



CROOKED

Outwitting the
Back Pain Industry
and Getting On the
Road to Recovery



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Pilates and its close relative, Gyrotonic—and from the East, the practices of Iyengar yoga and the Asian martial arts Tai Chi and Qigong. Although several of these approaches had been properly studied in randomized controlled trials, others had not undergone evidence-based scrutiny. In such cases, I relied on my own experience, and on word of mouth.

Although they look and feel different, these techniques have something important in common. They rely on the brain's remarkable and sustained capacity to reorganize itself. They produce similar results, improving posture, proprioception (awareness of where your body is located in space), and movement patterns. With the exception of Tai Chi and Qigong, which are practices that cannot be attributed to any individual progenitor, these techniques were developed by unusually intuitive people who influenced one another's thinking in significant ways.

Feldenkrais

I began with the Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education, usually referred to simply as Feldenkrais. There were two aspects to this form of training: Awareness Through Movement group classes and workshops, and one-on-one Functional Integration sessions. Hospital rehabilitation programs, HMOs, local gyms, and community recreation centers offered inexpensive Feldenkrais programs.⁵ Best of all, you didn't have to be fit to get started, so this practice was accessible for just about anybody.

Margaret Mead, the cultural anthropologist, was a Feldenkrais fan. Andrew Weil, the director of the University of Arizona's Center for Integrative Medicine, is also a booster, explaining that the practice allows us to “rediscover the free, effortless sense of movement we had

in the first few years of life—and undo many of the aches and pains that plague us as adults who have literally become too set in our ways.”

After a friend described the Feldenkrais Institute of New York, on the West Side of Manhattan, as “a kind of church . . . a temple of the human body” where she was sure I’d feel very welcome, I e-mailed the institute’s cofounder and clinical director, physical therapist Marek Wyszynski.⁶

In our initial conversation, he said that when he first saw a client, he was always curious to discover what he or she thought had brought on the pain. Both patients and physicians, as well as most physical therapists and chiropractors, dwelled on what they called the “inciting incident,” but did not take into account how aberrant movement patterns, over many years, had resulted in this accumulated damage. Wyszynski said it was important to consider how the problem was related to posture, movement patterns, and behavior in general. He wanted to know what the client was doing every day that might be causing the distress.

“As you start to examine even the simplest actions,” he said, “you realize that our awareness of how we do what we do is very limited.” We are on automatic pilot most of the time, he added. “But when an activity starts to give us problems—like pain when getting up from a chair or difficulty climbing stairs—relying on automatic pilot leads to slower recovery or even further deterioration.”

A few weeks after our initial conversation, Wyszynski invited me to attend the Feldenkrais Institute of New York’s sixth birthday celebration at the organization’s headquarters on West Twenty-Sixth Street. I pushed through the heavy doors of a converted loft building, where the institute occupied the immense second floor.

In preparation, I’d read several of Moshé Feldenkrais’s better-known monographs, including a useful one called *Learn to Learn*.⁷ A physicist, mechanical engineer, and one

of the first Western black belts in judo, Feldenkrais was born in what is now Ukraine. After immigrating to Palestine in his teens, he moved to Paris, where he received his doctoral degrees from the Sorbonne, and took a position at the Institut Curie, analyzing the prospects for nuclear fission.

At the beginning of World War II, having signed on with the British Admiralty, Feldenkrais left Paris for Great Britain, transporting precious cargo: a jar of “heavy water,”⁸ in which the hydrogen in the molecules is partly or wholly replaced by the isotope deuterium, essential in the operation of nuclear reactors. After the war, he settled in the new state of Israel, to do physics research at the Weizmann Institute. In the 1940s, on board a submarine—by then he was director of the Israel Defense Forces electronics department—he slipped on the deck, reinjuring a knee that he’d damaged while playing soccer in his youth. Doctors could not promise that rehab or surgery would work; after the operation, they told him, he might spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Because Feldenkrais understood how the laws of gravity and motion affected the mechanics of movement, he began to develop what would become a series of short exercises that helped educate the body in easier, more efficient movement patterns.

He gave his resulting thousand “Awareness Through Movement” lessons names, like Pelvic Clock, Coordination of Flexors and Extensors, and Spine Like a Chain. From the beginning, he focused on teaching patients effective techniques for self-rehabilitation.

When I stepped off the elevator into the Feldenkrais Institute’s reception area, I walked into a crowd of extremely friendly New Yorkers, ranging in age from their early twenties to their early nineties. Moments later, there

were whoops of joy from an adjacent room, as seventy newly certified Feldenkrais teachers—who had just completed their prescribed eight hundred hours of rigorous training over a three-and-a-half-year period, at a cost of about \$4,500—were presented with their diplomas. Since 1999, the number of teachers worldwide has grown from three thousand to nearly six thousand, with programs in thirty-nine countries. Ready to celebrate, giddy graduates and teachers-in-training emerged from the twenty-seven-hundred-square-foot studio.

The rest of us, dressed in comfortable street clothes rather than workout gear, drifted into the enormous room and plucked wide, thick foam pads and blue blankets from a big stack. We spread them out on the wood floor, so that each of us had our own little island.

One woman of about my age walked past me with a jungle cat's confidence and grace, seemingly prepared to move in any direction, at any time, at any speed, without hesitation. Hers was what Feldenkrais would have described as a "potent posture," and it was a beautiful thing to watch.

There were no mirrors in the studio, because Feldenkrais believed that it was unproductive to imitate an external model or ideal. The impetus for movement had to come from within, and there was no right way or wrong way to do a movement.

"Do everything slowly," Feldenkrais wrote. "I do not intend to 'teach you,' but to enable you to learn at your own rate of understanding and doing. Time is the most important means of learning. . . . There should be sufficient time to perceive and organize oneself. No one can learn when hurried and hustled." As I thought about all the energetic and exhausting yoga classes I'd tried (and failed), I understood how important this was.

When the instructor joined us, he stood at the front of the room, next to a human skeleton that dangled, cranium to

toe phalanges, from a metal stand. Since some of us were new that evening, he said he'd start with the basics. He'd remain at the front of the room. He would not touch or adjust anyone's posture. He would not perform the exercises himself, so there was no need to watch him. For the next forty-five minutes or so, we were to listen to his words⁹ and move as much or as little as suited us, in as much comfort as possible. The goal was to allow our bodies to discover new kinesthetic patterns—ones that might serve us better than those that were old, stiff, and stale. Then he asked us to consider something I'd never considered: exactly how our bodies were meeting the floor.

I recognized that my left foot and toes were pointed straight forward, but my right foot—in fact, my entire leg, including hip and thigh—rotated sharply to the right. The right buttock was glued to the floor, while my left cheek barely skimmed the mat. Something was seriously out of whack. As we began the Feldenkrais lesson called the Gentle Twist, the instructor issued calm, easy-to-follow directions. Quickly, I drifted into a relaxed state, alert enough to follow along but not at all anxious about keeping up. The time flew by; a knee moved up, back, sideways; the pelvis rocked, the tailbone lifted and retreated to the floor. That the practice didn't require fitness, strength, or flexibility was part of its appeal.

When the class ended, after about an hour, we were asked once again to check to see how our bodies were meeting the floor. To my surprise, my body's corkscrew twist had resolved: I lay flat. When I got to my feet, instead of moving stiffly, I felt light and energetic.

In another room, where platters of cheese, fruit, sandwiches, and salads had been set out in celebration, I met Courtney King. In her midthirties, King had soft, straight brown hair and a shy smile. "A year ago," she told me, "I was sure there were things I'd never do again,

because my back was so tight and inflexible—but Feldenkrais has changed that.”

She was twenty-four when the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001. That day, she felt the first twinge. Three months later, her back muscles were in such severe spasms that she couldn't stand up straight. By 2004, “there was pain I could not make go away,” she remembered. She'd encountered Feldenkrais in an acting class in college, but hadn't continued. Compared with the two or three ballet classes she took every week, and her Hatha yoga practice, it had seemed unchallenging. Now, desperate for some gentle exercise, she began to visit the institute a few times a week. “I'd thought the back pain was related to the stress of yoga and dance,” she said, “but as I got more involved with Feldenkrais, I realized that the pain had more to do with the way I carried myself every day.”

With Feldenkrais, her back pain was gone in about two months. She resumed her yoga practice. But like many others, she stuck with her Feldenkrais lessons. “People mostly come to the institute for pain management,” King said, “but they stay on because Feldenkrais makes them feel so good.” There were other benefits: She was a shy person who was not often comfortable in social situations, but at the institute, she'd felt right at home. “After the lesson, when you walk down the hall,” she said, “everyone you pass is wearing a big smile, and you're suffused with this sense of peace and well-being, as if you've unwound all the bad stuff—all the social constraints and habits that get in the way of making connections.”

It seemed impossible that a single Feldenkrais session could reduce my pain. But the morning after, I hinged neatly at the hips when I reached for the Crest, instead of jutting out my chin and craning my neck. When it was time to go to work, without special attention from my brain, my body called upon the previous day's lesson. Instead of relying on the small muscles of the shoulder girdle to pull

open a heavy door, I recruited the latissimus dorsi, the strong, broad muscles that encircled my rib cage.

Back in the Bay Area, I found physical therapist Deborah Bowes, a highly respected teacher, at the Feldenkrais Center for Movement Education in San Francisco. Bowes, who became a Feldenkrais practitioner in 1987, was one of the center's cofounders. Although Feldenkrais was very popular with younger people, many of the workshops that Bowes ran were designed for those of us who were starting to feel our age. "So many people have been injured by going to a modality that doesn't fit," Bowes said. "You have to think about what you can do that would be comfortable for you."

I signed up for a three-day, eight-hour-a-day back care workshop with Bowes. Among my classmates I found Patty, a Pilates teacher whose back pain made it hard for her to carry her own groceries. There was Lynn, a fitness instructor who had been dependent on Vicodin for about a decade. Margarita sometimes had to lie on the floor for days. Cheri, rosy-cheeked and lively in her late seventies—and who looked as if she was in the best shape of all of us—was committed to staying that way. Two younger men filled out the group—Pradip, a thirtyish engineer whose hamstrings were chronically tight and painful; and Brad, an impressively buff ice hockey player who had injured his back in training. Together, we ran through lesson after lesson with an occasional break for a lecture. It was fascinating. I could imagine coming back for more. Among the workshops Bowes offered were "Feldenkrais for Freedom from Habitual Patterns," "Walking with Ease," "Pain-Free Knees and Ankles," "Feldenkrais to Reduce Stress and Anxiety," and "Comfortable Sitting." There was a Feldenkrais workshop for people who suffered from insomnia, and one for musicians, and another called "Comfortable Feet."

In addition to the Awareness Through Movement group classes, Feldenkrais teachers offer private Functional Integration sessions. FI, as it is known, is not a replacement for ATM classes, but for many, it becomes a key adjunct to them. Many people report feeling taller, refreshed, free from pain and tension, flexible and balanced, more comfortable and confident physically, and more emotionally positive, or “lighter,” after this one-on-one work. Intrigued, I decided to sign up for an FI session with Bowes.

Stretched out on the low, padded therapy table, fully dressed, I listened to her soothing voice. My body tends to tense up in the presence of an unknown massage therapist, but Bowes was so gentle that readily, I granted her admission to a very primitive part of my central nervous system. “This is about finding out where the ‘noise’ is,” she murmured, as she ran gentle fingers over my rigid trapezius muscles. “We want to find out where the blinders are. You may have been crooked for years without noticing . . . until you do. Pain is like a garment you don’t know you’re wearing until you take it off.” As she continued to manipulate my head and spine, I spent ninety minutes in a semiconscious state. This was not any kind of massage: It was visceral communication. It took considerable sweet-talking, but I felt the taut muscles of my low back and hip finally give up their fight.

Afterward, I bought an audio CD of Deborah Bowes’s Feldenkrais lessons, all delivered in that same hypnotic way. After several weeks of individual lessons, I was moving better, with much more fluidity. My back no longer hurt, nor did my hips. It was something I knew I wanted to pursue further in the future. But for the time being, I was moving on—because who knew what I’d find down the road?