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Keeping Your Balance

—by Gabrielle Pullen, GCFP

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Dr. Frank Wildman is widely recognized for introducing the clinical applications of the *Feldenkrais Method*® to the medical community. He is founder and director of the *Feldenkrais*® Movement Institute. He works privately with individuals in California, New York, Australia, and conducts professional trainings worldwide. Dr. Wildman studied for more than a decade with Moshe Feldenkrais. He also brings an interest in evolution, dance, and somatic psychology to the table.

SA: There are many ways to work with balance. You are currently writing a book that relates to balance issues?

FW: Yes, indirectly. I recently finished a book called, [Change Your Age](#). In this book, I necessarily address balance issues given that they are so often associated with getting older!

SA: Clearly, everyone reaches some point in time where they wake up one morning and realize they are afraid of falling. For some it may begin at 40; for some it may not begin until 65. It may be prompted by a long period of being sedentary, or a recent accident. Either way, it's the beginning of a new fear response where previously there was none. What's the difference between the physical therapy approach and a *Feldenkrais* approach to balance issues?

FW: There are many different kinds of physical therapy approaches. The *Feldenkrais* approach is focused on learning in small increments. One of the things that my students complain about to me is that they have been put on a balance program through a hospital or clinic, and the program is too difficult, or there's no 'how' to it. They don't learn how to do it. One of the advantages to working with a *Feldenkrais* approach is that I can give students very small movement tasks to do every day that aren't too challenging. Then I increase the challenge gradually as they master those tasks without anxiety. Nothing is ever too hard, so there is high compliance and a longer lasting outcome.

SA: Do you mean you start out by anchoring new pieces of knowledge on an existing experiential knowledge base?

FW: Yes. Because of all the equipment available today, there's a tendency to create so much



Dr. Frank Wildman, GCFP teaching a class

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challenge that people start off feeling as if their balance is worse than they thought. They end up thinking, 'I can't do this. This is really hard.' And that's not a good way to learn. So, I feel it's best to start off with no equipment at all, by learning to do things that are very simple in the kind of situations that approximate daily life.

Actually, if you wanted to think of non-traditional balance exercises, the closest approximation would be the kind of things that dancers do. In dance, there is the need to get length in the body and to be very, very stable and balanced as you are moving from leg to leg.

There are simple things you can teach people that can improve their balance in just minutes a day. For example, I teach students to walk backwards. If a person can walk even a few steps backwards, and be really comfortable doing that while breathing easily, it can make a huge difference. This, along with a few other simple *Awareness Through Movement*® lessons people can do, may enable them to keep their house. Often people move out because it happens to have a second floor and they find it too difficult to go up or down the stairs; their balance is too poor.

Falling is one of the major causes of catastrophic injuries in the U.S. Often, when people fall, they break their hip. The consequences can be really difficult in terms of maintaining your ability to work, being able to easily get in and out of a car, or move easily up and down stairs.

SA: It's often a problem that leads into a significant decline. Do you think it's preventable?

FW: Absolutely, it's entirely preventable. I think it can also be

There are simple things you can teach people that can improve their balance in just minutes a day.

one of the easiest and one of the most fun things to prevent. Balance problems that seem to accumulate as we get older can easily be changed and my "Change Your Age" program has demonstrated that older people can—at any point of their life—learn to balance like a very young person. Older people can reverse the habits that lead to difficulties with balance.

Balance is not just something that takes place when we're older. For example, when we're infants, we fall down a lot. Kids really fall down. They have terrible balance. They fall down much more than older adults. They grow up getting used to the idea that they're supposed to fall down. Generally, we fall less as the proportions of our bodies change and we gain more muscular control. Finally, we reach ages and stages where we can maintain balance quite easily, even when playing sports or climbing trees, which is a good way to improve balance. But in many sports you expect to fall down. Feldenkrais learned how to fall well because you must in a sport like Judo. I think that may be why he developed so many excellent lessons that strongly affect balance.

SA: Are you saying we should actually

learn to get more comfortable with being a little bit out of balance, or sometimes off balance, or in and out of balance?

FW: Yes, like kids. One of the things I teach people explicitly is to get to the floor in a single movement faster than they could fall. Because when we fall, we struggle a bit, and we get stiff and that stiffening can lead to broken bones if people cannot move well enough to get to the floor. I have them try several ways to get into and out of a crouching position.

SA: Like a stunt man, for example?

FW: More like an athlete because if you can get into a crouch immediately, you're more stable. You've lowered your center of gravity, and if you widen the stance of your legs a little, it's actually quite hard to fall from that position and it's easy to move. So, instead of falling and stiffening or trying to raise the head and neck, you learn to get down like a baseball player. If you can learn to move faster than gravity, you're less likely to fall, because you've got control over your body.

The primary movement you need for good balance is to move the center of

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your body. If you have to move your arms and head a lot, or if you have to twist or torque your ankles, you are probably pretty unstable. People with good balance control the center of their body, they move their core and their pelvis. If you move your pelvis just one inch with all the weight of your center over it, you have far more control than trying to catch yourself with the edge of your ankle, or by grasping into the air with your arms.

A really good fun thing that people can do at any age to develop their balance is the hula-hoop. Then you've got it covered, because you're moving the middle of your body, and you're engaged with something other than your balance.

That's important, because what physical therapists face, and a lot of clinical studies have found, is that you can teach people balance exercises that are successful in the clinic, but they leave and they have a fall. That's because their attention hasn't been trained. As long as their attention is on balance, they can succeed, but in the real world, you're walking through a crowd, you're getting in and out of a car, or somebody calls your name and you turn to look at them. You're spontaneously not paying attention to your balance, and you might have a spontaneous fall, if you're off balance.

So, my idea of training people for balance is to have them do something else, while they're working with balance. Once they've mastered what they need to concentrate on, I might have them sing.

SA: Sing?

FW: Yes, sing while they are balancing. Tell me a story. Or, I might throw a ball to them. Can they engage in other activities while balancing? The dangerous moments are when the person is momentarily distracted, so you want to make sure they can walk outside while looking at the scenery, or talking with a friend, or looking in shop windows, whatever it might be. The moment of distraction is the dangerous moment, and you want to make sure the person's attention is trained for those kinds of moments.

Falling is one of the major causes of catastrophic injuries in the U.S.

SA: It's said that the knee is the most vulnerable joint in the body. What would you say to someone who came to see you with a knee problem?

FW: I would ask him to show me how he moves to create the knee pain intentionally. I'll get him to practice that movement very slowly and carefully until he really starts to feel a pattern with the rest of his body. I might even put my hands on him and guide a part of him that he



Dr. Frank Wildman, GCFP teaching a class

is unable to pay attention to while attending to the pain in the knee. For example, what is he doing with his head and neck while he steps forward making the knee hurt? I might guide his head and neck with my hands until he starts to feel a whole body pattern through the conversation with my hands. I want to make sure that my student in pain knows how he hurts himself. It's not just something happening to him, but in fact, he has control over it.

Once he learns that he can make pain worse intentionally only then do I ask him, "What could you do that would make it hurt less?" I try to guide him into developing internal skills and body awareness and then move in the other direction with a more evolved set of postural habits, and maybe into a new way of walking.

SA: In essence, you are guiding people to develop their own internal resources rather than 'fixing' them?

FW: Exactly. That's one of the many skills I learned from Moshe. •

You Look Like a

Dancer

How the *Feldenkrais Method*® changed my life from the inside out

—by Tiffany Sankary, GCFP



Tiffany Sankary, GCFP

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My first memory of my body was putting on tights before ballet class when I was four years old. My grandmother pointed at my belly and said: Look at those spare tires. After that point, dance was for other people. Years later I went to that same ballet studio and watched my friend dance. I sat on the edge, watching. This was my relationship to bodies and movement: I observed, from the outside.

I tried playing sports later on, but it never felt right. I lacked coordination and feared the competition. That was also not the place for me. I spent years trying to fix my relationship with my body by using my mind: therapy, spirituality, self-help courses and books...

My mom introduced to me the *Feldenkrais Method* when I was 24. She called me and said, "I just had a session with this woman. She barely moved me at all, but I feel taller! I want to sign up for this four year training program to learn how to do this!" A week later I visited her in New York City and had a lesson with the same woman. I didn't feel taller, but after I left the building I felt beautiful, which surprised me. I hadn't been feeling that way. Several blocks later I noticed that my walking was different. It felt like my hip joints had been oiled. I felt a sense of fluidity and ease like the spinning wheels of a bicycle. This made me curious. I walked myself over to a bookstore and bought my first copy of [Awareness](#)

[Through Movement](#) by Moshe Feldenkrais.

I was fascinated with his idea that "We act in accordance with our self image." "Self image" expanded my idea of "body image" to include a perception of myself from the inside related to my actions in the world. And this could change? Through movement?

I found that there was a training program in Berkeley happening around the same time as my mom's. I went the first few days to check it out. And I stayed. What a gift! Everything changed in the course of those 4 years.

I remember one lesson, sitting on the floor with the soles of my feet together, leaning on my hands behind me. I was rocking my pelvis forward and back. I clearly remember a moment of being invited to do something which I had been trying to contradict my whole life. I watched as I expanded my abdomen forward with breath, my hip joints opening, lower back arching. I felt the front and the back of myself at the same time. I was in a room with other people, but I was inside myself, in my own process. There was no competition, no judgment. I was learning to feel more

and more of myself in movement with a loving, pleasurable quality.

At some point it occurred to me - if I can move this way, slowly, with attention, coordination, and comfort, then why not move faster with music and rhythm? A door, which had been closed for so long, suddenly opened. Dance class! I brought in principles from *Awareness Through Movement*® of being patient and curious. I was not in a hurry to get it right away. I had learned how to learn. I am still surprised when I organize myself in complex movements, shapes and patterns that were not available to me before. The *Feldenkrais Method* gave me the gift of my body: myself!

When I meet people and they ask: "Are you a Dancer?" Sometimes it is still a shock to me. How do they know? "The way you look and move. Graceful, fluid..." When this happens now, I thank Feldenkrais.

I have a whole new world of movement, joy, exploration and I get to share this with other people! Feldenkrais said the highest purpose of his work was to help people live their unavowed dreams. My dreams were hidden from my view. Now they are visible when I walk in a room. Gratitude, gratitude.



Becoming Human

-Catherine Rosasco-Mitchell, GCFP

He had me bend over the treatment table. There were at least 60 people watching. I thought, "Jeez this is embarrassing." Then I realized, "Hey this guy is an assistant for the world famous Moshe Feldenkrais. I'm just going to go for it." The session happened in the first year of my *Feldenkrais*® training. I didn't know much about my body at the time but after this session something strange began to unfold deep inside me. "How can this *Feldenkrais* Practitioner, gently pushing against muscles and bones, actually open my mind to new perceptions?" It just didn't make sense.

The practitioner seemed to lightly touch many bones at different angles. I could swear the hour was only minutes. When I got up from the table my stance was wider, more grounded but surprisingly lighter. I felt taller, and I don't know, fuller? It was as if new places in my body became alive. There was a sense of confident, and

yet humble. Humble because my mind wondered, "Wow, this feels good," but then struggled with "but who is this?"

Have you ever awakened from a dream and been surprised it was all a dream? Everyone seems to, at one time in their life, do things they don't realize they are doing. My first hands-on *Feldenkrais* session pulled me out of what felt so familiar, but hidden from my awareness. This "awareness," different than a knowing or acknowledgment, made only the present moment alive. It was an experience - not a thought - but an experience that changed my thought. Bizarre. What Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais calls "awareness" was pushing my past into the distance, as if to move a book away for aging eyes to see more clearly. My reflections of my past were at a distance, yet alive today. Familiar thoughts and feelings seem to somehow be in a different reality than my own.

"Is this real? How was I taken out of the body I was familiar with and put into such a new body? This could only happen in the movies." But there I was, experiencing this new me, so much more comfortable, freer, and even powerful in a peaceful way.

This *Feldenkrais Method*® communicates to a complex synergy of "thinking" and "feeling" through my body, without a word. Something deeper opening inside me could feel what it was like to evolve. Now, twenty some years later after giving over ten thousand *Feldenkrais* sessions, many say similar things to me when they get up off the table such as, "Wow, if that isn't me then who am I?" Who are we? How can our bodies rewire our minds? I wonder, are we all amazing and unique beings, becoming human, moving towards the true essences of our souls?

Poster Child for the *Feldenkrais Method*®

-by Jane McClenney, GCFP

I've been a *Feldenkrais*® practitioner since 1996 and have worked with all kinds of injuries, neurological damage, head injuries, and disabilities. With this experience, I know and appreciate how life can change drastically in a moment's time.

Seduced by a warm March day, I saddled my horse and went for a ride in the pasture. My horse threw me. Flying was OK, landing was hell. I shattered my L3 vertebra when I landed on a rock. Assessing the damage with the surgeon from my hospital bed, we concluded he would do a relatively new type of surgery, inserting a titanium cage at L3 and grafting my bone fragments back together. Not many choices - wheelchair or surgery. And with surgery, I

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Jane McClenney, GCFP teaching a class

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would be able to ride again one day.

The day after surgery, in incredible pain even with dynamite drugs, I knew I had to begin my own rehabilitation. And I would do it with what I know, live and teach: the *Feldenkrais Method*®. My brain went through many gyrations: would I walk normally again, how long would it take to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again, couldn't I possibly hit a rewind button and go back in time a few days, how stupid to have been riding that day. All useless but normal angst. With a 9" incision on the left side of my abdomen, I discovered my left leg didn't work well. Slowly, with the tiniest movements possible, I began playing with an *Awareness Through Movement*® lesson that we practitioners often call "frog legs." Tiny, tiny movements to roll my left knee out to the side and slide up my foot towards my pelvis.

The day after surgery, in incredible pain even with dynamite drugs, I knew I had to begin my own rehabilitation.

Each day I continued doing small movements, parts of many *Awareness Through Movement* lessons until I slowly began to get movement back. To stand. To walk. To bend from the hip joints. The pain was unimaginable. Stop, rest. Try again. Little tiny movements. Lying in bed for 2 months with my legs on a huge roller, I kept making small, gentle movements with hands, arms, neck, keeping the back quiet, to remind my body that one day it would do everything again if I just kept going. As time passed, I continued doing more bits and pieces of lessons, slowly gaining ground. My surgical team and others could not believe the progress I made each week. Focus, move, rest. Engage the brain and body. Transformation. When I was allowed to move my back again, I began working weekly with another *Feldenkrais* practitioner. Progress was amazing.

Now over a year later, I am happy to say I am practically back to normal. Small movements that add up to huge results: that's how I describe the *Feldenkrais Method*. These small movements create major transformation in people's lives, those I touch as clients, as well as re-creating myself in my own life. I am grateful for this body of knowledge. And yes, I am riding again.



Please lie on your back. Notice the length of each leg. Does one feel different than the other? Notice if one leg is turned outward or inward more than the other. Notice the space under your low back. How much of an arch is there?

Begin to make a small movement with the right leg – a movement which will roll your right knee ever so slightly out to the side and back. Repeat very slowly a number of times.

As the knee rolls out to the side, feel how the outside edge of your foot comes closer to the floor. Lengthen the leg, then slowly bend the knee again. As the knee bends, do you find the foot slides a little closer to your pelvis? Repeat slowly a few times. Lengthen the leg and rest.

Roll the knee out again. Explore how you initiate the movement – where does it start? Is the movement of the leg smooth or jumpy? Can you feel your hip joint begin to open? Is it tight? Does it open smoothly? Are the groin muscles tight? Go slowly. As you lengthen the leg, returning it to its beginning point, does it feel longer or shorter? Is your low back still as arched or is it flattening to the floor? Lengthen again and rest. Observe for yourself the difference between the right and the left legs, and the difference in the right and left side of your low back.

This is just the beginning of a lovely *Awareness Through Movement*® lesson. It is a wonderful lesson for horseback riders, and for anyone wanting to maintain healthy hip joints.



Cookie Murphy/Petee, GCFP

My Life Re-Newed: Discoveries from the *Feldenkrais Method*®

Over a period of 30 years, from being an athletic, active woman who danced, skied, enjoyed long walks and loved to garden, I became a woman plagued with chronic pain from osteoarthritis. Then I was led to the *Feldenkrais Method*® and enrolled in the 4-year *Feldenkrais*® Professional Training Program.

One day in the first year of training, I had a glimmer of my coming transformation. Our class was doing an *Awareness Through Movement*® lesson that involved the ribs, pelvis and spine, slowly building towards the possibility of a back bend.

While I never fully arrived there, the physical memory of how it felt to be in a back bend position returned from my childhood, so that my ribs and vertebrae felt different than at the beginning of the lesson. I knew at that moment that I was starting to experience what the instructor had been telling us: I didn't have to be able to execute or perform the directed movements to reap the benefits; I could be "aware through movement." The key lies in the process of sensing what's happening when we move: in our skeletons, in our nervous systems, in our whole selves.

While during the four years I regularly faced my pervasive insecurity around physical limitation and pain, experiences like the "back bend" lesson deepened the breadth of my understanding. Gradually, and yet sometimes in lightning-bolt moments, I would move beyond frustration, fear or pain to learn and experience what was important for me—not just in the training, but in life: who I am, how I learn, how I help others.

Within me, a continuing redefinition of success also evolved. Success was not "doing" a back bend. It was re-discovering my core strengths and then re-defining how to use them along with my new skills—those of the *Feldenkrais Method*.

My life of debilitating pain is in the past.

While other learning experiences and knowledgeable people in my life had suggested that I am primarily a kinesthetic learner, the training fully corroborated this part of my identity: I best comprehend new learning through physical example and experience. When this path is available, I breathe freely and feel whole. When it is not—when I don't grasp something that I want to understand—often I literally feel a knot at the base of my neck or in my chest. Moshe seemed to be speaking to me when he explained, "Pleasure relaxes the breathing to become simple and easy. Excessive striving-to-improve impedes learning...master the way to learn new skills. You will get to know new skills as a reward for your attention."

While the compensation and other rewards of the public service career that I left several years ago were ample, they came at the cost of intense and often debilitating physical pain. It was a key reason for my financially risky decision to leave, to retire from that profession quite early.

These problems had spilled over into my private life, as I became someone who could no longer garden for more than 20 minutes nor walk more than a few blocks. I started the *Feldenkrais* training mainly for my own well-being and growth. But as I rediscovered the joy of working with people in nurturing ways that cause me no harm and that provide the framework for my continual learning and improvement, it was clear that I wanted to move in the direction of a practice.

I have already begun *Functional Integration*® work with clients, and in January 2010, a colleague and I will start an *Awareness Through Movement* class in our neighborhood.

While I still have limitations and chronic pain, both are significantly diminished and the progression of the osteoarthritis has been slowed. I'm happier and I move through life in a more integrative way, with more ease. My life of debilitating pain is in the past. I'm not skiing again—but I do snowshoe! I live a life of possibility with much greater optimism.

From the training, I have been given a promising set of tools and processes to help me live out—and live in—my nurturer self, I've regained some of my lost physicality and I've gained knowledge of how I best learn. Moshe Feldenkrais died in 1984. I never met him, but he has "spoken" directly to me in many ways, including: "I do not intend to 'teach' you, but to enable you to learn at your own rate of understanding and doing. Time is the most important means of learning."