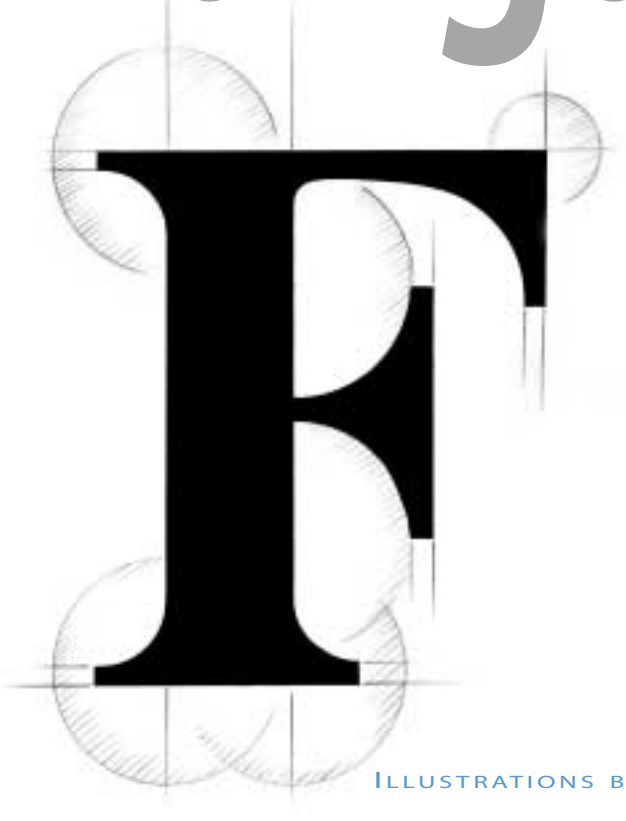
# Body Language



## An excursion through the alphabet in somatic terms

BY THOMAS MYERS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BOWMAN

# Part One

Body Language is a column where we explore the alphabet in terms of the body and bodywork. For each letter, we look at a letter's origin, introduce a bodywork approach that begins with the letter, and examine one clinical issue suggested by the letter. In this issue we explore the letter F's origin, Moshe Feldenkrais, Ph.D., and his Functional Integration approach to posture.

Although the sixth letter of our alphabet, F, is only one stroke away from the fifth letter, E, it has a completely different derivation. In fact, F shares common roots with the letters U, V and W, a bunch of Germanic variations toward the end of our alphabet. The original name of the letter F was *vav*, and its most widely used original form was like yet another of our letters, Y.

The original meaning of *vav* was nail, in the sense of link, or something that joins two parties. Its initial form in the proto-Sinaitic alphabet is thought to be either some form of hammer or an oar, though this soon opened up into the widely-used Y-shape.[1] This sense of nail, or hook, was extended into the sense of burden, still present in our language in phrases like "he got nailed" and "on the hook." Inherent in the meaning of *vav* also was sex, or another way of joining two parties. You can see the feminine vessel at the top part of the letter, and the male phallus represented in the bottom part of the letter. And of course, the powerful, blunt Anglo-Saxon word for the joining of two parties in sex still retains the designation, in our coy media society, as "the F word."

In the journey through subsequent alphabets, the two upright strokes bent to the left until they settled as two parallel lines. As with many other letters, the direction of the upper strokes reversed itself when scripts started being written from left to right instead of right to left, yielding the modern letter. ▶

Interestingly, this letter appears in a third alphabet, the Norse alphabet of the Runes. This letter, third in the sequence of 25, is called *Ansuz*, meaning signals. These are specifically the signals of the gods to humankind, carried in the Norse tradition by the god Loki. Loki corresponds to Hermes in the crowd on the Greek's Mount Olympus, or Mercury in the Roman pantheon (the guy with wings on his hat or his heels who delivers flowers nowadays). In the Native American tradition this is the *heyeohkah*, the striped trickster. In fact, all these traditions depict these messenger gods as mischievous, in keeping with the findings of people all over the planet that messages from the gods are mysterious, confounding, and often not what they first seem.

We can see a link between the two meanings of the letter in the two alphabets (it is not clear whether *Ansuz* and *vav* in fact come from the same source). The Hebrew-Greek-Latin *vav* speaks of a directly physical link, like a nail; the Norse *Ansuz* speaks to the more spiritual or at least non-physical link, a message or a signal. I will not belabor the point, having made it before, but this reminds us that we are communicating with our clients at a minimum of two levels. There is the direct, physical, hand-to-body link that conveys a certain amount of information to and from the client, and there are the indirect signals that are carried in the manner of touch, the tone of voice, and the context of caring.

**Top row, left: The original name of the letter F vav, which meant nail, in the sense of link, or something that joins two parties. Its initial form in the proto-Sinaitic alphabet is thought to be either some form of hammer or an oar. ✧ Top row, middle: The proto-Sinaitic letter evolved into this Y-shape. Inherent in the meaning of vav also was the sense of sex, or another way of joining two parties. You can see the feminine vessel at the top part of the letter, and the male phallus represented in the bottom part of the letter. ✧ Top row, right: In the journey through subsequent alphabets, the two upright strokes bent to the left until they settled as two parallel lines. ✧ Bottom row, left: F also appears in a third alphabet, the Norse alphabet of the Runes. ✧ Bottom row, middle: The Greek letter phi, which sounds somewhat like F. ✧ Bottom row, right: As with many other letters, the direction of the upper strokes reversed itself when scripts started being written from left to right instead of right to left, yielding the modern form of the letter F.**

The two source meanings of the letter F carry both of these levels, the direct link from hand to body, and the indirect signal from psyche to psyche.

To link a bodywork pioneer to the letter F there is an obvious choice: the late Moshe Feldenkrais, Ph.D., physicist, judo master and tireless student of movement. And since he termed one of his approaches Functional Integration, Part Two of this installment on F (September/October) will look into what is meant by the word function.

Feldenkrais was born in 1904 in Eastern Europe. At the age of 13, long before there was an Israel, he walked, alone, to Palestine. He later took his doctorate in physics at the Sorbonne in Paris; while in that city, he also worked extensively with Jigaro Kano, the developer of modern judo, and became one of the first Europeans to earn a black belt. When old sports and martial arts injuries were aggravated by a bus accident in 1940, he was told that he would never walk again without surgery—surgery that offered only a 50 percent chance of success. Feldenkrais decided his own chances were better, and drawing on his background as a physicist and martial artist, to which he added countless hours of watching children learning to move, he retrained himself to full use of his legs and began teaching his method to friends. After ▶

Photo by Lionel Belvenyet

**Somatic pioneer Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), developer of the Feldenkrais Method of movement therapy, which includes Awareness Through Movement and the Functional Integration approach to posture.**

World War II, in Tel Aviv, his avocation became his vocation, and he produced a number of books on movement, including the classic that can still leave me drop-jawed with its insights more than 50 years later: *Body and Mature Behaviour: A Study of Sex, Gravitation, Anxiety, and Learning*. Through Ida Rolf, he was introduced to the human potential movement at Esalen in Big Sur, California, where he conducted several professional trainings before his death in 1984.

The method Feldenkrais taught consists of two inter-informing techniques: Awareness Through Movement (ATM) and Functional Integration (FI). In the ATM classes students lie comfortably on a carpeted floor while an instructor gives direction in how they are to move. The movements are simple, with the oft-repeated suggestion to keep them soft, light and small. This is not about stretching tissues; we are loosening up the nervous system with these lessons, not the muscle and fascia. (Yoga students and massage therapists who love stretching have to be constantly held back, in my experience of teaching these lessons, lest they make a stretching game of them.)

The movements themselves are not challenging to the outer tissues, but they can quickly become a challenge to the conditioned patterns with which the nervous system runs the muscles to create our smooth movements. Hidden within the seeming simplicity of the movements which begin the lessons is a way of teasing out—differentiating is the word Moshe used—the various single movements that make up our usual movement patterns. By taking a movement apart and reassembling it, Moshe could convey his students to a new place of movement integration.

Here are a couple of examples:

First, to show you just how unconsciously habitual we are, clasp the fingers of your two hands together, as if to pray. Look down at your hands. One of your thumbs is on top, and the other hand's little finger is at the bottom, yes? Disengage your fingers and put them back together again, clasped similarly, but with the *other* thumb on top, and the fingers alternately interlaced until you get to the other little finger on the bottom. Now tell me, would you *ever* do that, unless I guided you into it? If it does not feel weird to have the other thumb on top, then either you are extraordinarily ambidextrous, or you have run into Feldenkrais or something similar before.

The two positions are anatomically equal, and in my experience of doing this exercise with literally hundreds of groups, which thumb is on top is not at all related to whether you are right- or left-handed. It's just a preference, which developed when you were very young for who-knows-what reason. But, oh, how strong that preference feels when you first try the complementary position! Go back and forth for half an hour, or over a few days, and the preference will fade, even to the point where you ask yourself which was your original preference. It is not anatomical, or structural, it is just *a neural pattern of movement*, a preferred sequence of firing down the motor nerves, or, in short, a habit, Feldenkrais's chosen field of battle with pain, fatigue, anxiety and malfunction. ▶

Photo by Lionel Belvenyet

**Moshe Feldenkrais teaches students new ways to move and relax, and to develop body awareness, flexibility and coordination.**

Here's another exercise to try:

1. Sit on the floor with your legs out to your right side. Your knees are bent, so that your right knee fits into the arch of your left foot. Although some of you will be able to get both cheeks on the floor this way, most of you will be more into the left buttock, and you can use your left hand to support yourself, so that sitting this way is easy.
2. Put your right hand up, palm down, about a foot in front of your eyes, so you are looking over the back of your hand.
3. Turn your torso to the left, keeping your hand in front of your eyes, and notice how far you go. Do NOT strain or stretch to go farther—just see how far you go comfortably.
4. Repeat this several times, looking over your hand to mark a place on the wall that seems to be about where you arrive on average.
5. Return to looking straight ahead.
6. Turn your head, hand, shoulders and torso to the left *while you simultaneously turn your eyes to the right*.

In other words, do everything you just did with your body to look to the left, but work the muscles of your eyes so that they look to your right as your body looks to the left. (By the way, this is not intended to be sequential, i.e. turning your body to the left, *then* looking to the right, but simultaneous—moving your eyes to the right at the same time, in the same movement, as turning your body to the left.)

Suddenly this simple movement isn't so simple anymore, right? Practice it until you ▶

have it; in fact, you can just practice it in your mind, if your imagination is complete enough, because it has no[a]thing to do with the bones and muscles, and everything to do with the sequence of firing patterns from your brain and nervous system. Like some sports skills, mental rehearsal works in ATM lessons. Practice this movement until it is as smooth as the original one, until it is easy and coordinated.

Now for the surprise—do the original movement again, swinging eyes and body together to the left, measuring by looking over your hand to the wall in a similar way. Did you go farther the second time than the first? For many, the answer is a startling yes, even though no muscles were worked or stretched, no fascia was melted, no trigger points released.

Although I had tried a couple of ATM lessons and had briefly watched Feldenkrais teach in 1975, when he was training people in San Francisco, I was too naïve (and too enamoured of Ida Rolf and her work) to appreciate Feldenkrais's work at that time. My own history with Feldenkrais really begins in 1980, a story that we'll pick up in the next issue's installment of Body Language. M

**Footnotes**

1. *Mysteries of the Alphabet*, by Marc-Alain Ouaknin, 1999, Abbeville Press, London, England.

2. ibid.

3. *The Book of Runes*, by Ralph Blum, 1993, St Martin's Press, New York, New York.

*Thomas Myers studied directly with Drs. Ida Rolf and Moshe Feldenkrais, and has practiced integrative bodywork for more than 25 years in a variety of cultural and clinical settings. He directs Kinesis Seminars, Inc., which develops and runs international training courses for manual and movement therapists. Myers served as a founding member of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, and as chair of the anatomy faculty at the Rolf Institute. His articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and a book is now underway on his Anatomy Trains Myofascial Meridians approach.*

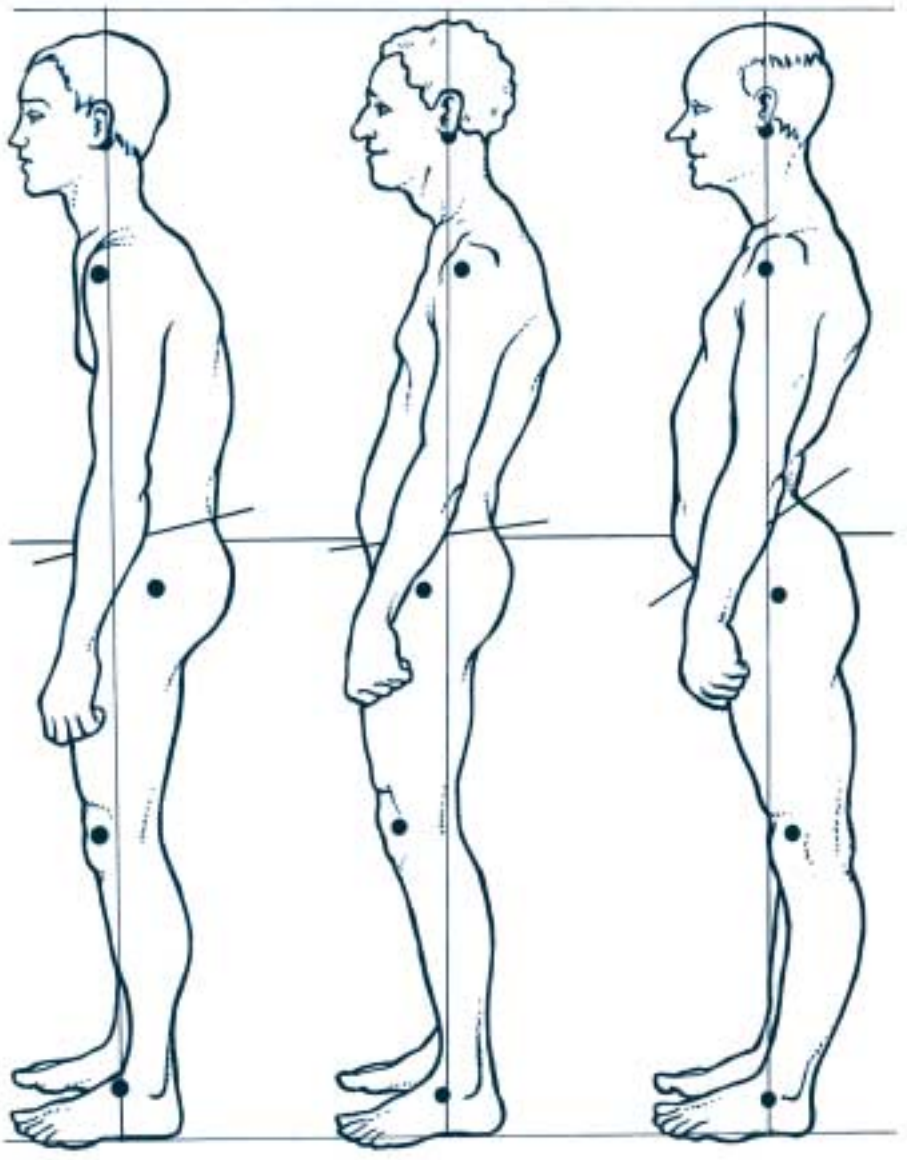
# Part Two

Body Language is a column where we explore the alphabet in terms of the body and bodywork. For each letter, we look at a letter's origin, introduce a bodywork approach that begins with the letter, and examine one clinical issue suggested by the letter. In the last issue we explored the letter F's origin; in this issue we continue with F by exploring Moshe Feldenkrais' Functional Integration approach to posture.

I was fortunate to meet Moshe Feldenkrais in the last years of his life. I was in London working as a Rolfing® practitioner, and was doing some sessions with an excellent and renowned concert pianist. I presume he was getting something out of the sessions, since he kept coming back, but this was the early part of my career and my work was still overly painful. He invited me to dinner at his flat one night, and he also invited, it turned out, two psychotherapists from the nearby Tavistock clinic, and a Feldenkrais trainer who was passing through London. Often, at a London dinner party, the host will set an intellectual hare to running during the course of an evening, and you, along with everyone else at the table, are expected to make a run at it. No quarter is asked or given during these discussions; the usual English politeness is buried, the claws unsheathed, and quick wits are required to keep your ego from getting painfully scratched. The pianist's question of the evening was, "Do you learn more from pleasure or from pain?" He expected that the psychologists and the Feldenkrais person would be on the side of pleasure, and that I, given his experience of my sessions, would come down on the side of pain. ▶

Well, we thrashed the question around quite a bit over pasta and excellent wine, and when the dust had settled, the psychotherapists, reluctantly, both concluded that human beings learn more from pain avoidance than from pleasure seeking. The Feldenkrais trainer and myself were looking at each other, surprised that we both agreed that people learn much more through pleasurable experiences than they do through painful ones.[1]

As it turned out, Moshe Feldenkrais himself was arriving in London the next day, on his way back to Israel from a training



**These are among the common postural patterns that get played out in movement, a process Feldenkrais termed acture, or posture in action. Everyone agrees that alignment reduces excess tension, but how do we get there? This is a question the entire somatics industry—the heirs of Reich, Rolf, Feldenkrais, Trager and many others—is experimenting with in novel and interesting ways.**

he was doing in Massachusetts. We met the next night (minus the psychotherapists), again at the pianist's flat. Now this apartment was immaculate, filled with creamy rugs and glass shelves holding beautiful art pieces. And here is Feldenkrais in the middle of the room, clearly wearing the same clothes he wore over on the plane and perhaps for some time before, one shirttail flapping out, food stains on his pants. He is holding forth at a great rate, the desire to speak and the desire to smoke fighting for the occupation of his mouth. Ashes were flying, to the obvious (but politely Anglicized) distress of the host. Once I had arrived, the main object of his continuous discourse was the superiority of his work over Ida Rolf's, in which he made some good points and some less-than-convincing ones.

But it was not his words, as clever and as pithily wise as they were, that convinced me to train with him. In full spate, with a cigarette in one hand, a glass of wine in the other and most of the chairs around him occupied, he made to sit down on the end of a low coffee table. The table's legs were closer to its center, and the whole affair—hors d'ouvres and all—at once started to tip like a see-saw under Moshe's weight. Without even pausing in his sentence, Moshe regained his feet and looked for a solider seat for his rump. But I lost what he was saying, agog that this 70+ year-old man—with damaged knee ▶

The way a human learns new movement is exploratory and experimental, while most movement training in our society is linear and goal-directed.

ligaments and an ample middle—had recovered himself so easily and gracefully from a potentially disastrous fall. It was then and there that I decided I must train with him.[2]

And train with him I did, but for only half of his professional program. I have been working with the principles ever since, but within the confines of my teaching and structural bodywork practice, so I will let others who did complete the program and devote their professional lives to it speak for the rest of this article.

In particular, I would like to quote from a piece by Mark Reese, Ph.D., who has done a masterful job of differentiating the Feldenkrais system from most other methods of training movement.[3]

Reese's main contention is that Feldenkrais anticipated current views in nonlinear dynamics and chaos/complexity theory by incorporating these principles into his movement system. The shortest way of saying this is that the way a human learns new movement is *exploratory* and *experimental*, while most movement training in our society is linear and goal-directed.

"Conventional ... methods involve strictly following indications for good form or posture, literal movement instructions, and imitation of visual models," says Reese. This is "consistent with hierarchical motor-control theories that invoke higher centers … to order the body through commands to adopt new postural or movement patterns." In other words, most systems impose "good" movement or posture from the top down.

Feldenkrais held a contrary view, that "functional learning emerges through pursuing exploratory variations constrained and facilitated by functional demands and the environment." In other words, from the bottom up. He hated it when people called his lessons exercises, and preferred to think of them as scientific experiments to develop solutions to motor problems.

Think of a baby learning to crawl: It is certainly not a decision on the part of the child's conscious mind, and certainly not from visual imitation of someone else. But is crawling an inevitable result of genetic neural programming, or an opportunistic discovery in response to a movement problem? Watching all the different ways infants come to crawling, and the variations in their manner of doing it, suggests that the latter phrase comes a lot closer to hitting the nail. And in a similar way, Feldenkrais's lessons allow students to discover for themselves what factors in their own movement they need to control to meet any given problem, rather than telling them how they should do it.

"He believed that sensitivity to the requirements of learning is crucial," says Reese, "and that mechanical repetition, forced stretching or manipulation cannot be primary agents for changing patterns of action."

I must insert myself here to say that while I agree with the first part of that sentence, my own experience is that repetitive movements, stretching and manipulation *can* be very effective routes for generating the awareness that can indeed change action patterns. But when do they work, and when are they meaningless repetition? Another Feldenkrais teacher, Elizabeth Beringer, puts it this way: "People have had their muscles relaxed and their bones put back into place, but they keep coming back to the same problems, because they haven't *learned* anything."[4]

It is a very real and excellent question to ask yourself whether your clients are learning anything in their sessions with you. Are they asked to take responsibility for what they feel and learn in their work with you? If the answer is no, then it is worth looking at your method to see whether you are helping or merely enabling your clients. But the dismissal of repetitive exercise, stretching ▶

There is no such thing as posture as a static place, we are always moving, making postural adjustments constantly, even at our stillest. There are familiar places we return to, recognizable to us as comfort and to our friends as characteristic, but they are never exactly the same.

and manipulation as devoid of learning possibilities is, in my opinion and experience, simplistic at best and dead wrong at worst.

Having rapped their knuckles, I am in enthusiastic agreement with the Feldenkrais folks in considering posture as a dynamic rather than a static event. As far back as the 1940s, Feldenkrais coined the term *acture* to emphasize how we must see posture in action, as an action or as part of an action pattern. There is no such thing as posture as a static place, we are always moving, making postural adjustments constantly, even at our stillest. There are familiar places we return to, recognizable to us as comfort and to our friends as characteristic, but they are never exactly the same. It is impossible to assume a fixed posture, no matter whether it is "good" or "bad." Our posture, then, is like a "strange attractor"—an area of stable variation rather than a fixed point. And to move a person away from one highly stable attractor to another requires a period of instability and a phase shift.

Translated to our daily practice, this amounts to saying that if only minor changes are made to a person's movement patterns by an intervention (a massage, a chiropractic adjustment, a new stretch or exercise), then the stability of the client's posture in action patterns may be temporarily improved, but they are likely to return to their familiar and stable area, even if it involves pain or reduced function. Only if the existing postural attractors are sufficiently destabilized and novel environments, orientations and effort patterns introduced can we have any hope of making a significant change to someone's postural pattern toward a new, stable attractor. We can argue whether Feldenkrais' methods are the only way to induce such a change, but Reese is definitely correct in saying that incremental steps toward some imposed visual postural ideal is certainly a recipe for failure.

"Conventional physical therapy," Reese says, "has emphasized the primarily mechanical factors of muscle strength and flexibility, skeletal alignment and mobility." But "movements and exercises without imbedded functional values are superficial, and may represent little more than noise" to someone seeking the multiple and necessary correlations between perception and move-

ment necessary to finding the value-rich action trajectories toward their desired goals.

I know that's a tough paragraph, but take the time to think it through and it might change your whole practice. How do we create multiple correlations between perception and movement for our clients? There's a lifetime of work right there, just exploring the implications of that idea.

So, in summary, if we define posture as a component of movement and not as a static ideal (however well-intentioned or thought out) and if we see learning new movement patterns as the way out of dysfunction and pain, and we recognize that these learning trajectories are entirely individual, then how do we recognize a functional pattern when we see one?

Feldenkrais, over his long career, developed an answer to this question, too, so here is our third sally into the world of F: What is functional? Feldenkrais' answer, as another teacher of mine put it, was "simple, but not easy": 1) minimum effort; and 2) reversibility.

Whenever you say, of Michael Jordan or Michelle Kwan or another top athlete, "They make it look easy," what you are noticing is the minimum effort, achieved not from laziness but from endless refinement. There are many elements to this ease, this elegance; coordination and correct sequencing figure ▶

large. Here's what we can notice in our daily observations of our clients: Ease is characterized by the lack of parasitic movement. A parasitic movement is extra muscle contraction unnecessary to the task at hand. When someone puts their arms forward to contact a computer keyboard, if they also raise their shoulders toward their ears, this is a parasitic, unnecessary movement, tacked onto the necessary ones by the person's brain, and now completely associated into their daily movement. Whatever your work with them, if when they are finished with you they no longer add the lifting-the-shoulders movement to the putting-the-arms-forward movement, then they are well served. But if they do continue to add that extra movement, they are ever so likely to return next week in the same state they arrived in this week. It is not enough to relax a muscle, as Elizabeth told us to, if the client learns nothing from it. Parasitic contraction on top of the intended motion is a prime cause for pain and ultimate breakdown. Minimum effort is beautiful function, and all too often it does not happen by itself.

The second element, reversibility, is interesting. Reversibility means simply that at any time during an action, you should be able to change your mind and reverse the movement. Obviously this won't work if you are jumping down from a wall, but the everyday task of sitting is a great example to use with yourself and with your clients. Use a simple kitchen or folding chair, and sit down very, very slowly, without touching your arms or hands to the chair. Can you change your mind at any time and stand back up? Or is there a place, probably when your seat is near the chair, where you fall into the chair, unable to change your trajectory? This is a fun exploratory exercise for you or your clients to play with, and will result in a different use of the hips. If you get really good at it, you may be able to do what so impressed ▶

me about Feldenkrais: recovering from an unstable seat without falling, embarrassing yourself or even breaking your train of thought. M

**Footnotes**

1. I have always considered the pain of the structural work that I do to be a by-product of the process, not the main event. It took some years of practice, however, to attain the same results without pain that I achieved in the early days with such strong work.

2 The evening did not end there, however, we went out to a movie in downtown London, and his running commentary, both on the way and right through the movie, was stinging, funny and right on target. He was the only person—ever—to smoke in my car; I did not have the chutzpah to tell this irascible genius who had fought to birth his country that he could not sully my New-Age American car with his tobacco.

3. Reese, Mark, Ph.D., 1999, "A Dynamic Systems View of the Feldenkrais Method," *Somatics*, Fall/Winter 1999/2000.

4. From a 12/00 conversation with Elizabeth Beringer, teacher of the Feldenkrais Method, founding editor of the *Feldenkrais Journal*, and director of Feldenkrais Resources.

For more information on The Feldenkrais Method, contact The Feldenkrais Guild, 3611 SW Hood Ave., #100, Portland, OR 97201 (800) 775-2118, www.feldenkrais.com

*Thomas Myers studied directly with Drs. Ida Rolf and Moshe Feldenkrais, and has practiced integrative bodywork for more than 25 years in a variety of cultural and clinical settings. He directs Kinesis Seminars, Inc., which develops and runs international training courses for manual and movement therapists. Myers served as a founding member of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, and as chair of the anatomy faculty at the Rolf Institute. His articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and he is the author of* Anatomy Trains—Myofascial Meridians for Manual and Movement Therapists*, published in 2001 by Churchill Livingstone.*