

EMBODIED SPIRIT

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

□ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

What a mystery it is that we are here and know that we are here! This is what the great French Jesuit priest, scientist and mystic Teilhard de Chardin, Moshe Feldenkrais, Gene Gendlin and Zen masters proclaim in diverse and vital ways. This unfathomable realization made possible by reflective awareness evokes awe, gratitude and deep curiosity.

Teilhard de Chardin’s main field of scientific study was paleontology. I highlight him here as he was an enormously influential forerunner of the emerging paradigm of Deep Earth Studies which includes the conceptual shift from ego-centrism to eco-centrism. We are indebted to him for our growing sense of the earth as a living Being, of Gaia, of the essential inseparability of matter and spirit. He profoundly experienced the continuity between bones, fossils, bodies, the earth, consciousness and our experience of the divine. He also continues to be a bridge between the often divided spiritual/religious view points and scientific methodology.

WE ARE HERE. Uniquely alive in this moment. Teilhard discovered that in the deeply felt, bodily experience of ordinary life we have access to the spiritual world. His profound observation that not only is life evolving but "God is evolving through us", changes everything. Resonating with Zen masters, he saw that through deepening our perception of ordinary reality, we can encounter the spiritual or Absolute dimensions of both human experience and the cosmos.

“Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things...as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value.”

□ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

One does not need to use spiritual language if that does not fit. It seems unfortunate to me when scientifically minded people forego the most profound realizations available to us due to a repulsion against spiritual or religious language. I see many people who were betrayed by the church or spiritual elders, surrendering their capacity for transcendent experience because of old wounds. By transcendent I mean transcending one’s

experience and identity beyond the separate self. To sense deep interconnectivity with all of life is transcendent. For some this is called spiritual, for some cosmic consciousness and for others simply profoundly human.

Feldenkrais was very influenced by the Talmudic and Hasidic teachings that were alive in his home and village yet he was not religious. He was uncomfortable with spiritual language. In the San Francisco training in 1975, this scientifically trained man was aghast at the sloppy, new age thinking of many in the group, me included. He demanded more precision in our language. So committed was he to the unbounded potential of embodied awareness that he once said to me with a sly smile: "you can learn more from your skeleton than from your soul". He was always fascinated by the unlimited potential of human consciousness. In basing his teaching on "awareness through movement", he was not idolizing the body, rather he was pointing toward a different kind of textbook based in experiencing *through* bodily movement. He knew that deep, embodied experience could also be transcendent.

"In those moments when awareness succeeds in being at one with feeling, senses, movement and thought, the carriage (ed. the organism) will speed along the right road. Then man can make discoveries, invent, create, innovate, and 'know'. He grasps that his small world and the great world are but one and that in this unity he is no longer alone.

Moshe Feldenkrais

Gendlin says the key for him is "to be connected to the larger system" though he is loathe to speak about God or spirituality. In conversation, Gene, who experienced the Nazi's taking over his family apartment in Vienna and other horrors as a small boy, curses when referring to God and then says something profoundly transcendent like his famous quote:

"Your physically felt body is, in fact, part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people, in fact the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from the inside". Gene Gendlin

Without using "spiritual language" both Moshe and Gene, based on my conversations with them, had/have deep experience of the transcendent. They rail against the limitations created by habitual language and thought. Typical categories- body, mind, spirit- break down when we place our focus on the vitality and wholeness of our lived experience. This is an essential point of living The Embodied Life. By this I mean, the focus is not

“the body” as a physical object but how, being grounded in our bodily process, can open us to richer dimensions of consciousness.

I recently began reading the new, remarkable biography of Moshe Feldenkrais written by my friend Mark Reese. What a life! Traveling from his home in the Ukraine by foot, train, boat and carriage at 14 years old with pistol in his boot, this muscular, brilliant young man was already engaging with life in extraordinary ways. As a boy he had seen brutal acts of anti-Semitism yet also discovered an intimate, loving relationship with nature and was already drawn to helping people with disabilities. From his notebooks, we see that he loved both the physical world and self-reflection:

“When I was a child, the sky seemed like a hat on the world...I would start running to hold in my hand the wonderful blue stuff that made up the sky....Still I love the sky very much....I also like the clouds very much. I sit silently and watch the clouds.”

Moshe Feldenkrais

To be alive in itself is enough! To know it, sense it, feel it and symbolize it accurately brings us to a sense of wholeness that is implicitly satisfying. There comes a sense of rightness, JUST in being alive. Feldenkrais used his unique life experience, both the tragedies and gifts, to go deeply into his felt-experience. This integration of bodily experience with reflection and feeling invites a sense of wholeness.

To understand the world knowledge is not enough; you must see it, touch it, live in its presence and drink the vital heat of existence in the very heart of reality

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Two weeks ago I spent the day with Gene Gendlin at his home in New York. Though struggling physically, his mind is bright and his liquid eyes full of kindness. He is the best, most precise and present listener I have ever known. My heart warms remembering the look in his eyes. Each day he awakens with various discomforts yet finds meaning and goodness in JUST being alive. The key for him is connectivity to both his felt-sensing and to the larger system. We spent much of our time discussing death and dying. When asked how are you doing he often says with both gratitude and humor, “well, I am still here”. His passion for going deeply into the experience of being alive is undiminished. Again, allowing the deeply felt, living experience in its wholeness- the pains and joys- invites an unpredictable, life-giving unfolding.

EVERY BAD FEELING IS POTENTIAL ENERGY
TOWARD A MORE RIGHT WAY OF BEING
IF YOU GIVE IT THE SPACE
TO MOVE TOWARD ITS OWN RIGHTNESS
Eugene Gendlin

I feel very blessed to have intimate friendship with both Moshe and Gene. I learn different things from each of these creative, dynamic human beings: Feldenkrais, more physical, more earthy, Gendlin more cerebral and more articulate about his feelings; Feldenkrais emphasizing the doorway of physical movement, Gendlin the doorway of the felt-sense.

Each demonstrates a passion for living, for uncovering meaning, integration and learning. In my language system, different from theirs, they are embodying a profound spirituality. By spirituality, I am pointing toward the deepest and highest, most profound experiences that implicitly are connected to something larger than self. Whether we call that spirit, God, the larger system, the All or Life, the most important thing is that we experience this intimate connection. It is from this experience of connectivity and wholeness, that, I believe, love arises in human beings.

“The most telling and profound way of describing the evolution of the universe would undoubtedly be to trace the evolution of love.”

□ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Valuing the gift of embodiment in their differing ways, both Moshe and Gene invite us to:

- question ordinary thinking especially the division of body, mind, spirit,
- commit to the integration of thinking, feeling and sensing,
- value the accurate, creative use of language,
- recognize the wisdom living through bodily experience,
- value the unique beauty and preciousness of your experience being alive.

This same realization is expressed by most Zen masters when they implore their students with the phrase:

Wake up! Do not miss this life”

Ordinary life as lived through this body can connect us to the most profound human experiences. Rather than seeking life in the esoteric, perhaps we can find the esoteric through deepening our experience of

everyday life. The gift of being born in a human body is unfathomable. For me, this is the essence of The Embodied Life.

“Our duty, as men and women, is to proceed as if limits to our ability did not exist. We are collaborators in creation.”

□ **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**