

The poetic body

Using gentle mindful movement to inspire poetry and transformation

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Abstract

This paper will describe a workshop that I delivered at the inaugural European Biblio/ Therapy conference in Budapest and explore some of the ideas behind it. The session introduced the ways in which a combination of gentle mindful movement inspired by the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education and expressive writing and poetry has the potential to inspire creativity and self-exploration. As a Feldenkrais practitioner and therapeutic writing practitioner here I outline my thoughts on these two practices and how they might interlink and potentially enhance the therapeutic process.

Keywords: movement, awareness, poetry, therapeutic writing, embodied, metaphor

Introduction and context

I have been a therapeutic and reflective writing practitioner in the UK for the past 14 years and over that time have facilitated groups in a range of contexts and with various clients, most recently medical students, health professionals and doctors, carers, older adults and people with mental health challenges. In this work I typically draw on techniques associated with poetry therapy and journal writing therapy. I often encourage expressive writing in response to prompts to encourage creativity and self-exploration.

In 2020, I qualified as a Feldenkrais practitioner after a four-year training in London. The Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, uses gentle movement and awareness to harness neuroplasticity and potential for learning, affording ease of movement and a sense of physical and emotional wellness. I decided to embark on this path for personal reasons; I had no idea of the potential connection that would develop between this discipline and my interest in therapeutic writing. However, I soon became aware that Feldenkrais was having a positive effect on my writing as well as the way I moved through the world both physically and mentally. I found that my writing was freer, it was easier to focus and let words and metaphors flow onto the page without judgement. I also felt as if I was more in touch with myself and that my voice became stronger. It felt like a natural progression to introduce some gentle movement sequences into my work with groups to see if this benefit could be shared.

The Feldenkrais Method® was developed over a 40-year period between the 1940s and 1980s by Moshe Feldenkrais, an eminent physicist and judo master. According to Feldenkrais the unity of the mind and body is an objective reality, an idea increasingly borne out by scientific evidence (Maté & Maté, 2022). ‘A brain without a body could not think.’ (Feldenkrais, 1990). Feldenkrais discovered that combining awareness with movement, which preoccupies a large

part of the brain, could provide potential for re-education and lasting change in the way we move and think.

Feldenkrais developed thousands of movement sequences which he labelled Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons. Rather than working towards a prescribed posture or action, people are encouraged to explore movement and difference as a way of learning, in the same way a baby or infant might. This has the potential to harness neuroplasticity, improve fluidity and ease of movement. It can provide relief from pain, support for neurological conditions and enhance physical performance and produce a feeling of calmness and wellbeing.

My experience, and that of others, is that the practice of the Feldenkrais Method, which combines guided attention to heighten our awareness of ourselves and our sensations, encourages a sense of play and exploration. This can translate into inspiration for creativity and a more embodied kind of writing.

In my work I have been combining movement sequences with therapeutic writing sessions in a number of configurations. Sometimes these are simply to settle people's nervous system at the beginning of the session. At other times the sequences work to bring people's attention to themselves and their bodies in a deeper way, with the aim of encouraging a more authentic and fluid freedom of expression.

In late 2020, for example, I won a commission from the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK to run a lunchtime workshop for psychiatrists called "A Letter to My Big Toe", which was designed to take doctors 'out of their heads and into their bodies' by bringing attention to a physical sense of themselves through gentle movement. Participants were invited to write freely and expressively to a part of their body in the form of a letter and then craft a letter in response from their whole self. After the hour-long workshop, a number of participants reflected on shifts in perspective and a sense of acceptance that had occurred in relation to parts of their body that they had previously felt shame or anger towards.

In my work running a creative writing group for personal and professional development with medical students, I found that short gentle movement sequences followed by a stint of freewriting helped students to move from a professional medical persona that is focused on intellect and knowledge to a more grounded and integrated sense of themselves. This experience, when combined with freewriting – writing without stopping without attention to the constraints of punctuation and grammar as a means of accessing the unconscious and promoting creativity – seemed to put them more in touch with, and afford expression of, their emotions. One student described how this process encouraged 'words to flow from the body at ease with little resistance... I find it to be the most accurate way of discovering how I feel about something'. (Taylor, 2023, 229)

In addition, participants in a series of independent workshops that I have devised involving a more equal amount of movement (in longer sequences lying down) alongside writing and sharing, have found that writing flowed more easily and metaphors and images arrived more readily for them and in surprising ways. In the words of one, the movement sequences and prompts helped 'to tune into myself and to connect with a part of myself which is usually silenced It was this voice that spoke in the poem I wrote. I've never written a poem in this

voice before, but the words flowed out of me with ease.’ (personal email correspondence, April 2024)

The Budapest workshop

It is against this contextual backdrop that I proposed and delivered the workshop which I delivered in Budapest. I am eager to involve others in my exploration of how the Feldenkrais Method of somatic learning can connect with therapeutic writing and creativity. The workshop that I designed was inspired by a line from Mary Oliver’s poem *Wild Geese* (Oliver, 2020) – ‘You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves’. Many people think of writing as a cerebral activity and my intention was to use this line to invoke a more embodied way of writing from the whole self. The workshop involved gentle chair-based movement sequences, expressive writing from prompts and poems and the opportunity for sharing.

Before starting the session I briefly introduced the ten participants to some principles of the Feldenkrais Method ®. I warned them to take care and that moving in new ways (and writing expressively) can throw up some strong and unexpected emotions. Even breathing in a new way can release feelings that might have been previously stored away somewhere. Participants were invited to remove their shoes, their belts and spectacles and to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

We started with a gentle guided Awareness Through Movement (ATM) sequence in sitting. ATM involves slow, repetitive and exploratory movements. I encouraged participants to find softness, to make movements small and slow and to focus on finding ease and reducing effort. In this way we can learn easier ways of movement, break old habits and holding and this in turn can lead to new ways of thinking.

The first movement sequence was focused on finding connection between the floor and feet, on connecting the pelvis to the chair and then the pelvis and shoulder girdle. This also involved a number of rests and pauses to allow the brain to respond and concluded with a gentle rocking of the pelvis allowing the trunk and shoulders and arms and head to follow. I then invited participants to write freely and continuously for six minutes in total using the prompts: ‘My soft animal body...’ followed by ‘I feel...’ and then ‘I am curious about...’

Participants then introduced themselves using a word or phrase that emerged for them from the process and sharing what they felt curious about. I often use poems as prompts with groups for their potential to both hold emotional ambiguity and to elicit a visceral response. For this workshop I chose Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem *Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower* (Rilke, 1960) for us to read together and discuss. The poem nods to the idea of embodiment, breath, agency, space and transformation and to movement back and forth.

I encouraged participants to sense how the poem made them feel and to note any words or lines that stood out for them. I then led everyone through another 15-minute movement sequence which focused on the soft and rhythmic movement of the hands and fingers. Once again participants were invited to write freely afterwards for three or four minutes and then to write for a further seven minutes in direct response to the poem. The group then split into pairs and

were given an opportunity to share their writing with a partner or to talk about their experience of writing following movement.

We then came back together as a group and I asked everyone to say goodbye using a phrase or word that came to them in response to the workshop.

Participants at my movement and writing workshops have generally reported feeling much more grounded before starting to write, and much more in touch with themselves physically and emotionally. Often they find that this is a novel feeling for them, and have been surprised by what has flowed out onto the page. In line with this, the ten participants in Budapest described finding themselves in a calmer, softer, and physically and emotionally freer place than at the start of the workshop. The words curious and inspired also emerged.

Some Observations

Although my findings here are provisional and anecdotal, I have begun to develop some ideas on how Feldenkrais and Awareness through Movement can enhance the process of therapeutic writing. My proposition is that participation in movement and awareness sequences before writing activity enhances freedom and fluidity of expression, particularly when combined with freewriting or flow-writing. ATM calms the central nervous system, and cultivates a grounded and centred state of being before we start to write. In my experience this calmer, more embodied and softer state allows our unconscious thoughts to flow more readily onto the page.

I have also found that inviting participants to freewrite or write expressively — without attention to grammar or punctuation — for a few minutes following a movement sequence has allowed for an enhanced sense of freedom and play. This is what Creme and Hunt identify as a ‘freer and more spontaneous experience of creativity’ (Creme & Hunt, 2002).

Freewriting is a form of expressive writing, which has been shown in a number of experiments by James Pennebaker, when linked to writing about a traumatic experience, to ease emotional pain and improve physical and mental health (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). It is my suggestion, for reasons mentioned above, that movement sequences in advance of expressive writing has the potential to enhance this therapeutic process.

Sense of Self/ Felt Sense

I am also interested in the idea that writing following an ATM may enhance the way we sense ourselves, which according to Bessel van der Kolk (2014) is an important part of emotional health and regulation. ‘Agency starts with what scientists call interoception, our awareness of our subtle, sensory, body-based feelings; the greater the awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives... If we are aware of the constant changes in our inner and outer environment, we can mobilize to manage them.’ (van der Kolk, 2014, 222)

Moshe Feldenkrais also elevated the idea of self-image and the importance of us having a sense of ourselves. In the method he developed this through working with skeleton and relationship to

gravity. I also posit that these ideas are related to what Eugene Gendlin described as the ‘felt-sense’—an inner knowing or ‘special kind of internal bodily awareness ... a body-sense of meaning’ (Gendlin, 1981). Sondra Perl (2004) has developed a writing method focused on harnessing Gendlin’s idea of felt sense using mindfulness, breathing and relaxation. Perhaps writing provides us with further opportunity to attend to our senses.

Metaphors

I am also fascinated by the idea that our cognition is embodied within us in the form of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) propose that metaphors are rooted in our psychology from birth — for instance, the association of warmth with affection, weight with importance, sadness with down and happiness with up. We all allegedly embody these universal metaphors, but we also develop a complex network of personal metaphors reflecting our unique life experience.

Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) posit that the ‘inability to translate traumatic experiences into language’ or to ‘translate powerful emotions into language appears to be psychologically unhealthy, linking our emotional memories to language is often beneficial.’ Further, the authors discuss using imagery and metaphor as part of helping someone heal from traumatic memories or experiences: ‘When we convert an image in our minds into words, it fundamentally alters the way the image is stored’ (145).

Bolton (2014) suggests that it is when we let go of the cognitive thought process and have a sense of letting go that metaphors emerge: “metaphor reveals because it sidles up sideways, giving non-traumatic images for traumatic events. We often don’t understand our metaphors initially, as with dreams, but when we do the illumination can be astonishing” (Bolton, 2014, 109).

I speculate that awareness through movement combined with creative and therapeutic writing could unlock opportunities for accessing and exploring the metaphors we hold within us creatively, but also perhaps for healing and making sense of our lives.

Conclusion

I am aware that this workshop was part of an ongoing exploration which calls out for further research and perhaps collaboration. I am not alone in suggesting the idea that movement and awareness have the potential to embellish and/or enhance the therapeutic writing process. There are other practitioners including dancers, yoga teachers and mindfulness practitioners who are on a similar journey of exploration with poetry and writing. I have more questions than answers about this work: I wonder, in particular, if there is anything about the Feldenkrais Method in particular that can enhance or facilitate the therapeutic writing process? And whether writing can enhance the changes facilitated by the Feldenkrais Method® and Awareness Through Movement process? I will continue in my exploration with these questions in mind. Meanwhile, I will also hold on to another oft-quoted line from Mary Oliver, one that is pertinent to these questions, to the creative process and to movement and poetry – ‘to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work’. (*Yes! No!*, Oliver, 2020, 264)

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