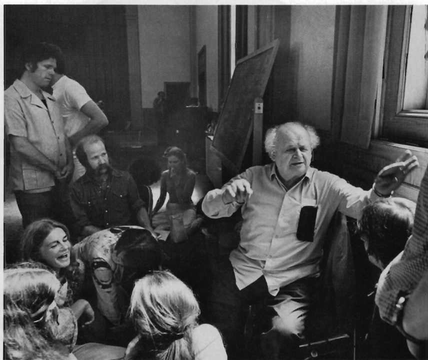


THE FELDENKRAIS PHENOMENON

The newest maestro of body-mind health is a septuagenarian Israeli physicist who insists that the whole secret lies in how people move

CHARLES FOX

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE FREER

I lay on my back on the table watching Moshe Feldenkrais bent over my right leg. The old man was puffing slightly, concentrating intensely, turning the leg this way and that, sometimes pushing it slightly, sometimes pulling, sometimes kneading muscles deeply with strong hands to get them to relax and stop working, the signal that the motor cortex had stopped working and was free to receive the signals he wished to transmit to it. And I was suddenly profoundly grateful to him. Blurting out my thanks, I said that these lessons, as he calls them, had given me an ability to move that was freedom.

"Of course," he said brusquely, without pausing to look up. "For you and for everyone else, movement is life."

For almost 40 years this Russian-born Israeli has studied human movement and the way it relates to behavior and learning. I'm convinced that nobody understands more about the way we use our bodies, or is more able to teach us a better way to function, than this former physicist who heals by his teaching.

"Anything that lives, moves," Feldenkrais tells his students. "They thought that a living thing must consume oxygen until they discovered anaerobic microbes, which reproduce but don't breathe oxygen. Life starts with such cells and culminates with the human nervous system. Movement among lower orders is concerned with survival—self-preservation, food, and reproduction. But we humans have taken it further. Movement allows us to exercise prerogative, our basic freedom of choice."

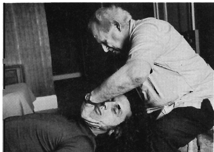
Although the full meaning of Feldenkrais's insight came to me slowly, I can claim more than ordinary awareness of the equation between movement and freedom. Over the past few years, I have gradually been ceding control of my body to an incurable disease. Last year I consulted Feldenkrais in San Francisco, where he spent the summer teaching his methods. Hearing him talk excited me. But this was nothing compared to the joy of experiencing the Feldenkrais technique. And experience, I was to discover, is itself the essence of that technique.

My trouble is a demyelinating disease commonly referred to as multiple sclerosis. It affects about half a million Americans. The garden variety is apparently caused by a slow-incubating virus that lodges in the central nervous system and blossoms years later to capriciously attack and derange its host with varying degrees of severity. At 28, I was an athlete. At 34, I am no match for Feldenkrais, and he is 74.

When it first came subtly, almost imperceptibly- I flew to London to see the quiet-spoken Denis Williams, one of the wisest elders of neurology. "Live life to your capacity," he said. "Fight this thing, but not too hard. Don't let it become your central aspect. And please, stay away from our sort. There's nothing we can do for you."

So I looked to a variety of other therapies, did what I knew I could do myself, and went on with my life. But by the time I went to Feldenkrais I walked with a stick and fought off gravity by attempting to hold myself upright, thrusting my chest forward and my head rigidly back. This puffin's strut quickly exhausted my lower back and legs and on a good day gave me an effective range of only two blocks. Eight months of daily struggle to consciously reorganize my walking posture had proven futile. I couldn't keep my resolutions in mind for more than a few steps.

It was unusually hot for San Francisco when I arrived at the house Feldenkrais had taken for the summer. Paul Rubin brought me. Rubin was about to graduate as a Feldenkrais teacher after three years of training. Inside the house it was shaded and quiet and comfortably old-fashioned. Feldenkrais was working in the front room. He sat on a stool at the head of a small, birdlike woman who lay on a low massage table. He was a short, heavy man in a green sport shirt, gray flannel trousers, and sandals. Tufts of silvery hair circled his massive head. His right eye was closed. Rubin told me he had recently had a cataract removed: that in Paris, between 1934 and 1936, he had built a prototype of the Van de Graaff generator, and that many of the scientists who worked on such high-voltage instruments have



Fox receives the Feldenkrais treatment: "There was nothing for me to do but lie limp, listening to his bulldog breathing and occasional grunt of satisfaction." ***Opposite*****: The old man regales a training group in San Francisco.**

CHARLES FOX is an English journalist who has lived in the U.S. since 1962. His work has appeared in numerous magazines ranging from *Playboy* to the *Catholic Digest*.

developed cataracts. Oddly, the insult added to the strength of his face, which reminded me of a Leonardo da Vinci head -the short curls, the strong forehead, nose, and chin, the pale, almost translucent skin.

When he had finished with the woman I went over to him.

"How are you?" I said.

"Fine. And you?"

"It's a bit hot for me," I said.

"You think it's just hot for you?" he said. "Don't be so egotistical. It's hot for all of us." He had a light, clipped English accent. "What's your complaint?"

"Multiple sclerosis."

"Please. Walk to the other room."

He hung back and watched the awkward process.

"Remove your coat and shoes and lie on your back on the table." He drew up his stool and, placing a palm on my forehead, turned my head softly, stopping and changing hands and direction at the slightest resistance.

"How long have you had this?"

"Six years."

"Has it affected your eyes?"

"Not appreciably."

He gently felt the muscles in my neck.

"Are you married?"

"I was," I said.

This was all he asked. Now he worked without

"If I had let all those highly intelligent people teach me their ideas for three years, I should have concluded my own were absurd."

comment for over an hour. He gently kneaded muscles in my neck, chest, and back with hands full of authority and awareness. He did nothing sudden or painful. He knew precisely where muscles were tense and tender from overwork and, ranging over my neck, torso, feet, and legs, he released them. He lightly bent and stretched my arms and legs, bent my knees and folded my legs back. He pulled very lightly on my neck. Every so often, he would again roll my head under his palm. There was nothing for me to do but lie limp, listening to his bulldog breathing and occasional grunt of satisfaction.

Then he lifted me into a sitting position, cradling me under neck and knees as if to guard against undoing the work just begun. He planted my feet squarely under my knees and told me how to stand.

In standing, I activated my musculature for the first time since I'd lain down. And as I came upright there was a very peculiar rush of sensation from feet to brain. Intuitively I sensed that this was a transmission of vital information.

"Notice how it feels to stand," he said.

My usually reflexless legs held a delicious trace of

"Far from feeling rested after an hour lying down, I was irritable and wanted to sleep. Instead I had to write the old man a check for $100."

spring in them. He walked beside me as I took a few steps, his hand on my neck gently rolling my weight from leg to leg as I walked.

"Just notice how it feels," was all he said.

But beyond the first few steps, walking was no easier. And far from feeling rested after an hour lying down, I was exhausted and irritable and wanted to sleep. Instead I had to write the old man a check for $100.

It was two days before I noticed any difference. "When you feel a change," Rubin had advised, "don't get caught up in analysis. It's beyond your conscious mind, in the first place, and you'll likely interfere with the process if you insist on an explanation or quantification."

So I simply noticed as I lay in bed that morning how the customary tremors in my legs were far less vigorous than usual, and when I rose, how much better my balance, how pleasant to walk.

In small and private triumph I went nakedly about my house and out onto the deck. My hips felt oiled. My thighs rose easily. I was sitting back on my pelvis and no longer pitching myself forward to walk. I even assaulted steps without a stick, legs obedient as two good dogs.

When I went back, Feldenkrais made me kneel and lie face down across the table while for some time he gently, firmly spoke with fingers to the muscles in my lower back and buttocks.

"Have you injured your back?" he asked.

"No."

"You haven't had an accident?"

"I broke my knee," I said.

"The right one?"

"Yes. I favor that leg."

"And ruin your good one while you do so."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Feel." He guided my hand. On the left side the pelvis was jammed against the back rib cage. On the right there were inches of space between the two.

Again I felt markedly different when I stood. The following day he laid me on my back, rollers under neck and knees, and spent half an hour touching my toes and the soles of my feet very lightly with a small chopping board from the kitchen. That was the lesson. He offered no explanation, but I noticed that I stood with far more confidence.

In his class the following day, coincidentally or not, he demonstrated the same thing with one of his students. "What am I doing?" he asked without pausing. "I know, I'm doing this damn silly thing with a breadboard. But what am I doing?" There were no answers.

"What's the function of a foot? To support a standing human. How does it function?" He got up and pretended to ski. "See? The ankle adjusts to keep the foot flat upon the ground and its owner from slipping. No matter what the angle. Now"—he went back to the girl's foot—"to make a perfect foot we must first relieve it of the weight of the body. One of Freud's most propitious discoveries was the couch. You see. I contend that all successful analysis is accompanied, and probably preceded, by a change in posture and muscular habits of the body and face. By laying his patients down and relieving the major extensor and flexor muscles of the habitual patterns of standing, a change could occur. Freud didn't know this, of course. He laid patients down because he didn't like looking them in the eye. Particularly when they were talking about sex."

At a San Francisco training session: "We were conscious eyewitnesses to unconscious function. I felt like Marco Polo riding into the Forbidden City. A ripple of laughter broke."

The old man looked pleased by the laughter and turned back to the girl. "So we lay her down and then, by touching her foot like so, convince her cerebral cortex that she is really standing. On a slope. Look!"

Holding the board at a 45-degree angle to her sole,

he touched the outside edge of the sole with it as he spoke and the girl's foot turned to meet the board full face while she watched, as much a spectator as the rest of us. He took the board away and touched the inside edge, and the foot turned to flatten itself against the board again. It was a simple movement but most awesome. We were all catching that other secret half of ourselves, unawares. We were conscious eyewitnesses, for once, to unconscious function. I felt like Marco Polo riding into the Forbidden City. A ripple of laughter broke.

"That's right," the old man said. "You should laugh when you learn something as important as this." He teased the foot with his board. "We have made this an intelligent foot. Her brain is working it perfectly, because there is no possibility for the habitual mistakes this girl makes in standing."

As Paul Rubin later explained: "The fundamental mechanism he has taught us to use is the interaction between afferent [sensory] pathways of the central nervous system—the ones that carry information to the brain—and the efferent [motor] network, which carries impulses from brain to muscle. The interaction has long been known, but it was Feldenkrais who saw that it could be used as a tool to improve function and who figured out how."

With this student he had used the host of afferent nerve endings in her foot as a computer terminal to contact the brain and demonstrate to it a more efficient, and therefore more comfortable, way of operating the foot. Instantly the brain had perceived the new way and begun reorganizing. Here, I assume, was my "rush of information" that came after he worked on me.

Now I saw how hopeless had been my conscious attempts to reorganize the way I walked. For the only conscious part of any intentional movement is the decision to make it. The cortex at birth is essentially blank. In the uterus, reflexive, random, and repetitious movement has begun, sparked by impulses genetically encoded in the subcortical centers of the brain. But there's nothing on the big screen, the motor cortex, which initiates intentional movement. Intentional movement starts when a baby's brain becomes physiologically able to record and associate the effects of random movement through two or more sensory modes. In other words, when each specific movement becomes associated with another sensation—a touch, a sound, or a visual occurrence—we can repeat that movement at will.

In short, an infant's reflexive movement develops into intentional movement, and intentional movement quickly becomes habitual. The infant laboriously learns to stand and then to walk. But as soon as

Students practicing Feldenkrais techniques in New York. Of 66 Americans who enrolled in his most recent U.S. class, 63 stayed for the entire three years.

such actions are learned they become "automatic." The infant merely punches up STAND or WALK on his motor cortex to trigger a complex series of habitual movements.

Feldenkrais has an exact understanding of this learning process: the order of it, its fine and gross components, the basic neurological "pathways of preference" relating limb to head, eye to pelvis, hip to shoulder, and so on. These subtle relationships determine the way all human movement is initiated and learned, and it is Feldenkrais's remarkable understanding of them that enables him to reprogram the minds not only of "normally" functioning individuals but also of those, as Rubin puts it, "whose cortical library of learned information has been destroyed or has become inaccessible."

When the student on whom he did the breadboard demonstration in class stood up, it was obvious that, through her foot, Feldenkrais had changed the organization of her entire neuromuscular system. Her left eye was visibly larger, the left side of her mouth more relaxed, her left shoulder several inches lower than her right. Feldenkrais looked around with his one-eyed gaze.

"You can reach any muscle you want," he said. "A physiotherapist, a Rolfer* will rub the muscle and maybe bring a little more circulation. That's all. But you can make the muscle work," he said. "Yesterday I used this technique on a man who had been paralyzed from the neck down since he was a child, and I got tonus in a foot where no muscle had been active for 32 years."

The body reflects the attitude of the mind. Improve the function of the body and you must improve the state of the mind.

Feldenkrais was brought to his work by infirmity in himself. Born in Russia in 1904, he left that war-torn country on his own at 14, and six

*A therapist practicing the techniques of deep massage and manipulation developed by Ida Rolfe.

months later arrived in newly created Palestine with 1,000 other Jews. He went to Paris in 1928 to earn a doctorate in applied physics at the Sorbonne, as well as a degree in electrical and mechanical engineering. He worked in France's atomic program, founded the Judo Club of Paris, and wrote several books on the art. He knew Niels Bohr and Max Born, but only once met Einstein. "I was a schoolboy," he recalls, "but Einstein was proud of me. He patted my head. He was happy to see a Jewish boy with broad shoulders."

When the Germans invaded Paris in 1940, Feldenkrais and his physicist friends fled to England, bringing with them the "heavy water" developed in atomic research. The British Admiralty put Feldenkrais to work as a weapons scientist and refused to surrender him when the others were called away to make the bomb for Roosevelt. It was then that an old soccer knee injury acted up and turned Feldenkrais to an examination of his own mechanics. Surgeons offered their art but could not be optimistic about the outcome. Feldenkrais declined. Instead, he read everything he could find in German, Russian, French, English, and Hebrew on the structure and function of the nervous system. This led to exhaustive study and experiment with the details of a complex and, for him, fascinating relationship: that between human development, education, and movement.

In 1947, his research culminated in the publication of a book entitled *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning.* In it Feldenkrais largely dismisses the modern practices of psychology and psychiatry as merely symptomatic of the social pathologies they were meant to cure. He holds instead that the most consistent way to revise human behavior is not through verbal access to the mind, which inclines to self-deception, but via the somatic route, the physical self.

> "Most people go through their whole lives not knowing how to stand up properly. They can stand, so that's enough."

Western insistence upon separation of mind and body, he writes, leads only to "an inextricable confusion of thought." The body reflects the attitude of the mind. Thus it may be used as a subliminal route of communication with the brain. Improve the function of the body and you must improve the state of mind.

Despite a growing acceptance of such holistic systems of thought as relativity theory and the Oriental medical practices then filtering into the West, Feldenkrais's book proved too radical for its time. Consigned to the lunatic fringe, he returned to Palestine. There he worked in relative obscurity, supported by those he helped, among them David Ben-Gurion, whom he brought back to health while Ben-Gurion was in office. Word of his "miracle

(Continued on page 98)

Weekend workshops, like this one at New York City's New School for Social Research, acquaint the uninitiated with Feldenkrais's technique.

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cures" spread through Europe, but it was 20 years before the holistic health movement brought him to North America, where his genius was quickly recognized by open-minded researchers, among them anthropologist Margaret Mead and Professor Karl Pribram, head of the Neuropsychology Labs at Stanford University. "He's not just pushing muscles around," says Pribram. "He's changing things in the brain itself so that the patient can gradually adjust his whole muscular dysfunction to what we call a normal image. In the motor cortex there's a photographic image which I call an image of achievement. And it's that image which Feldenkrais transmits. He knows how it ought to be. He transmits the image and you organize your brain to meet it."

Feldenkrais once had a wife. She was a doctor. She wanted him to become one too. They were in London after the war. One of the medical schools there offered him two years of credit for his research.

"Wouldn't it have been easier for your work to gain acceptance if you had become an M.D.?" I asked.

He snorted. "My work wouldn't exist today if I had. If I had let all those highly intelligent people teach me their ideas for three years, I should have concluded my own were absurd. How could all of them be wrong?"

Feldenkrais is a national treasure in Israel. He lectures at the University of Tel Aviv, and he works there through the winter with a small group of teaching assistants who have studied with him for 15 to 20 years.

His American legacy will likely be the 63 students whose training he has just completed, except for three months of postgraduate work in San Francisco next summer. They are devotees. During their three-year training period, only three dropped out of the Feldenkrais program. It isn't difficult to understand why. The man is sometimes angry, generally impatient, and largely intolerant. But he is fascinating on a broad range of subjects and passionately dedicated to teaching people to help themselves—fools though they may be. His life is "the work." When I asked him about famous men, Paris in the thirties, wars, and Israel, he waved his hand at me and later remarked to someone: "That Fox just wants to write about me and Ben-Gurion. He wants to write a social register." When I complained, he said, "Look. Nothing is more important to me than the work I am doing. It is the work that deserves what space you have."

He did say one thing about Israel: "I hope it survives. It's the only place in the world where I don't feel like a Jew."

In San Francisco he worked from at least 8 a.m. until 8 p.m., seven days a week, teaching in the morning, giving private lessons in the afternoon and evening. Then there were the weekend seminars. He conducted four of these on the West Coast. The last was at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. I went.

Most who seek Feldenkrais's treatment have no gross dysfunction but merely want to move better. Many are athletes, dancers, musicians, and others who rely on fine movement for a livelihood. For this majority he has developed a series of simple floor exercises called "Awareness Through Movement" (the title of his second book).

At the Fairmont, 300 of us lay on the floor of the grand ballroom and he taught us something of what we had known as babies and then forgotten: the easiest way to roll over and sit up. He sat on a dais above the rows of bodies, looking through one eye, cantankerously cajoling, instructing, and berating us for our habitual stupidity.

"Lie on your backs." We did. "Think of what part of you you move first when you roll over on your side." I thought. I didn't know. I'd never thought of it before. I decided it was my head. "Roll over the way you usually do," he said. I was aware of the awkwardness of the movement, the effort. There was little gravity to excuse me here.

"Lie on your backs," he commanded again. "Now bend the right leg and sweep the right arm across the floor until it is straight above your head and let your arm come across your body and the hand come flat to the floor on your right side . . ." and suddenly I was lost in the effortlessness of the movement. One led naturally to the next and I bobbed upright like a cork coming to the surface.

Looking around, I saw the same wide-eyed wonder that must have been on every face the first time any of us came upright in our cribs and discovered the vertical dimension. I will never forget the feeling. And if I now roll over another way, I feel that it is wrong. Feldenkrais teachers joke when they see a baby: "Look," they say, "it's doing Feldenkrais.")

We had just learned the meaning of what the old man calls "Aware Movement." It is the apogee of movement, a meditation. "Until you know what you are doing, you cannot do what you want," he said as we lay on the Fairmont carpet. "Whether you do it right or not, until you know what you're doing you are not right. An athlete who hurts himself is not an athlete. He's a silly fool. Because you can't hurt yourself if you are doing the movement right. And if you're not, then you're not exercising choice, which is your prerogative. And most people," he went on, "never do. Most people go through their whole lives not knowing how to stand up properly. They can stand, so that's enough. They do everything just well enough to get by."

He was smartly attacked for being such a paradoxical figure himself: five feet seven inches tall, he weighs 190 pounds and chain-smokes. Unhesitatingly he said, "I'm just an average human being. What I've learned I've

At the Fairmont, 300 of us lay on the floor of the grand ballroom and he taught us the easiest way to roll over and sit up.

learned from experience and observation. If I were perfect, I wouldn't want you to listen to me, I'd only want you to admire me."

By the following afternoon he had taught us to stand. As I popped to my feet I wondered how many people this man had reawakened to an enthusiasm for themselves and their capabilities. I thought of the work's beauty, its universality, its ultimate simplicity and almost insulting obviousness. I thought of needless suffering that will continue. Of all the people who will be forced into casts, braces, wheelchairs, and asylums because of pride and ignorance. I thought of the inconceivable potential that lies within each of us in that substance Fel-

hood. "We want to be as self sufficient as we can," says Rueda. "We even want to grow some of our own food on vacant lots. We'll be an extended family of 10,000 people."

A feeling of community already pervades the area around 1186. A vacant lot at the corner of East 168th Street has become Unity Park. It is a place for big meetings, celebrations, and partying. Everybody seems to know everybody else on the block. Walking down the street becomes a sequence of smiles, handshakes, and friendly banter: "What's happenin', man?"

PDC has selected a nine-block core for its village. Later the members hope to expand the area to 40 blocks. As the first step, PDC singled out five abandoned buildings near 1186 for renovation. They took them over just as they did with 1186. They are also working with tenants in other abandoned but still habitable buildings to make essential repairs and maintain gas, water, and electrical services. Unfortunately, they have to struggle with myopic bureaucrats as well. PDC is always trying to stop the city from demolishing any more potentially salvageable buildings in the immediate neighborhood. One city agency supports and funds PDC programs, while another threatens to tear down the very buildings the group wants to fix up. The race between builders and destroyers could easily be a chapter in *Alice in Wonderland.*

Nevertheless, PDC is making progress with job training and other forms of self-sufficiency. For example, the members have set up their own woodworking shop to make the kitchen cabinets and counters that go into their buildings. And between stints of sweat equity, they gain more experience by working for outside contractors and other rehabilitation projects.

Even garbage plays a role in PDC's self-sufficiency efforts. To bring in money, the members separate glass and metal refuse and sell it for recycling. They've also launched BESS (BioEcoSolarSystem), a scheme for turning biodegradable garbage into food with the cooperation of ordinary earthworms. There are several worm troughs in the basement of 1186 and in a vacant lot across the street. Each trough contains 4,000 worms per cubic foot; the worms in each trough consume 50 pounds of compost every week. The worm castings are a rich fertilizer that can be sold or used in PDC's vegetable gardens. The worm population doubles every 60 days. They can be sold as bait and zoo food, or fed to the chickens and rabbits PDC plans to raise for food.

Although the men and women of PDC are involved in forward-looking things like solar energy and worm raising, their goals are quite old-fashioned. These young people are urban pioneers. Like the families that settled the West 100 years ago, they are looking for decent homes, independence, and some control over their lives in today's urban wilderness.

PDC may yet achieve its vision of an urban village. By renovating 1186, the members have already done the nearly impossible. They have the advantage of working in a vacuum. Nobody wants the South Bronx. It has been abandoned by most of its landlords and residents and, some would say, by government and big business as well.

PDC's approach seems to work. Last June, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development granted a low-interest 20-year

"We want to grow some of our own food on vacant lots. We'll be an extended family of 10,000 people."

$1,200,000 mortgage to PDC for five buildings with 74 apartments within a block of 1186. A consortium of New York City banks is providing the interim construction loan.

PDC members were elated at this news. But they weren't surprised. Even before the announcement, they were hard at work gutting the five buildings with the assumption that they would find the necessary financing. South Bronx residents had faith in PDC, too. They were signing up at PDC to put in their sweat-equity time on the buildings and move into them when they are ready. PDC members have set high goals for themselves. But if they can pull off their plans, there may be a day when a small part of the South Bronx is a symbol not of despair but of human ingenuity and neighborhood renewal.

Let an Angel say "Merry Christmas."

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Records and Cassette Tape

denkrais calls the rarest on earth: brain tissue. I thought of what Carl Sagan wrote: that the number of states in the brain is much greater than the total of elementary particles in the universe. I thought of how few people there are who contribute to the total of our knowledge. Here was one, sitting like a one-eyed Humpty Dumpty before us.

When he had finished working us he said, "Stand up. Notice how you feel. Do you feel different?" There were murmurs of assent. "Do you like yourselves better that way? Good. Thank you very much."

He left the next morning to see Milton Erickson, the hypnotist, in Arizona. And then to Washington and New York to teach at the New School and then to London and then Paris to oversee the publication in French of his new book *Nora: A Case History* and then to Geneva to see about illustrations for another book and then to Munich to begin a three-year course with 60 European doctors and then home to Tel Aviv.

He left me feeling not only better, but inspired. He left me a quarter of an inch taller and with friends remarking on how different I looked. In the downward spiral engendered by a negative prognosis, I had become angered at and withdrawn from my body as though it were an ugly part of me. I was afraid to fail, afraid to fall, and rigid and falling from the fear of it. Now I was recovering function. I felt and saw the motor cortex being reconnected with my body. Feldenkrais didn't speak of a cure. "When people think of being cured," he said, "they think only of being as they were before. We don't go back. You can become a great deal better than you were before. It's up to you."

All I felt now was summed up in what he had told the class one morning: "The human nervous system is 90 percent concerned with recovery of stability," he said. "But life is not a stable process. Stability is for trees. For us, life is a process of risk and recovery. Each step we take is a risk. The ability to recover is our greatest quality. Stability? You have stability when you go to bed. And you keep risking, because one experience is not enough. If it were, then one glass of wine would be sufficient. One game won. One success."

I made plans for Christmas in Tel Aviv. ●

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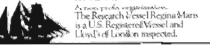

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