

Notes by Gail Thompson on Larry Goldfarb talk on ATM book lesson 10: “The Movement of the Eyes Organizes the Movement of the Body” [or “Dead Bird”]

He calls this an “archetypal or primordially neuromuscular” lesson. Constraints include the positional one of side-sitting, which is missing in many developmental models, and even some languages have no term for side-sitting. Another positional constraint is placing both hands on the floor, while evenly distributing the weight and twisting around them. There also is extra twisting and reversal of proximal & distal. And there are some small side-bending oscillatory movements, based on Feldenkrais saying that “you can’t say yes and no at the same time.” That is, you can’t maintain habitual tonus when certain movements interrupt them. The oscillating movements balance movement in both directions.

Two configurational constraints are moving the head and arm in side bending; also the triangle of arm-leg-head. Everything in the triangle moves together, making movement in the neck disappear. The third leg of the triangle is imaginary, with the arm straight you go as far as you can, then bend the elbow and move the head, and you go farther, because you get a neck and it’s moving, because the triangle is broken. The eye on the thumb is the “no neck” version. The lesson in the ATM book has a more sophisticated/differentiated aspect that is important. The lesson title is a good clue. There are many uses of the eyes in how we look and how we see.

Also important is standing and swinging the arms and the beginning and end of the lesson, because the movement grounds the lesson in activity. If you want to recall the lesson to your body you can do the arm swinging and ask “How did I feel at the end of the lesson?” You also notice the jumping of the eyes. Feldenkrais’s ATMs often omit this step, while the FIs he gave in the 1970s and 1980s start when the person walks into the room. He sometimes asks what they want to be able to do; he sometimes interacts with them. But he brings it back at the end of the lesson, creating a bridge from movements to the lesson and back to the vertical world. People can then apply what they learn on the table in everyday life. ATM teachers need to do more of this.

The lesson explores the importance of eye movements. The tonic neck reflexes, global movement patterns present before birth and in early life. They diminish as we age, unless cases of cerebral palsy, brain injury, and stroke. Symmetrical and asymmetrical tonic reflexes. We lower our head and fold/flex or raise our head and extend, which are movements of automatic coordination. When we turn our eyes and head to a side, the nerves/muscles get more toned; when we differentiate--the eyes and head go to different sides--tonus decreases. Consequently, we start to undermine the level of compulsion of habit—it’s a subtle pattern (but brilliant) interruption. It undoes our normal linkage and is an antidote to the way we usually hold ourselves. The lesson has us look with one eye, the other eye, and both eyes—these are levels of pattern break-up. We use our own organs and nerves to undo our normal pattern of tonus.

It’s the initiation that’s important, not how far you go in a movement. You have to change how you start a movement or you just end up in the same place. You can start outside your habit or with a weaker habit. This is based on Dutch physiologist Magnus’s research in the early 20th century. The reflexes have been used in observation—it was Feldenkrais who determined how to

use them as a tool for affecting the nervous system, to make changes that can't be made consciously, to use the eyes and head moving together and differentiated to change how we move. The lesson contains many variations.

Near the end of the lesson are some movements of side bending. The twisting movements increase the distance, lengthening on both sides. If a student is stuck and all the eye movements don't have enough effect, then exploring side bending might help. It's a different approach to making it easier to turn because the student isn't holding one side short.

Positional constraints include side sitting, sometimes with the hand on the floor. Configurational constraints include having the arm in front for twisting in the horizontal plane; moving the arm and head together. Instructional constraints include turning the head, looking with one eye, then the other, etc.

The lesson is “primordially neuro-muscular,” harnessing the effect of certain muscles on the whole body: the eyes, neck, ankle, feet, and hands. If tonus changes in those places, the effect will spread throughout the body. Playing with tonus in these places will undo habit and make it possible to decrease the level of contraction, co-contraction, and tonus so the student can twist more easily. The final twisting in standing allows the student to take away a connection with the lesson. ATM teachers need to do more of this.

If you understand how Feldenkrais used the tonic neck reflexes to achieve results in the lesson, you better understand the lesson and the method behind it. It's not just faith—we have evidence and experience about how it works. It's a tool in the lesson that we can count on to work. Teachers need to let the lesson do its job. We are responsible to get the student to *respect* the constraints or they won't get the benefit from the lesson, and teachers can't help them learn and be safe. We need to help students *appreciate* the lesson's constraints: “The challenge of this part of the lesson is to move your eyes differently from your head. Are you doing that or do you just think you are?”

The lesson challenges students to know what they are doing. Teachers should use the constraints to help students do this because the constraints help the students to learn. When the teacher and students let the lesson do its work, the lesson becomes more reliable. The more the teacher knows what to emphasize in a lesson, the more effective it will be. The lessons will be more user-friendly and approachable.