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## Teachable Moments

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## Teachable Moments

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Teachable Moments

### *A Veterinarian's Induction into the Feldenkrais Method and the Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action.*

John E. Franklin

An unexpected email from Chuck Graybill, a Feldenkrais® classmate, sparked memories of my first professional training. Mark Reese, the educational director, had split the segments between San Diego and the Indiana University Bloomington. Esther Thelen, a professor at the school and a leading expert in child motor development, was a student in our class.

I had learned about the Feldenkrais Method® from my friend Beth Scott, a physical therapist and a soon-to-be *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner*. She explored the curves of my spine with a gentle touch, as I sat on her table. She invited me to lay on my back, to explore the space beneath my low back with my own hand. A tennis ball would have had ample room to pass beneath the lumbar curve. She placed supports beneath my head, knees, and ankles. Her subtle movements of my head, shoulders, hips, and legs felt different from the deep myofascial release technique in previous visits to her office. My lower back touched the surface of the table when she finished.

After twenty-one years of diagnosing and treating animals, my wife Sharon and I had sold our practice to pursue other interests. During our career as veterinarians, we took time to explore territories beyond the paradigms of western medicine. We traveled to Peru to work with indigenous healers. We spent week-long retreats at the Monroe Institute and the Omega Institute to experience expanded states of consciousness. I studied the subtle energies of the body with various teachers. After my Functional Integration® lesson with Beth, I headed west to explore yet another body-mind frontier--this time through the lens of the Feldenkrais Method.

I had never experienced an Awareness through Movement® (ATM®) lesson when I arrived in San Diego to study with Mark Reese and Donna Ray. I joined a second-year class of 40 plus students, many who were either physical therapists or occupational therapists. I was to make up the first year by attending other professional trainings.

I came early the first day and sat beside my new friend Frank on the floor of a dojo where our training was taking place. We watched an Aikido class, clad in white *gis*, practice their judo rolls across padded mats. Frank already knew how to do a judo roll. He learned it in the first year. Worried that I should know this, I persuaded him to teach me before our class started. I had read of Moshe's background in judo and assumed that to roll forward over my shoulder was part of Awareness through Movement.

The first ATM of my training came from Mark Reese, who instructed us to lay on the floor. I

found a space among the supine bodies spreading across the vacated dojo in orderly rows. The voices of my fellow students faded into soft murmurings and then silence. Mark's melodic voice invited us to witness places where we contacted the floor and the places where we did not.

Easing us into a side-lying position, he described different movements in which to explore the shoulder on top. To move my shoulder forward and back, to slide it up and down, and to make clockwise and counterclockwise circles invited a child-like sense of play. Though Mark's preoccupation with the ribs beneath our shoulders and how, along with our breath, they might improve the quality of our shoulder movements, suggested a body that I apparently knew little about. I watched the students around me to see what they did.

We gathered around Mark afterwards to discuss the lesson. Curious what he meant about feeling the movement of our ribs, I raised my hand. I said that I was a veterinarian. In the world of the four-legged, the ribcage protected the heart and lungs and supported a weight-bearing scapula on each forelimb. I agreed that the shoulder girdle of a two-legged being was unique, but how my ribs influenced the movement of my shoulders was not clear.

Mark's narrowed gaze signaled a keener, more personal interest in me than I intended. He invited me to lay on a nearby Feldenkrais table, to turn onto my side with my knees bent. Unaccustomed to dormancy beneath the stares of a curious crowd, I closed my eyes, better appreciating the feelings of the four-legged beings I had palpated on stainless steel exam tables. When Mark asked the students to give us more space, I took another breath. In the clarity of his voice, I heard that he had my back.

Mark sat behind me, my shoulder cupped between his hands. His touch, attentive and delicate, was inquisitive. He explored the cardinal points along the rim of the joint. In the tiniest of movements, he maneuvered around the bumps and twitches and jerks that I had earlier pushed through. I scarcely breathed, as though a small part of myself lay hidden beneath my shoulder blade.

I edged into a dusk-like darkness beyond what I could feel--a dream from a boyhood too long ago for me to be certain. I heard a voice behind my lips whisper in silence, *You have been touched by the hand of God.*

Mark followed a rib upward along my side and I took a deeper breath. In increments, my shoulder yielded to his hands, circling clockwise and counterclockwise as though moved by tiny eddies. My shoulder blade slid across my back freer than before.

I shared my experience with the class afterward. Only later in private did I tell Mark about God's hand. He looked surprised but said nothing.

After a break, we worked in pairs to explore the relationship between the ribs and the shoulders. My partner was an older woman with a history of shoulder issues. She was the student who Mark had chosen to demonstrate what he wanted us to try. I felt oddly free of anxiety or expectation placing my hands on a person I did not know. She lay on her side with her knees bent. I cupped her shoulder as Mark had mine, in search of an invisible compass.

I moved her shoulder slowly, gently, testing for ease, for clarity. If only in my imagination, I focused on making a connection through her shoulder, to her ribs, and to her breath. In our bones and in our joints, we shared a kinship.

Later in the training, Mark showed us a video of Moshe lecturing to a class in the Amherst training. He walked among rows of students seated on the floor in a large gym-like space. His tone was gruff, almost caustic at times: pain was part of life--our birth was painful. I cannot recall what else Moshe said that day.

I do remember a slight woman with wire-rimmed glasses who raised her hand when Mark asked for comments or questions after the video. Her name was Dr. Esther Thelen. Mark had introduced her at the beginning of our training.

Esther said that the way in which Moshe spoke to his students was patronizing, patriarchal. She would have walked out, had she been in that class. She could not tolerate that way of being addressed.

Mark answered with equal passion, his head bobbing forward as though he sought to demonstrate a "hen-pecking" ATM lesson. Embodying words like *attractors* and *markers*, he spoke of behavioral psychology and other concepts that Esther paused to consider. He polled the class, to gather our reactions to Moshe's lecture. A few of us agreed with Esther, a few with Mark. But most of us did not venture an opinion.

Esther's expression softened a bit and their conversation ended as though it was a brief thunderstorm with the barest of rain. I was amazed that such a discussion could happen in a class. Later I learned that Moshe might vehemently argue a particular point, before reversing his position in contradiction to what he previously said.

The next morning, Mark discussed Milton Erickson, hypnosis, and neurolinguistic programming. My friend Frank, who came from East Germany, raised his hand. Frank said that he studied hypnosis and that he had never heard of Erickson. What made this man so important?

Mark's features softened, his nod conveyed a gentle patience. He said that Milton Erickson was an important figure in American psychiatry and family therapy. Several of Moshe's assistants had studied with Dr. Erickson.

My friend Frank did not appear convinced, but I was impressed by Mark's tone and choice of words. He embodied the respect that a good teacher gives a student's question. I thought about Moshe, a man who survived persecution through two world wars and who lived amidst unending conflict in the Middle East. That a failure to adapt intelligently to life's challenges could have harsh consequences might have informed how he spoke to his students.

Most of my classmates took lunch in the bistros tucked along the beaches of Cardiff by the Sea. I took my brown-bag to a bench outside the dojo. I spoke to Mark, who sat across from me with his lunch. I heard that he was writing Moshe Feldenkrais' biography, work that would come to

embody volumes of intense research. I asked what Moshe was like as a person. Mark paused. He said that Moshe could be extraordinarily kind and, on occasion, extraordinarily rude. He was a genius: brilliant, complex, and passionate. Mark spoke kindly. His dark eyes, curious and shy, touched me in the way that his hands had earlier done. *Compassion* comes when I think of that day.

I traveled to Indiana University Bloomington for the second session of my professional training. Mark had created two parallel tracts to accommodate Esther Thelen's professional schedule. Roger Russell and his partner Ulla Schläfke came from Germany to teach the 10-day segment. Our class numbered around twenty students. We met in a carpeted, softly lit room in the student center. I remember the morning that Ulla taught an ATM lesson sometimes referred to as the *Spinal Chain*. We lay on our back, scanning our contact with the floor. With our knees bent and our feet brought to stand, we tilted our pelvis toward our head. To sense my lower back flatten against the floor without strain was to reverse the effort of my previous strategies and exercises. The chronic tightness from years of hoisting large dogs onto exam tables yielded to a more flexible movement.

I rolled my pelvis toward my feet, lifting my back from the floor, each vertebrae individuated in my imagination. I rolled from the back of my head to my feet in a multitude of variations, my neck and low back no longer separate entities. Memories of childhood play returned to a spine too long given to the duties and habits of daily tasks. I imagined an undulating serpent traveled through my vertebrae. My chest and ribs folded in a softening of effort and intent. Mobility was freedom called by a different name.

After lunch, Roger asked us to choose a partner. To create a beginning of a Functional Integration lesson, one of us would lie face down on a mat and the other would place a hand on his or her back. We were to sense the other's breath through the movement of their ribs, to witness the different areas of the back in motion. The role of the "practitioner" was to listen to the "client" through nonjudgemental touch, not to force a change.

I glanced at the slight woman with wire-rimmed glasses beside me. She dabbed saliva from a corner of her lips--a part of her jaw had been removed. Esther Thelen was a cancer survivor. She accepted my self-conscious offer with a reassuring nod.

Roger instructed us to give feedback to our partners after the exercise. Esther and I shared our experience—what we discovered in the movement of our own breath, in the presence of the other's hand. That deep awareness when touching another without agenda, feeling different movements as ribs reflect each inhalation and exhalation. That we could share such profound intimacy in fifteen to twenty minutes, more deeply felt than with people we had known for years, was more than our words could convey. Even a piece of a Functional Integration lesson could have a significant emotional impact. *Sacred* comes whenever I remember that day.

Esther had co-authored *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action*. During our training, she coordinated a series of events to introduce us to leading edge research in the field of developmental psychology. We toured her labs, watched her assistants record movement patterns of a musician from the school orchestra. We attended the presentation

of a research paper and mingled afterwards with doctoral students who did their work under Esther's supervision. Esther and her husband, Dave, invited our class to their home for a baked salmon dinner, a welcome break from the intensity of our training. She arranged for us to attend an opera at the university's famed school of music.

I settled into a pleasant routine during the Bloomington segment. I often took a run through campus before class. After class, I might take a walk, meet my classmate Chuck for a sandwich. He was a physical therapist from another state and, like me, eager for conversation. Sometimes we met with other classmates for a fancier meal. I enjoyed the social interaction with people who shared my interest in the body-mind field of exploration.

At the end of the day, after I climbed the stairs to my tiny room in a high-rise dormitory, I would call home to visit with my wife. After sliding into the spartan student-sized bed, I might weep for 15 to 20 minutes before I fell asleep. The crying was cathartic, an emoting of my own cognitive and neural development. Awareness through Movement and Functional Integration lessons left few stones unturned.

I was sitting on a couch in the student center one afternoon when a distraught Esther sat down on a nearby sofa. She had just taught an introductory psychology class for freshmen. First year students should know the full range of what the field of psychology could offer them. She saw the blank stares at the end of her lecture. Esther, a tenured professor who mentored doctoral students, suffered a sense of failure because she might not have connected to a class of freshman. I understood better why Mark brought a Feldenkrais training to Indiana University Bloomington<sup>1</sup>. Esther was herself a passionately devoted, life-long student of how we learn to do what we do—a teacher not unlike Mark and Moshe<sup>2</sup>.

I came to understand that the Feldenkrais Method and Dynamic Systems shared more than the science of movement and cognition. The genius of Mark and Esther was to bridge the world of behavioral research and the frontier of human potential by bringing a professional Feldenkrais training program to Indiana University Bloomington. Moshe's genius was to create a method in which our experience might expand into what we imagine is possible--awakening us to move more fully, more freely, into more of who we are.

<sup>1</sup>Linda B Smith, "Movement Matters: The Contribution of Esther Thelen," *Biological Theory*, no. 1 (2006), 87-89, accessed July 7, 2018. [Movement Matters: The Contributions of Esther Thelen](#)

<sup>2</sup>Mark Reese, *The Feldenkrais Method and Dynamic System Principles*, accessed July 7, 2018, [The Feldenkrais Method and Dynamic Systems — Zoe Birch](#)

After twenty-one years of veterinary practice, Dr. John Franklin, a Diplomate of American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, changed his focus from four-legged creatures to those who uniquely travel through life on two. John graduated from the Santa Fe Feldenkrais® Professional Training Program in 2003, as a *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner (GCFP)*.

Concurrent with his Feldenkrais training, John completed his certification as a Zero Balancing® practitioner and later as a Faculty member in the third teacher's training. In addition, John completed a massage therapy program at the Esalen Institute.

John and his wife, Sharon, have traveled to Peru for over a decade, organizing trips for Zero Balancers and other healthcare professionals to study with indigenous healers. The Franklins' book [\*Gift of the Jaguar\*](#) explores the overlap of the principles of Zero Balancing with underlying tenets found in the Andean wisdom traditions.

John teaches Awareness through Movement® classes and offers Functional Integration® lessons in Lynchburg, Virginia, to help others explore the joy of movement. You may contact John at [dr-johnefranklin@gmail.com](mailto:dr-johnefranklin@gmail.com).



