

Review: Several short sentences about writing by Verlyn Klinkenborg

This is a book of first steps. Their meaning will change as your experience changes. This book contains the bones of many arguments and observations—a vertebra here, a mandible there—but the whole skeleton is what you make of it. You'll find as much about thought and perception here as you will about language. There are no rules, only experiments.

-Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several short sentences about writing*

My directory listing on the Guild's website reads: "Performing Arts, Writing." I have never been asked to assist someone with writing using the *Feldenkrais Method* and, until recently, would have been hard pressed to do so. Last month, however, I received a book that convinced me I am on the right track, both as a writer and *Feldenkrais* practitioner.

Several short sentences about writing by Verlyn Klinkenborg is intended for people who would like to improve their ability to communicate in words. And yet, the way in which Klinkenborg asks us to pay attention, both to our writing and to the world around us, applies to any aspect of life that requires making a connection with another person. I am reviewing this book, not only because I wish to recommend one of the best books on writing that I have ever read, but because Klinkenborg's approach to teaching and learning will have particular resonance for the *Feldenkrais* community. His focus on *authenticity* in writing, that is, the unapologetic reliance on our own observations, has surprising parallels in the work of *Feldenkrais* practitioners.

Klinkenborg advises writers to pursue strong, straightforward sentences, and to revise these sentences continuously. If you are a writer, you are likely familiar with the editing process, in which you or an outside editor eliminates superfluous information in favor of communicating something specific and relevant. This kind of editorial assistance resembles the feedback that a *Feldenkrais* practitioner might give a client. In an ATM class, for example, a practitioner might notice that a client is missing the intent of a lesson or doing a movement backwards. As the practitioner offers feedback, the client may become aware enough to change what he is doing and in the process discover something about himself that he had not previously been aware of.

The idea that noticing is as important as doing or acting is the first lesson we encounter in our *Feldenkrais* training. We make use of what we notice as we undertake a functional movement, both consciously in the choices we make and unconsciously in the integration of our nervous system. The result of noticing, rather than "trying," "diagnosing," or "hoping to achieve a goal," is that we transcend our current conception of ourselves and of our clients, arriving at what we did not imagine possible, or did not even imagine.

Similarly, as writers, we must pay careful attention to what we write as well as what we notice. We may decide to make a change because we feel uneasy about something we've set down, or

we may follow unexpected pathways when we become excited about what has emerged. Proceeding in this way, sentence by sentence, Klinkenborg suggests that we end up expressing far more than we thought we knew how to say, far more than we could have foreseen or planned.

Along with the value of noticing, Klinkenborg discusses the idea of authority, which gives us the confidence necessary to make use of what we observe. With characteristic humor and directness, he gently mocks the notion, evidenced in academic papers with endless references and quotations, that nothing we say is of value unless someone else has said it first. He demands instead that, even in a non-fiction piece, we write from a place of authority based on what we have noticed.

On page 126 Klinkenborg writes, “You were taught in school to repose on the authority of the evidence you gathered...But what if you were to muster your own authority?...All the authority a writer ever possesses is the authority the reader grants him...Authority arises only from clarity of language and clarity of perception. Authority is how the reader’s trust is engaged.”

Klinkenborg insists that we have a right and responsibility to be authoritative when we write, to acknowledge the truth of our own observations and experience. As Feldenkrais practitioners, we rely on observations rather than diagnoses of our clients, and we speak with the authority of those observations through the language of touch. We must also bring our clients to recognize their own self-observations as having a validity distinct from anything a diagnosis can tell them.

This is the most profound connection with the Feldenkrais work: cultivating the authentic experience gleaned from our own sensation through attentive self-correcting, the way a child does in the earliest stages of learning and development. As Feldenkrais practitioners, we seek to bring clients to that state of awareness where they can acknowledge the authority of their own sensation and acknowledge feelings they have suppressed or ignored. When we succeed, the people we work with come to be more present in themselves and act with far greater efficacy than before.

Klinkenborg downplays easy, automatic processes sometimes employed in creative writing classes. He advises mistrust of all sentences that seem to flow out of us. In Klinkenborg’s experience, “flow is something the reader should feel, not the writer.” After all, he reasons, it isn’t the writer’s state of mind that the reader feels but the effect of the writer’s choices.

Flow may be similarly problematic in our work. Clients on the floor doing ATM may feel a flow in their movements, especially if they are exceptionally limber. In the absence of effective organization, this kind of flexibility can be deceptive. The aesthetics of a movement can disguise its ineffectiveness.

In addition, my own desire for the sensation of flow may hamper my ability to do the work. Whether or not my movements with a client “flow,” I want to be focused on the actual

connection I am making with them, and the impact that each of my movements will have as they translate through my skeleton to theirs.

I just returned from a training where I saw students who had little confidence in their abilities and who lacked a complete picture of what they were doing. Although many of them felt awkward and lacked apparent mastery, they were still able to create powerful change in the people on the tables in front of them. They had been trained to pay attention and to act on what they noticed by pursuing that vital sense of connection.

The decisions I make as I move with my client are analogous to the decisions I make as I construct a sentence. When I push through someone's talus bone into his tibia bone, the movement will have meaning if I can connect the push all the way through the spine, contextualizing the sensation and suggesting functionality. The movement generated by the push gains meaning among other movements and sensations because the connection the client senses can be used in more effective walking, standing or lifting. I want my sentences to have the same impact as that revelatory movement, and they will if the words are connected in a meaningful way to the things in the world that I share with the reader.

The analogy I am drawing between Klinkenborg's "good sentences" and our "moves" is not arbitrary or coincidental. Both arise from the act of "noticing." Klinkenborg insists that if we write well about what is interesting to us, what captures our attention most, it will be interesting to the reader. Our clients are similarly interested when we communicate clearly about what we are noticing—with our eyes and hands and skeletons—in ATM and FI.

As a writer, I found myself walking away from Klinkenborg's book with a more profound sense of myself and my capabilities, the way I feel after a good *Feldenkrais* lesson. This should come as no surprise as Klinkenborg has taken the aspects of effective writing that he has noticed over time and connected them to my experience. Although I had been employing many of his ideas for years without realizing, it was only upon reading this validation, and recognizing what I had missed, that I gained a new sense of direction and orientation in my work. As a teacher, a writer, and a teacher of writing, I should aspire to create the same sense of connection with my readers, and I will use *Several short sentences about writing* as a guide.

We as *Feldenkrais* practitioners have a particular challenge in communicating with our clients. Both in speaking and writing to the public, we may find it difficult to describe our work in a way that gives people a real sense of what we can do. If we can recognize the similarities between generating good sentences and the work we are already trained to do as *Feldenkrais* practitioners, we may find that we are speaking with authentic voices and making an effective connection with our clients through our words as well as our hands.