

I want to create processes, not mediate knowledge

A conversation with Barbara Pieper



Barbara Pieper ©

by Uta Ruge

When I was in Munich to visit the German Guild's office I stayed with Barbara Pieper at Gräfeling. Early in the morning we cycled to the place where she gives FI sessions, about 10 minutes away from her home. This is the attic of one of the district's large detached houses, surrounded by gardens large and small. There's just enough space for the table and walking around it. Everyone who enters this room is immediately led – in a friendly and unassertive way – to focus on personal resources and the relationship through which learning can take place. When we were cycling back again we started to talk shop – about clients and our practices. Back in Barbara's home, where her work-room is also full of papers and books, we had a quick breakfast and then continued in the living room with a tape recorder.

What was your personal and professional situation when you first encountered the Feldenkrais method?

That was in 1980. At that time I was working half-time at Munich University on a research project involving the interconnections between family life and job. In the seventies those two spheres were treated separately, but our project was interested in the connections between work and private life. Every three years our work was assessed by external experts in sessions extending over several days. Our employment depended on that. During that period we had to work day and night. At the same time I had a child and household. During one of those periods I had a kind of slipped-disc and an acquaintance recommended a Feldenkrais teacher.

Who was that?

Ned Dwelle. He and Roger Russell were the only Feldenkrais teachers in Germany. So I literally crawled to him and ended up in a little room in a commune – and thought all that very strange. But it did me a lot of good, and going home I could walk better.

And you did that for some time?

I had a great number of individual lessons and thus coped better with the difficulties of a life split between university and family, and also involving friends and many guests. At some stage Ned said I now had to learn things for myself. He wouldn't give me any more individual sessions. Instead he got me to do an ATM lesson. I thought it incredible that I should pay the same money when he only talked and did nothing while I had to do everything. But I remembered that lesson when I felt pain again on holiday so I did it again. Then I became curious and said to myself: this is something completely different ... After that I went to group courses for about six years.

You were still a sociologist at the university?

Yes, with three different jobs in the course of sixteen years. I started in 1971 as an assistant lecturer in urban sociology. I really wanted to become an architect, so as a sociologist I also ended up dealing with human beings in space. Then came my first child and I was on the outside for a time. After that I switched to being the executive director of this research until I realised my role was the same as at home: a housewife and mother for all, jumping in everywhere and doing everything ... So I ended up in one of the projects, still part-time.

Was it the fascination of the Feldenkrais method that then impelled you towards a training?

No, I wasn't any longer satisfied with research which was so different to family life. By then I had two children, and the vitality and intensity of a family always conflicted with abstract work at the university.

So you mainly wanted to get out of the situation you were in?

Yes. I absolutely wanted to do something. All the knowledge accumulated in a university impressed me, but I wanted to apply knowledge. Then I wasn't satisfied with applying knowledge. I wanted people to take into account the connections I had researched and experienced for myself. I could do that in the Munich Women's Academy, set up by women scholars. For a time I also served on the Board of a non profit family education centre.

That means you both suffered from and researched into the problem of co-ordinating work and family?

Yes since I'd always been interested in how theory and practice influence and support one another, and in how one can live this symbiosis. But that was usually a little too much ... Initially Feldenkrais gave me a possibility of helping myself. I only understood all the other things with the passing of time.

So first just a kind of self-help model?

You could say that. When Ned Dwelle suggested in 1983 that I should do a training, I still thought that completely absurd, even though I was already looking for something new. Only in 1986 did I join Gaby Yaron's Munich II training. I had previously taken a look at Chava Shelhav's work and was very attracted, but that wasn't possible because of the children. I didn't know anything about Gaby but took what was closest at hand.

What did you have in mind when you did the training?

My idea was to first do something for myself so as to be able to cope better with these different expectations and tasks. But right from the start I also intended to continue working professionally. After all with Ned and Gaby I saw people who lived from this work and at the same time contributed to their own development. In addition this process accorded with the picture I had of myself: being independent, with a job, and earning my own income.

Was there something akin to a key experience for you in the training, making clearer: that's what I want, and it also advances me intellectually? Did that come more from life or from theory?

The distinction you make there simply doesn't exist in my life. I always experience an inner interrelating, even if I don't always express it outwardly. To start with the training offered absolutely nothing in the way of theory. Gaby was a woman of music, of intuition, and it took me a long time to understand what she wanted. Later though I learned very much in her advanced trainings. If I hadn't done ATM and FI for so many years, I would have been

very lost in the training. Then Myriam Pfeffer came and she addressed an intellectual or spiritual level I found highly attractive. Finally Yochanan Rywerant taught as well. Initially I again had difficulty in understanding and only in his advanceds could I come to terms with what he offered us – this systematic approach which was so different to Gaby – and his wonderful subtle irony. Carl Ginsburg also taught in Munich II. He used a ‘skeleton approach’, which began so slowly that I saw I could link what I’d previously learned with what I was now experiencing. To start with I was ready to give up sociology altogether.

What was it about work on the skeleton that reminded you of sociology?

Sociology is concerned with relationships between the individual and the surrounding environment. It deals with life-processes in society, with what could be called “function” and how “structures” (self-reinforcing conditions) are established time and again, for instance specific forms of behavioural regulation as social norms. Something similar can be found in the skeleton. That’s to be found at birth. Then we use our bones in accordance with purposes and intentions. That becomes our skeleton, our scoliosis, or whatever. For me there’s no separation between structure and function. I see them as different means of access in observing the same thing. The subject, the person taking action, is the connecting link.

So what about the key experience?

During the training period my family and I visited the Grotte de Clamouse, a cave with stalactites and stalagmites in the South of France. You drive under these and see how a great range of structures can form and constantly change on the basis of a single principle, the falling of a drop of water. These structures could be flowers or a wartime battlefield (That comes from my having been born in 1945). At any rate, I then started to read books on the natural sciences, to involve myself in how structures are formed out of specific processes and then change as an outcome of use. The same is to be seen in the sea, for instance in mud-flats where the tide forms drainage canals which then look like nervous systems or a tree. Suddenly seeing the world like that grabbed me and enormously enriched my life. It was as if what I experienced in different spheres was now getting integrated. After all, these were the same things, the same processes, but seen from different angles. That took a great load off me, relieving me of the work needed to bring these realms together.

So it wasn’t work any longer. You could recognise the principle as being the same?

I could recognise the principle as being the same in anything vitally alive. Vitality is what interests me. And discovering in that vitality the structuring, constantly emerging, and changing possibilities. And being active too in that realm.

Let’s move on then to this being active. How did you make a start?

I got going because I absolutely wanted to work professionally again – immediately after the second year of training, together with Eva Bleicher-Flohrschütz, in the Munich adult education set-up with an ATM course. We’ve been doing that now since 1987. I had always worked in teams so I didn’t want to miss out on the stimuli and challenges offered there. The search for other people with whom I can share both theory and practice has been a central theme in my life inclusive of my “Feldenkrais life”. For my previous circle of friends and colleagues I had become something exotic.

Were you also shocked that they weren’t interested in what you were doing?

No, that was to be expected, but at the same time it made me sad. For instance I told colleagues from the Women’s Academy that we had to devote attention to the natural sciences, to the body and the links with social behaviour ... But their only response was: Leave us in peace. I couldn’t find a berth anywhere for these new ways of seeing things, which in the meantime have become accepted – also by scholars. At that time though I was very much thrown back on my own resources – in practice, theory, and my awareness of life. That changed only

slowly. I met new people at meetings of Guild members, and then finally there was the co-operation with Sylvia Weise on the 'Vocational Profile' – the "Berufsbild".

Then you helped write the 'Vocational Profile'. How did that come about?

Christoph Goertz talked to me at the 1995 Guild annual meeting in Berlin. The Guild executive had set up a working group headed by Karin Engels-Maurer but the draft proposals produced were thought insufficient. I wanted to make a fresh start in a team – only because I was already writing a presentation for former colleagues who wanted to know what Feldenkrais entails. Sylvia expressed interest too so we were asked to produce a new draft. Michael Schründer was also involved to begin with, but dropped out for personal reasons. We were also able to make use of some of the material assembled by the working group, such as vocational profiles in compatible fields. So we didn't start from scratch.

How long did this job take you?

We basically worked non-stop from February to mid-August 1996, struggling for months to bring together practical experience and the right words. Our draft was then discussed at the members' Guild's annual meeting in October 1996. Changes were incorporated and finally accepted. We didn't want to use the term 'Beruf' (occupation, profession, job) and that's why the text is called 'Feldenkrais – a New Field of Work', indicating that practicing Feldenkrais is more far-ranging than the usual idea of a job and cuts across existing occupations. Ironically, despite all that, this text is now everywhere as the 'Berufsbild', even in the other languages into which it has been translated. But Feldenkrais is precisely not a traditional occupation but a new multifunctional kind of professional activity.

Let's return to the beginnings of your practice. How did that work out with the transition from fixed employment to working on your own?

Alongside the ATM classes in the adult education centre I offered private classes here in my living room with neighbours, friends, and former colleagues. Michael, my husband, moved furniture around and the children had to clear up their things. Then Feldenkrais could happen here. I had difficulties with individual lessons to begin with because I thought I wasn't so good there as in teaching groups. So initially I didn't ask for any money ... Looking back I'm surprised at myself since I'd intended to be professional – and that was basically completely unprofessional. Later, in my application for accreditation as an assistant-trainer, I worked out how much work is involved in making Feldenkrais into an autonomous practice. My conclusion was that for every hour of teaching one additional hour was needed for organising everything inclusive of cleaning rooms, making telephone calls, tax declarations, further training etc. This invisible but necessary additional work is usually as unappreciated as housework.

How did your work in trainings get under way?

That just happened. Around 1997 Ned Dwelle asked me whether I, as an 'experienced practitioner', would like to participate in the Koessen I training. I wasn't thinking of that but finally did so, out of curiosity... A year later Myriam Pfeffer said goodbye to me at her Paris training with the words: "Yes, Barbara will now become an assistant-trainer". I sat in the plane and wondered: Why did she say that? Basically she was showing me that the time had come for a decision.

Looking back, how does the development-process you went through seem today?

Initially everything seems more a matter of chance. Here and there someone knows you and needs help in a training... But retrospectively that succession of events had an astonishing dynamism of its own: first local teamwork on a small scale, then co-operation on the 'Vocational Profile'. After that involvement in trainings and then in 1999 establishment of the feldenkrais zeit and shared editorial responsibility with Werner Kraus, Sylvia

Weise, and Konrad Wiesendanger. And finally in 2000 the start of work in the International Feldenkrais Federation (IFF).

Here I must tell readers that while Barbara is talking she also paints spirals on the table and in the air.

This movement time and again returns to me in attempting to bring things together so as to be able to live with them and make constructive use of tension. It always gets under way with curiosity and the wish to be together with others and work with them.

Was that also the start or the motivation for your involvement in the IFF?

Yes. Years ago the IFF began to devote attention to the question of how the Feldenkrais method can carry on developing. There were studies devoted to 'What is a successful practitioner?', and then in 1999 a working group on quality and competence in practicing the method was set up. Sylvia, who was in the German Guild executive and an IFF representative at that time, was also part of this group. She wanted to involve other people and asked me if I knew anyone... Then it became apparent to me that I was interested too. The working group at that time consisted of Francesca White (Australia), Rob Black (Canada), Markus Riesen and Daniel Clénin (Switzerland), and Cliff Smyth (Australia/USA). I met them at the Neuburg/Donau IFF Assembly in 2000, and today they are all working in the IFF Academy.



Photo Deborah Bowes © IFF Assembly 2004 Soesterberg / NL

From the left: Rob Black (CND), Lester Loops (USA), Dr. Barbara Pieper (D), Daniel Clénin (CH), Cliff Smyth (AUS-USA), Janie Randerson (NZ), Markus Riesen (CH), Rineke Brinkhof (NL), Lynette Reid (CND)

Did concern about the quality of practitioners' work underlie such efforts?

No, such concern was not the main emphasis. I saw possibilities here of bringing in and applying my experience of the method and occupational research in a specifically Feldenkrais approach to the development of quality and competency. I'm driven by the idea of bringing together what would otherwise seem unconnected. I'm interested in the question of how we as Feldenkrais teachers can work to improve the quality of our practice. I see this as a way for the method to remain in existence and, above all, stay vitally alive.

Let's return again to your practice. How did you hit on the idea of study-groups for practitioners?

Work in trainings greatly enriched my practice. That enabled me to understand very much more about what I am doing. People completing trainings always look for other practitioners with whom they can continue to learn, so since 1998 I've been organising little study-groups for practitioners – like those I attended myself. I really enjoy this work. In much Feldenkrais further training a specific sequence has become habitual: first there is an ATM and then that is transformed into FI work, initially as a demonstration and afterwards tried out in groups of two or three. In my study-groups I try to design FI teaching in the same way as an ATM, so far as possible showing nothing and instead presenting the sequence in such a way that colleagues themselves jointly discover suitable forms of intervention from highly differentiated perspectives. Daniel Clénin and I are also experimenting with such approaches in the IFF. The different spheres of my work come together here.

The IFF is the 'umbrella organisation' for national Feldenkrais associations, the TABs, and the Feldenkrais family. Does that leave sufficient time for such detailed work?

Basically not, but we take time. Only if I'm involved at the level of detailed content do I enjoy working on the Board. The IFF's 'Quality and Competency' concept is certainly not meant to be pushed through without consultation of those concerned. That's why the IFF Academy was set up in 2001 as a participatory model for Feldenkrais professionals. Here practitioners can work together locally on absolutely concrete projects while developing professionally. The idea is not to lose touch with one's own practice, or to mediate 'knowledge' or advanced information from on high. Instead the intention is to create processes with colleagues and for colleagues – for instance within the framework of the IFF Academy Days. The next such event will take place in Berlin during the 2005 European Feldenkrais Congress. Here we are always working simultaneously on our own qualification.

I'd like to mention another example. A group of practitioners came together out of the Heidelberg IV training. They call themselves "moving bones". In their project they accompany clients through ATM and FI in a process ending with each participant both feeling and knowing the bones better and also appearing in a dance performance. This group constantly evaluates and rewrites its concept, and is also ready to make this available to colleagues so that they in turn can bring in and assess their experiences. There thus comes into existence a wealth of experience from which all the participants can profit. We call that "open sources". In addition the PRISMA Blue workshop, developed by Daniel Clénin and myself, has already been presented in seven countries since 2001, constantly leading to revised versions. Daniel and I frequently rewrite the workshop sequence, which is a kind of presenters' manual.

And what do you get out of your ideas being made available to others after you have taken the trouble to record what happens, evaluate, etc?

We're asked that time and again. But where would we be today if Moshe Feldenkrais hadn't continuously re-evaluated, changed, and recorded his ideas as, for instance, in the Alexander Yanai lessons? In the IFF Academy we learn and derive benefit from and with one another. Finding words for our work means devoting attention to our own capabilities – and that brings about a real leap in quality for all those involved. For me this kind of learning is Feldenkrais. If everything weren't simultaneously linked with practical action, I wouldn't be where I am now. That's what is so gratifying.

You mentioned that the IFF is also seeking Feldenkrais-specific procedures. I imagine it isn't always so easy to communicate that to members or delegates.

Of course not. The international level also involves processes of integration, say between small and large Guilds. Sometimes that works well, sometimes not. For the most recent Assembly, in Holland 2004, we devised a specific design as a further attempt at taking the Feldenkrais philosophy seriously and applying it to what is being done at present. This design, called "Modes of Attention Process", is documented on the IFF Website (Members' area).

We all know from our courses HOW difficult it is to change behaviour. And HOW difficult it is, even among Feldenkrais teachers, really to do something new. Sometimes I'm truly astonished since we all say we're so flexible... For me that also raises the issue of the culture which prevails in our Feldenkrais world. With the Academy the IFF wants to promote a culture where the practitioners who participate take on responsibility – as they are already doing. I am optimistic that a culture of communication, sharing, and creative teaching will grow from below.

Like in the image of the limestone cave which develops from below...

...Yes, the drops of water fall from above while structures grow towards one another from both above and below: top-down and bottom-up in a single process.

In conclusion I want to return to aesthetics. What art is closest to you – or, differently phrased, what is your art?

The art which is closest to me begins with my hands. My hands and my eyes..., but primarily the hands. I was always busy using my hands... with the children or sewing; or climbing trees, seizing hold of them and climbing up high, swaying in the wind; and the hand's movement when writing, the kinaesthetic element... That's one aspect. Then the eyes. I don't mean special visual acuity. Particularly not that. Rather a 'looking from the inside outwards' and back again, communicating what has been experienced – discovery in a comprehensive sense, through the hands and eyes. And the third element is music. My parents made a great deal of music, and very beautifully too ...

So that's a kind of spatial art, opening up space by way of sound.

Yes, but compared with the hands and eyes my hearing is almost under-developed with regard to differentiation of perception... I play the saxophone because it induces me to develop my capacity for hearing. I like walking in mud-flats and listening to the noises there... Kinaesthetics and sound, designing and recognising – that's basically my art. Nevertheless I link that with relationship. If relationship isn't present, I'm not interested. I'm concerned about relationship – between the different aspects of myself, with other people, and between inner and outer... I regret that in the Feldenkrais world much remains within, and that little is said about the relationship between inner and outer. We talk about self-image, about acting in accordance with the picture we have of ourselves. That's true, but we also act in accordance with the way we see others. If there isn't any relationship there, I search until I find one.

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