

Movement, Fun and Learning

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As I teach *Awareness Through Movement* and *Functional Integration* in my Feldenkrais practice, I make learning fun for clients and students. With a background in fine art, therapeutic horseback riding, and the *Feldenkrais Method*, my goal is to have learning be enjoyable for students.

I discovered the *Feldenkrais Method* through therapeutic riding. A client, who had always needed three people to get from his wheelchair to his horse, came walking in one day without his wheelchair. He had had many lessons with Feldenkrais trainer Jeff Haller, and left his wheelchair behind. After this introduction, I became a Feldenkrais practitioner, sometimes combining the Feldenkrais Method and therapeutic horseback riding programs for people with disabilities.

My intention as a Feldenkrais practitioner was to create an environment, a background, where children could gain more movement. One summer, I decided to include art, creativity, and horses in this learning environment. With enthusiastic support from staff and parents, I created a summer course of art and movement to be given after therapeutic riding. After all, once bodies and brains were warmed up, why not challenge their experience in new directions?

Work with the horse is fun for individuals with disabilities, and the movement of the horse helps awaken their brain and bodies for more movement. Many of the children and adults have had exhaustive physical or occupational therapy, but the gait of the horse stimulates neuromuscular changes which students may not gain with traditional therapies. Horses have similar anterior, posterior, rotation, up-and-down movement to that of a human gait, but the motion is greater due to four legs. The movement stimulates the brain and motor cortex while incorporating a large, kind, kinesthetic animal. "Moving the body demands a lot from the brain. Exercise activates countless [brain] neurons, which generate, receive and interpret repeated, rapid-fire messages from the nervous system, coordinating muscle contractions, vision, balance, organ function and all of the complex interactions of bodily systems that allow you to take one step, then another."¹ Taking warmed up bodies and brains in yet another direction and finding more fun with the creative process, was not difficult. Children do not need much prompting to use their imaginations.

¹ New York Times article, Feb. 22, 2012. See also, Journal of Physiology, Feb. 2012.

Two afternoons a week after children finished their ride, we began an art and movement program. It turned out to be a great learning experience for me as well as the participants. Two participants in particular, John and Mandy, taught me a lot.

John, six years old, had been born with a major tactile deficiency. He was afraid to touch anything. Asking him to pet his horse, for instance, produced a grimace. He would ever so slightly pinch his index and thumb together around a few horse hairs, then yank his hand away as if he had been burned. If teachers or volunteers touched him, he instantly recoiled. Each week, we tried to encourage him to touch various places on the horse, on his saddle, on his own body, or a volunteer, with poor results. Getting him aboard his horse was a feat in itself.

So what in John's nervous system had so shut down his sense of touch? What type of self-image did this child have? What might produce within him a desire to reach out? These questions whirled through my mind. Dr. Moshé Feldenkrais writes in *The Elusive Obvious*, "Does a newborn baby see the right way up from the start, or does he actually have to touch things in order to be able to interpret the impression received to fit his checking sense – his touch? . . . And if my suspicion is not altogether wrong, movement may be necessary to all living things to enable them to form their objective exterior world, and perhaps even their objective internal world."² How might I stimulate possible changes in John's world?

After John's ride, I produced paper and tempera paints, cajoling him to hold a brush and play with paint colors. He watched closely. I offered him the brush. Frown. Refusal. Repeating my actions with the brush, I painted a horse on the paper, and asked him if it resembled the horse he'd ridden. He stepped a little closer. I offered the brush again. This time he accepted it but held it at arm's length, again pinching it between thumb and fingers as if it was distasteful. He appeared slightly intrigued and edged closer. So far so good. Inviting him to try another color, he made a few marks on the paper, then moved away. I grabbed a brush, painted stripes of various colors on my own hand, and quickly printed it on a big piece of paper. John grinned. Taking his hand before he could pull it away, I covered it with stripes of paint, and placed his palm on the paper. Before long, John was painting his own hand and printing his own hand print. In another session, we finger painted. We were making progress. In the weeks that followed, he came more out of his shell, beginning to actually place his palm on his horse.

² *The Elusive Obvious*, Moshé Feldenkrais, p. 20.

He began making more eye contact with his volunteers. He also began following instruction without constant prodding. In a few instances he even laughed and smiled.

Pleased with the results, I produced larger paper, hoping to entice more movement from him. We began painting big circles, squares, swirls, so that he had to move his body more to create a shape. I wondered if creating bigger art, challenging more movement from his body, would begin to open up more interest or attention to his environment. In the weeks that followed, John took a more active interest in his horseback therapy, including holding his own reins and beginning to steer his horse. More than ever, I was intrigued with Moshe's idea of creating the environment in which learning was possible. Offering John an opportunity to creatively explore his environment appeared to influence his learning and interest him in engaging more with teachers and family. John was making new connections.

For many years, scientists believed that humans have a critical period during our early development where the brain maps functions and experiences. More recently, neuroscience has discovered that the brain can continue to change. According to Michael Merzenich, a noted neuroplastician, the remarkable plasticity of the brain allows us to make changes well beyond that critical period. "Of neuroplasticians with solid hard-science credentials, it is Merzenich who has made the most ambitious claims for the field: that brain exercises may be as useful as drugs to treat diseases as severe as schizophrenia; that plasticity exists from the cradle to the grave; and that radical improvements in cognitive functioning –how we learn, think, perceive, and remember – are possible even in the elderly."³

Another of my students that summer was Mandy, seven years old, and labeled autistic and legally blind at least in one eye, with very poor vision in the other. Faced with such labels, I wondered how could we help Mandy. She did not interact with volunteers who helped her with her horse. She did not speak. She did not appear to have much interest in her surroundings. But because most children love to paint or draw, I produced watercolor pens, sat her at the picnic table with large paper, and began to draw a flower and ask her to examine it. With eyes only an inch from the paper, she correctly identified it as a flower. I offered her a pen. She began drawing lines and scribbling. Suddenly, she jumped up from the table, and roamed the stable yard picking dandelions with her face close to the flowers. Uncertain how to respond or know what was in her mind, I went with her, merely following

³ *The Brain That Changes Itself*, Norman Doidge, M.D., pp. 46-47.

her lead, taking each flower close to her eyes, describing the color, asking her to feel the texture of the flower on her face and hands. She frequently brushed me away or turned her back. I kept trying. Eventually I led her back to the table and picked up pens again. This time she began drawing one of her dandelions for a few minutes.

She stopped drawing flowers and drew something I was unable to identify. I placed my face close to the paper with hers and asked her what she was drawing. Her mother told me Mandy was interested in dinosaurs. Without warning, Mandy threw down the pen, went to the car and put herself inside. At this point, she would not make eye contact or communicate with anyone. As I left that day, I was discouraged – unsure what had transpired and how to proceed with her. Had I reached her in any way? Given our Feldenkrais approach, isn't this often how we approach a *Functional Integration* lesson? Where to begin? Or how an artist approaches a blank canvas? We make a small perturbation to the nervous system. What does the nervous system do with the information?

Next week, Mandy returned. Her mother summarized events: Mandy had begun talking a lot, identifying dinosaurs in her picture books. Before her mother could finish relating these events, Mandy grabbed my hand, dragged me to the table, saying clearly "Jane draw, Jane draw." I quickly gave her pens. As she began drawing dinosaurs and telling me their names, I began to smile. This was autism?

Her mother filled me in on Mandy's early background. Mandy had been born prematurely and required multiple surgeries for her eyes. She had spent the better part of her first two years in a hospital in a fairly sterile environment. How had Mandy been touched during that time? How had she reacted to that environment? Mandy retreated inward.

The therapeutic horseback riding and the art program began to stimulate Mandy; she was more interested in her environment. She felt safe exploring her environment by reaching out, holding a hand, asking to draw, speaking more.

Over the next few weeks, Mandy and I drew, painted and moved around the stable yard stooping, reaching, looking at things. The label of autism did not seem accurate, as Mandy began to respond to people around her as well as her environment. Touching things and moving herself in her environment, whether by herself or through the movement of the horse, Mandy explored a new sense of self. She was creating a new self-image, becoming more confident, more engaged with other people, finding a better sense of stability within herself. Isn't this what we Feldenkrais practitioners attempt to provide for our clients, a sense of safety to explore new territory?

One afternoon, with a group of kids in wheelchairs and walkers, we created paper towel rollers with long, colorful crêpe paper streamers. We whirled our paper towel wands to create fun shapes around ourselves as we waved them in circles, figure eights, various shapes in the breeze. My idea was to encourage better balance for them in their wheelchairs and to enhance the balance they were learning on horseback. The streamers sometimes went low to the ground, high in the air and they reached behind themselves to create bigger circles with their paper wands. As they played, their balance simply increased, whether they were aware or not, as did their self-confidence. No one fell or lost their balance.

As the summer went on, I began to invite the able-bodied siblings who accompanied their disabled brother or sister to participate in the art and movement. The able-bodied children did not get to participate in the horseback riding, but they were ready to join in the fun. What began to happen was truly a joy. Able-bodied children began to assist other children and not necessarily their own sibling. They shared ideas while painting and other children would follow suit. I began to move further to the background and let the children teach themselves, only interacting where I thought I needed to introduce a new idea or technique. Before long, it became difficult to separate the disabled children from the able-bodied children. I was watching learning occur and occasionally contributing. They were children enjoying themselves while learning.

One day I came to the barn with a basket filled with balls of yarns of many different colors and textures. Some were fluffy and soft, some hard. I had created large construction paper spiders. I informed my group of kids, both able-bodied and disabled, that we were creating a huge spider web – a home for the spiders. Several children wanted to create their own spiders, so we made more. Afterwards, each child was allowed to pick a ball or two of yarn, and begin to tie them to something in the stable yard.

Slowly, we wove a giant web. Most exciting for me, was to watch John, with his tactile deficiency, at first afraid to start with his ball of yarn. Another able-bodied child came over, took him by the hand, and said she'd help him get started. An hour later, you could not tell John had any tactile deficiency. He was weaving a web with the rest of the children, winding his ball of yarn over the many strings others had already started. He seemingly had forgotten his fear of touch.

Mandy was excitedly jabbering away with a new friend, weaving an intricate web – more by feel than by sight. She was having a great time, giggling and laughing, using as many different colors and textures as she could. Meanwhile, even the horses in their stalls were hanging their heads out their

stall windows watching the proceedings as children attached yarn to their stall doors, the surrounding bushes, trees, and picnic tables. Children were crawling over, under, and around parts of the web, moving in different ways to accommodate and create their web. The stable yard was transformed into a giant, multi-colored web, with construction paper spiders hanging inside. Talk about movement and learning! Given an opportunity to create something from their imagination, movement was occurring, learning was occurring, and many disabilities were being overcome, at least for the afternoon, and hopefully beyond.

That summer, my understanding of the Feldenkrais concept deepened considerably. I initiated a process, provided the background, got out of the way when appropriate and intervened when necessary. The children created their own learning process. They created it in a way I could not have predicted. It was a lovely experiment. Everyone was empowered. The differences between the children were not so great. The creative energy, imagination, movement and learning ability of these children ignited with just a little input.

By making learning pleasurable, it can occur at a remarkable rate. We, the practitioners, hold the possibility for someone to change. We help provide the pace and the exploration, and then watch with interest how things unfold.