

Thoughts on Towardness, Awayness, Attention and the *Feldenkrais Method* during the polar vortex of 2019

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In the teaching of *Awareness Through Movement* and the practice of *Functional Integration*, it's very easy to slip into thinking that the movements of a lesson are responsible for the changes and improvements that are taking place. But, they are not. And, this distinction is essential for us.

I think of the movements of a lesson as the notes, but not the music; the medium, but not the content. The movements do not create the primal communication with the nervous system that leads to awareness. Of course, the movements are not completely irrelevant but, nor are they in and of themselves completely sufficient. What the movements do is provide a pathway to the brain, and create a context in which a particular kind of attention is possible. I would suggest that it is important to understand what we mean by an attention, ie. attention which facilitates learning in both ourselves, and our students, and what we can do to potentiate it.

One of the basic binaries of life, is 'toward' and 'away'. Even the earliest single celled organisms had the ability - or impulse or instinct - to move toward that which is low intensity and potentially life sustaining, and away from that which is high intensity and potentially life threatening. The primacy of this dynamic certainly influenced the development and differentiation of the flexors and extensors, nervous tissue, and ultimately the distinction of the parasympathetic and sympathetic systems. I would like to propose that this biological concept of 'toward and away' can help us to understand an important dynamic of attention that is vital to us, as *Feldenkrais* Teachers.

(Of course I understand that describing anything related to life as a binary, is reductionistic. Words are always a poor approximation, especially when trying to explain complex processes.)

The direction of our attention conveys to our nervous system that which is worthy of our attention and should be attended to. We have the capability to orient our attention externally, or away from ourselves, or internally, toward ourselves. We direct our attention externally so that we can find food, social connections, protect ourselves from danger, etc. And, we also often learn to turn our attention away from our internal sensations in response to stress or trauma.

While giving precedence to externally oriented attention is important to life, it actually inhibits the fundamental type of learning and change that concerns us in the *Feldenkrais Method*.

Learning does not happen outside of ourselves. It can only take place internally, inside ourselves through the medium of our nervous system. I propose that in both ATM and FI, it is our 'in the moment' relationship to our internal experience that potentiates improvement, not the movements of the lesson. As teachers, it is when we create the

conditions in which our students can move toward themselves, move their attention inward, toward their unique internal sensations and feelings, and toward positive, pleasurable sensations, that the transformative possibilities of both FI and ATM can be fully accessed.

In contrast, when we give primacy to the movements of the lesson, we provoke a dominance of externally oriented attention, effectively 'de-potentiating' the transformative possibilities of both FI and ATM. As *Feldenkrais* Teachers, the responsibility is on us to bring about a different, more internal dynamic of attention.

In ATM, we use language to bring and direct our student's attention towards the interiority of themselves, to their 'in the moment' sensations, to letting go of unnecessary muscular effort and to setting aside their habits of trying to achieve and accomplish. The more intimately and internally we know the lessons we are teaching, the more we are capable of guiding our students in this way.

In FI, we rely on our relationship to our own interiority and our quality of touch to direct the student's attention toward themselves. While giving a lesson, we find ways to gently join our skeleton with our student's skeleton, our spine with their spine, our breathing with their breathing, our sensing with their sensing, and our movement with the whole of them. As Dr. Feldenkrais said, "I am joining my system to their system."

In FI, we can effectively direct our student's attention internally with our own internal attention and through our quality of touch. As they bring their attention 'towards' themselves, they learn the skill and value of sensing and feeling. The more we give primacy to this way of connecting with our student, and the more they move toward themselves, the more potent our lessons will be.

The dynamic of coming toward oneself enables deep fundamental healing processes to work and will help to create a parasympathetic state, one in which the protectiveness and 'awayness' of our flexor muscles can be inhibited, allowing us to move in a more harmonious, synergistic way 'toward' life.

*\*The general concept of the biological primacy of 'toward and away' originated with the great animal psychologist and entomologist T.C. Schneirla (1902-1968). Regarding the concept of 'attention', listen to Dr. Feldenkrais' 1980 lecture in Amherst on July 29th and read psychologist William James (1842-1910) writings on attention.*