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Beginning at the Beginning

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This is a follow-up on the article entitled "Do-it-yourself Continuous In-service Training" (published in the English Feldenkrais Journal) that reported on the advanced training I gave in Vienna last year. The piece described some of what I had presented, giving a different emphasis than I had chosen, conferring different definitions than I proposed, and making statements--such as one about the unimportance of the idea of function--that I can neither claim nor defend. While I like that the ideas I presented could be used in an ongoing way for continued learning, the article left me in the uncomfortable situation of both appreciating the intention and wanting to disavow the execution. Rather than respond with corrections, I offer what follows--the first part in a series--as a statement of my current ideas, concerns, and ways of working. In this series I offer an introduction to SPIFFER, the observational framework I have developed, along with suggestions for ways of learning to use it to improve your observation and teaching skills:

When we meet a new student, we encounter someone presenting a problem, desire, or request. At this moment, we encounter the problem of observing movement. Often we face this encounter feeling ill-equipped and unprepared, especially when we are learning the method or beginning to practice. This uneasiness is not inappropriate, for we are attempting to understand and describe movement in a new way. This new way is one that reveals the previously unconsidered possibilities, those necessarily missed in the very way that movement is misunderstood or overlooked.

Where do you start looking? What questions do you ask?

Most students come to a lesson with a complaint and an explanation: if pain is the problem then the place that hurts is often thought to be the cause or culprit; if control or coordination is the difficulty, then some part of the nervous system is considered to be broken or malfunctioning; if there is

physical abnormality or deformation, then the structure itself is the reason for any woe. More often than not, whether the student comes with a homemade rationale or with an official one, the description is one that localizes the problem. Something is thought to be wrong some place in particular.

What's missing from most descriptions is movement. This is a primary difference between the Feldenkraisian view and orthodox biomechanical or medical analyses. Instead of finding the cause localized at a site or situated in a position, we look for how the problem, or limitation, exists in the context of the whole person in motion. Until the question at the heart of our work--"How does this problem, this limitation, live in the student's movement?"--has been asked, our inquiry has not begun. Unlike other approaches, we see the movement as causing the problem, rather than the problem as causing the movement.

The question that interests me most is "How is this person moving such that it is necessary for her or him to have this problem?" This means that I situate the problem in a pattern, in the habitual way the person moves. Wherever I teach systemic movement analysis--to trainees in a Feldenkrais training, to University students, to physiotherapists in a weekend workshop, or to the general public--I am interested in finding a way to make this elusive creature--pattern--visible. The difficulty lies in talking about the pattern--that stubbornly consistent configuration that underlies movement--without being vague. Being obscure and imprecise is of no assistance: in order to facilitate change, I must know exactly what the student needs to learn. This requires that I understand, with precision, how the student's movement is responsible for the presented problem.

The trouble with talking about patterns is that we want to speak about or point to something elusive and intricate. This something, this pattern, is not localizable, it doesn't live in any particular place. It is easy to fall back to a describing of a problematic posture--a description of a frozen moment in time--or to diagnose by localizing the cause of the problem--like disassembling a lawn mower on the Sunday paper until we find the broken or misaligned component. But how do we articulate the constellation of a movement? How do we make the distinction between what the person is doing and how they are doing it? I suggest that we need a systemic, rather than reductionistic, point of view. By systemic, I mean a perspective that recognizes and respects the unity of perception, action, intention, and environment. This is necessary if we want to make sense out of the complexity and simultaneity of motion.

A system consists of elements in relationship such that they form a unity, an integrated whole. To point to the elements would be to return to a reductionistic description. To talk about wholes is, more often than not, to get lost in generalities. Considering the relationships is a way to begin to understand the system, for it is relationships that tie the system together, that make changes in one place effect the entire entity. Out of all the ways that the elements can be related to one another we can observe the variety of the system (which relationships are possible), the constraints on the system (which relationships are not possible), and the organization of the system (which relationships are present at this time). By organization, I mean how, out of all the possible configurations that could exist, this particular constellation comes to be. To look at movement from a systemic perspective means to look at relationships, to observe how, in the flux of motion, they change and stay the same. . . and understand the way in which these changes (and lack of changes) tell us how the system is organized.

Looking at any particular activity, we can describe movement as the changes in the ongoing relationships of parts of the body. For any given action, we can ask "Where does the movement begin?" This is not a philosophical question; in this context I am not asking, "Does the movement start in the muscle? The nerve? The brain? The soul?" Out of all the possible places it could begin, each movement does begin somewhere, at some specific physical site. In other words, the relationships between the parts of the person change such that some part moves first. In keeping with the skeletal orientation of our work, what I mean here is, "Which bone moves first?"

We know that the bones themselves do not initiate movement, but rather are moved by muscles. Investigating which muscle begins an action leads to the kind of localized, part-by-part thinking to which I am proposing an alternative. For the time being, I want to shift attention away from muscles to the skeletal system, to turn away from questions about which muscle or muscles start a movement. As we will find in future installments of this series, thinking skeletally gives us a sense of how the whole person is moving.

So, the question is "Where does the movement originate?" Here we look for which bony segment begins the action. To answer this question requires that we name a time when the movement begins. That requires, in turn, that we are specific about the action. We cannot observe in the abstract, but must deal with a particular action, bounded in time and related to the student's intention. How does a limitation live in movement? If someone has pain, when does he or she feel it? What makes it worse or better? If, for instance, the student has a problem controlling leg movements or has back pain, how does that difficulty manifest itself as the student's rolling, standing up, ambulating?

Once the specific action is identified, then the initiation can be observed and the detail noted. Is there one initiation or many? That is to say, does the person move the whole body as one piece or does one segment move first? If there is more than one place that starts the movement, are they simultaneous or sequential? From here we can make further distinctions about how the movement commences. For instance, is the initiation a smooth transition into action or are there preparatory movements? By preparatory movements, I mean does the person have to shift or adjust him- or herself before beginning the desired action? (If the action being observed is rising from sitting in a chair to standing, is it one continuous execution or does the mover first re-adjust his or her posture before making the motion?)

To see initiation, you can start with a general question that categorizes the beginning place. For instance: "Does movement start on the right or left side? Does the movement initiate in the lower or upper body? Is the part that begins the movement proximal or distal?"

Teaching this kind of observation in my Patterns in Motion course at the University this semester, I have come, once again, to appreciate how difficult it is for the uninitiated to shift into the kind of perceiving necessary to see where movement begins. Analytic, reductionistic thinking is incorporated into our zeitgeist; our very way of looking makes it difficult to look for initiations and see patterns. When learning to look from the pattern perspective, most difficulties arise from how the observer observes.

Seeing initiation requires that the observer not focus tightly on the mover, but rather look in such a way as to get a sense of the big picture. This requires that the observer stand back from the mover to get a longer, more inclusive view. Given the three-dimensionality of action, it also means that the

observer should view the action from various perspectives to develop a richer appreciation of the many facets of the motion.

When most people first look for initiation, a sort of panic sets in. "Will I see it? Will I miss it? Where is it?"

Often the initiation we are looking for is a fixed or recurrent one. This is a kind of habit of initiation, like the movement of pulling the head down and back that F. M. Alexander wrote about so eloquently. That means that the same initiation appears repeatedly over a number of trials because the mover can't help but manifest it. Therefore, one does not have to catch it on the first try, in the very first few seconds of moving. So, even if you do not see it on the first movement, you can find it by asking the person to repeat the movement. As an antidote to the kind of frantic searching that often happens, I encourage my students to develop the attitude that the initiation will come to them, that they do not have to go looking for it.

Central to the observer's seeing differently is learning use peripheral vision: focus past the person and watch the motion out of the corner of the eye. For many people this is difficult to do, they are afraid that they might miss something if they don't "look closely." But peripheral vision is designed to detect pattern and motion, offering a way of seeing that prevents the observer from overlooking what is missed by the focused gaze. Looking this way gives a sense of the whole action, making the starting place clear in the context of the entire movement.

Besides using peripheral vision, the observer can look with her or his hands by gently placing them on the person. For those of us who have a highly developed tactile sense, this will be easier. The contact is made with open fingers that gently contour to mover's body, without interfering with the action. Once in contact, the observer feels for the moment when the mover engages, sensing how the person launches an action and where the motion begins. Often what the eye cannot see, the hand can fathom.

In terms of learning to see initiation, let me suggest the following few exercise formats:

¨ Find a comfortable place from which to observe people opening a heavy door. Notice how each person reaches for the door. Once the handle has been grasped, watch how they move themselves to move the door. Finally, observe how they hold the door open as they step through the threshold. Begin by looking without being intent on finding the precise point, just watch. If you can do this with colleagues, the discussion can be a good way to begin to notice what you notice and what you miss. (You might even consider video-taping this so that you can watch the same person several times over.)

¨ In a group of three, take turns observing one person. The observed person rises from sitting in a chair to standing. Have one observer look at the movement from a few feet away. The other person "goes for a ride" by putting his or hands on the mover in an unobtrusive manner, with eyes closed. (It is important that the "toucher" maintains a stable configuration so as to reduce tension in the hands and to allow for easy tracking of the mover's action.) The person rises and sits several times while the observers maintain their respective positions. The observers then discuss what each has noticed, attempting to converge on a description of the mover's initiation. Rather than arguing about who is right, each can say what was noticed and what specific sensory experiences served as evidence of the observations. Here it is important to discuss only what is directly perceived without

trying to second guess the mover's thoughts or intentions. The observers can then switch roles and return to observing the person rise from the chair. After each has taken a turn at every role, discuss which way of observing is easiest and how watching may differ for each observer. This exercise is an excellent way to differentiate touch and sight, to appreciate differences in one's observation abilities, and to begin to integrate your senses.

¨ In a group, analyze an Awareness Through Movement lesson from the perspective of initiation. Begin by observing each of the people in the group perform the test movement from the lesson. How does each initiate the movement? After doing the lesson, observe the movement again, noticing how initiation has changed. What kinds of differences you notice in the ease of movement? Finally, review the lesson and discuss how initiation is used in the instructions. In particular, how are changes in initiation used as to create differentiation and develop function?

Learning to become a better observer of movement requires differentiating between the different dimensions of action. Therefore, in each of these exercises, please confine your observation simply to the aspect of initiation. This facet is the "I" in the SPIFFER model of movement observation, the rest of which will be presented in the next articles in this series.

In future installments, we will go beyond this aspect by investigating other parameters, exploring their definitions and nuances, clarifying their interrelationships, and studying their use in teaching strategies. For instance, once the initiation--the beginning place--has been clarified, we can ask, "Where does the movement go?" In the next article, we will see that there are two answers to this question, one that follows the movement into space and the other that follows the course of the motion through the body.