

Maxine Davis works with a colleague using the hands-on, one-on-one modality of the Feldenkrais Method.



Continuing Education

One More Conversation about the Feldenkrais Method with Master Teacher Maxine Davis

by Jill Anna Ponasik

CS wraps up its four-part series on the Feldenkrais Method with a continued discussion about how this technique can help you learn to release unnecessary tension in your singing and discover a new way of doing things.

It was sweltering summer when I first met Maxine Davis and began learning about the Feldenkrais Method of education. Now, as I type, sepia-tinted leaves are drifting down on cool breezes. In the four months that have passed, we've discussed what it means to prepare, how to allow more play in our practicing, and the importance of observing yourself from a point of neutrality. I even took a private lesson with Davis and described the experience step by step.

For this final interview, I began our conversation by asking Davis, "Well, what have we left out?"

My answer, a big belly laugh, came crackling through the phone. OK, maybe it's a silly question. The Feldenkrais Method touches so many aspects of life

that to cover them all would be impossible. Still, we have explored a wide territory and

"Here is Edward Bear (Pooh) coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump on the back of his head behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming down stairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it."

—A.A. Milne

I hate the thought that we might have left some important concept unexamined.

We decided to allow our conversation to zigzag a little bit. Some of these thoughts address topics that we have already visited, others venture into parts unknown.

What are some of the most common ways singers hold themselves back? What keeps us from using our bodies elegantly and efficiently more of the time?

To employ minimum effort and achieve maximum results we need to be able to *feel* the reality of what we're doing and how we're doing it. Some of us have habitual thought patterns that prevent us from feeling that reality, such as our urgent need to succeed or to feel like we know what we're doing, even if we don't. As long as we're locked into that thought pattern,

we could work with 20 different teachers—and maybe things will change a little this way or that, but the new messages will never quite sink in. Someone might come to me with something they think of as a specific problem, but often the area that needs attention or opening up is the way they approach learning.

Those of us who are good students, who have excelled in academia, tend to be attached to the security that all learning can be done from the intellect. The intellect isn't a bad thing, of course, but singing is a very physical process. Often the process improves when the mind is less active.

The Feldenkrais Method is taught either one on one in a functional integration lesson or in group classes called Awareness Through Movement (ATM). I've already described a functional integration lesson [see November 2008]. Could you tell us a little bit about what goes on in an ATM class?

In a way, the only difference is that in an ATM you're responding to verbal directions—sequences of movement that involve the body and the imagination. These lead you to explore how you make *sense* of verbal instruction. They take you into your own mind.

How do you figure out how to follow these instructions when you can't go look it up in a book? Learning through movement is very different from learning by looking something up. The lessons provide a safe context for you to discover how you approach these kinds of directions, in terms of both the physical movements and your emotional reactions to them.

The first time that a student can't figure something out, what happens? Some get frustrated, some get angry, some giggle or blame the method or the teacher. Those are all normal reactions. Part of the process is learning that if you can pull into a more neutral place and observe your reactions with curiosity—like, "Oh, isn't that interesting, I get really frustrated when I try to do this." Or "Wow, I can see that when I get frustrated, I give up"—those emotions will lose some of their power over you. Why? Because as long as you're feeling extreme frustration or anger, or if you check out, you can't feel the details of *how* you're doing *what* you're doing. You're obscuring what could actually help you figure it out.

Through movement, the classes can introduce you to new relationships between different parts of your body. They might lead you to stand or walk better or even to tie your shoe with more ease. On another level, they give you a chance to discover how you approach learning something new. Do you immediately think "I should be able to do this?" Do you have to be first in the group?

In a Feldenkrais ATM you don't know where the directions are leading you, you don't know what the ending movement is, so your mind can't jump around and begin leading you from an old idea. It can only attend to the present kinesthetic feedback.

You began your career as a singer and your voice teacher introduced you to the Feldenkrais Method. What was your early Feldenkrais training like?

When I first began, I was physically very tight, and had a variety of emotional reactions to the movements, but as time went on, I was overwhelmed less and less. I knew that if I couldn't do a certain exercise today, I was missing some piece of the puzzle and I'd get it when I got it. Somewhere in the third or fourth year, there was a lesson that was very demanding and I could feel that if I tried to do it, I might hurt myself. I also felt that if I didn't do the movement, I'd *never* be able to catch up to the rest of the class, and I *hated* the feeling of being left behind. I realized, "My gosh, this is what kids go through in school." Once I recognized that, I was able to say, "OK, I'll get it when I'm ready."

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During a Functional Integration lesson, Davis communicates kinesthetically with the student, helping her move out of the intellectual mind into a felt-sense (experienced in the body) way of processing.



the Chinese master talks about how we respond to the physical effects of moving energy, such as shaking, moving, or trembling. He suggests that we neither block it nor follow it. That really struck a chord for me. When we're swimming in the waters of unfamiliar movements or skills,

our minds want to jump in and make sense of whatever feelings or sensations we may be having.

How, exactly?

For instance, what if a singer turns their head to one side and discovers greater resonance? The mind might say, "Ha! This is the answer to my problems." So the singer adopts that new stance. However, after a while it doesn't work very well because they've fixated around that new position and lost the extra space they had. Plus, now they sing to one side all of the time.

If you neither block nor follow those thoughts, you're ready to try singing to the left or the right, a bit up or a bit down, and then you can forget it all and just sing. If you're absorbed in the sensations of your body and your sound, your mind is less likely to float there asking, "What will my teacher think?" or "What will the review say?" Tuning into your body can bring your nervous system back to neutral and help with the nerves that destroy your breath control and turn you into jelly.

Could you tell us a little bit about what it means to move with attention?

Well, think about the average gym. If people are working out, they probably have earphones on and they're doing some kind of routine. They're distracting themselves as they go through the process. To watch people work out like that is to watch suffering! They sweat, their faces are red, they hold their breath and they look miserable. Their attention is not on *how* they're doing *what* they're doing.

If you take the same exercise and do it with attention you might notice, "Hmm, when I go to lift my head, I lift my chest and it gets stiff." And if you are really paying attention, you might notice, "When my chest is stiff, it makes it hard to lift my head. I'm kind of bumping into myself. What could I do differently?" Maybe your abdominals are drawn in sharply and kind of stuck there. So you say, "OK, what if I do it the opposite way?" Your attention, and the details that you notice, can lead you to more efficient, more enjoyable, movement.

One thing that is changing for me is the attention I give to how I'm doing the task at hand, especially in my singing, or even now as I write. I'm more aware of what I feel as I work.

You're simply tuning into your body, and when you do that, you can be in the present. I've been studying *Qigong* lately and

It seems like most of us are tuned in when we begin. We start singing because we love it and because it *feels* great. How is it so easy to lose that connection as we progress?

I had a piano teacher once who would sit next to me and write all of my mistakes in the margin as I was playing. Imagine that and feel what your body does! You stiffen up because you feel like you're always failing.

When someone is disconnected, they often don't know it. They go from teacher to teacher, trying to break through this barrier, and [they] end up feeling like a failure, when really they just haven't had someone help them reconnect so that the message can go in and be received.

A lot of us expect learning to be linear. We want it to be a nice predictable staircase.

Yes, we expect that if we've spent three hours a day practicing, we should improve, just because we've put in the time. Yet the reality is that you may have spent the time in hours, but you haven't really been present to receive the learning. There might be a short in the circuit somewhere. Curiosity can help us close the circuit.

As a learner and as a teacher, you're always asking, "What is the context that will help me learn?" If putting your leg on the table and your head on your hand with your elbow on your knee helps

More on Feldenkrais

If you'd like to learn more about the Feldenkrais Method, and other ways to learn through movement, here are some of Davis' favorite resources:

On the Web:

- *Feldenkraisresources.com*
Feldenkrais Resources sells books and CDs about Feldenkrais and other related topics.
- *www.Feldenkrais.com*
The Feldenkrais Guild's website. It has a national directory of teachers and classes in your area as well as information about training.

In print:

- *The Elusive Obvious or Basic Feldenkrais*, by Moshe Feldenkrais
- *Body Awareness as Healing Therapy: The Case of Nora*, by Moshe Feldenkrais
- *A Soprano on Her Head: Right-Side-Up Reflections on Life and Other Performances*, by Eloise Ristad
- *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*, by Norman Doidge

you find the appropriate coordination, that's what's important, not how many times you sing a major scale or how many hours you spend in the practice room.

We can learn a lot by beginning with questions like, "How can I best put together what works for me?" "How can I organize my practice time so that I get the most out of it?" "How can I put together the right combination of coaches and teachers to help me reach the point where I can perform my best—with reliability, spontaneity, enjoyment, and heart?"

Many of us do ask those questions, but then the challenge lies in accepting the fact that our answers may look different than someone else's.

Exactly, what works for someone else may not work for you!

When this project began, I expected another opportunity to meet an interesting person and write a few articles. I had no idea that what I learned would affect my life in so many small but powerful ways. After two lessons and several conversations with Davis, I'm surprised to say that my whole life seems more vivid. Practicing and performing are more fun, daily tasks are easier and more enjoyable, and if I feel myself begin to get frustrated or lock up, I'm more likely now to pause and ask, "Is there an easier way to do this?" And you know what? There usually is.

Maxine Davis has degrees in both music education and performance. She is the recipient of a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship

and is a 1991 graduate of the NY Feldenkrais Professional Training Program. She has introduced the Feldenkrais Method to people at NYU, the New School, the 92nd St. Y, and the Chautauqua Institution. Davis currently offers private Feldenkrais lessons and classes, as well as voice lessons informed by the Feldenkrais approach to learning, from her studio in New York City. Visit her online at www.maxinedavis.net.

Jill Anna Ponasik is a singer-actress enjoying the effects of Feldenkrais on the quality of her life. She lives in Wauwatosa, Wis. with her husband and her cat, both of whom enjoy classical music. You can reach her online at www.jillannaponasik.com.



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