

# Self-Fulfillment Through Organic Learning

Moshe Feldenkrais, D.Sc.

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais is an international authority on human movement and the way it relates to behavior and learning. A Russian-born Israeli, Dr. Feldenkrais earned a doctorate in applied physics at the Sorbonne in Paris as well as a degree in electrical and mechanical engineering. He also founded the Judo Club of Paris and wrote several books on the art. In 1947 he published *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning*. He came to the U.S. in the sixties 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. Dr. Feldenkrais's method of work with Awareness Through Movement leads to the creation of new habits by redirecting the brain's habitual patterns of response to the movement in the gravitational field using more natural and efficient paths for the mobility and deployment of body energy. Dr. Feldenkrais continues to lecture at the University of Tel Aviv, and to travel throughout the U.S. demonstrating his work and training students to carry it out.

The following article was edited by Mark Reese from a presentation given by Moshe Feldenkrais at the 1981 Mandala Conference.

I usually don't make it to conferences. I talk to people and I feel like talking to friends. As a lecturer, I'm not a lecturer. I just talk to people who would like to learn something. I'm not an ordinary teacher either, but a peculiar sort of teacher who is interested not in his teaching but in what people learn. Therefore, I never, never wrote or prepared a lecture in my life. There are many people of the Feldenkrais Guild here who know me and will witness that for four or eight years of teaching I never prepared anything. This time I wrote a paper—and of course, I don't need it.

I wrote this because I didn't know what I undertook, that the name of my talk should be "Self-Fulfillment Through Organic Learning." About "organic learning" I could talk without preparing, but "self-fulfillment"—what is self-fulfillment? I never can do anything with abstract notions without talking for days and getting nowhere. I need concrete things that are plausible to everyone, that you and I can understand, and that we can touch, see or hear. After that, when we have some common experience, we can understand one another when we use language. Otherwise, it's impossible. I can say a word like "holistic" and you understand God knows what by that word. What is it? I learned the word "holistic" like Dr. Lomas said yesterday, from Field Marshal Smuts' book. Since then I have seen the word so used and misused that I don't know what it means anymore.

I must begin with concrete things. What is self? What is fulfillment? What is organic learning? If we don't know what we are talking about, we will get nowhere. So first let's see: what is a self? There are four and a half billion selves, and there are not two of them equal, neither in their fingerprints, nor in their immune system. We cannot transplant things from one person to another; they are individuals, each one absolutely unique in his own rights. That's a self. This is a simple sort of thing. But there are probably 200 billion selves like that in the world because all the animals are also selves. What are common to all these selves are very fundamental biological quantities or qualities.

First, self-reproduction. Without self-reproduction no species can exist. All species that exist, including man, must be able to reproduce themselves. The next is self-maintenance. There is no animal, no bacteria, no creature in the world which can exist without absorbing either oxygen, or nitrogen, like the anaerobic bacteria. And water is essential to all life, and food. Without self-maintenance it's inconceivable that any species could exist for a long time. In fact, maintenance is much more drastic than self-reproduction because self-reproduction occurs no more than once or twice a year for most mammals. But maintenance—if you don't breathe for two, three minutes, you won't breathe forever after. Self-preservation is even more drastic: not to be eaten up by a lion or a boa constrictor; falling from a rock, or

a high mountain or a precipice. This can be a question of a second and you're not there. These three "selves"—self-preservation, self-maintenance and self-reproduction—are common to all animals; they have nothing to do with human beings alone. None of these three selves can be satisfied without self-propulsion, or movement, or action—whatever you call it. You can't self-reproduce without movement; if you don't move nothing will happen. And you cannot get your food, air and water without moving. You cannot avoid dangers and preserve yourself without running away, attacking, or being careful in the movement you do—whatever you learned how to do so you could survive.

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While this is common to all living creatures on this earth, the human being is complicated by extraordinary things like thinking, feeling, sensing, consciousness, awareness. What are these things? With what are we going to deal? Awareness, consciousness. Consciousness is also common to most animals, but to such a minor degree, and the difference with which we are endowed with it is so great that you can say it's a different quality. When I ask most people why they have to have consciousness, they say it's enough to be awake. You sleep, you're awake, what do you want to have consciousness for? And in fact, what do you do with your consciousness? What is it? Isn't being awake enough? Well, it turns out that it isn't! Because you yourself can see through personal experience; for instance, you can wake up and not know where you are, and not know whether you are awake or not. You can take a child out of his bed and take him to urinate because you want the bed to remain dry. The child gets up and obviously he does feel that he's getting up. He's awake and he's doing something and going back to bed, but he is not conscious; he doesn't know anything and he doesn't even remember that he was lifted out of bed.

So to be awake is not being conscious. What is it then to be conscious? When you are unconscious, say, after a car accident, or wake up in a hospital not knowing where you are, the first thing you say is "Where am I?" This is actually one of the essences of consciousness. Before you are oriented in the gravitational field so that you know whether you're sitting or standing, and that your eyes meet the horizon in the normal way, you don't know whether you're asleep, whether you are dreaming, whether you're sitting,

whether you are standing, whether you are folding your arms or not. This is one of the major problems of consciousness: to know where you are, what you are doing.

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Now what's the difference between consciousness and awareness? Just to repeat: consciousness has to do with your orientation in the gravitational field. Without that you don't know where you are, what you are, what you are doing, or what is happening with you. Awareness is being conscious and knowing something about it. For instance, I look at you here and I know you and you, but if you ask me how many people are here, I don't know. I have to count them. What do I do to count them? Actually an internal sort of thing. I shift my eyes to you and I say one and two, then three; I count my own shifts of attention. Then I want to know how many ladies sit here and how many men. Again I shift attention. If I want to count peas, it's the same thing. In other words, counting is an internal affair. Very funny. We think we count oranges; but in fact, whether we count oranges, peas, human beings or anything, we count the number of shifts of attention of the eyes or the ears. I will show you some very interesting, almost incredible, things, once you know what we are going to come to. Awareness is a question of knowing what you're doing, knowing what you are conscious of. Now we've said something about the "self" which, of course, is only roughly touching the thing. If you want to know what the self is really, there are many psychologies and theories. My own approach is quite different from what other people do.

Now, what is fulfillment? Fulfill what? I say that if I want to know what fulfillment is I can get to it only if I know what the *limitations* of fulfillment are. Otherwise, fulfillment of what? Fulfillment of four thousand or four billion people's consciousness, or what? What do they want? Everyone wants something else. Then how? *How* does he or she want something else? By the limitations we can understand the thing. Let's see how the limitations come about.

The human being is born a *tabula rasa*. The minor abilities that he has coming into the world out of his mother's womb are practically insignificant. He can't do any of the things that most animals can do in a few days or weeks. For him, the whole thing is concerned with an experience of learning. What can he do? Most of the things like sweating, say, the animal functions of the body, he has more or less under control within a day or two. But everything concerned with human life and fulfillment is nonexistent. The human being can't walk, can't speak, can't sing, can't whistle,

can't do anything. In fact, he can't do mathematics, can't do music—whatever you think, he can't do. Yet all these things will come to him. How? He has a highly-developed nervous system. That nervous system has only one quality which is innate: curiosity. That curiosity is innate in all animals; otherwise, they wouldn't know where to go home and they wouldn't know how to avoid danger. The only real quality that is innate in human beings is curiosity. With that curiosity one will learn to realize what time is, what rhythm is, what singing means, what music means, what speaking means, walking, running, jumping, swimming—I don't know all the functions that the human being can do—functions which are all learned. There is such an amount of learning, and nobody knows who we learn to speak and nobody really knows how we come to learn to crawl and walk. By the time we deal with human beings, people like Piaget or General Smuts or anybody else, we deal with grownup people; we believe that that's a human as he is. But in fact, there isn't one of these systems that has not undergone an extraordinarily long period of organic learning which is completely different from academic learning.

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Academic learning has nothing to do with your personal growth unless by chance, occasionally. Therefore, it is not linked with time at all. It's a social event and a social necessity. We learn architecture because architecture is needed. We learn archeology, we learn engineering, we learn chemistry and computer science because society cannot exist without them, or exists better when it has those things. But none of them depend on or are linked with time in any way. I know Dr. Trager was long ago something else and then he became a doctor; he could have not done it at all. He could have postponed it another 50 years. He could have taken it 50 years ago. It is not written that you should do medicine at all. I have not done medicine, though I wanted to, and I've never been to medical school. So you see, you can do whatever you like. You can stop it, you can postpone it; you can never do it, or do it at any chosen moment of your life. But try to skate before you can walk! Can you? Try to walk before you have crawled. Anybody who has begun by walking without crawling already has defects, and will need Dr. Trager or somebody else to help him. When you think of that, we can begin to see that fulfillment is not just a simple thing, provided we think of how a baby becomes a human being, a grownup human being. You will find that there is a period of organic learning where you cannot alter the time, the sequence, or the length of it—you have

practically no say—while in academic learning you are the master, it's a social thing.

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Let's go back to fulfillment. See the learned things we have done: to speak, to walk, to stand, to write, to read, to make music, to learn to understand and deal with mathematics. You can see most of our occupations and in these find life fulfillment or self-fulfillment is a necessity. Suppose you can't walk. You grew up and you can't walk. You might have cerebral palsy, dystonia, muscular dystrophy, you might have God knows what. There are hundreds of diseases which will interfere with your walking. Life fulfillment for you or for me may be to be able to walk, or to be able to stand without support, or move without a wheelchair. That's a fulfillment. If I can't speak, if I stutter, it may be a life fulfillment to be able to speak clearly. Some people may have a life's fulfillment in singing. For instance, singing and music was eliminated from my childhood by my father's attitude of being a learned man. He thought it was futile to whistle or sing. I should deal with mathematics, with learning—which I did, of course. At the age of 70 I gave myself a birthday present, because up to 70 I had received about 200 neckties for birthday presents, and I don't wear neckties anymore. The first present I gave to myself was two years of learning to play the piano. My teacher was a pupil of mine, a composer named Lockner. Then I learned singing for three years. Only then, by doing that when I was already 75, did I realize what I had missed all my life. I regret today that I did not start when I was 15, or 12. So you see, it's in all those things we learn that there is a question of fulfillment. There's a question of fulfillment if you can't walk; it's a fulfillment to be able to walk. If you have cerebral palsy with athetosis it may be a fulfillment to be more or less like everyone else—which is never the same thing as being yourself. You find that in these limitations in organic learning there is a question of fulfillment.

Now let's see further. Singing, music, mathematics, whistling, walking, swimming, all the actions that are possible, and the elimination of all the troubles that can happen to a human being, may be life fulfillment. I have some extraordinary examples of somebody fulfilling his life. I define health in a funny sort of way I'm sure none of you do. When I say I'm sure, maybe I am wrong, because the unexpected always happens. I have, I believe, a few original ways of looking at health, not because I tend to be original but because I am doing things in a concrete way. And can you see how concrete it is; my first definition of health is somebody who is capable of realizing his or

her unawowed dreams. Believe it or not, most people had intentions of organizing their lives when they were children or when they were adolescents that were stamped out of them in the long run. But these unawowed dreams remained active in them so they can be miserable all their lives having everything they want, but still being dissatisfied, feeling that their life was not fulfilled. For instance, somebody wants to paint, feels that he or she is a painter, and all her life has no chance. Conditions are such that it is impossible. I have an example of that in my own mother. My mother began to paint at 80, but until 80 she didn't have a minute when she could do it. She painted until 93 and produced a series of pictures that many painters admire. They are unawowed dreams in many people; in fact, in every one of us. Salvador Dalí—I don't know whether you read his biography—said that when he was five years old he wanted to be a fireman. A year later he decided he wanted to be Napoleon. Since then, his ambitions keep on growing. So you see, there are many examples like that.

Having defined health as I told you, I had an extraordinary occasion in New York only a few weeks ago. I gave a workshop in New York at the Statler Hilton. There were 350 people and it was a week's work. Among them were some crippled people; several were in wheelchairs and one woman came in with two four-pronged walkers. I couldn't understand why she came, what she wanted to get from my "Awareness Through Movement" lessons, how she would improve—but usually they do. People helped her to lie down on the floor and helped her to get up. Then at one moment people said, "You teach us Awareness Through Movement. We have heard of Functional Integration which is individual nonverbal contact with a person. Would you show us what it is? We would like to understand and to have a concrete experience of it." I said, "All right." I looked around and said, "Is there one here who is really crippled?" Because if I do only a half hour's work and the person is not really crippled, when he gets up you won't know whether he has been hypnotized, or exactly

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what happened by my shaking him here or there. I wanted something where there was nothing that could make that person different enough in an hour or so. I looked around, and picked this woman. She has cerebral palsy and is 49 years old. She is an intelligent woman, like many cerebral palsy people are. She is the librarian of the La Rochelle Library in New York. I told her to come with me, we improvised a table, and I put her on the table. I told them I would work

on her about five minutes, not saying a word, so that she would not be influenced by what I said. Then I would repeat to them in words the same things, in the order I did them, so they could understand what I had done. First, the order is important, the number of movements you do, and all sorts of things. I worked on the woman and it turned out, with speaking, it took much longer than I expected. It took about three-quarters of an hour. When we finished she was crying and laughing at the same time. A hundred people in the audience literally wept seeing the difference that took place. I took the woman off the table, took one hand, with her in a dancing position and said, "You just follow what you feel. Do nothing." I moved her very gently and in a minute or so we were waltzing, she was waltzing. Then she left, forgetting the walkers near the table. Later she came to Amherst, where we train our 235 new practitioners to increase the numbers in the Feldenkrais Guild.' She carried one walker in her hand, literally carried it, and then came and stood while I presented her to the audience. She put the walker aside and stood the whole day on her feet. She said, "That was an unavowed dream: to be able to stand." In New York, she actually told me, "Now that this unavowed dream is realized, give me another dream."

In other words, when we talk about fulfillment or self-fulfillment, you can see that the thing is actually much more complex than just, say, self-fulfillment. If you have a concrete way of seeing it, you have concrete ways of helping. You cannot have concrete ways unless you know how we grow from a baby who can't speak, can't walk, can't do whistling, singing, speaking, mathematics, times and rhythms, doesn't know anything and learns all these things. How does a baby come to the state we are in? Obviously all these things cannot be taught to every child because it is the child who learns. You can't teach him what you want. He learns and his way of learning is actually a sensory-motor way. The first year-and-a-half it is done without thinking. Only if we understand how that growth, that initial motor-sensory learning, becomes what we are when we are grown, can we understand what fulfillment means. Then we can provide some people with the means, within themselves, because I have no means to provide. I can make conditions in which they can learn to realize what their unavowed dream is, actually delve into it and find that they achieve also the means in themselves to perform it, to realize it. There is not a healthy person who is not like that. I believe that the person who never avowed his unavowed dreams somewhere in his unconscious, in his dreams, feels he has wasted his life, and when he is old he will realize it. So self-fulfillment is a real, vital necessity.

Once we come to organic learning you find, if you look at it from the same point of view—how the learning occurred and what it did to the person, how it is performed and what learning means—it is absolutely different from what we usually think and it

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works in an extraordinary way. I can show you here and now some things which will probably make you wonder why you didn't think of them yourself—and you could.

What is the speed of reading? It's the speed of speaking. And how many words a minute can you speak? About 300. How many words can you read? 300 words a minute. Now this looks as if it is a human quality. Bunkum. It isn't. It isn't because the way we learn to read and write is using our hands. You have to copy "A" a hundred thousand times and somebody talks to you and says that this is an "A." It takes you some time to learn to write and read. It's linked with hearing the words, pronouncing the words even slower, and the movement of the hands, which was done in conjunction with speaking. Therefore, it is linked. Our reading is linked with the rate of speaking, with the rate of writing. It's so wired-in in our nervous system because our nervous system learns to do things. It doesn't happen to the nervous system; it doesn't come out of the blue. It took years before we could read and write and speak. They are all linked together and the speed is set by the habit of the learning process. But these habits are completely divorced from our biological, physiological ability.

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Everybody knows that there are now people in America who have learned to read 3,000 words a minute; Kennedy could do that. There's no city in America, I think, where there are not speed reading lessons. What do they do? A kind of thing I have been doing since 1947—I didn't know it was called speed reading. I called it just becoming normal. The thing was divorcing speaking from thinking. This means learning not to use the speaking system, which is common to everybody and limits everybody. If you think in images, in patterns, if you are thinking

visually, auditorially, with your smell or kinaesthetically, and you do not pronounce the words even subliminally, every one of you can learn in a few minutes to double the speed of reading, and of hearing also. By divorcing speaking from thinking, you are capable of reading with your eyes practically two or three lines in one look. People have learned to read at ten times the normal speed—3,000 words a minute. They see the content clearer; therefore, retention is better and comprehension is better. I've seen a person reading a book like that, a chap called Dr. Frank. I gave him a book to read, and he turned the pages at 10 seconds per page. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm reading the book." "Have you read it?" He said, "Yeah." "What is it?" He told me everything in it. He had learned by doing it himself. Try it at home and you will be surprised. Take a page and move across the first line with your hand, without trying to read it—just the first line, five, six times. Then a little slower, and a little faster, and you'll be surprised to find that suddenly you know what is written in that line. It's enough to do about 10 or 15 movements like that. You do it without having pronounced the word, and you know what is written in the line. Then do it with the second line; it goes faster, and the third line, still faster. You will find that if you spend a quarter of an hour on the first page just moving your hand across without trying to read, just looking, following your hand, you can read at the speed of moving your hand.

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Once you have learned to divorce or separate speaking from seeing, not only can you read without pronouncing the words, and do it 10 times faster than before, you discover your thinking was nil before that. When you think the way you are thinking now as you listen to me, what are you doing? The words are connected with what? When you speak now, what's connected to it? It is syntactically formed. It's formed in phrases. Which poet, painter, inventor, creator, has ever thought in syntax-formed language in his mind? It's impossible, because the thing he is doing, the thing he has created, is nonexistent. Therefore, there are no words for it, no phrase, there couldn't be syntax for it. In fact, you have to create a new word to express it, like Freud with the unconscious, or some mathematicians with imaginary numbers. How could you do mathematics with words? The way I'm talking now I can only say things that I have already thought at some earlier stage of my life,

things I have read, things I have learned, things I have dreamed, and things other people told me. But none of that has to do with fulfillment of my life because I am actually acting out of memory, re-living, re-hashing things that were done before. What sort of thinking is that? How would you think something new, creative? It may happen for only two seconds in your life, if at all. If you read the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Financial News of Great Britain and the London Times for 25 years, what will you be able to do after 25 years of reading? What has it improved in you?

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The way I teach my students to work is to bring them into conditions where they can learn to think. They have to learn to think without words, with images, patterns and connections. That sort of thinking always leads to a new way of action. With the gibberish talking and thinking we do now, we can talk for a donkey's age and nothing has changed. But if you think for one second in the way which eliminates the connection with words, you cannot think but in patterns, in disciplines connected to one another. You can't think otherwise than Edison, or Gauss, or LaPlace. You are thinking with the elements of thinking. Maybe whatever you do has already been invented by somebody, but you have invented it yourself. You have created it. So you can see, by learning speed reading—divorcing or separating talking from thinking—you actually begin to think for the first time in your life, originally, creatively. You will be surprised what you can do. I was surprised.

I worked all my life as a physicist. I was with Joliot Curie for ten years. I was in the British Admiralty as a scientist, and many other places. Until the age of 50 I was a scientist. Since then, having come across the ideas I'm explaining to you now, I have created more than 10,000 recorded hours of human movement,<sup>7</sup> combinations of human movements. Only people who have been in contact with me will be able to do them. They are simple movements with the mouth and the hands, which are the most conscious parts of ourselves. I have created about 10,000 hours and

recorded 30 variations in each one. In other words, I have composed more music than Beethoven and Bach together. Now I had no idea of that at all.

Now to give you a simple example: just extend your right arm in front of you, and twist the arm around until your palm faces to your right. Now cross your left arm over your right arm and interlace the fingers of your left hand with your right. Bring your interlaced hands toward you. Now go on, put your head into the hole formed by your arms. That's your habitual way of interlacing your fingers. What about doing the opposite, the non-habitual one? People don't even know that they are able to do it. If you believe this is simple, I can assure you it is not. If you do the habitual one behind your head, you find it comfortable. You do the non-habitual behind you, and you find that something is funny in the space around you. Obviously, it should be because if you exaggerate it you see what your system has learned. If I do the habitual interlacing of the hands, that hand, that shoulder and this hand and the head, do that. If I want to do it the other way around there must be a significant reorientation of the head and the eyes and the spine. If you lie down on the floor you will be surprised how different it is because the shoulder blades and the chest and everything move differently. You can see how these are movements people have never learned.

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What do we want a nervous system for? Humanity, until a few hundred years ago, didn't know there was a nervous system at all. If you don't know that there is one, probably you don't need it. I believe that is actually the essence of it. Does any animal know he has a nervous system? Can't a lion or a cheetah run better than any human being without knowing at all that it has a nervous system? How many people can tell where the nervous system is? What do you know about it? In which condition is it? You don't know; I don't know either. In fact, it turns out in the way of looking at learning and growing, a good nervous system is one which you don't know that you have. As soon as that nervous system gets faulty, and you find you want to touch y-y-y-y-our n-n-n-nose and you c-c-can't get it, then you are very interested in what the nervous system is. The nervous system is the most precious thing on this earth. If you take away

the water, which is 90 percent of the brain, the brain tissue in itself is the most precious organization on this earth. It is rarer in quantity than cobalt, uranium or anything. There is much less of it than any of the precious things on this earth. It is so precious that the God, or nature, or whoever created us, made sure that none of us will have access to it and put it there, inside our safe. Nature, evolution, thinks we are much too silly—if we had a finger to put in it, it would never work. When it doesn't work in some human being, and someone has to go and open it and have a look at it, it is better for us that that doesn't happen. In other words, a healthy nervous system is not like a nervous system the way we think of it in the normal way of speaking about holism—it is much more. Actually, General Smuts saw it in practically the same way I do. It is an extraordinarily important, complex thing that there is much to know about and use.

I told you about reading. I will show you something even more striking—hearing and music. We normally remember melodies. We can remember notes through that technique of melody, and we can remember a lot of single notes sung. We are used to reading and speaking at 300 words a minute. If I take a tape recorder and present you with what you have heard, obviously you could hear it. I advise you to take a tape recorder at home, at the normal rate it speaks, rewind that phrase and press the fast-forward button. You will be surprised that with the speed doubled you can understand every word of the phrase you have already heard. Then rewind two phrases, the one before that you never really heard, and you will find you can hear the other one at double the speed. I assure you, take that tape recorder and deal with it for 10 minutes and you will learn to listen to and understand every word. It doesn't matter if you are a hundred years old, or 20. This shows you what happens when you understand and inquire into the human rain, as we do in Functional Integration. Tomorrow at the end of the day we will show you a

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videotape of a cerebral palsy child. You will see how that system changes in one hour, to the point where many of you will have tears in your eyes. Many will go home and say that they have seen a miracle; you will see everything from the beginning to the end. We have 190 tapes like this. It is holism improved to improve life by leaps and bounds, in hours instead of years. That is what happens to the human brain when it works.

Now the next thing about hearing. If I do this [tapping 2 times], everybody knows there are two knocks, and then [tapping 3 times] you know that's three. Take a pad and do this [tapping 5 times, fast] and actually count them. How many? Five. You know that. Now take a piece of paper and a pencil so that you can actually count whether you made a mistake or not. Now tap many times, fast. How many are there? You will find that in about five minutes of doing that, you say "21." And you count out 21. In other words, as I claim in my new book, *The Elusive Obvious*, we never use more than about 10 percent of our abilities, except in the one thing on which we build our life. There we use our full ability, or almost all of it. But there is no reason why you shouldn't do

this on every level of your existence.

I hope you can realize all your unavowed dreams.

#### Footnotes

1. For directories of practitioners trained by Dr. Feldenkrais to teach and other info: e.g., books and tapes, contact the Feldenkrais Guild, P. O. Box 11145, San Francisco, CA 94101, (415) 552-8708.
2. Feldenkrais Foundation, c/o Gerald Nierenberg, 230 Park Ave., New York, New York 10169, (212) 986-5555.