

### Case Study 3: Margarete – A Life with Feldenkrais

My Feldenkrais Practice is strongly based in my hometown, Erlangen for various reasons. This situation allowed me to accompany many of my students closely intensely for a very long period of their lives and to follow their development. For some of them learning with the Feldenkrais Method, both with FI and ATM, is a constant factor in their lives while almost everything else – working situation, profession, partnership, family situation – changed over the last 23 years I knew them. I am thankful that I witnessed many deep changes – in single moments as well as on the long run. From the outside it sometimes seems like a miracle, but I do not see it this way. To me it is an unfolding wisdom within the organic processes of learning human beings that we can witness in stories like those of Margarete.

**Margarete** is a person who went through a very deep and challenging transformation over the last 23 years, which - according to her - could not have been possible without the Feldenkrais Method. This statement of hers impressed me and made me curious to find out more about HOW this could be possible? Is it pure accident, is it just exclusively connected to my student or myself or are there some general ingredients in the way we, as Feldenkrais Practitioners, create a learning environment that can make these deep and transformative processes possible?

Like most of my long-term students, Margarete has broad experience both with ATM and FI. Thus a clear distinction of what was learned when and where would be rather artificial. Both modalities intermingled to shape and foster her unique development.

I decided to use the format of an **interview** for my investigation to gain a perspective from within, a first person perspective. Letting her speak for herself, I avoided interpreting her words according to my expectations and preconceptions. (All she said literally is put in italics). Later, I grouped her answers under certain headings to bring some order to her story and carve out those aspects that support my inquiry.

To facilitate the readability I also made artificial distinctions like sensing, moving and learning that are not present individually in the experience itself.

This whole process deepened my understanding of the Feldenkrais Method as well as my own self understanding as a Feldenkrais Practitioner. I suspect that this understanding – that slowly developed over the last 30 years – is quite tangible in the story I am going to tell. However, by the end I realized that I'd left the format of the required case study - using a series of lessons in Functional Integration. Margarete's story lacks specific descriptions of what I did, why, how and

when. It speaks more about the conditions for learning and how I as a Feldenkrais Practitioner create such a learning context with all my presence and awareness, my values and set of beliefs, my whole being.

Therefore, I decided to put Margarete's whole story in the **appendix** for the interested reader, and offer here just a **summary, which** may serve as an appetizer:

## **(1) Introducing Margarete**

When I first met Margarete she was 40 years old and in a situation where she said she could neither stand, walk or sit without pain – sometimes in the middle spine, sometimes in the upper or lower area of her back and sometimes a headache. Keeping herself upright was so exhausting that by early evening she had to lie down. Margarete was born in 1953 and contracted Poliomyelitis soon after her first birthday – she had just started to walk. She had to spend almost a year alone in an isolation station of a hospital lying in bed. When she came home she had lost almost everything she had learnt before, she did not speak, did not walk and was repeatedly banging her head against walls – a typical sign of the deprivation a long and isolated sojourn in hospital can cause. Over the course of four years she learned to walk again - with uncountable stumbling and falling. But ever since, *“falling and hurting was part of my life”*. She learnt to tolerate pain – the price she had to pay to reach her aims. Until the age of 40 she completely resisted talking about the experiences of her childhood and refused to use the word Polio at all. She put an enormous effort into her goal to be normal, hide her “deficits” and avoid those terrible feelings of “being less” that accompanied her childhood.

In the ATM class she was very often desperately trying to do it right and was frustrated when she could not do what she expected of herself. Going slow and sensing was hard for her.

Getting the thing done and avoiding sensing the pain that had been associated with movement all her life, was her strategy for success up to now. This attitude was very visible in the many “classical” signs like e.g. clenching her teeth, holding her breath, tightening the belly.

In 1953 Poliomyelitis was an epidemic and severe viral disease and there was, and still is, no cure for it. Less known is the fact that many years after recovery the majority of sufferers exhibit post-polio syndrome (PPS), in Germany alone more than 100.000 people had PPS in 2012. The symptoms include progressive muscle weakness, severe fatigue progressing to complete exhaustion along with breathing difficulties and pain in the muscles and joints – and there is no cure for it. It seems that Margarete was not only suffering from the consequences of the polio infection but was

already developing symptoms of PPS when I first met her - to say nothing of all the side effects and deep traumatic, psychological and developmental impacts of having had poliomyelitis.

## **(2) Slowly approaching a new way to learn**

Margarete attended ATM classes for 22 years - in a weekly group as well as in workshops. It was only 13 years into those 22 years that she started to take occasional FI lessons. This kind of learning was very new to her and presented her with a lot of challenges – but she sensed that there was something in it that was exactly what she needed – and so she continued to this day and keeps on investigating.

## **(3) What can be learnt?**

### **a) It is not a body who learns to move, but a person who learns to live – differently**

*... and I started to ask questions not only at the way I move, but at the way I live my life.*

### **b) Learning to sense one self - New Sensations and surprises**

*...I got to know my body and slowly learnt to listen to its signals, sensing unknown correlations and connection.*

### **c) Learning to move**

*As a baby I learnt to walk then I became Polio and could no longer walk, then I had to learn to move and walk again in a painful even brutal way and with a huge effort. With the Feldenkrais-Method I learnt it a third time – but with much more ease and fun and a much better outcome.*

### **d) Learning to learn**

*...I learnt that learning something new can make me happy.*

### **e) Getting to know one self**

*...and slowly I am making peace with my history.*

### **f) Restoring human dignity**

*Slowly I realized how it feels, when I am hurt in my dignity and I learned to take more and more care of myself*

### **g) Going beyond limits - Becoming who we are – Margarete's Life, now**

*...I realized that I am capable of much more than I thought... Feldenkrais is an everlasting source of vitality and love for life.*

#### **h) Health means to live our unawoved dreams**

*22 Years ago I was trapped in pain and immobility and didn't have the faintest idea about my dreams: Moving elegantly, beautifully and with ease. Feldenkrais was the beginning of my moving life. Today, I am 22 years older, but much healthier, more flexible both in my mind and my body, more upright, more independent, and more self-confident – and I love to move and even dance...*

### **(4) A learning context – conditions for learning**

Having witnessed the development of Margarete over the last 22 years very closely I was very curious to find out more about the conditions for such life changing learning and the unique elements provided by the Feldenkrais Method.

#### **a) A learning environment**

*...To get involved with Feldenkrais I need a secure and protected space – inviting for discoveries and experiments... the permission to be myself.*

*The atmosphere in class is such a unique mixture of high attention, seriousness and at the same time serenity, lightness and humour imbedded in an overall respect and esteem.*

#### **b) An inherent Order**

*... a piece of art, an ingenious choreography in which an inherent order and wisdom was unfolded. ...like in music awe of the oeuvre plays an important role – you sense that you participate in the insights of someone who was far ahead of his time.*

#### **c) Language**

*Language plays a crucial role – its sound, timing - and the verbal indication need to coincide perfectly like in a fugue of Bach which is precisely composed and every single tone needs to be at a certain time at a certain place.*

*The way you use language in Feldenkrais is precise, clear and logical. It is full of colors and nuances and plastic, like a piece of music leaving space for hidden secrets, unknown aspects and always tempting.”*

#### **d) A skilful Practitioner**

*...I need to sense that the practitioner knows what he is doing ...*

*... a profound knowledge – knowledge about movement, learning and all its countless facets to adapt it to every single student as well as to the group, making it fit for everyone.*

*...from that place of empathy you can touch the other person either with touch or with language.*

*...you are very present and tangible as a person...And you burn for your work – this is contagious.*

## **(5) The Interview - Verbal Communication in a Feldenkrais way?**

Would it be possible to apply Feldenkrais strategies in a dialogue like this interview - using questions that could trigger new thinking and learning?

*As we are talking about my movement experience I am becoming aware of so many different aspects of my life that are present in my movement but remained hidden for so long. I can name my obstacles and place my experiences of anger, rage and impatience in a much bigger context. All of a sudden connections are getting crystal clear. Now I can retrace and understand even better while I stay tuned to Feldenkrais since so long and happily continue to follow this path – for me it is a real school for live. Every time the unique history of the person moving is unfolding.*

## **(6) Conclusion**

As described in the introduction I started the case study with Margarete with questions that have long accompanied and inspired me. I was very interested to find out how the Feldenkrais Method can touch people's lives. How can we all become more and more of who we are or even who we are meant to be and get closer to our unawowed dreams? And how do we as Feldenkrais practitioners provide the conditions and means for such a process to unfold?

In my interview with Margarete I received very inspiring answers to my questions, all the while without claiming that those are the final ones. Rather, they are answers that are open for further inquiry and thus inspire me to go on asking. There seems to be no end to that kind of learning both for me as a person and as a Feldenkrais practitioner. It's quite obvious that my personal development as a person is tightly connected with my professional development. I can only provide an open and secure space for learning if I know that place in my self. Surprises can only happen in my students if surprises don't frighten me. How could I ask them to trust the process if they don't sense this confidence in me? I am caring for my students and know they need to make their own "mistakes".

Looking back, it is quite obvious that both of us, Margarete and myself, learnt and grew together. I sharpened my view on how people incorporate their experiences, I learnt to trust more and more the wisdom of the Feldenkrais process and to stay present and keep on breathing in moments of uncertainty. Having a clear goal and a plan can be very calming whereas Not-Knowing can be very frightening but especially with Margarete it is very obvious that even in my wildest dreams I could have never foreseen how far she would go. This is true for her life as well as how she moves today. It seems I can help to slowly lift a curtain, but I can never know how big and colourful the world behind that curtain will be. Every goal, every plan I could have had before would have limited her possibilities.

Love, respect and dignity – these are big words, but I know they are essential in this process and I can't claim that I am already there but I sense that my daily work with my students in this process is helping me to get closer. And like so many times before, I can only honestly bow before the multilayered depth and wisdom of the oeuvre of Moshé Feldenkrais.