

BODY OR FRAME?

The seventy-year old woman who visited my Feldenkrais practice was worried about the first signs of hobbling and an elderly gait. She told me that she often staggered and would wave an arm to improve the locomotion.

As usual, I asked her to find a comfortable position on my bench. She first curled up into a foetus position on the side, but quickly turned onto the back instead. She was not completely comfortable – her back was tense, she said, and she was not resting the small of the back in a comfortable manner. I tried to alleviate this by putting a roll under the knees. I selected a mid-sized roll but it was not big enough. She preferred to lie in the foetal position, although on the back. We compromised by using the large, 8 inches in diameter roll. I placed several layers of finger thick hard pads under her head. We tried various changes in position until she was satisfied; she was now lying with the head in roughly the same position as when she was standing upright – protruding forward. The hips were also bent, corresponding to the forward-leaning walk. I gave her as much rest and support as my wide, long bench allowed. She had received a lesson a few years earlier, and she knew it was up to her to try to relax as much as she could. However, she was slightly anxious. The facial expressions and ceaseless opening and closing of the tension-contorted hands indicated far too much activity for her to be comfortable.

She assisted me as I slowly lifted the left lower leg at the ankle. It remained raised and I repeatedly made the same slow movements. I noticed after a while that the tonus of the entire leg was slowly decreasing. I was able to lift, lower and turn the hip and knee without much resistance. When I pulled away the large roll, I could position the legs as a support and easily pushed the entire foot along the length of the leg towards the pelvis. She understood. She accepted the support from the stability of the skeleton and replied with a deep sigh. I repeated these manipulations several times and each sigh indicated that she was slowly neutralising the high level of tonus throughout her self. The breathing also became increasingly deep and soft. I switched between the left and right leg several times and lay the legs, in a comfortable resting position, on the roll, with the hips turned outwards.

On my stool, next to the head-end, I applied the gentlest possible movements to get the head to roll from side to side. It proved impossible. It was as if her neck and vertebral column were in a vice. The incredibly intricate system that keeps up a raised head had locked. Despite the fact that she was resting against the head support, I could hardly move her. Instead, I provided her with support via the head in direction of the pelvis and feet. The same quick reaction. A deep sigh. I slowly lifted the head and supported it with cupped hands. Very aware of the breathing rhythm, I tried different directions in order to move the head from her locked position. The throat muscles on each side of the clavicle revealed the unconscious exertion and lack of any real relaxation.

The head suddenly became heavier, more like the actual weight of a human head. I started to feel tired and I slid a few pads under the head to provide it with support instead of holding her. However, there were only half as many compared to when we began.

I returned to applying the procedure from the feet. The movements in the torso indicated greater flexibility when, intermittently, I lightly pulled or supported the legs towards or away from the head. The slightest movement and I noticed that the head started to rock along with it. She sighed deeply every time I stopped the slow movements.

I now moved the hands onto the stomach. The arms had previously rested on either side of the torso. Via the hands I sought movement and provided support under top of the shoulder blade and the shoulder. I tried to direct the movement towards the central point of her. The chest heaved with every breath she took. Depending on the direction of the support I gave her and the movements I selected, I could vary the point where the plasticity of the ribs could be felt. I decided not to move the hands. Very conscious of that. This old woman had a lifetime's experience of holding things, lifting, carrying and supporting. How would she respond to movements not generated via the intelligent hands? I was looking for the unusual – for unexpected movements – without preconceived ideas. I left the hands until the end of the session. I again tried to give the head support and the ability to move freely. I suddenly realised I could angle her backwards. The neck muscles became softer at exactly the same time as the throat muscles did. I intuitively fixed my gaze on the movement of the abdomen, which was even softer and deeper. The face was peaceful. I had no difficulty in laying the head directly on the bench. I went back to the foot-end and changed the big roll to a smaller one. I supported, turned and lifted. I sensed an opportunity to let her lie stretched at full length with the hips stretched out. The tendency for the hips to stay bent ceased when everything that was drawing together the front of the torso and limbs slowly extended. She accepted the support via the outer side of the sole of the foot. She sighed again in reply. "Here – this is your skeleton," I wanted to say aloud, but I realised she would certainly not be receptive to such an explanation. My silent message was sufficient.

I went back to the head-end and took hold of the hands from behind as if greeting her. I lifted the arms towards the ceiling. I immediately felt the tension in the upper arm caused by the grip. I raised and lowered the arms several times until she began to understand. Then I released her hands. The left hand had changed shape – it was completely relaxed. The claw-like form of the previously tense hand had disappeared. One more time I loosely "greeted" her and the arms this time turned outwards, all the way from the wings of the shoulder blades.

I cleared the throat to break the forty-minute long silence. "That was so restful," she said. "I haven't rested like that for forty years, not since I attended a relaxation course at the maternity ward." She wanted to lie there a while longer, stretched out at full length. The back had dropped down – it now caused her no discomfort at all. She looked stately, lying there at the full length. When she eventually sat up on the edge of the bench with loosely hanging shoulders and a naturally supported chest, she looked completely different from when she arrived. She began to walk around the room. Much straighter than normal, but I said nothing. I felt that my comments would have had the wrong effect. Instead, I avoided answering the question as to whether she was limping less. What I saw was important, but the most important thing of all was what she felt.

She suddenly stood still and starting talking. "Do you know, I've shrouded dead women for thirty years? When I lay on your bench and you walked round and lifted me in different ways, I started to think about how I help the deceased to dress in their final clothes. They don't help at all – clothing a dead person feels special. Their arms are heavy and fall back as soon as I release my grip. When you first lifted my arm and I felt how I resisted, only to later feeling its weight, I was reminded of how it feels when I shroud these women – but the opposite. How my arm then tumbled down onto the bench.

I suddenly understood the difference between a dead and a living person. I'm happy to be alive. I thought about so much when I was lying there on the bench. How much tension against all difficulties we use when alive. I was also able to solve some problems. It was extremely restful – a real rest. What is muscle tension by the way?"

"Tension is life," I interjected. "Without tension, no life. You lay still and you did everything you could not to resist but accept when we were in those movements. But you lived and you felt and thought unusual thoughts. Perhaps a person who had observed us would have said that I carried out movements and you remained passive, but what you told me proves that the opposite is true. You participated to the full. Your entire system vibrated with impressions and information in a most unusual manner. You learned something about yourself and your account is only a fragment of everything that has happened."

I watched her as she left my practice. The walk had changed. Although she retained a cramped posture around her shoulder bag strap, the bearing was that of a much younger woman. We had momentarily suspended time and, in our own way, challenged fate.

Swedish title: Kropp eller lekamen
translation: Bill Harris, editing: Russell Hall

Address: Eva Laser; Feldenkrais teacher, Reg. Physiotherapist, ergonomist
P.O.Box 71 70 SE - 170 07 Solna (Stockholm) Sweden
www.somatik.se eva.laser@telia.com