

A Dancer's New Lightness: A Feldenkrais Case Study

By Angelica Anke Feldmann, 2003

Rafael first came to my private practice about one year ago. A friend had suggested that he work with me, and get to know the Feldenkrais Method. Rafael (34) was a highly skilled and graceful dancer, trained in ballet and contemporary technique. He had been a member of dance companies performing all over the world, and was going to spend a few months living in Basel and working with the Basel Dance Theatre. He was raised in South America, had lived in many places, spoke several languages fluently, and loved to be "on the move." When we first talked on the phone, I could sense his outgoing and bright personality from the tone of his voice.

The first time he came to me, however, he seemed tired; after initially holding himself upright while sitting, he slumped into a more comfortable position, and told me that for the past few months he had been experiencing recurring attacks of back pain, which troubled him so much that he was fearful of not being able to continue with his living the way he had in the past. For the first time in his life, he said, he felt the wish to take some time off rather than working and moving as much as he had been, and he was concerned about getting older and losing his habitual vitality. His expressive face mirrored his thoughts and I could sense some sadness and apprehension.

To my question if he could, in fact, take more time off and allow himself a longer break he replied, "That's when the trouble really starts." He explained that as long as he stayed with a daily training routine and continued to perform, his back was more or less fine, but the very moment that he stopped, he often started to feel the pain again. Consequently he found himself in a bind of being fatigued, yet unable to cease working.

Since his childhood he had dealt with scoliosis, and a lot of his earlier life had centered on this issue. He tried physiotherapy as a teenager and had worked hard and tenaciously to become a dancer. Very remarkably he had dealt with what he considered his "handicap" by always working to overcome it. While touching his back, I noticed that his spine seemed surprisingly well organized, but his muscle tone was extremely high and his chest felt tight, limiting his breathing. Rafael was convinced that his scoliosis was the reason for all his troubles and he had come to me because he had heard that the Feldenkrais Method "has some great tricks for dealing with scoliosis."

In the beginning of *the first lesson* I asked him to do a number of movements while I observed. What came to my attention spontaneously was not so much the shape of his spine but the level of control and the extent of his muscular self-image, even while performing simple movements. There was obvious evidence of years of intense training, over-exertion, and most likely an uneconomical self-use. While moving as a dancer it is crucial to find relationships from the periphery to the center of the body, and to spread movement evenly across the whole organism. The aesthetic demand of dance technique may require, for example, strong muscular support and counterbalance of one limb. Often that is taught and performed with the idea of fixing the center of gravity and isolating the movement of the limb. This reduces the dancer's ability to move with the sensation of liveliness and integration. For Rafael this also resulted in too much tension in his torso, and in his musculature making up for the lack of support through his skeleton. His middle appeared to be tightened and pulled up almost as if he were lifting himself away from the ground; his center of gravity was raised, and because he habitually contracted his abdomen,

his diaphragm would not move downward efficiently while breathing in. He seemed to position his body in space with a limiting and rigid view of himself.

I shared some of my observations with Rafael and we got into a discussion about the training of dance techniques. From my own background in dance education I am familiar with the ideas of “pulling up through the middle” and “flattening out the curves of the spine,” which often are visually enforced and controlled with a mirror while the dancer experiences kinesthetic confusion about how to achieve the desired results. This way of learning is based on the traditional, frontal, teaching approach (watch and imitate), with the teacher dispensing continuous criticism while the image of the dancer is trained with the mirror. Even improvisation is often simply a repetition of routine and preset, or stereotypical movement. More importance is placed on form and outward gestures rather than on inner space and rhythm, on formalistic criteria rather than on authenticity. Along with this comes the development of parasitic efforts, contradictory and compulsive actions, which detracts from “being present” and being in touch with one’s own spontaneity.

Since Rafael had worked so hard to accomplish these tasks, he seemed to have forgotten how to move in other ways—the traces of his identity as a dancer were obvious in all his movement. He had no conscious differentiation between dance as a highly sophisticated and refined art form, and movement as a basic function of life and well-being. He seemed to be stuck in well-trained virtuosity, uncomfortable and unsatisfied with himself.

Considering Rafael’s request to “work with his scoliosis” and his wish to practice movements by himself, I decided to offer him a basic “crawling on the belly” lesson. Supporting the pattern of his spine, I turned his head while drawing up one leg and changing over his arms. He easily understood the idea of twists and counter twists and enjoyed noticing the sensations throughout his spine. Staying with the idea of the lesson I asked him to do parts of the lesson himself (like an Awareness Through Movement [ATM] lesson) while directing his attention to the sensations of effortlessness, breathing, and skeletal awareness.

These movements helped his abdomen to be integrated with his breathing, to sense support through his organs and his inner volume, and to establish a vital connection from head to pelvis. Rafael was now better at staying in a vertical axis while turning either sitting or standing. I invited him to join my ATM class so that he could deepen his experience and get the most out of the two months that we could work together.

In *the second lesson* I raised the subject of how he employed the transmission of ground forces through his legs to his spine and the corresponding role of his hip joints. The entire lesson was based around “getting to know his hip joints” (as outlined in Alexander Yanai, lesson # 241): tilting his pelvis while mapping his abdominal region, sensing when and how he contracts his abdomen, discovering his hip joints and the function of his psoas without triggering his ingrained habit of contracting his belly and pulling his chest up. He had done this ATM during my ATM class the previous week and was intrigued about the effect of feeling taller and lighter in his legs.

To further clarify things, I put a small styrofoam roller underneath his pelvis (lying supine) and asked him to roll his pelvis up and down while distinguishing between his abdominal muscles and his legs, letting his belly go, and sensing the motion in his hip joints. Following this, moving his pelvis both ways while bringing his leg toward his chest (adding an outward rotation of his thigh) helped him to discover a clearer image of the interaction between his legs, pelvis and chest.

Sitting, he now felt more stable and grounded on his sit bones, with his spine more naturally lengthening upwards, and with a new and unfamiliar feeling of having a sense of pelvic volume. His self-image was kind of disturbed by “having a belly,” yet he agreed that breathing was much easier. I shared my observation that he might have been trained to pull in his belly and to actually lift his center of gravity to meet the aesthetic requirements of desired shapes and gestures. Furthermore, he might be able to experience a better sense of groundedness and ease of breathing in his daily life if he would allow his belly to be softer. There are good reasons for strong and trained belly muscles for a dancer, but Rafael would also need to learn how to let them go to improve his breathing and the mobility of his spine. The habit of constant contraction restricts the resilience of the diaphragm and the pelvic floor, and inhibits the vitality of the inner organs. Overworked muscles become tired and they lose their elasticity and strength; a well-distributed muscle tonus allows a better postural support and dynamic balance, and this would contribute to his dance skills as well.

We ended the lesson standing facing a wall, and I asked him to roll a hard roller with one foot, exploring various ways of coordinating his pelvis and spine. Before he left I gave him Moshe’s book, *Awareness Through Movement*, and recommended that he do Lesson Six (the pelvic clock) to deepen his exploration and experience.

The *third lesson* was based around the “artificial floor”. I intended to stay with the theme of the previous lesson and continue with developing a more skeletal self-image. The lesson might also give him the opportunity to experience how small, fundamental movements provide interesting conditions for the nervous system to learn.

While standing and walking after the lesson he had a better sense of presence towards the ground and being upright felt easier for him. “Let’s experiment,” I proposed. “Walk and think of pushing and sliding away the ground, gently but firmly. Listen to what happens with your chest and head. Keep your lower belly toned and soft, and if you find yourself contracting your middle and lifting yourself up, let it go again, until you become able to sense what you are doing”.

Initially Rafael found this confusing, but after a while he could clearly notice differences. He started to enjoy the experience of increasing his sensitivity and to focus on process-oriented exploration. I asked him to experiment, balancing on one foot, turning his feet outward in first and second ballet position, while maintaining this specific focus of presence. The effect of actively relating to the ground with the core support of his pelvis and chest released a more comfortable connection into his spine and lightness in his upper limbs. He was able to erect and stabilize himself without the essential power being generated through co-contracting his middle. Rafael became curious about how this would contribute to his dance practice.

In the beginning of our *fourth lesson*, Rafael was very tired, his back ached and he was in a bad mood. The enthusiasm for his new discoveries had waned and he was back complaining about his scoliosis and the need to “work on it.” Taking his tiredness and mood into consideration I asked him to lie on his side, supported the shape of his spine, and told him I would work directly on his spine and diaphragm. He sighed relief and seemed more at ease again.

I started working with the idea of releasing the muscles in his belly and lower back, taking over the work of the muscles in the valley next to the spine, bringing pelvis and ribs closer together on his upper side, creating a sense of breathing and inner volume. I supported the lifting of his diaphragmatic arch and explored all around the attachments of the diaphragm while following the directions of his breathing.

Finally his breath started to expand into his lower back and abdominal cavity, his diaphragm now enabled to move down while inhaling. “At the same time that the surface of the diaphragm is lowered by the contracting of its crura, the ribs and sternum are lifted and the thoracic spine lengthened by the action of the intercostal and spinal muscles.” (Todd M., 1937, p. 232. “The action of the diaphragm”, a brilliant description about the dynamics of breathing.) As I sensed the lengthening in his thoracic spine he told me about an intense feeling of relief throughout his entire back. I continued the lesson with him lying on his back, staying with this subject while paying more detailed attention to the relationship between his breathing patterns and the movements of his spine and ribs. My hypothesis was that the release in the action of the diaphragm would offer a new potential for movement in the parts of his spine inhibited by his musculature.

At the end of this lesson, Rafael said that he experienced an unfamiliar new sense of inner volume, and he sat on the table looking softer and more vulnerable. I encouraged him to simply sit there, and pay attention to himself without speaking or changing anything. He closed his eyes. His emphasis had shifted to his inside experience. After some time I proposed that he slowly open his eyes while staying in contact with his inner sensations, to be in both places simultaneously, with fluid transitions. He was able to transfer this fluidity of attention and presence into standing, walking and into projecting his sight and voice out into space. When he left he said he felt refreshed, like after a long nap, and his backache was gone.

In the *fifth lesson*, I was encouraged by the explorations from the previous lessons and proposed that we proceed working in a seated position with his arms and head resting on a high table in front of him. Rafael was back to his usual vitality (in fact, after the last lesson he did not have back-trouble while dancing or resting), and immediately agreed to explore this further.

Sitting behind him I invited his breathing volume to expand by taking over the work of the major frontal muscles and gently lifting and compressing his ribs from different places, synchronous with the shapes of his breathing. While touching and clarifying a sense of three-dimensionality of his chest, I gently suggested subtle turns and twists, supporting as well as challenging the unique conditions of his spine. It felt like a multi-dimensional duet of breathing and molding. To enhance the challenge and bring in a more distal aspect I initiated the turns also from his arms and integrated the movement of his head.

At the end of the lesson I asked Rafael to sit without leaning his arms and turn around 180°, pivoting on his pelvis while keeping his breathing unimpeded and look around in the room. He did this beautifully, while moving slowly and listening to himself. I had the impression of a new quality of movement unfolding—a sense of length and expansion arising from the undisturbed flow of his breath and the acknowledgement of his skeletal structure interacting with his environment. Rafael clearly was on his way to discover a sense of support through the integrity of his spine as an important part of economical movement. “It feels so simple, so effortless,” he said, “and I feel whole and much more like myself.” I was touched by his expression and his words as I felt he had discovered more of his individual resources. “Each of us is an individual person...but it is important.... that an older, large and voluminous body is just as refined in his sensitivity as a young, slim body...with refined I mean that the actor (dancer) is in connection with his entire body at all times and if he proceeds with a movement he is always aware of all elements of his body” (Brook P., 1995, p. 33).

In the *sixth lesson* Rafael reported that he became more comfortable in his daily life and started to recognize the sensory cues when he was leaving his comfort zone and overworking himself. The quality of his resting time had improved; the spurts of back pain had subsided. He was planning to travel to the States to participate in a performance project with a composer and director who were both friends of his; he said he wanted to do something “more fun.” I was happy to hear that he was breaking new ground.

With Rafael lying on his back, I started by exploring the movements of his foot as related to his hip and spine, using compression in different planes of movement, bringing one leg over his chest to highlight what happens in his chest and sternum, and letting the ribs be at rest. This reconnected us with previous sessions. Compression from his seventh cervical vertebra formed a pathway down into his hips and guided us into a diagonal exploration between hips and shoulders. Rafael’s ribcage had become a lot more pliable and his spine allowed more movement, both in the transverse and sagittal planes. We kept exploring compression, passing through upward and downward, finding the thrust through the bones and a sense of inner space. Lifting his head and following the subtle patterns of his spine created an even more distinct awareness of his spinal structure, and a lengthening throughout his entire spine freeing up the articulation of his hip joints.

I concluded the lesson by asking Rafael to push with his feet while I pushed back from head and neck, paying close attention to the various trajectories and the maintenance of breathing and length.

Guiding Rafael from sitting to standing with subtle movements from his head felt in fact like creating a common experience about rising and falling in a vertical relationship to gravity. Rafael’s balance in standing and walking felt effortless and he was ready to move in any direction with ease and elegance. “As the torso is stabilized along the axis of gravity, through the balance of compression and tensile forces, unnecessary effort holding weight away from the axis is eliminated” (Rolland J., 1984, page 65).

Rafael had learned to use the support from his bones to generate stability, orientation, and dynamics for his dancing. This changed his relationship to space, and he reported some refined feeling of timing in his movements. In his self-image, he had shifted from only relying on aesthetics, performance and external analysis towards including an exploration of his own kinesthetic experience and developing all the richness possible from that.

Rafael called me up four months later, after returning from the States. He was in good shape and spirit and had started to think about moving to New York and training as a Yoga teacher. We had two sessions that re-established the work we had done before, and during the last lesson, he told me he would fulfill a long-time dream of his and travel throughout the Far East.

When he returned some months later he called me immediately. His back had started to hurt after carrying for a prolonged time a heavy bag on one shoulder during a stressful situation in Malaysia. Fortunately, he had been able to deal with it, working on his own, remembering parts of our ATMs, breathing and taking care of himself. Rafael felt good about this and a new sense of self-esteem seemed to come from it. He had been able to discern what had happened (how he created the painful state of imbalance in his back, carrying the bag), and he no longer thought of himself as “having a problem” or “having a scoliosis.” He now knew better how to become aware of the dynamics of his actions and he was able to take better care of himself and improve his situation. He began to re-engage with his dance training and felt ready to perform again after a short time. He still takes Feldenkrais lessons with me if, by

chance, we both are in the same location at the same time, and says that he enjoys what he came to call “an exciting new lightness of being.”

The work with Rafael underlined for me the value of the Feldenkrais Method for dancers, as the Method employs motor and cognitive intelligence instead of mere strain and repetition. It not only can prevent injury and burnout, but also may contribute to a deeper appreciation of a dancers unique resources and authenticity.

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