

# The Feldenkrais Journal

An abstract line drawing composed of various geometric shapes and patterns. It includes several cylinders of different sizes and orientations, some with horizontal lines on their sides. There are also overlapping circles, some with horizontal lines, and various polygons and rectangles. A prominent feature is a series of small black dots arranged in a curved path that winds through the composition. The overall style is minimalist and architectural.

2017

#30

# Contents

5	Letter from the Editor, 2017	20	<b>LGBT Elders and the Feldenkrais Method: Lessons from the SAGE Centers in New York City</b> Frederick Schjang	49	<b>The Origin of Consent</b> Shannon Lynne Sullivan
7	<b>Dennis Eugene Leri 1945-2016</b> Elizabeth Beringer	26	<b>The Weber- Fechner-Henneman Movement Optimization Cycle</b> Roger Russell	55	<b>Remembering Michael Krugman</b> Jean Elvin
8	<b>Selling Water by the River</b> Dennis Leri	14	<b>Complex Problems</b> Todd Hargrove	40	<b>An Introduction to Sense Writing or Life, I thought, was harder than that</b> Madelyn Kent

# An Introduction to Sense Writing or Life, I thought, was harder than that

Madelyn Kent

I took my first Feldenkrais class in the 1990s in an abandoned candy store on Henry Street, the original store sign still hanging out front. The floor inside was black, the walls too. The autumn light barely made its way through the closed metal grate over the storefront windows. The teacher, in a wheelchair from multiple sclerosis, talked plainly about the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education, the only thing that had improved her movement and well-being since she had been diagnosed with the illness several years earlier. On a thin mat in the dark room, a few light bulbs overhead, I imagined it the perfect place for a shakedown by the local mafia. But the teacher's simple instructions quieted the noise in my head. The movements were so small and slow that I felt pleasantly puzzled. Yet, there was something deeply familiar in their gentleness, and I soon became absorbed in the ebb and flow of rest and movement.

I was there because I had seen a hand-written flier on a wooden telephone pole that simply read: Feldenkrais, Awareness Through Movement. I had never heard of it. But I remember walking out of that session into the bright Brooklyn afternoon having enjoyed myself fully, though not understanding why. I had a sense of grounded clarity, edged with mystery. That was my first experience of the Feldenkrais Method, and it would be my last for over a decade. I was in my twenties, an aspiring playwright looking for the kinds of leaps, breakthroughs, and

revelations that writing spells and intense yoga provided. Although I knew “something” had happened in that class, I was not yet ready to learn so gently. I did not understand how much this kind of approach could benefit me. Life, I thought, was harder than that.

Choosing to be an artist, especially in the United States, often involves an enormous amount of struggle. In competitive environments where almost no one teaches or nurtures process, struggle can become a habit. And even though my own work as a theater artist was increasingly process-oriented, I was still not confident that I was providing my students—or myself—with a sustainable vocation. I continued to write and direct, eventually forming my own theater company, while teaching playwriting and screenwriting as an adjunct at New York University. I could not help but realize that I, along with many of my peers in the art world, had prematurely accepted struggle as a dominating, and often costly, motivator. I understood that longevity as an artist would come for me, and my students, only if pleasure and curiosity—as opposed to struggle—were its engine.

Over a decade after my promising experience in the candy store, I moved to Tel Aviv to attend a Feldenkrais training. From the beginning of the training, I intuited connections and potential applications across Awareness Through Movement (ATM), Functional Integration (FI), and the creative process of writing. The Method echoed dynamics and processes I had encountered in classrooms and rehearsal rooms while working with students and collaborators back in New York. Sometimes, resting off to the side during a lesson, I would watch as a sea of people, from professional dancers to people with visible neurological disorders, rolled around the floor, each learning, perhaps for the first time, how to have a finely-tuned, empirical relationship with their kinesthetic self. I realized I was experiencing an intricate process of self-organizing with no endgame, a process of yielding that could be softly activated and refined.

A sense of relief—not a cloud-parting, revelatory kind of relief—but a steady relief, accreting over months, began to build in me. A dynamic system of implicit learning, specific and vast, self-empirical and partially lawless, was slowly revealing itself to me. The movement sequences, instead of pushing, provided contained-yet-open, suspended states of exploration where I would find myself in a kind of collaboration with my own nervous system. On a bone-deep level, both self-trust and risk-taking were fostered, a combination crucial to my creative process.

One Saturday afternoon a couple of years later, while teaching a writing workshop, I found myself spontaneously asking the participants to stand and do a short, light ATM lesson. We had just completed a writing sequence that started with a constraint and went into a free-write. I felt that the physical ATM sequence would enhance the underlying principle we had just been exploring in writing. Subsequently, I found that the more I folded Feldenkrais lessons into the writing

classes, the more I came to a deeper understanding of the writing sequences themselves, many of which I had been teaching for years. I realized that what I had sensed years before—the ability of the Method to deepen processes of artistic discovery—had been made concrete. I was now able to tease out, develop, and share increasingly pragmatic structures for writing based on Feldenkrais principles and their frequent employment of paradox.

## Possibility in the pause of paradox

In the Feldenkrais Method, paradox is a generative tool for learning, the proverbial door that opens when another shuts.

Perhaps inspired by his Hasidic childhood, with its culture of questioning rather than answering, Moshe Feldenkrais saw paradox as a way to give the nervous system the opportunity to improvise new habits by noticing and questioning old ones. In practice, his movements often accentuate a student's own way of holding the body—it is a way to make the patterns more apparent, and therefore more open to change. Working one-on-one in an FI lesson, a practitioner will shape her hands to the contours of the client's body in order to support—and even exaggerate—what is already being enacted. “Paradoxically, when a person is pushed sufficiently in his or her own extreme, it begins to feel right for the person to spontaneously correct his or her posture,” writes Mark Reese.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than opposing a person's tendencies through stretching and manipulation, these techniques accommodate them, bypassing the resistance that might arise from direct contradiction. Intrinsic abilities of the person's own nervous system can come out of hiding, gently coaxed through micro-movements into new manifestations. A more articulated subjectivity begins to emerge. In the pause of paradox, individuality finds space to offer, rather than to obstruct.

## Mistaking paralysis for paradox

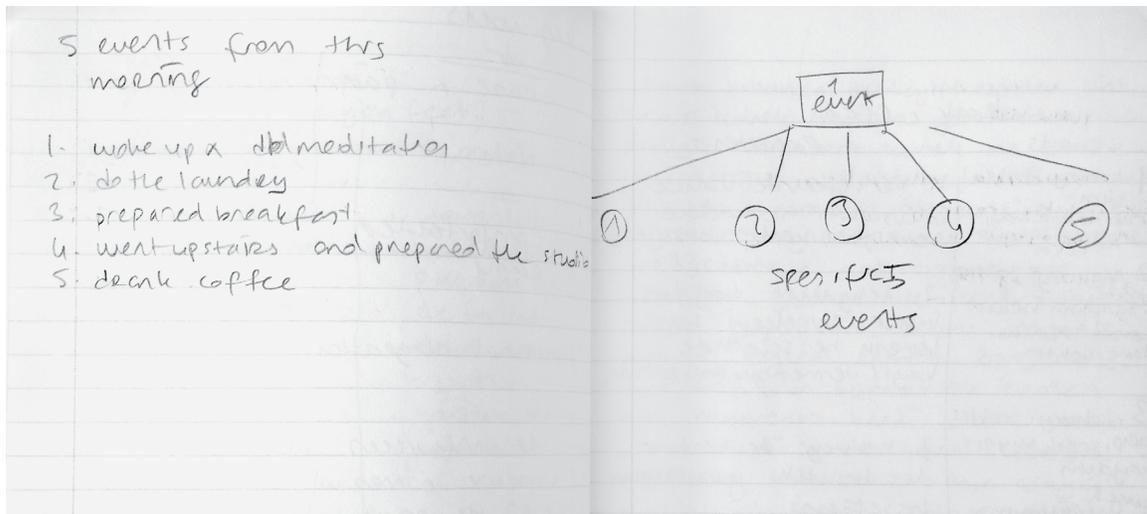
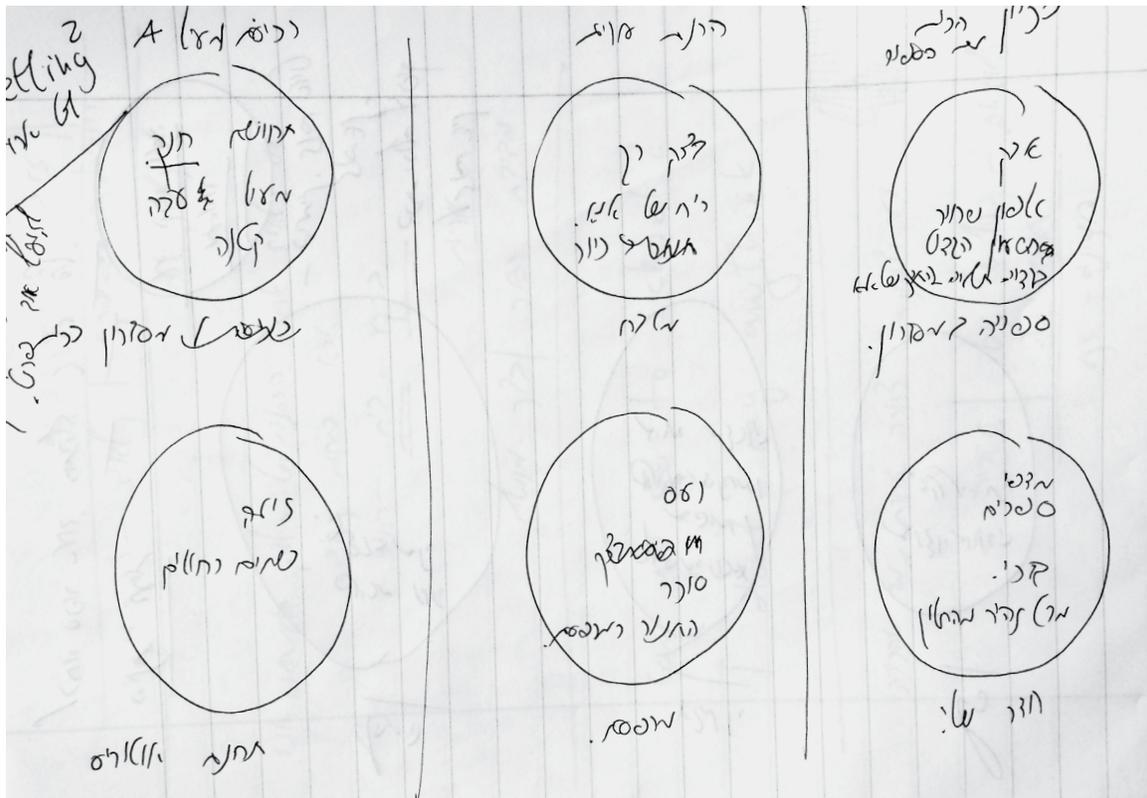
“I do not treat people, I do not cure people, and I do not teach people,” wrote Feldenkrais. “I tell them stories because I believe that learning is the most important thing for a human being.”<sup>2</sup>

Artists are drawn to paradox, to the complexity preserved inside stories. So too is the nervous system. Often, however, we can mistake struggle for paradox. Both can include an involuntary stop or slowness, a confusion of what comes next. Like paradox, struggle can keep us engaged and energized. We find novel ways of doing things when faced with either. However, struggle can also exploit tendencies towards vigilance and anxiety, which can grow dominant in our thought and

<sup>1</sup> Mark Reese, “Moshe Feldenkrais's Work with Movement: A Parallel Approach to Milton Erickson's Hypnotherapy,” *Feldenkrais Journal* no.1 (1984), par. 23, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.achievingexcellence.com/Moshe-Feldenkrais-Work-with-Movement-A-Parallel-Approach-to-Milton-Ericksons-Hypnotherapy.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Elusive Obvious* (Capitola, CA: Meta, 1981), 118.





Notebook pages with Sense Writing sequences by students in Istanbul, Israel, and the West Bank, 2015-2017 (pgs 43, 44)

action. In American culture, the idea of the struggling artist is ubiquitous, and it is often internalized by artists who lack other options. In my own group of peers, I often saw people speaking in stark terms of survival.

Unlike struggle, which is rooted in choicelessness, paradox brings us into sustainable, open states that provoke new insight, interrupting existing patterns to allow the possibility of new actions. In the Feldenkrais Method, paradoxical or indirect techniques are meant to destabilize, to create what Mark Reese called a “highly exploratory phase,” where a person can find spontaneous solutions to new information.<sup>3</sup> These open-yet-contained explorations were what I sought in my own creative practice, where I loved to linger.

**3** Mark Reese, “The Feldenkrais Method and Dynamic System Principles,” Mark Reese to Esther Thelen, undated notes, par. 12, accessed July 7, 2016, <http://davidzemachbersin.com/2012/02/the-feldenkrais-method-and-dynamic-system-principles/>.

## Accepting what paradox offers

Gradually letting many techniques and realizations coalesce, I started to develop what is now called Sense Writing, an approach to creative writing that combines movement and writing sequences to help people refine the innate intelligence of their own nervous systems and uncover richer processes of artistic discovery.

There are probably dozens of paradoxes that can activate these suspended states of exploration, and, of course, with experiential approaches, it is best to try things out rather than just reading about them. The following is my attempt to parse some of the paradoxes that enable us to enter a state of flow or “the zone,” as athletes sometimes refer to a similar phenomenon. At the end, I have provided two short Sense Writing sequences for you to try on your own.

### 1 Delayed interpretation yields sudden insight

Sense Writing is an approach to creative writing that is not only, or even mostly, about writing. Most classes and one-on-one sessions begin with body mapping, a technique of lying on the floor in order to allow antigravitational muscles to relax and structural habits triggered by coping with gravity to recede. Without the ambition to express anything (yet), participants bring their attention to an internal, wordless landscape, noticing how it shifts and changes, re-organizing itself moment to moment. We linger in our senses without trying to put those senses into language. Engaging with our subjective selves, before the force of narrative sweeps in, allows us to avoid what Feldenkrais called “premature interpretations.” Writer’s block (and really any creative block) can be viewed as a series of “premature interpretations” that keep us stumbling forward into blind alleys of resistance rather than basking in “the sudden insight” of enriched experience and options.<sup>4</sup>

**4** Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self: A Study of Spontaneity and Compulsion* (Berkeley: Frog Books, 2002), 160.

## 2 Blocks create more space, not less

Some of those who come to Sense Writing workshops are new writers hesitant to even begin, while others are experienced writers who feel stuck in a particular project. Instead of taking a pickaxe to this hardened terrain and forcing it to give way, in Sense Writing we till the soil elsewhere. Whether writing fiction or nonfiction, in a real or imagined landscape, if a student is stuck in a story or project, we work on a section that surrounds this hardened terrain, a section that is softer and more yielding.

In the Feldenkrais Method, there are many strategies that allow us to guide the nervous system to work around hardened terrain, and perhaps, afterwards, to soften it. Ruthy Alon writes in *Mindful Spontaneity* (1996), “When movement is difficult, you are entitled to the assistance of various compromises, such as partial movement, all kinds of supporting pads, rhythm change, activation from another direction, assistance from another part of your body.”<sup>5</sup> All of these have their corollaries in Sense Writing. If, for example, a writer finds herself stuck, she might write into scenes that take place just minutes before or after the “problematic” scene and go deeply into these moments, though they were never part of “the story.” Or she might explore the scene itself more directly by reversing the chronology, or telling it from another character’s perspective. Whether these new passages stay in the story or not, they often lead to unanticipated breakthroughs. Alternating positions refines the writer’s ability to make new choices, and the problematic section or scene often stops being “problematic.”

I have found this indirect approach especially beneficial in the case of people who have experienced trauma. Some students come to the workshops eager to write into a part of their lives that they have never been able to express. Past experiences remain as shards of sensation not yet integrated viscerally or contextualized in narrative. As artists, we are encouraged to explore and find meaning in places that are difficult—to “dig”—and we can get stuck. Either the unexplored depths eventually stop yielding, or they yield too much, subsuming “the artist’s voice,” narrowing or limiting range and expressive choice.

In Sense Writing, through an ebb and flow of movement and writing sequences, participants first immerse themselves in surrounding stories that are easier to tell, even ones that initially seem “insignificant.” Exploring the links among movement, thought, emotions, senses, and language, they discover how these can form and re-form into fresh combinations, and new unforced ways of telling stories emerge. New, untold stories are actually discovered. With the connective tissue

<sup>5</sup> Ruthy Alon, *Mindful Spontaneity* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996), 60.

between viscera and narrative strengthened, participants can then choose to spiral back into the more “resistant” story, finding that it not only unfolds more easily, but has itself shifted and changed as part of the whole.

### 3 Constraints lead to freedom

In all forms of art, constraints can open up new possibilities. In a writing constraint, for example, you might write a scene by starting every sentence with “I remember.” (This could be from your point of view or a fictional character’s perspective.) The constraint of the sentence starter “I remember” allows you to “aim low” and not worry about syntactically positioning yourself for each new sentence. Other parts of the self can be brought to the surface. Then when you switch into a free write, writing in any way you want into the scene, each moment will be more textured as you re-orient yourself, word by word, in the story. Similarly, an ATM lesson might constrain the use of the neck in order to turn the head. Inhibiting the use of the neck, parts of the spine, ribcage, pelvis, or feet come out of the woodwork and support the movement. This quiet dialogue among the lesser-used parts expands our internal kinesthetic space as a whole, and after, when walking, new sensations and possibilities can often be felt in places that were not specifically moved in the sequence.

Sessions involving “writing constraints” are followed by a period of free writing, where participants are asked to write into that same scene without the constraints. Afterward, they are invited to reflect on the difference between how it felt to write with the constraint and during the free write. Did one flow more? Was there one that was more awkward? For some people, writing with the constraint will be easier, for others the free write will feel better, but for each person these differences will change throughout the process, effectively changing their writing as well.

To reflect on the writing and movement components of Sense Writing is a key step in the process. Like Feldenkrais lessons, these sequences make up a kind of empirical tracking system, and reflecting on our experience keeps us engaged in the dynamics of a process that is always changing and often full of surprising connections. In neuroplasticity, this kind of empiricism actually becomes a tool in the repair of function. Reading Norman Doidge’s *The Brain’s Way of Healing* (2015), I was struck by this crucial aspect in the case studies: recovery was often connected with a patient’s ability to be aware of what was going on as it was going on, and to be able to express this understanding afterwards—to self-report accurately.<sup>6</sup> This ability to pay attention to finer and finer details allows the patient to recognize small improvements and to re-build trust in her own nervous system. The reflective aspects of Sense Writing increase curiosity and trust in the creative process as it evolves, keeping the writer engaged in her own work.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain’s Way of Healing* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

Students begin to figure out that the constraints they encounter are there to make them feel more comfortable while they seek their own points of comfort inside the practice. This discovery of inherent abilities within a self-directed practice full of questioning is for me the very practice of being an artist.

“I like to work on a song until those slogans, as wonderful as they are and as wholesome as the ideas they promote are, dissolve into deeper convictions of the heart.”—Leonard Cohen<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dorian Lynskey, “Leonard Cohen: ‘All I’ve got to put in a song is my own experience,’” *The Guardian* (January 19, 2012), par. 17, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jan/19/leonard-cohen>.

A brief Sense Writing sequence:

This is a 10-minute introduction to the first principle of Sense Writing, which is Constraints and Freedom. Sequences are usually recorded or led aloud by a teacher, so it is best to use a timer so you don’t have to watch the clock.

#### 1. Constraint writing (three minutes)

Write into your morning using the sentence starter “I remember.”

Start every sentence with “I remember.”

Keep your hand moving. If you feel you are getting stuck, just repeat “I remember I remember I remember nothing. . .”

Aim low, with simple sentences.

#### 2. Free write (six minutes)

Write into this same morning in any way you want.

Don’t look back at any of the constraint writing.

Try to keep your hand moving.

#### 3. Reflection

Take a moment and write about the differences between the constraint writing and the free write. Without looking at the

**Elizabeth Beringer** studied and worked closely with Dr. Feldenkrais from 1976 to 1984 in both Israel and the U.S. She has been involved with the practice and development of the Feldenkrais Method for more than 30 years, including founding and editing *The Feldenkrais Journal*, developing educational programs and materials, and co-founding Feldenkrais Resources with David Zemach-Bersin in 1984. Currently she is the educational director of training programs in Switzerland and in California, at the Feldenkrais Institute of San Diego, where she maintains her private practice.

[www.feldenkraisresources.com](http://www.feldenkraisresources.com)

**Andrew Dawson** is a theater director, performance artist, Feldenkrais practitioner, and hand model. His diverse career spans the creation of original works such as 'Space Panorama' (1987), the story of the Apollo 11 moon landing told with only his hands, 'Quatre Mains' (1998), and 'Absence and Presence' (2005). He has also choreographed and directed movement for the Metropolitan Opera of New York and the English National Opera and presented on the Feldenkrais Method and neurological disorders for TEDMED San Diego.

[www.andrewdawson.info](http://www.andrewdawson.info)

This year marks **Jean Elvin's** 20th anniversary teaching the Feldenkrais Method. She maintains a private practice in Palo Alto, CA, at Integrated Healing Arts. She also teaches at City College of San Francisco through the Physical Education and Dance Department (since 2008) and at Stanford University through the School of Medicine's Health Improvement Program (since 2004). At CCSF she offers Awareness Through Movement lessons as well as the newly designed program *Feldenkrais for Dance and Performing Arts*. Elvin lives in Santa Clara with her cat and husband, with whom she enjoys Argentine tango dancing on a weekly basis.

[www.sweetagility.com](http://www.sweetagility.com)

**Todd Hargrove** is a Feldenkrais practitioner, Rolfer, and author. Todd graduated from Hamilton College in 1990 with a B.A. in Economics and Philosophy, and from the University of Washington School of Law in 1995 with a J.D. While working as an attorney, Todd developed chronic neck and back pain but eliminated it through self-education, lifestyle change, and exercise. He quit the law in 2005 to help others with their pain and physical function. Since 2008, he has written a blog focused on applying pain science and neuroscience to manual and movement therapy. In 2014, he published *A Guide to Better Movement: The Science and Practice of Moving with More Skill and Less Pain*.

[www.bettermovement.org](http://www.bettermovement.org)

**Madelyn Kent** is a Feldenkrais practitioner and the developer of Sense Writing, which she has taught throughout Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Her theater work has been presented at Soho Rep, PS 122, the New York Public Theater, The Flea, and other theaters. She has taught playwriting, screenwriting, and theater at New York University/Tisch School of the Arts.

[www.sensewriting.com](http://www.sensewriting.com)

**Roger Russell**, M.A., PT, trained with Moshé Feldenkrais in San Francisco, Amherst, and Israel (1975 – 1982). A movement scientist, physical therapist, and Feldenkrais trainer, he is co-director of the Feldenkrais-Zentrum in Heidelberg, Germany. Since 1975, he has been intrigued by the network of ideas, including neuroscience, which stands behind the practical methods that Feldenkrais developed. He is one of the initiators of the Feldenkrais Science Network and a leading participant in the FGNA/FEFNA symposia *Movement and the Development of Sense of Self* (2004) and *Embodying Neuroscience* (2012).

[www.feldenkraiszentrum-hd.de/de/](http://www.feldenkraiszentrum-hd.de/de/)

**Tiffany Sankary** is a Boston-based Feldenkrais practitioner and the continuity Assistant Trainer for the Boston Feldenkrais Training. She is in the process of bringing more of her offerings online, including courses on the Feldenkrais Method, Authentic Movement, and creative process. Her first book, *Feldenkrais Illustrated: The Art of Learning*, was self-published by Movement and Creativity Press in 2014.

[www.tiffanysankary.com](http://www.tiffanysankary.com)

**Frederick Schjang** is a veteran of the fitness industry. He is largely responsible for introducing the Feldenkrais Method to Equinox Fitness Clubs, Reebok Sports Club, and the New York Parks Department, among others. His Awareness Through Movement class was selected as one of the "Best Fitness Classes" by TimeOut NY, and his annual Feldenkrais Festivals draw national attention, with partners including Jazz at Lincoln Center and Sirius XM. Schjang is a founding faculty member of New York University's Doctorate Program in Physical Therapy. He currently holds the position of Elected Representative for the New York Region of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America.

[www.frederickschjang.com](http://www.frederickschjang.com)

**Shannon Lynne Sullivan** teaches ATM and FI lessons to private clients, and she trains dog-human teams at Urban Pooch Training & Fitness Center. She lives in Chicago with her husband Stephen and Virginia, the rescued, rehabilitated Mountain Cur.

[www.shannonlynnesullivan.com](http://www.shannonlynnesullivan.com)

Inquiries regarding the publication of *The Feldenkrais Journal* can be directed to:  
The Feldenkrais Guild of North America,  
news@feldenkraisguild.com. If you have an  
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- Journal 1** General Issue (photocopy)
- Journal 2** Martial Arts
- Journal 3** Special Interest Groups
- Journal 4** Emotions
- Journal 5** The Arts
- Journal 6** Stories
- Journal 7** Conceptual Models
- Journal 8** General Issue
- Journal 9** Parallel Developments
- Journal 10** Children
- Journal 11** More Children
- Journal 12** General Issue
- Journal 13** The Self-Image
- Journal 14** Performing Arts
- Journal 15** Awareness Through Movement
- Journal 16** Performing Arts
- Journal 17** General Issue
- Journal 18** Parenting
- Journal 19** Awareness
- Journal 20** Awareness
- Journal 21** Open Issue
- Journal 22** Teaching
- Journal 23** Aesthetics
- Journal 24** General Issue
- Journal 25** Let's Play
- Journal 26** Science
- Journal 27** Improvisation
- Journal 28** General Issue
- Journal 29** Aesthetic Experience