

# Poetry in motion

*June 12, 2012, 2:04 pm*

*The Feldenkrais method of gentle, deliberate movement can help reduce the symptoms of chronic pain even as it lifts the spirit.*

## **Ursula Sautter | July/August 2012 Issue of Ode Magazine**

Slightly raising your leg from the ground is an astonishingly complex action. First, you bunch together your hip muscles, followed by the muscles in your pelvis. Then you tense your hamstring...

It has never taken me this long to slightly raise my right leg, and the only reason I'm doing it at all is because of Peter Schulz, the instructor at my Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement (ATM) class in Düsseldorf. With amazing patience and precision, the 58-year-old talks us through some very basic motions as we lie on the floor of his bare training room. We lift our legs, slightly. We turn our knees to the left and to the right. We swivel our heads.

We do all this in an extremely slow, gentle and incremental fashion. There is no momentum involved, no sweaty effort, no right or wrong. "Learning, which is the basis of improvement, is always a process of trial and error," says Schulz, who sits on a low stool with his back against the wall, his bearded chin resting on his chest. "In Feldenkrais, which is a sensuous process, the decision of whether something is a success or a failure takes place in, and for, each of us individually." That's why he only describes an exercise, never demonstrates it. "That would be fatal and contrary to the idea of the whole thing, since it would introduce the notion of an ideal movement people should strive for."

Amidst the clamor of Twitter feeds and Facebook updates, and the anxiety over double-dip recessions and political crises, the ATM exercises create a welcome oasis of calm. But they also can create something more. When practiced regularly, the Feldenkrais method (FM) can help relieve back pain, headaches and arthritis pain as well as improve posture, mobility, concentration and coordination. Unlike many other physical regimens, FM doesn't require stamina, agility or even fitness, so the techniques are suitable for the elderly and infirm. As I lie on the floor slightly raising my leg, I can feel my spirits rise too.

Feldenkrais ATM was invented by the Ukraine-born Israeli mechanical engineer and physicist Moshé Feldenkrais, who died in 1984. When, in midlife, a painful knee injury impaired his ability to move, and the operation doctors suggested seemed less than promising, the keen judo practitioner resolved to cure himself.

Feldenkrais began testing novel ways of manipulating the afflicted joint until he discovered a sequence of motions that could restore its function. He based his methods on physics, biomechanics, anatomy, physiology and psychology and began instructing others. While the brain controls our muscles, Feldenkrais argued, we can still use our muscles to send back messages to the brain. If we become aware of our bodies and learn which movements are good for them—and if we repeatedly perform these movements slowly, carefully and consciously—we can each teach our brain to include them in its repertoire.

Feldenkrais's method of "somatic education," now widely taught in Europe, the Americas and Australasia by some 4,000-plus practitioners, has proved particularly effective in treating chronic pain. Oliver Leo Schmidt, a 47-year-old professor of conducting at Essen's Folkwang University, is a case in point. While still a university student, he developed intense and debilitating back pain from a congenital spine deformation called kyphoscoliosis. Since nothing else helped—neither physiotherapy nor swimming nor various more exotic treatments—he started taking regular lessons with Peter Schulz. "Very soon, I was extremely enthusiastic," says the musician. "So I decided to keep it up."

After around a year, Schmidt was able to conduct for hours; before, his back muscles would seize up after about 10 minutes. He also realized that ATM's careful self-observation and conscious incremental way of moving improved his performance as a pianist and conductor. "My movements have become more economical, coordinated and fluid and my sense for what I do more finely honed," Schmidt says. He's even incorporated some Feldenkrais techniques into his own teaching.

Feldenkrais is also taught in functional integration (FI) sessions. During these one-on-one encounters, trainers use their hands instead of words to help the client feel new ways of organizing movements. Feldenkrais called these FI sessions "a dance between two nervous systems."

I started my own session with Schulz by lying down on a low, padded table. I was anything but comfortable. As usual, my neck muscles went into spasms, as if they were attached the wrong way. Schulz gently but precisely guided my limbs, neck, head and torso through a sequence of very slow and gradual motions. Though I was really stiff that day, few of these exercises caused more than a twinge. Most were even curiously pleasant, since Schulz—unlike a massage -therapist, chiropractor or orthopedist—exerts only the slightest pressure.

"What I'm doing in FI is interacting with the client's nervous system in a very direct way that may allow me to feel its needs and help it satisfy them," explains Schulz, who also works with mentally disabled patients. So instead of forcing my arm and shoulder into positions they don't really want to assume, he seemed to suggest to them that it could be pleasant to move in this or that way, much like a skilled dance instructor smoothly guiding an amateur around the floor. By the end of the session, my neck was free of twitches and my limbs felt more supple. I moved with less effort; my gait was much more light. I felt grounded, both physically and mentally.

It's this combined effect on body and mind that makes Feldenkrais so compelling. Bodily movements are represented in the brain by linked sets of neurons that fire together whenever specific movements are performed. While we usually acquire these firing patterns via our experiences during infancy and childhood, "the formative process doesn't end then," says neuroscientist Jim Stephens, adjunct professor of physical therapy at Temple University in Philadelphia and chair of the Research Committee of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America. Our brains and nervous systems change, both structurally and functionally, as a result of new experiences, a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity. So the mental image of our bodies can alter even in adulthood and old age.

That means the sensory input your brain receives during ATM and FI lessons can create new neural connections. As these connections activate more and more often during the course of training, the

pathways become stronger. Eventually, they become the default pattern, the preferred neural choice. The Feldenkrais method “is not just pushing muscles around but changing things in the brain itself,” says neuroscientist and Nobel Prize nominee Karl Pribram, emeritus professor of psychology and psychiatry at Stanford and Radford universities. “So the patient can gradually adjust his whole muscular dysfunction to what we call a normal image.”

This makes the technique particularly useful in treating neurological disorders like multiple sclerosis, stroke and cerebral palsy. In Christchurch, New Zealand, psychologist and FM practitioner Cindy Allison successfully applies the method to spinal cord injuries. In both individual and group sessions, she helps her clients relearn some of the basic movements they have lost. For some this may mean the ability to determine where body parts are in space (proprioception) or to feel themselves moving (kinesthesia). Others “may experience improvements in coordination and ease of movement, posture and stability, or a decrease in muscle spasms and pain,” according to Allison.

That’s been the experience of Claire Freeman, 33, a graphic designer from Christchurch. Freeman sustained a spinal cord injury in a car accident at the age of 17 that left her a partial quadriplegic; she has some movement and feeling below the neck. She’s been taking regular one-on-one sessions with Allison for five years and has found the treatment “has improved my sensation, balance and awareness of my body. I feel engaged with parts of my body I would normally not be conscious of. I feel my walking has also improved due to better proprioception of my body.”

Feldenkrais may even be able to help those who have never experienced normal motor function at all. Kathy Yates, a certified FM practitioner from New York, helps youngsters suffering from neurological disorders like cerebral palsy discover parts of their bodies they have never actually felt, then to use them and, finally, to slowly gain more mobility and independence.

Before she started weekly sessions with Yates about two and a half years ago, Zoe Petrou, 9, from Nyack, New York, could “only scoot on the floor and barely sit up or walk in a walker a few steps,” says her mother, Karin, a 45-year-old restaurant worker. Zoe has dyskinetic cerebral palsy, a rare form of the disease with particularly disabling symptoms. Despite undergoing traditional physical therapy from the day she was born, Zoe’s condition did not improve.

Then Yates started working with her. Incrementally, she moved Zoe’s body in various directions and into various positions the girl couldn’t achieve on her own. In that fashion, she slowly managed to teach the child’s brain “to recognize, and then develop an image of, parts of her body that previously didn’t exist for it and therefore could not be used,” explains Yates.

Today, Zoe is able to roll over from her belly onto her back, something she had not been able to do before. When lying down, her mom reports, “She can pull herself up and then sit unaided.” And, to her family’s delight and her own, she can now also grasp things with her right hand.

Indeed, FM practitioners and clients all agree that FM can do more than simply ease a few aches and pains. If taken seriously, the method can lead to a more deep-rooted kind of change that affects your ideas about yourself and what’s good for you. Training the body in this way “not only changes the strength and

flexibility of the skeleton and muscles,” as Feldenkrais himself put it, “but makes a profound change in the self-image and quality of direction of the self.”

*Ursula Sautter has looked long and hard for a way to become more relaxed in body and mind. She thinks she's found it.*

Original Source: <http://odewire.com/poetryinmotion>