

# Touched by Feldenkrais

By LYNN WALFORD

At 7:00 P.M. ON JANUARY 7, 1996, my car stalled in the third lane of the five-lane Santa Monica Freeway. As I heard cars swerve and screech, I raced through my options: If I got out of the car, I would be hit. If I stayed in the car, sooner or later, something would plow into me, but the metal of the car would offer some protection. As I waited for the inevitable crash, I never expected that my inability to move would lead me to a whole new way of moving in my life.

Finally, a red Miata rammed into my car's right rear fender, totaling the car and whacking me around like a paddle ball. Needless to say, my injuries required treatment. I tried acupuncture and chiropractic, which helped a bit, but my head and neck were still in severe pain, and it was an excruciating task for me to write. Then I remembered that a neighbor of mine had sponsored an exercise class with Feldenkrais practitioner Pauline Sugine the previous summer. I had lost track of Sugine after taking classes with her regularly during the early 1980s. Now, something inside me knew that Feldenkrais would help. After 13 years, Sugine looked the same. But she had greater verve than I remembered, and she moved like a breeze. While I had pursued a writing career, she had established a thriving practice, the Center for Physical Health in West Los Angeles.

My first Feldenkrais Functional Integration session at the center was like heaven. Functional Integration (FI) is the hands-on approach to the Feldenkrais Method, in which the practitioner touches and moves various parts of your body to communicate new and more efficient methods of movement to your body and brain. The touch felt as light and magical as a baby's and as relaxing as meditation. My body responded immediately and began to let go. During our sessions, we talked about the people we used to know, and Sugine often mentioned "Moshe." At the time, I didn't know what a fascinating life Feldenkrais had led.

MOSHE FELDENKRAIS WAS BORN IN UKRAINE IN 1904. After emigrating to Palestine as a teenager, he worked as a laborer and tutor. By 1928, he had saved enough money to travel to Paris, where he earned a degree in engineering and a doctorate in physics at the Sorbonne. He then took a job in the laboratory of Irene



and Frederic Joliot-Curie, winners of the 1935 Nobel Prize. Meanwhile, he pursued a separate interest in judo. He was instrumental in bringing martial arts to the West, cofounding the Judo Club of France in 1936.

Around this time, Feldenkrais's knee, which he had injured as a young man, began to trouble him. Soon, he could barely walk. "He spent time studying the anatomy of the knee," says Judith Stransky, a Feldenkrais Method teacher and long-time friend of Feldenkrais. "He started out by imagining all the parts doing their job properly. Then he began working on himself with delicate touching. Eventually, he was able to walk normally." In essence, Feldenkrais had discovered his own version of the mind/body connection. "He started helping other people with the hands-on work," Stransky adds, "and then one day he said to himself, 'I can reach far more people if I can invent exercises that do the same thing as this hands-on work.'"

Feldenkrais's studies in anatomy and neurophysiology were interrupted by the German invasion of Paris in 1940, a great threat to him because he was Jewish. The Gestapo searched the Joliot-Curie laboratory. As he made his escape, Feldenkrais was given two suitcases secured with the seal of the French Republic and told to give them to a French government official in London. Then he was left on the beach near Bordeaux to try to board a British destroyer.

Interned when he first arrived in Britain, Feldenkrais held onto the suitcases, which British Intelligence eventually allowed him to hand over to the DeGaulle government. Although he didn't know it at the time, the

suitcases contained papers from the Joliot-Curie laboratory that would help keep nuclear fission out of the Nazis' hands and make it available to the Allies. Feldenkrais spent the war years in Fairlie, Scotland, working at the Admiralty's anti-submarine establishment. After the war, he moved to London, where he practiced and taught judo and movement classes. His first book, *Body and Mature Behavior* was published in 1949.

In the late 1940s, Feldenkrais was asked to direct scientific research for the Israeli armed forces. He spent the rest of his life in Israel, giving classes and refining his hands-on and movement techniques. He regularly treated Israeli president David Ben-Gurion, who had become very ill and could no longer be helped by conventional doctors. Feldenkrais's work did not become well known in the United States until decades later, when he led a training program at the Esalen Institute in California in 1972. There, he developed different names to distinguish between his two methods of work. Recalls Stransky, a student in that first program, "We called the group exercises Awareness Through Movement, or ATM, a natural after the title of his book at the time, and the individual hands-on work Functional Integration." Feldenkrais taught several more workshops in America before he died in 1984.

THE SAME WORK THAT HAD HELPED Feldenkrais's knee helped me, too. I healed quickly. Feldenkrais treatments enabled my muscles to become fluid and supple again. But the years I had spent writing without breaks, tensing my sitting body, had also taken a toll. An acupuncturist I consulted around the same time put it bluntly. "You have the muscle tone of someone twice your age," she told me. Sugine suggested that I take Feldenkrais ATM classes at the center. In these classes, we moved our bodies very slowly, became conscious of our habitual movements, and learned how to move in less limiting ways. I found that I didn't necessarily need to have someone work on me to receive the benefits of the Feldenkrais Method.

I also began noticing things I had never noticed before. My chair was too high, for example, so I took off the wheels. When I typed, I did so with enough kilowatts of stress to light a small city. It seemed my nervous system, like a primitive blender, had only two settings: off and liquefy. I also learned that hundreds of people had undergone experiences similar to mine. People of all ages who couldn't find help anywhere else had come to the center and become well.

"The work has been a lifesaver for me," says practitioner Pat Barragan, who taught my ATM classes. In 1987, her last year of Feldenkrais training, Barragan was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), a degenerative disease of the central nervous system with no known cure. "MS destroys the myelin sheath of the

nerve fibers, and then the body scars over the damage," she explains. "By doing the Feldenkrais movements slowly, gently, and repetitively, you forge new neural pathways. In neurology, it's called neural plasticity. By doing this work on a consistent basis, I'm always staying either a half step or a step ahead of functioning. I may not have the stamina of an athlete, but I can walk and do everything I used to be able to do. And because I'm doing this work, not just having it done to me, it keeps me much more directly connected to my body. That has allowed me to be sensitive on an entirely different level with my clients. There is an intuitive knowing." Barragan has helped her Feldenkrais clients with MS to achieve a better sense of balance and connection within themselves.

In 1992, cardiologist Jerry Rosenberg of Santa Monica was injured in a car accident. He couldn't move his neck or pelvis, and his neurologist diagnosed him with head trauma, whiplash, and a slipped disk. The neurologist wanted to operate, but Rosenberg refused and began taking Feldenkrais FI treatments. After three months, he could move his neck. Diagnosing himself; he says, "My cerebral spinal fluid was blocked and wasn't flowing from the pelvis up to the spine and the neck. The Feldenkrais treatment unblocked it and allowed that flow to occur. It was relaxing. I had less stress. I felt that I could recover immediately after the treatment. I was breathing easier, and I was given hope."

Psychologist and rabbi Ron Levine of Van Nuys, California, concurs. "It restored vitality and joy to my life," he says. "It brought movement into my body, and then it brought movement into my psyche." Levine spent a year and a half in bed with severe back pain starting in 1987. He saw two orthopedists, two neurosurgeons, and two chiropractors, and he tried biofeedback, acupuncture, acupressure, and hypnotherapy. Finally; in June 1988, he tried Feldenkrais FI, and within a year and a half, he was fully functioning. Levine became a certified Feldenkrais practitioner in 1994, and he has since created special Feldenkrais workshops designed to help couples become more aware of their movement patterns and their relationships.

Feldenkrais work can also enhance other forms of exercise or athletic activity. PGA professional golfer Duffy Waldorf uses ATM techniques before he hits the links, and choreographer Kim Blank has integrated Feldenkrais techniques into her own dancing, as well as her work on such films as the recent *Out to Sea*, starring Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon.

There are now more than eight hundred certified Feldenkrais practitioners in the United States, and many of them are taking the work in new and wonderful directions. Practitioner Bill Hutchinson of Watertown, Massachusetts, has developed a walking workshop

based on Feldenkrais principles that he has presented to groups around the country, including the staff at Harvard University. He is also contributing his expertise as a Feldenkrais practitioner to a new department of alternative medicine at Boston's St. Elizabeth's Hospital. The method, he says, "will take twenty years off your life. I'm grateful for Feldenkrais. I'm nearly sixty years old, and it makes things easier. Weights don't feel like weights anymore. You feel like you're on top of the world."

While writing this story, I have had no pain. I have taken breaks and listened to my 39-year-old body. And at a recent party, I won a dance contest for being able to twist the lowest. Part of what I've realized through Feldenkrais work is that I hadn't been moving enough. Now, after seeing what it can do, I am moved to tears.

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