

The Paradox of War: A Moshe Feldenkrais Story

Moshe Feldenkrais was a teacher of awareness.

Although mostly known for his ingeniously creative and effective approaches to movement, his greatest effect on me was on my ways of thinking.

His vigorous insistence that his students question their habitual, simplistic, "cause and effect" thinking, and one-sided views, changed my world. He spoke of the importance of "paradoxical thinking" and the ability to hold contradictory views at the same time.

He believed that if you could not emotionally and intellectually argue *against your own point of view*, you did not fully understand the issue. To look at any opinion or belief from at least three points of view, and ideally more than five, was a path to freedom. Although he did not say this, in my view, this versatility in thought is also a pathway to empathy.

This is a demanding and often painful path:

- Could you withstand the inner turmoil to argue that Hitler was the founding father of Israel! He and I had this frustrating conversation.

- As a committed abortion rights activist, could you tolerate the discomfort of passionately arguing against this choice or vice versa?

This is not an intellectual game; it is the fundamental recognition that almost all viewpoints have value and validity and are connected to a basic human need. The key is not to be paralyzed by this deep understanding. Moshe was a man of action, even seeing the necessity, in certain circumstances, for killing other human beings.

The following conversation is based on my memory and post-conversation journaling.

The Scene:

Moshe's apartment, Tel Aviv, July 1982. Moshe was recovering from his first stroke and I would give him two Functional Integration lessons (hands - on Feldenkrais sessions), each day. We would pass the rest of the day talking at his small desk. At this time, the Israeli Air Force was bombing Lebanon in response to deadly missiles fired into Israel by militants.

The Conversation:

One day upon hearing the planes, I innocently said: "*Moshe, when will human beings reach a point where we no longer kill each other to resolve our conflicts.*" I came of age during the Vietnam War and was part of the peace protests. The universal and unarguable principle of peace was obvious to me.

Moshe's startling response was:

"Russell, you are an idiot! Don't you realize how many lives have been saved by war? Throughout history, battles have prevented much larger losses of life than the numbers killed. Also, the greatest advances in medicine that have saved and helped many people in peacetime have come from wars. The gene pool of humanity has been diversified and strengthened through war more than anything else. The spread of the arts, language, diversity of thinking, religion and culture has been advanced by war more than anything else. In addition to medical advances, many, many scientific discoveries were greatly accelerated and even dependent on war. If one looks from a larger point of view, war has elevated humanity and saved more people than the number killed. Have you thought about all this"?

I remember walking back to my apartment stunned and even shaky. I really didn't know what to think. Clearly, Moshe was once again, challenging my **certainty**. I saw that unquestioned certainty had stopped my thinking. This realization was profound and unsettling. If I couldn't find my ground, identity and clarity from the surety of my own views, where was I, who was I?

The next day, I returned to his small, Frug Street apartment. After giving Moshe a table lesson and drinking some coffee together, we heard the planes flying overhead. I commented, half facetiously, with a mixture of uncertainty, confusion and even wonder:

"Moshe, how wonderful, humanity is being saved"!

His response came with deeply compassionate eyes:

"Russell, you idiot, what could be worse than the killing of innocent children..."

My gratitude to Moshe is immense for inspiring me to engage in the profound discomfort of learning to hold disparate views simultaneously. And then, after deep looking, to stand strongly, passionately and with some open-minded questioning, for my current perspective. To disagree with another, while respectfully valuing them and their perspective will change humanity, perhaps more than any single thing. This is an important part of the path of Love!

A few afterthoughts:

Moshe was not against this military action, he saw it as important for Israel's survival. He was against all simplistic points of view and could usually see from diverse positionalities. Also, he used the term "idiot" gently and with humor. We had passed some weeks of daily, long conversations, this was an expression of intimacy.

An old Chinese story:

A general who cares only for victory can send troops into battle with little care and is the worst leader.

A general who cares for his troops but hates the enemy must be wiser in their use of force and is a better leader.

A general who cares for his troops AND those of the enemy has the most difficult time using force but is the wisest and best leader.