

Moshe on Health 1 & 2 On Health and Dreams; Recovering Integrity and Dignity

~ Russell Delman November 2010

On Health and Dreams

Feldenkrais always had unique ways of looking at life. Like a Zen master, he had the capacity to radically shake up one's modes of perception. Take health for instance. While most people were looking at health through the lens of diet, blood pressure, exercise, cholesterol and other accepted measures, he saw through completely different eyes. After completion of the San Francisco training program in 1977, Feldenkrais offered an advanced training in the form of a practicum in which the practitioners gave lessons to a great variety of people under his watchful gaze. Among the people receiving lessons were dancers, athletes, yogi's, along with people dealing with a great variety of physical challenges. After observing many interviews and individual sessions, Feldenkrais asked the group of teachers "who was the healthiest visitor we saw today?"

Following various answers, he said: "you are all wrong, it was that man with the big hunchback, the extreme scoliosis and the limp". We were all shocked and confused. He continued, "did you see the light in his eyes when he told us about his life? Did you notice the love and care that he shared with his wife and children? Remember when he said he was the principal of a school and loved his job helping the students and teachers? This was his dream growing up. Also, how he devoted time to listening to the classical music that he loved and going to the San Francisco Symphony with his family? Here is a man living his dreams."

From this and other comments by Moshe I learned, from his point of view, one of the greatest measures of a person's health is whether they are still in touch with their dreams. Those dreams they had before the practical issues of life became dominant, their desire to paint, write poetry, travel, sing, to know the spiritual world or sail around the world. Often the dream includes sharing a unique aspect of ourselves with the world. Living in a way that includes your dreams does not require abandoning your responsibilities. It is listening to that quiet, often young, middle of the night voice that is asking for more in life, perhaps some creative expression that has been ignored.

When the demands of our social roles become so dominant that our soul-life withers, we feel false to ourselves. This "wrong" feeling is actually a good thing because it can motivate us to locate that gift that wants to be shared. Unless we are sharing our gift, we will feel a nagging sense of incompleteness. I have been blessed by a life in which "living my dreams" has been close at hand. I am forever grateful, really deeply grateful, to Moshe Feldenkrais for this perspective.

MOSHE ON HEALTH (2): Recovering Integrity and Dignity

Moshe always offered unique points of view. In conversation with him my perspective was always widened, any narrow certainty challenged. He detested shallow, habitual thinking and saw original thinking as a rare human accomplishment.

In this newsletter last month, I described his ideas about the connection between living one's dreams and health. When talking about dreams, he did not emphasize grand schemes or radical adventures rather it was about our everyday life. He encouraged us to find non-habitual ways to vitalize our life through creative expression or through finding an activity in which we felt delight.

Another favorite definition Moshe would offer when asked about health was "the degree of shock a system could absorb and recover its integrity". Let's explore this further.

Integrity is a fascinating word. Look at the primary definitions:

in·teg·ri·ty (n)

1. the quality of possessing and steadfastly adhering to **high moral principles** or professional standards
2. the state **of being complete or undivided**
3. the state of being **sound or undamaged**

To re-integrate is to become whole again. This new wholeness might look very different from the wholeness that preceded it, yet, as sensed from the inside, it is undeniably authentic. Someone reintegrating after a brain injury might not do all their former activities, yet they might feel more 'whole' than ever before. Many times recovering clients have said to me, "I wouldn't wish this injury on anybody and I would not trade the love and insight that has grown in my life for my former health."

In a way we can call this human dignity- to be "insulted" or challenged by life and find one's way back to integrity, to wholeness. Moshe always said the essence of his work was to restore people to their human dignity. Dignity is often defined as "the condition of being worthy of respect, esteem, or honor".

One of the great gifts of being a Feldenkrais teacher has been the opportunity to work with many people finding their way back home to dignity, reintegrating themselves, amidst "insults" to their nervous systems and to their lives.

Ram Das, the popular spiritual teacher came for sessions after his debilitating stroke. As an eloquent speaker, losing his capacity for articulate speech was a great challenge. Relying on others for many of his basic functions required a new kind of humility, also inviting a new kind of dignity. His comment to me at the end of our second session still reverberates: " what I appreciate most about you Russell is that you approach me as if I am whole just as I am. Other therapists and most of my friends, treat me like I am damaged". His statement is not really about me but about the attitude of someone who learned from Moshe Feldenkrais.

As a meditation teacher I often ask students, "what needs to change for you to be whole in this moment?" This is synonymous with asking "what needs to change for you to be yourself right now?" When we are well connected to Self, the answer is always "nothing". Yet, when we are disconnected from ourselves, when we are lost in our "false identities", the inner sense is that a lot needs to change. It is important not to confuse this kind of self- connection with enjoyment, "liking" the moment or being happy. Rather, there is a basic sense of authenticity and acceptance- uprightness in the face of our challenges. Rather than whining or arguing with life,

we acknowledge our reactions, our disappointments, etc. and find a way to turn ourselves wholeheartedly toward reality. This too is a definition of dignity.

To experience this “nothing needs to change”, to know in an authentic and direct way that we are whole is a great blessing. This sense of wholeness cannot be faked, our inner life, our “wisdom body” as I call it, won’t agree to self-deception. We can engage in wishful thinking or positive affirmations and the ‘place in there’, down in our bellies, deep in our chests might disagree. Integrity, wholeness is governed by ‘that place in there’.

For Moshe, who witnessed pogroms by the Russian army as a youth in the Ukraine, lived in Paris when the Nazi’s invaded and inhabited Palestine/Israel most of his life, the concept “degree of shock a system can experience and recover” was based on devastating life experience. He extended this idea further through his experience of working with many people recovering from debilitating injury. With Moshe as a model, I learned to appreciate how human dignity, in the sense of moral uprightness was connected to recovering one’s wholeness.

This conflation of the definitions of integrity as both a moral quality and as an expression of wholeness seems very significant. When holocaust survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankel did his profound research into the qualities that allowed certain people to survive and even thrive having endured the horror of a concentration camp, this dual sense of integrity comes to the fore. How people could create meaning in these circumstances was usually predicated on connecting with something higher or larger than their immediate circumstance. Sometimes this was a relationship with God, at other times it was concern for their fellow prisoners or uncovering something beautiful to care about.

Similarly, Tibetan monks and nuns subjected to long term, horrific torture rarely experience PTSD unlike almost all other people. When asked about this, the Dalai Lama pointed toward practices that encourage the prisoner to include the torturer in their prayers. Recovery of wholeness seems connected to a moral framework, to enlarging the view of one’s situation from self- concern to a larger sense of interconnection.

While this concept of health as the capacity to recover from shock is helpful when we think of extreme situations, it also points us in a valuable direction when considering our everyday life. In many ways we are all “recovering from the insults of life”. Certainly some circumstances are much more challenging than others: chronic pain, the loss of loved one’s, the “worst of the worst” that we all dread. Yet, we all have situations that challenge our integrity, our wholeness everyday. Think of all the minor stresses that make up our lives- waiting on the phone, long lines, being late, waiting when others are late, traffic, so many minor irritants. How easy it can be to lose our sense of wholeness and dignity.

When we lose contact with our integrity, we can say, our health is compromised. Said another way, returning to integration, experiencing our fundamental unity in visceral, gut-level ways is a path toward our true health. One part of this recovery is expanding our concerns to include a larger web of interconnection. It is opening our hearts beyond the boundaries of our self-obsessed thoughts and letting fresh air into our situations.

What does it mean to recover our integrity in daily life? There are three main factors:

First, it is helpful to have practices that encourage us to maintain a sense of self-connection. To listen to “that place in there” which speaks from our inner life is critical. Authenticity, the sense that one feels real to ones self, is key.

Second, to have a sense of one’s wholeness, it is very helpful to be connected to all levels of human experiencing- physical, mental, emotional and relational. It is difficult to feel whole when lost in a sensation, feeling or thought. Moshe defined integration as a unity of sensation, movement, feeling and thinking. Functioning in one’s entirety as a whole being is the ground for integrity.

Third, expanding one’s sphere of concern beyond the self can enliven and refresh the moment in surprisingly powerful ways.

Moshe pointed toward the degree of shock any system could absorb and return to wholeness as a definition of health. We can now turn that around and say- our ability to return to authentic connection to Self, to integrity and dignity- is the path toward genuine health. This authentic connection to Self also includes our connection to Others- there is no true Self existing outside our relatedness to Other.

May we all find our way back home to this inner sense of integrity and dignity.