

Summerflute Blog

DAY ONE

Dear Musicfriends,

Day one of our Body Awareness Music session has been a nice introduction. Even though this workshop has been targeted at flute players, and a renowned flautist, Liisa Ruoho, is giving masterclasses, there are many other people here who are not flute players: bassoon, piano, percussion. This is, in fact, quite a diverse crowd!

RECITAL

The day began with a faculty recital, to which I contributed, playing the first movement of Mozart's Sonata in G-major, K 283, and a jazz piece (I Hear Music). I haven't checked in with you all since last summer regarding my playing, but I now feel very much like a "normal" piano player. While I can hear lots of places where I want to improve, I no longer feel like I'm missing a fundamental concept. Now, instead of wondering what's wrong with me, I'm beginning to ask myself how I might make a better sound on the instrument. I cherish that normalcy.

CONSTRUCTIVE RESTS

After the recital, we had a short introduction from one of the Body Mapping/ Alexander teachers about how to take Constructive Rests. This is a way for the coordinators to let the participants know they are to take care of themselves by resting when they are tired instead of pushing on, and giving them explicit physical instructions on how to do so (ie. - Lying on the floor with the knees up; Draping the body over a chair; etc.)

MASTERCLASSES

Following dinner, Liisa, the Finish flute instructor, began giving Masterclasses. I hadn't intended to watch these, as I am not a flutist, but I changed my mind and watched 3 of the 6 students. I'm glad I did. Liisa said a number of things to the students which changed their sound immediately and radically, and which I could apply to my instrument.

1) Liisa asked the first participant to "turn her ears back" and listen to the air behind her as she played. This made a huge difference in her sound. She also asked the student, who was playing Bach, to lean casually against the piano as if she was at a party and play the Bach that way. The intention was to take all the anxiety and deliberateness out of the playing so that she was "just playing Bach, and doing nothing else." Despite the fact that the student was not in the taught "flute pose," her playing suddenly became much more musical. She was instructed to take this "just play" state into a more traditional pose.

2) In contrast to the first student, Liisa asked her third student to keep her active engagement with the music. But her approach was to ask the student, who was showing a lot of aggression in her playing, "Where does your biggest emotion sit? Where is it in your body?" In this case, the student, playing Piazzola, was doing a lot of bird-pecking with her neck. There was a lot of force up there. Instead of leaning this student against the piano, Liisa said "Do not release the head, but put your emotions elsewhere." In this case, she wanted to keep the intensity of the playing, but wanted to globalize the effort. It worked. The student kept the intensity, but it was a body-intensity now, and the body was free to move.

TOMORROW

I give my first ATM (group session) on using the large muscles of the trunk for effort and eliminating superfluous efforts in the limbs, lengthening the body for work instead of contracting it.

Love,

Adam

DAY TWO

Dear Musicfriends,

EARLY MORNING REVALATIONS

I spent a lot of time last night preparing my first group lesson (ATM) for the students. This would be my first impression to them as a Feldenkrais instructor, and I wanted it to be a good one for them. I really got to know the lesson very well - it's about doing work using the large muscles of the trunk, and letting the limbs be free to direct that work to a specific place.

Before I taught, I had some practice time. I thought back to all the trouble I had with the Chopin A-minor Etude, and how it always made my hand cramp. I began to contemplate the idea that perhaps my hands were plenty strong enough to play this line, and that maybe they hurt, not because it was so hard, but because they weren't free to move. I thought maybe if I moved using the large muscles of my torso and kept my spine lengthened for support, I might have more

freedom in my fingers. Lo and behold...the passage that hurt a minute ago stopped hurting. Nice revelation. Now I just need to refine it (forever!)

FIRST ATM

Over 30 people lay on the floor in the CSU Chorus room as I took them through what for many was their first experience with Feldenkrais. They were open to the experience and did a good job taking care of themselves, not pushing, not performing. They were willing to laugh at the right times, and to keep up the somewhat rigorous pace of this particular lesson. In the end, many of them showed obvious freedom in their ability to raise their arms and legs up from the floor without the back muscles interfering or shortening their spines. A few came up to tell me that their balance had improved, or that something that had always hurt was not bothering them now. Very gratifying. Even better, several more signed up for private sessions (FI).

BODY MAPPING IS AWESOME!

Next I took the first Body Mapping class from Amy Likar, one of our two coordinators. I've long put off the study of anatomy...I find trying to turn flat pictures into internal three-dimensional structures very difficult. At last, though, I've found this...it's functional experiential anatomy. You learn how the parts work gradually, and by using them. It's marvelous, and will greatly assist me in understanding how the Feldenkrais lessons work, and how to assist my clients and myself.

MORE LESSONS WITH LIISA: COURAGE AND STAGE FRIGHT

Our renowned Flautist gave more masterclasses today. Here are some gems: She explained to one flutist that every note does NOT have to be beautiful. In fact, if you make some notes less beautiful, the piece you are playing gains contrast and color. She urged her to be courageous in this. Another student, a woman who had given up the flute for 45 years and only returned to it after retirement, played wonderfully and then shared with us that she has severe stage fright which causes her abdomen to shake. Liisa had several good pieces for her: She suggested that the woman record herself playing the piece several times; the first time, imagine an audience of thousands. The second time, just play for yourself. Listen to the results. Try different kinds of thinking while you play, and see what you need to think about in order to play. One last gem: "It is the air that plays the flute, not the body."

PRIVATE SESSIONS

I gave three private lessons today. It's so much fun to work with these people. They come with varying desires: To sit comfortably in any position without having to balance all the time; to overcome habitual, chronic and debilitating stiffness; to learn to lengthen without straining the back. For most of them, the solution is subtle and hidden and takes some time to discover. They

listen with their bodies. Their breathing goes from shallow to deep and gratified as we discover a better way to move, and back to a panicked shallow when we come back into gravity. As we rediscover in sitting or standing, and bring it back to their everyday life, they leave thoughtful and encouraged. I'm tired but happy.

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

After my sessions I had 30 minutes to sample the end of opera singer and professor Laury Christie's Alexander group lesson. I've never done one of these before. I loved the attention to the spine, the various places I could bring my attention, ways to move that I haven't had a chance to explore. A very nice way to end the day.

Check in tomorrow! More good stuff to come.

Love,

Adam

DAY THREE

Dear Musicfriends,

I'M AN IDIOT AT THIS!

I woke this morning feeling anxious. Yesterday went so well...I'm in a place where, for the first time in my life, everyone either knows what the Feldenkrais Method is, or believes that it's great. I don't have to explain or sell it to anyone. People are deferring to me for answers and are telling me about the powerful changes they're feeling in themselves after the lessons.

Holy cow, I can do this job, but I'm no genius. I can't claim to have made all these people feel this different! All I could think of was, "What if they discover I'm still learning?" How can I live up to their expectations?

Nevertheless, the morning ATM went just as well. People were respectful and cooperative, took care of themselves, and got up looking thoughtful. My evening private sessions were varied and good. One woman got up astonished at the fact that she had toes...she had never really noticed them before. Another was satisfied with an increased range of motion in her standing. A third sat there for 15 minutes, deliriously happy and feeling like she was in a completely different body. She didn't want to move because she felt so good.

So if I'm not a genius, and they're all having good experiences, then they must be the geniuses. They're attentive and they're taking in the information and using it to transform themselves. Liisa said something similar to her students: "I'm not a genius. Bach is the genius." She plays the music and keeps everything else out. It's the only real explanation, and it keeps everyone sane and happy.

I WANT TO PLAY

On a personal note, something astonishing happened to me today. I wanted to play the piano. Anticlimactic? Not really.

All these years I haven't played out of enjoyment. I've played out of frustration. I can't honestly say I've LIKED playing the piano. I liked being ABLE to play it. I liked making music with other people. But just sitting at the piano, playing music? That was boring, and often frustrating. It's been a long time since I was able to sit and just enjoy the sounds I could make.

But today I suddenly got sick of listening to masterclasses. I wanted to go to the piano. I wanted to play the Mozart, not because it has to be perfect for a concert, but because I wanted to see what colors I could bring out. I got to a piano and I PLAYED. Not music, games. I experimented with touch, with sounds, with thoughts and feelings. I had fun! I haven't felt this way in decades. I think I was 15 the last time I played around. It was joyous to love to play again.

BODY MAPPING AND MASTERCLASSES

In Body Mapping I came to understand for the first time why we have two bones in our forearm: Radius and Ulna. The radius turns as we turn our arm, and since it's connected to most of the hand, the hand turns with it. The ulna stays still at the elbow and the hand turns around it. I don't know what I was thinking before...that the whole thing rotated, maybe? Except how would that work? It wouldn't. Yay, two bones.

We have an anatomist from Georgia Tech with us, and he explained to me that the spinal processes, those things you can feel sticking out of your back, have all kinds of muscles attached to them which move individual vertebrae and groups of vertebrae too. This is helpful, because when I see a skeleton, I just see those things sticking out like a dinosaur tail and I wonder why they have such a strange shape.

Liisa showed a student today that she didn't have to "do" anything to make music. She just had to be here and play, and the music came out. Some students need that kind of guidance. They gild the lily, pour sugar on a lollipop, quote the lines during a movie, as it were, never realizing that they don't need to "do" because they're already "doing" by being there and playing.

Another student brought me to tears. She was playing a melody. Liisa had her walk with her flute and play. Liisa walked behind her and asked her to change the color or feeling at various points. "Now play it happy." "Now sad." "Now through the fog in the distance." "Now the sun comes out." Each time the student changed the color of the flute dramatically. I couldn't believe

how many different ways the same melody could sound on a flute! I started to cry because the changes in mood were so beautiful. That made me want to play even more!

TOMORROW

Halfway there. I hope you're enjoying this half as much as I am. Stay with me!

Love,

Adam

DAY FOUR

I can breathe.

No, not just because this wonderful workshop is almost over. We worked on breath today in Body Mapping, and oh, what a moment I had!

After spending an hour and ten minutes examining the structure of the ribs and scapula, and the musculature that relates to breathing, we went and lay on the floor for forty minutes and breathed, and felt, and breathed, and felt. At the end, we were invited to get up and play our instruments (cacophonously, on our own, all together, listening to ourselves). That meant 20 flutes, a piano and a marimba! I was the piano.

As I began to play with breathing foremost in my mind, I had several revelations. The most important one was that I was LISTENING to my breath, and therefore I was also listening to the music I was playing. For many musicians, it is a natural thing to listen to oneself as one performs. But not me...all these years, I listened to myself when I practiced, but when I performed, I "DID" instead of "LISTENED." That idea of "doing" on stage put me in a completely different body position, contracted, one that made it more difficult to play. On those rare occasions in my life when I found myself at the piano and really feeling musical, it was always because I was in a groove and listening to it. But I could never find that groove intentionally. It had just happened. Well, here it was, the answer: When I listen to my playing, I can play. I sit a different way. I respond. On the other hand, when I try to execute (don't you love that word?), I get out of a body-position that is lengthened and efficient. And breath is the water that takes me down that river, I think. I have a lot of exploring to do! It should be fun, too. I can't wait to perform again. (That doesn't sound like me!)

MORE FELDENKRAIS...WE WANT MORE...

People keep feeling compelled to come up to me and tell me how much they're enjoying their lessons. All I can say is, "You're welcome." I'm delighted that so many people are happy with the wiggling, that they're thinking about things. That Moshe Feldenkrais, his lessons work!

My individual students keep coming back to tell me more revelations. My footless woman told me how easily she was able to fit her toes in her toe-shoes this morning, whereas before she couldn't get them in there without a lot of trial and error. She knows her toes. She's got a lot more stability in walking, she says, smiling.

And my ecstatic student from last night is still ecstatic. She slept great last night. After her lesson she couldn't understand why her legs kept shaking. I think it was like that line in the Matrix. "You've never used them." Now she tells me that she thinks she's standing on her muscles and not her joints. What a relief. She's considering training in the Method. That's exactly the reaction I had!

And I worked with our percussionist. He wanted to know everything he could about the Method after our lesson. I told him to enjoy the changes first, let them sink in, don't try to read the end of the mystery novel before going through the book! Then he can learn all about it.

I'm going to miss these people. They've all had such a great attitude. They've given me more than I've given them, but they don't know that.

Last day tomorrow.

Adam

DAY FIVE

Dear Musicfriends,

In an hour and fifteen minutes we'll have a concert recital where everyone will play after all they've learned. Then we'll say goodbye. What a wonderful week! There is a lot of mutual joy and gratitude going around.

THE PELVIS CLOCKS IN

My last lesson with the group was the popular "Pelvic Clock" lesson that anyone who has done it remembers. Some found it easy, some uncomfortable. To my delight, people on the floor would occasionally ask questions that I was just about to answer, meaning they were thinking exactly in the direction of the lesson. One woman got very confused about how to make an arc on the floor with her pelvis, and my answers didn't help. Then she made a complete circle and...OH! All the little pieces made sense. That's what I love to see.

A FLUTE MASTER SOLVES MY PIANISTIC MYSTERIES

Liisa was kind enough to give me a piano lesson this morning. She spent nearly 2 hours with me, and most of that time we just talked. She was masterful at suggesting information and then shifting to stories and anecdotes so that what she had told me would have time to sink in. It didn't feel manipulative. She was just aware of me the whole time while I processed, and she made contact where I was. All the while it was just a conversation, very friendly, very nice.

She had some wonderful ideas for me. She says that when she sits on a bench, she thinks of herself as having six legs. Her own, and the four legs of the bench. That was a revelation. It makes it possible for me to connect all the way to the floor and not feel so insecure. Then she suggested I imagine the hammers hitting the strings, so that when I play, my connection with the vibrating air over the piano goes all the way from my fingers through the hammers to the strings.

I improvised for her and felt myself come in and out of connection as I played various chords. It was wonderful. I felt sad and joyous and connected. Sensation where there never has been any. Like a deep, rich AHHHHHH from my soul to the sky. Then she pointed out that when my fingers move more quickly, I lose the connection to the strings. The first note is connected, but the others aren't. There were two huge mysteries to solve with that revelation. Want to know what they were?

While I intended to get help on the Mozart, instead I found myself playing the A-minor Chopin Etude for her, or at least the beginning. This is the one that bedevilled me for the last few years, that I want to play at tempo, that I don't want to have to "lift weights" to become strong enough to play. Sure enough, she quickly observed that I was leading the movement to the right with my right fourth-finger, not with my pinky. I remembered how Alan Fraser had to help me find my pinky last year. She went further and suggested that I lead with the right side of my hand and wrist. No pain. Easy to play.

When we looked at the difference between the thumb and forefinger, versus the three other fingers, she suggested something astounding: that the thumb and forefinger can actually anchor the hand and stabilize it so that the other three fingers are free to move. She suggested bouncing with them, as if they were a pair of legs, into each position, while the other fingers, staying connected to the strings, were spaced away from them and could move up easily. I always thought the addition of the thumb and forefinger in that etude was a mean move on Chopin's part, an increase in the difficulty. In fact, Chopin is showing us the interrelationship between the thumb/forefinger and the other three, and how they can assist one another while doing independent tasks. Brilliant. All of the sudden this etude seems very approachable. Bounce, bounce, bounce.

She talked about the approach she uses to keep her practicing fun and interesting. She says that she seeks to understand the color she could bring to the piece at whatever tempo she's doing it, at that particular moment in the performance's development. She says she won't do "discipline." She must motivate herself with something that's fun and interesting. When she comes to a problem, she stops, goes and "has a coffee" and thinks about how she might approach the

problem. If it works when she comes back, great. If it doesn't, she'll decide she's on the wrong track entirely and rethink the problem from a lower level.

So I told her how, despite 25 years playing jazz, and a fascination with bebop, I have been loathe to "discipline" myself to learn the vocabulary. I simply haven't, and for some reason, wouldn't, sit down and drill a million jazz licks. Not for the last 25 years, no matter how frustrated I was at not being able to do them. In fact, I've learned EVERYTHING ELSE. Jazz theory out the wazzoo. Any tune, any key. Chords, voicings. But not this, the one thing I've wanted to know, the thing that got me motivated to learn to play jazz in the first place. We considered what I needed in order to motivate myself to learn.

We discovered that, given that I have had difficulty knowing which direction to take myself in fast runs, what part to lead from, how to ground myself and balance beneath, how to stay connected to each note, that it was no wonder that bebop phrases, which CHANGE DIRECTION QUICKLY, would completely throw me off. If I couldn't conceive of following a movement in a line up or down, there was no way I was going to be able to follow these spirals and circles. If I couldn't understand that this was what I was actually working on, then I'd have no approach to it.

My stubbornness, my laziness, have gotten me to this understanding. Sometimes it's good not to do it just 'cause, even if it takes you twenty-five years to learn how come. A lot of musicians out there are not going to like this! But don't worry. Most of you probably had that motivation internally without realizing it, so you wouldn't have had to wait twenty-five years. It probably wasn't mindless discipline to you, though it might have seemed that way, and though it would have been for me.

So thank you Liisa, and thank you Amy Likar and Meerena Shim, for a fantastic week. If you want to talk to Amy about these kinds of events, here is her information: www.bodymap.org

Love,

Adam

EPILOGUE

Dear Musicfriends,

Three more little details as I close out this chapter and head back to a more stressful life.

One: As I listened to the recital, I watched the pianist, an amazing woman named Yien Wang, as she accompanied the flutes. I noticed how she was grounded, balanced on the bench, how she connected to the piano and through. And all of a sudden, the image of her body came out in

three dimensions stark against the wall behind. I knew how far I was from her, and how far she was from the wall. It was like putting on the 3-D glasses at the movies. For those who have followed my gradual regaining of depth-perception, you will understand the significance of this.

Two: Near the end of my lessons, Liisa worked with me to find my sacrum, that pelvic space where the spine inserts so that it can bear the weight. She placed her hands on my back to show me where the triangular muscles are that connect the arms to the back of the pelvis. Then she touched the outside of my arm, just below the shoulder, to show me how the muscles wrap around and go under the arms. I felt under there with my own hands and was amazed at how big the backs of my arms actually were!

After the concert I started walking down the street and I felt that fleshy part of my arm on both sides. Suddenly my arms started swinging freely as I walked. I don't know that I've ever been aware of this sensation before. They swung freely and loosely.

Three: I neglected to mention Meerenai's website. She is a remarkable person and well worth learning about. Please check out www.meerenai.com

Thanks for reading. Please keep commenting and sending me e-mails.

Your musicfriend,

Adam