



Case Study No. 3 – Gil

Gil's case study showcases the challenge of applying the Feldenkrais Method to a relatively young person of complex personality. I was not sure whether to include this case study here since it was an unstable process of elusive character and it did not conclude with any sense of success. I decided to write about it because of the intense curiosity that it evoked in me. It demanded much attention, listening and observation, which included repeated self-re-examination. Deciding to write about it now demanded a deeper look at what had happened.

I have described the lessons closely to the way the process unfolded. I reveal my reflections and thoughts in a different format, so my internal process is represented. The functional explorations were pretty straight forward; the challenge was to create an environment in which Gil could feel safe and calm, an environment that would allow him to open up.

Initial phone conversation prior to the lesson:

Gil, a 35-year-old man, is an independent consultant in the field of computers. He was referred by one of his friends. During the phone conversation Gil spoke mainly about his back aches, which he described as so severe that he uses crutches to alleviate the pressure in his spine. Since sitting is difficult, he generally stands to work at the computer. He also

mentioned that he is overweight. Gil was unfamiliar with the Feldenkrais Method and wanted to experience a personal lesson.

First impressions:

A large man entered my office. I estimated him to be roughly 190 cm height, 130 kilograms. Contrary to my expectation of seeing a guy with crutches, I met a guy dressed in up-to-date sportswear, equipped with innovative sneakers.

Reflection: The gap between the figure I had imagined during the phone call and the actual person I met is the biggest I have experienced in all my years as a teacher

At a first session I usually invite clients to find a place in the room to sit for our introductory conversation. I position myself according to their initial organization in the space. Gil remained glued to the spot, standing close to the entrance. His huge dimensions compared to my much smaller stature added to our mutual awkwardness.

In contrast to the relatively conversational tone which Gil had during the telephone conversation, in the face-to-face encounter Gil was particularly introverted. He lacked communication of any kind, devoid of physical or emotional movement, a kind of "Freeze" in all communication dimensions.

Reflection: It seems that I am faced with a case of some kind of social difficulty. I asked myself:

- *Would non-verbal communication at his first introduction to the FM and his first meeting with me be enough to sufficiently lower his anxiety levels?*
- *How should I organize myself to work effectively whilst protecting myself in the face or working with his massive body dimensions?*
- *What are his double and confusing messages camouflaging?*

Work process:

I briefly explained about the method. I kept our verbal communication as short as possible since Gil was so obviously uncomfortable talking. I asked whether he would like to lie down on the table and asked him in what way he would prefer to lie. His unsurprising answer was “any way you want me”. I smiled and invited him to walk around the room, to sense himself in walking and to then lay himself spontaneously on the table in whichever way he felt comfortable. I hoped that walking around the space would expand his range of comfort in the environment.

After some hesitation he chose to lie on his right side. I observed how he was organized and offered another pad to support his head. Lightly touching his neck, I clarified the relation between the height of the pads and the organization of his neck. When I asked him whether he was comfortable, he answered that the height of the pads did not matter to him and that whatever seemed okay to me would be fine with him. I made another attempt at getting him to notice his own comfort by having him compare the how he felt when the left leg was on lying on top of the right leg and with the left leg placed in front of the right leg. Once again, the same answer “Whatever you think”. This time I did not respond. I waited for him to choose and finally he chose to place the left leg on top of the right with both knees quite distant from his belly.



My hands were on his iliac crest and on his left shoulder. My intention was to instill a sense of confidence, comfort, listening and empathy. I hoped he begin sensing himself more, rather than being in a reactive state to outer factors.

I noticed that his breathing was very shallow with a marked lack of thoracic movement, his muscle tone was high, and he did not respond to my touch. I removed my hands and

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asked him whether he was comfortable and should we proceed with the lesson. He nodded in silence. I returned my hands to the same places while trying out various intensities of touch in search of the connection between the manner of touch and a response in his breathing. Gil responded to deep touch – long and continuous (in musical terms a “Legato” touch). When his breathing became deeper, I started moving his shoulder and pelvis together in the same direction (non-differentiated) while searching for the right range and tempo for Gil.

The movements forward and backward of the hip and shoulder are based on one of the AY lessons 139# On side – movements of shoulder and hip (Reel 9, Track 3). This movement can be calming both physically and emotionally and I used it as a reference movement throughout the lesson.

I chose breathing as the theme of the lesson. Having a strategy would help me stay clear in my intention and help me avoid getting lost in a plethora of details and distractions that often come up during a lesson. It would be relatively easy to track changes in Gil’s breathing during the lesson and it would provide Gil with something tangible for him to sense and respond to.

Working with Gil reminded me of Prof. Alon Talmi's article "Five Women." An article about the relationship between "The Muscular Armor" and "The Emotional Armor". Could it be that Gil's size and structure along with his high muscular tonus were acting as a defense system as a "large and massive armor" that is actually protecting a particularly delicate and sensitive soul? In the article Talmi tries to show that with the help of FI lessons, the gates of the "physical fortress" can open. Improving and perfecting movement ability brings with it an improvement in the emotional (sensory and mental) abilities. Would I be able to apply this with Gil?

I decided to focus on breathing

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Another benefit of focusing on breathing is that it has a regulatory quality, which may reduce anxiety. I looked for the development of breathing: superficial primary breathing only in the upper respiratory tract; diaphragmatic breathing; costal breathing and abdominal breathing.

Feldenkrais notes that "a pattern that has taken root, for years, in the cortex, cannot be easily reversed" hence the need to repeat the action, in several ways and in several positions, until the muscles learn to release holding patterns. This line of thought accompanied me throughout the process with Gil.

When Gil seemed to be getting tired and his attention began to wander (approximately halfway through the lesson), I asked him to move onto his back. I placed some thick padding under his knees, and a narrow padding under his ankles to support his lumbar arch. Surprisingly, the thing that disturbed Gil the most in this position was the band across the width of the table where it folds.

Attempting to get Gil to sense himself more clearly, I continued the lesson. I tried out several types of touch and varied tempo and directions, trying to discover what would provoke a response.

I recalled the story about the princess and the pea. Even a high pile of soft mattresses did not prevent the princess from recognizing a small pea that was under the pile – only a “real” princess with highly refined sensitivity can do that. Gil’s hypersensitivity was expressed only in relation to external factors and his difficulty in turning his attention inward was evident.

With Gil still on his back, breath continues to be the theme of the lesson. I explored the front and side of the chest, the movement of the clavicles, the shoulders, and the sternum and watched for the respiratory response to the touch. I continued to explore the posterior rib cage and the diaphragm from the base of the rib cage. I took time to allow the feeling of support permeate his sensations and for the muscle and nervous systems to release

unnecessary tension and holding. Gradually Gil quieted down and began to breathe more fully. My impression was that of all the things that I had tried, it was the continuous rhythm that captured his attention. Gil was so calm that he almost fell asleep; his breathing began to deepen and was more continuous and quieter. There was a noticeable relaxation of the facial muscles and eye movements.

I moved on to the distal parts – hands, legs and eventually to his feet. Gil's breathing became even deeper and more continuous and he was even snoring slightly. This was a signal for me to start integrating the lesson. I pushed through his feet to connect the distal part of the foot with the center of the body. I did this while maintaining the same pace of work, and the same mood, with the intention of maintaining the same quality of breath. I stood at the foot of the table, especially attentive to the organization of my body, and lifted his foot, to transfer movement from the feet along the entire skeleton. I was happy to find that it was less heavy and not as difficult as I expected.

Another step in integrating the lesson was with Gil sitting. My intention was to help Gil return to a functional mode and enable him to learn to use his own body as a source of support. That bony support would encourage a departure from unnecessary (and emotional) muscular holding. Make a change in one pattern so that it affects the entire internal organization.

I asked Gil to pay attention to his feet on the floor: only his toes were in contact, his heels were in the air, and the knees well before his feet. We checked together how it felt when each foot was supported fully on the floor, and the lower legs perpendicular to the floor. Gil easily recognized the difference in feeling between the two options. I taught him how to identify his sitting bones, how to lean and use them in a way that would provide full support for his back. I suggested to him to experiment with shifting his weight between the sitting bones. This time, Gil easily recognized the connection between the position of the sit bones on the seat and the sensation in the back, he began to move the pelvis and to involve the spine in the motion. There was a clear connection from his lower body right up to his head. The chain of movement involved the pelvis, spine, and chest. I asked him what it felt like when he leans to side so there is more weight on one side of the pelvis and how this affects the spine, the head and chest. Gil smiled slightly and continued to

explore and sense himself sitting, surprised that he could sit without the need for back support.

We ended the lesson in standing. This time with much less embarrassment relative to the beginning of the lesson. Much like transferring weight to the sit bones, I asked Gil to shift his weight from one foot to the other and sense the effect on the entire body. I also asked him to turn and look over his shoulders so that he could sense himself twisting and lengthening his spine. The twisting could help him experience further functional options of thoracic movement and expanded Gil's possibilities to sense himself kinesthetically with the hope that he would feel that he is not "trapped" in a single movement pattern.

Right at the door, on his way out of my workspace, Gil noted casually that a few months ago he had begun a psychological process. With inquisitive eyes he searched for my response. I calmly stated that he now has at least two tools for learning and helping himself.

Continuation:

We decided to keep meeting, he wanted to give it a chance.

Over the next three months we met six more times. Sometimes once a week, sometimes the break between lessons was longer. It was difficult for Gil to set a regular schedule of lessons. There was also a great deal of difference in his mood. Sometimes he was in a great deal of pain, one time he said that he was about to embark on a challenging trip. In some of the lessons I would find him crouching with no energy, and there were sessions when he was happy and curious to discover new things. When I thought that there had been a breakthrough and that I could go a step further, I would run into regression. I learned not to plan, simply to accept him as he is at any given moment. To be here and now and to respond to his current needs.

One example of a regressive process occurred when I suggested to Gil that we do a lesson on a mattress rather than on the table. I judged that he was about ready to go a step further, investigate and take responsibility for his own movement. I thought that a

personal ATM lesson would support his self-image and allow him to use and propel himself in an environment of comfort, security and, above all, a sense of ability.

At first, he seemed to be attentive and to handle himself nicely. His facial muscles seemed calm and his breathing was quiet and continuous. We repeated movement processes based on what Gil had already experienced in previous FI lessons. In retrospect, it turned out that I was advancing the process too quickly with Gil. At the end of the lesson he stated that he was waiting for this lesson to be over.

Gil's response startled me. I was alarmed since I did not recognize his cues in time and by the thought that I led him further than he was ready to go and that my pace in our joint process did not match his rate of progress. Nonetheless, that fact that he could say this to me out loud, indicated his progress in verbal communication, an improvement and refinement of interpersonal communication.

Development is not linear or one-dimensional. It seems that sometimes we go backwards in one plane, while unconsciously progressing in another.

This turned out to be Gil's last lesson, following which Gil traveled abroad for work and sought to relocate to permanent residence abroad.

I was left with a lot of question marks; the process was just beginning. I don't know how much Gil internalized and whether it opened up new possibilities for him; if it made a some difference in his organization, if he felt more comfortable, and if I had provided him with tools to handle his pain. I do know that the word "crutches", or the use of crutches, never came up after our first encounter.

What I have learned:

The process with Gil has taught me that when dealing with people with low confidence and relatively high levels of anxiety, it is advisable to stay clear and simple within the framework of the lesson. To focus on simplicity and find diverse ways to vary the iteration of movement. Simplicity and clarity in themselves provide security. The pace of the lesson should be accurate. The verbal part of the lesson, both in terms of the amount of talk and clarity, must be very precise so as not to arouse anxiety. Such processes can take a long time and should not be accelerated. To respect the place of regression within

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the process. To identify the signs of anxiety as they begin to surface and not leave the student in uncertainty in such a state; to give him the feeling of being with him, until his breathing becomes better regulated, and the body is noticeably more comfortable. I learned that I need to be in my "emotional neutral" to support and facilitate the student. That I need to integrate stability and a clear framework for the lesson with flexibility and adjustments each time anew. I learned about the tremendous possibilities that the Feldenkrais Method offers the practitioner, so she/he can adapt the lesson to each and every person, and to their changing needs, within the lesson and throughout the entire process.