

Feldenkrais & Drawing

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“I look only at the movements.”

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

“... this movement as such eludes any mediating perception because it is already effectuated at every moment, and the dancer or lover finds him- or herself already ‘awake and walking’ the second he or she falls down, and even the instant he or she leaps. Movement [...] cannot be perceived. However, we are obliged to make an immediate correction: movement also ‘must’ be perceived, it cannot but be perceived, the imperceptible is also the *percipiendum*.”

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Anyone who has ever tried to market Feldenkrais is likely to have run into a problem: how do you *show* what matters? And in a way that another person will be able to perceive. It would be too easy to chalk this up to the problem of “advertising”: how do we layer some kind of aesthetic appeal over something much more profound, without disguising or minimizing it? But in so doing we would be missing the opportunity to perceive a more fundamental relationship between movement and the aesthetic. Kierkegaard proposes a particularly Feldenkraisian strategy: don’t get caught up in what is not essential. In art as well as in life—in life as a form of art—attend only to the movements, not to appearances. Actual living movement, the kind that avoids reduction to mere displacements of objects in Cartesian space, eludes simple perception. Functional Integration is, in this lived sense, an exercise in the imperceptible. But Deleuze and Guattari immediately point out the paradox of the essential: it “also ‘must’ be perceived”. A difference is a difference that is palpable. This perceived quality is the very heart of the learning. We might even boldly turn the formulation around and say: “only the imperceptible is actually perceivable.” The elusive obvious. This is the paradox that the Method teaches us to come back to. We learn to slip beneath what we typically think we know, in order to *feel more*. Doing less, we enter an expanded field of potential relations. And it is there, risking disappearance, getting lost, that we sense differences that make a difference. Beautiful differences.

When, in Feldenkrais, does the challenge of imperceptibility make itself known? It might be during a training, as you struggle to feel your partner in Functional Integration practice or to follow the subtle, nonverbal interaction of an FI demonstration. Do you recognize this uneasy tension, this effort? There is nothing bankable about the paradox, always on the verge of eluding us entirely. This is the art. To attend to something elusive or subtle can open up worlds or it can be a non-event. You work with someone on the table, illuminating all of these subtleties, only to

be told, “I don’t feel anything.” Or they do notice a difference only to say, “well, yeah, okay, but I really just wanted you to fix my back pain.” You go to the museum to allow works of art to reconceptualize experience and then you get bored. Or fold it away in your back pocket. “Yes, I adore Matisse....”

Like Kierkegaard, we have to get past the false distinction of an either/or approach. Our experiences are not toggles oscillating between separate states where you are either in it or out of it. Both art and Feldenkrais remind us that a whole field of potentials exists. Are you unsure, confident, bored or frustrated? Excellent. This is always the task: What is happening? What can be happening? How much more can we barely perceive in this moment? What relationships are to be felt? Feldenkrais asks us to pay attention to the field before knowing it. Open into the experience of movement itself. Here contradiction is reconceived and set in motion differently as complexity; dichotomies give way to dynamic relationships; constraints are opportunities. We get stuck when we want to be done with it, to have something else happen.

Here’s one way to get stuck. Beauty has a bad rap these days. Many people come to Feldenkrais to recover from the effects of trying to conform to conceptions of beauty, whether physical, professional, personal, spiritual.... Beauty, conceived as an external and abstract measure, is fraught. And yet, aesthetic experience can also provide an opening or process that isn’t reductive. Beauty can become an emergent property of felt experience. Let’s take figure drawing as an example, because it resonates nicely with Feldenkrais. Figure drawing today suffers from many of the same assumptions as “beauty.” It is often considered elitist, stuffy, unsophisticated, bourgeois, boring, old-fashioned and concerned primarily with pretty, amateur picture-making. This is the paradox: attention to our very living form can come off as disconnected, a specialized and peripheral skill. But if we think aesthetically, *looking for the movement*, there is always another way in. Seen as a direct engagement with the movement of bodies in relationship to each other, we can recognize live drawing’s great capacity for embodied learning. Taken up this way, it involves us in sensing and learning that is generative and reflective without being definitive or overdetermined.

So what can this look like? A classic exercise is blind contour drawing, in which you follow the movement of an object’s contour with your pencil but without looking at your drawing. Doing less, *seeing less*, in order to see more. But what if you find blind contour drawing itself becoming habitual, rote, an absent-minded exercise? Can you call upon your sense of touch to help make drawing strange again, to re-engage your attention? Using one hand to feel the contours of your own head, you might draw with the other hand. As hand feels head, and head feels hand, your drawing hand translates these sensations of mass, shape and surface to the page.

Or rather than approaching “perspective” as an optical or geometric problem to be solved through technical skill, you might allow something like “foreshortening” to emerge out of the kinesthetic exploration of shortening, lengthening and rotation in experiential space. A reaching and rolling ATM that distinguishes the head, ribcage and pelvis by turning them in different directions might be a good one for opening up the classic concerns of perspective, bringing a little life into the

picture.

Or, what if, in an ATM lesson that asks you to imagine five lines through the spine and limbs, you try actually drawing the lines? Can you connect to these active, potent lines through the sense of sight and the contact of your drawing tool, clarifying your self-image and creating a rigorous feedback loop for self-study?

Or can you use a continuous line on the page to help you feel for the gaps in your understanding of an ATM sequence? When do you lose the line? What part of the diagram of movement is dropping out?

Drawing is experiential and generative as much as it is representational and technical. Functional movement is aesthetic, we could say, as much as it is practical and experiential. We hold these modes apart to our own loss. Playing with the apparent dichotomy of drawing and movement we discover much about the worlds they share. Practically speaking, we use Feldenkrais to deepen and expand aesthetic expression and drawing to fill in the gaps and reinforce Feldenkrais work. Each informs the other and participates in a larger field where the distinction between life and art becomes interestingly elusive. “Elegant” movement only means something within a world that attends to and responds to it.

So, how do we become imperceptible to ourselves, which is to say, how do we foster a moving sense of ourselves and others? In the less perceptible, more elusive, but no less available layers of experience, how do we connect? Feldenkrais and live drawing can help us to access an elusive understanding, a less binary give-and-take, by sensitizing us to a spectrum of movement we might otherwise miss. Noticing or “observing” subtle movements in other people requires training or a practice of sensitization that responds over time. Just because I can't see your experience doesn't mean you aren't having one, or that I can't glean something of its importance, or that I won't recognize something more of our shared experience next time.

Imagine, for example, a plane that extends out from your centerline—the line that passes through your belly button, up along the middle of your breastbone and over the bridge of your nose. Bring your hand to this plane and slide it along the surface, feeling how the movements of your hand and shoulder orient and establish this plane.

Stand facing another person; allow your movement to establish a shared midline plane.

Slip a drawing pad between you and the other person. Allow the long edge of a rectangular block of graphite to slide along the surface of the paper. How do the planes expressed in your movement meet the page and reflect the planes you sense in the movement of the person you are drawing?

As you do something with one side of yourself, you can feel it with the other; movement is

*relational. We move in ever changing relationship to ourselves, others and our environment.
Moving with our partners, we begin to draw, locating a shared rhythm on the page.*