The Problem of Learning

(Are Learning and Aliveness Incompatible?)[1]

By Dr. Arno Gruen

Translated by Dr. Arno Gruen 2005, especially for the Feldenkrais community.

Why should learning be difficult? Why should education be such a chore and such a struggle? Who does not remember the drudgery of learning reading and writing and arithmetic? How is it possible that learning itself has become a problem of world-wide dimension?

The answers, as we know them out of the technical literature speak of inhibitions and emotional blocks, of neurotic regressions and fixations, and of resistance to the demands of reality by primeval antisocial tendencies. In line with such thinking, man's most pressing concern revolves around the gratification of his egotistical desires. To top this off, one speaks even of defects and limitations in our brain structures.

Running through this dilemma is a common thread, a largely under verbalized reproach: The faults for the difficulties reside in the learner himself. And thus, man stands accused, the non-explicit nature of the accusation depriving him of awareness for challenge, preventing appeal, and leaving him vaguely, yet intensely, guilty for not - so it feels - accomplishing enough. In this way, in one swoop, learning becomes infused with guilt and a sense of inadequacy. And we wonder why learning is difficult! Let us take a closer look.

A cat learns within a matter of weeks how to take care of itself. For us humans, it is a different story: The cat learns only what is vitally necessary for it. We on the other hand are for such a long time so absolutely dependent on our parents, that we cannot differentiate between what we really need to know and what is forced upon us. Our dependency during our earliest development is so absolute that learning to live in terms of the other's will become the very basis for our learning, determining how and what we learn.

The insidiousness of this process is such that parents living in a culture such as ours, wherein self-esteem is a direct function of the ability to dominate others (economically, politically, socially, intellectually, emotionally, sexually, etc.), will exploit a child's dependency to further their own needs for self-esteem. And where such exploitation is unwitting, its intention is not accessible to consciousness and therefore cannot reach individual and social awareness. This inevitably leads to the submission, on the part of the child, to needs not his own. But when a child must

[1] Lernen ohne Anstrengung-erstrebenswertes oder minderwertiges Ziel?"
Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Samstag/Sonntag, 5./6. Juli 1980, p.37

shun its own initiatives, learning loses its natural playfulness and becomes a duty. This, because parents expectations are for their children to perform, not to enjoy. Learning thus becomes programmed and segmental, and forces an orientation based on repetition and boring practice.

That is the basic difference to playful learning in which the essentials of the learning process are absorbed without the coerciveness of "you must learn". Here "learning without conscious intention" lets the inner processes come into play, so extensively described by the national school of psychologists like Koffka, Kohler, and Wertheimer. Their focal characteristics are integration, spontaneity of learning and joyfulness. On the other hand learning that is oriented toward achievement and proper performance generates tension, fear and anxiety.

While playful and pleasurable learning leads to a sense of freedom, the other forces us to aim for ever more perfect performance. The drive to perform is prescribed by parents whose needs for dominance brings them to continuously assess and criticize their children. In this way we develop and incorporate a need for an authoritative instance to judge and approve us. And even if we do rebel against such an authority, there remains deeply anchored in our psyche the need for just such an authority, which will accept and acknowledge us.

That is why we keep searching for a new authority to replace the one just dethroned. The chains that tie us down affect us profoundly. When the women's lib movement coined the phrase "our bodies, ourselves" they justifiably were demanding the right to determine over their own bodies. If women thereby only thought of sexual subjugation, then they did not touch the core of the problem. For it is not only the women who are being detached from their bodies through the described process, but all humanity. How many women, men and children move their bodies in a harmonious way that is in full agreement with their bodies' potential for harmonious movement? With few exceptions, people in Western cultures walk and move in stressful ways. This is not generally perceived, the prevalence of the resulting back and muscle tensions being attributed to other causes.

Nikolaas Tinbergen, in his 1973 Nobel Lecture -- devoted to the analysis of Stress Disease - analyzed our posture and movement. He had been drawn to this by the work of the late F.M. Alexander, who, having developed serious speech impairment had come close to losing his voice. During a series of agonizing years, he worked out how to improve the use of his musculature in movement and posture, and was in this way able to regain control over his voice. Becoming aware of the misuse of his body, Alexander observed that his fellow man stood and moved in equally defective ways. Most of us, it seemed, walk in ways that contract the muscles of the neck, raise our shoulders and tighten our buttocks, sitting also in a manner that curves our backs either too much forward or too much backwards in order to conform to "ideas" we have of sitting, standing or walking (the photographs in Tinbergen's lecture illustrate the point; see Science, volume 185, 1974). Our conscious notions of posture and movement reflect a static idea of balance, rather than its dynamic character. Thus, proper body control based on being truly attuned to one's body would mean that no preliminary adjustments or

movements are necessary to pass from standing to walking, or walking to running. Yet, when we try to become conscious of our functioning, most of us will notice that for each change, we need to make preliminary inner adjustments in order to pass from one movement to the other.

What impressed Tinbergen most when he and his family subjected themselves to Alexander's retraining method was the speed with which improvement in the use of the body could be obtained. Obviously, we can shake off the shackles of our past if given the right opportunity. Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais , who has studied human movement for almost 40 years, has similarly commented on the ability of our cortex to "learn. "Apparently we have the capacity to immediately reorganize our learning, so as to drop defective muscle patterns for better integrated ones, if given the chance to experience the new.

"Misuse with all its psychosomatic, or rather somatopsychic consequences," says Tinbergen, "must therefore be considered a result of...a culturally determined stress." The brain apparently operates in terms of an idea of "correct" performance, as von Holst and Mittelstaedt (Naturswissenschaften: 37, 1950) have formulated it. It seems to compare feedback reports with expectations stored in the cortex. What Tinbergen, Alexander and Feldenkrais suspect is that the basis for these expectations is not genetic, but phenotypic, that they are a function of conditions residing in the nature of our earliest learning and socialization?

This, however, is not just a matter of wrongly learned motor patterns. The issue is that culturally induced, but harmful, ways of walking and standing are part of a larger phenomenon, the learning to substitute the other's will for our own. The consequences of such a largely unconscious substitution of one's own will by that of another's is illustrated by the following experience of a workshop I attended.

This workshop in the therapy of Functional Integration was given by Dr. Feldenkrais at the Kinderzentrum of the Munich University School of Medicine (under the direction of Professor Th. Hellbrugge and Dr. M. Pachler). In his movement work, Feldenkrais early came to recognize the coerciveness of socialization in inhibiting and diminishing our potential for learning. In retraining patients with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and other difficulties, it was the thinking and wrong experience with our bodies that stood in the way of growth, and was often responsible for the severity of malfunctioning. Forced upon us by the socialization process, these thought patterns steer our bodies towards adaptation, for that is what promised us social and therefore emotional security. Such thinking inevitably leads to the splitting off of our body sensations. And this kind of separation, which brings a splitting of feelings in its wake, makes it extremely difficult for a self to emerge on the basis of our own experiences. It was the goal of the workshop to introduce the participants to a form of integration built on new body experiences.

In two days, Feldenkrais brought a group of approximately 100 specialists (doctors, psychologists, physical therapists) to the point of gaining control over their motility do such an extent that, sitting on the floor and pivoting in only one direction, they were able to encompass a visual angle of 360°. Our movements had been stemming

from abstract concepts we have about the kind of actions possible for us, Feldenkrais enabled us to be so in harmony with our body that we could modify these movements once he reunited us with a bodily self from which we had become alienated.

In the course of these 30 minutes, he made it clear to us that the way we dealt with our bodies was bound by the conceptualization that only learning that has been accompanied by stress has any kind of validity. "Try harder" is what we are constantly exhorted to do, as a consequence of which we adopt a fundamental but totally unconscious attitude toward life, namely that what is learned without stress cannot be of importance nor be of importance. In that way we never have the opportunity to learn that that which might be pleasant or agreeable might be worthwhile, and thus do not imbibe such ways of living. In Feldenkrais' workshop it therefore became instantly clear that we even had the right to learn ways that were considered awkward. And out of this emerged the astonishing experience that we could in no time at all perform as well as the best among us.

Apparently, as Karl Pribram, head of the Neuropsychology Laboratories at Stanford University, put it, Feldenkrais is "changing operations in the brain itself." By stimulating and moving muscles, he is changing the representation in the motor cortex (the feedback expectation of von Holst and Mittelstaedt) and giving us the opportunity to switch over to what is more efficient and more comfortable; and our brains, feeling the freedom of the new learning, rush to meet it.

As I found myself turning to reach practically a 360 degree sweep I heard Feldenkrais comment, "You see, when you have been told over and over again 'exert yourself,' you will never find out how to learn what is comfortable for yourself, and therefore never what is right for you". At that moment 2000 years of our civilization with its cult of the physical exertion passed before my eyes. I thought of all the awful gymnastic hours I spent in physical education in school and the sense of inadequacy they called forth in me. And I thought of the inflated self-esteem of those who were praised because they were obedient to the authorities. What they were really doing was to submit and yield their own will to another's. I thought of "Qual auf der Matte" ("Torture on the Mat"), a piece by Michael Tiedt in the November 23, 1979 issue of Zeit Magazine describing the humiliation suffered by him during his gym lessons, and he was a person who loved sport! It became clear to me, that the sadistic acts he described were just a special instance of the general demand for surrender to authority. And such authorities themselves had once to surrender too. This process repeats itself generation after generation. This surrender to power outlives all forms of government, political and social organization, acting practically like a hereditary factor. The worst aspect of it all being that we are not conscious of this surrender. Yet the proof of this ubiquitous surrender is our flawed carriage and our awkward gait.

The worst aspect of this is not that we all in some measure live in terms of the other's will. What is downright dangerous is that having once begun to live, so to say, "outside of our bodies", we begin to fear the freedom that awakens with coming in touch with our own feelings. We all desire freedom, but are bound to power, desiring recognition praise from those who hold it. This condemns us to an

eternal search for approbation from those very people who deny our real needs. We learned in earliest childhood to yield to the demands of those whose "love" we are dependent on. Without reflection, we learned to equate freedom with disobedience. Therefore, we respond to freedom with anxiety and fear. Why else do we end up feeling more at ease with those who reject us, rather than those who truly accept us? The basis of Proust's profound observation about man's need to have his suffering appeased by whatever being has made him suffer in the first place must have its roots here.

Thus, it was no surprise when a number of course participants, despite their experience of a freeing of their bodies, on the second day, began to express hostility to Feldenkrais. They felt insulted when he suggested a change in the course program. They insisted he hold to the announced schedule. These same people reacted with rejection of the new experiences they had made. One of the physiotherapists wanted to know the sequence of exercises to be followed in working with a child maimed by cerebral palsy. Her question was at complete variance with her own experiences during the workshop. She had not learned by going through a sequence of exercises but by creating opportunities for stress-free movements through which she could organize new movement patterns. Her insistent questions denied the learning she herself had experienced of a unitary not segmented learning process.

This person insisted on a form of learning that perpetuates the process of learning that she had always been subjected to and which express is that learning is a segmented process, one imposed from without, and thus destructive to an inner organizing process that makes the learning of movement an act of one's own.

Is it that we are by and large so conditioned to being programmed, that the very experience of freedom in bodily movement alone is capable of arousing unease? Eric Fromm, in his classic Escape from Freedom, pointed out that freedom on the political level involves responsibility, which is something people would like to evade. That is why fascism is so attractive. It seems to me, however, that what undermines our chance for freedom is the fear going back to those early childhood years, characterized by uneasiness and anxiety, during which our own vitality and zest for life became our enemies. In other words, the real and potential self become our enemies. We want to escape responsibility because we are deeply afraid of having a self of our own. It is not an abstract responsibility we find threatening but rather the responsibility to realize ourselves. Our own vitality as well as that of others frightens us; if it still manages to surface, we respond with rage and turn against our own freedom. It is vitality itself that we are opposing.

Perhaps now we can consider that the learning difficulties we started out with are not simply an expression of pathology, but also an expression of opposition to the demand for submission. Perhaps our fellow citizens who fail in their learning and living abilities are telling us something about the world we live in that the rest of us need to hear. And we should learn to listen if we want to get a hold on man's destructiveness. An example out of the so-called pathology may illustrate: The hallmark of every neurotic and schizophrenic struggle is the avoidance of domination by a world sensed to be hypocritical, false and unjust. Yet the form of

this struggle against submission may be through compliance itself. This may seem paradoxical. This is why the meaning of this struggle so often escapes us. A patient once told me, "You cannot touch me if I am as you wish." With unusual perceptiveness, he anticipated other people's every wish and thought. Then, by complying, he kept "free" of having to declare himself. He only "performed" what others expected; he himself was never invested in his actions. Since in this fashion he never revealed his own will, he believed himself invulnerable and thus he felt "free". What we need to hear --without diminishing the awfulness of the self-destructive nature of this stance -- is what such an individual is telling us about the world we all live in. And apparently as Tinbergen, Alexander, Feldenkrais and others have shown, we may not know or be at all aware of what has happened to us. Most of us adjust to domination and therefore do not know the source of our rage!

We will not understand what we have done to our own needs for freedom, if we do not start paying attention to those among us who are failures in learning to read, write, count, walk, stand, and of life itself. Through their failing they are in a paradoxical way in touch with what we the "successful ones" have probably lost, the contact with our needs. It is true the "failures" cannot make use of what they sense so indirectly but they can help us to discover the ways in which we learned to lose touch with our own needs by yielding to the pressure to accommodate. It is the fear of the unfolding of our own aliveness that underlies our irrational destructiveness.

Published with permission of Prof. Dr. Arno Gruen

Rütistrasse 4, CH-8032 Zürich Phone/Fax: +41 1 262 39 80

For more information about the author;

http://www.arnogruen.net