (Random House, paperback, \$15.95). The book focuses on the mental attitudes that can help tennis players improve their games by increasing concentration and overcoming self-doubt and ner-

the most basic level. Thousands of open strings later, I found myself beginning to play with tremendous ease and freedom. And what is virtuosity but the ability to perform difficult acts easily? Shouldn't this be a major goal of string pedagogy?

Moshe Feldenkrais would say his purpose was to make the impossible possible, the possible easy, and the easy elegant. This was one of the first things I learned at my first Feldenkrais Professional Training

Examining the Feldenkrais Method

vousness. It is also popular among musicians and many other kinds of performers. For me, the book showed the way to the idea of learning through physical awareness, the kind of learning that goes beyond simple judgments of good and bad. I began a process of rebuilding my playing by working at

Program, a month of intensive training for would-be practitioners led by Dr. Frank Wildman, director of the Movement Studies Institute of America in Berkeley, California. Through these classes, I found a way to improve the efficiency of my movements in viola playing, and also a means for

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better explaining movement awareness to my own students. I also became convinced that the more physically free musicians become on their instruments, the more they can say musically.

I spoke with Wildman at length about how and why the Feldenkrais Method can be the foundation for learning a skill such as string playing, not through imitation but through self-awareness.

What attracted you to Feldenkrais?

I was involved in the performing arts as a dancer, and I noticed that there was a limit to technical improvement for many performers—and the limit didn't necessarily seem to be related to how hard someone worked or how many hours they practiced. It was more a matter of working smarter

than harder. And working smarter seemed to mean that the person could feel what they were doing, really sense their entire body, rather than just trying to focus attention on performing a certain movement or copying some idea of how to look. What interested me was that those people who were able to express themselves fully with their bodies had fewer mechanical difficulties than other people. They seemed to be able to feel the spine, the balance, the position of their head, and the tips of their fingers all at once.

Other people worked very hard but were prone to body injuries, and they also seemed to have less bodily awareness. And if they assumed that they'd reached a certain level of proficiency based upon years of practice, they tended to assume that the secret to going further was to practice more, and harder.

FELDENKRAIS FUNDAMENTALS

The Feldenkrais Method aims to teach ease, comfort, and skill in physical movement by learning to understand the physical cues the body gives when in motion. Practitioners sometimes say that a better understanding of their muscles also helps them "free up" their emotions, which can be particularly helpful to performers in the creative arts.

The Method is based on the work of Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984), a physicist, engineer, and athlete. Born in Russia, he studied physics and electrical engineering in Paris before World War II, when he fled to England. His career continued, but so did a number of injuries he suffered through his involvement in soccer, judo, and other sports. His own physical problems prompted his interest in anatomy, kinesiology, and physiology, and he paid close attention to the seemingly insignificant movements, such as sitting and standing, that we all undertake many times each day. This led him ultimately to larger questions of the neurological and physiological aspects of learning. By the 1970s he was teaching his observations internationally as the Feldenkrais Method, and he ran the Feldenkrais Institute in Tel Aviv until his death.

There are two basic forms of Feldenkrais practice. The first is officially known as Functional Integration, which is many people's introduction to the Method. FI consists of a series of one-on-one sessions of movements done at an instructor's direction. Trainers teach through verbal interaction but also through touch and guided movements, and they can help identify areas of particular strain or tension for different individuals. The other form of training, for those who already have been through some FI sessions, is called Awareness through Movement and is based on movement lessons Feldenkrais himself developed. Lasting from about 45 minutes to an hour each, they can be done in a class setting with an instructor or to taped narration at home.

Paul Ehrlich, the principal violist with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, has studied Feldenkrais for a number of years. He highly recommends it for all musicians, even if they aren't trying to overcome muscle tension or injury. "For me one of the really revealing things was how much was happening in my shoulders and neck and chest," he says. "After playing an instrument for many years, you lose awareness. But after a Feldenkrais lesson, you begin to realize how these muscles work together, and that you can control that not by moving a muscle but by *undoing* something you may have been doing for years. That can be an astonishing discovery."

For those interested in learning more, there is Moshe Feldenkrais' own book, called *Awareness Through Movement*. Other books by contemporary trainers are also available, as are cassette tapes for home practice. Numerous Feldenkrais-based organizations around the world provide workshops. In the U.S., they fall under the umbrella of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America (which has sister organizations in Europe and Australia). Contact this group for information about books, tapes, and accredited practitioners in your area. The Feldenkrais Guild is at PO Box 489, Albany, OR 97321-0143; (800) 775-2881. You can find its Web site at www.feldenkrais.com.

—Mary VanClay

In other words, people believe that acquiring a skill has to do with the repetition of movements. But repetition without awareness of all the parameters involved isn't actually all that useful.

Right. What I mean by "working smarter" is to think, "What is it that I need to know and feel so that I can perform better without having to drill myself so much?" You could almost say that if we have to constantly practice something, we must not fully understand it yet.

Many string teachers try to get a student to duplicate a given movement, instead of becoming aware of their own movements so that they can learn from the signals that their bodies give them.

One of the questions I ask myself when looking at a student is, "What are the superfluous tensions in his movements, and how can they be eliminated so that his body is completely prepared for the task at hand?" But the excessive tension can be something that the player has divorced himself from feeling physically, in order to try to focus on the task of playing the music. And this tendency to separate oneself from the problem is in itself a source of much effort. If we have habits that we can't identify, such as tensing our jaws or throat muscles and overworking our backs and necks, eventually we'll end up in some sort of difficulty.

Many people have various means of dealing with tension—taking vigorous exercise, stretching their muscles regularly, or drinking too much or taking drugs. But these are still rather ineffective measures, because the problems caused by excess tension may still arise as soon as the individual picks up the instrument again. The brain has not been given the necessary input to change these habits. Imagine playing an instrument without the brain going through the excess work and distraction of continuously creating habitual tensions. The Feldenkrais Method provides an opportunity for all types of performing artists to improve both their gross and fine motor coordination by learning to sense the subtlest detail of how they are using their whole body in any movement.

There are a handful of great players in the world who are deemed naturals because they play with certain grace and efficiency of movement, as well as a fearlessness, that few people can duplicate. I suspect that they have an inborn sense of how to learn from their bodies.

What people often do is practice the things they can't do. What appealed to me about Feldenkrais was that you were learning to



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Trainer Yvan Joly helps the author experiment with both relaxing and raising her left shoulder while playing for a class.

vastly improve the things you *could* do, and developing those basic, fundamental skills that are the foundations of much more complex movements.

So we can build complex movements on top of a solid foundation of the basics—that is, on top of what we already know.

It's extremely empowering to the student if the teacher works that way, starting from the point where the student feels comfortable and confident.

And it's also a matter of understanding the things about our bodies that we assume we understand but actually don't. When a musician picks up a musical instrument and

says, "I have difficulty performing this section of the piece," I look at how they are balanced. How anxiety and frustration are expressing themselves in their bodies. How that limits their ability to do even such things as moving their fingers in a certain way. Many of these things are invisible most of the time.

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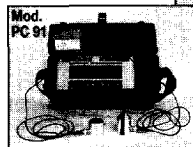
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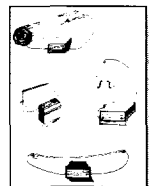
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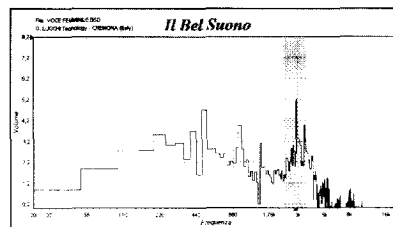
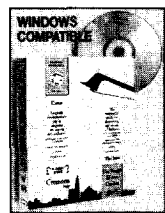
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You mean to the untrained eye?

Both to the person performing and to the untrained eye. Exhortations from the teacher to "try harder" are in effect just a way of saying, "Look, I don't know what you're doing, but I suggest that you try something that once worked for me." That's fine, but it's also a kind of a hit-or-miss approach.

But the Feldenkrais Method asks, "How does one physically learn? How can we take you back to that place where you're not even thinking about improving, but rather—much like a baby learning to take its first steps—sensing body movements kinesthetically?" When we do things for the pleasure inherent in the movement, then we're working with the true foundations for coordination.

I observed that dancers who learned how to be more sensitive to their bodies could actually do things that required more speed or more force without hurting themselves. If someone is dancing properly in the first place, he or she shouldn't have accidents. The greatest prevention of injury to any performing artist, whether instrumentalist or dancer, is awareness.

Many string players have problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Bad habits can

eventually cause people to have to stop playing altogether.

These problems stop many people's careers. If someone doesn't have much awareness of the effort they're making when playing a stringed instrument, it would be almost impossible to ask them to play that same piece with half the amount of effort in their hands. It would be the equivalent of asking someone who is very tense to relax. That person might respond by relaxing to the extent that that word has meaning to them, but they wouldn't be able to relax beyond that point.

So the student needs to learn the range of possibilities that relaxation can encompass.

Exactly, and that is why asking a person to play a difficult piece "in a more relaxed fashion" has a limited effect. However, if you teach people to feel curiosity and interest in just the movement, for the movement's sake, they can start to sense what the components of a skill are, and the brain and central nervous system have the information needed to do a given movement with the least amount of effort. For example, many string players with carpal tunnel syndrome don't realize that they're always holding their shoulders up. That's because

the way they're sitting prevents their legs from feeling that they're really connected to the ground. There can, of course, be various causes for carpal tunnel syndrome, but the point is that it could be prevented if players were able to develop enough awareness, on a somatic level, to alleviate the causes.

Is there a way you usually summarize for newcomers to the Feldenkrais Method what they might expect to get out of it?

I tell my classes that we will ask ourselves, "What is the meaning of movement? How do you feel a movement more deeply, and how do you feel yourself more deeply?" Performers who come to me generally want to change in one way or another, whether it be physical, personal, or professional. Many people have no idea what they want to change. But experience has shown me that they often get more than they bargained for—when they liberate themselves physically, they liberate themselves emotionally, as well. *

The editors thank Paul Rubin, Feldenkrais consultant to the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, for his insights about musicians and Feldenkrais.

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