

Case Study: James

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James arrived out of breath. Sixty-one years old, fairly tall but somewhat stooped and hollow-chested, head held oddly cocked to one side ... He was also a bit anxious – he said that he had got lost finding the address, and had walked up and down the street several times.

He told me his story. Heart condition: atrial fibrillation and associated hypertension, controlled by a variety of drugs and a recent ablation procedure, to burn out a bit of the heart tissue in order to simplify the signal by which the heart paces itself.

Listening, I wondered what role I could play in this – I'm certainly no heart surgeon! But he went on: he'd had thirteen car accidents, each of them a case of being rear-ended by a car behind. That's the classic example of an accident that isn't one's own fault, and yet – thirteen of them! That had left a legacy of neck problems, augmented more recently by sciatic difficulties. And the heart problems made it difficult for him to walk very far or very fast, hence his breathlessness on arrival. There were also other triggers that he knew made him breathless: any kind of panic, including the very physical sense of panic that could arise from tripping even slightly.

Another person might have made this story rather long, but James related it with hardly more words than I've used here. I thought his observation of the 'triggers' was astute. He finished his story by saying that he had recently, almost accidentally, been given two Feldenkrais lessons that had helped his sciatic and neck pain, and left him feeling calmer as well. That had been during a visit abroad; now that he was home, he wanted to explore further. He had recently retired from an office job because of his health, and had also trained in NLP.

As I listened and watched, I wondered where best to begin. There was no shortage of possibilities; he sat with both feet way back, the heels lifted, lower back very flexed. He had also mentioned a shoulder injury, his chest was hollowed, as I had first noticed, and his head remained almost always slightly cocked to the left. I stood in front of him, as he sat, and asked if I could touch his head. I felt for the beginning of turning, the beginning of nodding – there was very little of either; I was not surprised by the strong holding that I felt.

“Look, here's the basis of all human communication – yes and no.” I led his head gently into turning again, and then nodding, as I said this. He understood, and laughed, and the movement was easier – a little – as our intentions began to have some common ground. I explored a few other directions of movement of his head, especially translations, very lightly and briefly, pointing out a few details that I

thought might be useful for him to notice – changes of flow, of direction. One movement in particular interested me, as there was such a marked difference between the two sides: turning his head to the left and also tilting it a little to the left, exposing the right side of his head and neck, as though to bring the right ear forward to listen – this was relatively easy, but the other side immediately had the brakes on. It was also a movement that, on the easy side, recruited a good deal of his spine, almost into the pelvis.

Such a clear difference, and the functions involved – the simple action of holding his head up, of seeing the world. listening, shifting weight – seemed to clearly relate to his request; surely this was a good starting point? I held back for a moment, wondering if it might lead too directly into the maelstrom of his injuries, but then decided that I could still be sufficiently indirect, sufficiently cautious. And from his report of himself, the neck problems had been with him for some time, and were well integrated into the rest of his movement. But I trusted most the rapport that we had found by that point; we seemed to be on the same wavelength of noticing and sensing.

In his previous lessons, he had apparently been on his back. But as he said that he always slept on his left side, I asked him to lie like that. The shoulder presented by this position was the less injured one. I put some pads under his head, letting his comfort lead me. The result was a position of his head more in line with his spine than he used in sitting. I started by feeling for the free movement of his shoulder – hardly any! It might have been measured in millimetres, but more easily by the merest feeling.

I tried negotiating with the shoulder, moving it as lightly as I could into what seemed the easiest direction, but it was as though the shoulder wasn't listening at all. So I lifted his lower arm, and, holding it in line with his spine and parallel to the table, moved it slightly upward – as though he were beginning to reach upward. At the same time, I hinted to the shoulder blade that maybe it would like to slide back and down, along his ribs, toward one of the lower thoracic vertebrae; or it might like to slide more upward, toward the back of the base of his neck. A few times one way, a few times the other ... the shoulder blade started to, as it were, consider the choice, express a preference; it felt like a conversation had begun.

When I put the arm back down and returned to the shoulder by itself, there seemed to be a clearer willingness to negotiate. Sitting behind James's back, I began to slide the shoulder toward different thoracic vertebrae, and at the same time lift each vertebrae slightly toward the shoulder blade. Moving them towards each other, holding a moment, waiting for his breathing, releasing ... When I returned to ask just about the

movement of the shoulder blade, it was certainly easier, more free: more clearly differentiated from the torso.

Wanting to put this into a larger context, I lifted his arm and began to explore which directions of reaching were possible now, how action through the arm might build on on the freedom of the shoulder. And then it seemed a good time to address his pelvis directly. There was some free movement, not huge but not negligible, in the direction of shortening that (right) side of his waist and flexing his lower back slightly. I touched his lower ribs, and began to feel their accompaniment to the movement of the pelvis, then played with the idea of a little more, a little less. When I returned to the reaching movement of the arm, I felt happy with the development of ease and range, with the involvement of his ribs and pelvis, but I also felt that the real frontier was now the neck, where I knew I had to be at my most respectful.

What would be safe? An undifferentiated movement of his whole upper body, in this position rolling would be easiest – this seemed a good choice. With another person, I might bring the hand to the head, but the range of James's arm, though improved, wouldn't allow that. So I sat behind him and, with one of my hands on the side of his face and the other on his ribs, I began to experiment with rolling. It seemed easy enough, and with enough clarity of the idea of undifferentiated unity – I was satisfied that I was not asking for any turning or bending in his neck. When I once again tried the reaching movement of his arm, there was a much easier yielding between the head and torso.

Feeling that there was a chance of a little more development without going too far, I began to explore the lower ribs on his right side, the side facing the ceiling, and found an easy range of moving them downward and across, toward the opposite side of his pelvis. This rolled his whole chest a little forward and also shortened the right side of his waist, ever so slightly lifting the area of T1/C7. This was so strongly related to the original movement that had attracted my attention, of bringing the right ear forward, lengthening that side of his neck, turning the torso – had I been aiming at this all along, or had I stumbled into it? Whether intuition of accident, it was certainly enough.

I asked him to roll onto his back, and to notice whatever difference there might be in the sensation of the two sides of himself; it was clear that he felt something, clear that he was a bit surprised by it, clear that he enjoyed the sensations.

Asking him to roll onto the other side, I told him that I wouldn't try to repeat everything, but that if I gave a few hints, there was a part of his unconscious that would complete the job better than I could. I felt sure that an NLP practitioner would be receptive to that idea! We spent only three or four minutes there, not doing but just

asking, sensing, waiting ... Then I asked him to sit. After a moment, I put my hands on the sides of his head and began to lead it into the movements of yes and no, into some of the translations, into the movement of presenting the right ear forward; I led him into that movement a few times, and then commented on the way in which so much of his torso now accommodated and supported the movement. Then it was time to ask about the other side: tentative, then more sure, bolder – it was not so easy as the first side, but the change and the possibility were obvious to him, without any prompting from me.

As he walked around the room, he smiled, and commented on his felling of tallness, of ease. I could see that, while his head remained cocked to the left, he walked more easily and more confidently. In some ultimate sense, symmetry is good and desirable, but how much more important are those more human qualities of ease and confidence; even a small step in the direction of symmetry can be useful for these larger goals. I drew his attention to the movement qualities of his walking, and listened as he described his experience: more grounded, more fluid. He asked me what he might do on his own. I suggested that when the pain in his neck caught his attention he might benefit from enlarging that attention. What was he doing with his chest, his breathing? And to enlarge that further, how did his chest relate to his pelvis? Could he consider the movement of his head as a movement of his whole torso, or even of his whole self? I thought that the idea, general though it was, might be a good foundation for future work. He thanked me and left: taller, less apprehensive, more confident than at his arrival.