

Leaping from Cookie Cutting to Natural Function: The *Feldenkrais Method*® in Fitness

—by Irene Gutteridge, GCFP

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The fitness industry is big business and a mainstream reality that is here to stay. Individuals seek fitness guidance for a number of reasons.

Such guidance is a perfectly valid step towards improving general health and well-being. Let’s face it, exercise is essential. Our voluntary muscles need to be stimulated and our cardio-respiratory function thrives on intense forms of aerobic activity—without doing so, it has been proven time and time again that morbidities and illnesses such as heart disease, depression, certain cancers and obesity¹, to only name a few, prevail. The *Feldenkrais Method* can compliment such fitness endeavors.

Moshe Feldenkrais was an athlete and Judo master. His work is steeped in enabling health in many facets. The four main biological functions that we as humans require for healthy living are the keystones of the *Feldenkrais Method*: sensing, feeling, thinking and acting. Mind-body connection is all the rage in the fitness industry now, and the *Feldenkrais Method* brilliantly blends these four functions, clearly putting the mind-body connection into practical action. It helps people explore how they truly can “work smarter, not harder” – one of the mantras of the fitness industry now.

Being a fitness professional by trade, I have noticed that the fitness industry has become fixated on targeting “key” muscle areas with little attention put towards the functionality of the whole system. Awareness is only taught in mind-body classes or during relaxation portions of exercise regimes. Even in professional sports, athletes typically do their physical, psychological and relaxation training separate from one another. For general fitness folk, many come out of their regimes with improved physical and aerobic capacity, but disembodied and segmented into pieces and parts and miles away from self-awareness.



Photo by Irene Gutteridge

Luckily, times are a changing. Many coaches and instructors are realizing this disconnect being taught. “[The] *Feldenkrais [Method]* attracts me because it moves away from the “cookie cutter” approach so often found throughout the fitness industry,” says Diana Rochon, a strength & conditioning specialist based out of the Canadian Sport Centre Pacific in Whistler, BC. “This is especially true in terms of ‘functional’ assessments that presume all movement problems are found in the problem muscle.”

A few words from Moshe: Learning vs. Exercise

“And that’s how we can avoid the tedium of repetition of exercise, by finding that if you differentiate yourself; if you know that the object is

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—by Gisela Moellmann PhD., GCFP

I understand the absence of visual input in teaching *Awareness Through Movement*® lessons as being on the same level with doing movements crucial for efficient walking while lying on the floor. That is: To make the learning experience as far removed from habitual behavior as possible. Having to interpret instructions that come exclusively through the auditory system opens learning channels different from those coming through the visual system and again different from those coming through touch or the kinesthetic sense. Our learning years are so dominated by external visual images that other sensing systems go into hibernation and cause us to suffer from habitual sensorimotor amnesia. This concept is applicable also to the Suzuki Method of instrumental music education, which Shinichi Suzuki has named not Music- but Talent Education. Learning to play a musical instrument is the tool. No note reading until the sense of hearing and the kinesthetic sense of playing the instrument by anticipated sound have become second nature. These children develop a phenomenal memory and unflinching security in playing and performing. They become excellent students in school.

It's a matter of offering choices other than the usual. In the book *Elusive Obvious*, Moshe Feldenkrais writes: "Processes go well if there are many ways to influence them. We need more ways to do what we want than the one we know even if it is a good one in itself." He repeatedly asserted that the movements per se were immaterial- he even used the word 'idiotic'- that his teaching went far beyond movement. Of course, his brilliant movement lessons can't hide the thought,



Photo of Gisela Moellmann, PhD, GCFP

intelligence and knowledge that went into them and the importance he gave to his thousands of integrative movement sequences, which are said to be as effective when done in the imagination as when executed on the mat.

My sister is a violinist, a graduate of the Yale School

We need more ways to do what we want than the one we know even if it is a good one in itself.
-Moshe Feldenkrais

of Music. She has immersed herself in the *Feldenkrais Method*® for two decades and marvels at the fact that learning to do all those movements, which overtly have nothing to do with violin playing, has given her the skills to automatically use new fingerings and new ways of drawing the bow in order to produce the sounds she internally hears. For my six-year old granddaughter, her first *Awareness Through Movement* lesson was one of imagining her body partially filled with dried beans that gradually shifted position as she slowly turned onto her side. This half-hour lesson caused instantaneous integration of her habit to sound out words letter-by-letter, into fluid reading of any text she laid eyes on, including words she didn't know. This is integration, the integration of dormant skills waiting to be integrated into function.

On the light-hearted side, there are simply delicious physical after-effects from *Feldenkrais*® lessons, like the experience of a mid-octogenarian who phoned me after getting home: "Mrs. Moellmann," she shouted in excitement, "when I got into the car after your lesson, I was looking OVER my steering wheel!"

The more intricate a movement, the more we learn to learn and to outfit ourselves with choices within action, including choices in movement. We learn to be ready to find and choose among many, many choices, on the spot, at the moment of need or opportunity.

This route of learning, referred to by Moshe Feldenkrais as organic, has its most outstanding manifestation in the behavior of babies and toddlers (who devise '*Feldenkrais*' lessons on their very own!) and in the treatment of nervous system disorders, in the latter instance with the help of precisely directed touch that leads to awareness and eases spasticity while simultaneously allowing spontaneous integration of intention into function.

Bicycling and the Pleasure Principle: An Interview with Michael Wolk, GCFP

—by Jeff Kerr

Michael Wolk is a practitioner in Portland, Oregon, who enjoys combining his love of bicycling with teaching the Feldenkrais Method®. He graduated from the Vancouver, Canada training in 1997, and has been a Physical Therapist for over 20 years.



Photo of Michael Wolk by Jeff Kerr

JK: When did you first hear about *Feldenkrais*® and what was your first experience with the *Feldenkrais Method*?

MW: I knew nothing about it! (laughs) I was working as a PT in rehab settings – strokes, spinal chord injuries, amputations, etc. I was hungry and restless because I felt like what I was doing wasn't enough, that there was something I was missing.

I was exploring a lot of options and I heard about a 2-day workshop with Frank Wildman, who was preparing for his Portland training (this was back in 1991 or '92). We didn't talk at all in class at first, we just lay down and started doing an *Awareness Through Movement*® lesson. After the lesson, I stood up, and I said to myself, "I have to unlearn everything that I've ever learned, to learn how to do this stuff." And I just sort of stood there dazed and Frank walked by. I said that to him and he said, "That's exactly right." So for me, that was in and of itself intriguing enough to follow up.

JK: The *Feldenkrais Method*, then, works with people's habits, unlearning poor habits?

MW: Well, there are certain adages that really ring true and one of them is that "as soon as you're aware of something, it changes." So, my intention in working with people is not necessarily to change habits, it's to help them become aware of what their habits are and a number of options for change. In many cases, that's all that's really needed, with people who are curious.

It's all about the chaos theory- if you make a small change in a large system, it can result in large and/or unpredictable changes in that system. Because I work alone, work out of my house, and because I don't work with doctors, everyone I see comes to me via word of mouth. Many of these people have experienced other treatments, other therapies that didn't work. So when they come here, some people are hungry to learn. It's sort of self-selecting that by the time they make it here, they're often willing to learn what it is they can do to help themselves. When they become more aware of what they're doing and how it affects them, often times they "self-

adjust" or the change takes place spontaneously in themselves. I can add this, I can suggest that, I can add something else, sometimes relatively small things- and they're prepared for it, and run with it, in ways that I wouldn't be able to predict.

JK: When did you first start focusing on bicycle riding in your practice?

MW: I started bicycling because I was born with severe congenital hip dysplasia and contracted suppurative arthritis when I was seven. So, I'm missing significant ranges of motion, especially my elbows and hips. For me, bicycling fit my dysfunction perfectly, although I have other sport activities. I started riding a lot after age seven, to spare my hips, and I've been an avid bicyclist since then. When I say avid, I don't mean guys with the two thousand dollar bikes and all the fancy clothing. I just like riding a bike. To me, bicycling is meditation in motion and a restful way to get exercise. I ride about 70 miles a week, rain or shine.

I feel most at home on two wheels, so for me, bicycling has always been about pleasure and about joy and about calm. It's hard to remain calm when you are riding in the city sometimes, but I know some ways that make it easier.

From the beginning, I've always had my bicycles adjusted differently than the "correct" way, because I wanted to be comfortable. If you're going to do something because you love to do it, you might as well be comfortable doing it. For me, it wasn't a passion, where I tried to get everybody to listen and change to my parameters.

I never intended to be a bicycle specialist and I'm still not a bicycle specialist. I just wanted to be comfortable on my bicycle. Over time, I became better and better at choosing equipment and adjusting for myself; then I would see clients and friends and they would tell me they were having trouble with their bicycles. So, I would spend time with them making a few adjustments and they would say, "This is like a different bicycle; I feel great!" Then I became even more interested in the variety of frames and components available for my bikes and then the equipment on other people's bikes and the next thing you know, it became a part of my regular practice.

JK: So what does the *Feldenkrais Method* contribute to bicycle riding?

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MW: The principles are very, very simple. When I'm working with someone and they want to be more comfortable on their bicycle, I'm using two fairly specific criteria for when the person can know that the bicycle fits them as well as it can. One: the quality of breath. Two: how far can you look ahead, around and behind you?

If you have difficulty breathing, that mimics the feeling of anxiety or fear. If you get on the bike and you start out having difficulty breathing and thus a feeling anxiety or fear, then chances are the pleasure quotient is going to be pretty low. If you get on the bike and you can't look ahead, on either side or behind you without hurting your neck, you're not going to want to look and that's going to make you feel less safe. And if you feel less safe, you're going to be more anxious. And if you're more anxious, you're not going to feel joy in riding your bike.

These are the two main criteria and from that point, we can work on handlebar configurations; we can work on the tilt and the type of seat that you use; we can work on whether the crank is long enough or short enough; whether the frame is appropriate for you, and then you can work with that or you can change it. So, in a sense, there's a lot of variability in how you fit a bike. But if you start with those two criteria-how easy is it to breathe, how easy to turn and look around you- and get to the point where you're really happy with how you're functioning, chances are riding a bicycle is going to be a real pleasure, you're going to be and feel safer and you're going to ride more often.

JK: Is there a common situation where someone comes in, complaining of something? I know that I feel, and other people also, have issues with the neck. The neck is hurting or you're feeling like you have to crink your neck to look the way you want to look?

MW: A lot of times, that's an issue with the position and the tilt of the seat, and the type of handlebars that you're using. Maybe the handlebars are not appropriately sized or shaped to your advantage or the position your hands on the bars are in when you're riding inhibits motion in your ribs and thoracic spine, so when you turn your head, there's no integration between the base of your skull and your pelvis and hips. The way you use your arms and the way your back is positioned, if that interferes with your ability to integrate turning the neck all the way down to the pelvis, then your neck is doing too much work and you will hurt.

Try this yourself: lift your arms in front of you, with straight elbows, below shoulder level and turn your arms so your thumbs face each other, then pay attention to your quality of breath and range and comfort looking to the side and behind



Examples of different hand positions possible with Nitto Moustache handlebars. Photos by Jeff Kerr.

you. Now, turn your arms so your thumbs face upward and repeat the same evaluation of your breath and range. Almost everyone I've seen will immediately sense a dramatic difference between the two. So, when you're heading downhill on dirt tracks, thumbs pointing towards each other is a good position to absorb impacts, but it makes it more difficult to breathe pedaling uphill. That's why most mountain bikes have add-on perpendicular bar ends, to allow the riders to position their arms "thumbs up", and to breathe more deeply heading uphill. So, the mountain biker has two optimal choices for

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arm positions.

The road biker resting on the brake / shifters (known as “brifters”) starts out in the thumbs-up position, so breathing and looking is already advantageous. However, that position can get tiring, and the other available positions are either the same arm position at the bottom of the bars or thumbs pointing together on the top of the bars – neither of those choices are advantageous to the recreational rider. And we all know what happens with only one or two choices!

So, some suggestions for better bars: If you want a more comfortable road bar, the Nitto Noodle bar is the best I’ve seen and has a great reputation for comfort.

If you are a city/commuter biker, try the Moustache bar (my fave - it’s on my road, city, and mountain bike, and allows for 4-5 hand positions), and Albatross bar, both made by Nitto; and the “Moose Horn” touring bars, with 3-4 different hand placements.

Also, adjustments in the positions of the shifters and brakes on the handlebars, as well as the height and length of the stem will make a big difference. Experiment!

JK: You did physical therapy for ten years before you trained as a *Feldenkrais* practitioner. What are some of the differences between an approach a PT might take and a *Feldenkrais* approach?

MW: To me, the gross lesson of what the *Feldenkrais Method* is and specifically when we’re talking about the bicycle stuff, is the difference between expertise and being an expert.

To me, the *Feldenkrais Method* helps you become your own inner-expert, so that no matter what an “expert” tells you is right or wrong, bad or good, correct or incorrect: you judge what’s best for yourself, because you’re the expert. There are genetic, accidental, congenital, cultural, familial and so many differences between so many people that “correct” becomes a destructive rather than a constructive word.

In a conventional physical therapy sense, there’s correct and there’s incorrect. If you have this much flexibility then you’re good, but if you have that much flexibility then you’re bad.

I see people, like myself, who have limited flexibility, who rarely hurt - and I see people who are really, really flexible, who are always in pain. So, which is correct?!?

To me, the whole essence of conventional physical therapy is documentable range of motion, strength and correctness of body mechanics, versus learning how to be comfortable in your own skin – that’s something that conventional medicine can’t document and really hasn’t been able to get a grasp on.

JK: In a *Feldenkrais* lesson, you’re trying to provide an environment in which learning can take place? In other words, you’re trying to provide a basic environment so that they can figure out what works for them and they can learn in that environment?

MW: I think that’s a secondary part of it. The primary part is that I try to help people to gain the confidence to know or figure out, what’s right for themselves- to become their own expert. If they learn how to pay attention to themselves, they can eventually find a way to be comfortable in their own skin. Then, learning not only becomes easier, but is eagerly sought out.

If someone has difficulties figuring something out, then someone like me, with my experience and expertise, can help them figure it out. But really, it’s saying, “you can do this, you can figure this out: you know what’s right for you: I can help you along, but you’re the person who’s in charge.”

**I try to help people to gain the confidence to know, or figure out, what’s right for themselves- to become their own expert.
-Michael Wolk**

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to differentiate – it means make a difference between two similar movements or similar actions. And the next thing, generalize – it means involve your entire being. If parts of yourself do not participate in the movement, it will never be as good as you can make it. And it will never become a habit with you because it's uncomfortable so long as you don't involve your entire person in it..... That is not learning. That's exercising. So, slowly, the most important thing is not to achieve the movement, but to find the process of organizing yourself for the action and introducing to that a generalization. Involve your entire self and not those little bits which (you) are used to. And as, especially if you carry it over in other walks of life, it's extraordinarily important.²

These key words spoken from the founder himself offer the fitness industry a more humane and intelligent way to become fit and health conscious. *Feldenkrais*® lessons have the potential to offer powerful, intelligent and effective ways to help people discover how to use their whole self for more strength, power, ease and efficiency. This whole-person approach is what works best for real-life activities. When an infant squats and picks up a toy, you can be sure they aren't following a step-by-step protocol and cueing the activation of specific muscles. They initiate movement by finding support within themselves skeletally and from their environment. Action occurs when curiosity and safety prevail. When this happens, muscles do their job and there is proportional organization throughout their whole self.

Working with the *Feldenkrais Method*, I, and other practitioners have supported fitness enthusiasts – from rookies to Olympic athletes – to break through training plateaus, discover new strength and success supported

by different ways of organizing, and significantly improve exercise technique and effectiveness. "People often tell us how surprised and pleased they are with the speed at which their 'body-intelligence' creates changes that really do make a difference" says Violet van Hees, Trainer of Fitness Leaders and *Feldenkrais* Practitioner based out of Whitehorse in the Yukon.

"Feldenkrais is the new name in fitness"

Recently, Chicago's *Daily Herald* wrote "*Feldenkrais* is the new name in fitness³". This headline is exciting and hints at a tipping point in mass recognition of the *Feldenkrais Method*. "I enjoy showing clients a few tips I have learnt through the *Feldenkrais* lessons I've experienced and watching what a difference it makes in their mobility," says Sylvie Allen, fitness and strength instructor from Pemberton, BC. "I suggest that every fitness professional try *Feldenkrais* and open up to a whole new world of knowledge!"

- 1 – Nelson, ME., and colleagues. 2007. Physical activity and public health in older adults. Recommendations from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association. *Circulation* 116:1094-1105.
- 2 – *Feldenkrais*® Professional Training Program Transcripts. Amherst, Mass. 1981. Ed. Humiston, B. Week 7, 8, 9. Morning Session Tape #61. Page 7 and 8 of 38.
- 3 - <http://www.dailyherald.com/story/?id=221024&src=118>



Incorporating knowledge from an *Awareness through Movement*® lesson into weight-lifting routine. Photos by Irene Gutteridge

California- Northern

Breath, Rhythm and Life

Jennifer Lee
 Saturday, October 18, 2008, 2:00 PM – 5:00 PM
 Exploration of movements of breathing and their effects on states of being and quality of life.
Feldenkrais® Center for Movement Education, San Francisco, CA
 \$50.00
 415-826-3680/www.feldenkraissf.com/
 fcme@feldenkraissf.com

The Spine and Hip Relationship — For Athletes, Dancers and Movers

Katharina Darvas
 Saturday, October 25, 2008, 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM
 Exploration of the spine in relation to the hip joints, so your exercise will suit your body instead of overworking or injuring those areas.
Feldenkrais Center for Movement Education, San Francisco, CA
 \$60.00
 415-826-3680/www.feldenkraissf.com/
 fcme@feldenkraissf.com

Easy Hands and Arms

Cliff Smyth
 Saturdays: October 25, November 1 & 9, 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM
 Lessons for people with hand and arm injuries, and those who want to prevent them. Includes two ATM lessons.
Feldenkrais Center for Movement Education, San Francisco, CA
 \$20.00/session
 415-826-3680/www.feldenkraissf.com/
 fcme@feldenkraissf.com

Two-day Awareness Through Movement® Intensive

Mary Spire, GCFP
 Berkeley, CA
 Saturday & Sunday, Nov. 8 & 9, 2008; 11:00 AM - 5:00 PM
 \$90 per day
 maryspire@optimalmoves.com;
 optimalmoves.com; 1-866-678-8948

Pelvic Health and Awareness for Women and Men

Deborah Bowes, PT
 Saturdays, November 15 & 22, December 6, 2008
 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM
 Exploratory in much greater depth, these classes will allow you to develop your ability to improve your relationship with your pelvic floor.
Feldenkrais Center for Movement Education, San Francisco, CA
 \$20.00/session
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 fcme@feldenkraissf.com

California- Southern & Hawaii

Introducing: Your Self

Relieve Pain and Restore Comfort to Everyday Life

Shawnina M. Gomez, GCFP
 Saturday, October 18, 2008; 10:00 AM- 4:00 PM
 San Diego, CA
 goodroad2@yahoo.com; 619-971-1430

Your mouth and jaw and TMJ problems

Eve Strauss
 Nov. 8, 2008, 2-4:00 PM
 Kapiolani Women's Center, Honolulu, HI
 Health Connection at 808-535-7000
 www.feldenkraisinhawaii.com

Feldenkrais and Fitness, Train the Brain

Stacy Barrows, PT, GCFP, CPI and co-teacher Christine Cutbush, GCFP
 Introducing the fitness and wellness professional to the *Feldenkrais Method*® and exploring the importance of the role of somatic education for attaining higher levels of accomplishment in athletic or performing arts.
 December 6, 2008
 Los Angeles, CA
 www.californiaeducationconnection.com or sabccpt@aol.com

Canada

Free Your Jaw, Neck and Shoulders

Vita Kolodny
 In this workshop, you will become aware of the triggers that put strain on the jaw, neck and shoulders.
 Sunday, October 26, 1-4:30 PM
Feldenkrais Centre Vancouver, Vancouver, BC
 \$65. Pre-registration required
 Vita Kolodny, 604-263-1321; www.feldenkraisvancouver.com;
 feldenkraisvancouver@telus.net

You and Your Rib Cage

May Nasser
 In this workshop, you will discover how a freer ribcage can impact your entire sense of well being.
 Sunday November 23 1-4:30 PM
Feldenkrais Centre Vancouver, Vancouver, BC
 \$65. Pre registration required
 Vita Kolodny, 604-263-1321; www.feldenkraisvancouver.com;
 feldenkraisvancouver@telus.net

Beat Insomnia the Relaxing Way

Vita Kolodny
 You will learn easy to do movement sequences that will help you fall asleep easier.

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Sunday, November 30, 1-4:30 PM

Feldenkrais Centre Vancouver, Vancouver, BC

\$65 Pre-registration required

Vita Kolodny, 604-263-1321; www.feldenkraisvancouver.com;

feldenkraisvancouver@telus.net

Midwest

Stress Free Knees

Mary Susan Chen

October 25, 2008

\$35 Oak Park residents, \$53 non-residents

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Register: www.oakparkparks.com

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Jean Fung

A treat for the feet that support you ... we will explore ways to keep our feet happy and vital.

Sunday, October 26, 2008, 1-3:00 PM

Northwest

Ingrid Musson, PT, GCFP, LMP

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Saturday October 11th, 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Puyallup, Washington

\$120

Ingrid Musson, 360-379-1373, musson@olyphen.com

Southeast

Avenue of Expression: A Feldenkrais® Approach

Taught by Ann Harman, GCFP

October 23-26, Tampa, FL

We will explore movements of the neck, jaw, breath, and voice, and their relationships to the rest of the self.

To register, contact Upledger Institute, 1-800-233-5880.

Ripples and Waves: A Feldenkrais Workshop

Lavinia Plonka, GCFP

Saturday, October 25, 9:30 AM – 1:00 PM

\$45

Asheville Movement Center, Asheville, NC

Discover the freedom in the fluid movement of the spine.

Ashevillemovementcenter.com/ 828-258-7220

Southwest

Rocky Mt 1 Feldenkrais Training Year 3, Segment 12

Yvan Joly trainer

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Santa Fe 4 Feldenkrais Training Year 1, Segment 3

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Open for enrollment; Public and practitioners welcome to visit

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Santa Fe, NM

Call Efrem at 877-533-6933

www.movement-educators.com

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