

“To Hold a Vision . . . for Someone Else”

From My Mother’s Notebooks

Iris Alon Milward

Translation of a memorial for Ruthy Alon, given over Zoom, in Hebrew for the Israeli Feldenkrais Guild, on February 15th, 2021

Shalom, Everyone . . .

Last summer, Ruthy and I prepared a talk about “The Early Days of Moshe Feldenkrais’ Work in Israel.” It was intended for the Guild’s Zoom meeting. As it happened, she decided at the last minute to teach a movement exercise, instead. Yet all the papers we had prepared were still in place, ready for presentation. The following, save for a few inserted experiences of my own at the time, consists entirely of Ruthy’s own words — her own memories, in her own language.

It was written in Hebrew — and I am not a professional translator — so please bear with me.

After Ruthy died, I received hundreds of calls and messages from around the world — from every continent: Alaska to Japan, Brazil to Australia, from the USA, and from Europe — and it moved me to know that I “shared” her with so many of you. I take this opportunity to thank you all for the beautiful and moving letters and emails you sent me, following Ruthy’s death.

I also found hundreds of notebooks, full of lessons . . . She thought deeply about the prospect and process of improvement, enhancement and understanding — in movement, and in life.

Here’s one example I found, a contemplation about *Habits*:

“Unproductive (sterile) roots —
Like some soil, that is crowded by roots of long-dead plants,
with dead roots that fill the space, and don’t let new plants develop there . . .
Maybe habits are like these roots; parasitical and ‘space grabbing’
that don’t allow us room to grow.”

Inside the books she read, Ruthy marked whatever she found useful — she highlighted the lines, filled up the margins — and then she summarized that which she found valuable in her many notebooks. All this material, including all her personal work based on Moshe’s teachings, Ruthy left to the *Movement Intelligence Trust*, run by Yona Manbar [manbar7771@gmail.com]. The *Trust* will make this material available to all of you, and it invites you to contact them to learn more, and to continue Ruthy’s legacy.

A few words about Ruthy’s early personal history: She didn’t like to talk much about it, because she did not grow up living with her parents, but rather in an institute, and then alone throughout her youth. Her parent’s rejection of her, at a very young age, posed a very heavy burden for her. And yet, when she became a mother, herself, to me she was the most loving, supportive, allowing, encouraging, explaining and teaching mother you could ever imagine.

I first met Moshe Feldenkrais in 1967, when he was teaching FI [Functional Integration] to his original group of 13 students. Ruthy brought me there, with my agreement, to be one of the people that Moshe demonstrated on. This took place during the course of a year, when I was 12~13 years old. When I had an FI with Moshe, he made me feel as if I were the center of the universe, and nothing else existed.

Later on, I visited Ruthy during the many workshops and courses that she taught. She never expected that I would follow her professional path, instead supporting me to find my own.



I'd now like to present, in chronological order, her professional study with Moshe Feldenkrais, beginning with the "early days" . . .

In her own words:

1957 — We live up north, in Israel. I hear about Feldenkrais at a talk given by Moshe's acquaintance.

1959 — Back in Tel Aviv, I call Moshe to ask if I might join the ATM classes at Alexander Yanai. He answers: "Come by, and let's see."

I began going to classes.

Soon, I started to move the furniture away in our living room twice a week, to clear the room and make space to give ATM lessons. I began teaching my neighbors, starting with a "women's only" group. Then the husbands wanted to join in, so I started another ATM class.

Within six months there was no longer enough space in our living room, so I hired the Scouts' hut, four times a week, to give lessons.

1960 — I attend Moshe's ATM lessons three evenings a week, plus Friday afternoon for the "Teacher's Lesson." Sometimes he asks me to demonstrate, saying "Ruthy has absolute hearing in her feet." He approves me to teach ATM classes.

1963~64 — Tel Aviv University asks me to teach their professors. I went in the evening to meet Moshe, and asked him to write me a reference letter for the University. He tells me he is about to offer a training for his "private work" [FI], and that he thinks that I am suitable for it. I have no idea what he means by "private work" — but I go home delighted.

At the time, my friend Mia Segal was Moshe's only assistant. [Charles Alexander] Neil, who worked with Alexander in England, introduced them.

"I understand Alexander Technique to be based on the postural model of an upright, stiff English gentlemen, whereas Feldenkrais's model for posture and movement is based on the baby."

1967 — Moshe commences his first FI course. There is space for only 13 small stools around his low treatment table, hence the limited number of participants.

1967~70 — At Nachmani Street (next to Moshe's mother's house), this group studies for three years: one hour a day, six days a week.

The content was unexpected. FIs were sometimes on Moshe, sometimes on us, sometimes on our clients. He used to tell us: "FEAR OF FAILURE IS WHAT DISABLES YOUR INTELLIGENCE."

At the time, as a scientist, he was eager to be recognized by academic institutions.

This was an issue that bothered and saddened him throughout his life.

We were only allowed to ask questions if *we ourselves* contemplated the questions for *two weeks* before asking. Moshe made clear that, if we talked during our lesson, he'd stop teaching. We used to *not* talk even after a lesson was over; we only began speaking to each other once we left—and rounded the street corner.

It was 1967, with the Six-Day War in the background. I invited Moshe to my home; there were others, many from the military, engaged in a political discussion. Moshe said that, in return for peace, we must return all the occupied territories. Nearly everyone disagreed with him at the time.

After our three-year course, we had two more years of "continual professional development" — which took place once a week. We could also come to watch him do FI, whenever we wanted.

1972 — We completed our training, and received our certificates.

Around this time, a representative arrived from the Esalen Institute [in Big Sur, California]. He was an admirer of Ida Rolf [creator of Structural Integration, aka "Rolfing"]. Ida had told him that *the only one who makes sense regarding movement is Feldenkrais, in Israel*. So he came to find Moshe, and he invited him to New England — hence creating Moshe's first opening in America.



When Moshe returned from the U.S., he told us that Esalen wanted someone to come teach ATMs there, and he asked if any of us wanted to go. Following the lesson I went up to him and said that I was willing. I didn't think of this as a career opportunity; I just wanted to see the world.

In the early 70s I wanted to record my lessons on cassette tape, and I asked for Moshe's permission. It was a back-and-forth process, where for several months we sat at his mother's house in the evenings: correcting, changing, and editing the script — until it finally met with his approval.

Soon after, in the early 70s, I began teaching in the U.S., and then in the rest of the world. Moshe didn't open any new trainings in Israel, but he did do so in the United States.

The other 13 graduates of his first training also began teaching around the world.

Before I move on to the next part of this chronology, I'd like to offer you Ruthy's notes on the differences in intent between FI [Functional Integration] and ATM [Awareness Through Movement]:

[FI] In order to *soften* someone, they can remain passive whilst someone else does the movement for them. To "interrupt" a pattern or a habit, a person can stay passive, whilst the practitioner brings her/him to *neutralize* her/his habitual pattern, and offer new options.

vs.

[ATM] In order to *strengthen* someone, he/she cannot remain passive. In order to move in a new "non-habitual" pattern, one needs to move his/her own body whilst listening to a *suggestion* offered by the teacher.

In the 1980s, astronauts — who were a model of fitness — were coming back from being in space's zero gravity, unable to support the weight of their own bodies. After training at the gym, their muscles regained their strength, but their bones didn't restore all that well — they often got bent, or even broken.

A new concept entered public consciousness: "Osteoporosis."

In response, the medical establishment invented instruments to measure "bone density," and developed and prescribed various pills (with questionable side-effects) to be taken for the rest of one's life. Moshe asked us: "How come Nature can repair a bleeding wound, but cannot repair a broken bone?"

About that same time I was exploring ways to transition from an ATM lesson into moving into "real life" — from lying down to standing up.

I understood that "lying down" offers an optimal strategy to facilitate the possibility of new learning . . . but that it was also necessary to *wean* oneself from it.

I asked myself: "What are the most efficient movements that I've learned from Feldenkrais that can contribute to strengthening bones?"

I felt that exploring options while lying down has vast potential, but that it is not enough in order to strengthen bones.

I began developing a set of movements where, instead of using the floor as the "reader of the topographic map of our back" I used a wall. A wall makes it possible for us to read the structures of our back while standing upright, and leaning against it.

I also understood that bone strength is a function of "supply and demand" — if you don't make the *demand* on your body to move in a way that challenges its strength, it supplies strength to neither muscle nor bone.

I saw a video about "Water Carriers" in Namibia, where these women walk erect and gracefully — with the heavy weight of water jars on their heads — challenging their bodies to be upright, and support their posture. I watched this video many times over, to decipher which parts of their body were recruited for this mission. In developing new lessons, I added other challenges and safety measures — such as a very long piece of fabric I first called a "harness" — in order to support vulnerable joints in real time, while making dynamic movements like walking, or even jumping . . . and at any age. (When was the last time *you* jumped?)

1984 — Moshe died.



- I started to develop and write a program for “BFL” [**Bones for Life**®], and to try it out with a group of volunteers. This program has 90 processes.
- Then I wrote a program for sitting, called “**Chairs**” — since sitting nowadays is our most common posture — with 60 processes.
- This was followed by a walking program [“**Walk for Life**” aka WFL] to improve health, posture and “biological optimism” (150 processes).
- And finally a program to deal with limitations and obstacles in movement, called “**Solutions**” [for Optimal Mobility] with 120 processes (10 x 12).
- This work, the sum of these programs, is called “**Movement Intelligence**” — based on the teachings of Feldenkrais. They awaken our sensory compass for movement — which can become harmonious at any age.

I’ve taught in many countries, on many continents throughout the world, and at many institutions — including at NASA, in Houston, Texas — and I’ve certified hundreds of teachers. And now there are many instructors, also certified and qualified to teach, right here, in Israel.

This is all that Ruthy wrote of her work.

Since most of you are teachers, I’d like to conclude by sharing a few paragraphs that Ruthy wrote about teaching:

Being a Teacher

“You can never ‘know what you know’ until you share it.
It becomes clearer as it passes through us, to someone else.
Start sharing modestly. When you are just starting out, try not charging for it; say that you’re a *beginner* and ask your students to help you practice. Because when you take payment, you feel you must ‘succeed’ — and it can lose the playfulness of beginnings for you.”

About Different Types of Teachers

“There are teachers with charisma, like actors on stage; they are entertaining and fascinating. Others are quiet, and do not dare to take all the attention for themselves.
You’ll find out that it doesn’t matter. Whatever happens to you is not determined by the teacher’s performance, but by the process that happens *within you* as a response to the lesson — the process that brings you to discover, and to change.
Sometimes a teacher is so entertaining that you feel that you don’t need to do anything. People like brilliant teachers, because they think they’ll do the work *for* them. You have the illusion that to stand by them makes you taller — the illusion of all devotees and followers.
A real master brings up masters.
A real method brings up masters, and not followers.
However talented the teacher, it matters not.
What matters is what moves within you, in your own determination.
All of you — each one — will be a master, because the process is built that way.”

Holding a Vision

“How many people throughout your lifetime wished you your full potential, and believed in you — knowing that you could become a ‘full person’ . . . even though what appeared on the outside was sadness and exhaustion, small and full of mistakes?

“The ability to *see* someone’s inner vitality through their frustrations, their ideal self hidden beneath their compromises — *this* is encouragement, more than any words.
It is to believe in and contend with a far-off reality. It is to breathe through frustration.”

“To hold a vision . . . for someone else . . .”

Thank you,
Iris

