

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ZEMACH-BERSIN

Over a period of a few days in November 2004, David Zemach-Bersin and Mark Hirschfield (a faculty practitioner at the Institute and a graduate of David's Montclair, NJ training program) communicated by e-mail and telephone about David's thoughts on the FELDENKRAIS METHOD® and on FELDENKRAIS METHOD training programs.

Mark Hirschfield: It seems to be a generally accepted idea that Dr. Feldenkrais was still experimenting with his approach to training students to become practitioners. Where do you feel that you've improved on the legacy that he left?

David Zemach-Bersin: You are right, Moshe was very much experimenting, and his approach to teaching was constantly evolving. He was an extraordinarily brilliant thinker and synthesizer. I felt that much of the way that he taught was by transmission and not through spoken language. Rather than trying to improve on Moshe, I can only think of trying to improve on myself. I take my development as a teacher and my role as a transmitter of Moshe's work and his legacy very seriously, and I am constantly challenging myself to grow and change.

When we—the group of us that began teaching in Amherst and after Moshe's passing—started doing training programs we had to find our own way. For example, a large issue was how to talk about *Functional Integration*® while teaching. We had to create a language, for making the implicit and elusive, explicit and obvious. In my teaching, I am constantly attempting to keep both the richness and the poverty of language as part of the dialogue I am having with my students; in other words, honoring how the necessity of language and the insufficiency of language co-exist. For example, some students in the San Francisco and Amherst trainings felt that Moshe's unwillingness to answer questions in the linear way that they wanted, was a sign that he was trying to obfuscate and hide the answer. But, quite the contrary, he felt a profound sense of the inadequacy of language to describe the fluid, dynamic complexity and multi-layered, multi-dimensional-ity of what he was thinking, feeling and sensing.

But, I think that students deserve transparency, i.e., that the teacher explains to their fullest ability what they are doing. After all, FI is not simply a matter of pulling here or pushing there. There is so much more in the contact with another nervous system that is hidden from view; the quality of contact, the thoughts of the practitioner, the pacing, rhythm, direction, sensory and non-sensory information, how particular relationships and functions are built. The joining of two systems in FI creates a very information-rich context. If Moshe had continued to live, my guess is that he would have taken this path of making FI more explicit. Though on the other hand it is very possible that doing so would have interrupted, disturbed his creative processes.

MH: You mentioned earlier that Moshe's process was constantly evolving. What about your own?

DZB: Each training that I do is different, different in terms of curriculum and different in terms of pedagogy. As I mature and grow in my own practice and understanding of the work, I bring these developments to my teaching. The current New York City program is the 7th program that I have directed. In this program, I find that I am tying the *Awareness Through Movement*® and *Functional Integration*® very intimately together. Using each to inform and explain the other, much more than I have ever done before. Teaching in this way challenges me to create needed ATM lessons and to go deeply into the concepts and strategies behind Moshe's lessons. I think that the ideas of function, of the physics of movement, of the synergistics of the musculature, of the summative/building block quality of learning, are hard enough to understand. I feel that one of my responsibilities as a teacher is to construct or devise repeated sensory experiences that show how these ideas

are imbedded in each and every lesson. In this way, I hope that the ideas underlying Moshe's work will always be lived rather than be abstract or academic.

MH: Let's talk about the aspect of the method that embodies a way of learning that is counter to what we know as the typical "academic model." The experiential learning of the method as opposed to the academic means of learning by imitating or memorizing. How do you reconcile the typical student's longing for the security of learning through the old academic model with your attempt to get them to embrace experiential learning? You do answer questions during your trainings; you demonstrate FI techniques; you encourage students to use published ATMs in their classes. These are, relatively speaking, techniques that are drawn from the academic model.

DZB: This is a great question. There is a great deal of insecurity associated with learning the *Feldenkrais Method*. And it is not easy work to learn. It takes time. It's unlike anything else in our culture (in terms of both the theory and the practice), and in fact, you can only learn it by ultimately abandoning the formulas and recipes that you have been taught. This is the conundrum. My task as a teacher is to provide an environment in the room where everyone-myself included-can learn to be comfortable with the discomfort of their insecurity. It is this insecurity that makes us (yes, even the teachers) want to rush towards formulaic structures and explanations. This anxiety can evoke a tendency to want to stop time or to fix things rather than see and live in process. In addition, when we try to fix things, we tend to explain what we see through the frame of cause and effect, and to assume that the world actually corresponds to the way that we talk about things with our one particular language. I believe that this

is a fallacious and dangerous way to think and teach, and actually makes it much more difficult to learn the *Feldenkrais Method*. Yet, some teachers believe that this mode of explanation is what students need, and what will make our work more understandable to the medical world. I believe that this way of teaching is by definition reductionistic, and points students in the wrong direction, that it in fact provides an obstacle to understanding. It also contributes to the mistaken notion that the *Feldenkrais Method* is actually about movement or that the explanation for change lies with a particular movement or technique. What Moshe taught is that the least important thing is the movement; the information or learning is in the relationships, the patterns that connect at a deep archetypal level.

I hope I am providing my students with a model of someone attempting to keep process in the foreground, not just the visible process, but also the vast interior processes that are in fact the soil in which both *Functional Integration* and *Awareness Through Movement* lay their seeds. For example, in FI, it is not I as the practitioner that plants the seed, but rather the seed arises out of the interaction between myself and another, combined with today's air and smells and light, and both of our yesterdays, i.e. every prior lived moment is contributing to this moment. And, for that seed to grow, we as the practitioner must not pre-determine how it is to grow, or make assumptions about the meaning of this seed, this new precious and precarious learning that has just happened for someone. Because, the meaning and value may have nothing to do with the improvement of movement, but with something much deeper, more powerful, and more important to the person.

I feel it is important to keep the unspoken dimension as vital a part of the discussion as possible. So, even though students may be seeing primarily what is visible, and their vision may be at times discontinuous, I am trying in each moment to keep the creative and the unknown as present as possible, as imbedded in my teaching as I can.

In this way, when the time comes for the learning of basic FI techniques or recipes, what you are calling academic teaching, I believe that my students will understand what a fluid and generative medium we are working with, how context dependent this moment is, the role of chance, how interior the process is, and how little is accounted for by what is happening on the surface.

MH: Can you describe the difference between beginning an FI with a "strategy" as opposed to setting out to give a particular lesson?

DZB: Firstly, there is nothing wrong with planning to use a particular lesson structure. The question is how to make that lesson a meaningful, alive, internal, learning experience for the student. Every lesson needs a compositional structure, by that I mean, an ordering or arranging of relationships into a pattern that can be recognized by the nervous system. In part, the meaning, the biological value, and the learning of the lesson are extracted from this compositional structure.

As we develop our perceptions, our sensory acuity, our dexterity, our ability to join with another nervous system, the composition in FI can become more and more fluid. Even though we might begin with one line or thread, it should be able to change according to new information. When we improvise, we are improvising on and within the composition of the lesson. But, it is not a free-form improvisation, there is still a dynamic interplay between the theme or structure of the lesson, and how we feel the changing student.

So, even if one begins with a "strategy," for example, going with the student's latent pattern or organization, you still need a structure that enables you to create the conditions for learning and for the student to make purposeful sensory distinctions. As Gregory Bateson said, "there is no new pattern without new information, and there is no new information without a pattern that connects at an intrinsic biological level". This is one very clear way of thinking about *Functional Integration*. While learning is certainly a result of

exploration, the exploratory interest or curiosity is provoked by a problem or rather the search for a solution, and it is this dynamic between a problem with biological value and curiosity that is created by a melding of the attitude of the practitioner and the structure of the lesson.

MH: During my training, you expressed a certain displeasure with those who try to apply a set of "rules" to the Method, or even to try to categorize or systematize the Method as part of teaching new Practitioners. Given then that each lesson has a strategy, can you talk about the difference between strategy and systematization?

DZB: When we begin working as practitioners, it is often necessary to have basic structures that we can rely on. I think they are useful for our learning, and I offer my students countless basic structures. And, I also think it is valuable to be able to have ways of "seeing a person," and to use these as a stepping-stone to becoming more confident and more capable. I show my students many ways of thinking about a person's organization. The goal is to see the whole person--this took me a long time to be able to do--and then to listen to what emerges; where do my eyes go? What do I feel? What do I see? I try to use all of my senses. I see the person as an organism in space, inhabiting space in their own unique way. For example, sometimes I see the person as embodying a latent intention, or sometimes I actually look for what aspect of their organization is the furthest from the ideal, or sometimes I respond to what I perceive as their emotional tone.

But, I think that this trend toward systematizing, codifying or reducing the *Feldenkrais Method* to a series of rules, is antithetical to the way that Moshe taught and worked. And, more importantly it will only make it more difficult for students to actually learn what is unique and most potent about the method, and how to think in a "Feldenkraisian" way. There are no shortcuts without tremendous cost to the work.

A lesser issue is how some even ex-

perienced practitioners rely on a fixed number of situations. I believe that Moshe's way of thinking and perceiving is in fact highly generative. With a good understanding of the method behind the method, the building blocks of functions, how to create a learning state, and how to access underlying archetypal or phylogenetic patterns, you can easily learn to create new lessons in either FI or ATM.

I urge my students to see abilities, rather than inabilities, health rather than pathology, wholeness rather than parts, and potential rather than dysfunction. I try to offer my students the understanding that the most miraculous and transformative results of the *Feldenkrais Method* spring from our ability to treat the person, and not a problem, from our concern with learning and not fixing, and from our ability to combine knowledge and spontaneity in the lived moment. My personal concern is with how the method will be practiced in the future, and what we can do now in our teaching to maintain what I see as its most vital and essential qualities. How can I help to maintain the method as the art form that it is? How can we keep spirit and form joined?

MH: Because I know you, I know you've got a pretty solid plan for the future. Do you want to say something about that?

DZB: I feel that it is time to begin to create a stable structure that will help the *Feldenkrais Method* to endure. Myself and a group of my graduates and close Assistants are embarking on the formation of the Feldenkrais Institute of New York. It feels to me as if this is an organic outgrowth of the community we have begun to build together. We are leasing the entire floor of a building in the Chelsea area, where we will have private practice offices, my training programs, workshops, classes for the public, advanced trainings, FI supervision programs, a low-fee clinic and much more. We intend to have consistent hard research on the *Feldenkrais Method* occurring at the institute. For example, Sheryl Field will be doing foundation-funded research on her work with children.

Part of my vision is to have yearly symposiums that focus on applications of the *Feldenkrais Method* in particular domains, like music, theater, education, or athletics. I am very, very excited about the potential of this synergistic collaboration.

MH: The Guild is going through an extensive process of potentially revising the rules by which practitioners become Trainers and Assistants. What else is being done to keep the process of training new practitioners "alive?"

DZB: At the international level, as part of the Phase II Project, I am involved with Carl Ginsburg and a small group of others in embarking on a process of attempting to evaluate what we are doing in training programs, and to figure out if we as Trainers are doing what we think we are doing; i.e., are students learning what we think they are learning? We hope to find a way to evaluate what is working in training programs, and what is ineffective. We will begin by trying to interview Trainers about how they teach, how they structure a training, what innovative processes they use. In academia, the sharing and publishing of information is seen as part of what helps a discipline to develop and mature, but traditionally there has been very little collaboration in the Feldenkrais training community. Different trainers have developed different pedagogical strategies, but wouldn't it be wonderful if our entire community were to benefit from these insights and ideas?



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