

Beauty and the Feldenkrais Method

The famous Feldenkrais mantra goes something like this: “To make the impossible possible, the possible easy, and the easy elegant.” It is this last piece of the triptych that so intrigues me. Why go the extra step to make something elegant?

It appears to suggest a couple of things. First of all, it reinforces Moshe’s belief that there is no limit to improvement. After something becomes easy, there is a further place to go.

Second of all, it appears to place elegance on the upper end of the hierarchy, above possibility and above ease. Does that strike you as odd? Since when has elegance held an important place in your life?

Do you consider the elegance of a dinner party to be superior to the possibility of getting together with friends? Or to the ease of its execution? Why should one prefer an aesthetic appreciation of an act to one that does the job as effortlessly as possible?

To answer this question is to answer the question: “Why beauty?” What role does beauty, or if you like, aesthetic appreciation, play in human development generally, and in the Feldenkrais Method in particular?

Certainly the Method can make beauty *possible*. If one has greater resources with which to paint, or to play the piano, or to recite a poem to one’s beloved, one can make such an effort for something that will be more greatly appreciated. Improvement thus serves beauty.

But this does not address the question of what function beauty might serve in human improvement. Is the relationship between beauty and function an equation? Can it be turned around?

When one considers an infant of the sort that we model our lessons around, the infant on the floor, wiggling and struggling to determine what configuration of limbs will bring its head level to the floor, we can make some educated guesses as to its motivation. Certainly it is, to some extent, hardwired to explore. It wants to improve because that is what all healthy babies do when left on their own, at least in the realm of movement.

No doubt the baby is motivated by a desire to communicate with those around it, and being able to see such people more clearly is a plus. Likely, the desire to see the objects in the room also plays a role, as children know once they see things, they can begin to get at them. And so, for various reasons, the baby *wants* to improve, is driven to do so, and does not need any encouragement.

Not so for adults. We appear to be somewhat complacent after we reach our maturity, or the state that substitutes for it. As long as we can get what we want, and do what we want, we do not strive for more.

Unless, of course, we are motivated. The greatest motivator is trauma or crisis, of course, but what I said is that “we can get what we want” at the present time. Short of a crisis, what could motivate us?

This is the question that we bring to our lessons. How shall we bring the clients into recognizing a deficit they are unaware of, or unwilling to face? We wish to avoid shame or other negative reinforcers, as these will most likely backfire upon us and them.

What we require is something positive, a shining something that does for the adult what nearly everything does for the baby. We require the activation of the pleasure sense, which in adults can be a wonderful motivator. Adults often forego, or have forgotten pleasure.

We may provide certain kinds of obvious pleasures such as relaxation, “permission” to go slow, heightened sensation. These may be absolutely necessary in order to reach our clients, to bring them from a place of resignation to the realm of possibility. Sometimes, however, these kinds of joys are insufficient.

If a client fails to value the aforementioned pleasures, or cannot experience them for a variety of reasons, then they will fail to motivate him or her. Even more perplexing, a client who is not in crisis and yet wants or needs to improve may already be normalized to relaxation, permission or sensation. Such clients need a further motivation to bring them to a place of improvement.

For this reason, I suspect elegance is at the top of the list. In this case, I would substitute beauty for elegance, as it is the subject in question. Both words relate to a question of aesthetic enjoyment that goes beyond functionality.

A client that can learn to discover their own beauty may begin to hunger for improvement. Feldenkrais did remark that one can accomplish a great deal by teaching someone to love themselves. Such a client may decide that these characteristics really are not optional or vain at all, but have become necessary for their survival.

The heightened state that the Method may engender will also enable someone to more fully love the beauty of the place they are in, and the people they are with. To love the beauty of the view outside our window is no trivial thing, as it determines how we get out of bed in the morning. Are we eager and curious about our world, awoken to its beauty and eager to explore further? Without such sensation we may not find life worth continuing.

Finally, while we have mentioned that the Method may enable one to more effectively create beauty, we have not discussed the converse, that in order to more effectively create beauty one may wish to improve oneself. If I am a skilled musician or artisan, I am accustomed to coming up against the deficits of my talent. If I can surpass myself to create the kind of work I had previously only admired, then beauty has served me well.

Beauty is no trivial thing in this life, though it is often held cheaply in places where everything is available at all times. Perhaps those of us unfortunate enough to live in such places of cheap beauty have been dulled to its true value. It does not merely adorn the path, but leads us down it to discover more.

If we are able to recognize the value of beauty as Feldenkrais practitioners, we will strive to make use of it in our lessons. We will see to it that our clients recognize the necessity of the beauty in the arc that their arm traces across the floor. They should know that the better the arc, the better their journey will be.