

# EVERYDAY MIRACLES: UNDERSTANDING THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD

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The work of Moshe Feldenkrais, although widely known, is often viewed as either the inexplicable product of an individual miracle worker or a very useful form of bodywork. It is miraculous and *does* promote enhanced bodily ease. However, the “miracles” are not idiosyncratic evidence for one man’s personal power, but the natural result of developing a learnable, systematic approach to human movement and action.

The Feldenkrais Method incorporates an engineering knowledge of physical movement principles, a martial arts understanding of force and energy in human interaction, and great sensitivity to the functional interrelationship of movement and feeling states in the human being. Over a period of 35 years, Feldenkrais succeeded in turning his own very personal genius into a system for teaching awareness whereby trained practitioners are enabled to create “miracles” in turn.

Practitioners are not taught to “do” anything. Rather, they learn how they themselves maintain their own familiar identity or self-image through habitual ways of using the body. Over a training period of four years, practitioners become aware of themselves in a kinesthetic, non-analytical way. Months are spent re-experiencing their own movement patterns, from infantile hand and mouth coordination through sophisticated processes of group interaction. Only then, is this new awareness used to teach others through establishing a special kind of relationship in which the practitioner senses the needs of the client better than the client does alone.

The method focuses on action: *how* we do whatever we are doing in life. This puts it at the intersection of mind and body, because only in action are thoughts made manifest and movement functional. Clients are actually students, since what transpires is fundamentally a process of learning how to learn from the constant physiological biofeedback provided by everyday life movements. Through sequences of guided movement called Awareness Through Movement (ATM) and individual table work called Functional Integration (FI), students gain a sense of unexpected pleasure in movement while discovering how they normally restrict themselves. They learn how to observe themselves in action, and often find that the way they move during a Feldenkrais lesson is a model for the way that they move through life. As the name states, what is taught is *awareness* through movement, not pain relief, relaxation, fitness, or flexibility, although these are common effects of the process.

The practitioner-client relationship is the basis for FI. It is a question of a level of mutual communication and willingness to do so, rather than a treatment that one human being gives to another. Such learning provides a non-intrusive way to improve personal organization from the nervous system outwards. During a lesson in FI, the practitioner observes ways in which the student is habitually unconscious in his body and skillfully helps the learner become more comfortable and conscious on a kinesthetic level.

*A client complained to the practitioner about stiffness on one side of her body. The practitioner slowly began to work with her arm and noticed that the arm was not ready to move. It moved without gross difficulty, but with a subtle form of resistance that can be sensed in the quality of movement. The practitioner communicated this to the client, who then noticed a vague, underlying discomfort and reluctance to move her shoulder. As soon as she released the shoulder on her own accord, the entire arm softened in the hand of the practitioner. She commented, “All my life I have pushed myself even though it sometimes hurt. I never realized quite how much I’ve been doing so until this moment when it became so clear in my arm.”*

The idea of Functional Integration is not to manipulate a human body toward a particular standard of action or comfort. Instead, it creates a kinesthetic level of communication whereby the practitioner “suggests” and when the client “understands,” the learning occurs. Such understanding may be explicit, but it is more often nonverbal and outside of the client’s analytical consciousness.



**During a Functional Integration lesson, the practitioner (Dr. Goldman) contacts the nervous system through touch.**

*A woman complained of a headache. She was a clinical psychologist by profession. As she became more comfortable on the table, her breathing deepened. After awhile, she began to feel sad. “What are you doing?” she asked the practitioner. “I’m moving your rib-cage,” was the response. Instead of engaging in conversation, reassured that the practitioner knew what she was doing, the woman on the table forgot her feelings, forgot her thoughts, and began to release the chronic tension in her head, neck, shoulders, and chest. The practitioner chose to tell the client what was happening, so that she could begin to learn how it felt to release each group of muscles.*

*Gradually the discomfort was relieved, and she understood her part in the process.*

The body is used as a concrete example for the learner to sense the quality she brings to initiating and carrying out an action. At the same time, the analytical function of the mind is removed. This creates freedom to give up habitual thoughts and beliefs about what one can and cannot do. The practitioner and client carry on a conversation of sorts through touch which allows the client to experience personally the practitioner's sense of how she could move more easily at that very moment. It is through this shared awareness that the learning occurs.

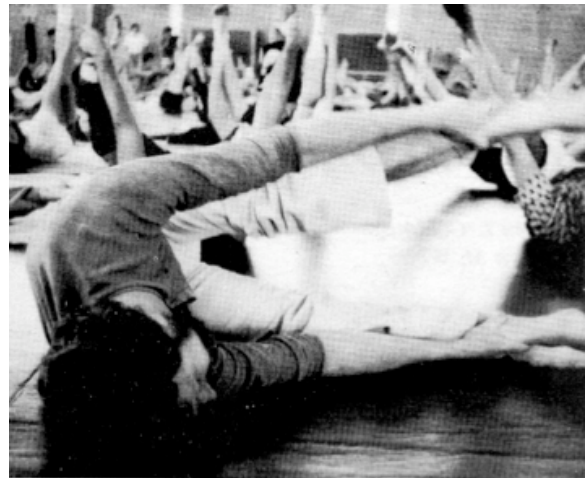
The floor exercises (ATM) provide both individual and group self-awareness. The instructor encourages each participant to move at his own level of ability without any achievement or goal orientation. In giving up the need to achieve the biggest or best movement, a process of attentiveness to the "how" of the movement occurs. After some time, a group of people have enough self-awareness through the movements for harmony and unity to occur spontaneously in the group as a whole.

*Picture, if you will, a large room in a North Carolina Baptist church filled with people of all ages lying on the floor, rolling from side to side simultaneously, with absolute syntony and grace. No counting, music, or drumbeat, give rhythm to their shared movement. Looking more like the flowing tentacles of one sea anemone than like the diverse, rather awkward non-dancers they actually are, they were able to move together in such an organically harmonious way because of their improved individual organization in action.*

Following the instructor's "map" consisting of directions and alternative routes, each participant can, within a short period of time, move with the others in unity.

This experiential awareness has an interesting spiritual dimension. The individual participant is involved in a meditative relationship with the self by means of slow, small effortless movements. Suddenly, there is a kinesthetic and visual recognition that other people surrounding are involved in this same process. The physical movements evolve to a shared harmony and mutuality of space. There is an observable rhythm and common purpose. A feeling of general amazement and wonder emerges. Seemingly arbitrary individual and group movements produce an overall feeling of oneness among strangers in a very short time.

It is interesting to compare ATM with sitting meditation. Both are methods of observation and attentiveness. Meditation generally trains one to observe thoughts, feelings, and bodily processes in a still (non-active) mode. The mind watches itself, while outer physical movement is eliminated. In ATM, on the other hand, the body is attentively active, clearly observing itself while moving. The mind is temporarily freed of its preconceived thoughts. Both ATM and sitting meditation often produce similar states of consciousness, e.g., well-being, clarity, lightness, relaxation. However, ATM helps the person become aware of herself in action, since the lessons involve walking, sitting, standing, lying, and a myriad of other activities.



*Awareness through Movement develops meditative self-observation while improving movement functioning.*

Feldenkrais himself is interested in the spiritual dimensions of human experience, although this is not often discussed explicitly in his writings. During the training programs, he discussed the relevance of Gurdjieff's "Stop" exercise to his own approach to movement quality and emphasized the importance of his study in Japan with the founder of Judo. In *Awareness Through Movement* (1972, p.54), he writes.

*In the esoteric schools of thought a Tibetan parable is told. According to the story, a man without awareness is like a carriage whose passengers are the desires, with the muscles for horses, while the carriage itself is the skeleton. Awareness is the sleeping coachman. As long as the coachman remains asleep, the carriage will be dragged aimlessly here and there. Each passenger seeks a different destination and the horses pull different ways. But when the coachman is wide awake and holds the reins, the horses will pull the carriage and bring every passenger to his proper destination.*

*In those moments when awareness succeeds in being at one with feeling, senses, movement, and thought, the carriage will speed along on the right road. Then man can make discoveries, invent, create, innovate, and "know." He grasps that his small world and the great world around are but one and that in this unity he is no longer alone.*

Neither bodywork, therapy, nor anything else for which we have an easy label, Feldenkrais work is a special form of learning rooted deeply in the fusion of western science, spiritual wisdom, and common sense. Seen in this way, it's not quite as surprising that "miracles" can sprout from such rich soil!

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