



MOVING VISION The Feldenkrais Method, Art and Transformation

By Mara Della Pergola

Translated into English by Anastasia Bernadi & proof-read/revised by Scott Clark.



Mara Della Pergola (Amherst 1983) Feldenkrais Trainer, studied with Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais. For more than 30 years she has directed the Istituto di Formazione Feldenkrais in Milan Italy, where she lives,

directing ongoing training programs and conducting a varied private practice. She teaches in Europe, North and South America and is known for her clarity, creativity and the accessibility of her teaching style. Mara has written several articles on the Method and the book 'Lo sguardo in movimento. Arte, trasformazione e metodo Feldenkrais' (Moving Vision. Art transformation and the Feldenkrais Method). Her background is in the psycho-social field and theatre. She has served as President of the Italian Feldenkrais Guild - AIIME.



Anastasia Bernadi (Melbourne 2018) studied Yoga in an ashram in South India for almost a year in 1991, after 7 years of Karate. She completed a Master of Education in Italy and a Master of Teaching in Australia. Author of 'Yoga il respiro della vita' published in Italy in 1997.



Scott Clark (London 1990) is a Feldenkrais Trainer living in London, UK, and the organiser of the current training programme there.

A few years ago, while visiting a museum, I spoke to my companion about some details of a painting that struck me, details that made me feel more grounded but at the same time lighter. Taken by surprise, my companion said she had never perceived so clearly the connections that I brought to her attention. She suggested that I write about "the art of observing art"; she pointed out that the general approach to a work of art is to analyse it culturally, and no one considers the processes taking place in the observer at the moment of observation.

Her suggestion pleased and inspired me. I had long wanted to share some of my exploration of the physical, psychic and cognitive experiences that belong to us as a species, and that accompany us in the process of maturation and becoming aware human beings. Now I could suddenly see my own personal and original way of writing; I could link two of my major passions, the Feldenkrais Method and Art. As a Feldenkrais teacher I could speak about what is important to me, applying the principles of the Method to writing, offering the reader a multidimensional experience; not only cognitive, but also sensory and kinaesthetic.

The eight themes that I call in Italian the Fondamenta, our “foundations” (note1), that are always present in my teaching – *feeling supported, differentiating and integrating, identifying one’s core, orienting, inhabiting inner volumes, realizing an intention, imagining and imagining oneself, meeting the other* – are described in my book and explored further, beginning with my observation of works of art that represent them beautifully.

Ordinarily, if these "foundations" are mentioned, they are considered either as something that can be recalibrated through correction or therapy, or they are seen as abstract/metaphorical values unconnected to physical experience. Identifying these foundations, physically recognizing them, becoming aware of them through guided self-listening – these are the first steps toward learning to transpose them into new dimensions, integrating them into our actions, thoughts and feelings.

Observe Art to find yourself

The awareness that results from observing a work of art with subtle and timely attention enchants us; we find sensations leading to emotions, organizing themselves into thoughts and questions. In such moments a

dialogue begins, not only with the artwork, but above all, with oneself – and this dialogue can continue far beyond the present moment.

Both figurative and abstract art can go beyond the will or imagination of the artist and generate a moment in which we can sincerely surprise and listen to ourselves.

Some details magnetically attract us and change our habitual mental horizon, orienting us towards a new vision, bringing us into a resonance with the painting. A previously dormant or inattentive part of us must pause there, simply waiting, and in that very moment we become aware of it and acknowledge it.

We offer the artwork a further dimension, that of our bodymind. We allow it to come inside ourselves, through the gaze, involving the senses and the breath, and we transform it into an embodied experience, alive and vibrant. Coming close to an artwork in this way allows us primarily to perceive and see ourselves, and the progression unfolding through our sensations. We see our reflection in the artwork, and in turn, the artwork awakens us and makes us think.

Before the work of art we momentarily transform ourselves, as if we were meeting a person: subtle

changes, often imperceptible, but if carefully observed, precise sensations can be found, localized or global, that constantly accompany our thinking and the doorways into our emotions. Without a body that feels and expresses, surely we would not understand, interpret or even imagine many abstract concepts. We would not be able to compare or distinguish, we would not be able to think and to name.

Therefore imagination, cognition and the senses are united in us, influencing each other. Of course this is already confirmed by neuroscience, but our personal way to profoundly understand is through practical experience.

Exploration: moving to feel

In Moving Vision, I catalyze this embodied mode of observing the works of art with some short self-exploration practices (ATM), with the intention of moving the reader's gaze in two directions: towards the artwork and then back inward.

Through slow, unusual movements, free of any goal-oriented trying, it can be possible to refine our perception and to obtain a richer, more precise, more personal understanding of the artworks.

In order to deepen the act of feeling and listening to oneself, I urge the reader not to neglect the experiential part. It is principally through such a child-like exploratory action that one can truly bring together sensation and intellect, and in so doing, come back to oneself again. Without this small practice, the text would be incomplete and inadequately integrated because, as always happens when reading, the mind would once again prevail over the somatic experience that I am suggesting.

Hence Moving Vision is a text overlapping the teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais, meditation and other disciplines for improving self-awareness through physicality and movement, with the observation of artworks, to enable a concrete expression of ideas and feelings.

Following the concept of organic learning (note 2) coined by Moshe Feldenkrais, I enriched the cognitive aspect with notes about child development, and wishing to share the results of my approach, I also talked about people and groups with whom I worked.

This article summarises the chapter that in the book describes the first "foundation". The practical part has been conceived for the general public.

Feeling supported

An extraordinary experience begins at birth, when the newborn, who has floated in his mother's womb for months, suddenly finds himself in a colder, brighter environment, exposed to new sounds and to a new presence: gravity. To be immediately embraced in the mother's arms while still curled in a fetal form feels whole and calming. That embrace itself becomes a primary source of nourishment. In the best possible case, the child may be supported without any limit to his exploratory movements. Such a feeling of being loved and protected will start the child on the long journey toward maturity.

Once on the floor, the child will discover a new and solid support that allows him to roll, sit, and move; to reach for an object or a person, to get up and walk toward another place, but also to fully rest. These external supports – first the arms of the parent, and later the floor – become internal – the skeletal structure and the sense of the self – and so become a source of autonomy throughout life. If the child's need for support is not adequately met, or if the child is stimulated too early to keep himself upright, he may prematurely activate his still immature musculature.

This activity can become a great tension, an unconscious effort, continuing even into his future life. Like loading oneself with a heavy weight without realizing it, any activity becomes more complex; imagine turning or walking with a heavy weight in your hands or on your shoulders. And since all our spheres of activity are interrelated, every action of exploring, of being curious and learning becomes more challenging. If, on the other hand, the support becomes excessive or hyper-protective, the risk is symmetrically opposite: the child will not have the freedom to explore and follow his curiosity, and this might delay the discovery of his own creativity.

Such support would no longer be a good nourishment, but would become a restraint. Of course, there are numerous components in growth and maturation, and I do not intend to imply any absolute cause / effect relationship. I would, though, like to draw the attention of those who work with children and adults to the somatic aspects that influence cognitive or relational abilities.

Observing art

Raphael's Madonna of the Chair and van Eyck's Madonna of Chancellor Rolin are two masterpieces that we are going to observe because they so



Raffaello, Madonna of the Chair, 1514

beautifully represent a mother holding a child. For this purpose we will not consider the religious theme of the two paintings, nor the different eras, regions or cultures in which they were produced. For a moment let us suspend the cultural filter and, employing all our senses, observe the two mothers, each holding their baby in their arms. Look at one work at a time and then compare them. What strikes our attention at first? Where does our gaze go? And how does it move within the painting?

In Raphael's work we observe a very close mother-child couple; the mother holds the child on her right thigh and supports the child's back with her left knee and both her hands. In addition, their heads are touching at the temples. The contact is soft and stable. The child seems to be well supported yet still free to move. Notice his left foot and his hands; he could be playing with the mother's breast or her shawl. The child is protected by his mother, but not limited. Her gaze towards us communicates her desire to protect him. But now let us pause and observe our sensations, first as if we were the mother, then as if we were the child. What mood is triggered in us? Which thoughts come to us? How do we breathe?

And now let us look at the van Eyck painting. How do we see the manner in which this child is held? What kinds of glances are there? The mother looks down and directs the child towards the very elegant Chancellor Rolin, who gazes straight ahead. The mother's contact with the child is limited to her left fingertips, the right hand is not visible.

The child does not seem to be sitting on his mother's lap, rather, he appears suspended, even self-supported. He holds an object in one hand and makes a gesture with the other, but his back is not yet ready to support him in order to have his arms really free. So he is making an effort, perhaps unconsciously. It looks like he has been set in a role, rather than simply inhabiting his own childhood. What do we feel? What are the emotions triggered in us? What kind of thoughts run through us? What kind of future do we imagine for these two children?

Raphael's child seems to be loved in all his parts, and we can imagine a future of games with another child, a future already present in the work. Whereas for the child of van Eyck, we can only imagine the encounter with the cold gaze of Chancellor Rolin. Warmth is not shown to this child.

This is how life starts for these two children; and we feel it in the very cells of our bodies. Let us try a small



Van Eyck, Madonna of Chancellor Rolin, 1435

practice, and after that, we can go back to the two paintings with greater presence.

Sit comfortably

1. Sit forward on a chair, with your back away from the backrest, with your legs slightly apart and your feet below your knees. Do you feel comfortable, or do you feel like you are starting to sag, rounding your back? Is the sensation of the length of your back equal to that of the length of your front? Become aware of how you keep your shoulders, neck and head. Where does your gaze rest on the horizon? What comes into the visual field? How is your weight distributed on the chair, does it seem

that you have more weight on one side than on the other? Do you feel like you're sitting in front of or behind the sitting bones? Put the back of the right hand on the chair and place the right buttock on the palm of the hand; you will feel the hard presence of a bone: it is the sitting bone or ischium, which is located at the bottom of the pelvis. Now reach your left hand across to the upper right side of the pelvis, the iliac crest, and sense the distance between the two hands. In this way you can sense how tall the right side of your pelvis is. Make some small movements with your pelvis forward and backwards, and you will feel that the ischium moves in relation to the hand. Remove your hands; perhaps the contact with the chair has changed, perhaps there are differences between the two sides of the pelvis and of the back.

2. Repeat all this on the left side of the pelvis. Notice how you are sitting now and what you feel on your left side and in your back.
3. Imagine the pelvis as part of a sphere, open at the front. Place your hands on the upper part of the pelvis, on the right and left, on the two iliac crests; roll the pelvis slightly forward and then return several times to the starting place. The shoulders and the head need not move forward, they remain where they are. Imagine that

the ischia are two ball bearings and you feel how their contact with the chair changes. Leave the abdomen free and soft. The movements are slow and the breath continues freely. Note how the lumbar area arches slightly forward. Reduce the strength and let this very tiny and small movement of the pelvis involve the spine.

4. After a short pause, do the same movement in the opposite direction, bringing the top of the pelvis slightly back, and then return. Observe if the movement is only the pelvis or if your back also participates, rounding backward. The head and shoulders can remain where they are. Then rest and feel if the contact of your pelvis with the chair has changed.
5. Move in both directions several times, as fluidly as you can find. When the upper part of the pelvis comes forward, the pubis descends towards the chair, your weight goes forward in the chair in front of the ball-bearing ischia, and your back arches slightly. When the upper part of the pelvis goes backwards, the pubis rises slightly, your weight rolls behind the ischia, and your back starts to round. Reduce the range of the movement until you come to a rest. Don't correct your posture. In which of these two positions are you sitting normally? Take a break by leaning back on the chair.

6. Return to the front of the chair and look towards the floor, slowly bringing your head down, and then looking up, lifting it several times without making any effort. Take a visual reference point on the opposite wall to see where the eyes reach, both up and down. Observe if you move your head only with your neck or if you can let the movement include your back, even down to your pelvis.
7. Place your right hand on the top of your head and tilt the head down; at the same time move the top of the pelvis slightly backwards several times. Each time, return to the starting position. Your back rounds backwards and gets longer. The front of the thorax shortens, and the sternum descends towards the abdomen, which slightly retracts. You can put your left hand behind your waist and then on your sternum, to feel if and how they participate. Notice if you prefer to tilt your head while inhaling, or while exhaling. Take a rest.
8. With your right hand on your head, move your head as if to look upwards and move your pelvis forward, leaving your abdomen free. Each time, return to the starting position. The back arches and shortens while the front of the chest opens and extends, and the sternum moves away from the belly and rises towards the head. You can feel it

with your left hand behind your waist or on your sternum. Continue in both directions.

9. Put your left hand on your head and do the same movement with your head and pelvis, at first moving in only one direction from neutral and then alternating directions.
10. Remove your hand from your head and move your pelvis back and forth again, imagining a portion of a sphere that can roll in all directions. While moving the pelvis also allow the chest to participate spontaneously. Does the movement reach the neck and the head? Now initiate the movement from the head and the eyes, without activating the neck more than the rest of the spine. Coordinate your breathing with the movement of your pelvis, head and eyes. Shortening the front of the trunk is easier if you let the air out. The chest is like a balloon full of air, which must be slightly emptied to reduce its volume in order to bend. Take a rest.
11. Are you sitting more comfortably on the chair? Note the link between the head and the pelvis, through the spine. Where is your gaze resting? Stand up and see how the weight is distributed on the ground. Take a few steps.

Now look at the two artworks again, one at a time, paying great attention to how you are sitting. It is possible that, through being able to perceive some new details in yourself, you will be able to resonate more with the two paintings. Where does your gaze stop or move? What strikes you about the masterpiece? What other details emerge from the painting? What other details do you perceive in yourself as you look at the artwork?

Now exaggerate your posture and keep yourself upright as in van Eyck's painting. What changes do you feel? Where do you stiffen or shorten? Do you let all of your weight go into the chair? What effect does it have on your breath? And in what mood do you feel you are in right now?

Now imagine being held by loving hands in just the right way, as in Raphael's painting, and make a comparison of your reactions.

Conclusions

I invite the reader to start from the sense of pleasure and integrity that comes from exposure to artworks, to deepen the quality of self-attention and also the attention toward inner spaces – spaces that are too seldom experienced. Then transpose this awareness

from figurative art to any other activity, even including activities that apparently have nothing to do with physicality.

This path restores the body's dignity, without overestimating it and without adapting it to external models, but considering it as our tool for understanding and communicating with the world, together with thought and emotions.

By learning to observe ourselves we will be able to discriminate what is authentically integrated from what comes mainly from the mind that loves to consider itself in charge of the body; or what comes mainly from the body, which in turn knows many tactics to impose itself. This is a perspective that allows us to direct the attention to ourselves in relation to the environment.

Moving Vision is my personal contribution to the knowledge of the Feldenkrais Method and I hope it will generate interest for our work. People will be attracted by the marvellous artworks and they will be able to approach the Feldenkrais Method, not by the sense of a malaise or pain they want to get rid of, but intrigued by a pleasurable experience.

Note 1. Fondamenta (the foundations) are the streets that line the canals of Venice; they delimit the city, separate the ground from the water and are a solid support for walking.

Note 2. Della Pergola, M., "Organic learning according to Feldenkrais: how to inhabit perceptions for the emergence of actions", AIIMF National Conference, Milan 2004, www.istitutofeldenkrais.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/CONFERENCE_COLOR11.pdf

Translated by Anastasia Bernardi – Anastasia is currently teaching at her Brighton Bay Studio in Melbourne, integrating Yoga and Tantra with the Feldenkrais Method - anastasiabernardi65@gmail.com

Revised by Scott Clark - www.feldenkraislondon.com and Mara Della Pergola

Address: IsFel-Istituto di Formazione Feldenkrais - Corso di Porta Nuova, 32, 20121 Milano

Phone: ++39 02 6590508 or ++39 335 6894128

Email: istituto.feldenkrais@fastwebnet.it or mara.dellapergola@fastwebnet.it

Website: www.istitutofeldenkrais.it ■