

An interview with François Combeau

A Presentation of the Feldenkrais Method as part of a symposium about / on “The Means of Investigation and Pedagogy of the Singing Voice”

(Lyon, February 10th, 2001)

I was invited to give a presentation of the Feldenkrais method and its pedagogical utility in the training of singers, choir leaders, voice teachers and drama coaches, health professionals, and others. The one who did invite me was Dr. Guy Cornut, who knew my work from the singers of the Lyons opera (with whom I worked for 10 years) and various speech therapists (for whom I have led many workshops).

My intervention was to include a 45-minutes talk before all the conference participants (200 people) and two 90-minutes workshops for groups of forty persons. In addition to describing the principles of the Feldenkrais method, Dr. Cornut wanted my presentation to raise new questions and offer a fresh look at the pedagogy of the voice and its reeducation.

Many of the participants were experienced professionals (therapists or teachers) in a milieu that I am quite familiar with because I was used to be part of it for many years. I know that it can be given to certainties, received ideas, and ingrained habits of thinking where notions such as posture, breathing, or placement of the neck, jaws, and tongue are concerned.

I thus decided not to launch into the definition of yet another method from a conceptual, theoretical point of view. I knew that if I did so, the conference participants would listen to me with the ears of their own convictions and the “Yes, but” of the difficulty to imagine that other paths may exist. Rather, I opted to use this “talk” to propose real hands-on work elaborated out with “meta-commentaries” on the main principles of the method through three short ATM*s lessons of 15 minutes each.
ATM* : Awareness Through Movement®

I wanted to give them the opportunity to be touched, to have a real sensory-motor experience, and to be giving my remarks a meaning based on sensations tied to their immediate personal experience.

I wanted the experience itself to raise new questions, but the kind of which would not immediately come into conflict with the public’s existing ideas, beliefs, and know-how (which I still respect even if I have moved away from them over the past 20 years). There were about two hundred of them sitting on closely arranged chairs in front of me, waiting.

I was standing on the stage (the talk took place at the Regional Conservatory), microphone in hand. I gave a few words of introduction to situate the talk within the conference and in terms of a basic pedagogical analysis. I wanted to make it clear that I had no intention of judging or calling into question anyone’s practice but rather, sought to propose real-life experiences that would contribute to the analysis.

We began with an ATM on “the mobility of the pelvis and the dynamic sensation of verticality in a sitting position.”

Seated on the edge of our chairs, we made various observations about the points of support

(the ischium and the feet), the equilibrium of the parts of the spine and the head, the mobility of the head, and various sensations of the face and the organs of phonation.

I then suggested pelvic movements on the chair, with different ways of initiating the movement and various points of attention during it.

These were followed by ankle movements (flexing and relaxing the ankle, raising the front part of the foot, raising the heel) and the coordination of these movements with those of the pelvis. Finally, I introduced eye movements around the clock from 6 to 12 and back again, here too with different coordinations between the foot and pelvic movements. All of these were punctuated by rest periods with everyone comfortably seated on their chairs. We then came back to the pelvic movement and its effects all along the spine, followed by different observations concerning the seated position, the sensation of verticality, how we feel ready for action and expression, and the necessity of freeing the head and eye in order to enter into contact with space.

Standing up, anchored on the floor, we explored the sensation of the self in relation to the surrounding space, the opening up of the visual field, the mobility of the jaw.

During this session, I introduced:

- **The importance of awareness** as the means of feeling what we do and how we do it (the indispensable prerequisite for all evolution).
- **The notion of a dynamic self-image** recreated at every instant through the sensations we have and which allow us to define ourselves. Obviously citing Feldenkrais (“Each human being determines his or her behavior and action on the basis of self-image”), I explained:
 - how this self-image is built, how it can limit itself, deteriorate, become blocked in the course of each person’s history.
 - And conversely, how it can be restored, once again varied and enriched with the work of exploration and awareness by and through movement.
- **The work on ourselves**, in terms of behavior and of the passage from intention to action, during which the processes of questioning and exploring the unaccustomed and the possible are more important than the immediate result obtained.
- **The notion of learning** at the central nervous system level: the ability to create new connections, to adjust and adapt the response given to the situation proposed, the environment, the emotion underlying the action.

I also referred to the young child’s learning process, its characteristics, the environment that encourages it, the “gratuity” of the initial explorations with the sole aim of self-discovery, the search for new sensations, the relations established among the different parts.

Last of all, I situated the session they were participating in, “Sitting and dynamic verticality,” in the context of the involvement in real sensory-motor processes linked to deep-rooted patterns that have been part of our evolution. These patterns thus correspond to memories that can become instantly available once they are awakened and solicited—which accounts for the almost immediate effect of the effort.

At the end of the session, everyone remained standing in place, and a great calm pervaded the auditorium. I continued with certain remarks related to the content of what had gone before, followed by others that were seemingly more remote (such as the differences concerning the opening of the mouth, movements of the arms, the visual field, but also the

inner state, breathing, a.s.o).

This was the point where I insisted on the fact that in such work, it is necessary to take the entire person into account. The movement of the whole or of a single part allows us to recreate a real sensory-motor dialogue, to attune action and sensation, to develop the kinesthetic sense and its many sensors operating in the bone, joint, and muscle systems as well as on the skin.

I thus elaborated on an important idea that this public, still “under shock” from the sensations emerging in the course of the session, was now able to hear:

Rather than replacing one form (posture) that a person has settled into, by habit or limitation, with another form (posture, way of standing or doing) that is held to be a better, necessary response to a given situation (singing, speech, playing an instrument) and in which the student often becomes blocked with the zeal of convert, we propose exploring different possibilities in order to develop the ability to create forms adapted to the situations, intentions, and emotions at hand.

Today’s so-called best response may well be inappropriate tomorrow and thus become its own limitation.

Any correction imposed from without the outside, even with all the instructor’s good will and pedagogical know-how, creates a conflict between the old habit and the new functioning required and ties the learning experience to the instructor rather than the student’s “self.” Such learning will be called into question every time that stress, anxiety, or doubt will make their way between intention and action. (This is how we see the bad habits reappear and hear comments like “You found it last week, but now you’ve lost it”. A formulation that makes it quite clear that the acquisition in question remains a data, something external to the individual rather than a life experience retained because it has been explored and felt).

“There are no good or bad jaw positions for opening the mouth. There are only positions that are appropriate or inappropriate to the reason for opening the mouth, to the sound and the vowel uttered, the language spoken, the enthusiasm and emotion of the person speaking, the intensity that needs to be developed in order to be heard. . . .”

After a brief period for participants to make exchanges with their neighbors and a short break, I began the second mini-session on “Opening and closing the mouth, feeling how we make the movement, and its impact on the face and the neck.”

I asked them to repeat this simple movement several times while shifting the attention paid to the “self in movement” so as to create different points of view on their own functioning:

- **Opening and closing** the mouth while observing the movement of the lower jaw, then the changing space between the teeth, the back of the mouth;
- **Making the same movement** while focusing on the back of the upper teeth, then the lower ones;
- **Thinking** about the palate, then the bottom of the mouth;
- **Feeling** the articulation of the jaws on the right side and then on the left.

In this way, they could observe how the fact of varying the focus and form of their attention permits a greater sensation of the self and a modification of the behavior itself. I then had them focus their attention on the development of the space inside the mouth and the inside-outside relationship.

After a rest period, where they placed their elbows on the backs of the chairs in front of them, I suggested several mouth openings with the chin resting on the hands in order to discover and clarify the locus and mobility of the cervico-cranial joint.

Here I was able to bring out another part of the work we propose: becoming aware of the structure of our articulations by and through movement and thus developing a richer, more differentiated self-image that is closer to our reality, notably in terms of the skeleton in movement and its vast potential for mobility.

We then explored various differentiations between the opening of the mouth (with the lower jaw or with the cervico-cranial joint and the lower jaw) and the movements of the eyes, the head, and so forth, with various directions and rhythms.

This offered an opportunity to specify the importance of these differentiations, their roles in the maturing of the nervous system, and how they develop and expand the field of possibilities while eliminating the habits and fixations that are tied to individual history and static know-how.

Seeing that certain people had difficulty with these increasingly sophisticated differentiations led me to speak at length about our attitude toward the work and the goals and challenges we set for ourselves.

“The important thing is not to succeed with each variation but to raise questions.”

Each situation or configuration is a new question that is raised; one which leads the brain to “let go” of the habitual response and create a more adapted one (even if this is often done awkwardly at first). If we take our brain as an organ of creation capable of establishing increasingly adapted plans of action through new cellular connections, it has to rediscover a certain neuroplasticity. This requires feeding it with the information transmitted by the many sensors found in the bones, muscles, joint surfaces, and skin. This sensory-motor system needs to be awakened, stimulated.

We insisted on the quality of the exploration itself, freed from the intention of achieving a result and oriented instead toward developing lightness, ease, and consciousness—rediscovering the notion of organic learning that is so striking with young children. This implies learning at our own pace in function of our needs, exploring in order to discover, feel, expand our field of action and observation through an “experiential evolution.”

Going back to the little session on the opening of the jaw, we associated the movement of the mouth with that of flexing the ankle (clarified during the first session) and that of the eyes.

We worked with one side of the body only, so that each participant could feel the immediate effect of these variations - the fundamental links between the opening of the mouth and the mobility of the ankles as joints permitting the passage from vertical to horizontal. The different remarks that followed these propositions surprised more than one person in the amphitheater.

I went on to speak about what makes for the effectiveness and sometimes even the immediacy of this work and its great functionality - the awareness that allows us to know what we're doing, the return to the exploration of the primary sensory-motor patterns that each human being has memorized. These patterns, inherited from the evolution of the species, were explored in early childhood, at a time when discovery, gratuity, the pleasure of feeling and feeling oneself, the ability to focus our attention and invest ourselves completely in our tiniest actions were the ingredients of organic learning.

We ended this mini-session with observations of articulation and vocalization movements, first in a sitting position and then standing up. A very harmonious atmosphere reigned in the large hall, with the sounds mixing together and enriching each other.

As a choir director who knows the difficulty of harmonizing the voices in a group and finding

such unison and vocal presence, Dr. Cornut (who was on stage with me) was surprised, if not amazed. I pointed this harmony out to the group and made the connection with what we had just explored together.

After a short break, we began a third mini-session, during which I wanted to come back to learning and present a few principles of the Feldenkrais method:

- Working with the entire person rather than focusing on a detail, a part, or a “problem”,
- Exploring and enlarging the field of possibilities rather than wanting to “change” by making the person fit into a mold or external model,
- Going along with the person, enriching that person through an awareness and development of what he or she already knows how to do. It is only at that point that the play on increasingly differentiated variations can lead to the discovery of other paths of action and other adaptations to his or her needs,
- The notion of Functional Integration,
- The need to know what we are doing and how we do it in order to do what we want,
- The development of quality and ease.

For this third mini-session, I chose a sequence on the mobility of the head and its relationship with movements of the eyes and spine:

Sitting on the edge of the chair, turn your head to the right and left and observe how far it can go comfortably. What are the echoes and consequences of this head movement with regard to the rib cage and spine? What parts of yourself are involved in this movement?

Continue making the movement toward the right only and observe what happens to your eyes. With your head relaxed, feel your eyes, their volume, and their position in the sockets. Then make a few eyes movements toward the left, leading with the left eye going left, and then the right eye going left. How fluid are these eye movements? What is your breathing like? Where does it express itself?

We then went back to the head movements to the right in order to observe how the eyes movements in the other direction had freed the head from certain constraints. Next we made different eyes movements toward the left with head positions increasingly inclined toward the right and noted each time their effect each time on the initial movement, its development and quality, and the sensation of reduced effort.

Another series consisted of pelvic movements produced by moving the right knee forward and returning to its original position, then backward and returning to its original position, followed by various combinations and differentiations between the movements of the head, pelvis, and eyes.

Finally, we came back to the original head movement and, noting that it now developed more easily, felt its integration along the entire spine down to the pelvis.

We observed that, to attain this freedom and fluidity of the head, we had at no time sought to overcome limits by stretching the muscles but rather, to awaken and differentiate different parts that were to be integrated into a more functional pattern of movement, to clarify the plan of the action, and develop the brain's ability to organize varied and increasingly coherent responses. (I developed these notions from a more theoretical, conceptual point of view.)

During the observations made in a standing position, I stressed the relationship to space, the development of the visual field, the sensations all along the right side. These remarks all evoked a great deal of surprise.

I then discussed the importance of the eye's role in regulating and organizing the tonus all along the corresponding side of the body. I also defined out the notion of the sensory-motor

dialogue with the self that we develop by and through movement.
How movement leads the nervous system to refine the organization of our entire skeleton and distribute the tonus more uniformly.

We went on to speak of stimulating the human organism's capacity for self-organization, self-regulation and self-healing. We all have these capacities, but they are often thwarted, concealed by static patterns of functioning and the loss of sensory-motor contact with ourselves.